

Sacrificial Pets and Maternal Instinct in Gloria Sawai's "Mother's Day" and Barbara Gowdy's *Falling Angels*

Neta Gordon, Brock University, teaches courses on Canadian Literature and Literary Theory. She has published on such authors as Ann-Marie MacDonald, Jane Urquhart, Barbara Gowdy, and Sky Lee.

Abstract

Sawai's and Gowdy's representations of the deaths of kittens demonstrate how the category of pet depends on an inherent relationality to humans, thus confronting the extent to which hierarchical social coding has been normalized. Further, human-pet relations symbolically illuminate how motherhood is implicated in similar social codes that require self-sacrifice.

Résumé

Les représentations de Sawai et de Gowdy de la mort de chatons démontrent comment la catégorie d'animal familier dépend d'une relation inhérente aux humains, confrontant ainsi l'étendue à laquelle le codage hiérarchique et social a été normalisé. De plus, les relations entre les humains et les animaux familiers illumine de façon symbolique la façon dont la maternité est reliée à des codes sociaux similaires qui requièrent l'abnégation.

In Gloria Sawai's story "Mother's Day," the 13-year-old protagonist, Norma, recalls an encounter she had with a stray kitten two years previous. While kittens are generally associated with urban domesticity, Norma finds this one in a ditch following the very sort of severe snowstorm that might comfortably, if formulaically, represent the wild Canadian landscape. Though Norma tries to find a home for the kitten, she is unsuccessful. In Barbara Gowdy's *Falling Angels*, the Field sisters share a twelve-hour interlude of childhood bliss after finding a kitten under a bush in their neighbourhood. Unlike the kitten in Sawai's story, this kitten's strayness seems entirely disconnected from a wild environment, and it is quickly immersed into a thoroughly suburban scene: the family feeds the kitten Beefaroni and the youngest Field girl, Sandy, dresses her in a doll's pink ball gown (Gowdy 1989, 33). Unfortunately, Gowdy's kitten appears to pay for her total absorption in an urban realm with her life, as she is sawn in half by the family car's engine after having sought shelter from a rainstorm under the hood. In fact, both kittens represented in these texts end up dead, in Gowdy's text as a result of a suburban accident and in Sawai's text by Norma's own violent hand. Both texts explore how encountering the human and being drawn into the process of becoming a pet proves fatal to the animal.

It is my contention that Sawai's and Gowdy's representations of deadly human-kitten relationships demonstrate how the category of pet is problematic, and how emphasizing the compulsory relationality inherent in the category of the pet forces a confrontation with the extent to which

hierarchical social coding has been normalized. It is also my contention, however, that the most pressing concern for the authors is not the pet itself, but how human-pet relations symbolically illuminate the way the figure of the mother is implicated in a similar social code. The focus on the kitten, which seems inconsistent with the traditional Canadian concern for non-urbanized animals, exploits a critical predisposition to relegate kittens to the apparently lesser side of a false wild-domestic dichotomy, doing so in order to destabilize both concepts. This destabilization then serves as a model for a similar challenge to notions regarding the naturalness of motherhood. Both Sawai and Gowdy are interested in how the social codes that bolster the myth of maternal instinct foreground acceptable behaviour towards children, as is symbolically represented by suitable behaviour in pets. My investigation begins by discussing the binary opposition between wildness and domesticity that typically manifests itself in cultural representations of animals in general and in Canadian literary representations of animals in particular, showing how domesticity comes to be associated with oppressive notions of "natural" femininity. I discuss the significance of conceiving pet-human relationships as inherently hierarchical, examining both texts to show the way that the kittens can only be deemed as pets if their domestic role, and the "natural" behaviour associated with that role, proves acceptable within a determined social structure. The social obligation of the pet's tolerability will then be compared to how the myth of the "naturally" sacrificing mother actually depends on similar social structures that demand a woman's performance of her secondary status in her role as mother. Thus, the death of the kittens in Gowdy and Sawai's texts operate as violently symbolic depictions of the way the women are required not only to sacrifice themselves to the institution of motherhood, but also to think of this sacrifice as natural, as a

fulfilment of domestic instinct. In *The Wild and the Domestic*, Barney Nelson argues that the short stories and critical essays of early-twentieth century American nature writer and feminist Mary Austin show the traditional opposition of wild and domestic animals to be a false dichotomy. Austin's observation of animals, Nelson states, led her to think that "by watching 'wild' animals, humans actually learned 'domesticity': homemaking, territory claiming, food storage, raising young, education, society, and religion" (Nelson 2000, 22). Austin's stories delineate the complex territoriality exhibited in the so-called "wild," where both the "highly cultivated trait" of welcoming visitors and the defence of territory among equals are evident (2000, 31). Austin's work thus troubles the distinction made between wild and domestic behaviour, undermining a hierarchical privileging of human over non-human animals that equates the capacity for domestication with superior intelligence and wildness with mere instinct (2000, 41). Farm animal activist Karen Davis, however, has proposed what appears to be an inverse argument, in which wildness becomes the privileged term in the wild-domestic dichotomy. In "Thinking like a Chicken: Farm Animals and the Feminine Connection," Davis points out that the animal advocacy movement has tended to focus on those species that are culturally associated with wildness and "freedom," often neglecting the plight of animals that have been domesticated for the purpose of being farmed as food (Davis 1995, 196). Furthermore, Davis argues that this emphasis on the "rights" of certain animal species over others demonstrates the way that wild animals are glorified because of their association with masculinity, while "animal protectionists exhibit culturally conditioned indifference toward, and prejudice against, creatures whose lives appear too slavishly, too boringly, too stupidly female" (1995, 196). Though Nelson and Davis may initially appear to be at odds, both examinations show how the wild-domestic binary has been mobilized to

favour human behaviour that seeks to exercise and establish power. While one might pursue how the relationship between these sets of oppositions works to doubly privilege the male for being both rational and wild, as in the social sanctioning of the cultured predator, for the purposes of my examination of Sawai and Gowdy's texts what is more interesting is how the arguments of Nelson and Davis produce a narrative of the way the category of domesticity is activated to ensure the subjugation of animals and women. Nelson argues that Austin's work tries to resist the move to oppose nature and culture, whereby the domestic traits of animals are shown to be evidence of a sort of natural culture. Davis's argument, though, shows how the nature-culture divide reasserts itself so that the set of social conventions that encompass domesticity become associated with inherent or natural weakness.

A survey of the recently published collection, *Other Selves: Animals in the Canadian Literary Imagination* (2007), reveals that the majority of Canadian literary representations of animals, as well as critical examinations of animals in Canadian literature, feature wild animals - bears, wolves, birds, moose - that emerge out of a space not yet given over to the effects of urbanization and domesticity. The most salient feature of animals, especially as they figure in non-allegorical Canadian literature, has been their wildness, whether this wildness is depicted to "lead us back to the old kinship of earth" (Roberts 2001, 146), as Charles G.D. Roberts writes in his preface to *Kindred of the Wild*, or, as Margaret Atwood might suggest, to reveal our own cultural fears. In *Survival*, Atwood (predictably) associates the "The Canadian concern with doomed and slaughtered animals" (Atwood 1972, 76) with her contention that "Canadians themselves feel threatened" (1972, 79); this connection is made within the context of her claim that Canadian physical space is generally portrayed as dangerous, indifferent, alien, and wild. John Sandlos, though rejecting

Atwood's efforts to think of the wild animal as an "abstract expression of a national Canadian psyche" (Sandlos 2000, 74), focuses on how, in Canadian literature, confronting the death of the wild animal, a figure imbued with "symbolic potency," (2000, 84) offers humans a way to resist "narcissistic alienation from the world around us" (2000, 88). Here too, Sandlos privileges the wild animal that is somehow inherently separate from the banality that constitutes "the world around us," a space that must be read as domesticated. My concern with the perhaps less inspiring and certainly less emblematically Canadian figure of the pet, specifically the kitten, questions what these stories about the deaths of such thoroughly domesticated animals as pet kittens "lead us back to" (Roberts 2001, 146). What does the story of intense urban domesticity and its capacity to be non-functioning, given to excess, narcissism, and being "too stupidly female" indicate? I argue that Sawai and Gowdy's depictions of kittens challenge the prevalent focus in Canadian literature on the wildness of animals in order to critique similarly ingrained conceptions regarding the naturalness of motherhood, especially as it is associated with the banality of self-sacrifice.

The category of pet is generally considered to be problematic. Whereas a "wild" or non-urbanized animal may be considered on its own as either anomalous or representative of its pack, the individuated animal, paradoxically, can never be understood in isolation. Despite the benefits for both human and non-human animals of this manifestation of biophilia cited by many animal advocates, there remains an uneasy consensus that pet ownership is, at best, "quasi-paternalistic" (Zamir 2007, 98) and, at worst, a violent enacting of power. As Yi-Fu Tuan points out, "Domestication means domination: the two words have the same root sense of mastery over another being" (Tuan 2007, 143). In order for a pet to be a pet, it must be deemed thus by a human, ideally one who

feels affection for it. "Pet" is not a term that defines the animal's essence, but rather its role; animals are not pets until humans construct them as such, and pets cannot exist except in a relationship to humans. Human relationships with pets are often deemed inauthentic, and a matter of childlikeness, whim, excess, or substitution for a "real" relationship, as in the stereotype of the spinster woman and her too many cats. Bruce Boehrer further notes that the aberrance of the pet is suggested by the term pet itself, which "in its earliest recorded usage can refer not only to animals but also to people" (Boehrer 1999, 154). This ambiguous denotation, on the one hand, "[elevates pets] to the status of honorary people"; on the other hand, "the pejorative associations of the substantive pet...[suggest] belittlement and even ridicule" (1999, 154). Boehrer's point here is that the linguistic history of the term pet categorizes such a creature as "the allowed fool, the pampered darling, the ornamental nonproducer who is tolerated precisely because s/he cannot be taken too seriously" (1999, 154). Boehrer's use of the terms "allowed" and "tolerated" clarify that the hierarchical relationship between human and pet is not simply a matter of authority but of authorization. The pet is not only constructed as such by the human, but also bound by the relationship's conditions to be at once completely dependant and consistently pleasing.¹

The kittens that Sawai and Gowdy depict are strays, a portrayal that suggests a loss of the animal's natural place. Sawai calls attention to the stray's displacement by emphasizing its ugliness, especially of its voice: the kitten Norma finds is "grey and skinny, its voice thin and unpleasant" (Sawai 2001, 103). Sawai's focus on the kitten's voice is indicative of the story's thematic exploration of the ramifications of miscommunication, both unintentional and deliberate. While the climax of this thematization, which I will discuss below, emphasizes the agony of an unintentional disconnect, Norma's narrative response to

the kitten's "ugly voice" (2001, 103) represents her deliberate refusal to recognize the kitten's meowing as communicative and her choice to read the animal as a non-pet, as an object of revulsion rather than preference. The kitten the Field sisters find has likely not long been a stray. The description of her beautiful "white fur as silky as angel hair" (1989, 32) indicates that she is a lost pet who has already been domesticated. The girls are delighted by her purring, meowing, even though her madcap antics, which include peeing in a basket, keep them up all night (1989, 33). Because the Field girls construct the kitten in terms of preference, as a pet, her behaviour is understood as appropriately relational and in the service of human appreciation.

In both cases, the relative appeal of the kitten reflects a rendering of home and the extent to which the domestic space operates as a space of comfort for the female. For Norma, the ugly kitten represents a barrier between herself and home. Sawai indicates her thematic interest in how the home space is constructed and vulnerable to disruption early in the story in her description of a spring snowstorm. As Norma listens to the wind blowing outdoors, she imagines that it is "a great enemy who hated us personally and our home too, down to its very foundation....an enemy [that] wanted to rip us right off the ground we'd settled on" (2001, 93). Sawai's use of the word "home" rather than "house" in this sentence is significant, as later in the story she implicitly contrasts the two terms. After telling Norma to "ask at the other houses" about where the kitten comes from, her mother instructs her to "come home soon" for supper (2001, 104). "Houses" are where other people live and are perceived from an external position. "Home" constitutes what occurs within a house, and it is these foundational patterns the enemy storm seeks to upset. Sawai's use of the term "settle" to describe the family's relationship to its home "ground"/grounding refers not only to the common trope in Canadian

literature of the pioneer journey, but also to the concept of agreement, even compromise, as the "home" Norma's family maintains proves a problematic construct.

Norma finds the kitten in the afternoon on Mother's Day, after having spent the morning at church; during the service, the congregation sings a special "Mother's Day" hymn, which she feels "has a lot of meaning":

Mid pleasures and palaces, though
we may roam
Be it ever so humble, there's no
place like home.
A charm from the sky seems to
hallow us there,
Which, seek thro' the world, is ne'er
met with elsewhere
Home, home, sweet, sweet, home,
There's no place like home,
O, there's no place like home.
(Sawai 2001, 103)

Throughout her attempt to find the stray a home, Norma is told to take it back to where she found it, to which Norma responds: "I found it in a ditch" (Sawai 2001, 104). Norma's dilemma is that she realizes that the kitten disturbs the construction of home for her own family and for her neighbours and, therefore, has no place. It is an "unhallowed" creature and associating with it forces her to "roam" from house to house in a fruitless pursuit. The hymn's reference to roaming is another idea foreshadowed in Sawai's description of the storm, as Norma observes: "Every inch of air was disrupted, uprooted, the snowflakes swirling about. Like refugees, I thought...Like lonely refugees without homes, wandering in the cold, looking for a place to settle...But they couldn't find such a place, so they wandered all in a frenzy, cold and lonesome" (Sawai 2001, 94). Norma herself becomes a "refugee" during her involvement with the kitten, even while she chooses not to consider the animal itself in such terms. As Norma recognizes that home is conditional, that it is only "charmed"

(2001,103) insofar as it retains certain socially complex boundaries, she becomes increasingly insistent on and appalled by the stray's lack of proper place. The repetition of "I found it in a ditch" (2001, 104) ironically undermines the hymn's final refrain, as Norma must discriminate between "home" and "no place."

In *Falling Angels*, the kitten's beauty does not, as might be expected, indicate a comfortable domestic space, but rather suggests the veiled danger that lurks in the Field home, which, in itself, symbolizes the false "paradise" of 1960s suburbia. Though James Field, the family patriarch, is noisily concerned with maintaining external appearances, routinely inspecting his children's clothes and his neighbours' lawns for signs of lack of care (Gowdy 1989, 18), the chaotic and violent daily existence inside the home is concealed from outsiders, as "Nobody who wasn't related to them ever visited" (1989, 21). Lou, the middle Field daughter, decides to call the kitten Rapunzel, signalling her home space as a sort of prison; indeed, when Rapunzel is put on a window ledge, "she instantly [starts] jumping and clawing at the moths on the other side of the screen" (1989, 32). However, whereas Grimms' Rapunzel was imprisoned by an overbearing witch/mother-figure intent on clinging to her "child," the kitten Rapunzel, like the Field girls and their mother, is subject to the will and whims of a tyrannical and possibly insane patriarch, a man who decides to prepare for a Soviet nuclear attack by locking himself and the family up in a home-built fallout shelter for two weeks, during which time his mania for authority reaches a fever pitch. The chapter describing this episode, entitled "Disneyland 1961," is a grotesque depiction of the "nuclear" family and the painful "fallout" for the girls of living in a home that is an artificially constructed, socially conservative mock prison.

When Rapunzel, still wearing a doll's pink ball gown, escapes through the front door in the morning after being

"adopted," Mr. Field declares "'She'll be back...Take it from me. Once you feed a cat, you can't get rid of it. I know all about cats. I know everything there is to know about cats'" (Gowdy 1989, 33). Moments later, his car engine cuts Rapunzel in half. Gowdy's representation of the circumstances surrounding the kitten's death reflect the violence implicit in the patriarch's knowledge, as what he "knows" about cats, and metaphorically women, is that their attachment to home stems from a desperation to be defined by particular cultural boundaries and dumb tenacity. Lou blames her father for the kitten's death and decides that she and her sisters, Norma and Sandy, must run away to "punish" him (1989, 33). In devising a running away scheme, Lou focuses on imagining other potential home spaces and composing persuasive stories to tell strangers about why their actual home space is unsuitable. Even in her anger over Rapunzel's death, Lou realizes that her father's part in it is not sufficiently incriminating and that their story for the orphanage should ideally include "an uncle who beats them" (1989, 34). The girls' attempt at running away is a failure; like Norma in "Mother's Day," they become strays themselves for a while, ending up back home again without anyone having noticed their absence. In the course of their confused wanderings through other suburban neighbourhoods, Lou sees another kitten which she thinks is Rapunzel, but which dashes off when Lou calls to it. Gowdy describes the girls' hunt for this second kitten, which, deliberately or otherwise, does not allow itself to be claimed as a pet, as "searching for white" (1989, 40), a recurring course of action for the girls which, throughout the novel, signifies the pursuit of absence. The Field girls, however, come to a similar conclusion as Norma's regarding the frightening and apparently non-negotiable distinction between "no place" and home, as chasing the second Rapunzel, an apparition from a fairy tale vision of just punishment and happy endings, proves impractical.

The behaviour of each kitten within the context of these complex constructions of home actually precipitates its death. Though both behave simply according to instinct, this instinctual behaviour, like the stray or lost pet itself, proves to be misplaced. Rapunzel cannot recognize the difference between the potential warmth of an urban domestic space and a car engine, revealing that, in suburbia, an animal's instinct for survival becomes disordered. Following the failed attempt to punish him by running away, Lou envisions rewriting the damning note left for her father in such a way that absolves him of killing Rapunzel: "We have gone to Florida because it hardly ever rains there. Not like here. Cats don't have to climb into car motors to keep warm in Florida" (Gowdy 1989, 52). Unhappily, though prudently, Lou acknowledges that mere animal instinct is of little value within the thoroughly artificial environment of her neighbourhood.

For Norma, the instincts of the kitten to demand comfort trigger only exasperation. Norma is disgusted by "that ugly kitten pushing on my chest, nibbling at me, purring and pressing against me as if I were its home, as if I were the place where it belonged" (Sawai 2001, 106). It is not the instinctual behaviour itself that is the problem, but that such behaviour does not, to use Norma's term, "belong." Presumably, the Field girls would be delighted by any display of affectionate neediness and, certainly, Sawai's kitten might have been better off had it sought shelter or comfort elsewhere. Instinctual behaviour only proves troublesome when it misapprehends or disrupts a construction of the home space, or when, in its social function, the pet is unsustainable or unwelcome. In "Mother's Day" and *Falling Angels*, the process of potential social absorption is cut short by the kitten's death, and the context for this violent response to misplaced animal instinct is a textual challenge by both Sawai and Gowdy to the myth of maternal instinct.

In *Motherhood and Representation*, E. Ann Kaplan traces the cultural discourse

that produced the modern institution of motherhood, beginning with an examination of the effects of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's revolutionary views on child rearing. Kaplan argues that Rousseau's "description of a regime of total attention to the child from an early age...[established] the woman's function in cementing the family through her skills in emotions and relationships" (Kaplan 1992, 20). Kaplan notes that modernist, postmodern, and feminist interventions into late-eighteenth and particularly nineteenth century motherhood discourse challenge "the 'given' (that woman's main purpose is to reproduce)" (1992, 26). Her concluding chapter, however, notes the various contradictory mother-discourses that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, including the ubiquitous sentimental mother-discourse, which "speaks from the position of the mother's being absorbed in nurturing" (1992, 209). Elaine Hansen's *Mother Without Child* also includes a survey of how succeeding stages of feminist inquiry into the meaning of motherhood appear to have resulted in "a kind of impasse" (Hansen 1997, 6): while "first-act" (1997, 5) feminists, such as Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, and Betty Friedan attacked the prevailing patriarchally-coded notion of motherhood, mid-seventies feminists such as Nancy Chodorow, Sara Ruddick, and Julia Kristeva sought to "reclaim and reinterpret motherhood" (1997, 5) as a unique preserve of women. The "third-act" (1997, 6) impasse that Hansen describes finds conceptions of essentialist motherhood thought to be oppressive confounded with attempts to celebrate motherhood as an expression of individual female subjectivity and action.

Within a Canadian context, Di Brandt's *Wild Mother Dancing: Maternal Narrative in Canadian Literature* is characterized by the impasse Hansen describes. In her "prologue in the first person," Brandt declares her objective to "account for the mother's traditional absence [in literature] and the reasons for it, a politicized reading act that is on the side of

maternal subjectivity. I wish to celebrate in my study the presence of the maternal reproductive body...and honour women's reproductive labour in childbirth and childrearing" (Brandt 1993, 9-10). While Brandt does acknowledge that all women are not mothers, and that mothers retain a part that "remains a separate and independent 'I'" (1993, 9), for the most part she participates in a sentimental mother-discourse that claims that all women who become mothers are happy about it; her examination of several maternal narratives by Canadian women writers closes with her assertion that "Each writer...imagines a time when maternity will come to be regarded as a conscious, intentional option for women" (1993, 157). In their representation of the death of kittens, Sawai and Gowdy seek to problematize what is entailed by what Brandt portrays as the conscious opting for maternity, exploring the danger of taking maternal instinct for granted, as well as the repercussions when a culturally constructed notion of maternal instinct apparently fails to kick in.

Hansen asserts that a crucial challenge for the third stage of an "emerging critique of recuperation" (Hansen 1997, 5) is the recognition that conceptions of motherhood, both "conservative and radical" (1997, 19), foreground its compulsory relationality. The fictions of Sawai and Gowdy pointedly compare the category of pet, which depends on human preference and an enforced social hierarchy, with the situation Hansen describes whereby the mother's "position or identity depends on the presence of the child to whom the maternal figure gives birth, nurturance, protection and so on" (1997, 19-20). Hansen illuminates her argument regarding "the relational aspect of the concept mother" (1997, 4) with a close reading of an archetypal tale about motherhood recounted in Kings 3:16-28, the story of King Solomon and the two harlots. She notes the curious case that "from the biblical narrative, it is impossible to tell which of the two nameless women - [accuser or accused]... - turned out to be the

'real' mother" (1997, 23), and argues that this narrative omission or ambiguity clarifies the principal meaning of the story: that the only thing that defines motherhood is the idea of self-sacrifice (1997, 23-4). Hansen notes that what is solely at issue in Solomon's decision is which woman will agree to participate within a structure that inevitably places her second, that circumscribes her choices within a framework of maternal self-sacrifice. Here too, Hansen's analysis is relevant to the way Sawai and Gowdy depict human-pet relations as symbols for what is damaging about the social coding of motherhood. In both texts, the kitten's death operates as a symbolic sacrifice on the altar of the archetypal, self-sacrificing mother. The very gruesomeness of each depicted death is a startling reminder that the linguistic history of the term "sacrifice" originates with defining the practice of ritually killing a person or animal as an offering to a deity. The fundamental sense of sacrifice, then, not only stands for killing but, perhaps more significantly, refers to a procedure that ensures the stability of a hierarchical community via ritual, via a rite that has been artificially constructed as a sign of absolute deference. In order to confront the conventional and allegedly benign connotations of what it means to be a sacrificing mother, Sawai and Gowdy summon up images that rationalize sacrificial violence as a necessary or inevitable consequence of social construction and stability.

After struggling unsuccessfully for some hours to find a home for the kitten, Norma ends up killing it in brutal fashion, first swinging it around by the tail and then bashing it with stones. The short story begins with Norma situating the incident with the kitten within the framework of a difficult weekend: "Mother's Day was on May 9 that year. On May 6 we had a blizzard and school was closed. On May 7 I was sick. I was sick until May 8, so I missed two days of school. On Mother's Day I found the cat. And on Monday, May 10, everything was

back to normal" (Sawai 2001, 91). Norma's emphasis on Mother's Day, as well as her use of the phrase "back to normal," is crucial, as the context for her murder of the kitten is an encounter with a maternal narrative that shocks her profoundly. Prior to relating the incident with the kitten, Norma describes, first, the day of the blizzard when her father, mother and she are snowed in; she remarks, "On very snowy days or rainy days my mother abandons all her housewifely responsibilities and sits in front of the window, just looking out" (2001, 95). On this day, Norma is not troubled by her mother's laxity, or by her fixation on the storm outside the window, simultaneously a symbol of escape and imprisonment; she asserts, "I have a very good feeling about that day, nothing at all like the days that followed" (2001, 95). On the day she becomes ill, however, Norma must confront an upsetting, though logical, outgrowth of her mother's ambivalence: her mother thoughtlessly sends Norma's father up to change a mustard plaster when it is clear that Norma is sensitive about her developing chest. Norma declares, "I can't understand to this day how my mother could have done that to me" (2001, 100). Describing the changing of the mustard plaster, the narrator emphasizes Norma's father's response to both his daughter's body and her embarrassment: "I looked up and saw his face and saw his eyes open a little wider, and I knew he saw my development. It was pretty clear to me that he saw...He wiped my eyes with the edge of the sheet and told me I'd be better soon and not to cry and mother was cooking vegetable soup with dumplings for supper" (2001, 101). Norma's father offers this attention to the duty of cooking as a reason for the maternal lapse, but Norma's subsequent actions reveal this rationalization as insufficient. Her behaviour towards the kitten is portrayed as a response to humiliation and rage, which is exacerbated by the well-meant pronouncement by a neighbour that her initial concern for the kitten proves what a "good little mother" (2001, 105) she will

make. Sawai's point here is that, in the maternal narrative, ambivalence and/or preoccupation with something other than mothering is not normal; it is a type of neglect at variance with the myth of maternal instinct. When Norma kills the kitten, she is justifying her mother's behaviour in the only way she can: she violently rejects maternal instinct in herself. After killing the cat, Norma walks back towards her house and muses, "I used to like going home after dark...I'd think of children and fathers going home in the dark. And when they got there, the house would be warm, the supper cooking, and the mother setting the table and humming. But that night, walking into town, it wasn't like that" (2001, 107). Norma's refutation of maternal instinct includes her acknowledgement that mothering is a social as opposed to natural phenomenon.

For the Field girls, adopting Rapunzel represents an attempt to perform an idealized maternal narrative to compensate for their part in a failed one. In *Falling Angels*, Gowdy portrays Mrs. Field not merely as ambivalent, but as functionally absent. The novel opens with Mrs. Field's awkward funeral, and towards the end, Gowdy describes her graceful, "yielding" (Gowdy 1989, 184) fall off the roof to her death. Mrs. Field's death fall concludes a life already gravely damaged: she is an alcoholic; her hair has turned white as a result, so she says, of her mourning an aborted foetus; she disregards the fact that her husband terrorizes her daughters. At the root of Mrs. Field's functional absence is the death of her first child, Jimmy, who she dropped over Niagara Falls, likely on purpose. At the funeral for her mother, Lou muses that after maternal instinct failed her, Mrs. Field simply "had no instincts left" (1989, 4). Outside the funeral home, a reporter asks Lou about the family cat, inquiring, "Your mother went up on the roof to rescue a cat, didn't she?" (1989, 2). Though the explanation for the reporter's false assumption is the lie Mr. Field tells a fireman to keep up appearances (1989,

184), the initial obscurity of the question suggests that Rapunzel represents Mrs. Field. Throughout the novel, both are portrayed, at best, as white absences and, at worst, as ornamental prisoners whose non-domesticated desires are not taken seriously. The fates of Rapunzel and Mrs. Field, as well as Lou's response to them, reveal Gowdy's interrogation into cultural expectations of a mother's role. Though she at first seeks to unequivocally blame her father for the kitten's death (1989, 33) and her mother's suicide (1989, 187), Lou ultimately concedes that "the truth is, all he did was screw up. [The night of the suicide] reminds her of when the cat climbed into the fan belt. It was their father's fault...but it wasn't his fault" (1989, 197). Both Rapunzel and Mrs. Field are killed by a machine, one in which they sought shelter. Although primarily Mr. Field drives that machine, he too depends on and is bewildered by it.

"Mother's Day" concludes with Norma's declaration that, lack of special celebration in some countries notwithstanding, "There's no nation in the whole world, not a solitary one, without mothers" (Sawai 2001, 109). Her summation suggests that her murder of the kitten ultimately operates as a sacrifice, as a rite of passage in her own domestication, during which she must admit that the notion of maternal instinct is an artificial, albeit powerful, cultural myth, and choose whether or not to take up the mantle of the social mother.

While standing at Niagara Falls, Lou finds she cannot decide whether her mother's dropping of Baby Jimmy was "an act of craziness or sacrifice" (Gowdy 1989, 205). All she is left with, after Mr. Field too disappears near the falls, is an imagined message from her mother, which tells her "The world is all yours" (1989, 207). Lou must return to her father's car (1989, 207) and negotiate a machine world that seems to necessitate death and desolation (or madness) in its social coding.

In *Animal Victims in Modern Fiction*, Marian Scholtmeijer examines René

Girard's theories on the origin and meaning of animal sacrifice, arguing that Girard's focus on the necessary stage of animal domestication in this process usefully "restores to the domestication of animals the dynamic of victimization" (Scholtmeijer 1993, 80). Scholtmeijer goes on to suggest that the linked procedures of animal domestication and ritual killing allow "the community [to reinforce] the sanctity of its myths" (1993, 80). In other words, the formula for animal sacrifice depends on first giving the animal an honorary place within the social system, a system that requires from all its members a figurative sacrifice made literal with the life of the newly absorbed member. "Mother's Day" and *Falling Angels* each tell the story of a symbolic animal sacrifice. In Sawai's story, Norma murders the kitten over the course of her realization that mothers are socially made, while in Gowdy's novel, Rapunzel's death represents the violent repercussions of Mrs. Field's failure to be adequately self-sacrificing to the social machine. The significance of both plots is the way they reassert the violence implicit in the very notion of sacrifice, a violence that has been concealed by social structures that code certain roles, such as that of the pet and the mother, as naturally inferior, and certain behaviours, primarily those that perform a longing to be tolerated, to be made use of, as simply instinctual.

Endnote

1. In her recent book, *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway confronts the problematically hierarchical terminology used to describe inter-species relationships, noting that "changes in terminology can signal important mutations in the character of relationships - commercially, epistemologically, emotionally, and politically" (Haraway 2008, 135). Her use of the term "companion animal" as opposed to pet reveals her desire to "make a mess out of categories in the making of kin and kind" (2008, 19).

References

- Atwood, Margaret. *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Toronto: Anansi, 1972.
- Boehrer, Bruce. "Shylock and the Rise of the Household Pet: Thinking Social Exclusion in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 50.2 (1999): 152-70.
- Brandt, Di. *Wild Mother Dancing: Maternal Narrative in Canadian Literature*. Winnipeg: U of Manitoba P, 1993.
- Davis, Karen. "Thinking Like a Chicken: Farm Animals and the Feminine Connection," *Animals and Women*, Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan, eds. Durham & London, Duke UP, 1995, pp. 192-212.
- Gowdy, Barbara. *Falling Angels*. Toronto: HarperCollins Canada, 1989.
- Hansen, Elaine. *Mother Without Child: Contemporary Fiction and the Crisis of Motherhood*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997.
- Haraway, Donna J. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis & London: U of Minnesota P, 2008.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*. London & New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Nelson, Barney. *The Wild and the Domestic: Animal Representation, Ecocriticism, and Western American Literature*. Reno & Las Vegas: U of Nevada P, 2000.
- Other Selves: Animals in the Canadian Literary Imagination*, Janice Fiamengo, ed. Ottawa: Ottawa University Press, 2007.
- Roberts, Charles G.D. *Kindred of the Wild*. 1902. Toronto: Exile Editions, 2001.

Sandlos, John. "From Within Fur and Feathers: Animals in Canadian Literature," *Topia* 4 (2000): 73-91.

Sawai, Gloria. "Mother's Day," *A Song for Nettie Johnson*. Regina, Saskatchewan: Coteau Books, 2001.

Scholtmeijer, Marian. *Animal Victims in Modern Fiction: From Sanctity to Sacrifice*. Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 1993.

Tuan, Yi-Fu. "Animal Pets: Cruelty and Affection," *The Animals Reader*, Linda Kalof & Amy Fitzgerald, eds. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2007, pp. 141- 53.

Zamir, Tzachi. *Ethics and the Beast: A Speciesist Argument for Animal Liberation*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007.