

Mads Jensen
Clara Juncker
21 November 2012

Bastard Claiming Carolina: Writing a Feminist Story in a Masculine Genre

Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Chapter 1: Defining Grit lit: Possibilities and Boundaries	3
1.1. What is Grit lit?	4
1.1.1. The Term Grit Lit	4
1.1.2. The Grit lit Writers	4
1.1.3. Grit Lit Characteristics	6
1.2. Dorothy Allison: Her Story and Her Work	9
1.3. <i>Bastard Out of Carolilna</i> : Summary and Introduction	9
1.4. <i>Bastard Out of Carolina</i> : Pushing the Grit Lit Boundaries	11
Chapter 2: From Silence to Gospel: Finding a Voice	17
2.1. No Voice: Starting from Scratch	18
2.2. Gospel Period: Discovering a Voice	21
2.3. Reclaiming a Story: Discovering the Power of Storytelling	23
2.4. Writing Your Own Story	24
2.5. Emancipation	26
Chapter 3: Male Maladies: Defining and Redefining Gender roles	28
3.1. Rearranging the Traditional Gender Dichotomy	28
3.2. Bone and Aunt Raylene Crossing Gender Boundaries	32
Chapter 4: In the Eye of the Beholder: Larry Brown's Girl v. Dorothy Allison's Girl	37
4.1. Why <i>Fay</i> ?	37
4.2. Why Mulvey?	39
4.3. Comparison	41
4.3.1. Woman as Erotic Object	41
4.3.2. Penis Envy	41
4.3.3. Male Dominance	42
4.3.4. Maker of Meaning and Bearer of Meaning	44
4.3.5. Active Male/Passive Female	45
4.4. Perspective: The Larger Meaning of the Difference between Bone and Fay	49
Conclusion	50
Bibliography	52
Summary	56

Introduction

What I want to do in this thesis is show how Dorothy Allison can write grit lit and still be a feminist author. Grit lit is a genre dominated by male authors and male-driven narratives, in which women typically serve as supporting characters. Allison demands ownership of this genre and claims this space for women. I want to look at what techniques she uses to achieve this goal.

While Dorothy Allison is often and with good reason classified as grit lit, she is also an atypical grit lit writer in the sense that she, while staying within the confines of the genre, manages to redefine part of it. This difference between Allison and particularly her male counterparts is what I want to investigate in order to illustrate the depth of this genre. In a larger context literature serves both as a view from the outside into a specific time and place, and as an identification object for particularly those inside that specific sphere. For that reason it is important for grit lit to have a female and feminist voice. When Allison claims the genre for herself, she by extension claims it for every poor, Southern woman who, like Allison, has felt herself denied.

First of all, the fairly recent term “grit lit” will have to be defined. This is done through looking at authors usually referred to as grit lit as well as their inspirations, and then looking at what literary traits they share. With a firm definition in hand, I will look at how Allison manages to rewrite some of the genre conventions while simultaneously staying within the overall grit lit framework. For that purpose I primarily use Dorothy Allison’s signature novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*. In this novel Allison uses her own background as the foundation for the narrative.

I will then look at how Allison’s own background is employed to form a story. When analyzing key events in the protagonist, Bone’s, life and holding them up against the formative events in Allison’s own life, we will be able to see how Allison’s narrative moves forward, and how she establishes her feminist narrative. Reading in parallel Allison’s discovery of who she has to be as a writer, and Bone’s discovery of her possibilities as a person, it will be possible to see how Allison’s project of reclaiming the poor white South for women takes shape. This parallel development of Allison and Bone will illustrate to the

reader that a feminist awareness is possible within the grit lit universe. For this section I will use all of Allison's other work to support this parallel reading.

Allison's quest is to create a feminist narrative, but how does she do it? Through deconstructing male and female characters in the novel and rebuilding them, we will see how Allison manages to strip the authority away from the males leaving a more powerful role for the women to assume. Allison subtly leaves men looking less like men and more like boys, thereby freeing up the space typically occupied by men. When transferring traditional male characteristics such as responsibility, willingness to act, physical strength and sexual power onto women, she allows them to take over this traditionally male space. This way, women have more power than in most grit lit work. Due to Allison's subtle tweaks to the traditional gender representations and her otherwise strict obedience of the grit lit characteristics, she manages to write grit lit, which in one key area is not very grit lit.

Allison's unique way of portraying gender roles will be held up against Larry Brown's *Fay*. You can make a solid argument that Brown is the definitive grit lit writer so his only novel with a female protagonist serves as an excellent basis for comparison. For this comparison, I use film theorist Laura Mulvey's theory on "male gaze" suggesting that film and, I will argue, literature made by men view women through a masculine lens. When this theory is applied, we will see how Brown's masculine point of view dominates his novel, even though the protagonist is a woman. In the end, the analysis of *Bastard Out of Carolina* will show how Allison's feminist project makes for a statement that is unique in grit lit.

Chapter 1

Defining Grit Lit: Possibilities and Boundaries

In many ways Allison is a classic grit lit author but in a couple of key areas she is not at all; she is a woman and she is a homosexual. These two for the genre unusual traits make her stories unique while staying within a rather well-defined genre. How Allison claims a genre defined by heterosexual men and makes it her own is the subject of this thesis. The sum of her bibliography forms a statement about growing up in an incestuous family and overcoming the odds. But it is also a strong feminist statement. In a genre where women are rarely heard and homosexuality barely exists, Allison's protagonist is not merely the predominant character and the sanest person in the novel; through telling it in the first person narrative Allison has a woman create the landscape usually perceived as inherently masculine.

Allison is a grit lit author and *Bastard Out of Carolina* is a grit lit novel. This is evident when comparing her bibliography to a set of grit lit characteristics. But in some ways she does not fit the grit lit characteristics and this dichotomy is the focus of this chapter. Grit lit is dominated by male authors and male characters who live in patriarchal society. Allison's most important characters are female and this feature is what makes Allison's literary project stand out. The male dominance of grit lit means that her narrative will invariably be different.

1.1. What Is Grit Lit?

1.1.1. The Term Grit Lit

Grit lit is a somewhat vague genre description. The term is fairly new and is therefore not as clearly defined as some other genres which have been around for centuries. In order to avoid misunderstandings, it is necessary to first find a set definition of the genre since the entire thesis rests on Dorothy Allison's fit with this genre.

"Grit lit" is a combination of the personality trait "grit" and "literature." Personally I like the resemblance of "grit" to "grits," the Southern dish which is such a basic, coarse and simple dish used as the cornerstone of a Southern breakfast. If it had been "grits lit," it would have worked just as fine and would add a regional aspect to the term.

Grit is the determination to overcome obstacles. Merriam-Webster online describes grit as "firmness of mind or spirit: unyielding courage in the face of hardship or danger" ("Grit"). An article in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* defines "grit" as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals [...] his or her advantage is stamina" (Duckworth 1087). Perseverance, passion and stamina are core values, traits that define a person. Grit then is a basic and fundamental necessity needed to get by. It is perhaps less flattering than traits such as "character," "honesty" or "integrity" but in this setting grit is more useful than any of these characteristics.

1.1.2. The Grit Lit Writers

Grit lit is a fairly recent phenomenon so it is difficult to simply look up what the concept covers. Erik Bledsoe notes that until 1988 Harry Crews was the best and one of very few representatives of what Bledsoe calls the "Rough South." In 1988 three important voices published their first fiction, he writes: Dorothy Allison, Larry Brown and Tim McLaurin (Bledsoe 68). Based on the authors cited, this seems like a fitting year to use as a rough date

for when grit lit emerged. For this reason a fairly small amount of literature referencing the term exists. Some use the term “Rough South” (like Bledsoe) and various other terms are also used. The only book using grit lit in its title that I have been able to find is so recent that I have not had a chance to read it. It is called *Grit Lit – a Rough South Reader* and is an introduction to grit lit. It was published on September 15, 2012. Its table of contents forms a rough overview of some important grit lit writers: Harry Crews, Dorothy Allison, Larry Brown, Tim McLaurin, Rick Bragg, Barry Hannah, Chris Offutt and Lewis Nordan are some of the authors the book deals with (Carpenter and Franklin).

While “grit” and “literature” are both easily understood, it is harder to find a solid definition of the term “grit lit.” Larry Brown is the author who most often comes up when looking for definitions. But it is still hard to define grit lit. For instance, the 2008 collection of essays on Brown’s authorship, *Larry Brown and the Blue Collar South*, has no mention of grit lit in its index (although the term is used in the book) so a collection of sources will be used to reach an acceptable definition.

In an interview with Larry Brown entitled “King of Grit Lit” by Pam Kingsbury of University of North Alabama for SouthernScribe.com, Brown was introduced with this paragraph:

“It’s hard to imagine contemporary Southern literature without the influence of Larry Brown. His books have been eagerly anticipated, widely read, and praised by critics. His characters reflect the raw elements of the South, where they need ‘grit’ to survive” (Kingsbury).

In this interview Brown lists Flannery O’Connor, Charles Bukowski, Raymond Carver, William Faulkner, Cormac McCarthy, and Harry Crews as his main inspirations. These references correspond well with the authors others have claimed represent the genre. For instance, Robert Beuka of Bronx Community College wrote in an essay on Brown that, along with Harry Crews and Barry Hannah, Brown “helped develop a school of rough-edged, modern Southern realism characterized by starkness and violence. Sometimes referred to as Grit Lit, Brown’s style of contemporary Southern fiction borrows from the Southern Gothic tradition to create a dark vision of the Deep South landscape” (Cash and Perry 73-74). For SouthernSpaces.org Lucinda MacKethan of North Carolina State University compared southwestern writing to, among other things, “the ‘grit’ works of writers such as Cormac McCarthy, Harry Crews and Larry Brown” (MacKethan). Brown has studied and taught at the University of Mississippi and its website opens its biography of Brown with:

“One of the foremost writers in what has been dubbed ‘grit lit,’ Larry Brown has been lauded for his graphic, raw fiction about the rural South – stories featuring characters who are ordinary and poor, and struggling with such real-life issues as marital strife, alcoholism, suicide and the traumas of war.” (“Larry Brown”)

This description places Brown solidly at the center of grit lit writers and it states that grit lit is in essence about the hard lives of poor whites – although “whites” is not stated explicitly. There thus seems to be some agreement on which writers scholars think represent grit lit.

1.1.3. Grit Lit Characteristics

Faulkner is the original Southern writer of the group. His shadow looms large in Southern literature and is naturally hard to fully escape. He is not a grit lit writer but his works clearly influence those who are. In the case of Larry Brown this connection is particularly evident as he, like Faulkner, hails from Oxford, Mississippi, the Deep South. Both attended the University of Mississippi but never graduated. In the center of Oxford a bronze statue of Faulkner sits on a bench and overlooks the town square and this is a fitting metaphor for his influence over his successors.

Several traits can be said to define grit lit. Five major characteristics are the patriarchal family structure and ditto society structure, the working class environment, the importance of the land. The narrative is assisted by the use of grotesque elements and Southern Gothic. These traits seep through all grit lit and define it. These traits will place Dorothy Allison within the genre and illustrate how she stands out.

Grit lit is blue-collar if collar at all. This pertains not merely to the jobs the characters hold but also to the way they live. The most predominant ways of enjoying yourself include Ernest Hemingway’s so-called three F’s: fishing, fighting and fornicating (Mobilio). We can safely add another activity associated with Hemingway: drinking. It is not just what they do that is characteristic but also the way it is described – it is rough which explains the phrase “Rough South.” The characters get extremely drunk and then fighting ensues and sometimes wrecked cars and dead bodies. Joe in Larry Brown’s *Joe* drinks a lot and that is part of the reason why he has been in fights. He drinks so much that his sexual performance suffers. In Harry Crews’s *A Feast of Snakes* Joe Lon Mackey dreams of back in high school when he was a football star which marked the high point of his life. This is why the woman with whom he cheats on his wife, is his high school romance. He gets into a strength contest with a visitor and he gets as drunk as he can handle. These activities thus often combine at once to form a rough and exaggerated and grotesque version of all of them.

In Southern fiction the land is always important and this is also the case in grit lit. Harry Crews's *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* deals with him growing up in a small home in rural Georgia. As the title suggests it is as much the story of a place as it is a memoir. Sometimes the land is treacherous as in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* where the protagonists find themselves in a post-apocalyptic landscape. The man and his son walk for days on end to cover the land and escape the cold. Reminiscent of this is the opening of Brown's *Joe* in which Wade and his family are walking for days on end, but here it is in an attempt to escape the scorching Mississippi heat. Again, this can be traced back to Faulkner's Bundren family. During the family's odyssey family members get in various kinds of trouble, but the trip also holds great promises for the patriarch. In all examples the land holds promises but also trials and dangers.

Another trait common to several of these authors is the use of the grotesque. Grotesque texts use exaggeration and shocking effects to strengthen the symbolism in its points. This literary trait is evident for instance at the end of Larry Brown's *Fay* where Fay's unborn baby has died while she has shot her lover who before dying from his wounds shot her former lover who has come to save Fay, just like he shot her rapist earlier. After this she leaves this morbid scene behind her and goes to New Orleans. Carson McCullers is an inspiration for grit lit writers. Her version of the grotesque is well-known and the cross-eyed Miss Amelia with eyes "turned inward so sharply that they seem to be exchanging with each other one long and secret gaze of grief" in "The Ballad of the Sad Café" is a good example of it (McCullers 1-2). McCullers's hunchback in the same short story reminds of Victor Hugo's ditto but McCullers's hunchback is more grotesque. His personality both entices and appalls and his age is impossible to decide.

It is too much and yet it works perfectly exactly because of this. When Patricia Yeager sums up the grotesque, she says that it "offers one answer. It offers a figure of speech with the volume turned up, a body that entices one's hearing and speaking because of its anomalousness" (Yeager 10). This is what grotesque scenes and characters do. The reader pays attention because it is simply too much, and yet you cannot look away.

Flannery O'Connor is well known for being one of the authors who have defined Southern Gothic. Southern Gothic is the term used to describe scenes which are supernatural and very laden with symbolism such as when Mrs. May has her heart penetrated by a bull in the short story "Greenleaf" after which it buries "its head in her lap like a wild tormented lover" (O'Connor 52). This is a very spectacular way of dying and it symbolizes the way in which males in the short story constantly ignore her and suppress her. Then at the end the

bull, almost as if it has human intentions and motive and not merely an animal's instincts, penetrates her with its horn. The symbolism of the wild male animal penetrating the defenseless woman is very strong and it carries great importance to the story. The violence and its consequences in Brown's *Fay* recalls "the Southern Gothicism of Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor," writes Robert Beuka (Cash and Perry 75). This serves to emphasize the importance of the Southern Gothic in grit lit. This is also a tool which Harry Crews for example uses in *A Feast of Snakes* where snakes hold symbolic meaning throughout the novel. There are snakes with the heads of people, a papier-mâché snake which is worshipped, crowning of a rattlesnake queen which is a beauty contest. The snakes are sometimes real and sometimes they take on supernatural powers like the snake with a white man's head that scares a black girl or when a woman has intercourse with a snake. And of course there are the biblical metaphors in the use of the snakes. Supernatural scenes where people, animals or symbols seem to hold a meaning that defies common sense are what signify Southern Gothic.

There are traits in grit lit that can be traced directly back to William Faulkner; for instance his mean patriarch who is famously personified in Anse Bundren from *As I Lay Dying*. He is the only surviving parent once his wife, Addie, dies in the beginning of the novel. Anse takes his children's money, betrays them, and finds a new wife at the place where he borrows shovels to bury Addie. The whole trip to Jefferson to bury his wife is just as much launched by Anse in order for him to buy a set of false teeth as to bury his wife. This is reminiscent of Wade, the father of both Gary and Fay in Larry Brown's novels *Joe* and *Fay* respectively. He could just as well have been created by Faulkner. Wade drinks and fights and considers his children his personal slaves. He is mean-spirited and seems to completely lack morals. At one point he trades one of his children for a car. His meanness is also the reason why Fay has just left home when we meet her in the beginning of the novel by the same name.

Grit lit then, is a combination of several characteristics found in the works of writers either directly associated with the term "grit lit" or with authors who are dubbed "grit lit authors." The setting for stories in this genre is white, poor, dirty with characters which drink, fight, fornicate and drive trucks. The dominating characters are males. There is a significant representation of the grotesque and Southern Gothic tools. So how does Allison's bibliography and *Bastard Out of Carolina* specifically fit this framework?

1.2. Dorothy Allison – Her Story and Her Work

Dorothy Allison was born in 1949 in Greenville, South Carolina, to a 14-year-old unwed mother. She is a lesbian and a feminist. She grew up in a small family of four. Her extended family, however, is large with numerous cousins, uncles and aunts. As a child she was abused by her stepfather. Her family moved to Florida where she got a scholarship to attend college after having graduated from high school as the first member of her family. In interviews Allison talks about reading a lot as a child and about how this was her only taste of freedom growing up. She wrote stories as a young woman but only decided to publish her first works after being attacked by other feminists at a conference. She currently resides in Northern California with her partner and their son. She still considers herself an outsider due to her poor white background as well as her radical feminist views.

In 1983 Allison debuted with *The Women Who Hate Me: Poems by Dorothy Allison*. It was followed up by a collection of semi-autobiographic short stories, *Trash*, in 1988. Several of these stories are reflected in the plot of her debut novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina* from 1992, which became a National Book Award Finalist. *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* from 1995 is based on her personal story and is about the power of storytelling – a topic which *Bastard Out of Carolina* deals with at great length. *Cavedweller* is a novel which, like all her work, is about strong women. It came out in 1998 and is her latest work.

Allison's collection of essays from 1994, *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class & Literature*, provides a look into Allison's mind. In it Allison deals with her own experiences and discusses key events in her life as well talks about how she has dealt with them, both as a person and as a writer. In *Skin; Talking about Sex, Class & Literature* the similarities between Allison's fiction and personal life become clearer. *Bastard Out of Carolina* is, we learn, part memoir and part fiction.

1.3. *Bastard Out of Carolina*: Summary and Introduction

The novel follows the lead character and protagonist Ruth Anne, nicknamed Bone, from her birth to her late pre-teens. It is written in the first person giving the impression of a memoir. Bone's perceptions and thoughts about the men and women in her family gradually form a statement about gender roles and traits in the environment where the novel has its setting.

Bone enters this world in a rather violent manner: Her mother, Anney, goes into labor when she lands on the road after having been launched through the windscreen in a car crash. Once in the hospital, Bone is delivered and named while her mother is still unconscious.

When her mother regains consciousness, the paperwork has been filed and because no father has been listed, Bone's birth certificate states that she is illegitimate – "a certified bastard by the state of South Carolina." Bone's mother, Anney, tries on several occasions to obtain a new birth certificate that does not label Bone illegitimate, but she has no luck until the court house burns and all the records burn with it.

Bone's father is someone who is never mentioned in her home – we only learn that he was no good. Reese, Bone's younger sister, has a different father and contrary to Bone's father he is held in reverence and considered almost perfect, but he is dead. Down on love Anney enters into a relationship with Glen Waddell, whom she meets through her brother, Earle. Daddy Glen, as he is called by the narrator, is very taken by Anney but soon the relationship turns sour, and the first culmination is when Glen molests Bone in the parking lot while Anney is inside the hospital giving birth to a stillborn baby with Daddy Glen.

Bone becomes a fairly secluded child who likes to read on her own and who has very few friends. She is somewhat of a "tomboy." This is illustrated in her adventures. When playing with girls she gets them to pretend they are an outlaw motorcycle gang. She is fascinated with the world of men and boys and she tries to combine it with the female sphere. This dichotomy is also evident in her strong connection to and admiration for Aunt Raylene who is a lesbian and mixes gender roles in her life.

The only friend Bone has, to whom she is not related, is Shannon Pearl. Shannon starts in Bone's class and Bone takes a liking to her initially. Shannon is an outcast among the other children due to her looks, she is obese, albino-like and overall unattractive – "ugly" and "monstrous" is how others describe her (156 and 155). In the end Bone and Shannon have a falling out and Bone is happy with not hanging out with Shannon anymore. At one point later in the book Bone is invited to a barbeque at the Pearls. She is hesitant but ends up going. Before even introducing herself she witnesses Shannon squirting lighter fluid into the grill and going up in flames.

Reese and Bone start going at each other as they get older. These tensions cause Anney to feel act. Anney sends her oldest child out to stay with Aunt Raylene. Aunt Raylene is a homosexual as we gradually learn. She soon becomes someone Bone looks up to. Raylene lives in a quite different way than the others. Her place is relatively secluded and surrounded by the river on three sides rather than the land like with the other aunts. She lives outside the city on her own. She has no partner and no children.

At Aunt Raylene's place Bone and her cousin, Grey, find a trawling hook in the river. They hide it from Aunt Raylene. A while thereafter, when Bone is becoming a woman and

defining for herself what that concept means, she and Grey meet to take revenge on Woolworth's. Bone once stole a candy bar from there and when her mother took her back to return it the manager looked at Bone and her mother with contempt. In an attempt to reclaim control over the Woolworth's store she and her cousin breaks in. While Grey steals all he can, Bone's sole goal is to break in and she steals nothing.

After Aunt Alma goes crazy with rage when her husband insults her and she wrecks her house in anger, Bone is sent to stay with her for a while. Then one day Daddy Glen shows up and rapes Bone while Aunt Alma is out of the house. Anney walks in on the scene and starts beating Daddy Glen. But when he starts sobbing and urging her to kill him she takes pity on him while Bone stands alone and looks at the scene.

At the hospital afterward, Bone will talk to neither the staff there nor the police. Aunt Raylene is the only relative to show up and she takes Bone home. Anney later comes by to give Bone her birth certificate and then she leaves without Bone.

1.4. *Bastard Out of Carolina*: Pushing the Grit Lit Boundaries

While not using the term "grit lit," Erik Bledsoe wrote a presentation of what he called the "Rough South" writer. The essay is entitled "The Rise of Southern Redneck and White Trash Writers," which further specifies who he is talking about. In the essay he primarily focuses on Larry Brown, Tim McLaurin and Dorothy Allison suggesting that the three make up a fine representation of the genre. He notes that all three's first works of fiction were published in 1988 with which they joined "Crews in writing about southern poor whites from within the class" (1). Dorothy Allison's publishing house writes in its description of *Bastard Out of Carolina* that "[c]ritics have likened her to William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor and Harper Lee, naming her the first writer of her generation to dramatize the lives and language of poor white sin the South" ("*Bastard Out of Carolina* Reading Guide"). This quote further places Allison within the "right" lineage for a grit lit writer. Here follows a look at how Allison files under the five major grit lit traits described in 1.1.3: blue collar setting, the importance of the land, use of grotesque and Southern Gothic elements, and the story taking place within an overall patriarchal framework.

Dorothy Allison has called a collection of essays *Trash*. This is a reference to the socioeconomic backdrop of both that collection of short stories and that of *Bastard Out of Carolina*. This is also the term Erik Bledsoe uses for the title of his essay describing the "birth" of grit lit. Daddy Glen, Uncle Earle and the other men all hold low-paid manual jobs when they hold jobs at all. In *Skin* Allison talks about the typical presentation of the poor

(“invariably male, righteously indignant, and inhumanly noble”) and then contrasts that with her own background: “The poverty I knew was dreary, deadening, shameful, the women powerful in ways not generally seen as heroic by the world outside the family” (*Skin* 17). Allison elaborates on this paragraph in an interview with Susanne Dietzel: “[Y]ou know we weren’t always clean and you could get seriously depressed about yourself if you did not even meet the romanticized notion” (Dietzel). This fits the “Rough South” label. There is nothing dignified or alluring about it. The setting is rough and dirty.

The characters in *Bastard Out of Carolina* “fish, fight and fornicate” to varying degrees. Uncle Earle at least talks about fishing, he fights and he fornicates (17, 246 and 273). Uncle Earle dates really young girls and Uncle Wade is thrown out by Aunt Alma for his extramarital activity so there is plenty of fornicating going on. Bone and her sister are too young to fornicate but they masturbate a lot. However, the fornication is never directly dragged to the forefront of the novel. This perhaps has to do with it being a novel being to a great extent a story about a molested child.

Daddy Glen is not much of a fighter, except when he beats Bone. His fornicating is kept to child molestation and his wife. There is no mention of him fishing. But then Daddy Glen is supposed to be the opposite of the masculine role model (though even the role model is obviously flawed) - Bone’s worshipped Uncle Earle.

The drinking ways of most grit lit characters are also found in Allison. Her uncles drink a lot, often when they fix their trucks in the yard. Bone sips some beer and whiskey at one point and she ends up kissing her cousin at her aunt’s funeral (*Bastard* 241-43). Daddy Glen does not drink; again he is the opposite of Uncle Earle. He is sober when he assaults Bone. This makes it seem more deliberate and harmful than the other men’s drinking and fornicating seems in the novel. The uncles’ drunken fighting gets them on the front pages of the newspaper and even in jail, and yet it is portrayed as harmless mischief. This is not the case with Daddy Glen who fights but only with a little girl. There is a clear line between drunken fighting and sober assaults.

The only character living in the same place and being content with it is Bone’s role model, Aunt Raylene (McDonald 21). Bone’s family moves whenever the bills catch up with them. Her Aunt Alma moves out when she finds out her husband has cheated on her because, as he says, “[a] man has needs, and she was pregnant. Was I gonna take the risk of hurting my own baby in the womb?” (71). Aunt Alma goes to live downtown with the children. The reader understands that she lives in what is considered by the characters in the novel to be a bad neighborhood and there is consensus that this is a bad move on her part. She does end up

going back to live with Wade but later she throws him out for cheating on her again. Aunt Ruth's daughter, Deedee, moves away from home and despises her childhood home. She wants everything her background is not. Aunt Carr leaves South Carolina and goes to Baltimore due to her hating being the less attractive sister. Through all these examples we learn that not much good comes from denying where you are from. Daddy Glen attempts to leave his upper middle class background to "marry the whole Boatwright legend, shame his daddy and shock his brothers" (*Bastard* 13). His attempt to leave his home – the upper middle class – also leads to bad results. He changes his place in society and the consequences are disastrous. The land holds promise but also dangers just like in Cormac McCarthy and Larry Brown mentioned earlier. Allison notes this duality of the land in *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* when she writes that Greenville, South Carolina "smelled like nowhere else I've ever been. Cut wet grass, split green apples, baby shit and beer bottles, cheap makeup and motor oil. Everything was ripe, everything was rotting. People shouted in the distance; crickets boomed in my ears. That country was beautiful, I swear to you, the most beautiful place I've ever been. Beautiful and terrible. It is the country of my dreams and the country of my nightmares" (6-7). This is a revision of the opening of chapter two of *Bastard Out of Carolina* where Allison sticks to noting that Greenville, South Carolina was "the most beautiful place in the world" (17). The latter description of Allison's hometown does a better job at describing it than the former.

There are plenty of grotesque elements in the novel which fits well into the tradition of Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor. Shannon Pearl, whom Bone befriends, is described as monstrous. Shannon is obese, so white-skinned that you can see her blood vessels through it. While her mother insists that she is not an albino, Shannon is at least "albino-like." She is described as ugly on several occasions and her ugliness goes for her personality as well. At one point Bone looks at Shannon and thinks that Shannon when looking back at Bone is "wholly monstrous, a lurching hunched creature shining with sweat and smug satisfaction" (155). Shannon is grotesque but, says Peggy Dunn Bailey, the grotesque is also implicit in Allison's portrayal of the Boatwrights and Glen (Bailey 284). The sweating, spitting grandmother, the insecure, underachieving stepfather, the eternally hell-raising Uncle Earle and the drunken gospel singers are all described this way to drive home a point. The volume is, in Patricia Yeager's words, turned up in order to make you take notice (10). Allison seems more wary of being labeled a grotesque author. In her interview with Amber Hollibaugh she says that she sees herself in the tradition of among others McCullers and O'Connor, she goes on to say that she likes the grotesque but that "there ain't nobody

grotesque in [*Bastard out of Carolina*]” (“Telling a Mean Story” 16-17). Allison recognizes the importance of the grotesque tradition when she in another interview defines the Southern tradition of writing like this: “It’s a lyrical tradition. Language. Iconoclastic, outrageous as hell, leveled with humor. Yankees do it, but Southerners do it more. It’s the grotesque” (Megan 81). While Allison claims “there ain’t nobody grotesque” in the novel, it is easy to present the counter argument.

Peggy Dunn Bailey writes: “With her definition of the ‘Southern tradition’ as ‘the grotesque’ and her identification of literary forebears [...] Allison associates herself and her writing with the complex category of the Southern Gothic” (1). Here she further labels Allison Southern Gothic and there is certainly some of that in *Bastard Out of Carolina*. For instance there is the love knot given to Anney when she marries Glen. It is given to her by “the Eustis aunts,” Marvella and Maybelle, and is made from some of Marvella’s hair and some rabbit blood drained under a full moon. (41-42). When it disintegrates the consequences are dramatic for the marriage (104-5). Then there are the deaths: Reese’s father dying in “devil’s rain” so delicately that it is hard for the eyewitnesses to believe he died (7). Shannon’s death is perhaps the part of the novel that is most Southern Gothic; she shoots lighter fluid into a grill and ignites: “Shannon didn’t even scream. Her mouth was wide open, and she just breathed the flames in. Her glasses went opaque, her eyes vanished, and all around her skull her fine hair stood up in a crown of burning glory [...] I saw Shannon Pearl disappear from this world” (201). On page 128 Uncle Earle talks about his brother’s wife and says she is like a “vampire sucking the juice out of him.” Bone’s birth to an unconscious mother who has just flown through a windshield is very Southern Gothic as well (1-2). The court house burns down and with that Bone’s birth certificate leaving her with an option to rewrite her past. She masturbates while she dreams of being beaten while flames start licking at her body. The novel is not dominated by Southern Gothic elements but there are several of them.

The final trait of grit lit mentioned in the previous section is the strong patriarchal hierarchy, both in the family and in society. In *Bastard Out of Carolina* patriarchy is the framework within which Allison operates. Daddy Glen is clearly the head of the family despite him failing to be any good at it. He himself comes from a patriarchal family where his father always tries to dominate him. Daddy Glen’s mother is never even mentioned which is a significant omission and her absence actually speaks volumes of Daddy Glen. The lack of a description or mention of her in any way reflects her say in the family. Daddy Glen’s frightening father is, however, described numerous times and his behavior has obviously impacted Daddy Glen. The fact that Bone’s very legitimacy is decided by whether or not she

has a father listed on her birth certificate marks the whole novel and its title. Uncle Earle tells Bone about how Aunt Raylene once took the name Ray and cut her hair short and went to work “for the carnival like a man” (179). This fascinates Bone who dreams of doing the same. It is noteworthy that she does not dream of working for the carnival “like a woman,” rather she implicitly accepts that she would have to adapt a male gender identity to do the same: “If I cut my hair real short, learned to smoke and talk rough, maybe I could” (179). Raylene’s role in the novel as a strong opponent to patriarchal society is in itself a statement about what she is up against. In one significant way there is a man missing at the top of the pyramid; Bone’s grandfather is dead and her grandmother is the family’s head. That there is a woman at the top of the family pyramid is a conscious choice by Allison. It serves as a symbol of the old family structure falling apart. Her uncles partly fill out the role of patriarchs but they fall short when they cheat on their wives and thereby disintegrate their families. When they go to jail, well they are in jail, and thus not in charge of anything. But as a whole *Bastard Out of Carolina* is very aware of the patriarchal setting in which it finds itself. And Allison is very aware of writing her opposition to it into the story.

Dorothy Allison fits the grit lit definition very well but she does not fit the mold completely. In this specific area which deals with gender roles and the power balance between the sexes, she reshapes the confines of the genre and makes it her own. The way in which Allison deals with gender roles and relations is different from the typical grit lit novel. While setting the novel in a male-dominated patriarchal environment she manages to expose the flaws of the systems and the products of it. These subtle variations present a statement about gender roles.

The men, while dominant, are portrayed as being little boys and certainly not men. This is quite different from several other grit lit writers. Here we often have a male protagonist who is mixed up with various women, often very young women. In Larry Brown’s *Fay* we have a young female protagonist but she is courted by several grown-up males. In his related novel *Joe* the protagonists are male and the few women who are included are sexual objects, like when Wade lets a man have sex with his 13 year old daughter. Despite the men not necessarily handling the relationships very well, there is no doubt that the men are the stronger characters and the ones in power. Women may come and go, they may complain and attack the males but the power dynamics of the gender relations are never seriously questioned. In *Bastard Out of Carolina* men are compared to boys, to girls and to dogs. Through this move Allison strips away male authority. Reese’s father, Lyle Parsons, is described as being “pretty as a girl” (59), Uncle Wade as “a dog. Don’t care where he sticks

it” (83). And Aunt Ruth says of Daddy Glen that “[t]here’s a way he’s just a little boy himself, wanting more of your mama than you, wanting to be her baby more than her husband. And that an’t so rare, I’ll tell you.’ [...] ‘Men,’ she said solemnly, ‘are just little boys climbing up on titty whenever they can’” (123). This way men are made to appear less masculine, human and grown up. Describing a grown man like this strips away his authority and makes him appear less dangerous and the men in the novel are not allowed to play as dominating roles when their self-perceived authority is constantly mocked behind their backs.

Dorothy Allison grew up in a patriarchal family and society and she does not deny these facts in her literature, but she does portray the gender dynamics a little different. Her men are still the ones who beat their wives, drive trucks, get drunk and get into fights. But these actions are portrayed more as expressions of powerlessness than of power. That is, the males are still physically stronger, they are the fornicators, the drinkers and the fighters which all fit within the tradition, but these traits are made to appear pathetic and this is fairly uncommon in the grit lit genre. It could be argued that Erskine Caldwell, who predates grit lit but bears some resemblance to the genre, has tried to make the males seem pathetic. Ty Ty Walden’s never-ending search for the gold he just knows lies somewhere on his small lot of land in *God’s Little Acre* is one example and Dude having sex with his sleeping sister in *Tobacco Road* is another but with Caldwell it seems more like comic relief than anything else (Bledsoe 85; McDonald 16-17). This is not lost on Allison who says: “[Caldwell’s] basic message was that poor people were dirt and hopeless” (Pratt 2).

Aunt Raylene is to Bone the most stable and reliable grownup. It is noteworthy that Aunt Raylene is the only dependable person which Bone has to look up to as Aunt Raylene is the only one seriously challenging the gender roles in the society where the novel takes place. In insisting on doing things her own way, she is nothing like the other women in the novel who may mock their men behind their back but in the end they stick with them; Anney and Daddy Glen, Aunt Alma and Uncle Wade. The other women serve to uphold the gender structures in society while Aunt Raylene both metaphorically and literally “has always lived out past the city limits” (Allison, *Bastard* 178).

While Allison avails herself of grit lit traits and characters, it seems clear that they are also used to reveal the flawed structure of the patriarchal framework in which Bone and Allison find themselves. Thus Allison fits within the grit lit definition but while staying within the genre’s overall framework, she deconstructs some of its defining features to make room to tell her own story. The importance of place, the patriarchal structures in society, the use of the Southern Gothic and the grotesque, the social class is more or less used to the same

extent as in the male grit lit writers' works. It is merely in her portrayal of gender roles and sexuality that Allison really sets herself apart. Allison's alternate take on gender roles is evident through two tools she uses in the novel. She uses Bone's coming of age and discovery of a voice and its purpose as a metaphor for a feminist awakening and she portrays the men and women in ways that leave no doubt that women are every bit as capable of taking care of themselves as are men.

Chapter 2

From Silence to Gospel – Finding a Voice

Dorothy Allison's literary project is directly reflected in the development of her protagonist, Bone, whose story starts with her birth to an unconscious mother and continues with her subsequent struggle to find an identity and a voice. As Bone finds a voice, Allison's feminist statement unfolds. Allison wants to reclaim the Southern universe for women, and does so by using her protagonist's coming of age as a metaphor for the construction of a feminist narrative. Bone's development in *Bastard Out of Carolina* reflects the development of Allison's feminist voice. The writing process behind the novel also serves as a therapeutic journey for herself (Allison, *Skin* 34). "Believing in literature – a feminist literature – became a reason to spend my life in that pursuit," Allison writes (*Skin* 168). This tells the reader of her fiction, in so many words, that her project is to write feminist literature.

To a great extent Dorothy Allison also sees herself as a voice for homosexuals, and for poor whites. She writes in *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class & Literature*:

"I have never been able to make clear the degree of my fear, the extent to which I feel myself denied: not only that I am queer in a world that hates queers, but that I was born poor into a world that despises the poor. The need to make my world believable to people who have never experienced it is part of why I write fiction." (14)

Her insistence to claim a space for herself and people like her is intense in this paragraph, as it is in *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Being homosexual and poor emphasizes the minority role in which Allison already finds herself as a woman in a patriarchal and heteronormative society which "despises the poor." In a collection of texts on homosexuality in the South, *Out in the South*, Mab Segrest writes in an essay dedicated to Dorothy Alison that lesbian literature is "fueled by the knowledge that what we have to say is essential to our own survival and to the survival of the larger culture that has tried so hard to destroy us" (205). This emphasizes the

void in Southern narratives made up by the nonexistent gay literature. While the stories of the poor are often written, they are done so in a sometimes condescending fashion. Allison writes: “The poverty portrayed by left-wing intellectuals was just as romantic, a platform for assailing the upper and middle classes, and from their perspective, the working-class hero was invariably male, righteously indignant, and inhumanly noble” (*Skin* 17). Allison grew up with incest and violence and does not see this proud greater cause and the honorable poverty; what she sees is much more sad and horrible. And of course the “invariably male” working-class hero can be both a he and a she. Allison’s project is to be part of filling this void; for gays, for women and for the poor. Indeed, using Bone as a metaphor for a feminist awakening Allison claims a space for poor, white, gay women in grit lit and the real world demographic it represents.

2.1. No Voice: Starting from Scratch

Bone is born a “nobody” in the sense that she does not feel as if she has an identity. This is illustrated from the outset by her being born to an unconscious mother and a father she never knows with a birth certificate stating she is illegitimate. Her father is never spoken of and is held in contempt in the family. His name is never even mentioned. This association with a despised man she never knows forms Bone’s early identity; she feels flawed and marginalized. Bone thus starts without a real voice because she has no story to tell. The reader hears almost nothing about Anney’s life prior to Bone’s birth, and Bone has to create her own story somehow.

As with all coming of age novels, *Bastard Out of Carolina* is about finding an identity. And we see Bone as a clean slate from the beginning. Bone says she is never called by her real name, Ruth Anne, chosen after her Aunt Ruth and her mother, Anney. Her real name of Ruth Anne is thus not even unique but a mere reference to others. Anne is spelled Ann, Anne and Anna on different paperwork being filled out at the hospital (2). With no parent present at her birth, she is named by an aunt. Bone’s identity is further blurred as she does not even go by her own name, but the odd nickname Bone. Bone is neither a boy name nor a girl name – in fact it is rarely used to describe anything living much less a person. Bone is at best a person *in spe* – she will have to create her own story. Furthermore Bone is “certified a bastard by the state of South Carolina” after her aunts fail to provide the name of her father. The narrator notes that the hospital may not mind how a newborn’s middle name is spelled but they sure mind whether there is a paternal last name (2-3). This illustrates from the outset that the setting is patriarchal and that it is going to be hard for Bone to assert herself.

Allison's story is semiautobiographical and so she tells it in her own words attributing power to the persons who in real life held power. Her biological father is therefore in Bone's story not mentioned by name, since he is not an important part of the narrative or Allison's own life. "There weren't any pictures of my real daddy, and Mama wouldn't talk to me about him," Bone says (25). Infant Bone even urinates on her biological father when he comes to see the child – the only time he ever does so. Her Aunt Alma says it was almost as if Bone expressed Anney's thoughts about him with that act (25-26). Bone's separation from her biological father is joined by her being born to an unconscious mother, a situation that dismisses the notion of a mother-child symbiosis at birth. Bone and her mother are two different people, and this is fairly clear from the outset of the novel and is finally made explicit at the end when Anney leaves Bone with Aunt Raylene.

Bone's search for a voice is a metaphor for Allison's attempt with this novel to find a literary voice, to tell her story in her own words, to take that story back and claim it as her own. This quote illustrates the personal importance of the novel for Allison: "Writing *Bastard Out of Carolina* became, ultimately, the way to claim my family's pride and tragedy, and the embattled sexuality I had fashioned on a base of violence and abuse," (*Skin* 34). When Allison was eleven to thirteen years old, she had a period when she stopped talking. And she says she has only vague memories of those two years (*Skin* 18-19). She literally had no voice then and through writing the novel she is creating that voice.

Whenever Bone tries to learn about her father, she is met with silence. When Anney and Aunt Alma are doing Reese's and Bone's hair, Bone asks Anney what her father was like, but nobody answers. Bone can see that she does not look like her mother and aunts. "I don't look like nobody," she says using a vernacular double-negative, but her words illustrate that she does not look like "nobody" and therefore she must resemble somebody, only she cannot find out whom. She then asks if she looks like her father, but again she is given no answers (30-31). Daddy Glen is also uninterested in Bone's past. When Bone hears stories her grandmother tells her, Daddy Glen reacts by telling her that she should pay no mind to her grandmother and adds that "I'll tell you what's true," and "I'll tell you who you are" (52).

Allison's struggles to come to terms with her past, to understand it and to accept it, are reflected in Bone's growing up. Like Allison's literary beginnings, Bone does not know what to say and believes that nobody wants to hear it anyway, therefore she says nothing. But she knows that there is a story that wants to come out. Allison's painful memories are reflected in Bone has screamed during a beating and been left without a voice (*Bastard* 107). "I did not know how to tell anyone what I felt," Bone says to the reader, thus reflecting that the lack of a

voice is to be taken both literally and figuratively. Allison's fight to come to terms with her mother and her not discussing the elephant in the room is, for example, illustrated when Bone says of her mother: "'I don't want to hear it,' she'd say when I tried to tell her something Granny or Aunt Alma had passed on to me. [...] [S]he expected me to ask no questions she didn't want to answer" (110).

Peggy Dunn Bailey suggests in "Female Gothic Fiction, Grotesque Realities, and *Bastard Out of Carolina*: Dorothy Allison Revises the Southern Gothic," that the references to the Boatwrights' Cherokee heritage serve as a symbol of the family being "disenfranchised, the descendants of ancestors from whom land, language and home were stripped, the victims of cultural rape and the inheritors of socially sanctioned violence and loss" (282). Her statement explains why a Cherokee heritage is used in Allison's novel. But in fact the Cherokee references might more fittingly be read as being particularly related to Bone and not the Boatwrights in general. It is Bone who is singled out as looking like her Cherokee great-great-grandfather – not the Boatwrights as a group. The other Boatwrights do, in fact, not look like him at all. When describing him, Bone's grandmother says he did not really like the children he had with her grandmother, and none of them looked like him. Bone's grandmother describes him as being "a black-eyed bastard himself" and this description echoes Bone's status as a "bastard" as well as her "black Indian eyes" mentioned on the previously (25-27). Furthermore, he is described as having been a quiet man, a trait which bears resemblance to Bone's demeanor at this point. It seems as if it is Bone alone who is "disenfranchised." Bone is the minority, the one who does not quite fit in. This role is something she actively adopts: After the narrator tells the reader that you never knew when her grandmother's stories were true and when they were not, and after Uncle Earle says, upon hearing his mother's story, that you never know who is and who is not Native American, Bone recalls: "I looked at him carefully, keeping my Cherokee eyes level and my face blank. I could not have said a word if Great-Great-Granddaddy had been standing there looking back at me with my own black eyes" (27). In this paragraph she accepts the role as a minority and an outcast; a person whose violent history has been told so many times over by the ruling majority that it is impossible to tell what is true and what is false.

When Allison was in college in Florida, she became very active in the feminist and lesbian communities. As Allison met other incest survivors, she became aware that she was "normal" and not a "monster," as she had previously believed. Rather, incest is more common than she thought, and Allison decided she needed to accept her past and not just move on but make a point of telling it. Accordingly, this is when she stopped burning her writing at an

annual bonfire (*Skin* 51-54). She learned to take on this outsider or minority role, just as Bone learns to take on her role as a descendent of Native Americans.

2.2. Gospel Period: Discovering a Voice

Bone becomes interested in gospel music. It serves as an escape for her, a place where she can dream big. She is fascinated with what it has to offer in the form of being the voice of God and part of a greater cause. Later, she learns that the gospel circuit does not hold all the answers and she becomes somewhat disillusioned. Allison is also fascinated by the gospel in the form of the lesbian feminist community, but she learns that she has to keep searching in order for her to find her own voice.

Gradually, Bone learns more about her past, and she slowly gets closer to being able to piece some of it together. She also learns from her grandmother that you do not need all the details for your story to work. Once when Bone goes to a new school, she is asked her name, and out of nowhere she says that she is Roseanne Carter from Atlanta (67). This constructed identity fascinates and surprises Bone. She had not thought it would be so easy to get away with. But it also frightens her, and when she transfers to another school again, she is done making up identities in school. This event signifies that Bone is learning she has a voice, and once she figures that out, she is anxious for people to hear it. This is when she starts becoming interested in Gospel music. She says she wants “more than anything in the world” to be one of the girls in white dresses wearing crosses and whose songs make old ladies cry (141). When comparing this desire to her poor white upbringing with dirty clothes and heretic behavior, it is clear that she is trying to create her own identity and that she wants it to be different from that of her family. Indeed, her grandmother exclaims “bullshit and apple butter” when Bone tells her she wants to be a gospel singer, an outburst that serves as a fine description of the contrast between where Bone is from and where she wants to go (143). The narrator soon informs the reader that Bone “no longer accepted everything Mama told [her] as gospel” (145). The use of the word “gospel” is deliberately ambiguous. Bone starts singing gospel songs and wants to join the gospel circuit meaning she wants something different from her mother’s situation, which is “not gospel.” Bone discovering gospel music symbolizes Allison discovering her voice – she can now create her own “gospel.” Only when Allison dissociates herself from her mother’s choices can she confront them and tell her own story.

In the feminist community in the 1970’s, Allison is determined to serve “the cause.” When she attends a two-week seminar at the Sagaris Institute in 1975, Allison says that she finds writing a “self-indulgent and trivial pleasure” (*Skin* 83). She prioritizes demonstrations,

building furniture for a women's center, and writing grants for a childcare collective over her writing. Like Bone, she wants to serve the greater cause.

Bone wants to sing gospel songs and have people admire her, even be a messenger for the voice of God, but she loses this ambition when Anney takes her to get baptized. All it leaves her with is a cold that necessitates her staying in bed for a week. Here she reads the Bible, but she focuses on the Book of Revelation, "taking comfort in the hope of the apocalypse, God's retribution on the wicked" (152). Bone is done believing she will be a messenger of God; she will not be one of "the little girls in white fringed vests with silver and gold embroidered crosses" (141). Bone meets Shannon Pearl, who starts in her class, and Bone instantly takes a liking to her. Shannon Pearl is obese, albino-like, has thin white hair and is described as ugly and monstrous. Bone initially thinks that Shannon must be a nice person because she is so unappealing physically. She gets this notion from novels she has read, but it turns out to not at all be the case. Shannon is viewed as an "angel" (155) by her parents, who book gospel concerts for churches, and with whom Bone therefore tours the so-called gospel circuit, but behind her parents' back Shannon is anything but an angel: she swears and tells horror stories that even Bone finds morbid. She drinks and has racist attitudes. When Bone and Shannon have their big argument, it is over a church they can hear from a distance. Bone is fascinated with the beautiful sound coming from it, but Shannon realizes that it is a black church and dismisses Bone's idea of letting her father know of these singers so that he can book them: "My daddy don't handle niggers," she says. This attitude infuriates Bone, and then Shannon also gets mad, and the girls embark on a major argument where Shannon calls Bone and her family trash and Bone calls Shannon ugly (170).

Just as Bone is disappointed in the gospel circuit when a member calls her "trash," so is Allison disappointed in parts of the feminist community when she and others are attacked at a conference in 1982, when she is accused of being an anti-feminist as well as a proponent of sexual abuse of children. This attack rattles Allison, who feels like Bone after her baptizing; the "church" has disappointed and Allison has to revise her faith in the community and what it has to offer.

Later, despite Bone not having seen Shannon since their argument, she is invited to Thanksgiving at the Pearls, which catches her by surprise. She ends up going, but before she even enters their garden, she witnesses Shannon spray lighter fluid on the grill. The lighter fluid can suck in air when it decompresses, there is a moment of silence, and then Shannon is burned alive. What is crucial to Bone's experience here is the way Shannon is subsequently remembered. At her funeral, Roseanne Pearl says of her daughter: "She loved babies, you

know. She was always a friend to the less fortunate. All her little friends are here today. And she could sing. Oh! You should have heard her sing” (202). This is the exact opposite of Bone’s impression of Shannon; Shannon told stories of infants killed in the most spectacular ways, she had no friends except Bone, and she could not sing. Even her name bears a resemblance to “shining pearl,” which again contradicts her actual appearance. Shannon’s mother completely rewrites her daughter’s personality and life. It is no coincidence that Bon’s invented character with a fictitious name and background is also called Roseanne.

Bone finds both Roseanne Carter and Roseanne Pearl dangerous due to their made-up stories and their fear of telling the truth. It scares Allison that you can tell a story that is completely false. In hindsight, Allison realizes how a seminar at Sagaris in 1975 was a formative event. The author Bertha Harris emphasized to Allison and the other women there that literature has to be brave and honest. When Allison thought about the other women’s written assignments, she realizes that they and she all wrote with a great amount of fear of telling the real story. After Sagaris, Allison was at a loss, and it took her six months to start writing again (*Skin* 90).

2.3. Reclaiming a Story: Discovering the Power of Storytelling

Bone learns that storytelling is very powerful and through her abuse she uses this power to rewrite events that she lives through. While making up lies like her imagined character, Roseanne Carter, Roseanne Pearl’s, story about Shannon, Bone learns through her masturbation sessions that rewriting actual events can help the person who lived through them reclaim a sense of power over past events.

Initially, Bone recalls imagining “being tied up and put in a haystack while someone set the dry stale straw ablaze. I would picture it perfectly while rocking on my hand” (63). Here she is not really controlling the fantasy, and she is not using it actively to rewrite the abuse she suffers, but gradually she learns to do so. The narrator tells the reader that Bone’s fantasies “got more violent and complicated as Daddy Glen continued to beat me with the same two belts he’d set aside for me” (112). This indicates that Bone is struggling to make sense of both the beating and her desire and how to combine the two. She feels wrong because she masturbates while recollecting the beatings she receives. She is sure what she does is wrong and that she is sick for doing it, but in fact she is slowly beginning to rewrite what actually happened: “In them [the fantasies] I was special. I was triumphant, important. I was not ashamed” (113). She is learning to use the power of storytelling to reconstruct her experiences, as Allison herself points out in an interview: “It becomes a technique whereby

she retains a sense of power in a situation where she has none. And comfort, just sheer physical comfort of retelling herself the story in which she is not the victim,” Allison describes the way she uses Bone’s storytelling skills as a way of shifting the power balance in the interpretation of the abuse (Megan 72). While she only defies Daddy Glen in her fantasies, she does defy him there. So while Bone cannot control the abuse, she can control her memory of it, and that is a powerful tool for her.

Later Bone thinks back on the rape she is the victim of. Again she masturbates, but she is no longer able to take any pride in her version of what happened: “I had been so proud of not crying the last time, so sure it was important. Why had it mattered? [...] No, it did not matter whether I had screamed or not. It had all been the way he wanted it. It had nothing to do with me” (253). Having learned the power that lies in retelling her own story and creating her own reality, Bone realizes that it does not change the actual events. No matter how much of a heroine she tries to make herself look in her fantasies, she is still the victim of molestation.

Allison says that she wrote stories upon stories for years and burned them all in an annual bonfire. It was not until she talked to other incest survivors that she realized she had to tell her story. The story offers her a sense of cleansing in that she comes to terms with her past but it also leaves her realizing exactly what she had suffered. The telling of the story and the victim’s perspective is important, even though it cannot change the transgressions. The only thing Allison, and by extension Bone, can do is move forward and in doing so actively make sure they write the future themselves and make choices which allow them to be who they want to be.

2.4. Writing Your Own Story

When Bone first is sent out to stay with Aunt Raylene for a while, it is because Daddy Glen has had his hours reduced so he makes less money and is home more. This is a liability to Bone, and her mother knows it. It is hinted at that Aunt Raylene is the third choice after Aunt Alma, who is fighting with Uncle Wade, and Aunt Ruth, who is becoming ever sicker. Aunt Raylene lives a bit of a distance from the rest of the Boatwrights, who all live in Greenville. She lives on the river, right where the river curves around her house. Aunt Raylene is a major revelation to Bone, because she is not like the other aunts. Bone’s first lesson at Raylene’s is that “trash rises” (180). This is to be taken literally, as Aunt Raylene picks trash out of the river when it gets caught in the river bed. She then cleans it and sells it. It is, of course, also a metaphor for Bone in particular and the Boatwrights in general. Bone learns that she has

options, that she can do things, and Aunt Raylene makes sure to encourage her in everything she does. Aunt Raylene says directly to Bone that she is “so tired of people whining about what might happen to them, never taking no chances or doing anything new. I’m glad you an’t gonna be like that, Bone. I’m counting on you to get out there and do things, girl” (182). This statement establishes the mentor-protégé relationship between Bone and Aunt Raylene.

The great metaphor is when Bone’s cousin Patsy Ruth discovers two trawling hooks in the river outside Aunt Raylene’s house. Bone gets them out of the river, and soon her cousins Garvey and Grey join her. They all ponder what to do with the hooks, but they are interrupted by Aunt Raylene who locks them away. Bone does not give up so easily, and she immediately starts dreaming about having one of the hooks. She wants to have it, and eventually she goes down to the cellar to get one of them.

Before Bone manages to get the hook inside the house, it is discovered by her cousin Grey who also wants the hook. Bone has to pry it away from Grey by saying that she will let him in on the break-in at Woolworth’s for which she intends to use it. She has to pry away the hook from her cousin, which also alludes to how Allison has to use some tricks to make grit lit her own. She does so through insisting on taking the typically masculine story and making it her own, in the same way as Bone does here. She takes the hook, which symbolizes the power of writing, and pries it away from her male counterparts within the genre, here symbolized in the family ties. She “throws out the patriarchy” (*Skin* 168) as she uses her bright mind to outsmart Cousin Grey and convince him to let her keep the hook (*Bastard* 191-3). Bone later uses the hook to break into Woolworth’s, where the manager is a powerful man in Greenville. This act symbolizes Allison using the pen to penetrate the male power structure of the literary establishment. Bone literally penetrates the main business in town and it is operated by a male who once humiliated her. Now he is on the receiving end of the power struggle.

At night she polishes up the hook and masturbates against the chain connected to it. The hook is a metaphor for Allison’s pen. Trash rises, and this is what happens here: out of the trash comes this sharp hook which Bone immediately knows she wants. Likewise, Allison discovers the power of her writing and the necessity of it after the classes with Bertha Harris. Allison remembers how she “gulped down Bertha’s lauding of what trash might do like a thirsty woman sucks liquid” (*Skin* 207). For young Allison, it is necessary to polish her writing style and find some direction for it. Of Harris, Allison says: “I, too, wanted literature, but I had no conviction of my own worth, none of the arrogance, insistence, and aggression that Bertha ascribed to great writers. I had only begun to figure out who I might be, not who I

was” (*Skin* 206). For young Bone, it is necessary to polish the hook for much the same reasons: “What I really was could not be touched. What I really wanted was not yet imagined.” When Bone goes to sleep that night, she begins to come to terms with, and feel comfortable with herself and she adds: “Somewhere far away a child was screaming, but right then, it was not me” (193). As Bone learns the power that lies in storytelling, she realizes she can create her own reality and improve her situation. The metaphor applies as well to Allison’s authorship: “When I couldn’t find my story, I wrote it. I trusted books; I grew up that way. And so I made my own story writing it down so that it would be real.” In this interview, she describes it as necessary for her to write stories (Megan 73). It is the writing and her using her voice that is creating her opportunities for her. This is what is illustrated in Bone’s discovery of the hook, and this is the way Allison has found a writing identity.

That Bone learns about her strength and power over her own narrative from Aunt Raylene is a metaphor for Allison’s mentor, Bertha Harris. “All those years I had owed Bertha Harris a debt. She was the one who stood up and dared to say what she really thought, who told me to name myself a writer and live up to the responsibility,” Allison writes (*Skin* 90-91), and her statement perfectly echoes Bone’s and Aunt Raylene’s mentor-protégé relationship as for instance when Aunt Raylene says to Bone that she is “counting on [Bone] to get out there and do things, girl” (182). Aunt Raylene’s and Bertha Harris’s mentor roles are parallel. Like Bone, Allison writes that she “gulped down Bertha’s lauding of what trash might do like a thirsty woman sucks liquid” (*Skin* 207). Just as Bone learned from Aunt Raylene, Allison learned from Harris that “trash rises,” a lesson for which she is grateful. In fact, as an homage, Allison named the Boatwright family after a character in Harris’s *Lover* (*Skin* 90-91).¹

2.5. Emancipation

The total dissociation from her family comes at the end of the text when Bone has been raped by Daddy Glen. After the rape, we learn that Anney focuses on making Daddy Glen stop banging his head against the car door and not on Bone who is in misery. In the next chapter, Bone wakes up in the hospital and only Aunt Raylene is there. Aunt Raylene takes Bone home to stay with her and after a short while Anney comes by to say that she loves Bone and then she leaves to be with Daddy Glen. In the parting process, Bone’s mother hands Bone her birth certificate. Here she is effectively saying to Bone that she is now her own

¹ It should be mentioned as a curious note, that in *Fay* Sam recalls going fishing with an Earl Boatwright in Magee, Mississippi (473). There is no other mention of him so this is most likely just a coincidence but Allison’s Boatwrights are not.

person. Thus Bone has found an identity. “I was who I was going to be,” Bone says but continues with the ominous “someone like her, like Mama, a Boatwright woman” (309). Despite Bone’s notion, she is in fact not going to be like her mother. Her mother gives in to a rapist, but Bone is determined not to follow her example.

While some have read the ending as tragic (Bailey 280) – including Allison herself in an interview (Megan 77) – the ending can also be read as bearing promises for Bone. Bone is emancipated from her mother in the scene that might be read as a rejection by her mother. But she lives with a woman who will undoubtedly serve as a better role model than Anney in that Aunt Raylene has provided Bone with more insight and a greater world view. When Anney hands Bone her birth certificate, now without “Illegitimate” stamped on it, she is in a sense disowning her child, but she is also providing Bone with a birth certificate, an identity certificate which does not have her father’s name on it. Bone is then free of her mother and of her father, and she is not a bastard for it. The way of life she is exposed to at Aunt Raylene’s is deemed acceptable and not “illegitimate.”

Allison may not have fit in at the beginning and she may have had a hard time making her voice heard initially, but by the end of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, she has managed to become a legitimate Southern storyteller. She is no longer illegitimate, and she is not subject to any masculine literary tradition. Just as the men in the novel have shaped Bone for better or worse, men have been part of shaping Allison’s writing, but she is no longer subjected to them. She realizes that “even if you know you are not part of that imaginary creature [...] you are still shaped by that hegemony, or your resistance to it. The only way I found to resist that homogenized view of the world was to make myself part of something larger than myself” (*Skin*, 16-17). Even if you oppose the structure that be, it still shapes you. You can resist it but it is still part of shaping you. Allison resists the grit lit gender structure, and her emancipation is symbolized in the ending of the novel – Bone has been emancipated without having the name of her father or literary inspiration on her birth certificate (Bailey 279). This translates into Allison becoming a legitimate writer without having to rest her work on the foundation of her male forebears.

Chapter 3

Male Maladies: Defining and Redefining Gender Roles

Dorothy Allison makes grit lit a mouthpiece for feminism. She does so through exposing the males as pathetic and/or harmless thereby emasculating them. With the men's towering presence gone, there is room for strong female characters and Allison has Raylene and Bone fill that void.

In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Allison takes gender relations and deconstructs them. Allison describes men as grit lit characters like above, and she then proceeds to illustrate how they are really more like little boys. When Uncle Earle chases girls, who are Bone's age, and when Daddy Glen cries like a child in Anney's lap, they are emasculated and *de facto* boys. This representation leaves room for women to occupy some of the space typically filled by men. Uncle Earle's girls' father complex does not work out in his favor as he is both in danger of going to jail and being castrated. Daddy Glen's mother complex also fails, as it strips away his masculinity when he becomes in essence another child of Anney's. The powerful roles as heads of families are still occupied by the men but only at first glance. Aunt Raylene manages to do just fine on her own, and Anney is the real head of her family, even though she fails to fully acknowledge that fact herself.

3.1. Rearranging the Traditional Gender Dichotomy

It is clear from the start that Bone is fascinated with men and the powers they hold. She has never known her father, and he is not spoken of at home. Reese's father is revered but dead. Daddy Glen is not yet in the picture. Thus her male role models are her uncles and they are described like this:

I worshipped my uncles – Earle, Beau and Nevil. They were all big men with wide shoulders, broken teeth and sunken features. They kept dogs trained for hunting and drove old trucks with metal toolboxes bolted to the reinforced wood sides. They worked in the mills or at the furnace repair business, or sometimes did roofing or construction work depending on how the industry was going. They tinkered with cars together on the weekends, standing around in the yard sipping whiskey and talking dirty, kicking at the greasy remains of engines the never finished rebuilding. Their eyes were narrow under sun-bleached eyebrows, and their hands were forever working on a blade or a piece of wood, or oiling some little machine part or other. (22)

These men are recognized throughout the grit lit landscape. They could be characters in Larry Brown's or Harry Crews's novels. Bone's fascination with these men mirrors Allison's appreciation of the male grit lit authors, and their inspirations. Allison is part of this sphere, yet she is not a full member of the "uncles'" circle. This is what Allison refers to, when she reminisce about her childhood when her uncle would not teach her how to shoot a gun. She promises she will be careful, but her uncle says: "It an't [sic] about careful, it's about you're a girl. You can whine and wiggle all you wont [sic]. An't [sic] nobody in this family gonna teach you to shoot" (*Skin* 46-47). While Allison's uncles are all revered by her, it is clear to her, and to them, that they are inherently different, but Allison does not accept being denied from doing what she wants.

While men are still atop the family and society hierarchical pyramids, their authority is dwindling. Allison illustrates this vanishing authority, when she in specific scenes have the men implicitly say more about themselves than they intend to. Furthermore Bone and Raylene function as direct threats to the male powers that be, due to their transcendence of gender roles. When they take on traditional male gender characteristics, they implicitly say that the males hold no power over the women.

Uncle Earle is known as Black Earle Boatwright because of his big black hair. When he goes to prison, he has his black hair cut off. This haircut symbolizes the emasculation, he experiences when being locked up. The hair is part of his identity and a symbol of his strength, so as with Samson in the Bible, cutting off his hair symbolizes stripping him of strength. Since it was his grit lit masculine behavior that got him there, Allison suggests that this idea of masculinity ends up undermining itself. While no male grit lit protagonist ends up wealthy and genuinely happy due to his "fighting, fishing and fornicating," he does often manage to stay in control, and when he is losing it, exertion of more power often helps. However, Allison's males only lose, when they continue their ways. Uncle Earle is by far the most classic grit lit male character in the novel, and his power as a male and a patriarch is often challenged. Here he talks about how his ex-wife Teresa left him: "Teresa used to tell me how I filled her up, satisfied her very soul [...] When she left me she told me I wasn't even a full mouth of spit. Me, her long, cool drink of water! Damn!" He then talks about, how sometimes things just fall apart, and then the paragraph concludes with this: "He tried to light the cigarette, but it fell apart in his hands. Looking down at the mess of damp tobacco all over his jeans he swore and pushed himself up off the step. 'Sad, an't [sic] it,' he said, 'a man who can't even keep a cigarette together? Sad as hell.' He walked away brushing his jeans as he went" (126). So, previously he has obviously had a strong libido, so strong that it has

ruined his marriage. Since “fornicating” is part of the male grit lit character traits, he has basically done what a grit lit male is supposed to do, but it has left him a failure. He could not be “the long cool drink of water,” which he “wanted to pour over that woman like a river of love.” Rather, his phallic cigarette is falling apart, and ends up soiling his pants. The phallic drink could not do what it was supposed to do, and his cigarette falls apart in his hands. The message here is that in the end the grit lit male undermines himself, but Allison does not write him out of the novel, she simply presents his ways as less than desirable.

Uncle Earle takes up with what we understand are girls so young you could go to prison for dating them. Uncle Earle mentions a girl he dated two years prior to the end of the novel. She was, he says, “not any bigger than Bone” meaning no more than twelve years old (238; 273). While the reader’s perception of Uncle Earle is mediated through the narrator who loves Uncle Earle, it is clear at this point, that he is at best a borderline pedophile. That this infatuation with girls cannot stand is hinted at when Uncle Earle says that one of his girls almost cut off his testicles with a pair of scissors (273). His masculinity is in danger, and he seems to implicitly know this when he talks about him not being a “long, cool drink of water,” and when he, blind with rage after having learned Daddy Glen has beaten Bone severely, yells “I’ll murder you, you son of a bitch!” (246). He then proceeds to beat up Daddy Glen. Uncle Earle’s rage, induced by learning his niece has been beat, illustrates how sad he is, since he molests girls himself. In the end, the abuse of power that the men in the novel are guilty of, seems to cause their very position to be endangered.

The most important man in the novel is, for better or worse, Daddy Glen, who is married to Bone’s mother, Anney, and who sexually molests Bone. While Bone is thoroughly impressed with her uncles and the male world in general, this does not go for Daddy Glen whom she dislikes from the beginning. When Daddy Glen takes an eye to Anney, he decides to marry her and carry a knife in order to be able to “kill any man who [dares] touch her,” thinking to himself, he “[feels] so strong he [wants] to spit” (13). The male domination is important: he decides he will have her, and does not ask her, whether the feeling is mutual. Daddy Glen is raised in a very patriarchal family, so much so that we never really hear about his mother. It is evident that Daddy Glen has “daddy issues,” when he talks about “marrying the whole damn Boatwright legend” in order to spite his family (13). This rebellion is one side of him; the other is the fact that his mother is a non-factor in his life. Anney takes on the mother role in the absence of Daddy Glen’s mother. Daddy Glen is thus *de facto* a child. This mother-son relationship is emphasized, when Daddy Glen buries his head in Anney’s lap like a child at a moment, when Anney’s actual child, Bone, needs her more. This picks apart

Daddy Glen's manhood. Daddy Glen strives to be like "Black Earle Boatwright." He wants to be part of the paragraph quoted above about Bone's uncles. Alas he is not. He strives to be a man, just like any boy, for a boy is exactly what he is, says Aunt Ruth: "Men [...] are just little boys climbing up on titty whenever they can" (123). Aunt Ruth continues: "there's a way he's just a little boy himself, wanting more of your mama than you, wanting to be her baby more than her husband." This emasculating quote literally states that he is not a man, but a boy.

Daddy Glen is of course not supposed to even resemble the failed hero. He does not properly fit the grit lit male character mold and is not supposed to do so. But he is the head of the family and yet for all his ever more desperate attempts at convincing both himself and the other family members of this, he fails. He remains the head of the family, but the family is disintegrating, as Bone at the end of the novel starts living with Aunt Raylene. Allison is thus not replacing the patriarchy, she acknowledges the patriarchal structure of family and society, but she seems to ask: Can the males handle that power?

In Bone's family, it is in fact Anney who keeps the family together. Anney initially seems weak to the reader, since she cannot just leave Daddy Glen, as you cannot help but hope she does, but she is an inspiration to Bone, and she does good things. When the girls cannot get dinner one night because Daddy Glen cannot keep a job, Anney prostitutes herself to get food for her children. Anney is the one making the sacrifices to make the family work. Daddy Glen's answer seems to be more domination, whenever he is faced with challenges as patriarch. As a clear opposition to this idea, Allison has Anney let herself be dominated in order to get food on the table. This illustrates the failure of domination as a successful tool to govern a family. Daddy Glen fails to take care of the children, while Anney makes sacrifices to provide for her children. She is humiliated at the courthouse for her quest to obtain a birth certificate without "illegitimate" printed on it. When she near the end hands over the birth certificate to Bone, that act could read as very selfless act on her part, since the birth certificate and Bone both mean a lot to her. Giving up both could indicate a desire to do what is best for her daughter. An act like this is what Allison refers to, when she writes that "[t]he poverty I knew was dreary, deadening, shameful, the women powerful in ways not generally seen as heroic by the world outside the family" (*Skin* 17). The irony here is that Anney marries Glen to get the safety and comfort that comes with a nuclear family. However, it is only when she does, that things start to become dangerous and uncomfortable, particularly for Bone. Daddy Glen is not the main stable provider in the family – Anney is. Kathlene McDonald notes the tragic irony of the reversed gender roles: "Anney falls in love with

Glen's need for attention and mothering yet she maintains that she needs him to take care of her" (20). Anney believes she needs a man, and Daddy Glen believes himself to be a man, but Daddy Glen actually acts like a child toward Anney, and with his inability to stay employed, he becomes another mouth to feed. Anney even has another mother-son relationship earlier, when Anney's relationship with Reese's deceased father, Lyle Parson, is described; Anney called him "manchild" and "loved him like a baby" (6). That Anney in the end chooses to stay with Daddy Glen is a statement about the failure of the family structure in Bone's family. Anney is more powerful than Daddy Glen, but the tragedy is that she does not realize it. The men are not powerful in themselves and if women decide to take care of themselves, they can do so just as well as any man.

3.2. Bone and Aunt Raylene Crossing Gender Boundaries

In order to assert herself in patriarchal society, Bone attempts to appropriate male characteristics. She suggests she, Reese, and their girl cousins play "mean sisters". Reese asks what mean sisters do, and Bone responds: "They do everything their brothers do. Only they do it first and fastest and meanest." Bone claims the characteristics of male gender roles for women, particularly herself. Acting like a man, pretending to shoot guns and ride motorcycles, makes her feel strong and powerful. She plays with a knife, and feeling powerful, she pretends she is "sticking that knife in Daddy Glen." The knife here also acts as a phallic symbol: Having appropriated male characteristics, Bone can now penetrate like a man. Through her phallus and penetration Bone can dominate Daddy Glen like he has dominated her (212-13). It is clear that Bone wants to claim for herself male traits such as capability of domination, exertion of power and readiness to act.

Raylene is a lesbian.² Although Raylene only says she is a lesbian at the very end of the novel, it is already evident here, that she is not like the other Boatwright women and that she blurs gender characteristics as the only person in the novel along with Bone. She wears overalls, cuts her hair short and drives a truck, just like the uncles. Aunt Raylene also went off with a woman to work at a carnival, but she did so as Ray; she dressed like a man in order to work there. Although she does manual labor, she is also considered the best cook in the family, so there is a constant mix of classic male and female gender roles. She looks butch and picks trash out of the river which paints a fairly masculine image. But Aunt Raylene also

² Allison expressively says she included Raylene as a lesbian because she "wanted them to know that there were dykes in the South, working-class dykes who survived, who lived in their families, and their families knew who they were" (Hollibaugh, "Telling a Mean Story" 16).

cooks well and cans vegetables, which is exactly what you would expect a woman to do and be good at in the 1950's. But again, Aunt Raylene blurs the gender roles: she cleans up the trash to make it pretty, and that could be considered a more traditionally feminine activity. She then sells the trash by the roadside along with the canned vegetables. Raylene is figuratively selling the female stereotype by the roadside, and that act suggests that she is not impressed with what it has to offer.

In a setting which is clearly patriarchal, Raylene is the opposition. She does not actively participate in the society structure. Rather she lives outside of society – “out past the city limits” (178) which refers to the geographical location of her house, but it could also mean that she lives outside society's conventions, or simply that she is “out.” This is illustrated in her house being located outside of town away from the other Boatwright women, who have all clearly succumbed to, or maybe never attempted to break away from, patriarchal society. It is also illustrated in Raylene not holding a typical job. She is not part of the structure at all. This clear opposition to the typical Boatwright way of living fascinates Bone, since all she has learned is that she does not really belong, due to her unpopular father as well as her “odd” looks and demeanor. Also, Bone does not want to be a part of the structure, although she does admire her mother's family. Aunt Raylene offers Bone a look at what a woman can also be. Kathlene McDonald notes: “Raylene is able to transcend other people's ideas of her” (McDonald 21). She does this through being a housewife who rejects the classic role for women, and through working with trash and driving a truck, while also canning vegetables. She is hard to pin down, and through her, Bone learns that she has choices.

Aunt Raylene's name in itself transcends people's perception of her: as Raylene she is an aunt, as Ray she is a man. She seemingly crosses gender lines with ease. Bone's real name is Ruth Anne after Aunt Ruth and Anney, but her grandmother wanted her to be named Mattie Raylene after Bone's two aunts with those names. This piece of information is included to provide a kind of inherent kinship with Aunt Raylene and her transcending of gender roles. Had Bone been named Mattie Raylene, it would have allowed her to perform the same gender line crossing act as Aunt Raylene; she could be Matt or Ray. Her double female name is never really used to address her, since it seemingly does not fit. Bone says, she is happy she was not named Mattie Raylene either, but she is nicknamed Bone, because she is “no bigger than a knucklebone” (2). Bone is an ambiguous name – even more so than Raylene, which can be shortened to Ray to resemble Raymond, or Mattie which can be shortened to Matt to give the

impression that the person's real name is Matthew. "Bone" does not in itself refer to either a boy or a girl.

The hook Bone finds at Aunt Raylene's place serves as a metaphor for Allison's pen, as noted in the previous chapter, but it also serves as a metaphor for appropriated male power. It is therefore no coincidence, that the girl who was supposed to be named Mattie Raylene finds the hook, which symbolizes that she can take on male traits and use them for her own good at her Aunt Raylene's place. Raylene blurs gender and sexuality roles, and therefore this is really the only place in and around Greenville where Bone can find a different take on what a girl is supposed to be. This discovery, that her femininity can be much more than what she has grown up around so far and very different from it, is symbolized in the hook. The hook gives Bone the power to do things differently and to level the playing field with the powerful men in town. That it is a hard and shiny object makes it a phallic symbol of male power in patriarchal society where Bone lives. When Bone returns home with the hook, which she stores in a secret place, Anney notes that Bone has changed: "'I'd say you were even a little taller. You hold your head up more'" (195). This change symbolizes that Bone, unlike Anney, is becoming aware of the power she has.

The break-in at Woolworth's is the central scene of the novel. This is where Allison comes of age as a writer, and it is where Bone passes into adulthood. When Bone is sitting on the roof of Woolworth's about to break in, she is feeling confident: "I felt strange and strong, like I had sipped some of Uncle Earle's whiskey or sucked one of Uncle Beau's green pipes" (221). Figuratively speaking, she feels like she has acquired some of the strength and qualities, which her uncles possess. The pipe and the bottle can both be construed as phallic, and they both hold some essence that they let the smoker or drinker take in. Bone feels she is filled with power usually held by males. She enters Woolworth's through the roof. Here she takes her sharp hook out and sinks it down through the air vent. She then proceeds to climb down the vent. She pushes the hook in front of her inside Woolworth's. At one point she slips, and she falls all the way down and crashes through a glass counter. This is a metaphor for Bone having acquired the male power of penetration. The breaking of the glass counter is an analogy to breaking the hymen during intercourse. This is Bone learning how to penetrate the world and dominate. Bone is becoming an adult at this point; she loses her virginity in a larger sense. In this scene she claims control over Woolworth's where the owner, a powerful male, once humiliated her. Woolworth's symbolizes institutionalized patriarchy with the male owner at the top. Bone assuming control over Woolworth's symbolizes her claiming control over her sexuality.

That Bone is the one penetrating is a hint at her having appropriated male characteristics. This is emphasized in her Cousin Grey standing outside helpless waiting for her to open up the Woolworth's store. The man (boy) cannot even do his own penetrating. Cousin Grey is still a rambunctious male, as he is part of finding the hook and part of the break-in, but Bone is in the lead role. Cousin Grey is thus not emasculated, but he is not dominating either, Bone does the dominating. Allison makes the female voice the powerful voice, but she does not alter turn the gender structure upside down. She merely indicates to the writer that women are just as powerful as men. The men are merely left less powerful and crucially less potent which is symbolized by Daddy Glen's abuse no longer having the same impact on Bone as it has had previously. Bone, whose name even has a phallic ring to it, is the one handling the hook. She has the initiative, the power and the potency. Now that she can control her sexuality, she is as powerful as the males. This renders Daddy Glen powerless. From this point on he can no longer hurt Bone. She realizes this on an implicit level and she clearly changes from this point on.

After the break-in, Bone reads a book she has got from Aunt Raylene, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis (228). There is a subtle statement in this small nugget of information. In her contribution to *The Chronicles of Narnia and Philosophy*, Karin Fry notes that "the most sympathetic female characters in *The Chronicles* are consistently the ones who question the traditional roles of women and prove their worth to Aslan through actively engaging in the adventures just like the boys." Fry goes on to say: "The characters have positive and negative things to say about both male and female characters, suggesting an equality between sexes" (158). *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe's* take on gender roles serves as an emphaser of Bone's awakening and coming of age. She learns that she is more powerful than what she has been told and shown at home.

Male and female gender roles are blurred primarily through Aunt Raylene and Bone, but also in other characters' behavior. For instance on page 54 when Bone's cousin Butch says of her: "[Y]ou got a man-type part of you. Rock-hard and nasty and immune to harm." These traits are clearly positive in this setting where people fight and get hurt all the time. The traits ascribed to Bone and usually attributed to men are the positive traits. Reese's father, Lyle Parsons, is described as "pretty as a girl and so white-blond he could have been a model in magazines" (59). Lyle is in fact perhaps the most feminine character in the novel; even his death is smooth and silent. He dies on a summer evening when his truck calmly skids in a shower – even his death is gentle and soft. While he is revered in life and in death, it is no coincidence that he is written out of the story on page seven. Though he embodies qualities

which are universally considered positive, Allison makes it clear that it will take more to survive in this setting. On page 206 Allison again reminds the reader that the protagonist is not your typical girl. Bone laments that she is tall for her age, she has “no hips and only the slightest swell where Dedee and Temple had big round breasts.” Her appearance is not feminine in the traditional sense. The following excerpt further drives home the point that classic Southern belles do not live here, nor would they survive as we are told (fittingly for the novel’s play with gender roles) when we hear of Lyle Parsons’s death:

Aunt Alma had given me a big paperback edition of *Gone with the Wind*, with tinted pictures from the movie, and told me I’d love it. I had at first, but one evening I looked up from Vivien Leigh’s pink cheeks to see Mama coming in from work with her hair darkened from sweat and her uniform stained. A sharp flash went through me. Emma Slattery, I thought. That’s who I’d be, that’s who we were. Not Scarlett with her baking-powder cheeks. (206)

Aunt Alma has first of all given Bone a very different book from the one Aunt Raylene gives her and she reads a little later. Aunt Alma seems to think that a girl should be a Southern belle and you would think that is how she raises her own daughter, Annie. But Annie ends up dying from a heart failure when she is just a small child. The grit lit South is a rough place and if you resemble a male more than you resemble Scarlett O’Hara, then that is not such a bad thing. Allison does not ascribe much value to the Southern belle. She says of her mentor, Bertha Harris, that she “didn’t want followers or worshippers. She wanted colleagues, big bad girls who would throw out the bullshit and get down to the work that would really challenge the world, take on the boys on their own ground and outwrite them” (*Skin* 204). This leaves little doubt that the roughness ascribed to grit lit is an attractive trait for women, if they wish to “take on the boys.”

Through having a female voice, which does not merely play into traditional grit lit characteristics; Allison manages to present a feminist statement. As there are few voices telling stories like Allison’s, her story is crucial in that it offers a voice for women of a similar background as Allison. This voice can be a tool for coming out on the other end of sexual abuse as a strong woman rather than merely a victim. Through stripping the traditional power traits from men and applying those and others to women, the men are no longer dominant or fearsome. Women become powerful and not merely supporting characters.

Chapter 4

In the Eye of the Beholder: Larry Brown's *Girl* v. Dorothy Allison's *Girl*

Grit lit is typically a man's genre. Most authors are male and so are the protagonists. Women are usually supporting characters and rarely protagonists. I have argued that Allison with *Bastard Out of Carolina* and the character Bone presents a feminist narrative within a genre anything but feminist. Claiming this masculine sphere for women is what makes Allison stand out in grit lit. In order to illustrate the significance of subversion of the genre, it is helpful to compare her approach with a typical representative of the genre to emphasize the differences between Allison's work and the norm within the grit lit genre. To do so, I have chosen a male-authored novel as close as possible to the overall narrative of *Bastard Out of Carolina* so that differences may stand out. The novel should be about a girl, and ideally the author should be someone who is representative of the genre. By comparing two novels within the same genre following a related or similar story line, the differences become clearer and highlight the feminist aspects of Allison's grit lit.

4.1. Why *Fay*?

My choice fell on *Fay* by Larry Brown, first because there are not many novels about girls or women in grit lit. Another option might have been a novel like *Ellen Foster* by Kaye Gibbons, but Gibbons is not as representative of the genre as several of her male counterparts. Indeed, Larry Brown is the "King of Grit Lit"³ and has produced a sister novel to one of his best-known works, *Joe. Fay* (2001) is about a young girl, and since the argument is that grit lit exists within a masculine framework, this novel would help ascertain whether there really is a perceptible difference between Allison and her male colleagues. *Fay* provides an excellent basis for comparison with *Bastard Out of Carolina*. While Brown's *Fay* is not exactly a coming of age novel, like *Bastard Out of Carolina*, it does follow the protagonist, Fay, through major events in her life. It is in her actions and her reflections on them, that the differences between Brown's *Fay* and Allison's *Bone* begin to surface. The majority of novels written by men has male protagonists and therefore tends to reflect a masculine view. Larry Brown's *Fay* is different. The main character is a girl, Fay, and Brown tries to get inside her mind through telling most of the chapters from Fay's point of view, though some chapters are about other characters that come into the novel due to their relation to Fay.

³ Pam Kingsbury entitles her interview with Larry Brown "King of Grit Lit" (Kingsbury). Keith Perry's wrote an essay on Brown entitled "Fireman-Writer, Bad Boy Novelist, King of Grit Lit" (Cash and Perry 130).

Fay is the novel about Gary's sister. Gary is one of the two main characters in the preceding novel *Joe*. We meet her immediately after she has left her extremely poor family consisting of her older brother, her younger sister, her mother and an alcoholic dad who has attempted to molest Fay on several occasions. We quickly learn that Fay is extremely ignorant due to her practically not having gone to school at all and not having learned anything at home. She has decided to head for Biloxi, Mississippi, which she has no idea where is. She is in the northern part of Mississippi, so she has some distance to travel. After having spent the first night with a group of horny, drunken boys and another woman, she barely escapes being virtually raped when she, heavily intoxicated, vomits on one of the boys. The next day she is walking down the highway, where she meets the police officer Sam. He can tell she is in dire straits, so he takes her home where Fay meets Sam's wife Amy. The couple has lost their teenage daughter years back, and initially Fay is like a daughter to them. But when Amy dies in a solo DUI accident, Fay and Sam starts sleeping together, and Fay becomes pregnant during their first intercourse. Sam and Fay are both overwhelmed, but eager to make it work despite Fay being only seventeen. However, Sam's former mistress, Alesandra, whom Sam has tried to make go away, shows up to shoot Fay when Sam is at work. They fight and Fay ends up killing Alesandra. She estimates that she has to take off to avoid being a liability to Sam whom she is deeply in love with. She hitchhikes to Biloxi where she meets the stripper Reena. While Reena is at work, Fay heads to the beach. Here she meets Chris, who rapes her when she is intoxicated. After having stayed with Reena for a couple of nights, she goes to the strip club to talk to Reena about her options. Here she meets Aaron, who owns the strip club with his brother. We later learn that Aaron pays Reena 500 dollars for the introduction and for helping talk Fay into sleeping over at Aaron's. Aaron is quite taken by Fay and lets her stay at his mother's Bed and Breakfast, where Fay is also offered a job as a helper around the house. Aaron drinks and does drugs. He is violent – also toward Fay. In order to show Fay he cares for her, he takes her to Gulf Shores, Alabama, where her rapist flies an advertisement airplane back and forth along the beach. Aaron shoots down the airplane, thus killing Chris. She does like Aaron's softer sides, but she remains in love with Sam. When she is home alone while Aaron is at the strip club, she finds a video tape of Aaron, his brother Cully, Reena, and other people having sex. It dawns on her that Reena's children are actually Aaron's and that he does not take care of them. So she starts getting really drunk; she drinks and smokes during her pregnancy but continually vows to stop. During the night she falls down the stairs and terminates her pregnancy in the fall. After she is released from the hospital, she starts contemplating a way out. She calls Sam and he proceeds to speed south, and once he gets

there, Fay has just managed to shoot Aaron in the abdomen. He has recovered the gun and when Sam walks in, Aaron shoots him. They both die. At the very end there is an epilogue about a woman in New Orleans who walks around smiling attracting lots of looks and approaches from men.

In this rough and convoluted narrative several similarities between *Fay* and *Bastard Out of Carolina* emerge. They are both grit lit novels living up to the criteria presented in chapter one – blue collar setting, importance of the land, male-dominated society and family structure, and use of grotesque and Southern Gothic elements. But they also both deal with a girl gradually becoming a grownup. Bone is perhaps a little advanced for her age; she reads ferociously and has a vivid imagination, while Fay can hardly read at all and comes across as extremely ignorant. Thus, despite their actual age difference of around five years, they seem closer in development. They both have abusive (step-)fathers, and they both decide to escape from them. They are both molested and raped. Despite differences between the two novels, they are about as close as one can hope for in seeking to make a comparison that will reveal not only Brown's masculine perspective but also the feminist lens through which Allison sees the rough South.

4.2. Why Mulvey?

It becomes clear that Dorothy Allison's novel provides a unique take on women's role in grit lit when *Bastard Out of Carolina* is compared to women in male grit lit authors' fiction. Rarely is the woman the main character as in Larry Brown's *Fay*. To reveal his masculine stance, I will use film theorist Laura Mulvey's theory on the "male gaze."

Laura Mulvey is a British film theorist and current professor at Birkbeck, University of London's Department of History of Art and Screen Media. In 1975 Mulvey published what came to be known as an influential article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in the academic journal *Screen*. After this article was subject to praise and criticism for years following its publication, she published "Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema inspired by *Duel in the Sun*" in 1981. Both articles are heavily influenced by Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis which Mulvey uses as the foundation for her analysis and development of her views. The two articles will form the basis of the comparison between *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Fay* since I find exactly the "gaze" to be a fundamental difference and the key to grasping exactly how different these two novels dealing with the same overall topics are.

Mulvey's premise is that while using a woman's point of view, as in having the story told through a female protagonist, is entirely possible that this view will often reflect a male perspective on the world – one in which male dominance is never questioned and never stated explicitly. Dorothy Allison makes a similar observation for literature: “Feminism revealed the city as an armed compound to which I would never be admitted. It forced me to understand, suddenly and completely, that literature was written by men, judged by men. The city itself was a city of Man, a male mind even when housed in a female body” (*Skin* 167). Allison notes how a masculine world view is the implicit premise, and even when an author attempts a female narrative, it is still seen through a male lens. Thomas Bjerre agrees: “Though he [Brown] attempts to create a female narrative with Fay as the center of the novel, the story is still male driven” (Bjerre 9). Mulvey explains further that the female protagonist “can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it” (Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure” 7). Her statement indicates that the woman never stands alone. She is merely there as a contrast to the man, and even when there is no man present, she is described in opposition to the male, as an Other. In this context, woman only makes sense when viewed through a masculine lens.

In short, Mulvey's views can be summed up as follows: The way female characters are described in film is mediated through a masculine mind providing the viewer with a masculine lens. Due to a basically masculine angle, the film ends up being presented as viewed through male eyes. Thus, Mulvey argues, a certain set of ideas is more or less forced on the viewer. Male ideas, fundamental values and drives decide where the director points the camera. This makes up the worldview presented to the viewer. Mulvey wants to draw attention to this bias and points to the things that make up what she calls “male gaze.”

The woman is not a woman in herself but rather a woman as perceived by a masculine mindset, and so is the man. The representation of women in film is therefore not as much a representation of women as a representation of “the other” as opposition to the male. While masculinity and femininity do not necessarily belong exclusively to biological men and women respectively, it could be assumed that a woman would often have a better grasp of the feminine and a man would often have a better grasp of the masculine. And indeed there is a difference between Allison's female protagonist and Brown's female protagonist. Mulvey's articles on male gaze are helpful in describing what constitutes this difference and its consequences.

4.3. Comparison

4.3.1. Woman as Erotic Object

“Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen” (Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure” 11-12). Fay functions on Mulvey’s two levels – erotic object for the characters within the novel and erotic object for the reader. Fay attracts all the men in the novel. Those who do not engage in relations with her still turn their heads in the street. The reader is informed that she is a very good-looking seventeen-year-old woman who loves to have sex. This clearly conveys the impression of an object of desire to the reader and locates Fay’s importance here. It is not Fay in herself who is interesting which is illustrated in an ignorant thought processes. What is interesting is what she makes the males do through of her being an erotic object. As Budd Boetticher says in a quote used by Mulvey to emphasize her point: “In herself the woman has not the slightest importance” (Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure” 11).

Meanwhile, Bone is only an erotic object for her stepfather, Daddy Glen; everybody else considers her for what she is: a child. The reader also sees her as a child, and there is nothing in the novel that attempts to convey the impression of an erotic object to the reader. Since the reader does not have the impression that Bone is an erotic object, he or she cannot sympathize with Daddy Glen, which is exactly the intention. In *Fay*, the reader fully understands the male characters’ infatuation with Fay, who is kind-hearted, loving and beautiful, and who has a strong sexual appetite. Being taken with her does not seem wrong or incomprehensible to the reader. Thus the male gaze functions perfectly. The reader sees Fay as the males in the novel do. In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, on the other hand, the male gaze does not work in terms of presenting the protagonist as an erotic object. Daddy Glen sees her as such, but the reader does not; therefore, Daddy Glen’s angle is considered wrong by the reader and male gaze is implicitly perceived as a flawed angle on the main character.

4.3.2. Penis Envy

Basing her theory on Freud’s psychoanalysis, Mulvey ascribes profound importance to the concept of penis envy. She states in her opening that “[a]n idea of woman stands as lynch pin to the system: it is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus signifies” (6). This point fits well on Fay. She

seeks out men, or perhaps she lets them seek out her, but either way she takes up with men for their skills in terms of being capable of protecting her (a police officer and a doorman) and providing for her. Sam owns a lake house and is close to a substantial retirement payout; Aaron makes good money off dealing drugs and possibly pimping the strippers at the club. Both drive masculine vehicles and carry guns. The men are powerful in every way and Fay is merely an “other.” Bone needs no man, as she learns from her Aunt Raylene. Aunt Raylene provides for herself through selling cleaned-up trash by the road along with her canned vegetables. In the 1950’s canning vegetables was a strictly female activity and she is thus not even assuming male lines of work to provide for herself: she does so through selling pretty things and home-cooked food. Daddy Glen is often unemployed, and once when he cannot put food on the table, Anney sells her body one night in order to provide food for her children. This actually reads as the exact opposite of *Fay*: Women have something which others want and are willing to pay for. Aunt Raylene’s products are created with female skills, and Bone’s mother is selling her female body. In *Fay*, Fay takes up with these men because she wants what they have, while in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, the women hold power because the men want what the women have. The phallic power represented by money and authority only means something when the women need it. The women in *Bastard Out of Carolina* ultimately do not. This is best personified in Aunt Raylene who does not sleep with men and who can just be “Ray,” if she has to. Men can do nothing, women cannot in *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Bone has learned this when she informs her sister and cousins that “mean sisters” “do everything their brothers do. Only they do it first and fastest and meanest” (212). Therefore penis envy is much less of a factor in Bone’s story than it is in Fay’s.

4.3.3. Male Dominance

The implicit acceptance of male dominance is not merely evident in male gaze representation but it is justified through the roles played by the characters and their actions.

“His [Alfred Hitchcock’s] heroes are exemplary of the symbolic order and the law – a policeman (*Vertigo*), a dominant male possessing money and power (*Marnie*) – but their erotic drives lead them into compromised situations. The power to subject another person to the will sadistically or to the gaze voyeuristically is turned on to the woman as the object of both. Power is backed by a certainty of legal right and the established guilt of the woman (evoking castration, psychoanalytically speaking). True perversion is barely concealed under a shallow mask of ideological correctness – the

man is on the right side of the law, the woman on the wrong.” (Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure” 15)

In *Fay* this right side-wrong side of the law dichotomy is quite clear. Police officer Sam is on the right side of the law and Fay, on the run after killing a woman, is on the wrong side of the law. Sam lies to his colleagues when asked about Fay and what transpired in connection with Alesandra’s death, so he is not on the right side of the law per se, but the reader sympathizes with him because he is protecting our protagonist. Fay is on the run, but she acted in self-defense, so that event does not actually put her on the wrong side of the law, but the reader cannot help but feel some animosity toward her despite wanting her to work it all out in the end. She does not take care of her child and she puts herself in situations where even an ignorant seventeen-year-old should know better. Besides, she stays with Aaron for way too long. So while she is initially just acting in self-defense, which places her on the right side of the law (that changes as she goes on the run of course), the reader still has reservations toward her for moral reasons. In the end Sam is on the right side of the right-wrong line, and the reader hopes for him to save the misguided damsel in distress.

In *Bastard Out of Carolina* this traditional gender dichotomy is not clear. Daddy Glen is on the wrong side of both morals and the law when he molests a minor, but Uncle Earle is on the wrong side of the law as well and is convicted of it, yet Uncle Earle is perceived as basically kindhearted, while Daddy Glen is a child molester. Even Bone breaks in at Woolworth’s and is thus on the wrong side of the law. The difference is that Bone’s actions seem justified while Daddy Glen’s do not. The reader is somewhat indifferent to Uncle Earle’s violations of the law and him taking up with very young girls, because he is revered by the narrator and yet you cannot help but be disgusted when he is called a cradle robber (257). Bone’s mother does wrong when she chooses a man who molested her daughter over her own child. While there is no explicit judgment in the novel, the reader clearly feels she made the wrong choice regardless of her motivation for doing so. This right and wrong dichotomy is in other words more complex and not just related to gender in *Bastard Out of Carolina*. There are men with whom the reader sympathizes and there are some with whom the reader does not. The same goes for the women. This blurred differentiation between right and wrong illustrates a view that is less defined than Brown’s. When Brown defines Sam as being on the right side of morals and Fay as being on the wrong side, he is passing judgment on his characters that Allison is not. This leaves more room for a deeper meaning of Allison’s characters, as there are more sides to them.

4.3.4. Maker of Meaning and Bearer of Meaning

The center of Mulvey's articles is the paradoxical dichotomy between what she calls the maker of meaning and the bearer of meaning: The male relies on the "other" to give him meaning. There has to be an "other" as opposition for the phallus to be meaningful. For the phallus to "make meaning," there has to be a "bearer of meaning." The "other" is important without being important – herein lies the paradox. Mulvey's bearer of meaning is a female character serving merely to emphasize the male character. She serves as an "opposite other" and is as such a passive character. This idea fits Fay, who is a passenger in the narrative for practically the duration of the chapters about her. Meanwhile, Mulvey's maker of meaning is an active character who drives the narrative and she is rarely female as in *Bastard Out of Carolina*.

Fay's rapist, Chris, escapes the rape scene relatively unharmed. Fay knocks him unconscious and parks his car some distance from the scene, but he is still literally flying high until Fay's new boyfriend, Aaron, pulls out his rifle and shoots down Chris's airplane, thereby killing him. It takes a man for Fay's rapist to be confronted with his actions, even though this confrontation happens in a vigilant fashion. This situation is symbolized by the phallic gun used directly to protect Fay, as Aaron sees it. Meanwhile in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Bone's rapist could also be considered to be let off, but while this is true in the sense that there are no serious physical consequences for him, Bone rewrites the molestation events when masturbating thereby reclaiming the molestation scene with herself in charge. She rewrites the story with Daddy Glen playing a minor role, and her playing the lead, thus she creates or "makes" meaning, a role typically ascribed to men. Fay bears the meaning in the sense that Chris's rape of Fay serves to provide Aaron with a sense that Fay is – contrary to himself – vulnerable, and her rape serves to provide Aaron with a chance to prove – using his big rifle – that he is a man and capable of taking care of a woman. Fay's role in these events is in essence irrelevant other than in contrast, serving to emphasize the male characters' traits. She bears meaning but creates none. Bone creates meaning when she takes the story, rewrites it, and claims it as her own. She literally creates meaning from the event in the form of retelling the story with a different emphasis and a different sense of who is in charge, who is the hero and who is the villain. Daddy Glen is the less relevant character in the molestation scenes. The relevant part where meaning is created is Bone's mind.

When Fay takes the gun and kills Sam's mistress, Alesandra, the act is destructive and pointless. She saves herself because she gets the gun, but there is no larger meaning in her having to shoot someone and then go on the run heartbroken, with herself and the child at

risk, leaving Sam at home. Fay's actions bear meaning in the sense that they illustrate how dangerous it is for her to have a gun and be in power. She creates nothing other than chaos in the scenes prior to, during, and after Alesandra's death. Whereas Bone uses her phallic device – the hook – as an active choice, whereas Fay gets hold of the gun by luck. Bone has been preparing the hook, polishing it and masturbating against it. She has wholly understood the power it holds, although probably implicitly. Through polishing it she helps emphasize its power in the sense that its rough appearance is altered by Bone to make it her own. She interacts with the symbol of power and adapts it to her liking. She finds the hidden shine it has, much resembling the process she is going through at that time. When covering it with her juices (she let the links of the chain tied to the hook “slip back and forth until they [are] slippery” (193)) as she masturbates against it, she is literally and figuratively coating the masculine symbol – the phallus – with the female. She simply takes over the phallic symbol. When she uses the hook, she penetrates the Woolworth's and this act bears great meaning, as it is an act of revenge toward the manager who once humiliated her. Now, using the male phallus, Bone penetrates his domain and thereby rewrites the meaning of Woolworth's in her mind. It used to be a place that held power over her, but after her break-in she is the one in charge. Woolworth's is likely insured, and her actions will have little consequence to the manager, but it is not about him, and that is the point; it is about Bone and to her the break-in is a victory. Conversely, when Fay gets a gun in her hands, it happens by accident, and after she uses the phallic gun, she has less power, not more, as she is forced on the run. Fay creates no meaning and writes no story when she kills Alesandra. She merely bears meaning and the message could be read as saying that women cannot handle phallic power. The same is the case when she shoots Aaron: she obtains the gun by accident after fighting and she ends up firing it. Again, her actions lead to tragedy as Aaron kills Fay's lover, Sam. Robert Beuka writes of this scene that the “bloody shootout caps the cycle of senseless violence in the novel” (Cash and Perry 83). This is exactly what it all ends up feeling like to the reader. There is no sense in everybody dying – no meaning is made through Fay's actions; they are senseless.

4.3.5. Active Male/Passive Female

When Bone is molested by Daddy Glen, the reader is from the very first time disgusted by him. There is no doubt that he holds the power and that he abuses it. Fay is a little older and she is described as quite good-looking. Fay is not described as leading her rapist, or for that matter the boys in the beginning, on, but she does go along. With her rapist,

Chris, she sits down on the beach and has a beer with him. Then they eat together and she gets very intoxicated. So although Brown does not imply she is at fault, she does oblige to some things that Bone would never do. Fay getting so intoxicated symbolizes her willingly giving up power and control. When Sam picks her up, she simply gets in the police cruiser. As with Chris and Aaron later in the novel, she simply gets in on the passenger side and sees where it takes her. The fact that she does not know how to drive is due to her family not having a car, but it also serves to describe her as someone who is a passenger in a larger sense. Even when she attempts to take control of her destiny and leave her family, she remains a passenger as she takes up with the boys, then Sam, Reena, Chris and Aaron. She is not in the driver's seat – literally or figuratively. This emphasizes the impression of her as ignorant and weak. The reader naturally takes a liking to her, because she is kindhearted, but she is not an inspiration like Bone. Bone acts, claiming traditionally male traits, while Fay stays within the confines of traditional gender roles.

Brown implicitly emphasizes on several occasions that the men are in power. When Fay first meets Sam, “[she does not] want to [say] the wrong thing. She [knows] he [has] all the power” (41). He is described as having handcuffs on his belt and an imprint of his wallet on his pants symbolizing physical and fiscal power respectively. Subsequently, Sam helps Fay fasten her seatbelt, as she does not know how. This is in the police cruiser which is cool and has tinted windows. Having been strapped tight inside, Fay feels great. It is even described how Sam's arm brushes against her as he buckles her seatbelt insinuating a form of arousal caused by Sam “tying her down.” The impression is conveyed that being subjected to male dominance is a desirable situation for a woman. Throughout this first encounter, it is clear that Sam is someone Fay is attracted to. That Sam is a classic masculine character is most clear when he, with a cigarette in his hand and most likely his wide-brim police officer hat on his head (he usually put it on when he leaves the cruiser) walks out in front of Fay and leans against a lamppost by the lake. This is almost a perfect representation of the Marlboro Man. To emphasize the classic gender role lens used here: the Marlboro Man rescues a damsel in distress (47).

Sam's wife Amy's hand as she greets Fay is described as “limp and cool, fragile as a bird's wing. It felt like it had no strength at all” (50). This is how the wife of masculine Sam is described when she meets Fay. Amy is an “other;” her main function is to serve as Sam's opposite, thus emphasizing his masculinity. That is what Mulvey means by only existing in relation to castration and not being able to transcend it.

While driving along and drinking on the afternoon she dies, Amy decides to have a cigarette, although she has not smoked for four years. The part describing how she decides to go on and smoke can be read as an allegory for Amy assuming masculinity in the form of the phallic cigarette, especially since Sam still holds on to his cigarette and cannot quit. Amy takes out the cigarette and this is the part that follows:

“[She] stuck the cigarette between her lips. She pushed in the lighter [...] God it was good going down. She wasn’t used to it and so she coughed a little at first, but oh it was good. Yeah, it was fine. How in the hell had she made it this long? And why in the hell would she have to hide it from him anyway? Didn’t he do what he wanted to? Why couldn’t she do the same?” (102)

The third sentence creates an obvious sexual interpretation of the phrase “feeling good to go down,” especially since the sensation comes after she “sticks it between her lips.” There does seem to be a definite sexual innuendo in the act of lighting the cigarette, which serves well as a phallus. Amy takes on the masculine role through inhalation of the phallus and it makes her feel powerful; she is no longer “fragile as a bird’s wing.” This is further emphasized in the last two sentences of the quoted part, since she takes on Sam’s character when she starts smoking. Taking on the masculine role puts her in control and this is how she feels as she is drunkenly driving through the countryside. She starts thinking about Fay and how wonderful she finds it that Fay has entered her and Sam’s lives. Briefly she ponders whether it is a gift from God, but she immediately discards the notion since “God didn’t do stuff like that. He didn’t reach down and move people around. People did what they wanted to on their own” (106). But then she gets the idea that Fay and Sam are sleeping together, which they are not at this point. She decides for herself that she will let them, thus taking on the role of head of the family – traditionally a male role – who decides who does what. The irony is that she feels so powerful that she actually considers herself to be able to “reach down and move people around” even though “people do what they want to.” She feels omnipotent and God is here described as a male – the most powerful male of all. The symbolism here is that she feels in absolute control. And then, despite her declaring that she “could get killed out on the road this afternoon but that didn’t mean she was going to,” she dies in a car crash (102). After she starts feeling in control – a feeling that is clearly described as masculine – she dies. She dies because in this novel’s overall view – its “gaze” – women cannot handle power. In fact, it is when she feels in absolute control that she actually loses control of the car and crashes. Ultimately Amy cannot handle what all the men in the novel can: drinking and driving.

Once Amy is gone and the mother role with it, Fay and Sam become lovers. This relation destroys the family dynamics, as the “father” strikes up a relationship with his “daughter.” While this works out at first, it is ruined when Fay has to use Alesandra’s gun to protect herself in the absence of Sam, who is at work. When Fay takes on the masculine role and kills Alesandra, she also further destroys the family dynamics just as Amy did. Now Fay goes on the run with her and Sam’s unborn child.

While Bone with the hook is a symbol of her gaining power and grasping her destiny and taking control of it, Fay with the gun – another phallic symbol – is downright dangerous. She shoots and kills Alesandra. A girl with a phallic symbol is in *Bastard Out of Carolina* powerful and in control. A woman assuming masculine power in *Fay* is dangerous to both herself and others. She even fails as a mother, since she goes off and puts herself and her unborn child at great risk and ultimately loses the child due to irresponsible behavior. When Bone is molested, Daddy Glen has the power, but she reclaims it through her fantasies and through her becoming an independent woman. Daddy Glen’s power is seen as corrupted. He uses it to hurt Bone. This is quite contrary to *Fay*, in which Fay is the one who cannot handle power. When she is powerful, bad things happen. The one time she does drive a car on her own, she goes to see Sam. Aaron notices where she went and this knowledge leads to him being very rough toward her and reinforces Aaron’s suspicion that Fay is not over Sam. This attachment ultimately leads to both Sam’s and Aaron’s deaths. Fay is dangerous behind the wheel and does not have a driver’s license – literally and figuratively. Fay is not a powerful entity who can act as an independent person. As Mulvey writes: “she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it” (“Visual Pleasure” 7). Bone “transcends the relation to castration” through becoming powerful in her own right whereas Fay is merely a liability to the phallus.

In holding up Fay’s dangerousness against Sam, it is quite clear who is a liability. Sam carries a gun but his power, his phallus, is legitimate as symbolized by his authority as a police officer. Sam is supposed to and licensed to carry a gun. Fay, on the other hand, is dangerous. She is not supposed to get hold of a gun and when she does, she first shoots Alesandra, then leaves Sam and by implicit extension breaks up the family. Fay with a weapon is dangerous to the very relationship between a man and a woman. It is dangerous for a relationship when the woman takes on male power. The male must remain in power, otherwise tragedy, ensues.

Toward the end of the novel, Fay calls Sam on the phone. At that point she has previously tried to give him the message that she needs his help. He heads south toward Pass

Christian on the shore, where she stays with Aaron. At this point Fay has killed a woman, left her lover, been drinking and taking up with Aaron, all the while postponing her problems and in the end causing an involuntary abortion. Now that she is in deep trouble, the ultimate male authority in the novel is called upon to help her out. This is once again a damsel in distress who is incapable of dealing with the situation. So Sam comes down south, and he and Aaron end up dead. This outcome does not read as the men being vulnerable; they are too infatuated with the femme fatale, Fay. Fay is not dangerous when she is at the lake house with Sam; it is only when she leaves Sam, fires guns and in general act on her own that she becomes dangerous. It is in other words not *her* power that kills the males; it is her inability to handle *male* power. That Fay is powerless is best illustrated in her actions ultimately killing her lover, Sam, and their unborn baby. None of the deaths were her intention, they just happen as a result of her trying to assume control.

4.4. Perspective: The Larger Meaning of the Difference between Bone and Fay

With Fay as a bearer of meaning, she falls into the role Mulvey says women hold in male gaze narratives: she serves as a passive emphasize of meaning. She, as Mulvey writes, exists only in relation to castration and does not transcend it. Bone, on the other hand, actively rewrites events in her life and learns that she can also rewrite her future. She exists as more than a mere “relation to castration.” She is more than an “opposite other;” she is a maker of meaning.

Fay and *Bastard Out of Carolina* are both set in the South; the main characters are poor whites. Both novels to some extent deal with incest. There are a lot of drinking and fighting going on, and in many respects the two storylines are parallel. But there are substantial differences in the way the reader perceives gender roles and power balances. Traditionally masculine traits suit Bone and she therefore claims them for her gender. And in the process she makes them feminine. When Fay and Amy take on masculine traits, tragedy ensues; the “masculine” traits do not “fit” women, so to speak. So the male gaze of Brown implicitly shows the reader that a woman should not assume those traits. This makes *Bastard Out of Carolina* a feminist narrative while *Fay* is not. Brown does not set out to write a feminist narrative, of course, nor does he set out to write the opposite, but the extent to which a male gaze permeates the narrative and becomes a filter through which Fay’s life is viewed is a strong testament to the fact that a female protagonist (or lead character at least) does not necessarily make the story feminist or even feminine. The importance of the gaze through which the narrative is viewed cannot be underestimated. Bone is a feminist character and Fay

is not at all. The reason for difference, is described by Mulvey through a reference to Jacques Lacan: who, she says

“[H]as described how the moment when a child recognises its own image in the mirror is crucial for the constitution of the ego. Several aspects of this analysis are relevant here. The mirror phase occurs at a time when the child's physical ambitions outstrip his motor capacity, with the result that his recognition of himself is joyous in that he imagines his mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than he experiences his own body. Recognition is thus overlaid with misrecognition: the image recognised is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject.” (“Visual Pleasure” 9-10)

This identification process takes place when the reader reads a novel. The reader identifies to some extent with the protagonist, who is unconsciously perceived as “more complete, more perfect” than the reader. When readers encounter Fay, they identify with a person who functions primarily as an object. Fay is not a role model as such, but the reader does follow her, hope she does well, and sympathizes with her. Also, in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, the reader at some level identifies with Bone, and her narrative is feminist. The differences between the novels run deep.

Conclusion

I have shown how Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* can be read as a feminist novel within a genre dominated by male authors and male-dominated narratives. This has revealed more depth in the grit lit genre, which I have shown can accommodate a feminist writer, despite the fact that part of its foundation is a patriarchal framework. While the interpretation of a novel comes down to the angle from which you choose to read it, it is safe to say that a feminist angle is certainly one justified angle.

I set out to illustrate how Dorothy Allison creates a feminist grit lit narrative. This goal has been achieved through initially looking at how Allison fits and does not fit within the grit lit genre conventions. Analyzing the development of Bone in comparison with the development of Allison as a writer, I have illustrated how creating a feminist narrative has been a set goal for Allison. Examining the gender roles in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, it became clear that Allison's trick is to take grit lit males and show them as men who cannot take care

of their families or themselves. This leaves them emasculated, and the space traditionally inhabited by them is now taken over by women, as illustrated in Bone and her Aunt Raylene, who both transcend gender roles and encompass the best traits of both men and women. Bringing this analysis up against Larry Brown's *Fay*, the "male gaze" of Brown's novel becomes clear and illustrates how Allison's subtle changes dramatically change the perception of the power ascribed to the genders. In short, I have shown how Allison manages to remain grit lit while concurrently challenging the genre definitions.

Grit lit has been shown as a genre holding greater perspectives than one could be led to believe. While grit lit can be fairly precisely defined, it still offers the possibility of challenging its conventions. Through doing exactly that, Allison makes the genre deeper, and in the process she manages to establish a voice for poor, white Southern women like herself.

Bibliography

Allison, Dorothy. *Bastard Out of Carolina*. New York, NY: Plume, 1993.

---. *Cavedweller*. London: Abacus, 1998.

---. *Skin – Talking about Sex, Class and Literature*. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1994.

---. *Trash*. New York, NY: Plume, 2002.

---. *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*. New York, NY: Plume, 1995.

Bailey, Peggy Dunn. "Female Gothic Fiction, Grotesque Realities, and *Bastard Out of Carolina*: Dorothy Allison Revises the Southern Gothic." *Mississippi Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 1/2 (Winter Spring, 2010): 269-290.

Baker, Moira P. "'The Politics of They:’ Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* as Critique of Class, Gender and Sexual Ideologies." *The World Is Our Home*. Eds. Jeffrey J. Folks and Nancy Summers Folks. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000.

"*Bastard Out of Carolina* Reading Guide." *Penguin.com*. 10 July 2012. <http://www.us.penguin.com/static/rguides/us/bastard_out_of_carolina.html>.

Bjerre, Thomas. "Male Mississippi: Reading Masculinity and Violence in the Works of Barry Hannah, Larry Brown and Lewis Nordan." M.A. thesis. University of Southern Denmark, Denmark, 2002.

Bledsoe, Erik. "The Rise of Southern Redneck and White Trash Writers." *Southern Cultures*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Spring, 2000): 68-90.

Bonetti, Kay. "An Interview with Larry Brown." *The Missouri Review*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (1995): 79-108.

Brown, Larry. *Fay*. New York, NY: Scribner, 2001.

- - -. *Joe*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2003.

Caldwell, Erskine. *God's Little Acre*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1995.

- - -. *Tobacco Road*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1995.

Carpenter, Brian and Tom Franklin, eds. *Grit Lit – a Rough South Reader*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2012.

Cash, Jean W. and Keith Perry, eds. *Larry Brown and the Blue-Collar South*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2008.

Crews, Harry. *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995.

- - -. *A Feast of Snakes*. New York, NY: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1976.

Dews, Carlos L. and Carolyn Leste Law, eds. *Out in the South*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001.

Dietzel, Susanne. "An Interview with Dorothy Allison." Tulane University (November, 1995): 26 April 2011 <<http://www.tulane.edu/~wc/zale/allison/allison.html>>.

Duckworth, Angela L. et al. "Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 92, No. 6 (2007): 1087-1101. 18 June 2012 <<http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~duckwort/images/Grit%20JPSP.pdf>>.

Faulkner, William. *As I Lay Dying*. London: Vintage, 1996.

Fry, Karin. "No Longer a Friend: Gender in Narnia." *The Chronicles of Narnia and Philosophy*. Gregory Bassham and Jerry L. Walls (eds.). Peru, IL: Carus, 2005.

Gibbons, Kaye. *Ellen Foster*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1987.

"Grit." Def. 4. *Merriam-Webster*. 10 October 2012 <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/grit>>.

Hannah, Barry. *Airships*. New York, NY: Vintage, 1985.

Hollibaugh, Amber. "In the House of Childhood." *The Women's Review of Books*, Vol. 9, No. 10/11 (Jul., 1992): 15.

- - -. "Telling a Mean Story" (interview with Dorothy Allison). *The Women's Review of Books*, Vol. 9, No. 10/11 (Jul., 1992): 16-17.

Jetter, Alexis. "The Roseanne of Literature" (interview with Dorothy Allison). *The New York Times* December 17, 1995. 10 June 2012 <www.nytimes.com/1995/12/17/magazine/the-roseanne-of-literature.html?ref=dorothyallison>.

Kingsbury, Pam. "King of Grit Lit" (interview with Larry Brown). *Southern Scribe* 2003. 26 April 2012 <http://www.southernscribe.com/zine/authors/Brown_Larry.htm>.

"Larry Brown." *The University of Mississippi*. Nov. 2004. "The Mississippi Writers Page. 18 June 2012 <http://www.olemiss.edu/mwp/dir/brown_larry>.

MacKethan, Lucinda. "Southwestern Humor: The Beginning of Grit Lit." *Southern Spaces* 1 March 2004. 26 April 2012 <<http://www.southernspaces.org/2004/southwestern-humor-beginning-grit-lit>>.

McCullers, Carson. *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. London: Penguin Books, 1963.

McDonald, Kathlene. "Talking Trash, Talking Back: Resistance to Stereotypes in Dorothy

Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol 26, No. 1/2 (Spring-Summer, 1998): 15-25.

Megan, Carolyn E. "Moving toward Truth: An Interview with Dorothy Allison." *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Autumn, 1994): 71-83.

Mobilio, Albert. "Biloxi Bound" (review of *Fay*). *New York Times* 16 April 2000. 15 October 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/04/16/books/biloxi-bound.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>>

Mulvey, Laura. "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,'" *Feminist Film Theory: a Reader*. Sue Thornham (ed.). NY: New York University Press, 1999.

- - -. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". *Screen*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (autumn, 1975): 6-18.

O'Connor, Flannery. *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993.

Pratt, Minnie Bruce. "Dorothy Allison." *Progressive*, Vol. 59, No. 7 (Jul., 1995): 30-35.

Taylor, Yvette, Sally Hines and Mark E. Casey. *Theorizing Intersectionality and Sexuality*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Yeager, Patricia. *Dirt and Desire*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Summary

The purpose of this thesis has been to look at how Dorothy Allison with her novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* manages to write a feminist story within the male-dominated genre called grit lit.

In order to make sure the foundation is in order, a definition of grit lit was needed. This definition was created based on a look at which authors are typically considered grit lit, as well as a look at who their inspirations are. Larry Brown has on several occasions been called “King of Grit Lit,” so to him a fair amount of attention was granted. Other authors in the genre include Barry Hannah, Harry Crews and Tim McLaurin. Their inspirations include particularly William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor and Carson McCullers, none of whom are categorized as grit lit authors. With a list of authors in hand, the next step was to take a look at what characteristics could be said to describe the grit lit authors’ work. Five characteristics seem to frequently come up: 1. Grit lit is set in a blue-collar or no-collar environment where typical activities include drinking, fighting and fornicating. 2. In grit lit the land is of major importance. It can hold promises, and it can hold dangers, and often both. 3. Grit lit stories take place in a society and family structure that is inherently patriarchal. 4. Grit lit use grotesque elements to drive home its points. 5. Grit lit stores also have Southern Gothic features.

With the genre defined as solidly as possible, the attention turned to Dorothy Allison, whose background was first presented and then a résumé of *Bastard Out of Carolina* was given. With an understanding of grit lit, Allison, and her novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*, it was possible to look at the extent to which *Bastard Out of Carolina* fits the genre definition. It fits well: it takes place in a blue collar setting, the land is important, the family and societal structure is patriarchal, and it uses grotesque and Southern Gothic elements. In one area, however, it is a little off: While it does take place within a patriarchal structure, the males in the novel are exposed for their flaws and that way power is stripped from them. Concurrently, the women are more powerful and visible than is typically the case in grit lit. The attention then turned to describing how Allison manages to do this without violating the definition.

In order to show how Allison’s feminist narrative is constructed, *Bastard Out of Carolina* was compared to what Allison has written and said about her own development as a writer. It became clear that the protagonist, Bone’s, coming of age reflects Allison finding her own literary voice. Key events in Bone’s life mirror key events in Allison’s writing career. Bone’s life is thus a metaphor for the gradual birth of a feminist.

Having established that Allison is a grit lit writer and a feminist writer, her presentation of the major characters in the novel was examined. This made it clear that the way Allison manages to write feminist grit lit is to let the men remain grit lit, but at the same time expose that role as undesirable. The males act like grit lit males, but their libido causes them trouble and they are left looking more pathetic than strong. This creates a void which Allison fills with her female characters, particularly Bone and her Aunt Raylene, who can then claim the traditionally male traits which are now up for grabs. These traits include sexual power and readiness to act.

In order to illustrate just how different Allison is from her male counterparts, *Bastard Out of Carolina* is compared to *Fay* by Larry Brown. The two novels share the grit lit tag and both have female protagonists who are raped and molested, and they both end up leaving their families. Using film theorist Laura Mulvey's thoughts on what she calls "male gaze" to analyze both novels, it becomes clear that despite having a female protagonist, Brown's narrative is still masculine. The males are in power and *Fay* primarily serves as "an other" who emphasizes male strengths. Meanwhile, Bone and Aunt Raylene are powerful in their own right, and their actions symbolize that they claim male power rendering the males unnecessary for their survival.

This exercise has illustrated that Allison has her cake and eats it too; she writes grit lit, but in one important area she alters the genre conventions. Allison's feminist version of the rough South landscape provides for women who live in it a voice which tells their story.