THE BOY WHO LIVED AND THE MOTHER WHO DIED: AN EXAMINATION OF THE DEAD MOTHER PLOT IN A CULTURAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The dead mother plot, or the motif in which the vaguely benevolent mother is disposed of either before the story begins or before the protagonist can start his/her quest in earnest, reverberates through the centuries, cropping up in tales from societies as far-reaching as Ancient Greece. It features prominently in the foundational works of most notable Western societies throughout history, including Classical culture, the European Middle Ages, and the Renaissance. It lasts all the way into 1980s America, appearing in its most basic form in *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Beauty and the Beast* (1991). However, a mere decade later, *Harry Potter* subverts the well-worn plot with Lily Potter, a mother who, though dead, serves an integral role as Harry’s comforter, informant, and counselor from beyond the grave throughout his hero’s quest. Thus, it follows that some societal dynamic must have shifted between the 1980s and 1990s to prime audiences to be so warmly receptive of such a diametrically different kind of mother.

Analyzing the primary texts as well as looking to cultural histories of the 1980s and 1990s (including evidence as disparate as commercials, political campaigns, labor statistics, birth and marriage rates, court cases, and religious movements), I found that the 1990s backlash against the culture of 1950s traditionalism espoused by the Reagan administration set the stage for very well-publicized and vocal grappling over women’s rights.

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1 The dead mother plot appears in Eastern society too – the earliest known version of Cinderella dates to 9th-century China – but I narrowed the scope of my research to Western literature for the sake of brevity and clearer connection to 1980s and 90s America.
(and more specifically, mothers’) place in society. This rebellion primed audiences to receive Lily Potter well, a character just as incendiary and groundbreaking as the movement itself.
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Introduction

Motherhood has always been central in the construction of an ideal American society. From the Republican motherhood of the Revolution to the coiffed housewife of the 1950s to the dynamic career mother of the 2000s, mothers form the backbone of the nuclear family, the foundation upon which American culture is built. However, for women that hold positions of such importance in this society, Americans have particularly fraught relationships with them, entangled as they are in the sticky web of gender roles, female expectations, and the dichotomy between real women and their idealized counterparts.

This contradiction plays out in American film and literature. From *Bambi* to *Clueless* to *The Flash* comics, society’s most beloved and popular works (and especially those which America’s children inhale with gusto) all share a common and macabre theme: a dead mother. In the vast majority of these iconic tales, the mothers are killed off before the story begins, often with no backstory or exposition.

Americans do not have the monopoly on this bizarre maternal massacre. Use of the dead mother plot stretches back into ancient Greek times, cropping up in societies as diverse as Ancient Greece to the European Middle Ages, the Golden Age of Rome to Renaissance England. The motif knows no bounds, cultural or temporal, and fictional mothers are slain again and again, an inexplicitly necessary event to catalyze their progeny’s quest and victory.

This plot device chugs along steadily up to 1980s America and the rebirth of Disney as a powerhouse corporation. After a string of flops, the studio turned its fortunes around with smash hits *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Beauty and the Beast* (1991),
beginning the so-called “Disney Renaissance.”² Given the tenacity and popularity of the dead mother plot, its reappearance in an era of traditionalism and conservatism is unsurprising. However, a mere decade later, the *Harry Potter* series exploded onto the national scene, upending the dead mother plot and providing a rich and fascinating example of subversion of the timeworn motif. Lily Potter, Harry’s dead mother, refuses to operate by the traditional plot standards. Active, vocal, and crucial to Harry’s success, she exists in the stories in a revolutionary way when compared to the vaguely benevolent and utterly silent negative spaces left my Ariel’s and Belle’s mothers.

Something of massive importance must have changed in this decade to prime audiences to so readily accept the undermining of a motif with which they had become so comfortable. Societal shifts in gender roles and battles over motherhood between the 1980s and 1990s predetermined the success of all three of these cultural phenomena, giving audiences a palatable female figure in accordance with the societal norms in which they lived. While the conservative and traditionalistic narratives of the Reagan administration upheld the classic dead mother plot as seen in *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, the intensely public grappling over women’s rights of the 1990s set the stage for *Harry Potter*’s subversion via Lily Potter, a mother both active and communicative from beyond the grave.

Initially, I thought that I could isolate the decade of 1989 to 1999 as a case study on the shifting use the dead mother plot in equitable social phenomena (e.g. Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* and *Harry Potter*). I wanted to highlight the significant swing from the erasure of mothers in the Disney films to the activity and

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emotional resurrection of Lily Potter. However, as soon as I dove deeper into the history of this plot device, I realized that isolating these few cases did not do justice to its extensive prevalence in the American canon or the loaded and complex societal contexts into which they were born.

I moved away from myopic textual analysis and into the literary history. I did extensive research into foundational works of literature in major Western societies (Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome, the early and late Middle Ages, and the Renaissance), and found that the dead mother plot reared its ugly head in all of them. I performed some fundamental historical research to provide background of the societies (specifically each culture’s gender roles and perceptions of motherhood) to analyze which problematic relationships with mothers or femininity prodded the author to adhere to the erasure plot. Together, this arc proved the longevity and staying power of the plot, making *Harry Potter*’s eventual subversion all the more remarkable.

I then moved into secondary sources, since a significant body of work exists comprised of literary analysis of the dead mother plot and the contradictions swirling around mothers in classic literature. Marina Warner’s *The Absent Mother* proved foundational to my education in this area. Her discussion of the benevolent absence of the hero’s mother in stories like *Beauty and the Beast* and *Cinderella* impressed upon me the rich history of American-adapted fairytales’ erasure of maternal figures before the inception of the story. In similarly-focused works, Sylvia Henneberg’s *Moms do Badly, but Grandmas do Worse: The Nexus of Sexism and Ageism in Children’s Classics*, Sarah Boxer’s *Atlantic* piece “Why Are All the Cartoon Mothers Dead?” and Marina Warner’s *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairytales and Their Tellers* all established
authoritatively that this bizarre maternal massacre has long thrived in beloved American stories.

After I established this solid foundation, the 1980s Disney films to *Harry Potter* shift seemed much more significant and much less coincidental in a specifically American context. *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* were less of cinematic landmarks than links in a long and well-established chain.

By refocusing my energy from the original literary analysis to cultural history, I found great insight into the success of these diametrically opposed plots. With this shift came a need for me to learn about the 1980s, including the earlier half preceding the late-80s in which the Disney films accrued so much popularity and ubiquity. Extending the timeframe I examined brought up an important and complicated question: what comprises a cultural snapshot? Though a tidy term, “culture,” even American culture specifically relating to gender and family in the 1980s, is huge, diverse, and starkly different depending on who you were and how you lived. I struggled to encapsulate the atmosphere, norms, and gender roles of a polylithic people.

Ultimately, I turned to the experts. By consuming a large volume of historiographies on the 1980s, I determined which facets of the decade had proven most salient and worthy of study. Works including Bob Batchelor and Scott Stoddart’s *The 1980s*, Douglas Rossinow’s *The Reagan Era: A History of the 1980s*, and Gil Troy and Vincent Cannato’s *Living in the Eighties* all highlighted similar themes. One of the most prevalent of these was the policy and narrative of the Reagan administration.

Starting there, I delved into this political regime. I examined Reagan’s campaign propaganda, including the famous “Morning in America” campaign, encapsulating the
white picket fence ideals of the 1950s. I examined Reagan’s landmark policies, including “Reaganomics” and supply-side economic policy (encompassing tax cuts, reduced regulation, and the slashing of social programs) and resounding lack of support for various civil rights movements of the time (including no legislation for gay or lesbian rights – lifestyles Reagan did not condone – and blatant opposition to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965).³

I dug into these policies further, specifically examining their effects on women and mothers of the time. Ray Marshall’s *Work and Women in the 1980s: A Perspective on Basic Trends Affecting Women’s Jobs and Job Opportunities* and Joan Turner and Lois Emery’s *Perspectives on Women in the 1980s* connected these sweeping political movements to the real women whom they affected. I learned that concurrently as the Reagan White House supported traditional family structures and heteronormative parenting, divorce rates were skyrocketing and an unprecedented number of single women headed their households.⁴ Thus, Reagan’s economic policy was a direct disavowal of the lifestyles many of these single, struggling mothers led. By cutting necessary welfare and childcare programs, many of these working mothers were left unsupported, painted as welfare queens and drains on society.⁵ In addition, the regressive civil rights policies indicated an administration with no interest in furthering the aims of marginalized groups, whether those be African Americans, the LGBTQ community, or

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women.

In addition to the political realm, most of those cultural histories mentioned the explosive growth of the Christian Right in this period. This faction of Christianity was a prominent presence that, especially through television, vociferously advocated for a return to fundamentalist principles including sexual purity and traditional gender roles.\(^6\)

Leading voices of this movement included Phyllis Schlafly, Anita Bryant, Pat Robertson, Reverend Jerry Falwell, and Pat Buchanan, all well-known and influential figures of the time.\(^7\) Again, this facet of society upheld a conservative and traditional model in which women were compartmentalized into domestic roles.

These narratives were prominent and remembered in this period, but they were not the only voices. In an ardent attempt to avoid picking and choosing the movements in the 1980s that supported my thesis and erasing the rest, I looked to the exceptions, the instances of female progression in this time period.

In reality, women’s advancements in this era were appreciable. Women’s issues, including equal pay, were widely acknowledged and debated; women were entering higher-wage career paths than ever before; more mothers gained the agency to leave the house and pursue jobs of their choosing; more women delayed marriage and childbirth to further their career goals.\(^8\) Somehow, this reality existed in a parallel universe with the widespread conservative depiction of mothers as domestic goddesses, a 1950s gender role wildly out of step with the economic realities of the 1980s.

In addition, some female figures stand out as bucking the conservative trend.

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\(^7\) Ibid., 11.

Women from Gloria Steinem to Madonna to fictional Murphy Brown were active and visible in this period. But amidst an environment of traditionalism, bleeding through in everything from legislation to the abundance of family-centered sitcoms, I concluded that these aberrations were the exceptions, not the rule. The 1980s seemed largely backlash against the progressiveness that defined the 1960s and 70s.

Through this research, I came to understand the environment into which the Disney films were born. The continuation of the practice of killing off the mothers made sense in this context – in a time fraught with contradiction (e.g. abundance of single mothers vs. White House narrative) and overlaid with glossy idealism, the simplest way to deal with a potentially problematic or dynamic older woman and mother was to omit her completely.

I then moved on to the 1990s, the decade that birthed *Harry Potter* and its accompanying franchises. Here, I saw the silent battles of the 1980s burst through onto the national stage. Nina’s *America in the Nineties* highlighted the very public grappling over women’s rights in this time, from the Anita Hill hearings to the pro-choice demonstration of 1992 to the birth of Emily’s List to the Civil Rights Act of 1991 to intensive legislative fights over women’s place in the military, culminating in the National Defense Authorization Act of 1994, to the Violence Against Women Act to the Monica Lewinsky scandal and Bill Clinton’s subsequent impeachment.9

Especially on this political and military stage, women rose up against decades of discrimination pinpointing sexual violence and harassment, topics largely taboo in Reagan’s America. However, I found that often, these public and salacious battles led to

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continued oppression. Take the Anita Hill hearings and the Monica Lewinsky scandal – though these women found the freedom and agency to courageously come forward against high-powered men, they were both widely pilloried and slandered, and ultimately lost their cases to the presiding old boys’ clubs. This progress was imperfect and incomplete.

But it was happening. The decade of the 1990s is rife with these splashy, attention-grabbing scandals, putting sex and gendered violence into the public discourse in a way it never could have been in the 1980s. Gender roles in the 1990s were fraught and contradictory and contentious – but this boiling point primed audiences to be more accepting of a maternal figure who would not succumb to traditional expectations, setting the stage for the subversive *Harry Potter*.

This shift to emphasize literary legacy and cultural context has allowed me to more deeply understand the significance of the use and subsequent disregarding of the dead mother plot, and how this choice depended on and reflected the social conditions of the time.
Chapter I: The Great Maternal Massacre

In children’s literature, a sinister motif abounds as ubiquitous as ball gowns, magical helpers, and happy endings: dead mothers. In classic tales of all genres, the protagonist’s mother is disposed of before the curtain lifts, leaving the hero/heroine unprotected and vulnerable to external evil forces. Honing in on this bizarre maternal massacre, I found that these absences are also frequently unexplained within the stories.

This motif, known widely as the “dead mother plot,” has transcended era, genre, and culture, remaining a permanent and largely unscrutinized fixture of children’s bedtime stories from young Yizong’s bedside in 9th-century China straight through to little Jennifer’s in 1980s America. This literary pattern…

…unites texts as diverse in both historical period and literary form as the Odyssey, the Aeneid, the Confessions of Augustine, King Lear, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Tom Jones, Emma, Persuasion, To the Lighthouse, Forrest Gump, The Descendants, the majority of Grimm’s fairy tales and Walt Disney movies, Pinocchio, Psycho, and Lolita.9

I start my exploration among the white temples and dusty roads of ancient Greece. With the exception of Sparta, the Greek poleis abided by very strict gender roles. Particularly in the Athenian model, women operated primarily inside the home, virtually invisible in the public sphere. Athenian norms subjugated them to second-class status, held to strict standards and given little freedom or independence in return. David Schaps writes: “Large areas of male culture were in fact entirely closed to women: the assembly, the law courts, the gymnasium, and even the normal daily social encounters of Athenian

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men, were not open to the direct participation of women.”\textsuperscript{11}

This defined linkage between women and domesticity explains Homer’s use of the dead mother plot in \textit{The Odyssey}, arguably the seminal work in the ancient Greek canon and along with the \textit{Iliad}, the most important to epic poetry, as the scene between Odysseus and his mother, Anticleia, demonstrates. As the story goes, when Anticleia’s beloved Odysseus left to fight in the Trojan War, she succumbed to heartrending grief. Her longing, sorrow, and uncertainty drove her to commit suicide, a fact Odysseus only finds out while in the Underworld on a separate mission. Her ghost opines:

As for my own end it was in this wise: heaven did not take me swiftly and painlessly in my own house, not was I attacked by any illness such as those that generally wear people out and kill them, but my longing to know what you were doing and the force of my affection for you – this it was that was the death of me.\textsuperscript{12}

This small fragment of the epic contains many hallmarks of the dead mother plot. Anticleia died outside of and separate from the action of the plot. Though her death is explained and recognized, an abnormality in the dead mother mold, Homer still carefully wrote her out of the hero’s quest. Odysseus only fully realizes his heroic potential without the protective shackles of his mother.

He even attempts to reconnect with her in an ultimately human way: “Then I tried to find some way of embracing my mother’s ghost. Thrice I sprang towards her and tried to clasp her in my arms, but each time she flitted from my embrace as it were a dream or


\textsuperscript{12} Homer, translated by Robert Fagles, \textit{The Odyssey} (New York: Penguin Group, 1996), 109; Hom. Od. II.204-II.207
phantom…”13 Her deathly state thwarts his attempts to leech affection, warmth, and safety from her. With this, Odysseus’s loss of innocence and separation from his childhood home is complete. The death of his mother prods him into complete manhood. His interaction with her ghost serves as a brief respite and delay from the arduous, painful, and dangerous journey to which he must return in order to propel the plot and fulfill his destiny. Only once he accepts her death and moves on can he can truly become a hero. Thus, within the parameters of the dead mother plot, the hero can only fulfill his role once his mother exits his life and the narrative stage.

Ancient Rome oppressed its women in similar ways to ancient Greece. Even the arrangement of their spaces and architecture reinforced the superiority of the male gender:

…the Roman forum was a major site for the establishment of the cultural meaning of gender. The forum was ringed by buildings in which the (male) business of running the Roman state was carried on; voting, political speeches, the censors’ assessment of senators and knights, and jury trials were held in the middle. Women’s important business was carried on elsewhere…14

Women were barred from the forum and the education that preceded entry, thus stripping them of any political or public agency.

Roman women were unwelcome in the law courts as well, significantly curtailing their rights as citizens: “with a few exceptions, all Roman women were for their entire lives subject to some degree of limitation for independent legal action. Authority to act must be obtained from, or was vested in, a man – father, husband or guardian (*tutor*).”15

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13 Elise P. Garrison, “Suicide in Classical Mythology: An Essay” (essay, College Station, TX, 2000), 5; Hom. Od. II.211-II.212

This arrangement of the legal system and rhetorical stage emphasized Roman women’s exclusion from the public sphere in favor of the domestic one.

Thus, the ideal of the domestic woman was codified in Roman law, as well as being ensconced in the literary tradition as seen in this excerpt from Tacitus’s *Dialogues*:

“For the son of each citizen, child of a virtuous female parent as well, was from the start brought up not in the cubicle of a hired nurse, but in the lap and bosom of his mother, whose special praise it was to look after her home and devote herself to her children.”

This tribute begins a litany of memorable Roman women, each a devoted mother and wife. Every aspect of Roman life shuttled women into the home.

These societal norms explain the use of the dead mother plot in Romulus and Remus’s origin myth. According to Plutarch, Tarchetius, king of the Albans, was visited by an oracle who foretold the coming of a son with surpassing courage, strength, and good fortune.

When one of Tarchetius’s handmaids bore twin sons, he bade a servant to steal them away from their mother and kill them. However, the servant left them on a riverbank where they were found and raised by a she-wolf. They grew up as powerful and heroic as prophesied and the brothers, Romulus and Remus, overthrew Tarchetius and founded the Eternal City of Rome.

In this myth, the handmaiden (her identity is disputed and varies with different

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17 Plutarch, translated by Bernadotte Perrin, *The Parallel Lives* (Loeb Classical Library: Cambridge, 1923), 96-97; Plu. Lives II.4-II.6

18 Ibid.
retellings) is largely written out of the story. Her contribution starts and ends with her reproductive accomplishment. After she births the boys, the king even strips her of the responsibility of raising them – their rough and wild upbringing primes them to grow into the ruthless and powerful leaders they needed to be, a fate they could not have fulfilled while being coddled by their biological mother. And Romans had no problem with their esteemed founders’ rearing by an animal; it reinforced the masculine brutality and martial prowess on which they prided themselves.

Medieval Europe proves no exception to the dead mother plot’s tyranny. In this time, women wore the hats of both damsels in distress and conniving temptresses. They were “objects to be worshipped, and yet at the same time, the downfall of men.”¹⁹ Medieval women satisfied the Classical roles of domesticity, with an additional sinful and lustful bent. Similar to the gender roles of antiquity, the medieval woman was expected to be a:

...perfect lady, whose deportment and manners do credit to her breeding; the perfect wife, whose submission to her husband is only equaled by her skill in ministering to his ease; the perfect mistress whose servants love her and run her house like clockwork.²⁰

The contradiction of these opposing inherent female virtues – chaste and lustful, pure and tempting, protective and endangering – created a tenuous ambiguity in the portrayals of older women in literature.

In St. Augustine’s Confessions of the 5th century, his mother Monica meets the same fate as Anticleia and the handmaiden and before her. Augustine writes of a close,


²⁰ Eileen Power, Medieval People (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2000), 81.
but fraught relationship with his mother. Mary Beth Rose characterizes it:

Augustine implies – though he does not state – that his mother’s intentions are good but oblique, not sufficiently solid; that somehow, despite her passionate intensity about her son’s spiritual welfare, she is prevented by obstacles (inner, outer?) from effectively pursuing his deepest interests. She proves in the end unable to realize her spiritual intentions for her son in the social/institutional world: that is, she falls short of connecting him to her beloved church.21

Monica serves the same purpose that the other mothers did. They are safety nets, warm and loving inhibitors of their sons’ greatness, the training wheels with whom the heroes can never hope to win the race. They coddle and restrict and protect and limit. Unsurprisingly, though Monica did put Augustine on the path to Christianity, he only reaches his spiritual potential and begins his churchly journey once his mother dies:

In terms of the structure of the *Confessions*, it is at the moment of his mother’s death that Augustine escapes the transitory conditions of history and time that generate his autobiographical narration, passing into the non-narratable permanence of timelessness and eternity. At each critical point in his journey, Augustine’s urgent, passionate relations with his mother – his descriptions of her behavior and his reactions to it – crucially inflect the narrative, both pushing forward and retarding its course, until at last his baptism coincides with her death.22

Augustine’s journey, though much less physical than his comparative protagonists’, still hinges on the elimination of his mother.

Later in the medieval era, the unknown author of *Beowulf* again uses the dead mother plot, but this time, it in its classic, most undiluted form. *Beowulf* as the standout work of the period, like *The Odyssey* and the *Confessions* before it, using the dead mother plot is rife with significance – these tales became foundations and models for other tales, legitimizing and expediting the spread of the motif.

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22 Ibid., 6.
In Anglo-Saxon England, women enjoyed a few distinctly-defined roles. Robert Harris writes: “The most common of female Anglo-Saxon duties is the role of peacemaker; indeed, women are most often found in Old English and Icelandic lore as peacemakers.” They achieved this end by wielding their most powerful weapons: their sexuality and reproductive ability:

To participate in a political marriage to settle disputes and put a stop to feuds was perhaps the most important role a woman could play in Old English poetry. Many of the women mentioned in Beowulf, from Hildibradh and Wealthow to Freawaru, are from foreign tribes, married to their husbands in an attempt to broker peace.

Anglo-Saxon women operated within this environment, directly shaping the portrayals of most of the minor women in the epic. Besides passing around a cup and serving as accouterments to the men, most of the female characters, with the notable exception of Wealthow, are relegated to the sidelines. Robert Morey writes: “Beowulf is a tale of violence and vengeance, feats of strength and acts of mercy, and perhaps accordingly, few women.”

The author does not even mention Beowulf’s mother in the epic. His father, Ecgetheow, though dead by the time the action starts in earnest, is at least considered worthy of a backstory that contributes heavily to the progression of the plot. Due to his murder of a man named Heathloaf, Ecgtheow started a feud with a tribe called the Wulfings. He fled to safety under the auspices of King Hrothgar of the Danes who paid to

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25 Ibid.
settle the battling. Ecgtheow’s resulting pledge of allegiance to Hrothgar compels Beowulf to volunteer his services to protect Hrothgar’s kingdom from the monster that ravages it come nightfall, beginning the story and Beowulf’s heroic victories.

Since Beowulf arrives primed and ready to fight, his mother’s absence makes sense. Unlike Odysseus who wandered and took time to understand his past and destiny, Beowulf has fully matured into a battle-ready hero by the time he makes his debut. For Odysseus, there was room in his story for interaction with his mother – he had not yet completely shed his childish need for protection and guidance. As soon as he comes to terms with his duty, her ghost dissipates back into a quiet, shadowy Underworld existence.

However, Beowulf features another mother so prominent and memorable that it would be remiss to omit her. Grendel’s mother, a wrathful, avenging, merciless monster, shatters Anglo-Saxon norms into sharp and deadly pieces. Harris comments: “This sense of wrongness may be what makes Grendel’s mother so terrifying; in an age where women were empowered primarily through their sons, a situation where the son is slain and seeks revenge must have seemed horrifyingly alien.”26 Mothers who lose sons ought to fall apart– weeping, fainting, and wasting away all fulfill a good mother’s duties - seeking to slaughter all those who had a hand in her son’s death do not.

Grendel’s mother sheds all vestiges of femininity by crusading as an avenging kinswoman, a role very much reserved for male family members. The author makes this shift very overt:

The link between Grendel’s mother and masculinity was no mistake or subtle reference. The poem twice labels Grendel’s mother’s vengeance as masculine;

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first, the narrative refers to her as a *wrecend*, which is a masculine form of ‘avenger’; second, Beowulf refers to her as Grendel’s ‘kinsman,’ and uses masculine pronouns to refer to her in that passage (Hennequin 512). 27

In addition, Grendel’s mother operates as the “ruler of her realm,” further asserting her status as nobleman pillaging on behalf of her wronged kinsman. 28

Grendel’s mother serves as a foil for Beowulf’s. While Beowulf’s mother is absent, separate, and silent, Grendel’s is violently active, deeply enmeshed in the story, and incredibly vocal, especially in comparison with every other woman in the story. The substitution of the quiet, benevolent, passive dead mother with an actively malicious stepmother (or other female/maternal figure) becomes an integral part of the dead mother plot. This “evil stepmother” facet of the plot crops up in many later fairytales and myths, prompting investigation into the link between female activity and evilness, passivity and goodness.

The dead mother plot rears its head again, in yet another tale of an iconic Western hero: the origin story of King Arthur. The tale starts with Uther Pendragon, the great king of England calling for a celebration in his court. Gorlois, the lord of Cornwall, attends with his beautiful wife, Igraine. Uther feels an immediate and burning passion for Igraine, and tries to woo her at the party. The couple leaves, stung by the public insult. Driven by his wounded ego and fiery temper, Uther declares war against Gorlois. Unsuccessful in his martial attempts, Uther resorts to supernatural means. He goes to Merlin for council, and the wizard transforms Uther into Gorlois’s doppelganger, allowing Uther to sneak into Tintagel castle and rape and unknowing Igraine. She is


impregnated with Arthur, and when Gorlois perishes that same night on the battlefield, Uther marries Igraine and establishes Arthur’s royal legitimacy.\textsuperscript{29}

Soon after, Merlin advised the King to put Arthur in a faithful lord, Sir Ector’s, safekeeping until it came time for him to ascend to the throne.\textsuperscript{30} As depicted in N.C. Wyeth’s famous 1917 painting, \textit{Merlin taking away the infant Arthur}, Igraine is left bereft as a steely-faced Merlin takes the infant away.\textsuperscript{31}

Arthur reenters the story upon the death of his father. By that point, he has reached the age of fifteen and possesses boundless regal qualities and competence. His poor mother, falsely impregnated and forced into marriage, is unapologetically cut out of his life immediately after she gives birth.

Igraine fails to fulfill her duty in that she cannot afford Arthur a mother’s protection. In advising the King, Merlin implies that Arthur’s upbringing at home would be fraught with dangers from competitors for the throne, and that the lineage can only safely be preserved if he grows up under the tutelage of a stand-in father in a far-off land. As soon as Igraine fails in this most basic maternal way, she becomes useless to Arthur, and thus to the main thrust of the story. Much like Romulus and Remus’s mother, Igraine exists to conceive and give birth – her guidance, protection, and love are moot after that point.

When the protagonist’s mother dies or is otherwise removed from the story, the plot begins in earnest. The theme continues into the Renaissance with the most masterful


\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
author of all time: William Shakespeare. This time, we see the more familiar iteration of the dead mother plot. In the acclaimed tragedy *King Lear*, the queen is quietly dead from the start. The king only references her once: Thus to our grief the obsequies perform’d / of our too late deceas’d and dearest / queen, / Whose soul I hope, possess’d of / heavenly joys, / Doth ride in triumph ‘mongst the / cherubins.³²

In this brief homage, Shakespeare gives the queen just enough maternal characteristics to set the reader at ease. The King loved her, thinks highly of her, and considers her deserving of eternal happiness. In a quick shot, the mother quota is filled and the plot, unhindered, can proceed. The king launches immediately into the dispersal of his land, wasting no time in stirring up conflict and starting the action.

However, Shakespeare does not limit his use of the dead mother plot to tragedies. Rose writes:

One striking example that can be culled from among the many I explore is the fact that in Shakespearean romantic comedy, the form that represents the wished-for society, there is not a single mother. The fact that Shakespeare represents and celebrates alternative sexualities in his comedies makes his avoidance of representing motherhood all the more interesting.³³

She goes on to postulate that, rather than grapple with the ambiguities and contradictions of motherhood, Shakespeare disposes with the mothers altogether to deal with simpler and more clearly defined social roles.³⁴ This correlates with the literary precedent. Even in the stories that do feature a living mother at the beginning, she is a point of contradiction and difficulty. Her maternal love and plot hindrance go hand in hand, making her an impossible feature of the story if the quest is to proceed. The

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³⁴Ibid., 10.
solution? Murder. Shakespeare does it earlier and quieter than do Homer or Augustus, but he commits the act all the same. Matricide precedes action.

From ancient Greece to the Renaissance, the dead mother plot and its hallmark characteristics held true: the mother must die, sooner or later, for the story to start and the hero to fulfill his destiny. These disparate cultures and far-flung tales all used the same device, finding mothers too complicated or ambiguous to decode satisfactorily. As years passed, authors increasingly wrote mothers out of the plot entirely, avoiding the loaded question of how to navigate the story around an active and multidimensional maternal presence. And, simultaneously, these authors filled the negative space left by the good mother with the raven-haired, cackling, crony-flanked malevolence of the evil stepmother.

Fairytale mothers especially are traditionally locked into this very strict dichotomy—they are either benevolent, pure, unsullied forces always disposed of before the story starts to preserve this perfection; or, they are malevolent and antagonistic figures, à la the evil stepmother archetype.

Many scholars have identified these opposing maternal models:

One element that has survived in ‘Cinderella’ as well as many other tales is without question the lack of nurturing parental figures. Dead or absent mothers, in particular, have stood the test of time, systematically supplanted by such literary icons as the evil stepmother or the stern governess.35

And again:

The good mother often dies at the beginning of the story. Tales telling of her miraculous return to life, like Shakespeare’s romances ‘Pericles’ and ‘The Winter’s Tale,’ have not gained the currency or popularity of ‘Cinderella’ or

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‘Snow White’ in which she is supposed to be supplanted with a monster.\textsuperscript{36}

Frequently accompanying the paucity of good mothers is an abundance of antagonistic female figures. Warner writes: “Fairytales told by women contain vivid examples of female evil: wicked stepmothers, ogresses, bad fairies abound, while virtuous figures like Cinderella’s mother, are dead from the start.”\textsuperscript{37} She adds: “Figures of female evil stride through the best-loved, classic fairytales: on this earth, wicked stepmothers, ugly sisters; from fairyland, bad fairies, witches, ogresses.”\textsuperscript{38}

This reveals much about vast swaths of societal views of women. There was clearly something difficult or dangerous or unappealing about retaining an active, benevolent mother in these stories. Warner writes: “…In their romantic idealism, the Grimms literally could not bear a maternal presence to be equivocal, or dangerous, and preferred to banish her altogether.”\textsuperscript{39} Much like in \textit{The Odyssey} and \textit{Beowulf} and \textit{King Lear}, the Grimms simplify the societally fraught archetype by deleting it all together. By erasing the good mothers, they disposed of the need to reconcile character complexities, gender assumptions, and most familial relations.

As predictably as good mothers are erased, stepmothers are unambiguously vilified. They are never just flawed or complicated or weak – they are devils incarnate. These active women with goals, independence, competence, and motivation can only ever be working to evil ends. A powerful woman is a malevolent one. The passivity of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Marina Warner, \textit{From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairytales and Their Tellers}, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), 201.
  \item \textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 201.
  \item \textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 212.
\end{itemize}
the silently dead mother affords her a one-dimensional grace and wholesomeness that her active, dynamic, plot-moving woman/maternal surrogate is always denied.

The preponderance of this theme is striking and strange. That so many disparate peoples could unwittingly collude on the indispensible need to annihilate the good mothers indicates a significant and widely felt instinct. Scholars have floated ideas from the historical to the literary to the misogynistic to explain this pattern.

The maternal erasure in earlier tales may have had its roots in reality. During the creation and recitations of these original tales in the middle ages and before, many real life mothers were prematurely deceased due to the high mortality rates associated with childbirth. If households of the time often were motherless, perhaps the stories were just an extension of a reality that would be relatable and familiar to the children who heard them.

Rose also takes a biological tact, highlighting the disparity between women’s biological importance and their societal oppression:

Despite the wide and deep recognition of maternal authority and the west and despite its grounding in biology, this authority and its impact do not find their corollary in most significant cultural formations of adult social and political life. The workplace and professions are impervious in their organization to the huge and omnipresent fact of maternal authority. Political structures do not embody it.

Thus, the mother figure lacks the cultural importance and authority to provide crucial action to the plot. In addition, if all of her worth emanates from her role as birth-giver, she has already fulfilled her destiny by the time the story starts. By birthing the hero, the mother has contributed all she can to the story. Her presence becomes

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superfluous when that job is done.

Another theory contends that the eradication of the mother is necessary to give the youthful protagonist the independence and freedom s/he needs to set out on her/his own. Heroes can’t quest while mother tags along behind them. Dever theorizes: “In the absence of the mother, the child is left with a personal mystery, too, that motivates a formal search for ‘origins’ in narratives ranging from the orphan discovering the truth of family history to the natural philosopher explicating, in somewhat larger terms, the origin of species.”42 Initial suffering gives the protagonist the mettle s/he needs to set out on their own into a world of obstacles and villains.

Another possibility suggests that the mother cannot possibly achieve Marian status while still alive. A dead mother can be perfect while suspended in the blurry realm of memory, shimmering with beauty that never fades, kindness that never wavers, and gentleness that never sharpens. Dever writes: “The representation of maternal loss is necessary to the reciprocal emergence of the maternal ideal, cause not effect of a codifying system; indeed, the nostalgia created in the wake of the mother’s death simply increases the urgency with which the text seeks to idealize that lost object.”43 Death shrouds the mother in incorruptible perfection she could never attain in life.

In an extension of this idea, perhaps the mother must be removed to preserve the sanctity of the home. If the mother is the heart of the family, the knowledge that she was unflawed means that the family is permeated with her untainted goodness. Cutting out a real, imperfect mother precludes possible familial problems and friction. Denver writes:

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42 Dever, Death and the Mother, xi.

43 Dever, Death and the Mother, 6.
“Ironically, therefore, representations of maternal loss – through abandonment, accident, or death – become a culture’s way of negotiating these paradoxes, and the narrative invention of a domestic ideal is almost invariably predicated on the prior condition of maternal abandonment.”  

44 Weir adds: “No child wants to lose their parents, yet the idea of being removed from the expectations of parents is alluring. The orphan in literature is freed from the obligation to satisfy his/her parents, and from the inevitable realization that his/her parents are flawed human beings.”  

45 A perfect mother is a perfect family.

Or, finally, the most sinister explanation may be the correct one. Maybe the only active females in these stories are purely evil because we as an audience are so uncomfortable with nuanced women. It is possible that we are so conditioned to want our women angelic or demonic that any figure hovering in maternal purgatory is too threatening to our delicate sensibilities. And a realistic mother would, most likely, fall in that gap. It is much easier to do away with her completely than have to wrangle with deeply entrenched expectations and the insidious psychoses behind them. Sarah Boxer quips exasperatedly: “And yet, in this medium where the creators have total control, we keep getting the same damned world – a world without mothers. Is this really the dearest wish of animation? Can mothers really be so threatening?”

46 She could. A mother with ambition or competence or neuroses or stubbornness or unconditional love is too important to be shrugged off by an adventure-seeking youngster. Dads are easier – they are most often either blocked off by masculine

44 Ibid., 34.


aloofness (see: King Triton from *The Little Mermaid*) or doddering incompetence (see: Maurice from *Beauty and the Beast*). By virtue of the deep and unique bond we have tied between the mother and child, she would never be left at home, waving wistfully from the kitchen window as her purpose for existence totters down the road, bindle in hand, blazing forth into the great unknown.

There’s something going on here. A multi-societal tradition that wants its mothers perfect or nonexistent is one that has a deep problem with women. Maria Warner sums it all up: “Bettelheim’s theory has contributed to the continuing absence of good mothers from fairytales in all kinds of media, and to a dangerous degree which itself mirrors current prejudices and reinforces them.”47

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Chapter II: Tale as Old as Time

Stretching back clear to ancient Greek times, the dead mother plot is alive and well in 1980s America with the premiere of Disney’s smash hit, *The Little Mermaid*. The *Little Mermaid* kicked off a period known as “the Disney Renaissance”:


He adds:

Thomas L. Harris notes how the ‘great Disney animation renaissance that began with *The Little Mermaid* was followed by an amazing string of films that were both artistically and commercially successful and became instant classics’ (1998, 167). Similarly, Doug Pratt sees *The Little Mermaid* as establishing ‘a pattern for a Disney cartoon renaissance that…lasted for more than a decade’ (2004, 721).49

Thus, *The Little Mermaid* was hugely successful to both the studio and the general public. For Disney, it sparked a powerhouse revival after a string of devastating flops. Audiences loved the film – it garnered extremely positive critical reviews and, when adjusted for inflation, $223,726,012.50 It was stunningly lucrative, well received, and immensely popular. So, its use of the dead mother plot is as significant as Homer’s use thousands of years before – it set the tone of a generation and mirrored its social tensions.

The movie opens with sailors bantering about legends of the sea, specifically

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48 Pallant, *Demystifying Disney*, 89.

49 Ibid.

50 The Numbers, Nash Information Services, LLC
King Triton. One snaggletoothed sailor jabs, “King Triton? Why, the King of the Sea, I thought every good sailor knew of him!” Ariel’s father’s reputation precedes him. Evidently, the sailors find her mother’s identity much less salient.

The scene plunges beneath the waves, opening up into a grand undersea concert hall. A seahorse introduces Triton’s daughter’s performance, and six beautiful (and only very slightly differentiated) mermaids spill out onto the stage. They sing: “for we are the daughters of Triton! Great father who loves us and named us well.” Again, the characters pay homage to the king without any mention of his queen. In this case, even their offspring acknowledge only their male parent.

The only other time the film even inches close to recognizing the one-parent households occurs when Ariel has just glimpsed Prince Eric and fallen deeply in instantaneous love. As she floats around the palace, humming and glowing with her newfound romance, her father feels utterly befuddled at her sudden change in behavior. He turns to the females of the household for an explanation. Ariel’s sister explains: “isn’t it obvious, Daddy? Ariel’s in love.” Here, Triton displays the requisite masculine obliviousness to matters of the heart, an arena that Ariel’s mother presumably would dominate if present.

Besides these passing tributes to King Triton and glimpses of his paternal incompetence, the film wholly erases Ariel’s mother from the story. She is neither mentioned nor missed. As history shows, her non-presence indicates Ariel’s readiness to embark on her journey from the very beginning of the film. Sure enough, adventurous

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51 *The Little Mermaid*, directed by John Musker and Ron Clements (1989; California: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 1999), DVD.

52 Ibid.
and headstrong Ariel conveys her desperation to break the surface and join humankind in her first scene on camera. With the maternal shackles gone, Ariel can pursue her destiny from the outset.

In keeping with dead mother plot patterns, Ariel’s mother’s absence is filled by a malevolent, active female counterpart: Ursula. Sebastian correlates her dominance with her nefariousness early on in the film in an exchange with Ariel: “Ursula has great powers.” “The sea witch?!” The audience knows that Ursula’s powers are evil and her magic, black.

Later, Sebastian characterizes her further: “Ariel, no! She’s a demon, she’s a monster!” Unsurprisingly, Sebastian paints Ursula with the same brush that nearly all other stepmother/maternal stand-ins are painted with – a complete, uncomplicated, non-gradated evil. She has no redeeming qualities, shows no remorse, and has no relations other than her similarly abjectly evil eel cronies. All of her goals aim to arbitrarily ruin Ariel’s and Triton’s happiness.

In addition, the film depicts Ursula in a way that visually distances her from the slim, voluminously-haired, golden-hearted protagonist. Where Ariel is slender, Ursula is rotund (and the filmmakers want to make sure you catch this specifically– Ursula says pityingly, “Now look at me, wasted away to practically nothing” as she swings her girth around dramatically). Her dialogue places Ariel’s looks in stark juxtaposition: “Keep a close watch on this pretty little daughter of his. She may be the key to Triton’s

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53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
undoing.”\textsuperscript{56} This theme runs throughout all of their interactions: Ariel is beautiful and good; Ursula is ugly and bad.

The film affords Ursula a further level of evil by pitting her against another woman. She literally steals Ariel’s voice, a heavy-handed metaphor for robbing her of her agency, power, and authority. Further, she challenges Ariel to win the prince of her dreams in three days in order to maintain her human status. When Ariel expresses her concern about how she could possibly achieve this mute, Ursula reminds her of her looks and the importance of “body language.”\textsuperscript{57} Ursula uses all of her power to undermine Ariel’s agency, making her own personal wielding of magic doubly reprehensible.

Ursula further upsets the gender dynamic by attempting to overthrow King Triton. She cackles: “I’ll see him writhe. I’ll see him wiggle like a worm on a hook.”\textsuperscript{58} Going after the King of the sea finally proves her undoing. After she magically emasculates him, another man (Eric) enters as a surrogate, and stabs her with a jagged, extremely phallic shaft protruding from the ship, righting the gender perversion and drowning the malicious female presence. In the end, Triton passes Ariel off to Eric with a wistful sigh and nautical blessing, and she enters into another man’s tutelage.

\textit{The Little Mermaid} operates well within the tried and true parameters of the dead mother plot. The filmmakers kill off Ariel’s mom without any explanation or backstory. No characters mention her, and her absence lets the father-daughter tensions between Triton and Ariel simmer until they boil into Ariel’s grand rebellion and adventure. Without a mother’s love and understanding to tether her home, her father’s dictatorial

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
edscts driver her away. Ursula steps into the maternal void, filling the space with her
tentacled evil. But, as with Grendel’s mother, the story concludes with a male-driven
murder of the perverse woman and a sigh of relief from the norm-accustomed audience.
Dead mothers they can stand – it’s the live ones that prove tricky.

Around this same time, Disney again showed its propensity to use the dead
mother plot in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), another landmark of the Disney Renaissance
and instant classic. The movie was met with widespread acclaim, netting lofty
compliments from movie reviewers:

> Two years ago Walt Disney Pictures reinvented the animate feature, not only with
an eye toward pleasing children but also with an older, savvier audience in mind.
Disney truly bridged a generation gap with ‘The Little Mermaid,’ bringing the
genre new sophistication without sacrificing any of the delight…Lightning has
definitely struck twice.”

It also became the first animated film to reach $100 million North America, Disney’s
most successful hit at the time.⁶⁰

*Beauty and the Beast* made much the same-sized splash as *The Little Mermaid.*
Audiences immediately loved the films, and they earned themselves an esteemed place in
the Disney canon. And just like history foretold – another massive hit, another
inexplicably dead mother.

In the opening musical number, Gaston refers to Belle as “the inventor’s
daughter.”⁶¹ Just like in *The Little Mermaid*, the other characters know the heroine solely
by her male parentage. No mention is made of her missing mother. However, differently

⁵⁹ Janet Maslin, “Review/Film; Disney’s ‘Beauty and the Beast’ Updated in Form and Content,”


⁶¹ *Beauty and the Beast*, directed by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise (1991; California: Walt
Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2002), DVD.
than in *The Little Mermaid*, Belle enjoys a very loving relationship with Maurice, her father. She cares for him and defends her valiantly in the face of Gaston’s mockery: “My father is not crazy, he’s a genius!”

Belle feels a fierce devotion for her father. In the absence of her mother’s love, perhaps her father’s affection would tether her home. However, Maurice pushes her into her adventure similarly to Triton, though in diametrically opposing ways. When Maurice leaves town for an inventor’s fair, his doddering nature befuddles him into getting lost in the woods. He ends up in the Beast’s castle, where the Beast holds him hostage. Belle’s rescue mission is the start of her adventure. Maurice’s incompetence operates in the same way as Triton’s severity – without mothers to balance out the fathers and make the heroines’ home lives livable, they must embark on their journeys to fulfill their destinies.

Traditionally, another female fills the void left by Belle’s mother. Though the Beast operates as the antagonist for the majority of the film, the film introduces another powerful opposing force at the very beginning of the tale. The story opens with the narrator expounding upon the Beast’s backstory. He enters the scene as a selfish and proud human prince who refuses to admit a cold and suffering beggar woman on a frigid winter night. He disregards the woman’s dire warning not to take appearances at face value. She then transforms into a beautiful enchantress and casts a curse on the prince and his castle. He mutates into a hideous beast and the rest of his castle changes into sentient objects.

The enchantress does not fit the traditional stepmother plot perfectly. She is less

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62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
evil than impersonal, a divine force that punishes those who deserve to be punished. In addition, she exits the story before the thrust of the main action. Nevertheless, she falls to the same destiny as nearly every powerful woman in these stories. The audience gets a passing glimpse of her, a momentary appreciation of her magic before she is wiped away. Her power and the ambiguity of her character make her too much of a risk to keep in the story. If she stayed in the story longer, the audience could reasonably expect her to become evil. After all, every other similar story features powerful women only when they operate in malicious, antagonistic ways.

*The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* prove that storytellers still used the dead mother plot constantly in tales that garnered widespread popularity and adoration, as significant and foundational to their time as *The Odyssey* and *Beowulf* were to theirs. The motif survived years, oceans, and cultural barriers, putting in a strong appearance in the reemergence of Disney, an era that captured the hearts of millions of Americans, defining a generation’s childhood.
Chapter III: “Strange and Mysterious Things”

Fast-forward about ten years: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* had exploded onto the scene. The book premiered in 1998 and the movie a couple of years later. Though the book originally gained success and acclaim, its popularity did not take long to spread across the ocean: “When *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, retitled *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, was published in the US it became an immediate sensation.” Its British success boosted expectation – Scholastic Inc. bought the rights to the book for $105,000, an extremely high price for a children’s book.

By and large, reviewers recognized the magic within the pages. As a small sampling of early reviews:

*Newsweek’s* Carla Power and *The Christian Science Monitor*’s Yvonne Zipp went further still, the former rehearsing ‘Rowling’s Cinderella-like story’ before ranking the book alongside classic fantasies by C.S. Lewis and Roald Dahl and the latter comparing it to Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and L. Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz*.

It also netted numerous high-profile awards almost immediately:

In 1998, within months of its publication in the US, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* won the School Library Journal Best Book for Young Adults, *Publishers Weekly*’s Best Book of the Year, and *Parenting Magazine*’s Book of the Year Award, and also hit the bestseller list in *The New York Times*, the first children’s book to do so since E.B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web* in the 1950s.

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65 "When Mr. and Mrs. Dursley woke up on the dull, gray Tuesday our story starts, there was nothing about the cloudy sky outside to suggest that strange and mysterious things would soon be happening all over the country" – *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*


67 Ibid.


The sales figures were astronomical, especially for a children’s book. The books set up camp atop the *New York Times* Bestseller List, prompting speculation that the newspaper split off a separate Children’s Bestseller List to give other books a chance. In the US, adult devotion significantly boosted these sales. Though categorized as a children’s book, a 2001 survey found that over 50% of respondents, both children and adult, had read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. A more formal “*New York Times* survey in April 2001 estimated that almost 60% of US children ages 6-17 had read at least one Harry Potter book.”

From its very introduction to the United States, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* became a cultural phenomenon. The book surpassed nearly every children’s literature landmine and still maintained explosive and widespread popularity – it appealed to both girls and boys; readers were undeterred by the length of the book; and it was ready-made to produce movies and spin-off franchises, leading to the development of an entire fantastical world rooted in the novels.

It spawned massive audience devotion, manifested J.K. Rowling’s stardom, highly-anticipated and hugely successful movies, and hoards of children shedding their Muggle clothes in exchange for wizard robes piling into their local *Borders* or *Barnes and Nobles* the night before the next book’s release date.

The *Harry Potter* empire is sprawling and vast. Though the films made enormous

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71 Ibid., 79.

amounts of money and garnered significant audience participation, the story’s popularity originated with the books, the foundational text. Within these pages lies a subversion of the dead mother plot, a twist on the classic motif that has sprung up in nearly every notable Western culture since Ancient Greece. For the first time, readers of stories of huge resonance and popularity found a treatment of the protagonist’s mother starkly different than any that came before.

From a cursory glance, *Harry Potter* seems to adhere to the dead mother plot parameters. Lily Potter was murdered by Lord Voldemort in Harry’s infancy, leaving her long dead by the time the story starts with 11-year-old Harry’s escape from the Muggle world and introduction to the wizarding one.

However, unlike all the other mothers we’ve seen, Lily speaks. From beyond the grave, she speaks to Harry multiple times throughout the series, whether that be in the form of a ghost, a memory, a mirror, or a disembodied voice. She actively gives him advice and guidance throughout the books, despite her bodily end. In addition, as Harry grows up and learns about himself, he also uncovers and develops his mother’s personality and backstory. Lily is not brushed aside like the other mothers – Harry’s discovery of her character is integral to his discovery of his own. Finally, *Harry Potter* subverts the evil stepmother trend. Molly Weasley, Harry’s surrogate mother, loves him completely and accepts him as one of her own.

First, Lily is a constant presence throughout Harry’s journey, despite her premature death. Harry glimpses her for the first time in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* when he stumbles upon the Mirror of Erised:

> She was a very pretty woman. She had dark red hair and her eyes – *her eyes are just like mine*, Harry thought, edging a little closer to the glass. Bright green –
exactly the same shape, but then he noticed that she was crying; smiling, but crying at the same time.\textsuperscript{73}

This marks the first time Harry sees his extended family. Despite the presence of his father and complete kin, he is most drawn towards his mother. Importantly, she is crying in the mirror – whatever theological factors are at play, Lily is conscious of the present, conscious of Harry’s presence, and conscious of the events that transpired after her death. She weeps and feels in the current moment. Her consciousness lives on. As Harry leaves the room, his gaze lingers on his mother, and hers is the visage hardest for him to leave: “He tore his eyes away from his mother’s face, whispered “I’ll come back,” and hurried from the room.”\textsuperscript{74}

Harry encounters his mother again in a visceral way at the end of \textit{Sorcerer’s Stone}. As he lies recovering in the Hospital Wing after his nearly fatal battle with Voldemort and Quirrell, Dumbledore comes in to explain things to him. Harry asks why Quirrell was unable to touch him without turning to crumbling stone:

Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn’t realize that love as powerful as your mother’s for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign…to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It is in your very skin. Quirrell, full of hatred, greed, and ambition, sharing his soul with Voldemort, could not touch you for this reason. It was agony to touch a person marked by something so good.\textsuperscript{75}

Lily’s sacrifice and presence in Harry’s very veins is the only thing that saves him in his first confrontation with evil. Lily’s sacrifice forces her continued participation in

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 208.


\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 299.
the story. Her protection courses through Harry’s body in real time. Her heroism cannot fade into the background, because it is too integral to Harry’s success and survival in the present.

Lily remains just as relevant in the next chapter of Harry’s adventure, _Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets_. In his second year at Hogwarts, Harry encounters Dementors for the first time, malicious beings that cling to their victims’ darkest memories and leech the happiness from their souls. Dementors cause all of Harry’s peers considerable anguish – they shake and cry and feel the joy sucked out of them. But they affect Harry differently. He faints, consumed with white fog and terrible shrieking: “And then, from far away, he heard screaming, terrible, terrified, pleading screams. He wanted to help whoever it was, he tried to move his arms, but couldn’t… a thick white fog was swirling around him, inside him.”76

In his next encounter, the screams came into sharper focus:

“*Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!*”
“*Stand aside, you silly girl… stand aside now…*”
“*Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead ---*”
Numbing, swirling white mist was filling Harry’s brain … What was he doing? Why was he flying? He needed to help her … She was going to die … She was going to be murdered …
He was falling, falling through the icy mist.
“*Not Harry! Please... have mercy... have mercy...*”
A shrill voice was laughing, the woman was screaming, and Harry knew no more.77

In Harry’s darkest moment, in the moment that causes him more pain than any other, the Dementors harvested the instant that Harry lost his mother. Though only an infant, this moment was the blackest, most heartbreaking one of his life. Harry’s father

77 Ibid., 178.
also died that night, sacrificing himself to save Harry. But the scene that stays with Harry, the epicenter of his most exquisite pain, is Lily’s death.

Lily physically comes to Harry’s aid at the end of Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire. Locked in fierce combat with Voldemort, an ancient magic is invoked and Voldemort’s wand starts regurgitating the ghosts of people he has killed in reverse order. His father appears first, but quickly gives Harry the most important information: “Your mother’s coming…” he said quietly. “She wants to see you… it will be alright… hold on…”78 James’ most effective method of solace is to assure Harry that Lily is on her way.

When she arrives, she enjoys a more intimate conversation with Harry than anyone else who has emerged so far: “She walked close to Harry, looking down at him, and she spoke in the same distant, echoing voice as the others, but quietly, so that Voldemort, his face now livid with fear as his victims prowled around him, could not hear…”79 She offers a comfort to Harry that no one else can give him.

In addition to the maternal warmth, Lily conveys to Harry the most crucial information he needs to survive the encounter: “When the connection is broken, we will linger for only moments… but we will give you time… you must get to the Portkey, it will return you to Hogwarts… do you understand, Harry?”80 Without this insight, Harry would be stranded in the graveyard and reduced to dueling, as a thirteen year old wizard-in-training, the most powerful dark wizard of all time. Lily saves him again with current information, knowledge she could not possibly have had before her death. She is still cognizant and contributing up-to-date information to Harry’s journey.

79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
Lily reemerges at the most crucial part of Harry’s journey and the climax of the series. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Harry finally finds out that he must die at Voldemort’s hand to vanquish the last Horcrux (fragment of Voldemort’s soul) that resides within Harry himself – by this self-sacrificial act, Voldemort would be reduced to a mortal, making him much easier to kill. Before he walks into the clearing where Voldemort waits, Harry has a garden of agony scene where he uses the magical Resurrection Stone to momentarily bring back his deceased love ones to give him strength and courage for the unspeakable act he must commit. He flips the stone three times, and his family (blood and surrogate) surround him:

They were neither ghost nor truly flesh, he could see that. They resembled most closely the Riddle that had escaped from the diary so long ago, and he had been memory made nearly solid. Less substantial than living bodies, but much more than ghosts, they moved toward him, and on each face, there was the same loving smile.\(^{81}\)

Echoing Harry’s encounter with Voldemort in the graveyard, Lily’s ghost emerges last: “Lily’s smile was the widest of all. She pushed her long hair back as she drew close to him, and her green eyes, so like his, searched his face hungrily, as though she would never be able to look at him enough.”\(^{82}\) She adds, “You’ve been so brave.”\(^{83}\) As has been the case throughout the series, Harry’s conversation with Lily holds the most emotional power. At the most horrifying threshold of his life, the time when seventeen-year-old Harry is prepared to expose himself to torture and painful death to save humanity, it is Lily that he turns to, whose affirmation and support mean the most in his

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\(^{82}\) Ibid., 699.

\(^{83}\) Ibid.
(supposed) final hours. Harry is utterly overwrought: “He could not speak. His eyes feasted on her, and he thought that he would like to stand and look at her forever, and that would be enough.”

After brief interactions with the other “ghosts,” Harry (like Aslan to the table, Christ to Calvary) prepares to walk to his death. His last words: “Harry looked at his mother. ‘Stay close to me,’ he said quietly.” At the end of his life, Harry yearns for the loving and life-sustaining source who has been with him throughout all of his perils up to this point. Out of all of those gathered around him, Harry wants to end his life with the woman who began it – their bond is as strong now as it was then.

Lily is active, present, and integral to Harry’s triumph over evil. She speaks to him from beyond the grave, and her sacrifice shields him from danger. Already, she blows the dead mother plot to smithereens. J.K. Rowling never writes her out of the story despite her murder that occurred before the story started. She is consistently one of the most important characters.

In addition, Rowling even gives Lily an extensive backstory. At best, some mothers who fall to the plot are ascribed classic maternal characteristics in passing comments, like kindness or gentleness – most give birth and die without any mention of their character or personalities at all. They are all incredibly one-dimensional and undeveloped. Lily, however, is developed thoroughly, from her childhood, through memories in the Pensieve (a stone bowl that holds memories into which one can travel and experience) and reminiscences of those who miss her. In addition, some of the traits attributed to her are traditionally masculine, in stark opposition to the bland mothers who

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid., 700.
came before.

Harry glimpses his mother for the first time in her adolescence. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Harry sneaks into Professor Snape’s memory from when he attended Hogwarts with Harry’s parents. In this particular memory, James bullies Snape for his own entertainment until a furious Lily stands up for her maligned friend. “Leave him ALONE!”\(^86\) Lily shouts as she advances on James and his friends. Harry turns to the voice: “It was one of the girls from the lake edge. She had thick, dark red hair that fell to her shoulders and startlingly green almond-shaped eyes – Harry’s eyes.”\(^87\) Rowling emphasizes Lily’s similarity to Harry, hinting at their mirroring natures.

Lily continues: “You think you’re funny,” she said coldly. “But you’re just an arrogant, bullying toerag, Potter. Leave him alone.”\(^88\) In Harry’s first real life glimpse of his mother, he finds a brave, outspoken, confident fifteen-year-old girl. While Harry’s father spends his youth bullying those weaker than he, Lily has already developed compassionate, heroic qualities.

This portrayal of his father and his parents’ relationship bothers Harry so much that he goes to his parents’ old friends to confide his concerns:

“How come she married him?” Harry asked miserably. “She hated him!”
“Nah, she didn’t,” said Sirius.
“She started going out with him in seventh year,” said Lupin.
“Once James had deflated his head a bit,” said Sirius.\(^89\)

Harry gets the solace of knowing that his father grows out of his bullying ways, and the


\(^{87}\) Ibid.

\(^{88}\) Ibid.

\(^{89}\) Ibid., 671.
reader gets solid proof that James had to elevate himself to be worthy of Lily’s maturity and goodness. In addition, that his parents are the same age as Harry when he witnesses this memory is important. By fifteen, Harry has already battled Voldemort numerous times, displaying his bravery, innate goodness, and strength. Lily had proven her compassion, fearlessness, and courage on behalf of the marginalized. James had proven his entitlement and heartlessness. From this memory alone, it is clear with which of his parent’s characters Harry’s more closely aligns.

After this episode, Harry again encounters Lily through Snape’s memories in the Pensieve. This interaction comes at the end of the last book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. A dying Snape gave Harry these childhood memories so Harry would fully understand the depth of Snape’s love for Lily, and the sacrifices he made in her honor for the rest of his life. The scene opens with a very young Lily and her non-magical sister, Petunia, playing as Snape watches from the bushes:

But the girl [Lily] had let go of the swing at the very height of its arc and flown into the air, quite literally flown, launched herself skyward with a great should of laughter, and instead of crumpling on the playground asphalt, she soared like a trapeze artist through the air, staying up far too long, landing far too lightly.\(^{90}\)

After witnessing the magical act, Snape leaps out from the bushes in excitement:

“Petunia shrieked and ran backward toward the swings, but Lily, though clearly startled, remained where she was.”\(^{91}\) From these early memories, Harry sees indications of Lily’s adventurousness and bravery. While her sister fears magic, Lily embraces it, indicating the powerful witch she would become. In addition, Petunia shrinks back in fear at the first sign of threat – Lily holds her ground, displaying the impressive courage and self-

\(^{90}\) Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 663.

\(^{91}\) Ibid., 664.
sacrifice she would pass down to Harry years later.

After many more memories of Lily’s and Severus’s budding childhood friendship (for Lily, romance for Snape), the two enter Hogwarts together. Soon, however, the two take different paths as Lily chooses goodness and light, and Snape falls in with Voldemort’s future henchmen:

It’s too late. I’ve made excuses for you for years. None of my friends can understand why I even talk to you. You and your precious little Death Eater friends – you see, you don’t even deny it! You don’t even deny that’s what you’re all aiming to be! You can’t wait to join You-Know-Who, can you?\(^92\)

Despite their childhood friendship, Lily’s morality prohibits her from remaining friends with a boy who has such dark inclinations. Much like Harry, Lily is presented with a choice between good and evil. Her constant inclination towards good reveals the light of her inner essence, the crucial goodness that enables Harry to resist dark temptation and fight as a crusader for the forces of love, friendship, and compassion.

Lily’s goodness won Snape’s cold, damaged heart for the entirety of his adult life. When Snape catches wind of Voldemort’s plan to murder Lily and James, he flees from Voldemort’s side, shattered and overcome with despair, to Dumbledore in a desperate attempt to shield Lily at any cost:

“If she means so much to you,” said Dumbledore, “surely Lord Voldemort will spare her? Could you not ask for mercy for the mother, in exchange for the son?” “I have – I have asked him –” “And what will you give me in return, Severus?” “In – in return?” Snape gaped at Dumbledore, and Harry expected him to protest, but after a long moment he said, “anything.”\(^93\)

The memory reforms soon after this pledge of loyalty, a bereft Snape shattered in

\(^{92}\) Ibid., 674.

\(^{93}\) Ibid., 677-678.
Dumbledore’s office upon the news of Lily’s murder. Dumbledore, sickened by Snape’s selective remorse, shows him his next steps:

“Her son lives. He had her eyes, precisely her eyes. You remember the shape and color of Lily Evans’s eyes, I am sure?”
“DON’T!” bellowed Snape. “Gone…dead…”
“Is this remorse, Severus?”
“I wish…I wish I were dead”
“And what use would that be to anyone?” said Dumbledore coldly. “If you loved Lily Evans, if you truly loved her, then your way forward is clear”
“Snape seemed to peer through a haze of pain, and Dumbledore’s words seemed to take a long time to reach him”
“What – what do you mean?”
“You know how and why she died. Make sure it was not in vain. Help me protect Lily’s son”

…

“There was a long pause, and slowly Snape regained control of himself, mastered his own breathing. At last he said, “Very well. Very well. But never – never tell, Dumbledore! This must be between us! Swear it! I cannot bear…especially Potter’s son…I want your word!””

Years after this occurrence, another memory reveals Snape’s enduring devotion to Lily:

From the tip of his wand burst the silver doe: She landed on the office floor, bounded once across the office, and soared out the window. Dumbledore watched her fly away, and as her silvery glow faded, he turned back to Snape, and his eyes were full of tears.
“After all the time?”
“Always,” said Snape.95

Snape’s all-consuming love of Lily is crucial, because it is another (albeit indirect) way that she contributes to Harry’s protection and wellbeing. In order to protect the last surviving piece of her, Snape plays double-agent for Harry’s entire life in the wizarding world, spying on Voldemort for Dumbledore and playing the most important role in Dumbledore’s scheme to keep Harry alive. Without Snape’s interference, Harry

94Ibid., 678.

95Ibid., 687.
would have died long before he gained the knowledge or skills to vanquish Voldemort. 
Lily fostered a love so great that it extended to her kin. Only Snape’s love of Lily could convince him to act with bravery and goodness. Her light shone so strongly that it illuminated those around her.

Finally, Harry gets a personal testimony of the goodness of his mother. In trying to convince Horace Slughorn to come teach at Hogwarts (so that he can extract from him a vital memory), Dumbledore brings Harry along for some added celebrity heft. Slughorn sings Lily’s praises: “Lily Evans. One of the brightest I ever taught. Vivacious, you know. Charming girl.”

Slughorn’s affinity becomes much more important later in the book, when Harry leans on it to procure the memory:

“Liked her?” said Slughorn, his eyes brimming with tears once more. “I don’t imagine anyone who met her wouldn’t have liked her…Very brave…Very funny…It was the most horrible thing…”
“You don’t want to get rid of the wizard who killed Lily Evans?”
“Be brave like my mother, Professor…”
“You’re a good boy,” said Professor Slughorn, tears trickling down his fat cheeks into his walrus mustache. “And you’ve got her eyes…Just don’t think too badly of me once you’ve seen it…”

Only the strength of his feeling for Lily could prompt this selfish, lazy, ashamed man to share a memory in which he gave Voldemort the tools he needed to become, for all intents and purposes, immortal. Harry understands the power of the devotion people feel for his mother, and uses it to fortify his assault on the forces of evil. Without that memory, Harry and Dumbledore would have failed in their quest. Again, Lily contributes an absolutely necessary piece in the overarching battle against Voldemort.

As some of these memories have shown, Lily clearly passed down to Harry the

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97 Ibid., 489-491.
brunt of his goodness. A common theme throughout the books is Harry having Lily’s eyes:

“You look very like your father.”
“Yeah, I’ve been told,” said Harry.
“Except for your eyes. You’ve got – “
“My mother’s eyes, yeah.” Harry had heard it so often he found it a bit wearing.\(^98\)

The significance of this shared trait is clear. The eyes are the windows to the soul, and Harry’s possession of Lily’s eyes indicates the extent to the similarity of their interior beings, despite their external differences. This reveals their mutual goodness and bravery, as well as the strength of their bond – they are so closely linked because their souls are so similar. The mother-child bond is all the stronger because of their mutual understanding.

Dumbledore hits the point home in a conversation with Snape:

“He is his father all over again – “
“In looks, perhaps, but his deepest nature is much more like his mother’s.”\(^99\)

Harry is his mother’s son, first and foremost, and it is from her that he draws his strength and inclination towards goodness.

Finally, the *Harry Potter* series decimates the final vestige of the dead mother plot by subverting the archetypal evil stepmother role. Just like with Lily, the story initially seems to follow the motif, until a deeper read proves otherwise. Harry grows through his abusive, neglectful childhood at the hands of his mother’s sister and her non-magic family. Harry’s Aunt Petunia is every bit an evil stepmother – cruel, angry, and dismissive, she treats Harry like an unwelcome burden and waste of space. Her childhood schism with Lily stemming from her jealousy at her lack of magical ability bleeds into her feelings for Harry. She has no compassion for the kind, lonely orphan, and much

\(^98\) Ibid., 69.

\(^99\) Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 684.
prefers her fat, greedy, selfish son to the shadowy reminder of the sister she once resented so much.

However, when Harry gets to Hogwarts, he finds a true surrogate mother. Molly Weasley, mother of Harry’s best friend Ron, instantly takes to Harry and accepts him as one of her own. Ever since *Sorcerer’s Stone* and Harry’s first Christmas at Hogwarts, Molly instinctually felt Harry’s loneliness and extended to him a maternal gesture that he had never before received: “I think I know who that one’s from,” said Ron, turning a bit pink and pointing to a very lumpy parcel. “My mom. I told her you didn’t expect any presents and – oh, no,” he groaned, “she’s made you a Weasley sweater.” Every year, Mrs. Weasley knits all of her children a sweater with their first initial on it. By making one for Harry, she includes him in the family and takes him under her maternal wing.

From this point onwards, Mrs. Weasley includes Harry in family plans, always inviting him home for breaks and sending him packages as she does Ron and her other children. In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Harry competes in the Triwizard Tournament, a very dangerous three-stage competition to win glory for his school. Before the final climactic task, all of the families of the participants come to Hogwarts to see their children and watch the competition. Harry expects no one to show up for him:

“What Harry stayed where he was. He really didn’t want to go into the chamber. He had no family – no family who would turn up to see him risk his life, anyway. But just as he was getting up, thinking he might as well go up to the library and do a spot more hex research, the door of the side chamber opened, and Cedric stuck his head out.”

“Harry, come on, they’re waiting for you!”

“Utterly perplexed, Harry got up. The Dursleys couldn’t possibly be here, could they? He walked across the Hall and opened the door into the chamber”

“Then he saw Mrs. Weasley and Bill standing in front of the fireplace, beaming at

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100 Rowling, *Sorcerer’s Stone*, 100.
Once again, Mrs. Weasley supports Harry in a moment where he would otherwise feel alone and unloved. Her maternal instinct and compassion for Harry prompt her to unofficially adopt him and treat him as though he was her true son.

This instinct occasionally puts her at odds with Sirius Black, Harry’s godfather and other surrogate parent in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, as they debate how much insider information to give Harry about plans to defeat Voldemort. The heated exchange occurs in the kitchen as Harry and others look on:

> I’ll just say this: Dumbledore must have had his reasons for not wanting Harry to know too much, and speaking as someone who has got Harry’s best interests at heart – “
> “He’s not your son,” said Sirius quietly.
> “He’s as good as,” said Mrs. Weasley fiercely. “Who else has he got?”

This is the first time that Mrs. Weasley articulates the feeling she has been demonstrating ever since she met Harry. She feels the same love, protection, and affection towards him that she does towards her blood sons. She is a true surrogate mother, lacking all of the malevolence that traditional evil stepmothers heap upon their stepchildren.

The feeling is mutual. Harry feels as fiercely protective of Mrs. Weasley as he does his own mother, and they are, in many ways, intrinsically joined in his mind:

> “- but you like the Weasley’s, don’t you, Potter?” said Malfoy, sneering. “Spend your holidays there and everything, don’t you? Can’t see how you stand the stink, but I suppose when you’ve been dragged up by Muggles even the Weasleys’ hovel smells okay.”
> “Or perhaps, said Malfoy, leering as he backed away, “you can remember what your mother’s house stank like, Potter, and Weasley’s pigsty reminds you of it –”

Harry was not aware of releasing George, all he knew was that a second later both of them were sprinting at Malfoy. He had completely forgotten the fact that all the

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101 Rowling, *Goblet of Fire*, 615.

102 Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 90.
teachers were watching: All he wanted to do was cause Malfoy as much pain as possible.\textsuperscript{103}

Harry does not differentiate between his surrogate mother and true mother in his protective instinct. Both women have cared for him, protected him, and loved him to their fullest capacity. When Draco Malfoy, Harry’s Hogwarts nemesis, insults his mothers, he flies into an undiscerning rage to defend their honor.

\textit{Harry Potter} completely undermines the dead mother plot, a motif thousands of years strong. Lily’s death does nothing to stop her from being an active, important part of Harry’s life. Rowling gives her a backstory and fleshed-out character, in stark opposition to most of the one-dimensional mothers annihilated before the story begins. Harry’s best traits can be directly traced to her influence, asserting her as the formative figure in his character. Finally, a protective and nurturing Mrs. Weasley subverts the evil stepmother archetype, as she treats Harry with love and respect, bested only by his true biological mother.

Something must have changed in American society between the end of the 1980s and very early 1990s (\textit{The Little Mermaid} and \textit{Beauty and the Beast}) and the end of the 1990s and early 2000s (\textit{Harry Potter} series) to prime audiences to accept this subversion after years of dead mother plot conditioning. Only a seismic shift in gender roles or perceptions of mothers could have set the stage for an insurrection cloaked in the most widely popular and adored book series of all time.

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 412.
Chapter IV: Changing Tides

The late 1980s/early 1990s is an extensive time period, given the size and diversity of American constituents. There were so many vastly different experiences of this period, heavily defined by one’s race, ethnicity, wealth, gender, sexual orientation, and geographic location, that to give a cultural snapshot of this period is to inherently leave out some of these voices and experiences. With this caveat in mind, I broke this period into three categories: the White House administration, economic state, and social norms. Together, these three facets of American life in the late 80s/early 90s paint a picture of the environment into which The Little Mermaid and Beauty and the Beast were born and enjoyed such positive reception.

For nearly the entire decade of the 1980s, Ronald Reagan sat in the Oval Office (1981-1989). Among conservatives (and a sizable number of Democrats), Reagan experienced massive popularity: “For some, the 1980s meant an era of grand prosperity, characterized by a political leader who symbolized a nostalgic 1950s view of America – patriotism, conservative family values, and conspicuous consumption – Ronald Reagan.”104 Reagan’s administration manufactured a return to 1950s traditionalism, cloaked in a finely tuned advertising campaign:

In the 1980s, conservatives succeeded in remaking large parts of American life. They reshaped American politics, working an alchemy that transmuted conservative dogma – on the wisdom of low income taxes, the special virtue of entrepreneurs, the parasitic character of government, the need for overwhelming (rather than merely great) military strength, the dependence of social health on proper values, and the nuclear family as the building block of society – into common sense.105

104 Batchelor and Stewart, The 1980s, 3.

President Reagan’s White House emanated a distinct exemplar for the American public. His vision for what the ideal American (and American family) looked like is encapsulated in his “Morning in America” political advertisement during his reelection campaign. The ad conveyed that “American values connecting patriotism, family, and moral conviction were the things that separated America from the rest of the world, and particularly the Soviet Union’s ‘Evil Empire’.”106

It displayed images of white picket fences, attractive and flourishing white nuclear families, young men marrying young women, dads cheerily leaving for work in the morning, and a flashing glimpse of a singular person of color hoisting the American flag. The narrator intones as American flags flap lazily and a hazy, romantic shot of the Capitol building fades into Ronald Reagan’s smiling visage: “Under President Reagan, our country is prouder, and stronger, and better. Why would we ever want to return to where we were four short years ago?”107 In short, Reagan’s status quo had kept us safe and flourishing. Maintenance of this social order promised continued American wellbeing. Enough Americans believed this sentiment to reelect President Reagan to a devastating victory over Walter Mondale in 1984.108

However, the tranquil soundtrack of the “Morning in America” commercial masks some far more controversial (and to liberals, darker) facets of Reagan’s governance. Among his priorities:

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106 Batchelor and Stewart, The 1980s, 6.


As Goldwater had done in 1964 with the backlash against civil rights, Reagan in 1976 aligned himself with the rising passion of movement conservatives, embracing the pro-life cause – meaning he now opposed keeping abortion legal – and speaking against ratification of the pending ERA to the US Constitution, which the quadrennial GOP convention platform routinely endorsed.\(^{109}\)

His extremely conservative agenda linked up with a crusading moralistic outlook on the makeup and behavior of American culture. Rossinow writes: “Reagan, like most conservatives, embraced libertarianism on many issues and moral traditionalism, enforced by government’s hand, on others.”\(^{110}\) Rampant consumer culture coexisted with ideals of familial restraint and wholesome good behavior. Bill Clinton termed the decade “a gilded age of greed, selfishness, irresponsibility, excess and neglect.”\(^{111}\)

This insistence on traditionalistic perceptions of women had a significant impact on 1980s gender roles, even within the physical administration itself: “As an executive, Reagan assembled administrations whose inside circles resembled a men’s club, and, in a fashion typical of corporate boardrooms in the 1960s, he sometimes referred to grown women, condescendingly, as girls.”\(^{112}\)

Reagan’s agenda, both political and emotional, reverberated through the decade and had far-reaching effects on American women (especially mothers), and how the populace perceived them. This effect is revealed most clearly and concretely through Reagan’s economic policy and its ramifications, and the societal dynamics of the era, many of which did not align with the White House’s sanitized picture of American family


\(^{110}\) Ibid.

\(^{111}\) Ibid., 9.

\(^{112}\) Ibid., 15.
President Reagan espoused the famous “trickle-down” economic model. In layman’s terms, he believed that giving money to the wealthy would in turn lead them to invest, spend, and pay their workers higher wages, letting this capital trickle down to the middle and lower classes. This strategy proved largely unsuccessful, greatly expanding the income gap between the rich and the poor, and adding significantly to the federal deficit. This had far-reaching effects: “The massive federal deficit drove interest rates higher, ensuring that little extra funds existed for social programs designed to help the poor and needy.”\footnote{Batchelor, The1980s, 19.} Here, Reagan’s emotional policy corroborated his legislative one. Batchelor and Stewart write: “The rhetoric coming from the White House waged psychological war against welfare programs and recipients, attaching a stigma to those who needed help to survive.”\footnote{Ibid.} Reagan’s administration justified the slashing of these social programs by insinuating that those who utilized them were lazy and manipulative, willing to leech an existence from the honest hard work or ordinary Americans. These economic policies and accompanying sentiments formed a poisonous brew:

By the end of the decade, more than 12 million people (1 of every 20 Americans) lived as hyper poor, making less than half the poverty line standard. Single females headed 60 percent of the families in this category.\footnote{Ibid.} Mothers suffered hardest as a result of these policies.

The 1980s saw an increase in divorce and single-parent households. Rossinow writes: “The decline of the two-parent family also appeared among the nonpoor,
suggesting a noneconomic explanation.”116 Thus, many single mothers served as both breadwinner and caretaker for their family, a reality drastically out of step with the White House ideal. In a 1980s report, Ray Marshall writes: “In 1950, 70 percent of American households were headed by men whose income was the sole source of family income; today, less than 15 percent of households fit this ‘traditional’ model…”117 Put another way, “…in March 1981, of the almost 32 million children under 18, 54 percent had working mothers, compared with only 39 percent in 1970.”118

Despite the uptick in mothers as heads of households, women in the workforce still faced significant disadvantages. The wage gap yawned considerably:

At the beginning of the 1980s, despite some occupational upgrading, women had about the same earning relative to men that they had at the beginning of the 1970s. Women who worked full time earned about 60 percent as much as men.119

Attempts to level the playing field for women in this period faced considerable opponents. The conservative wing featured powerful crusaders on the front lines including “Phyllis Schlafly, an indefatigable grassroots activist in the new right, had temporarily departed from her main concern – opposition to détente with the Soviet Union – to lead the campaign against the ERA, which was close to final approval.”120 Schlafly succeeded in her mission to kill the ERA, marking the last time that the bill posed a fighting chance at passing. In keeping with this movement and the widespread sentiment of the time, narrowing the wage gap, though definitely a massive push at the

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118 Ibid., 11.

119 Ibid, 15.

time, did not make appreciable progress in this decade.

Active, new policies hurt working mothers as much as the maintenance of the antiquated status quo. Marshall reports:

Both the 1981 tax and subsequent spending cuts adversely affect women. Heavily concentrated in low-income jobs, women will realize little or no benefit from the tax cuts, which are targeted toward high-income earners. Moreover, women are bearing the main brunt of cuts in human resource development programs. Over 70 percent of the cuts now in place affect programs serving low-income groups, in which women predominate.121

Working mothers, and most especially single working mothers, faced economic adversity enshrined in the law and accompanying moralistic judgment from an administration hewing to the ideal of a 1960s nuclear family complete with breadwinner dad, housewife mom, and happy, healthy children. This being said, women also made tremendous gains in this decade: “Although a large percentage of women remained in traditional occupations, significant increases were evident in nontraditional areas like medicine, law, and accounting.”122 Rossinow adds:

Between 1980 and 1990, the percentage of American women working full-time for pay increased from 51.5% to 57.5%; the ratio of their average yearly pay to that of American men improved from .6 to .72. The percentages of women among architects, lawyers, college professors, insurance adjusters, and bartenders increased. But progress towards equality, while noticeable, was very gradual, and contrary trends toward inequality cut against these gains. By 1995, about one fifth of the nation’s families were led by single women, and of these, about 70% had incomes of $25,000 or less.123

In addition, an oppositional narrative to the Reagan administration’s did exist, which lauded working mothers as hardworking and well-rounded. Marshall reports: “A

122 Marshall, Work and Women in the 1980s, 11.
paid job has become an important symbol of self-worth and personal independence for women, even though most women work for economic reasons.\textsuperscript{124} Increasing number of women chose to delay having children in favor of progressing their careers. The average birthrate in America “declined from 22.3 per thousand in the 1935-55 period to 19.5 per thousand between 1955 and 1978 and is expected to be 15.8 for 1975 through 1995-2000 (United Nations, 1979).”\textsuperscript{125} Marshall adds:

Associated with the decline in fertility rates is the fact that young women are delaying marriage. In 1960 only 28 percent of 20-24 year old women had never been married; by 1980 the proposition had increased to 52 percent and it is expected to reach 55 percent by 1995.\textsuperscript{126}

The daily reality of female independence and familial leadership contrasted sharply with domestic White House ideals, creating an ambiguity clouding the mother’s role. These contradictory narratives bled into fraught societal conceptions of women, and an overall confused sentiment towards mothers.

The 1980s were filled with:

“...many numerous dichotomies that were difficult to understand without the wisdom that comes with age. For example, Republicans trumpeted family values at a time the every day reality of divorce forced children to become ‘latchkey kids,’ responsible for themselves after schools until parents (or more likely, a parent) returned from work.”\textsuperscript{127}

Divorce rates climbed steadily through this decade, forming new configurations of American families, and uncharted life for the children.\textsuperscript{128} This “latchkey kid”

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{127} Batchelor, \textit{The 1980s}, 36.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 26.
phenomenon resulted in a shift in family dining. Prior to the 1980s (and especially prevalent in the 1950s traditionalism that Reagan so loved), the Norman Rockwell-esque family dinner served as a still of the perfect American family. Happy and functional families took time from their busy and productive work schedules to dine together. However, the 1980s saw a rise in quickly-prepared meals: “Microwaves and fast food also made life easier for children home alone after school to make a quick snack or for single mothers or working parents to pick up or prepare meals.”

Batchelor and Stewart add: “In the 1980s, however, the traditional nuclear family was harder to find, which led to meals becoming an add-on activity, something to do while watching television or playing video games.” The picture of classic American life changed, even as Reagan steadfastly pumped out images of what the nuclear family should be.

Debate swirled around abortion and other hot-button political issues. In 1989:

The US Supreme Court ruled, 5-4, in Webster vs. Reproductive Health Services, to reverse lower court rulings and uphold the constitutionality of several restrictions that the state of Missouri had placed on abortion, such as forbidding public employees or public hospitals to perform abortions regardless of whether public funds paid for the procedure.

These issues prompted a growing political divide between men and women. Rossinow writes: “Scholars concluded that men judged the state of the nation’s economy based on their own fortunes and prospects, while women reached verdicts based on their perceptions of the country’s economy as a whole.” The male and female voting blocks began to conceive of conservatism differently, beginning a dramatic shift on big political

129 Ibid., 79.
130 Ibid.
132 Ibid., 291.
issues and really marking the beginning of the GOP’s problems with women. Though this division was not broad enough by 1990 to cause significant electoral consequences (the GOP’s male advantage still outweighed its potential problems with women), this eventually large chasm has had notable political ramifications down the road.\textsuperscript{133}

The 1980s were characterized by this head fake, this layer of idealism glossing over the often gritty realities. Sparks of rebellion stirred among women, but were largely repressed by the traditionalistic order of the day. This informs \textit{The Little Mermaid}’s and \textit{Beauty and the Beast}’s use of the stock dead mother plot to such great effect. Despite real mothers’ gains in the workforce and increasing income levels, the tone of the country called for a return to familial origins and elevated the 1950s housewife as the ideal, all-American matriarch. In this context, the Disney films’ erasure of the mothers makes sense. Why grapple with the ambiguity of the mother’s role when she could be ushered offstage before the story starts? Their fraught and ultimately dismissive treatment of mothers matches the mood of the country, and explains why the films were received with such aplomb.

In contrast, the 1990s, the era into which \textit{Harry Potter}, was born, served as a battleground for the warring factions emerging from the 1980s. Those ambiguous tensions of the previous decade exploded out onto the public stage, producing a grisly and groundbreaking scene. Nina Serrianne writes: “Backlash to the civil rights movement, the conservative revolution, Reaganomics, and the election of Clinton created a decade in which both sides of the political spectrum sought to gain a better footing.” \textsuperscript{134}

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 291.

\textsuperscript{134} Nina Esperanza Serrianne, \textit{America in the Nineties}, xi.
In a familiar tactic, Reagan had successfully tapped into the resentments of the white working class, bolstering their tendency to scapegoat women and minorities as the cause of their economic distress and political impotence. Thus, the 1990s provided a forum in which these scapegoated groups found their voices.

Women particularly picked up the mantle of fighting for their rights. A major catalyst in the 1990s was the Anita Hill hearings.\(^{135}\) The spectacle of Hill’s public pillorying at the hands of a majority-male committee (and male defendant) sparked widespread outrage and renewed attention to workplace sexual harassment. Serrianne tracks the movement:

Indignation led to anger, which led to mobilization, which by the spring of 1992 led to a massive pro-choice demonstration in Washington (one of the largest protest rallies of any kind in the nation’s capital), the birth of dramatically effective feminist PACs like Emily’s List, and a record number of progressive women running for national office.\(^{136}\)

Though sexual assault was thrust into the spotlight, little progress was made. A groundbreaking case, *Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson* had given women access to the courts in dealing with sexual harassment cases. However, “The case broke down barriers, but did not provide a universal solution. Judges have consistently defined the term ‘sexual harassment’ inconsistently and have used women’s personal histories against them.”\(^{137}\) In addition: “The media attention given to sexual harassment in the 1990s was unparalleled in American history, but did not facilitate the deep social reforms that many

\(^{135}\) Ibid., 197.

\(^{136}\) Ibid.

\(^{137}\) Ibid., 212.
had expected.”\textsuperscript{138} Women increasingly vocalized their indignation at the sexist environments in which they worked and lived, but pressed up against a system habitually stacked against them. Anita Hill’s case proved to be a microcosm of this broader dynamic. Despite the lack of significant legal shifting, women were more confidently and frequently bringing their sexual assault cases to public attention for the first time in American history.\textsuperscript{139}

A similar dynamic played out within the military. Serrianne writes:

Military sexual harassment policies were a work in progress in the 1990s. The policies that existed revealed that rights were a myth and inspired hollow hope, but they also gave the furtive issue of institutional sexual abuse more public exposure.\textsuperscript{140}

In addition, 1994 in particular saw a large number of government legislation contributing to women’s rights within the military. These included the National Defense Authorization Act of 1994, which allowed women to serve on naval combat ships alongside men, and the reversed “risk rule,” which stated that women could not be excluded from military position on the basis of potential danger.\textsuperscript{141} This legislation opened up “32,700 U.S. Army positions and 48,000 Marine Corpse positions”\textsuperscript{142} to women.

The 1990s proved to hold landmark legislation for women’s rights in other arenas as well. Perhaps most prominently, Senator Joe Biden and Representative Barbara Biden

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 213.

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 218.

\textsuperscript{140}Ibid., 222.

\textsuperscript{141}Ibid., 225.

\textsuperscript{142}Ibid., 226.
introduced the Violence Against Women Act to the Senate and House in 1991:143

Legislatures and activists viewed the act as an opportunity to create a responsive criminal justice system that would hold criminals accountable and coordinate community response to violence against women (the first collaboration between the criminal justice system, the social services system, and private nonprofit organizations that responded to domestic violence and sexual assault).144

This importance of this legislation cannot be overstated. Not only did it make violence against women a national priority and hugely visible task for the House and Senate, but it has appreciably changed American culture surrounding sexual assault “by providing monies to domestic violence and rape crisis programs across the country.”145

Additionally, the scandals of the Clinton administration further bolstered sexual assault into the limelight. Clinton v. Jones came to court in 1997, over Paula Jones’ sexual harassment claims. Though they settled out of court, such a high profile case kept the nation’s attention focused on this recurring issue.146

This intensely public grappling over women’s rights played out just as viciously over the televisions as within the law courts. A major media scandal erupted in 1992 when “Vice President Dan Quayle condemned Murphy Brown, a popular television character played by Candice Bergen, because Brown chose to conceive a child out of wedlock and to raise it without a father.”147 This television arc sparked heated and nationwide debate over the fictional character’s choice, proving how salient this issue was for real women. A year earlier, similarly visceral reactions exploded: “Viewers also

143Ibid., 227.
144Ibid.
145Ibid.
146Ibid., 223.
147Schwartz, The 1990s, xv.
clashed over Ridley Scott’s sympathetic cinematic depiction of two women who become criminals after one of them is sexually assaulted in *Thelma & Louise* (1991).”

Television often serves as a mirror of anxieties plaguing society in real time, and these are just a couple of examples where art mirrored a very fraught and fractured reality.

At this time, the conservative faction that vocally threw itself into these battles was spearheaded by the increasingly powerful Christian Right. The Christian Right largely upheld the mantle of traditionalism trumpeted by the Reagan administration a decade before:

The Christian Right, in particular, used television and other media both to promote a return to fundamentalist Christian practices and to denounce the society’s sexual permissiveness, its growing tolerance for homosexuality, and its increasing acceptance of changing roles for women that, in contrast to biblical scripture, promoted women’s equality with men at the workplace and at home.

Voices like Anita Bryant, a popular evangelical singer, Pat Robertson, founder of the Christian Broadcasting Network, Jerry Falwell of the Moral Majority, and Pat Buchanan, a conservative pundit, led the movement adhering to traditional gender roles and blocking new civil rights and protections, especially for women and homosexuals.

As in the 1980s, the 1990s did see appreciable progress for women’s liberation, most notably in the workforce:

More women candidates were seeking seats in the Senate than any other year so far, and four women were elected to the legislative chamber, including Senators Barbara Boxer and Diane Feinstein. Additionally, the beginning of the 1990s saw the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1991 as an amendment to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The new act allowed for the improvement and strengthening of

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148 Ibid.
149 Ibid., 4.
150 Ibid., 11.
federal civil rights laws to provide damages in cases that included intentional employment discrimination. These progressive changes were unparalleled and created a new frontier for women in the workplace.\textsuperscript{151}

As women surged forward, societal segments like the Christian Right vociferously tried to restrain them, urging a return to traditionalism and moral conservatism. Unlike the 1980s though, the cracks in the idealistic veneer started to show. With high-profile court cases, an influx of female politicians running for office, and televised fictions wherein characters grappled with pressing women’s issues of the day, progress and repression clashed head on in a very public sphere.

These conditions welcomed the subversion of the \textit{Harry Potter} franchise. In a time where the battle over motherhood and femininity raged loudly and unapologetically, courageous and headstrong Lily Potter found her audience. Women thirsted for unrestricted freedoms and protections, for equality and fair treatment, for recognition of their importance and contributions - a series featuring a powerful and indispensable mother, a figure key to the protagonist’s success (appreciably more so than the father) could only have expected a warm welcome. Lily represented many mothers of the 90s whose skill and devotion contributed heavily to their children’s success. As the women’s rebellion gained steam, it needed an equally rebellious fictional woman to elevate along with it.

\textsuperscript{151} Serrianne, \textit{America in the Nineties}, 218.
Conclusion

History repeats itself. Stories are cyclical and often retold in different shades and hues. But the plot points that crop up again and again, the themes that so many disparate storytellers found evocative or relatable or important enough that they felt compelled to include them indicates something. It gives insight to the anxieties and priorities of the listeners, nearly always informed by the conditions and societal structures of the world around them.

Cultures from the ancient Greeks to 1980s America felt the deep compulsion to kill off their fictional mothers. Something about these women was too threatening or complicated or contradictory to risk writing them into the story in a meaningful way. This widespread erasure spared these communities from having to delve into fraught and ambiguous ideas of gender and motherhood, female agency and ideals – much easier to do away with her altogether.

At the premiere of The Little Mermaid and Beauty and the Beast, this anxious community was an American populace surviving on a diet of 1950s traditionalism and moral superiority. At a time when the Reagan administration led a society-wide nostalgic longing for Donna Reed, Murphy Brown was packing up her suitcase to go to work. While the White House espoused the values of housewifery, real mothers increasingly headed their families and broke into careers previously prohibited to them. The reality of 1980s life was completely out of step with the gilded ideal, creating a striking tension. This contradiction shrouded mothers, putting a significant onus on moviemakers to decide which depiction to represent. They chose neither. Adhering to the tried and true
practices of their predecessors, they quietly murdered the mothers behind the scenes. The stories were inhaled by a greedily excited audience.

Ten years later, this centuries-old precedent was turned on its head. *Harry Potter* burst onto the scene, featuring an unapologetically active, important, and multifaceted dead mother. Not only present, but actively integral to the story’s progression and Harry’s success, Lily Potter shattered the demure and silently absent dead-mother mold. Thanks to the riotous nature of 1990s gender debates (featuring televised sex scandal cases, monumental legislation in sexual harassment and abuse, and scores of new women running for public office), Lily found a place in the turbulent crowd. As gender tensions burst out of the glossy veneer of the 1980s, new kinds of mothers found acceptance, or at least warriors on their behalf.

Mothers are the backbone of American society, and have been since the days of Republican motherhood during its founding. How we write about our mothers reflects directly on how we treat and perceive them in reality. The dead mother plot and its prevalence reveals intensive problems with how societies that use it feel about mothers and their roles in their children’s journeys. Lily Potter represents a monumental breakthrough for mothers and American society’s relationship with gender. As J.K. Rowling says, “words are, in my not-so-humble opinion, our most inexhaustible source of magic.” And how we use them matters.
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