



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 36 | Number 1 | Issue 131, Fall/Winter

Article 8

10-15-2017

‘Your Mother Died to Save You’: The Influence of Mothers in Constructing Moral Frameworks for Violence in *Harry Potter*

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Recommended Citation

Mauk, Margaret S. (2017) "‘Your Mother Died to Save You’: The Influence of Mothers in Constructing Moral Frameworks for Violence in *Harry Potter*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 36 : No. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol36/iss1/8>

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Mythcon 50

Looking Back, Moving Forward

San Diego, California

August 2-5, 2019

‘Your Mother Died to Save You’: The Influence of Mothers in Constructing Moral Frameworks for Violence in *Harry Potter*

Abstract

This thought-provoking piece takes us to Harry Potter’s world and a study of mothers in that world—and how their actions permit an interpretation of some forms of offensive violence as pre-emptive or even defensive.

Additional Keywords

Rowling, J.K.—Characters—Mothers; Rowling, J.K. Harry Potter novels; Mothers in fantasy; Violence in fantasy



OUR MOTHER DIED TO SAVE YOU":
THE INFLUENCE OF MOTHERS IN
CONSTRUCTING MORAL FRAMEWORKS
FOR VIOLENCE IN *HARRY POTTER*

MARGARET S. MAUK

THE RABID FANBASE OF *HARRY POTTER* MIGHT FIND IT DIFFICULT to select the best written line from the entire seven-novel series, but there are certainly a few contenders for the most beloved line. Fans from all walks can easily quote Hermione Granger's explanation of the correct pronunciation of the Levitation Charm or Albus Dumbledore's description of death, but fans tend to cheer the loudest at Molly Weasley's iconic line from the seventh novel, *The Deathly Hallows*. Towards the novel's end, a large battle takes place at the Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. This is the culmination of the entire series: every surviving character seems to descend upon the school grounds to take up arms for their cause, to fight to the death if necessary. In this iconic scene, Mrs. Weasley—mother of Harry's best friend Ron and the rest of the large Weasley clan—cries when defending her only daughter, Ginny, "NOT MY DAUGHTER, YOU BITCH!" But Mrs. Weasley does not simply ward off the attack from Bellatrix Lestrange, one of the most intimidating Death Eaters and Lord Voldemort's right hand. After refusing help from those around her, Mrs. Weasley kills Bellatrix after screaming, "You—will—never—touch—our—children—again!" (*Deathly* 736). Her war cry is not as the mother of Ginny Weasley—"my daughter"—but rather has shifted to that of a universal mother—"our children." This moment, which is depicted as the one of the most heroic and emotional exchanges of the series, concretely declares permissible violence. She does not simply stun or disable Bellatrix; she kills her. She—like the other mothers of the text—make clear that, within the scope of the text, active—rather than reactive—violence is permissible when it can still be considered as defensive.

Fans easily accept Mrs. Weasley as a universal mother—even if they do not fully realize they have done so. As Katherine Grimes notes, Mrs. Weasley "is very much the prototypical mother" (96). Mrs. Weasley constantly nurtures, scolds, and *mothers* the characters around her. Frequently depicted cleaning, cooking, knitting, or even disciplining her children, Mrs. Weasley acts as the emotional foundation for the gang. Whenever Harry needs maternal support or a motherly hug, Mrs. Weasley appears on the scene time and time again. Mrs. Weasley plays this role from the outset of the series, assuming for Harry the role

of the mother taking her child to his first day of school by “provid[ing] Harry with the metaphorical key to enter Hogwarts—the secret passage onto Platform 9¾” (Weiss 20). After seven books consistently depicting this traditional motherhood, the readers readily identify Molly Weasley as a mother first and foremost. The role of the mother is consistently elevated throughout the texts, creating a pseudo-hagiography of motherhood.

Despite this pattern, scholars and fans rarely investigate the political function of the mothers *within* the text and instead focus primarily on the external influences. Critics often reference J.K. Rowling’s own history as a single mother when discussing her politics or her focus on public welfare. Rowling’s experience is often depicted as a Cinderella story of maternity as her “rags-to-riches life—her rise from single mother on welfare to best-selling author—corresponds nicely with what audiences expect when it comes to princesses living happily ever after” (Kern 142). But Rowling is not just a princess—she’s a Queen Mother. Her function as a mother for readers is frequently mentioned. Even when disparaging her work, critics rely on Rowling’s biographical details, claiming her role as a mother should have made certain socio-political demands on her content and even going so far as to assert, “I remain perplexed that a woman (the mother of a daughter, no less) would, at the turn of the 20th century, write a book so full of stereotypes” (Schoefer). Critics’ responses make clear that readers bring certain assumptions about mothers and family to the texts and these expectations shape their relationships to the narrative.

The family dynamic constructed in the series is a fairly conservative model. Although Rowling privileges the family, she presents a very limited understanding of family; every family in the text is formed by a father, a mother, and a varying number of children. The most prominent queer character¹—Dumbledore—exists largely without biological family, leaving the nuclear family primarily heteronormative. Fathers (such as Arthur Weasley, Lucius Malfoy, and later Remus Lupin) are seen working while mothers (Molly Weasley, Narcissa Malfoy, and Nymphadora Tonks) are presumed to be homemakers—even if it is only temporarily. In other words, the Potterverse families typically perpetuate “traditional categories of labor” as it relates to gender (Gallardo-C. and Smith 192). Queer parents, stepparents, and other alternative family structures are absent; the few exceptions—such as the

¹ As Catherine Tosenberger notes, Rowling’s “outing” of Dumbledore was surprisingly divisive within the fan community. While many fans welcomed the introduction of a queer character, others did not share their excitement. Some fans and critics cited the timing of the announcement as problematic; Jeffrey Weiss explained, “If you didn’t put it in the books, please don’t tell us now” (qtd in Tosenberger 196). With Dumbledore’s sexuality defined off the page, queerness is relegated to the margins of the Potterverse (and, unfortunately, this very article).

Dursleys' guardianship of Harry—are depicted as unsatisfactory. As Vandana Saxena argues, the Dursleys are the family most closely aligned with the West's typical understanding of "normal" (10). But the Weasley family's structure is quite similar to the Dursleys: both are nuclear families, both include a working father and a homemaker mother, both have relative economic security, and both understand children as something that needs to be protected and nurtured to ensure a stable succession. In the early twentieth century, this definition of family represented solidity and success; as historians such as Elaine Tyler May argue, "the nuclear family, figured as a kind of prophylactic against the internal decay of cultural values and external threats of communism and totalitarianism" (Terry 184). It follows, then, that when constructing a world—even a fantastical world—under fire from a political threat such as fascism or Lord Voldemort, J.K. Rowling would use the family to represent the potential victims and the potential resisters. For Harry as an orphan (and perhaps Rowling as well, having recently lost her own mother before the series' start), a nuclear family represents his greatest desire; the family unit epitomizes love, support and safety—everything he feels he lacks.

Harry Potter's feelings are not atypical; all children rely on parental figures for emotional, physical, and financial security. Children's literature often depicts familial strife as a source of real anxiety and danger. When examining the dynamics of Harry's adopted and substitute families, critics such as David Colbert or Ximena Gallardo-C. and C. Jason Smith frequently compare them to King Arthur or Cinderella. The heroes of children's stories are often orphans themselves or, at the very least, the child of a deceased mother. The mother's absence in the text both protects her from the violence of the inevitable villain (or as Cashdan explains, "her peaceful departure is preferable to a scenario in which she dies a violent death") and compels the hero to assume the mantle of maternal independence and responsibility to defend themselves and their community (42). At the end of the tale, the traditional family is able to reform through a marriage or birth, and traditional societal norms are able to resume as they functioned before, reassuring the child-audience that the family structure can once again provide the expected security².

Different shades of orphan narratives, Cinderella and other fairy tales, along with *Harry Potter*, do not simply follow the trajectory of the hero, but create a cultural inheritance for the reader. That is, because the orphan figure is raised by a series of families, the exclusive biological family unit is able to

² The series' epilogue, revealing the primary characters' marriages and subsequent children (marriages and births), follows this structure. The reader is assured the wizarding world is at peace by the presence of happy nuclear families assembling on the train platform.

include a wider cultural community while still excluding those who do not fit the cultural paradigm. Consequently, the figure of the orphan breaks open the institution of the family to make a new cultural family, one that potentially includes the reader. This representation of family perpetuates a deeply conservative understanding of how families are formed and how they are maintained. But while scholars such as Elizabeth Heilman, Maria Nikolajeva, and Rivka Temima Kellner have deftly examined how Rowling's depiction of family continues traditional notions of family and gender, little work has been done to investigate how the traditional interpretation functions to create wider moral frameworks that encompass not only domestic life but political ideologies. As Nina Auerbach claims, "Although we are now 'all orphans,' alone and free and dispossessed of our past, we yearn for origins, for cultural continuity. In our continual achievement of paradox, we have made of the orphan himself our archetypal and perhaps only ancestor" (416). Although the Boy-Who-Lived is an orphan, he has a clear set of inheritances beyond his account at Gringotts. Harry inherited his mother's eyes, his father's hair, and a strong set of principles. Other mothers in the text provide their own sets and spheres of influence. While their roles as maternal warriors might initially be surprising, readers easily accept Molly, Narcissa, and Tonks on the battlefield because it is clear that they battle on behalf of their children, using their names as battle cries and whispered motivations. Through mothers and maternal figures such as the aforementioned women, the texts craft a moral framework for violence based upon maternity. Through the represented child, Harry, the text attempts to locate an inherited moral framework that appears natural rather than constructed. If a framework can be inherited in the same manner as green eyes or unruly hair, it can then be situated as authentic or, more significantly, as essential.

Using the family to create an essentialized morality presents cultural ethics not as constructs but as biological imperatives. This allows characters—and readers—to justify actions as moral without sufficient critical analysis. Furthermore, it allows agents who operate outside of this framework to be positioned as inherently immoral, unnatural, and unhuman. Such a moral framework is clearly problematic, but it is able to function with readers' approval because it reflects and perpetuates established cultural values.³ Twenty-first century values perpetuate those established by the twentieth. While scholars have noted that the Death Eaters bear a strong resemblance to

³ As Robert Sutherland explains, children's literature often assumes politics of assent wherein the text embodies "a set of values and beliefs widely held in the society at large which reflects the society's assumptions about what the world *is*" (151). Using Sutherland's criteria for politics in children's literature could prove generative for assessing the identity politics of Rowling's series.

the Nazis of World War II, less focus has been paid to the resemblances of values from the same time period. The twentieth century witnessed a shift in concern regarding maternal roles: as the constructed boundaries between public space and private home were dissolved, the domestic became a political concern. Mothers were no longer responsible for raising moral individuals but rather were charged with rearing productive citizens; western Europe and the United States saw an influx of propaganda focused on the importance of raising fit families. Posters advertised "Better Baby" contests (early child pageants devoted to awarding the most genetically fit child), warned against the possibility of families birthing and raising unfit citizens (people who were considered handicapped, non-white, mentally delayed, or criminally inclined were all deemed to be unfit), and coupled a mother's home with her country's national security. Countries like Germany, France, and Russia bestowed medals of honor on women who birthed and raised multiple children who upheld their country's values. In the U.S. and the U.K., Margaret Sanger and Marie Stopes led the birth control movement, often grounding their arguments in eugenics. The eugenics movement more clearly linked the transformation of the maternal into the political.

Due to the eugenics movement of the early twentieth century, the role of mothers was transformed from the "Angel in the House" into the "superior woman." This pattern continued through the twentieth century, despite the decline of eugenics. The eugenics movement ties mothers not only to the life of their children but to their deaths as well. The eugenics movement created a rhetoric which asserted that with "good" genes and "correct" parenting, a child should survive and thrive. Consequently, there was a simultaneous rise in the public identification of "bad" mothers. One of the first ways mothers were recognized as "bad" or unfit was through the health of their offspring. As Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky observe, twentieth-century intuitions defined "'bad' mothers" as "those who did not live in a 'traditional' nuclear family; those who would not or could not protect their children from harm; and those whose children went wrong" (3). In the early twentieth century, ethnic food, sleeping positions, and accidents were all faulted as a mother's cause for her child's death. No longer was Medea the exception in the cultural understanding of mothers; every mother was seen as the power to corrupt her child. In the first half of the twentieth century, mothers were blamed for their children's homosexuality, economic struggles, and violence; the second half of the century saw mothers shoulder the blame for perceived social ills such as laziness, entitlement, and fragility (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 5). Again and again,

mothers such as Kendra Dumbledore, Petunia Dursley, and Merope Gaunt were charged either with the death of their children or the death of society.⁴

As mothers were increasingly linked to death, implied violence became an intrinsic part of maternity: from gruesome birthing scenes to fraught deathbeds, being a mother meant being a potential perpetrator of violence. From maternal-induced infant death in early novels like Charles Chestnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition*, maternal mortality in modernist novels such as Kay Boyle’s *Plagued by the Nightingale*, or the threat of competitive maternity in dystopian novels like Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, mothers have been both positioned in harm’s way and as harm’s way in twentieth-century texts. This violence (with the exception of Atwood’s novel, which challenges such views) was justified and deemed necessary for the good of the family and for the race. While most ordinary citizens would denounce the use of violence, most would also concede that certain uses of violence can be deemed as the moral choice. The twentieth century itself was structured around the belief of justified war and justified violence. Fascists such as Benito Mussolini contended that not only was violence a social and political necessity, it was “crucial for the spiritual preparation” of a society (Kallis 39). But the Axis powers were not alone in their understanding of violence as a moral imperative. After World War II, the different world powers implemented policies which relied upon violence—or the promise of violence—as “a forceful influence towards the maintenance of world peace” (Truman). As bombings, gunfire, and chemical attacks increasingly fell under the umbrella of defensive violence, the western understanding of defensive and justified violence shifted.

This conception of violence as a social good can also be understood as “virtuous violence.” Virtuous violence has had multiple iterations ranging from Edvard Westermarck’s assertion that violent cultural rituals were underpinned by moral sentiment to Donald Black’s claim that violence allows a “form of ‘social control’” (Fiske 13). It is clear that each society has used and justified violence to maintain their way of life, but typically violence was considered a masculine virtue. Western culture became increasingly committed to the idea that while most violence was immoral, certain violence within certain parameters could be deemed not only appropriate but moral. This violence, a

⁴ Kendra was blamed for the perceived poor treatment of her daughter, Ariana, which people linked to Ariana’s condition. She is linked to Ariana’s death through her son, Albus Dumbledore, who is cited as perpetuating his mother’s parenting approaches against his brother’s wishes. Petunia is frequently identified as the reason for her son’s abhorrent behavior. She is used to represent the parenting deemed responsible for the perceived social ills currently “killing” the modern western world: selfishness, gluttony/obesity, apathy, violence, self-absorption, laziness, stupidity, etc. Merope’s own death is seen as the source for Voldemort’s evil, and consequently, the deaths of his victims.

utilitarian approach to violence, asserts that violence is appropriate when done for the greater good. As Laura Calhoun explains, the twentieth-century understanding of war shifted: no longer was war for “purely punitive or retributive causes” permitted; rather, war must be undertaken to improve the conditions for the majority of people. She further argues that “if through waging war net utility will be maximised, then war is not merely permissible but, further, obligatory” (96). War increasingly became considered a means to maintain peace and social order rather than a method of conquest and acquisition. Scholars like Jonathan Riley-Smith, Louis Iasiello, and Michael Walzer attempt to locate the standards for a just war, with Walzer claiming “morality and justice are talked about in the same way as military strategy” (*Just and Unjust Wars* 13). Literary scholars have introduced this conversation to the wizarding world, acknowledging that many of the series’ most ardent detractors criticize its use of violence (Strimel 36). Consistently, though, the violence perpetuated by Harry and his supporters is discussed and defined as a sort of “virtuous” or moral violence, a foil to the unvirtuous violence wielded by Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Bethany Barratt charges readers “to consider the question of the legitimacy of the use of force” within the series (Barratt 28). But the second half of that examination of violence’s legitimacy and morality should be what shapes the framework that allows it to be defined as such. Because morality is made a part of twentieth century violence, war, such as the First or Second Wizarding War, and its violent collateral are re-contextualized as an unfortunate social good.

Within this new understanding of “virtuous” or “justified” violence, mothers assumed a significant role. Political violence in the twentieth century is re-imagined to allow its scope to include the feminine and maternal. When virtuous violence is rendered as maternal, it is a defensive and reactive violence. As Alan Page Fiske and Tage Shakti Rai note again and again, the mother has long denoted a family’s honor. Men are expected to defend their family’s honor when it is impugned or insulted, often through violent means. But in the twentieth century, women adopt active roles in society; as the private and public spheres collapse, women become arbiters of their family’s honor and safety. As Adrienne Rich observes, the late twentieth century saw women increasingly included in a number of “wars”: the war on poverty, drugs, values, etc. (xiv). But while Rich understands women as the recipients of this “war,” it is important to remember that many women were also active agents, viewing themselves as the defender of their nuclear and cultural families. The role of the defender would soon require more violent associations. Whether the initial victims of immoral violence who became the catalyst for retributive “moral” violence or the perpetrators of “moral” violence to protect their families, mothers became the signals for justified violence. Mothers were now expected

not just to further their family line, but contribute to and develop the next generation of their country’s race, to preserve the whole of their society biologically, culturally, and ethically. Threats against that perpetuation, threats against their family, were to be put down by any means necessary; this familial responsibility—long falling to fathers and sons—is transitioned into a female or maternal responsibility. The next generation of readers has embraced this sort of ideology with YA literature such as *The Hunger Games* or *Divergent* exploring similar themes of maternal care and defensive violence. This transformation of family and motherhood permeates the literary tradition of the twentieth century and shapes the morality that supports *Harry Potter*.

Throughout the texts, a mother’s love is not only presumed but valorized for its ordinariness, and as a result, readers assume that a “good” mother will do anything for her child regardless of any consequences. The series depicts a range of mothers—enabling, self-sacrificing, abusive, loving, or non-biological. But the mother also is an important marker of the series’ morality, and consequently, is one of the most significant tropes in the novels. The texts establish the powerful potential of motherhood at the end of the first novel, *The Sorcerer’s Stone*. After surviving a confrontation with a weakened Voldemort, Harry Potter demands answers from his mentor, Dumbledore. Dumbledore informs Harry:

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. (*Sorcerer’s* 299)

This idea of motherhood, safety, and binary opposition marks the entire series, and characters are frequently divided by those who had mothers who loved them and those who do not.

Mothers, then, become important markers for the series’ morality, and characters’ actions—whether for good or for evil—are justified by their relationship with their mothers. Even Dumbledore, the leading figurehead of the resistance and the major patriarch for the novels, cannot escape the influence of the maternal: the portrayal of Kendra as a bad mother casts doubt upon Dumbledore’s character in a way the reputation of his muggle-attacking father does not. While Dumbledore remains beyond reproach for the majority of the series, his reputation becomes suspect when Harry discovers insidious rumors regarding Dumbledore’s mother and home life. Harry’s trust in Dumbledore is shaken, but once he seems to find confirmation of Kendra’s poor treatment of her daughter, Ariana, and Dumbledore’s seeming perpetuation of his mother’s

actions, Harry felt “exactly as he had felt after Ron left. He had trusted Dumbledore, believed him the embodiment of goodness and wisdom. All was ashes” (*Deathly* 360). This is not the first time Dumbledore is accused of indulging questionable behavior, but it is the first time Harry accepts the rumors. Harry believes the rumors in part because of the role of an unacceptable mother within the narrative. While the article allegedly exposes Dumbledore’s misdoings, Rita Skeeter’s article primarily focuses upon a characterization of Kendra as a poor mother. Its judgment of a supposedly bad mother colors Harry’s view of his deceased mentor—altering all of his firsthand interactions with the man. Harry allows the trope of a mother to brand someone’s morality even when his own experiences counter the claims. While the reader may question Harry’s judgement, they do not necessarily question the alleged influence of a mother. Instead of challenging the potential effect of a “bad” mother, the text through characters such as Hermione ask Harry and the reader to consider the source of the information and the validity of the rumors. The characterization is deemed false because the information is false—not because mothers and their influence should not be markers within this framework.

The influence of a mother manifests most significantly in Harry’s two foils: Neville Longbottom and Tom Riddle. Through the development of these two characters in opposition to Harry, the direct influence a mother has upon a child’s moral development within the text is apparent. Neville Longbottom, the Boy Who Could Have Died, is an almost-orphan, his parents’ sanity and consciousness sacrificed for the good of the cause at the hands of Bellatrix Lestrange. Neville is often used to depict the courage of the ordinary, characters who choose to fight rather than those who have been chosen to do so. Neville frequently connects his motivations to his parents’ sacrifice and to his grandmother’s strict upbringing. When Harry arrives at the castle only hours prior to the Battle of Hogwarts, Neville lets them know what has been taking place at the school, relaying, “We were still fighting, doing underground stuff, right up until a couple of weeks ago. That’s when they decided there was only one way to stop me, I suppose, and they went to Gran” (*Deathly* 575). Gran, as the woman who has raised Neville, is his most significant mother figure. Gran’s character transforms the figure of the grandmother from one of gentle nurturing into one of fierce fortitude, a political activist maintaining the legacy of her family. Neville carries the letter she sent him in his breast pocket, almost as a knight’s token, to keep motivating his resistance. The moral legacies of sacrifice cultivated by his mother and his grandmother propel Neville not only to a position of leadership but a position that embraces violence. Neville dismisses Harry and company’s concern for his safety by informing them his grandmother told him that “she was proud of me, that I’m my parents’ son, and to keep it up”

(576). Gran, as Neville’s moral principle, condones the use of violence by ordinary teenagers within these extraordinary circumstances.

On the other hand, Lord Voldemort is an extraordinary wizard who introduces violence within seemingly ordinary circumstances. For the first five novels, Voldemort is portrayed as an evil motivated solely by hatred. Due to his carefully constructed persona as a divine leader, Voldemort’s inhumaneness initially avoids questions of his past or background, but information regarding both is slowly leaked to Harry. This information eventually comes together to imply Voldemort’s immorality results from an unsuitable mother, Merope Gaunt, and the accusation takes the foreground during the sixth novel. When Harry learns from Dumbledore and the Pensieve in *The Half-Blood Prince* that Merope “allowed” herself to die, he responds in shock and indignation. He asserts to Dumbledore, “she had a choice, didn’t she, not like my mother” (*Half-Blood* 262). Harry sees Merope as a failed mother who begat a failed son. Dumbledore, in his own way, confirms this as he replies, “Your mother had a choice too. [...] Yes, Merope Riddle chose death in spite of a son who needed her, but do not judge her too harshly, Harry. [...] she never had your mother’s courage” (262). Merope—the result of generations of incest—has only a legacy of abuse and hatred. The text marks her as an unfit mother and that acts as the primary explanation for Voldemort’s motivation. By doing so, the series constructs a moral binary dependent on mothers in that the “central theme of the novels, the battle between good Harry and bad Tom seems to have roots in their mothers—the good, self-sacrificing, pretty, charming mother Lily and the bad, self-destructive, failed, ‘plain, pale’ mother, Merope” (Heilman and Donaldson 153). If Neville (and Harry) marks the influence of proper mothers, Voldemort signifies the influence of improper mothers. According to the series, bad mothers lead to a degeneration of the family, corrupted sons, and unjustified violence.

This binary of good mother versus bad mother and their respective influences is furthered through a number of other characters in the series such as Draco Malfoy and Rubeus Hagrid, overtly revealing the expectations for motherhood, violence, and morality. The role of the mother in *Harry Potter* is to help us as readers identify the good characters from the bad characters and to differentiate good deeds from bad deeds by the maternal motivations working behind the scenes. In other words, this morality of motherhood teaches the “correct” way to be violent. While these smaller moments work together to create a consistency throughout the series, the overarching narrative of the novels rely on three striking moments to fully develop this idea of motherhood: the role of the father in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, the role of the mother and inherited responsibility in *The Goblet of Fire*, and the role of the substitute mother in *The Deathly Hallows*.

The absence of Harry's mother is strongly felt throughout the first two books. In *The Sorcerer's Stone*, her absence forces Harry to experience physical, mental, and emotional abuse at the hands of his guardians, her sister and brother-in-law. Her murderer, Lord Voldemort, appears at the end of the novel and confronts Harry face-to-face (or as face-to-face as Voldemort is capable of at this point in the series). Harry does not assume a violent role within the series just yet; he does not even assume an aggressive role. Voldemort attempts to attack Harry, but Harry merely resists. His mother's love—felt by her very absence—allows him to remain a passive hero. Her love, embedded into his skin as a form of magical protection, has become a part of his biological make-up, positioning him as the destined hero. The legacy of his mother exerts a type of violence of its own, allowing Harry to be almost a bystander in this violent encounter. Harry realizes that "Quirrell couldn't touch his bare skin, not without suffering terrible pain—his only chance was to keep hold of Quirrell" (*Sorcerer's* 295). Harry uses no spells, takes no physical action; Harry simply holds on, hoping for survival, while his mother's absent love defeats Voldemort—temporarily but violently.

Harry's mother becomes important not as an absence but as a presence in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*. With the introduction of the Dementors, Harry begins to experience his mother not through the mediation of a photograph or mirror, but as if she is still alive. He hears her and even sees quick glimpses of her last moments. The heightened presence shifts the expectations for Harry as a hero. Whereas in the first two books he is able to act like a hero by escaping, with the introduction of his mother's voice, Harry is expected to take action. After the Dementors arrive at Hogwarts, Harry repeatedly experiences his worst memory: the night of his parents' murder. Harry hears his mother's dying scream, her pleading last words, her tragic exchange with Voldemort and is haunted by her sacrifice:

Because Harry knew who that screaming voice belonged to now. He had heard her words, heard them over and over again during the night hours in the hospital wing while he lay awake [...]. When the dementors approached him, he heard the last moments of his mother's life, her attempts to protect him, Harry, from Lord Voldemort, and Voldemort's laughter before he murdered her. (*Prisoner* 184)

Harry is immersed in the presence of his mother and it is a violent presence that physically affects him. He lashes out at his friends, declaring that they do not understand the responsibility of hearing your mother's dying words. Harry from the outset ties his mother to an added responsibility.

At the end of the novel, a twist is revealed and Harry receives a new parental figure, his godfather. With the introduction of a new paternal figure,

Sirius Black, the role and legacy of fathers takes on a greater significance within the series, cleanly contrasting with the role and legacy of mothers. Sirius, Remus, and Peter Pettigrew all identify as James Potter’s best friends and each claim the legacy of Harry’s parents in an effort to influence Harry and his decision whether to commit a violent act. At first, Sirius doesn’t win over the Boy-Who-Lived, muttering, “make it quick, Remus. I want to commit the murder I was imprisoned for” (*Prisoner* 350). The Boy Who Lived values life and detests violence; vicious threats initially only prove to him that Sirius is a villain. For Harry Potter, there is no room for active violence within his version of morality. While Remus and Sirius invoke the memory of both Lily and James to encourage Harry to consent to the execution of Peter Pettigrew, Peter uses only James to appeal to Harry. Peter pitifully begs, “Harry, James wouldn’t have wanted me killed. . . . James would have understood, Harry . . . he would have shown me mercy” (374). Remus and Sirius are horrified, but Peter’s plea works; Harry rejects their demands to kill Peter and decides to seek the official channels of justice instead. Harry does so because he says his father would not want his best friends to lose their integrity. Harry is, at this point, primarily concerned with individual morality, and so the book establishes somewhat counterintuitively that the memory of the father is what may prevent violence.

Violence in Harry Potter is inevitable, though, and the memory of Harry’s mother rather than his father will help to dictate how he responds to its eventual appearance in the fourth book. *The Goblet of Fire* opens with a near constant deluge of insults directed towards characters’ mothers. From Vernon Dursly and Draco Malfoy mocking Mrs. Weasley’s weight to Hagrid’s mother coming under fire for being a giant, the significance of mothers in defining roles is elevated: mothers are used to indicate not only social status but moral integrity. The influence of the mother becomes apparent when Harry and Cedric win the TriWizard Cup and are transported to Voldemort himself. After killing Cedric, Voldemort uses Harry’s blood—Lily’s blood—to complete a spell restoring him to full health. Voldemort explains to his followers why he chose Harry’s blood:

But the blood of a foe . . . [...] Any wizard who had hated me . . . as so many of them still do. But I knew the one I must use, if I was to rise again, more powerful than I had been when I had fallen. I wanted Harry Potter’s blood. I wanted the blood of the one who had stripped me of power thirteen years ago . . . for the lingering protection his mother once gave him would then reside in my veins too. (*Goblet* 656-57).

As Voldemort points out, there are many wizards who hate him and are willing to stand against him and fight for their moral principles. Throughout the series, the texts provide many such examples: Kingsley Shacklebolt, Mad-Eye Moody,

Minerva McGonagall and more. By selecting Harry Potter, Voldemort not only marks Harry as his equal (as Dumbledore and text remind the reader again and again), but his selection denotes within the text Harry's moral legacy moreover as a biological imperative bestowed by his mother.

Once Voldemort transgresses the maternal imperative, greater action is demanded from Harry to maintain the moral framework. James Potter—once the moral beacon for young Harry—is replaced by mother Lily. While battling Voldemort, Harry for a moment accepts death even as he resists. He decides that “he was going to die upright like his father” (*Goblet* 662). Again, the memory of a father emerges to guide individual morality; this sort of individualistic morality encourages the passive resistance the texts have thus far modeled. Furthermore, this rhetoric encourages Harry to consider his *own* dignity and *own* legacy, but does not seek to consider the consequences for the society at large. Harry's death, at this point in the series, would allow him to die as an innocent, but it leaves the rest of the society—his friends and remaining family—vulnerable to persecution, torture, and oppression. Within this paternal framework, an individual is morally responsible only for his own actions and does not bear any obligations to those in his personal network.

The negotiations of networks of care help dictate to whom we are responsible for nurturing and protecting. As Nel Noddings explains, the “‘best self’ is a relational entity, something akin to what Richard Rorty calls a ‘network,’ but it is not based solely on actual social relations; it is also based on potential relations” (186). Frequently, at the heart of this network are women who form these networks through familial ties. In the *Harry Potter* series, the family contract is “much more than a legal obligation; it is an inviolable covenant among family members to provide care and support for one another, whatever the cost” (Kornfeld and Prothro 128). These familial ties are often concrete, but they can take an imaginative form with women—such as Molly Weasley—considering other children as their own or comparing their own networks to those of other women. Men can certainly participate within these frameworks as well, but they are typically defined as feminine structures (for example, it is Petunia Dursley who is perceived to have failed the contract with Harry more so than Vernon Dursley). But these networks of care then compel the utilitarian approach to violence as self-defense; that is, this network becomes the community on whose behalf a leader must advocate. Once it is made apparent that violence will allow the maximum for good for the extended family, the violence can be defended as necessary and even as just. Harry's own network-to-defend is a constellation of familial identities: his mother's sister, his best friend's mother, his parents' best friends, and so on.

And it is this network of care which quickly becomes quite tangible, for while Harry considers his father's legacy, he is confronted with the visual

echoes of his parents. He sees his mother—he talks to her—before he thwarts Voldemort so that he may live to fight another day. Harry is now faced with the consequences for his community rather than just himself as an individual. Dumbledore demands Harry relay the night’s events so that the resistance may begin to prepare. When Harry recalls the events for Dumbledore and Sirius, he re-organizes the sequence of events. As he tells them what happened, “he could see Cedric emerging, see the old man, Bertha Jorkins . . . his father . . . his mother” (*Goblet* 696). His mother did not, in fact, appear last, though. His father—who was killed first—appears after Lily’s arrival. By placing his mother last in the list, Harry gives her the primary position and identifies her as the most significant person. Immediately afterwards, Harry is given a potion for dreamless sleep; when he is awoken, it is by Fudge, the Minister of Magic, fighting with the Hogwarts staff. After dismissing the news that Voldemort has returned as the hallucinations of a mentally ill child, Fudge refuses to take action to prevent Voldemort’s rise. He claims such efforts would “destabilize everything we have worked for these last thirteen years” and such actions would result in him “kicked out of office for suggesting it” (707). Just as Harry did earlier, Fudge is considering the consequences of his actions in terms of what will allow him to maintain his “dignity” rather than how it will affect his larger network. It becomes clear the patriarchal Ministry will be no help in fighting Voldemort; it will be up to Dumbledore and Harry. In other words, Harry lingers on the memory of his mother and awakes to a new, heavy set of responsibilities.

Harry has transitioned from considering his own legacy to how his legacy will affect his community. That is, while the memory of James encourages Harry to consider his own reputation and his own terms, the memory of his mother leads him to focus on how his actions affect those around him. The memory prepares Harry not to die, but to survive so that he can fight because he has inherited this moral and violent responsibility from his mother. Her responsibility made physical through legacy is carried within his skin and positions him as the one true warrior for his real and imagined network. This network demands protection and care, but it also demands to be perpetuated. As Lee Edelman argues in his critical text, *No Future*, children are currently at the center of all our political debates: the symbolic child not only represents the impetus for our action but also represents the subsequent generation. The political hope is that the next generation will continue the values, ethics, and practices of the prior generation only better. Harry must fight not only to defend his friends and chosen family but to defend their values from the onslaught of a political opponent. Harry must fight because this is his maternal inheritance, to continue his mother’s quest to protect the next generation. By presenting a moral

crusade as a biological imperative, the series elevates the mother's personal morality as an inherent trait; morality, then, becomes genetic predestination.

The time for violence—justified violence—does not emerge, though, until the final book, after Dumbledore's death. With the erasure of the remaining father, the preventative paternal figures have all disappeared, and no longer is the memory of James enough to dissuade a violent response. As Voldemort assumes power, the mother figures of the Harry Potter universe rise individually and condone the use of violence. None of these women hesitate to take up arms; their active participation makes clear that—within the text—the time for peaceful alternatives is over. The mothers descend upon the grounds of Hogwarts to defend their children and ward off the threat of evil. Violence must be assumed to establish peace, and therefore, violence is positioned as the sole moral option.

One maternal figure who, perhaps, is the series' most consistent opponent of violent action is Minerva McGonagall. McGonagall passionately criticized violent measures taken by the Ministry, other Hogwarts professors, and the students themselves, yet when the time comes in the final book, she quiets her criticisms and takes up arms herself as a sort of mother. Harry and McGonagall have developed an affectionate relationship over the seven books. During Harry's first introduction to McGonagall and Hogwarts, McGonagall prepares the first year students for the Sorting Ceremony, explaining, "your house will be something like your family within Hogwarts" (*Sorcerer's* 114). If the House is a wizard's family then the Head of the House might be considered the head of the family, placing McGonagall as Gryffindor and Harry's mother. Critics such as Aurelie Lacassagne, Meri Weiss and others note McGonagall's role as a motherly figure, insisting that her students are eating enough, getting enough sleep, and are generally cared for. She consistently checks on Harry's well-being and frequently demonstrates an emotional stake in him as well as her other students, often getting teary when she feels a student has been disappointed or harmed by the school. McGonagall becomes the unspoken mother of Hogwarts and her affection is clearly reciprocated by Harry in *The Deathly Hallows* when her role as a mother initiates violence.

When the trio arrives at Hogwarts to retrieve the diadem—one of the last steps to defeating Voldemort—they discover that their arrival has been anticipated. Consequently, two of Voldemort's followers are waiting for their entrance. After disabling one, her brother, Amycus, confronts McGonagall over the foiled plan. McGonagall first questions Amycus's information, declaring, "Why would Harry Potter try to get inside Ravenclaw Tower? Potter belongs in my house!" (*Deathly* 592). McGonagall claims Harry Potter as one of her own and implies that Gryffindor Tower is his true home. For Harry's part, he "heard a little strain of pride in her voice, and affection for Minerva McGonagall gushed

up inside him” (592). This affection—or love—is the climax of seven years of a maternal relationship and Harry has developed a son’s loyalty to McGonagall. McGonagall continues to defend Harry and the other students against the Death Eater. She refuses to back down and make her students vulnerable to the Death Eaters’ violence. When Amycus realizes McGonagall will not comply, he aggressively closes the space between himself and McGonagall before he spits in her face. At this moment, Harry Potter perceives this contempt as an attack on one of his maternal surrogates, and he decides to intervene.

Harry’s reaction to the exchange clearly re-contextualizes what can be considered within the text as defensive violence. Harry rips the Invisibility Cloak off of himself and performs one of the Unforgiveable Curses, the Cruciartus Curse. Harry performs the spell surprisingly well and comments, “I see what Bellatrix meant [...] you need to really mean it” (*Deathly* 593). After everything Harry has experienced—years of abuse, facing Voldemort numerous times, losing his godfather in battle—what makes him fully feel the desire to torture someone is seeing McGonagall—one of his maternal figures—disrespected. It is not the actual violence of abuse or war but blatant disrespect that allows the use of torture. This instance is positioned as one that not only justifies, but demands a violent response. McGonagall at first chides Harry for being “foolish,” but when Harry asserts that he had to act when Amycus spat at her, McGonagall concedes, “that was very—very *gallant* of you” (594). McGonagall offers her approval for Harry’s actions because his violence fulfills his role as a substitute son and a member of her network of care.

It is under this renewed relationship that the entire Hogwarts castle prepares to battle Voldemort. Mothers permit this scene—the most violent in the entire series with the most carnage and the most deaths. We see Minerva McGonagall lead a battle charge of galloping desks, we see Tonks and Neville’s grandmother arrive to provide backup for the troops, and we see Molly Weasley battle as previously mentioned. Like Mrs. Weasley, these women fight in the name of “our children.” While men and women alike take part, it is the women who act as the leaders or who are depicted committing the majority of the violence. By locating mothers in the foreground of the battles, the text identifies the violence as committed in the name of family. Voldemort is shown as a threat to families from the series opening with the murder of young parents Lily and James in *The Sorcerer’s Stone* to the administrative-led destruction of families such as the Cattermoles in *The Deathly Hallows*. As Lee Edelman notes, we are predisposed to support the elimination of any threat against a family unit. As a threat, Voldemort represents “a wish, a will, or a drive toward death that entails the destruction of the Child” (Edelman 21). The Child, or Harry Potter, demands the protection of the larger network of care, and consequently, it becomes socially and culturally acceptable to commit violence in his name.

As Harry goes to sacrifice himself to Voldemort for the greater good—for all of his friends and supporters—he focuses on his mother. She again is listed last among the dead who come to visit him as he walks towards his death, giving her once again the primary position. It is she whom he specifically asks, “Stay close to me” (*Deathly* 700). Unlike when he was previously ready to meet his death and thought of his father, Harry thinks of his mother when he prepares himself to die for a moral cause, a cause beyond maintaining his own integrity. Harry, like his mother, knowingly permits himself to be sacrificed, to embrace a violent end rather than flee from it: he embraces her legacy of death and violence. His acceptance of death, though, allows him to come back to life so he can continue the war, continue to fight Voldemort.⁵

Harry’s return depends upon one final surrogate mother: Narcissa Malfoy. Narcissa’s role as a maternal figure is somewhat surprising within the text. For the majority of the series, she is positioned as a “bad” mother, but according to the novels, a mother’s love is the most powerful force in the world, and Narcissa Malfoy certainly loves her son. Her love for Draco compels her to transform Harry into a stand-in for her missing son; because she cannot care for Draco in the moment, she cares for Harry in an attempt to reclaim her son. As she examines Harry for signs of life, he feels “[h]ands, softer than he had been expecting” as “her long hair tickled his face” (*Deathly* 726). Narcissa kneels over Harry in a grotesque imitation of the Pieta, allowing her body to “shield[] his face from the onlookers” (726). As Narcissa protects Harry from Voldemort and his followers, Harry realizes that “Narcissa knew that the only way she would be permitted to enter Hogwarts, and find her son, was as part of the conquering army. She no longer cared whether Voldemort won” (726). Now that Voldemort has become a threat to her own son, Narcissa permits violence to be continued with a prolonged battle so that she may take the opportunity to protect her son. While she does not go as far as Molly Weasley to defend “our—children,” she protects Harry as a child, allowing him the chance to secretly revive and defend his cause and her own son.

The battle resumes after Harry’s secret revival, and Harry’s side is victorious, but if Harry Potter, as an orphan, is the reader’s cultural ancestor,

⁵ While Harry does not die knowing he will come back to life, he does die so that the war may continue and end with Voldemort’s death. Before he leaves the castle for the Forbidden Forest and his fate, he considers Ron and Hermione’s ability to carry out his mission. He then finds Neville and informs him of the necessity of killing Voldemort’s snake, Nagini. As he tells Neville what needs to be done, he thinks, “he must be like Dumbledore, keep a cool head, make sure there were backups, others to carry on. [...] now Neville would take Harry’s place” (*Deathly* 696). Harry, knowing his death would allow further opportunity, consciously makes decisions for the battle to continue after his own death.

what is the reader left with? It seems we have an inherited moral framework. Nineteen years later all is well (until the play, that is), but only for those included in Harry’s network of care; the series emphasizes how we should treat our friends and those in our network but is less certain about how to treat our enemies. The violence necessary to allow our heroes to make it back to Platform 9¾ is suppressed without giving them or the reader time to assess its utility in winning the war. While violence may indeed be the appropriate response at times, its use should still be consciously considered and constantly challenged. To erase possible criticisms of its use not only reduces the moral significance of the situation but reduces our own culpability. There have been countless studies, journals, and books dedicated to unpacking Harry’s moral influence over readers, but they mostly tend to ignore the role that mothers play in constructing an understanding of justified or virtuous violence. Consequently, it allows the reader to ignore the potential negative consequences of this sort of violence or even their beloved characters’ own complicities in the perpetuation of violence. In the *Harry Potter* universe, mothers justify violence through the understanding of family. That is, within this framework, violence is justified when it is defensive violence, but all violence is constructed as defensive when it is in the name of one’s family. Even offensive or active violence becomes permissible under this framework; consider Harry’s use of the Unforgivable Curse or Molly Weasley’s execution of Bellatrix. The series moves the readers from stunning spells to execution with the reader cheering our heroes on along the way as acts of war are rendered as maternal acts of love.

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