

ROSE O'NEILL'S SWEET MONSTERS: AN EXPLORATION IN
MOTHERHOOD AND ROMANTIC LOVE IN EARLY 20TH
CENTURY AMERICA

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by
MARY ETHIER
Dr. Kristin Schwain, Thesis Supervisor

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the

_____thesis_____entitled

Rose O'Neill's Sweet Monsters: An Exploration of Motherhood and Romantic Love in
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presented by _____Mary Ethier_____,

a candidate for the degree of _____Master of Art History_____,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

Professor Kristin Schwain

Professor James Van Dyke

Professor Lynn Itagaki

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Abstract

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries in America Rose O’Neill, artist, illustrator, and author, achieve unparalleled success. She was a self-taught artist, although her informal training was surprisingly academic in nature, who was able to change her style at will to match the needs of various publishers. Today O’Neill is best known as the creator of the Kewpie, adorable, illustrated figures that quickly turned into a merchandizing empire. Biographers and others have heavily emphasized the importance of the Kewpie as well as O’Neill’s vivacious personality. However, the Kewpie is only part of O’Neill’s oeuvre and the text concerning her personality often neglect a critical lens through which its construction can be seen. In this paper I detail O’Neill’s artistic development and her oeuvre. I then examine O’Neill’s private works, the *Sweet Monsters*, in which she explored major social issues and concerns specifically those concerning the Women’s Movement of this period. As a Suffragette O’Neill was well acquainted with the arguments surrounding women’s rights and she explored these arguments visually within her *Sweet Monsters*. I analyze two sets of drawings; one focuses on motherhood and creation and another that depicts romantic love and female sexuality. Through these images I argue that O’Neill can be understood as inverting and/or combining various traditional visual narratives to create new and yet familiar images of motherhood, creation, love, and female sexuality.

Introduction

Rose O'Neill (1874-1944) was the highest paid woman illustrator during the Golden Age of illustration in America (1880-1920s). Her work was featured in several major publications with the subject matter ranging from advertisements to images accompanying short stories, to political cartoons. The illustrative work O'Neill was most well-known for were her cartoons in Puck Magazine and later the Kewpie. The latter were innocent baby-like figures, known for their playfulness and acts of kindness. The popularity of the Kewpie illustrations led to the creation of Kewpie dolls and figurines. O'Neill's commercial success ensured that by the early 1910's she was a household name in America. However, the newspaper and magazine illustrations were only part of her oeuvre. O'Neill wrote a total of ten books half of which focused on the Kewpies, one was a book of poetry, and the rest were novels. She illustrated her novels as well as the novels of other authors, including her second husband Henry Leon Wilson. Beyond her commercial works O'Neill also created what she considered her private art, the "Sweet Monsters". These private drawings and sculptures were eventually exhibited in art galleries in both America and Europe earning O'Neill an international reputation as a serious artist on par with famous European artists.

Despite her success and international fame, O'Neill's career and works as a whole have been understudied in comparison to other artists who achieved similar levels of success and fame. With few exceptions, past scholarship has focused on her commercial work and her vivacious personality. One of the earliest writings, which discusses her life and works, is Ralph Alan McCause's *Titans and Kewpies; the Life and Art of Rose O'Neill* from 1964. It begins with an anecdote highlighting O'Neill's ability as a hostess,

a near perfect entertainer whether at her home in the Ozarks or her apartment in Greenwich Village.¹ McCause provides a great deal of biographical information about both Rose O’Neill and her family, making it highly probable that he had access to O’Neill’s unpublished autobiography at the time he wrote his book. He breaks down O’Neill’s life into chapters focusing on specific periods for example her time at Puck magazine and the creation of the Kewpies. Repeatedly, McCause notes that there are “strange” contrasts in both her art and in her personal life.² One of the largest contrasts in her work can be found between the style of the Kewpies and the Sweet Monsters, although he refers to the latter as Titans. There is little examination of the Sweet Monster drawings themselves, any formal aspects noted follow critics statements given after their initial exhibitions. Throughout the book McCause claims that O’Neill’s dramatization of her world came from a deeper need to escape the harsh realities of her life. The Kewpies representing a need for relief through whimsy while the Sweet Monsters were for serious moments.³ This assertion has pulled focus away from the work itself and has enhanced people’s fascination with O’Neill’s personal life.

Interest in her vivacious personality continued with the later publication of Rose O’Neill’s heavily edited autobiography. Toward the end of her life O’Neill began writing her autobiography however she passed before it was completed. In 1994, Miriam Formanek-Brunell edited a portion of O’Neill’s writing, piecing together the story of her life. It consists of reflections from a later point in her life that were left unfinished, and eventually completed by others. The book produced is relatively short when considering

¹ Ralph Alan McCause, *Titans and Kewpies; the Life and Art of Rose O’Neill* (New York: Vantage Press, 1968), 1-2.

² Ibid. 96

³ Ibid.30

that the Bonniebrook Historical Society, located in a replica of the home O'Neill built in the Ozarks, has several thick black binders filled with journal entries and letters from several different periods of O'Neill's life.⁴ There is certainly no shortage of material from which a long and detailed biography could be written. The edited autobiography as it is, is difficult to navigate as it goes from specific moments to more vague statements. One example is the great detail that O'Neill provides when she travels to her family's new home in the Ozarks after having lived in New York for a year. The man who drives the cart, the bumpy road, the nature surrounding them, she paints a picture for the reader.⁵ However, later when discussing her first gallery exhibition in Paris, from which she received great acclaim in Europe she says extraordinarily little other than that she was hesitant to display her Sweet Monsters. The work she discusses most in her autobiography are the Kewpies, from their inception in 1909 to the creation of the dolls in a factory in Germany, O'Neill charts their rise in popularity. Her autobiography largely focuses on her personal life, which was incredibly fascinating, rather than her artistic career. This prevents O'Neill from being able to claim space as a serious artist who engaged with major social issues of her time.

While the Kewpie remains important to the evolution of O'Neill's art and her international popularity, intense focus on their subjective 'cuteness' has detracted from her earnest engagement with modern intellectual ideas. One scholar who goes beyond the Kewpie is Shelley Armitage, in her book *Kewpies and Beyond: The World of Rose O'Neill* she notes that scholars have persisted in calling O'Neill and other women

⁴ Her letters and journal entries have been split up and sold to several different collectors, preventing a complete collection from being formed.

⁵Rose Cecil O'Neill and Miriam Forman-Brunell, *The Story of Rose O'Neill: an Autobiography* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 54-60.

illustrators of the era “charming, anecdotal, and decorative”.⁶ Armitage acknowledges the difficulties that women artists faced during the early 20th century and explores how O’Neill tried to navigate these traditional social rules. She is also the first scholar to introduce the notion that O’Neill’s public image was consciously and meticulously constructed by the artist herself.⁷ This separation of O’Neill’s public and private self further complicates the narrative provided by previous scholars. Armitage’s book is the first in depth look at that various mediums in which O’Neill worked and the intellectual conversations she was a part of. The connections Armitage makes between O’Neill’s visual and written works, and more specifically between the *Kewpies* and the *Sweet Monsters*, returns to a previously ignored statement that O’Neill made regarding the two distinct collections, “The buffoonery of the *Kewpies* and the passion of my serious drawings playing side by side is unusual, but not too unusual. In this droll existence, the Hamlet and Lear have always consorted with the clown.”⁸ The connections presented by Armitage highlight several key themes found throughout her works including androgynous figures, traditional ideals of motherhood, and the purity of childhood. Her book goes beyond O’Neill’s private life and provides more context regarding O’Neill’s intellectual engagement during her career. The connections Armitage examines between the *Kewpies* and *Sweet Monsters* are important, however she does not expand on the *Sweet Monsters* themselves, specifically beyond what has been previously stated by critics who first saw the drawings after their initial exhibition.

⁶ Shelley Armitage, *Kewpies and beyond: the World of Rose O’Neill* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 10.

⁷ Ibid. 110-111.

⁸ Ralph Alan McCause, *Titans and Kewpies; the Life and Art of Rose*, 27.

There are two goals for this thesis, the first is to rewrite the narrative of Rose O'Neill's artistic development. Currently there is no clear record regarding her growth as an artist, only bits and pieces have been placed throughout her autobiography and other works. An organized account which provides context will allow for greater understanding of her Sweet Monsters collection. Chapter one will focus on O'Neill's development as an artist, beginning with her early exposure to famous works of art and artists from Ancient Greece to the 19th century. Highlighting key points in her career as an illustrator, including being the first woman to create a comic strip and becoming the first woman employed as an illustrator by Puck magazine, will emphasize her skill. This chapter will also focus on O'Neill's stylistic versatility, the variations within her commercial works and the vast difference between those works and her private art, the Sweet Monsters. The simultaneous creation of her typical commercial works, her Sweet Monsters, and the Kewpies speaks to her ability as an artist and the varying purposes of these works. This versatility helped O'Neill become one of the most popular illustrators of her time, as well as a critically acclaimed artist who earned a position at L'Ecole des Beaux Arts. In regard to the Kewpie, in this chapter I will discuss not the figures cuteness but rather how O'Neill built an international merchandising empire with them, earning millions of dollars. By reworking O'Neill's artistic development and her versatility, it becomes clear that she was a savvy entrepreneur who not only understood the economy of illustration but was extremely successful.

The second goal of this thesis is to examine the ways in which Rose O'Neill engages with specific intellectual debates of her time through her Sweet Monsters. Chapter two will focus on a subset of six Sweet Monster images that depict large looming

female creatures that dwarf the classically composed men that accompany them. These images are indicative of O'Neill's engagement with debates concerning women's changing roles in late 19th and early 20th century America. Supported by tradition and new evolutionary theories, motherhood and women's assumed predisposition to caregiving were heavily emphasized during this period. Early women's rights groups chose to claim motherhood and their presumably natural caregiving instincts to argue for greater rights and involvement in politics. By centering their arguments around motherhood and acknowledging the key role women play in the formation of society led some, like O'Neill, to question the narrative of creation. The roles of mother and creator merged within these images as O'Neill blended traditional visual narratives with new ideas.

In chapter 3, in a second subset of *Sweet Monsters* O'Neill explores another prominent topic in conversations about women's roles in the late 19th and early 20th century, sexuality. Women's sexuality and whether or not women could control their sexuality were debated by numerous fields of study. At this time women's roles were changing in America, and different philosophies regarding love and marriage became prevalent. Romantic love allowed for intimate relationships through which women could safely express their sexuality. In the five images presented O'Neill's images show nude couples at intimate moments. She uses a series of well-known textual and visual narratives in conjunction with romantic love and new expectations women had for marriage to create new images of love and intimacy. As with the images in the previous chapter, the drawings in question have key similarities and yet are informed by different visual narratives.

Chapter One

The popularity of the Kewpies among collectors has kept the scholarly work about Rose O'Neill centered around this single aspect of her career. As a result, O'Neill's mastery of stylistic variability and her overall development as an artist is often overlooked. The pertinent information regarding her artistic development can be found within her edited autobiography mentioned previously, however the information is scattered and interrupted by other topics. In other scholarly works her early experiences can be found as brief mentions with little context. However, it is important to acknowledge her origins as a self-taught woman artist who achieved great success. It is essential to give equal attention to the different genres of her art, both commercial and private. In this chapter my goal is to rewrite the narrative of her artistic development in order to show her growth as an artist as well as her ability to meet commercial demands while also creating her own unique styles. I will begin by discussing her early life and training leading up to the beginnings of her career as a young adult. Then I will examine her versatility as an artist by separating her works into three genres: commercial illustrations, Sweet Monsters, and Kewpies. By separating her art into genres, I will be able to examine each one independently and identify how they fit in her career.

Early Training and Experiences

As a young child, Rose O'Neill's family was extremely poor and frequently moved from place to place. At the age of 7 her family finally settled in Omaha, Nebraska allowing O'Neill to attend school at the Duchesne Academy of the Sacred Heart, which was founded and run by French nuns. Her father also supplemented his children's education by teaching them famous literary works, especially poetry and plays.

Originally Patrick O’Neill wanted his daughter Rose to become an actress, having her memorize and perform Shakespeare’s plays with her siblings.⁹ After several failed attempts to impress adult actors and actresses, she decided to focus on her other passion: drawing. It is no surprise with her background in Shakespearean literature that among the first figures she drew was Falstaff, a fictional character who appears in three of Shakespeare’s plays.¹⁰ In her autobiography, O’Neill remembers “consuming all the art books” at the public library and requesting those that were unavailable.¹¹ These books along with those accumulated by her father, who also collected reproductions of historic paintings and sculptures, albums of photographs, and steel engravings of Greek statues and architecture during his European travels, became O’Neill’s references. From early on she was exposed to the works of great masters such as Michelangelo and Da Vinci and more recent popular artists like Hogarth. She made use of other books as well, including an anatomy textbook, and a book by Homer which was illustrated by Flaxman.

At a young age she spent her time illustrating books of Shakespeare and filling up any other blank paper, backs of photographs, and even wall space that she could find with images of Apollos and Aphrodites. In her own words, “I went Greek.”¹² Although she remarks that not all of her drawings were Greek inspired, some were clowns for example, she would often spend entire days with illustrated copies of the Iliad, the Odyssey, and a statue book before her. In these early days, her informal artistic education mimicked that of traditional art academies, with emphasis on copying the works of the great masters such as Michelangelo and Da Vinci, as well as Greek statuary. These art academies

⁹ Rose Cecil O’Neill and Miriam Forman-Brunell, *The Story of Rose O’Neill: an Autobiography*, 29-30.

¹⁰ Ibid. 43.

¹¹ Ibid. 44.

¹² Ibid. 47.

followed the idea that painting, as a discipline, was governed by rules that could be taught. These rules were derived from the works of great masters and it was thought that the best way for students to learn was to copy those works.¹³ Students typically spent the first two years copying the works of great masters and making casts of classical sculpture.¹⁴ By age 13 she was not simply copying the images she saw; O'Neill had begun to turn them into her own creations with changed gestures.

At the age of fourteen, O'Neill submitted her drawing, *Temptation Leading Down into the Abyss*, to a competition sponsored by the *Omaha World-Herald*. She won, but the organizers accused her of copying the piece (possibly from a Gustav Doré book). In her autobiography, O'Neill recalled wondering at the time why the judges would think drawing drapery would be difficult for her, since she had done it many times before.¹⁵ In order to prove she had created the work of art herself, she had to draw a variety of elements found in her work in front of the contest committee. After proving her ability, the editors of the *World-Herald* then taught her how to make chalk-plates, a process of reproduction for newspaper prints that was popular at the time. Immediately after she began to occasionally sell her drawings to both the *Omaha World-Herald* and the *Omaha Excelsior*.¹⁶ A little while later at age 17 she was employed by the Denver magazine, *The Great Divide*, to illustrate a pen-and-ink series of the Arabian Nights Tales that would accompany text written by the editor Stanley Wood. This was the beginning of her long career in illustration.

¹³Rafael Cardoso Denis and Colin Trodd, *Art and the Academy in the Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 136.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 133.

¹⁵ Rose Cecil O'Neill and Miriam Forman-Brunell, *The Story of Rose O'Neill: an Autobiography*, 45.

¹⁶ Ralph Alan McCause, *Titans and Kewpies; the Life and Art of Rose O'Neill*, 44.

After briefly traveling with a troupe of actors and actresses throughout the Midwest in 1893, O'Neill met with her father in Chicago where they attended the World's Columbian Exposition. The World's Fair was the first time O'Neill was exposed to a multitude of more modern academic paintings and sculptures. Hundreds of artists, both men and women, from 18 different countries exhibited their works at the Fair. In the Palace of Fine Arts there were over 1,000 oil paintings and more than 200 watercolors. More works were exhibited in other buildings, including the Woman's Building, which was the first of its kind at the World's Fair. The Woman's Building was built after years of lobbying by local women who wanted an official space for women in the planning of the fair and space within the exhibitions at the fair.¹⁷ The Woman's Building was designed and decorated by women and exhibited various fields from fine art to science to home economics. After Chicago, O'Neill and her father went to New York to increase her prospects as an illustrator as the money she was making was helping to support her family.

While in New York O'Neill stayed at a convent in order to maintain her reputation, a nun would also accompany her to editors' offices to act as a chaperone. As she navigated the world of illustration O'Neill learned early on the importance of retaining sole rights to her works. At this early stage of her career, she would sign her works with either her initials or with her last name in order to hide her gender. While illustration was considered a viable career path for some women, there were still restrictions on what kind of scenes they could produce.¹⁸ Acceptable themes included

¹⁷Jeanne Madeline Weimann, *The Fair Women: the Story of the Woman's Building, World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago 1893* (Chicago: Academy, 1981), 26-27.

¹⁸Helen Goodman, "Women Illustrators of the Golden Age of American Illustration," *Woman's Art Journal* 8, no. 1 (1987): 14.

motherhood, romance, and childhood. O'Neill spent a year in New York before visiting her family at their new home in the Ozarks. It was her first stay in the Ozarks was key to the development of her own style as well as the creation of what she would later call her Sweet Monsters. While she was in Missouri O'Neill spent most of her days creating illustrations with verses attached to them and studying other artists styles in various magazines.¹⁹ Her adoption of popular styles of illustration can be read as an understanding of the commercial art market in terms of what images would sell. She was willing to follow certain trends but retained a sense of uniqueness in her illustrations.

Commercial Illustrations

By the mid-1890's O'Neill was selling her work to a variety of magazines, including but not limited to *Truth*, *Life*, and *Harper's Bazaar*. She also created the first comic strip made by a woman in America. The strip, *The Old Subscriber Calls* (Fig.1) was published in the September issue of *Truth Magazine* in 1896. The first comic strip in America, *The Yellow Kid*, was created by Richard F. Outcault only a few months prior. The strip O'Neill created is a four-paneled comic which begins with three figures in first panel, a seated woman typing and facing away from the two men, who stand facing each other. A sign in the upper left corner states that they are in the editorial rooms of *The Scathing Blade*, a made-up magazine. The woman's hair is worn up with loose curls framing her face, a ribbon is tied around her neck and her dress has a floral pattern. The man in the middle is tall and large, he stands erect in his neat clothes and black hat, he points a finger at the other man, the words below the panel belong to him. The second man is thin, and identified as the editor, wearing pinstriped pants and a black jacket with

¹⁹ Rose Cecil O'Neill and Miriam Forman-Brunell, *The Story of Rose O'Neill: an Autobiography*, 71-72.

a pen is resting behind his left ear. His head is lowered, the top of his back is curved, and his right-hand rests on his chest over his heart. In the second panel, the two male figures are sucked into these waves of thin and thick lines, the larger man appears to still be standing but the thinner man is off his feet. The woman is now crouching behind her chair watching the fight, she looks frightened with her frazzled hair, and large eyes. The words below let us know the editor has been writing about this man. The third panel shows the editor on the ground, comically rolled up under the desk with his legs over his head. The woman sits on the desk looking away from the viewer upset and the other man leaves, only part of his left leg caught in the frame. In the final panel the woman looks at the editor with a tear on her cheek. Although his jacket and collar are torn, and one of his suspender straps hangs down behind him the editor smiles back at her. The text informs us he was more worried about the man stopping his subscription than being beaten up. O'Neill chose to create her comic in simple black and white, with the faces and comical bodily positions suggesting a more cartoonish style. This work is different from others that she created, due to the stylistic differences which were popular in certain magazines for specific subjects.

Magazines such as *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, *Life*, and *Puck Magazine* had different stylistic appearances that were informed by the characteristics of their genre, though some similarities can be found between them. The images she created for these magazines can be compared to one another and with works by other illustrators to highlight O'Neill's ability to imitate various styles in order to appeal to a broader audience. Rose O'Neill's illustration "*An Emphatic Rejection*," (Fig.2) published in *Harper's New monthly Magazine* in 1897 shares a great deal of similarity with Charles

Dana Gibson's "*Picturesque America: Anywhere in the Mountains*" (Fig. 3) published in *Life Magazine* in 1900. Gibson had started his career with *Harper's* and quickly developed a popular style that other illustrators mimicked.

In "*An Emphatic Rejection*" two women are on the left side of the black and white illustration, both angled toward the bottom left corner. They appear to have walked past the two gentlemen on the right side of the image, who are set further back. The women are seen only from the waist up while the men are visible from head to toe. The title of the illustration suggests that the women refused to engage in conversation with the men as they walked passed them. The women are both wearing large hats with accessories. They also wear dresses and gloves, covering every inch of skin in the most fashionable styles. Their faces are soft, unblemished, with slightly upturned noses and small cupid's bow shaped mouths. The woman closest to the center of the image has her head turned slightly, suggesting that she has either looked back at the men and is in the process of turning forward again, or she is in the process of looking back at them. Either way her gaze directs the viewer to make a connection between the women and the men. The woman closest to the left side, has a slight frown on her face, eyes partially opened, and looking out at the viewer. These women stand tall, with great posture, and they are desired by the opposite sex. The men on the right side of the illustration appear to be engaged in conversation with one man facing the audience with his gaze upon the women, wearing a bathing suit and his right hand on his hip. The other gentleman is wearing a suit with a hat and cane. Their faces are not as clear as the women's, but both appear to have mustaches. In the far background three additional figures seem to be playing in the water.

The figures in Gibson's *"Picturesque America: Anywhere in the Mountains"* are depicted in a similar format with two women in the foreground on the left, two figures on the right in the middle ground and three figures in the background, the only difference is an additional two figures in the middle ground on the left side. There are a total of nine women in the image. The two in the foreground are off-centered, closer to the left side of the page, and are seated upon a rock on a mountain. The two women on the right, are on a lower section of the mountain, one raises her hat in salutations to those on the higher cliff, while the other sits on the ground. Behind and to the left of the women closest to the viewer, two more women are seen one standing and one sitting, both looking out before them. The standing woman grabs hold of the rim of her hat. Behind that group of two and slightly to the right in the background, are three more women, two seated and one standing in between them, she raises her left hand, waving at the viewer. All of the women in the image wear long dresses and stylish hats, those close enough to determine facial features appear much like the women in O'Neill's illustration with unblemished skin, unturned noses, and lips that mimic a cupid's bow.

The women in both O'Neill's and Gibson's illustrations can be described as 'Gibson Girls', they are all stylishly dressed in long dresses that cover nearly every inch of skin and highly decorated hats, with upturned noses, fair complexions, bouffant hair in up-dos, and eyes partially closed in a nearly seductive manner. The 'Gibson Girl' was the visual embodiment of the 'new woman' for illustrations and they quickly became popular with magazines after they were created in the early 1890s.²⁰ Modeled after Gibson's wife,

²⁰ Martha H. Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 32.

these women were posed, quick-witted, independent, and well-educated. These women were also active, especially in the public arena. They were often shown in illustrations that highlighted their athleticism as well as their beauty and social skills.²¹ The ‘Gibson Girl’ was appropriated by many illustrators throughout the period as magazines across genres favored their appearance. *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* was known for its serious nature; mainly concerned with literature, art, politics, and finance. *Life Magazine*, on the other hand, was more focused on general entertainment and social commentary. Despite the magazine’s differing purposes both published the popular ‘Gibson Girl’ image.

At the same time O’Neill created her comic strip, she became the first woman illustrator to work for *Puck Magazine*.²² *Puck*, was a humor magazine that consisted of colorful cartoons, caricatures, and political satire. The overall appearance of the illustrations published by *Puck* are different from *Harper’s* and *Life*. Rose O’Neill’s illustration *In Georgia* (Fig. 4) was placed on the cover of *Puck* on April 11th, 1900. In this cover illustration, five African Americans are depicted on the front porch of their home in the country. Their faces are slightly exaggerated, with wide noses and protruding lower lips. In the foreground a man sits on a wooden bucket turned upside down, to his right is a little girl in a dress with shorts that have a patch on them, her hair is up in small braids sticking straight up in the air she reaches out to the older man, likely her father or grandfather, her small mouth pulled into an ‘o’ shape, eyes wide, and furrowed brows, clearly worried. The man uses his left hand to hug the child closer to him, comforting her,

²¹ Allan Mazur, “U.S. Trends in Feminine Beauty and Overadaptation,” *Journal of Sex Research* 22, no. 3 (1986): 288.

²² Ralph Alan McCause, *Titans and Kewpies; the Life and Art of Rose O’Neill*, 78.

while he looks off over his left shoulder, mouth slightly open, talking to the young man standing behind him. The young man has one hand in his pocket and is turned slightly to look at the older seated man. Behind the man is woman in a blue dress with a red head wrap on, with her left hand above her brow she peers off across the image to a group of white men walking away, they hold rifles. She holds a crying infant in her right arm. The caption on the bottom reads: “In Georgia. Pete.- Am dis much bettah dan de ole slav’ry days, Uncle Tom? Uncle Tom. – I dunno, zac’ly. In dem times we was too valy’ble to be lynched!” Here O’Neill has created a satirical cartoon that expresses the danger that African American families face in America.

Another contributing artist to Puck was S.D. Ehrhart, his cover for *Puck*, *Put me off at Buffalo!* (Fig. 5) published May 8th, 1901, is stylistically similar to O’Neill’s illustration above. The scene takes place within the interior of a train, specifically in a sleeping car. The man in the center of the image is an African American wearing a white coat with a white button-down shirt, a red tie, and hat worn by train employees. He holds his left hand over his ear, clutching it in an attempt to silence the noise created by the demanding people on the train who are all white. In his right hand he holds a pair of black shoes and a brush for shining them. On either side of the man people of various ages appear from behind green curtains each one making demands to the train employee. The woman on the lower right side appears relatively calm and looks like a Gibson girl, while the man in background on the left side is gesturing with a gun. The face of the African American man is slightly exaggerated, with a large nose, lips, and mouth. Below the illustration reads “Put me off at Buffalo!”. The scene along with the caption creates a situation in which the viewer would sympathize with the African American employee

who is desperate to get away from the ever-demanding white passengers of the train. When compared to O'Neill's cover above, the stylistic approach is similar, including the additional captions at the bottom of the images which guide the viewers understanding as well as the exaggeration of African American facial features. In both images the viewer is made to sympathize with the African Americans who are the main characters. These images highlight the struggles of the African American community at the turn of the 20th century within a cartoon style that greatly differs from that used in *Harper's* and *Life*.

The illustrations that O'Neill made for *Truth Magazine* are also in a style that was frequently used by that particular magazine but not by others. Truth magazine had started as a society journal but under the management of Blakely Hall in the 1890s it added social satire, more images of women, and colored print images.²³ In March 1897 O'Neill's illustration *Flirting with Time* (Fig.6) was used on the cover of the magazine. A young woman in a large pink dress is dancing with death, an old man with the wings of an angel and a large scythe. The couple is mid-step in their dance, the woman tilts her head back and to the right to make eye contact with the viewer. Her blond hair is piled on her head, with her neck and shoulders left bare. Her gloved right-hand rests in Death's left which also holds the traditional symbol of the grim reaper, a scythe. Death's right hand is splayed on her lower back. The skirt of her light pink dress showcases the movement of the couple's dance as it sweeps across the page with the white ruffles of her underskirt visible. Death has a large white beard and small dark eyes that seem to bore into the woman angrily although she pays him no mind. There are few clear sharp lines

²³Sloane David E E., *American Humor Magazines and Comic Periodicals* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 289-90.

within this illustration, otherwise it is far more impressionistic than the above illustrations by O'Neill. It also looks as if the color was applied via watercolor rather than the more typical print coloring seen in the *Puck* images.

Hy Mayer was another illustrator who often contributed to *Truth Magazine*. One of his illustrations was made into the cover on November 14th, 1896 *The First Chrysanthemum Girl* (Fig.7). A young Asian woman stands in the center of the image, with a large umbrella open behind her. She is dressed in a traditional outfit with her feet visible showing she is also wearing the appropriate stockings and sandals. The woman has a large piece of cloth tied to the bottom of the umbrella and her waist; she also holds onto it with her left hand. Inside the cloth basket are a number of flowers, presumably chrysanthemums. She is walking down a dirt pathway that is surrounded by flowers and grass. The title of the magazine is made to look like bamboo sticks while two lanterns hang off of the 'H'. The image itself seems to be inspired by the impressionist style, without any harsh detailing lines and the application of color with watercolors, this cover and that of O'Neill's are stylistically similar in this manner. Both depict beautiful women in flowing dresses with fluid and soft coloring. The illustrations which graced the cover of *Truth Magazine* often have an impressionist style to them which is far different from the covers of *Puck* or the illustrations inside of *Harper's New Monthly* or *Life*. When the above three images by Rose O'Neill are considered together, it is clear that O'Neill was able to change her style and according to preferences of the magazine she hoped to publish with. This ability to willfully change her style helped her become one of the most recognized and successful female illustrators early in her career.

Creation of the Sweet Monsters

As O'Neill continued to create illustrations for magazines and newspapers, in 1902 she began to develop another style which she would use for her Sweet Monsters. Included in this collection are androgenous figures, men, women, and mythical creatures. As stated previously, this collection was heavily influenced by O'Neill's first stay in the Ozarks. In her autobiography O'Neill provides a detailed description of her journey from the train station to the house, focusing on the nature around her. In the "Enchanted Forest" surrounding them, she could see strange figures made from the "heaped rocks and twisted roots of trees", primeval shapes with slanting foreheads, deep arched necks, and heaping shoulders playing on primordial flutes.²⁴ This fanciful background was easily related to the Irish myths and folktales she grew up listening to from her father, a first-generation immigrant from Ireland, and the sculptures and paintings she studied which displayed Greek and Roman mythology. The large looming figures she imagined coming up out of the rocks and formed by the landscape are featured in a number of her Sweet Monster drawings, as well as a deep connection between the figures and the natural world. It was through these forms that she explored and created "...ecstatic images of the up-surge of life from the ancestral slime....the epic of epics".²⁵ The style of these works is vastly different from O'Neill's commercial works, in these works her earlier interest in Greek and Roman statuary and mythology becomes apparent.

For example, the drawing titled *Orpheus* 1902-1922 (Fig.8), depicts a character from Ancient Greek Mythology, a poet and musician. After the death of his wife Eurydice, Orpheus goes to the Underworld in order to bring her back to life. Hades, God

²⁴ Rose Cecil O'Neill and Miriam Forman-Brunell, *The Story of Rose O'Neill: an Autobiography*, 57.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 120.

of the Underworld, allows Orpheus to take Eurydice however he was forbidden from looking at Eurydice before they exited the Underworld together.²⁶ At the very last moment he looked back at her fearing that the woman he was walking with was not Eurydice, because of this loss of faith the lovers are torn apart, and Eurydice is unable to join the living once more. O'Neill's image shows the moment in which Orpheus has turned to look at Eurydice while leaving the underworld. His body is shown in motion, thick muscled legs move his body across the page from the right to the left. Orpheus's torso twists toward the viewer, while his head is thrown back as he turns to look at Eurydice. His left arm is extended beyond view and his right hangs at his side. To highlight how close the couple were to being reunited in the living realm, a single feminine hand projects from beyond the thin line dividing the living and the dead, the tips of her fingers brushing against Orpheus's side. His body has a sculptural appearance, with thick muscles and dynamic movements bearing a striking similarity to the classical sculptures of Ancient Greece.

In her autobiography O'Neill states that the Sweet Monsters were her private art and rarely discusses them. However, she does talk briefly about her process of drawing of them, typically she would wait until nighttime and others had gone to bed so that she could ensure no one would enter her studio while she worked. "Late in the night I would get out of the "Drunken Sailor" (her rocking chair) and, half-drunk myself with visions, lay my drawing or drawings (sometimes there would be several) in the portfolio and stagger off to bed. Another monster had been born."²⁷ For a majority of her Sweet

²⁶ John Heath, "The Failure of Orpheus," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-) 124 (1994): 165.

²⁷ Rose Cecil O'Neill and Miriam Forman-Brunell, *The Story of Rose O'Neill: an Autobiography*, 120.

Monsters there are no exact dates of creation provided, but she begin creating them in 1902 and the first major show in which she displayed them was 1922. A handful were shown, unsigned, in France while O’Neill, her second husband, and their friends traveled through Europe in 1905. They began in Italy and ended in France, while there she was also elected as a Société member and was given the privilege of exhibiting in the official gallery of L’Ecole des Beaux Arts in 1906.²⁸ During this period O’Neill also briefly attended an art academy in Paris and six years later she would return to Paris and join another art school briefly for a final time before leaving once more. By 1921 O’Neill had created a total of 107 Sweet Monster drawings and 4 sculptures. This time she displayed the collection in Paris at the Devambeze Galerie for a week, gaining her much acclaim in Europe. Once she returned to the US her collection was then exhibited at the Wildenstein Gallery in New York City in 1922. The reviews of O’Neill’s Sweet Monsters were overwhelmingly positive as critics found similarities between her work and the works of Rodin, William Blake, and Michelangelo.²⁹ Overall, her works were described as powerful, refreshing, somber and yet hopeful. In this collection O’Neill explored several themes that I will be examining further in the next two chapters including creation, motherhood, gender roles, intimacy, and romantic love.

The Kewpie: A Merchandizing Empire

In 1909, O’Neill would create her most popular illustration at the behest of Edward K. Bok, chief editor of *Ladies Home Journal* magazine, the Kewpie. Bok had noticed that while corresponding with O’Neill she would often draw in the margins and

²⁸ Ralph Alan McCause, *Titans and Kewpies; the Life and Art of Rose O’Neill*, 103.

²⁹ Talbot Hamlin, “Mystic Vision in Modern Drawings the Art of Rose O’Neill,” *Arts and Decoration* 16 (1922): 486.

one figure that caught his eye in particular were these cupid-like figures.³⁰ He cut out the little decorative drawings and asked her to make some illustrations with them and he would have someone write verses to accompany them. O'Neill agreed to turn the figures into larger illustrations for the magazine and informed Bok that she would also write the verses.³¹ The name Kewpie was developed by O'Neill out of her occasional use of 'baby-talk', in which she would talk like a small child, Kewpie was thus baby-talk for Cupid. The angelic, baby and child-like figures featured in a number of magazines and were often accompanied by short verses and stories that highlighted their innocent and playful natures. For Rose O'Neill, the Kewpie philosophy was "Love and Laughter".³²

The appearance of the Kewpies is similar to O'Neill's work in *Puck Magazine* in that it is more cartoon in nature than some of her other commercial illustrations. The small chubby babies have big cheeks that are red in colored illustrations, little tufts of blond hair that points straight up on the top of their head, a tiny speck for a nose, big eyes, and small white wings on their backs. They are typically nude although some wear pieces of clothing or costumes depending on the theme of the story. After gain popularity as illustrations in magazines, O'Neill was contracted to create advertisements for Jell-O using the Kewpies.³³ *The Kewpies and the Sensible Woman*, advertisement from 1915, (fig. 9) shows how her work was used to promote Jell-O. Depicted are two excited small children, a boy named Bobbie and a little girl named Nan sitting at a table. Both children are looking at the Kewpie standing on the table between them, holding a plate of Jell-O

³⁰ Rose Cecil O'Neill and Miriam Forman-Brunell, *The Story of Rose O'Neill: an Autobiography*, 94.

³¹ *Ibid.* 94

³² Ralph Alan McCause, *Titans and Kewpies; the Life and Art of Rose O'Neill*, 19.

³³ Trina Robbins and Kristy Valenti, *Pretty in Ink: North American Women Cartoonists, 1896-2013* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2013), 13.

with whipped cream and a cherry on top. The Kewpie on the table has a little apron tied around its waist while a second Kewpie stands on what appears to be the arm of a chair and pointing at the first Kewpie while looking out at the audience. A third Kewpie on the left center in the foreground looks over its shoulder at the viewer as well. The Kewpies all look nearly identical to one another. Below the image is text which adds to the scene above, highlighting the children's excitement that the Kewpies have brought them Jell-O, which they like to eat. The advertisement goes on to make a connection between the wise Kewpies and the sensible woman, both know that Jell-O is a low cost and easy to make dessert that people love to eat. Between the illustrations and advertisements, fans across the country began wanting to have their own Kewpies.

Seizing the opportunity O'Neill turned the Kewpie into a merchandising empire that would stretch across the globe. The creation of the Kewpie dolls took place at a factory in Germany, however O'Neill had little input in the first batch, they had worked off her sketches alone. After traveling to the factory, she was displeased with the way the dolls had turned out and created her own mold from which future dolls would be made.³⁴ The first dolls were made of bisque exclusively until the 1920s when the dolls started to be made of composite. O'Neill had felt it was important to make the dolls of various sizes and corresponding prices so that all children, even the poor, could afford to have their own Kewpie doll.³⁵ After the dolls were made additional merchandise was made including household products such as plates and cups, and clothing. O'Neill also wrote and published five books about the Kewpies, one of which children could cut out paper

³⁴ Rose Cecil O'Neill and Miriam Forman-Brunell, *The Story of Rose O'Neill: an Autobiography*, 105.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 108

clothing for their Kewpies. The popularity of the Kewpies began to wane in the late 1930s as the Second World War was approaching.

Conclusion

Rose O'Neill was a self-taught artist, with only two brief stints at European Art Academies after she was already an established and successful illustrator. The way she taught herself to draw, copying the works of great artists and ancient sculpture was surprisingly similar to formal training. The level of success she was able to achieve as a woman artist who began her career at age fourteen with no social connections and no formal training, is remarkable. A large reason for her success was her ability to adopt various styles in order to suit the preferences of a wide range of magazines. For example, the above illustrations from *Puck Magazine* and *Truth Magazine* are incredibly different, one is cartoonish while the other appears impressionistic. There is also a great stylistic difference between her Sweet Monsters and her illustrative works, including the Kewpies. The commercial works follow popular trends in illustration, such as the Gibson Girl look, but the Sweet Monsters as a private art are a unique combination of classical and modern.

Chapter Two

Through her Sweet Monsters collection Rose O'Neill engaged with a number of intellectual and political debates surrounding popular conceptions of womanhood. During the 19th century, evolutionary theories influenced complex debates over the definition of womanhood and women's appropriate social roles. Despite increasing support for women

to have greater political power, this kind of public participation was considered at odds with not only social convention but also biology. O'Neill was a member of the suffrage movement, which began in America following the 1848 Seneca Falls convention and mostly ended when white women won the right to vote in 1920. In public, O'Neill participated in marches, gave speeches, and created posters using her images of the Kewpies. In private, she continued to explore crucial themes of First Wave Feminism, particularly conceptions of motherhood and women's creativity. In this chapter, I examine six drawings from the Sweet Monster series to argue that O'Neill borrows traditional visual narratives of motherhood and creation and ultimately transforms them to align with her feminist beliefs.

After briefly describing women's roles both in and outside of the home in the 19th-early 20th centuries to open the chapter, I discuss the impact of the growing scientific fields of evolution and biology on these roles and provide a brief history of first wave feminism. Then, I explore the Sweet Monster images that explicitly engage with the themes of motherhood, sexuality, and creation. By comparing her drawings to artworks from the Renaissance to the early 20th century that would have been well-known to her contemporaries, I address how her images deal with female sexuality and women's creativity. I show that O'Neill develops new narratives through traditional visual languages. Indeed, O'Neill's Sweet Monster imagery presents an image of womanhood that embraces maternity and female desire and that is responsible for Creation, replacing the male Christian God who traditionally holds this position in Western European art.

Ideal Womanhood of the 19th and early 20th centuries in America

In the Victorian era ideal womanhood was defined by obedience, chastity, motherhood, and morality. The Cult of True Womanhood, also known as the Cult of Domesticity, prevailed among upper- and middle-class women. It relied on notions of purity and piety to designate women as the symbolic keeper of morality within the home.³⁶ This position as the moral center was enhanced by the assumed ‘natural’ instincts of woman as caretaker and nurturer. Women’s sexual activity resulted in pregnancy and birth after which they “naturally” took on the role of caregiving. Importantly, a woman’s sexuality was considered a base animal instinct rather than a sign of desire or an informed choice.³⁷ Numerous theories were supplied by male scholars by the late 19th century claiming to provide scientific evidence supporting women’s traditional roles. Scientists and physicians argued that a woman’s psychology and health were related to their sex organs, promoting the misconception that biology is destiny.³⁸ They argued further that social behavior was guided by evolution and to go against these roles would be morally incorrect.³⁹

The conclusions of behavioral scientists and physicians were supported by developments in evolutionary theory, particularly Charles Darwin’s influential 1871 book, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*. In this text Darwin highlights secondary sexual characteristics; he labels men as courageous, energetic, inventive, and

³⁶ Susan Cruca, “Changing Ideals of Womanhood During the 19th Century Woman Movement,” *General Studies Writing Faculty Publications* 1 (2005): 188.

³⁷ Sherry Ortner, “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?,” in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, Louise Lamphere, and Joan Bamberger (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), 74.

³⁸ Maryanne L. Fisher, Justin R. Garcia, and Rosemarie Sokol Chang, “Introduction,” in *Evolution's Empress: Darwinian Perspectives on the Nature of Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.

³⁹ Janet Sayers, *Biological Politics: Feminist and Anti-Feminist Perspective*, (University of Kent, 1982), 37.

physically larger than women, who he labels as nurturant, reclusive, altruistic, and physically smaller.⁴⁰ Darwin and others believed that this was the result of competition and choice for mates during more “primitive:” times and had been maintained due to men needing to provide for their families. It was also thought that women’s natural maternal instincts undermined their abilities to choose or compete for mates.⁴¹ Darwin’s work added to the previously established view that women were closer to nature than to culture. As less evolved than men, women’s sexuality could be dangerous unless policed by society, specifically men.⁴² O’Neill greatly disagreed with these assumptions, she believed that men were repressing women with these ideas and marriage was akin to slavery.⁴³

Cultural ideals of womanhood and contemporary scientific evidence pointed to motherhood as woman’s most important role. It marked true womanhood and was espoused by both men and women during the 19th century. Popular literature encouraged its white, middle-and-upper-class Christian readers to embrace motherhood and to glorify women’s reproductive role in society.⁴⁴ It celebrated the nuclear family and the relationship between mothers and their children. Motherhood eventually became a major cultural metaphor for femininity in America; it was assumed that a woman needed to experience motherhood in order to achieve feminine happiness.⁴⁵ Motherhood was the

⁴⁰ Linda M Fedigan, “The Changing Role of Women in Models of Human Evolution,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 15, no. 1 (1986): 27.

⁴¹ *Ibid* 27.

⁴² Catherine Cocks, “Rethinking Sexuality in the Progressive Era,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 5, no. 2 (2006): 98.

⁴³ Doris Fleischman, “Woman's the Virtues, Man's the Stupidity, Is the Division the Gentle Inventor of the Kewpies Makes,” *New York Tribune*, April 14, 1915, sec. Woman's Varied Interests, 5.

⁴⁴ Nancy M. Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America: The Biosocial Construction of Femininity*. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 17.

⁴⁵ *Ibid* 18.

ultimate expression of what scientists considered the instinctual characteristics of females: the ability and desire to nurture. Altruism was another dominant trait. Cultural leaders emphasized the suffering mothers endured and highlighted the natural selflessness of women.⁴⁶ The ideal of the suffering mother was embodied in the Virgin Mary, who experienced great sorrow during the crucifixion of her son, Jesus. For Christian women, the Virgin Mary had long been the greatest example of motherhood. In the late 19th century, the Virgin continued to be a source of inspiration.

While many men and women celebrated this model of womanhood, debates over the rights of women and their positions occupied others. After the Civil War, reform groups proliferated, and women took on prominent positions in many of them. The influx of women involved in reform movements led to the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, which many historians cite as the start of First Wave Feminism. This was the first convention for women's rights in America, a forum where both women and men could "discuss the social, civil, and religious conditions and rights of woman."⁴⁷ The convention eventually resulted in the formation of two distinct movements with similar goals but competing ideologies: Temperance and Suffrage. Both groups adopted and rejected certain ideals of womanhood as they sought to increase women's roles in America. The Temperance Movement focused on women's position within the home and argued that women were "different from" and perhaps even superior to men, particularly in their ability to care for others and to help those in need.⁴⁸ The Suffragettes focused on

⁴⁶ Nancy M. Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America: The Biosocial Construction of Femininity*, 26.

⁴⁷ Judith Wellman, *The Road to Seneca Falls Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the First Woman's Rights Convention* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 189.

⁴⁸ Janet Zollinger Giele, *Two Paths to Women's Equality: Temperance, Suffrage, and the Origins of Modern Feminism* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 118.

expanding women's influence in the public realm, and more specifically, the right to vote. They espoused the inherent equality between men and women and claimed a "sameness" between the sexes.⁴⁹

Eventually, the Suffrage movement split into the National Woman Suffrage Association and the American Woman Suffrage Association. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady led the early Suffrage Movement (National Woman Suffrage Association). Stanton rejected the traditional gender hierarchy, or what she referred to as the "aristocracy of sex," and favored family limitation and female sexual autonomy.⁵⁰ The National Woman Suffrage fought not only for women's right to vote but a wide range of reforms to ensure women's equality in all aspects of society. In contrast, the American Woman Suffrage movement focused solely on obtaining the right to vote for women. Despite the differences between the Suffrage groups, both focused on the right to vote and used speaking tours as a means to educate the masses, although their audiences were primarily middle- and upper-class women. Neither group made significant progress but laid the groundwork for the next generation. In 1890, at the start of the Progressive Era, the two Associations combined to create the National American Woman's Suffrage Association.⁵¹

Since challenges to traditional gender roles were met with great resistance, the growing Woman's Movement adopted and adapted many traditional ideals regarding motherhood and women's sexuality in order to argue for greater involvement in public life. For example, in the early 19th century women propagated the idea of "moral

⁴⁹ S. J. Kleinberg, *Women in the United States, 1830-1945* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 196.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 193.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 199.

motherhood.”⁵² Making use of the notion that women were naturally nurturing and selfless, women argued they were more moral than men and, therefore, should have greater participation on the political stage.⁵³ For example, in the 1820’s Catherine Beecher, one of the leading figures of practical domesticity, believed that the rational and orderly running of a household conveyed a larger moral vision in which women were responsible for influencing their children’s characters as well as the character of the whole nation.⁵⁴ By focusing on the notion that women had an inherent sense of morality, which they imparted to their children as mothers, Beecher suggested that women’s influence naturally extended into the public realm already. The role of mother was no longer submissive and homebound; it justified women’s place in the public sphere.

Women of the late 19th century remained committed to the notion of moral motherhood and continued to use it to argue for political power. The National Congress of Mothers in 1897 stated that they intended to “carry the mother-love and mother-thought into all that concerns or touches childhood in Home, School, Church, State, or Legislation.”⁵⁵ They also began questioning the control men had over women’s bodies. The new interpretation of moral motherhood included women’s ability to assert control over their own bodies and sexuality as well.⁵⁶ Finally, they sought to establish more opportunities for women to get an education and work outside of the home. Although there were larger numbers of job opportunities for women in the 1870s and 1880s, most

⁵² Nancy M. Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America: The Biosocial Construction of Femininity*, 18.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 125.

⁵⁴ Janet Zollinger Giele, *Two Paths to Women's Equality: Temperance, Suffrage, and the Origins of Modern Feminism*, 36.

⁵⁵ S. Jay Kleinberg, *Women in the United States, 1830-1945*, 146.

⁵⁶ Nancy M. Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America: The Biosocial Construction of Femininity*, 135.

European-American, middle-class men and women still assumed that motherhood was the highest calling and true vocation for women.⁵⁷ It was expected that upon marriage women would leave their jobs to focus on their homes and future children.

The Six Sweet Monsters

Just as women's rights groups reinterpreted the tradition of moral motherhood to push the boundaries of traditional gender roles and to create a space for women in the political and public realms, so O'Neill relied on traditional Christian and mythological imagery to assert women's creative agency. This is revealed in six drawings from the *Sweet Monster* series that are linked visually and thematically. O'Neill presents the figures as nude, although their genitalia are either absent or covered. Only the breasts of the female figures are visible to the viewer. All the drawings focus on two figures: a large female figure who is integrated into the natural world or boasts animal attributions; and a man whose body mimics classical Greek sculpture. The woman appears the most human in *Man and the Earth* and *The Lips of Earth*, in which her body blends into or even becomes the earth. In *Man and the Earth*, she sits upon a grassy hill that conforms to the curves of her body perfectly as she leans back into the hill. In *The Lips of Earth*, she sits upon a rocky cliff and appears as though she is part of it. In the remaining four drawings, the female figures have animal-like attributes, including horns and thick, horse-like necks. In *The Poetess* and *Man in the Hand of Nature*, for example, the female figure has the attributes of a goat with her lower legs covered in fur and hoofs instead of feet.

⁵⁷ Nancy M. Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America: The Biosocial Construction of Femininity*, 115.

O'Neill's figures physically touch each other in each drawing, highlighting their close relationships and providing visual cues that relate her drawings to popular representations of motherhood and creation. The woman tilts her head toward the male figure in every image, and in all but *The Poetess*, the female figure's attention is solely on the man. In all of the drawings the female figures are also depicted with their eyes closed and a gentle, serene look upon their faces. In the coming sections I explore these images further and show their relationship with motherhood and creation as they were understood in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Sweet Monsters and Motherhood

O'Neill's *Man and the Earth* and *Untitled* deploy traditional depictions of Virgin Mary in order to evoke the motif of Christian motherhood while transforming it. A massive female figure dominates O'Neill's *Man and the Earth*, 1902-22, (Fig.10). The swell of her left breast can be seen below her arm, almost hidden in shadow. She sits upon a rocky surface that extends upwards to support her back. Her knees are pulled toward her body and she crouches over, holding onto a small male figure. The way her left arm curls around him and covers his torso suggests that her left hand is supporting his head. She tilts her head to the right, allowing a small gap between their faces. Classic characteristics of O'Neill's women appear here: closed eyes, thick lips, and a curving line that links the nose, forehead, and hair that extends downward, ending where the stone meets her back. The male figure boasts the well-muscled legs of classical statue, but they hang limply over her left leg. His face, devoid of distinct facial features, turned toward

her. The way she cradles in him her lap is reminiscent of the Pieta, in which the Virgin Mary cradles Christ upon her lap after he has been taken down from the cross.⁵⁸

The bodily positions and facial expressions of the figures in *Man and Earth* draw on the iconography of the Pieta. One of the most famous pietà's that O'Neill likely would have seen in art books is Michelangelo's *Pietà* in St. Peter's Basilica, 1498-99 (Fig.11). Although the artists are using different mediums, their images share underlining forms. The *Pieta* shows the moment in which Christ has been removed from the cross and lays lifeless in the lap of his mother, the Virgin Mary. The Virgin supports his head with her right arm while his legs dangle over her left leg. Sitting up straight, she bows her head and raises her left hand, gesturing for viewers to witness her child's sacrifice. In *Man and the Earth*, the female figure cradles the male in much the same way. She pulls the lifeless male body close to her face and wraps her left arm around him, obscuring his body. Both mothers have their eyes closed and a serene look upon their faces. While there are a few differences in the works most basic format, most notably the angle from which the viewer sees the interaction, both focus on a female figure cradling a lifeless adult male figure in her lap.

By using one of the most well-known Christian images, O'Neill ensures an association between her drawing, Christianity, and motherhood. However, her image also distorts this traditional visual narrative in ways that highlight how she was engaging with the notion of moral motherhood and its emphasis on suffering and Christian nurture. However, the sheer size of the female figure in comparison to the male, who is depicted

⁵⁸ Grażyna Jurkowlaniec, "Masterpieces, Altarpieces, and Devotional Prints: Close and Distant Encounters with Michelangelo's Vatican Pietà," *Religions* 10, no. 5 (May 2019): 6.

as a grown man, is unprecedented in Christian iconography. When there is a great size difference between the mother and child, it is typically because the child is young. Here, though, O'Neill makes the mother a giantess. She is large and strong, physically dominating the scene, yet she protects and cares for the adult child in her arms, showing a deep tenderness. The implication in this image is that the mother is responsible for the man. Although he is grown, she is still a nurturing force who supports him. *Man and Earth* calls on the notion of moral motherhood by showcasing her as an all-encompassing force; by picturing an adult male, O'Neill argues that a mother's influence remains with her child well into adulthood and, as a result, requires a louder voice in politics.

The drawing *Untitled*, also uses the iconography of the Madonna and Child that was embraced by O'Neill's contemporaries. In *Untitled*, 1902-22 (Fig.12), a large female creature fills almost the entire left side of the image. She cradles a male figure with her left arm. Her thick neck arches as she bends to the left and gently presses her face to his. The woman's features are similar to those of the other women in the series, although her hair is replaced by a large, long horn. The male figure is slotted into the open space between her bent forearm and her breast. Although he has a thickly muscled body, he is inactive. His arms remain at his side while his legs drape over the inside of her left leg. There is a gentleness to this image, as the woman holds the man close to her and appears ready to give him a kiss, which will bring her creation to life.

O'Neill's drawing is similar to Mary Cassatt's (1844-1926) *Mother and Child*, 1897 (Fig.13). A mother holds her young child in her left arm, pressing the child close to her body. The mother angles her head slightly and presses her cheek to her child's cheek, her eyes appearing closed while the child looks out at the viewer. In O'Neill's *Untitled*,

the female figure assumes the role of mother and cradles the male figure in her left arm. The female figure also has closed eyes and a gentle expression upon her face as she leans her head towards the man. The male figure, unlike the child, does not have its eyes open. Rather, his head is angled toward the woman. In both images the mother and child have their cheeks pressed against one another. In these images the mother is presented as being a tender, caring figure that is devoted to their child, focusing solely on them.

O'Neill's strategy in *Untitled* is similar to that of women's rights groups, who took advantage of the popularity of moral motherhood to assert their public roles. On the one hand, O'Neill presents women as caretakers and nurturers, thereby fulfilling their natural roles. However, by representing the woman as considerably larger than the man and turning a child into an adult male, O'Neill stresses that women continue to care for the children well into adulthood. The mother's place in society was to raise and educate her children, but also to protect them. With this in mind, women's rights groups advocated for greater political influence, specifically in things that involved providing care and safety to children.

The Sweet Monsters and Women's Bodily Control

In keeping with the social construction of gender during the period, O'Neill uses other visual elements to highlight the traditional notion of women's connection with nature. On the one hand, O'Neill pictures women as part of the natural world or as a combination of human and animal forms, appearing to reiterate the need for men to corral women's unbridled sexuality. However, her decision to call on the image of the satyr -- a

well-established motif related to sexuality – allowed her to represent female sexuality without upsetting moral sensibilities.⁵⁹

In *Man in the Hand of Nature*, 1902-22 (Fig.14), O'Neill presents a small, classically composed adult male standing in the palm of a female faun identified by the title as "Nature." She leans back and supports herself on her left elbow. Her left leg is tucked underneath her, and her right knee is pulled up, exposing a cloven right hoof. With her overly thick neck she tilts her head to the right, facing her creation and providing the viewer with a side profile. A smooth, curving line begins at her nose, travels over the slope of her forehead, and only indents slightly to follow the curvature of her horn and her rope-like hair. A small ear with tufts of fur sits just below the base of her horn. She has small round breasts and a realistic, slightly rounded stomach. Her lower legs and pubic area are covered in long dark hair. The man standing in her hand is miniscule compared to her but retains the classically composed male body and stands in a contrapposto pose with his weight resting on his right foot as the left is lifted at the heel, his knee bent. He stands before her with his hands held behind his back and head tilted forward. The posture is reminiscent of a bashful child standing before a pleased and doting mother.

In *Man in the Hand of Nature*, O'Neill's female figure is given the attributes of a goat and references a satyr. Antonio de Correggio's, *Venus and Cupid with a Satyr*, 1528 (Fig. 15) shows a satyr watching the goddess Venus and her son Cupid as they sleep. Venus is shown in a reclined position on the floor of a forest, resting against the bushes

⁵⁹ David Scobey, "Nymphs and Satyrs: Sex and the Bourgeois Public Sphere in Victorian New York.," Winterthur Portfolio 37, no. 1 (2002): 48.

that are partially covered by a blue fabric. To the right of Venus is the satyr. He holds the drapery in his hands, leering at her with a smile on his face as he reveals her naked body. In the bottom left-hand corner, Cupid lays facing his mother. His right hand and her left hand are nearly touching. Here, the satyr represents the male gaze bringing sexual connotations as he interrupts a peaceful scene of a mother and child.

In O'Neill's *Man in the Hand of Nature*, in contrast, the woman is depicted as a satyr. She holds the man in her hand, but here, there is no overwhelming sexual desire driving the behavior of the female figure, nor does the man fight her. The image is calm with the female reclining and the man simply standing in her hand. In this image O'Neill challenges the assumption that men have ownership and mastery over their sexuality while women were unable to possess theirs.⁶⁰ She uses the attributes of the satyr to show a female figure who is in control of her sexuality and her body.

In O'Neill's, *The Poetess*, 1902-22 (Fig. 16), a giant female faun leans back in an undefined setting, her left elbow resting on what could possibly be a boulder. Her left hand is clenched in a fist as she supports her weight. In her right hand she holds a pan-flute to her lips which are pulled together as she plays the instrument. Her neck is incredibly thick, and her hair resembles ropes, but this time, there is no visible horn. A smooth curving line that begins at the tip of her nose goes all the way back over her forehead and to her hair. Her knees are pulled up and her cloven feet are seen in the bottom left-hand side of the image. The copious amounts of hair on her legs and hanging off her left elbow, as well as the shape of her ankles and feet, highlight the animalistic

⁶⁰Pamela S. Haag, "In Search of 'The Real Thing': Ideologies of Love, Modern Romance, and Women's Sexual Subjectivity in the United States, 1920-40," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, no. 4 (1992): 565.

features of the faun. The upper half of her body is primarily human as the lower half resembles a goat.⁶¹ A small, but fully-grown man can be seen lounging on her abdomen. Leaning back against her breasts, he puts his arms behind his head and pulls his knees up, echoing her position. Both faun and man have their eyes closed; the moment is one of peace and tranquility. The man's classical and defined musculature contrasts with the faun's soft and curvy stature. O'Neill presents the faun as the creator of the man with the way her body cradles his and she plays him a song, much like a mother with her child.

As in Correggio's work, *The Poetess* can be understood as an image of a mother and child resting together. She reclines against a boulder, propping her left arm upon it while she plays the pipes. An adult male lay on her belly with his arms behind his head, relaxing as she plays music. However, she also depicts the giant female figure with the attributes of a satyr: the lower half of her body is covered fur, she has cloven hoofs, and horns sprout out of her forehead and sweep back to blend in with her hair. O'Neill follows the 19th century convention of satyr representing male sexuality and applies this logic to a female figure. As previously stated, it was believed that women were not in control of their sexuality and that it needed to be controlled by the men around them, fathers, brothers, and husbands. Here the female figure is in control of her own body, and indeed, the much smaller male body as well. The female figure also disrupts any potential male gaze by combining the traits of woman and animal, turning her into a creature rather than a human.

⁶¹ Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 135.

Alexandre Cabanel's *Nymph Abducted by a Faun*, 1860 (Fig.17), presents a more explicit example of male control over the female body. In it, a nude nymph attempts to fight off a satyr who has captured her. The satyr, depicting male sexuality, is in control of the nymph, who represents female sexuality. As the nymph struggles to free herself from the satyr, the fabric that was likely covering her body has fallen off and is draped over the arm of the satyr, presenting her body to both the creature and the viewer. The satyr smiles as he looks at the nymph, confident in his ability to control her body and ultimately her sexuality.

In both *The Poetess* and *Man in the Hand of Nature* O'Neill uses the satyr, a well-known motif, to show a female figure that does not require the help of a man to control her body or her sexuality. Motherhood was the expected outcome of women's sexuality and during this period women wanted to claim control of both.

The Sweet Monsters and Creation

O'Neill's engagement with creation myths can be understood as a continuation of 18th and 19th century thought. Romantics and other intellectuals sought out new understandings of the creation of man.⁶² Throughout this period the creator remained a male figure, a father of mankind following Christian beliefs. There was a well-developed visual language for depicting creators and their creations. Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, 1512 (Fig.18) is one of the most famous creation images in Western art history. God, depicted on the right, is flying toward Adam, on the left, surrounded by angels and putti. With an outstretched hand God will give the

⁶² Paul A. Cantor, *Creature and Creator: Myth-Making and English Romanticism* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 6.

spark of intellect to Adam through mere touch. Adam waits patiently reclining on a green surface with his left arm propped up on his right knee, his hand dangles in the air.

This reaching out to touch and enliven one's creation can be seen in O'Neill's *The Lips of Earth*, 1902-22 (Fig.19). A massive figure sits upon a rocky cliff with her arms on her knees, leaning toward a small figure reaching up to her, they press their faces together gently. Although it is not explicitly clear if the creature is male or female, the uninterrupted curve that travels from the tip of her nose to her forehead, thick arching neck, and closed eyes link her to the other female figures in O'Neill's *Sweet Monsters*. Her body is heavy, solid like the rocks on which she sits. The dark black lines around her body, specifically her legs, make her appear part of the mountain. The sex of the smaller figure is not explicit either, although the classically sculpted body, strong legs, short hair, visually link him to men in O'Neill's visual vocabulary. The man stands between the woman's knees and on his tiptoes, leaning forward and stretching his body upward to reach her face: the face of his creator. Although the female creator does not hold or cradle the male figure as in the other drawings, the figures remain connected through the tender touching of their faces, nearly kissing.

In *The Lips of the Earth*, a large female figure who blends in with the rocky cliff she sits upon leans forward and lowers her head while a much smaller male figure stretches up toward her. The female figure takes on the role of creator; however, her creation must take a more active role to reach her than Adam does in Michelangelo's depiction. Although the creators take a similar position in the works, they act differently. God rushes toward Adam, the wind blowing the green fabric below him. In contrast, the female creator sits and waits. She is patient and approaches her creation slowly, and her

touch will be gentle. O'Neill's female creator retains feminine characteristics while occupying a traditionally male role. She remains gentle and caring with her creation, as well as more passive compared to Michelangelo's God. In this image O'Neill has followed a common trend in early feminist works, reinterpreting traditional characteristics in a way that allows for greater power and control.

In *Sullen Son*, 1902-22 (Fig.20), a man stands slightly off center with his left arm thrown over his face, effectively blocking it from view. His right arm hangs down, the hand hidden behind his leg. The overall appearance of his body mimics a Greek sculpture with his thick and well-defined musculature. Unlike Greek sculpture, this man's genitals are entirely blacked out and he does not have feet, rather his legs extend into the ground he stands upon as tree trunks. Behind the man and off to the right, is a massive female form seen from the torso up. She is identified as female due to the visible breast between her left arm and the man's leg. Her hand is pressed into the man's left side, providing a connection through touch, and emphasizing this creature's role in his creation. Much like a sculptor molds their statue, she has molded his form. She leans her head forward as the man curves his body, causing his left rib cage to form an arc. A horn protrudes from her forehead and nearly blends in with her thick, rope-like hair. A single curved line follows from the tip of her nose to her forehead, her eyes are closed, her lips are thick, and her mouth large. Her body is softer than that of the male figure, despite its larger size. The title of the work, along with the gesture of the man, throwing his arm over his face, suggest the man is upset and vulnerable. The creator's face however displays a sense of calm, of peace.

In William Blake's *Elohim Creating Adam* 1795, (Fig.21) the act of creation appears slightly different. Elohim, the Hebrew name for God, flies above the body of Adam placing his right hand on Adam's forehead while reaching for more dirt. Adam lay upon the ground a distraught look upon his face as a snake coils around his legs. Blake's God is depicted similarly to Michelangelo's with white hair and a long flowing white beard that are being swept along by the action of the moment. The greatest difference between the two God's is the wings which are affixed to Blake's. In O'Neill's *Sullen Son* the female figure is put in the role of creator and can be seen pressing her left hand into the side of the male figure. She is quite possibly smoothing the surface of her creation, much like a sculptor molds clay. The lack of feet for the male figure suggests that she has yet to finish her creation, but she will continue to work his form out of the earth. O'Neill's decision to depict the creator as a female figure rather than the traditional male figure may have been influenced by a different image of the beginning of prehistoric societies that was developed in the mid-19th century. Some believed that in the earliest societies' humans operated under matriarchies, and that the patriarchy was developed later. For example, Johann Bachofen's theory of an ancient matriarchy that emphasized motherhood.⁶³

In this depiction O'Neill relates the creation of man and how artists are also creators. Attitudes concerning women artists remained relatively similar from the time of the Renaissance to the 20th century; women were not capable of artistic genius.⁶⁴ The act of artmaking had long been associated with heterosexual male sexual activity. The

⁶³ Peter Davies, "Myth and Maternalism in the Work of Johann Jakob Bachofen," in *German Studies Review*, Vol. 28 No. 3 (Oct. 2005), 503.

⁶⁴ Danielle Knafo, *In Her Own Image: Women's Self-Representation in Twentieth-Century Art*, (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), 77.

creation of art demanded an active nature, whereas women were considered passive.⁶⁵

What O'Neill has presented in this image is not only a female creator of man but acknowledged the ability of women artists like herself. For early feminist groups this elevation of the mother as creator was helpful in promoting their right to be involved in social and political issues. When these two images are brought into connection with the above four, the themes of motherhood, sexuality, and creation can be seen in each one. The female figures are all mothers, creators, who are in control of their sexuality and their bodies.

Conclusion

As a member of the Suffrage group and a participant in women's rights organizations, Rose O'Neill was aware of conversations and debates regard women's roles in America. In a 1915 interview with the *New York Tribune* provocatively titled, "Woman's the Virtues, Man's the Stupidity, is the Division the Gentle Inventor of the Kewpies Makes: Rose O-Neill, Artist-Poet-Composer-Inveighs Against Man as the Creator of Traditional Virtues from Which she Would Free the Women of the World", O'Neill talks about the beginning of humankind and how men gained control of women. She details how the control began as physical and then became mental, by defining women in a certain way and then upholding those ideals in society.⁶⁶ Those ideals are the same ones that have been described earlier in this chapter. O'Neill also highlights the work women do within the home: "Men have been the specialists. Women have done all

⁶⁵ Ruth Hubbard, "Have Only Men Evolved?" In *Biological Woman--the Convenient Myth: A Collection of Feminist Essays and a Comprehensive Bibliography*, Ed. Mary Sue Henifin, Barbara Fried, and Ruth Hubbard, (Schenkman Pub. Co., 1982), 26.

⁶⁶ Doris Fleischman, "Woman's the Virtues, Man's the Stupidity, Is the Division the Gentle Inventor of the Kewpies Makes," 5.

the rest. In the homes they have been the carpenters, the doctors, the nurses, the cooks, the diplomats, the educators.”⁶⁷ Although she agrees with the importance of women’s work within the home, she also argues for greater power outside it.

These six Sweet Monster drawings explore the restrictive roles and virtues women were expected to embody and enact in modern American life. Although they appear to follow traditional themes in the history of art, including motherhood, women’s sexual availability, and creation, she distorts them into something unfamiliar. She expands on the connection between mother and creator, using an appropriate feminine role to claim a traditionally masculine one. O’Neill also uses the image of the satyr to reclaim female sexuality from male control, and makes a strong connection between women as creator of children and creator of art. In the same article, O’Neill ends the interview talking about women’s place within the arts. “I am always indignant when women are denied creative power in art-that it has not widely shown itself proves nothing.”⁶⁸ Her Sweet Monster images redefines women’s role in reproduction as a productive, creative force that has the power to shape the world.

Chapter Three

In the 19th century, philosophies surrounding the idea of “Romantic love” grew in popularity and worked to legitimize or at least naturalize women’s sexual desires.⁶⁹ The premise of egalitarian marriages, in which the husband and wife were equal partners, became increasingly popular among women. Publishers responded, and artists like

⁶⁷ Doris Fleischman, “Woman's the Virtues, Man's the Stupidity, Is the Division the Gentle Inventor of the Kewpies Makes,” 5.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 5.

⁶⁹ Pamela S. Haag, “In Search of ‘The Real Thing’: Ideologies of Love, Modern Romance, and Women’s Sexual Subjectivity in the United States, 1920-40,” 556.

O'Neill were commissioned to create images to accompany romance stories in magazines and books. Like her other commercial work, O'Neill's illustrations followed popular trends and remained what was considered appropriate for a woman artist to display. In her Sweet Monsters collection, O'Neill explored emerging ideas about love, sex, and intimacy further. In this chapter, I rely on five of her drawings to argue that she creates a visual narrative of mutual sexual desire that combines traditional imagery and feminist ideals and situates her in transatlantic conversations with other contemporary artists.

After providing an overview of the debates and theories concerning women's sexuality in the 19th and early 20th centuries, I examine the ideals of romantic love and egalitarian marriage and how they demanded new perspectives on women's sexuality, courtship, and marriage. Then, I closely examine five of O'Neill's drawings and, by comparing them to popular images from the fine art tradition, I reveal how and why O'Neill upsets these traditions. I conclude that O'Neill's drawings reveal her struggle to create modern images that visualize romantic love and egalitarian marriage.

Women's Sexuality in 19th-20th Centuries

As I illustrated in chapter two, O'Neill's work engaged contemporary debates over women's sexuality and cultural, social, and economic roles. Many scientists and physicians believed women were less evolved than men and, therefore, unable to control their sexuality. Scientists, theorists, and cultural leaders drew on everything from Christian belief to the emerging field of psychological analysis to claim women were both inseparable from their sexuality and had no control over it. Medical treatises increasingly emphasize woman's reproductive organs, but only in relation to reproduction. Darwin's assessment of human evolution showed that women do not

compete for mates or even play an active role in choosing mates. Psychoanalysis affirmed that women were not only passive and irrational but also sexually bound.⁷⁰ Christian beliefs claimed unsanctified women were agents of the devil and filled with carnal lust.⁷¹ The most appropriate outlet for female sexuality was motherhood, as reproduction and passion for family were considered social goods.⁷² Sexual pleasure was reserved for men.

Pressure from women's rights groups and a quickly changing economy forced a reconsideration of these viewpoints. By calling attention to common assumptions regarding woman's innate morality, women's rights groups argued that morality extended into every aspect of womanhood, including women's sexuality. Woman's moral superiority translated into women having greater control over their sexuality than men.⁷³ In these arguments, women's sexuality remained firmly connected to motherhood.

O'Neill made a related, but nevertheless distinct, argument: if biology was destiny, women must have control over their own bodies and minds.⁷⁴ Women's access to birth control increased in the 19th century, allowing woman to exert more control over their sexuality. They had the ability to decide when they became mothers and how many children they had. Even though birth control methods were not as accurate as they are today, the total number of children per woman in the U.S. dropped from seven to four in

⁷⁰ Pamela S. Haag, "In Search of 'The Real Thing': Ideologies of Love, Modern Romance, and Women's Sexual Subjectivity in the United States, 1920-40," 549.

⁷¹ Nancy F. Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 4, no. 2 (1978): 220.

⁷² Catherine Cocks, "Rethinking Sexuality in the Progressive Era," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 5, no. 2 (2006): 97-98.

⁷³ Sylvia D. Hoffert, *A History of Gender in America: Essays, Documents, and Articles* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2003), 427.

⁷⁴ Talbot Hamlin, "Mystic Vision in Modern Drawings the Art of Rose O'Neill," 422.

these years.⁷⁵ Increased access to medical intervention and new methods of pregnancy prevention further helped women in gain power over their bodies.

Importantly, support for women's access to birth control accompanied arguments for women's fulfillment of sexual desire. In 1831, Robert Dale Owen published the first American publication on birth control: *Moral Physiology; or a Brief and Plain Treatise on the Population Question*. In this work he presented a range of arguments for use and acceptance of birth control including economic and health factors.⁷⁶ These developments furthered not only women's rights, but also their sexual liberation. Less than one hundred years later, there was a growing acceptance of recreational or non-procreative sexual activity. Nevertheless, there remained limitations on how women could express their sexuality in public, and female artists were expected to limit their works to depictions of childhood, motherhood, and courtship.

Romantic Love and Egalitarian Marriage

The development of the New Woman reflected changing gender roles for men and women. With greater access to higher education and jobs outside of the home, women, especially those of the middle and upper classes, found they were capable of supporting themselves.⁷⁷ Their increased self-assurance and independence changed their expectations for marriage. Typically, a married woman was expected to obey the commands of her husband, take care of domestic chores, and raise the children. Legally, women had little choice but to follow these social guidelines since they were treated as a

⁷⁵ Joanna Lahey, "Birthing a Nation: The Effect of Fertility Control Access on the 19th Century Demographic Transition," *The Journal of Economic History*, 2, 74 (June 2014): 482.

⁷⁶ Wilson Yates, "Birth Control Literature and the Medical Profession in Nineteenth Century America," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 31, no. 1 (January 1976): 44.

⁷⁷ Sylvia D. Hoffert, *A History of Gender in America: Essays, Documents, and Articles*, 283.

child under the law with her husband acting as her guardian.⁷⁸ In cases of abusive or unfaithful husbands, wives had little recourse aside from divorce. The emphasis on women remaining within the home meant that the majority had to rely on their husbands to support them and their children financially. In these traditional marriages husbands and wives were not equal; there was a clear hierarchy with the father at the top. This system held less appeal for the women who were fighting for their rights, were highly educated, and worked outside of the home.

Romantic love and the desire for egalitarian marriages grew substantially in the 19th century. The belief that love was “the most divine thing we are allowed to know about on earth” was not a new idea, but it inspired different views on what an ideal marriage should look like. Some promoted free-love, which claimed marriage to be an unnatural state for humans and promoted relationships based on mutual interest and desire.⁷⁹ While free-love was supported by both men and women, its leaders were primarily male. On the one hand, women were not beholden to the same expectations of marriage in a free-love relationship. They were not considered the property of their lover and if unhappy were free to leave. However, they also lost the legal protection and cultural legitimation afforded to married women. If women were already married, they risked the stigma of divorce, and women who were not married risked being abandoned by their lovers and left to raise any children from the relationship on their own.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ John Spurlock, “A Masculine View of Women’s Freedom: Free Love in the Nineteenth Century,” *International Social Science Review*, 3-4, 69 (2001): 35

⁷⁹ Wendy Hayden, “(R)Evolutionary Rhetorics: Science and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Free-Love Discourse,” *Rhetoric Review* 29, no. 2 (2010): 117

⁸⁰ John Spurlock, “A Masculine View of Women’s Freedom: Free Love in the Nineteenth Century,” 40.

Most middle-class American women, along with some bohemians and first wave feminists, believed that romantic love would lead to an egalitarian marriage. Romantic love acknowledged women as sexual beings and placed them in control of their own desires, which would then play out in the nebulous context of love.⁸¹ This romance would lead to an egalitarian marriage in which husband and wife were equals, even if the laws had yet to change and acknowledge their equality.

The Sweet Monster Images

Many of O'Neill's drawings address heterosexual love and intimacy. She depicts moments between lovers, deeply private and emotional scenes that do not typically have an audience. In general, the male and female figures are roughly the same size, and in some cases similarly muscled. The couples hold onto or lean into one another, resulting in a closeness that allows their bodies to meld into one another. They are the focus of the drawings. Although a third figure is present in *The Will to Live*, she, too, is entirely focused on the couple. The romantic and intimate moments O'Neill depicts mine specific visual and textual traditions to present visions of romantic love and egalitarian marriage.

In *The Master-Mistress*, 1902-22 (Fig. 22) the frontispiece of O'Neill's book of poems of the same name, the couple melds together, as if they are in the process of becoming one figure. O'Neill outlined the nude figures with thick black lines. They embrace one another as they kneel upon what looks like the twisted roots of a large tree. The couple faces each other, but their bodies from the neck down turn slightly toward the viewer. Although the man's body appears slightly more muscular, the two are roughly the

⁸¹ Pamela S. Haag, "In Search of 'The Real Thing': Ideologies of Love, Modern Romance, and Women's Sexual Subjectivity in the United States, 1920-40," 556.

same size. The space between their bodies consists of blackened nest lines crisscrossing over their bodies, beginning at their upper torsos, and going all the way to the twisted ground beneath them. The blurriness created by the lines blends their bodies together, connecting them to one another. The man's thick arm reaches out toward her, with his hand wrapping around the back of her neck. Her thinner arm is barely visible beneath his—she, too, reaches for him—but her hand disappears into his body. Their faces overlap, with the man's partially covered by the woman's, their eyes are closed, and their lips almost touching.

The Master-Mistress is the name of the drawing, the first poem, and the book itself. The poem appears to relate directly to the image, describing a creature arising from a rock, appearing as two distinct entities combined into one. She calls out to the creature, addressing it as Master-mistress but it does not respond to her it simply folds itself.⁸² The title “master-mistress” relates to one of Shakespeare's most well-known sonnets, which she likely knew from her father's insistence that his children read and enact Shakespeare's works. In Sonnet 20, Shakespeare refers to the subject as “the master-mistress of my passion,” and describes it with characteristics associated with men and women.⁸³ Scholars have debated the meaning of the sonnet and questioned its possible relationship to Shakespeare's sexuality. However, O'Neill likely referenced the sonnet because its subject combined male and female characteristics. O'Neill identifies the subject not as her own lover or a possible lover, but rather, a creature that is composed when a man and woman merge together.

⁸² Rose Cecil O'Neill, *Master-Mistress: Poems* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1922), 18.

⁸³ Stephen Booth, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven (Conn.): Yale University Press, 2000), 163.

O'Neill's imagined creature can also be seen as a male and female figure folding into one another as they rest on a twisting surface. The scene of an embracing couple has a long history in art. For example, in Titian's *Mars, Venus, and Cupid* (after 1530) (Fig.23), Mars leans into the frame of the painting and embraces Venus. Venus turns her head back toward Mars and reaches up to touch his hair as they kiss, Venus's nudity contrasts with Mars's armored body. His left-hand wraps around her head, clutching the white cloth draped over her thigh, while his right hand reaches below her and cups her bottom. This embrace is erotic. The God of War and the Goddess of Love are depicted in a passionate embrace, a union of opposing characteristics that will produce a child, Harmonia.⁸⁴

Although O'Neill's image is less erotic, it still presents the union of two bodies. Although the upper bodies of the man and the woman are held apart at arm's length, a dizzying array of lines blend their forms together. Unlike Titian's painting, O'Neill's image is influenced by the ideas of egalitarian marriage, the figures, relatively equal in size, both are nude and equally vulnerable. This woman owns her sexuality; unlike Venus, she is not on display for the viewer nor is her body being manipulated by her male partner.

O'Neill presents another deeply intimate moment between a couple in *The Eternal Gesture*, 1902-22 (Fig. 24). Two nude figures sit with their legs folded underneath them in an empty space. Their bodies overlap. Although the man's feet are visible, the woman's lower legs are incomplete. Is she disappearing into him or coming to

⁸⁴ "Mars, Venus Und Amor," Kunsthistorisches Museum, accessed February 3, 2021, <https://www.khm.at/objektdb/detail/1954>.

life due to their love? The man's left hand is placed on the woman's chest slightly above her breasts, resting on her heart. His right arm wraps around her body and his hand rests on the woman's right forearm, the woman's arms are pushed behind her. She tilts her head back and to the left, toward his, but both of their faces are hidden from the viewer. The man leans forward in the space, his neck bending as he lowers his head toward her neck. The man's body is more muscular while the woman's body is softer, although they are approximately the same size. They curve and bend toward and into one another. The scene is intimate, a private moment between lovers which is highlighted by their hidden faces.

The title of the work evokes medieval courtship, a period that experienced a revival during the Victorian era.⁸⁵ The use of medieval tales for inspiration was popular among artists as well as writers, who tales of courtly love dovetailed with the rise of romantic love, as I mentioned earlier. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Roman de la Rose* (1864) (Fig. 25) depicts a couple sharing a moment of intimacy in a garden filled with roses. A man kneels before his love, clutching her hands. As he tilts his head up, the woman leans down, and their lips meet as they share a kiss. A crowned angel stands behind them watching the couple as it wings spread wide, sheltering them, while it plays a harp. Rossetti's painting depicts a scene from the well-known medieval poem of the same name, written by the French author Guillaume de Lorris to explain the art of love.⁸⁶ In it, a young man journeys through a dream to find the Rose that symbolizes the love of his Lady. During the quest, he encounters the God of Love and other allegorical figures who

⁸⁵ Zsuzsanna Ujszászi, "The Pre-Raphaelite Journey into the Middle Ages," *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica* 7, no. 1 (2015): 30.

⁸⁶ "Roman De La Rose," The British Library (The British Library, January 14, 2015), <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/roman-de-la-rose>.

teach him the ways of courtship. Guillaume's story ends as after the man steals a kiss from the Rose, which alerts the garden's guardians who encase the rose behind stronger fortifications. The story was finished by Jean de Meun; the man succeeds in his quest and plucks the rose from the garden.⁸⁷ Rossetti's pictures the stolen kiss between the young man and his lady, under the wing of the crowned angel, the God of Love.

At first glance O'Neill's image does not appear to have a great deal in common with Rossetti's image. However, they share some crucial elements in their depictions of romantic love. In both images, a viewer acts as a witness to a fleeting, intimate moment between the couple. Both couples hold on to one another, unaware they are watched. Both artists emphasize the urgency in the men's affection and capture a fleeting moment of intimacy. This works encapsulate the notion of romantic love in which the couple are engaged in an intimate relationship in which the desire of both parties is not only evident but appropriate.

O'Neill's work differs from Rossetti's is in the absence of a background and in the nudity and position of the figures. The couple in the sole focus in O'Neill's drawing; only the title refers to the classic poem, the nudity further strips the couple of any material difference or historical reference. O'Neill's drawing evokes the ideas surround egalitarian marriages since both figures are vulnerable and not separated by social or material differences. They share equal roles in the image, nearly inversions of one another.

⁸⁷ Lori J Walters, "Rose Summary," Digital Library of Medieval Manuscripts, accessed April 23, 2021, <https://dlmm.library.jhu.edu/en/romandelarose/rose-summary/>.

O'Neill's *The Kiss*, 1902-22 (Fig. 26) is one of the artist's densest drawings and is the only one to provide a close-up of a couple. The background is covered in thick swirling clouds that blend in with the woman's hair as it floats around the space. Displayed from the shoulders up, the figures are rather similar: delicate lines mark their light faces and make them appear smooth and soft with well-defined features. The man is displayed in profile leaning toward the woman whose face is slightly angled and obscuring a small portion of his face. Both have their eyes closed as their noses touch with a nearly imperceptible distance between their thick lips turned down at the corners. The man's delicate eyebrows are furrowed while the woman's face is entirely relaxed. The man appears more desperate than the woman, but the woman stretches her neck farther than the man as they reach toward one another. While her hair blends in with the background, the man's hair appears as an unkempt thick black smudge. There appears to be a large space between their bodies as they lean into the frame from opposite sides. Their clothes are textured with thin lines and appear slightly loose, not at all confining or restrictive. The scene shows the tender moment right before the lover's lips touch.

A kiss is a common trope in the history of art, and most representations comment on sexuality and romantic love. Surprisingly, most of these works, including the one by O'Neill, do not show the couple kissing. In *The Kiss* (1907-08) (Fig. 27), Gustav Klimt wanted to explore the notion of love as an essential part of life.⁸⁸ The couple is depicted on the edge of a cliff, covered in flowers, against a dark golden background. The man stands, bending and stretching his neck to kiss the woman on the cheek. He holds her

⁸⁸ "The Kiss by Gustav Klimt," Belvedere Museum Vienna, accessed April 23, 2021, <https://www.belvedere.at/en/kiss-gustav-klimt>.

head in his hands, controlling the moment. The woman kneels before the man, her face turned toward the audience while her head is at an extreme angle. Her left hand reaches up and lightly grasps his right hand which holds the left side of her face and her left arm is thrown over his neck. Her eyes remain closed, and her face serene. The figures both wear clothes that would blend the figures together without the decorative rectangles and circles. This scene is intimate, although the male figure controls the situation and initiates the kiss.⁸⁹

In contrast, O'Neill's *The Kiss* features a close-up view of a couple whose lips are nearly touching as they lean across the space toward one another. The figures, equal in size, almost mirror one another. Although Klimt and O'Neill explore intimacy and romantic love, O'Neill's representation relates to the idea of egalitarian marriage. The man is not in control of the woman's body, holding or guiding her into a specific position. The woman is an equal, leaning toward him on her own volition. O'Neill's *The Kiss* emphasizes an essential element of egalitarian marriage: mutual affection between the couple, in which neither one dominates the other. She shows the kiss of a couple who are engaged in a relationship in which they are equals.

Unlike *The Master-Mistress*, *The Eternal Gesture*, and *The Kiss*, which focus on intimate moments between couples that can be described in positive terms, *The First Love-Death*, 1902-22 (Fig. 28) depicts the death of a lover or the death of a couple's love. A sculptural man stands in an exaggerated contrapposto pose with his head thrown back and his arms extended as he lifts a lifeless woman off the ground. The arch of his

⁸⁹ Renee Price, "The Kiss Gustav Klimt and Auguste Rodin," in *Klimt & Rodin: an Artistic Encounter*, ed. Tobias G. Natter (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco/Legion of Honor, 2017), 79.

back enables him to support her lower body with his own, bringing their nude bodies into contact with one another. The man appears physically larger than the woman and more muscular, with his calf roughly the same size as her thigh. The woman hangs suspended in the air by her lover: her head back, eyes closed, and lips parted slightly. The man struggles to hold her up, his shoulders pressed into his neck from the effort, while her body is limp and relaxed. His face expresses his anguish while she appears to be in no pain, *The First Love-Death* could be a depiction of a lover's death or the death of a relationship. The image is similar to fine art works that reference the former, while the bohemian culture in which she lived while in New York City suggests the latter.

Auguste Rodin's statue, *The Kiss* (Fig.29), formerly known as *Francesca da Rimini* (1882) depicts the story of Francesca da Rimini and her brother-in-law Paolo Malatesta. The two fell in love and carried out an affair for around ten years before they were discovered and killed in Francesca's bedroom by her husband, and Paolo's older brother, Giovanni.⁹⁰ Rodin depicts the moment just before the couple is killed. They sit nude upon a rocky formation as they embrace one another intimately. The man's right hand is beginning to grab onto the woman's waist, while her left arm wraps around his neck. As they turn toward one another, her right leg begins to overlap his left and their bodies start to twist and mold into one another. The sculpture points to the death of their love by ensuring their lips are unable to touch. They are nearly kissing, provoking a sense of loss. O'Neill's drawing features figures similar to Rodin's in their physicality and

⁹⁰ Teodolinda Barolini, "Dante and Francesca Da Rimini: Realpolitik, Romance, Gender," *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*, (2006): 305.

intimacy, but she represents a moment after one lover dies and the other is left to suffer alone.

The First Love-Death can also symbolize the failure of romantic love and egalitarian marriages. While romantic love and egalitarian marriages were ideals, few women found themselves in marriages in which they were considered equals to their husbands. O'Neill herself was twice married and divorced, and both courtships and marriages are described in great detail in her autobiography.⁹¹ The relationships had started out loving, Gary Latham was the charming son of a prominent family in New York, O'Neill used him as a model for many of her early illustrations. Once they were married however, Latham controlled her finances and spent the money recklessly, O'Neill had to beg her husband to send money to her family whom she had long been supporting.⁹² Her second marriage to Harry Leon Wilson took place shortly after her first divorce, as an assistant editor for *Puck* he began a correspondence with O'Neill while she was in the Ozarks.⁹³ Their relationship began with romantic letters back and forth, but once married O'Neill found Wilson's temperament and harsh treatment intolerable. Like many women of the period O'Neill had hoped to find love and equality in marriage, instead she realized the vulnerabilities and hardships women faced in difficult marriages.

Although artists in bohemian circles hoped these ideals would provide a certain amount of erotic liberation for women and would create new spaces for women artists to explore unhindered by gendered assumptions, this was not the case. Women's place in

⁹¹ See Rose Cecil O'Neill and Miriam Forman-Brunell, *The Story of Rose O'Neill: an Autobiography*, chapters 1-3.

⁹² Ralph Alan McCause, *Titans and Kewpies; the Life and Art of Rose O'Neill*, 80-81.

⁹³ Rose Cecil O'Neill and Miriam Forman-Brunell, *The Story of Rose O'Neill: an Autobiography*, 77.

bohemian culture was insecure and contradictory, and while women's sexual liberation may have been promoted, women's work addressing erotic love was not seen as high art in comparison to male artists.⁹⁴ These women artists were spoken of as muses, their work being inspiration for their lovers. The ideals remained but women in the late 19th and early 20th century were still bound by social expectations. O'Neill's *The First Love-Death* can be understood as her coming up against the reality she and other women faced during this period.

In *The Will to Live*, 1902-22 (Fig. 30) O'Neill's feminism and ideals of romantic love and equal partnership in marriage come together. The viewer's eye is drawn to the center of the drawing, in which the man's head covers the woman's face. The two nude figures are locked in a passionate embrace. Behind them is a large figure with its knees visible and its large wings framing the image and encasing the couple. The man's right arm sweeps across the image as he holds the back of the woman's head, while her left hand grips the back of his. The couple's bodies fit together like puzzle pieces; the outline of their bodies create a nearly unbroken line. The shape of her left breast fits into the space left between his right knee and right elbow. His right knee fits between her abdomen and thighs created by the bending of her body. The moment is intimate as the couple pull one another close, holding onto one another.

The couple in *The Will to Live* is accompanied by a third figure that resembles the maternal and creator figures featured in the previous chapter. This format of a couple depicted with their creator relates directly to Christian images of Adam and Eve before

⁹⁴ Elizabeth Wilson, *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 98.

God. Images with all three characters typically depict one of two scenes: the creation of Eve or the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. In Michelangelo's *Creation of Eve* (Fig. 31) on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (1509-1510), Adam lays on his right side on the ground and is propped up by a tree. Eve seems to be coming out from behind him, her upper body lowered and her hands together in front of her as she looks at God. God stands on the right side of the image, wearing a cloak that nearly covers his entire body. His head is tilted down as he look at Eve, and his right hand is raised as if he has summoned her to rise up.

According to Christian tradition, Eve was created from one of Adam's ribs. While Adam and Eve are considered the first couple in Christianity the images produced from the Renaissance to the 19th century do not show intimate or loving moments between the couple. O'Neill's image presents an alternative genesis story in which love, and intimacy play a larger roll. The couple in *The Will to Live* hold tightly on to one another and fit together, molding into one another's bodies. The shape they create together mimics that of an anatomical heart. They are equals in this image, as the shape would be incomplete with one of the figures missing. They are also passionately engaged with one another, supporting the idea that love is the greatest thing one can know and that it brings humans closer to the divine. Behind them, the female creator sits with her eyes closed, yet there is a sense that she is wholly focused on the couple before her. The viewer can see the tops of the creator's bent knees above the couple's head, with the lines of her legs extended toward the bottom right and left corners of the parchment. The couple emerges from between the legs of the female creator, mimicking the imagery of a mother giving birth to a child. She also protects the couple, with her wings wrapping around the edges of the

frame and sheltering the couple. There is great tenderness in this image, from the creator toward her creation, and between the man and the woman. Here O'Neill presents a different version of creation, one in which a female creator births a couple that is deeply in love with one another.

Conclusion

With the rising popularity of romantic love, it is unsurprising that many artists chose to address this theme in their works. In her *Sweet Monster* series, O'Neill creates intimate depictions of erotic love that are influenced by contemporary views. The philosophies surrounding romantic love created a space for women to engage in their own sexual desire, while egalitarian marriages encouraged women to search for equality in their marriages. Her works show mutual desire and intimacy between the figures, as both figures reach out and hold on to one another. They blend, twist, and fold into one another in ways that highlight their need for each other. The women are as engaged and passionate as the men, acknowledging them as sexual beings. O'Neill presents couples who care deeply for one another, thus making their desire appropriate within the framework of romantic love. The couples also rely on one another in the images, fitting together and supporting each other's bodies, hinting at the equality that can be found within these relationships. Relying on visual and textual traditions that featured passionate love between an active male and passive female, O'Neill created new but recognizable images of romantic love.

Thesis Conclusion

During the late 19th and early 20th century in America there were increasing debates concerning women's roles. From women's reform groups to physicians to scientists to artists, individual across disciplines attempted to either solidify traditional values or redefine womanhood. A majority of physicians and scientists continued to support the traditional characteristics prescribed to women such as obedience, morality, and chastity. The evidence they gathered confirmed long held beliefs that women were physically and mentally inferior to men. As women were assumed to be naturally inclined toward motherhood and caregiving, it made the role of mother the most desirable position for women. In the family the expectation for women was that they would become mothers and dutifully raise their children according to Christian teachings and social conventions while remaining submissive to their husbands. Women's reform groups however also adopted motherhood into their arguments. Through motherhood they were able to suggest that women held a key influential role in society which should guarantee them greater involvement in politics.

As a suffragette Rose O'Neill was well aware of the importance of motherhood in the debates for women's rights. As an artist she explored how to depict the newly emphasized motherhood that placed women in a position of power. She combines the image of mother and creator, making a connection between a woman's biological function and the creation of mankind. Previously the act of creation, specifically for artists, was considered the outcome of a heterosexual man's sexual engagement. In the six Sweet Monster images discussed in chapter two, O'Neill reclaims the act of creation, turning it into a natural extension of womanhood. To create these images, O'Neill took traditional iconography of motherhood and creation and inverted them. The child is a

grown man, the female figure takes the place of God. The female figures retain features which unite them to the idea that women are closer to nature than man, while the man remains idealized in form. The mother figures presented in these drawings are not the idealized mothers that fit social expectations, rather they are powerful, mythical, god-like creatures.

The other key issue with regards to women's roles during this period, was women's sexuality. Along with the assumptions that women were less evolved was the idea that women were unable to control their sexuality. Thus, it was critical for men and society to monitor and control women's sexuality to prevent promiscuity. Motherhood had been the only acceptable outcome of women's sexuality prior to the 20th century. As philosophies about love became more popular groups supporting Free love and Romantic love suggested different possibilities for women's sexuality. In bohemian circles these ideas quickly became part of their ideology, encouraging romantic relationships built on mutual affection. The goal was for couples who married to engage in egalitarian lifestyle in which there is no hierarchy within the household, the husband and wife are equals. While romantic love became adopted by the middle classes as a permissible way in which a woman could express her sexuality, there was still the expectation of marriage and motherhood.

O'Neill was an active participant in the bohemian circles in New York during the early 20th century. In the five drawings in chapter three O'Neill explores the idea of romantic love and what it would like if a couple were true equals. To create these images, she uses a combination of classical texts and iconography but unlike the drawings in chapter two, she could not invert the roles of the figures. Placing the woman in the role of

aggressor and the man in as the passive partner would only heighten social fears of women's sexuality. The figures in her work needed to be equals, both experiencing the moment with the same intensity and involvement. The only image in which this is not the case is *The First Love-Death*, which could suggest the anguish at the death of a lover or the possible failure of these relationships. Each of the images are an exploration into what romantic love of the 20th century looked like, the depth of the love and the pain of its loss. All of O'Neill's drawings discussed in this thesis show her engagement with important debates of her time and acknowledge her as a serious artist. These images were not made with any particular audience in mind, they were private works in which she combined new ideas with traditional forms. In the images O'Neill searches for the answer to two questions; what is motherhood if not creation and what does an egalitarian love look like?

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