

Good Mother/Bad Mother:

The Representation of Mothers in Printz-Award-Winning Literature

Motherhood and its surrounding choices are cultural battlegrounds in popular media and literature. The “Mommy Wars” (O’Connor, 2013) seem to break out every few months over some new aspect of motherhood: co-sleeping versus crying-it-out; time-outs versus corporal discipline; working versus full-time mom. The list goes on and on and on. In each instance, the amount of energy spent in trying to convince the world that “good mothers” do *this* instead of *that* can seem to border on absurd. These pop culture references are the reflection of the societal expectations that are set for the performance of motherhood. Sociological research also reflects a preoccupation with the attributes of motherhood (Edin & Kefalas, 2007; Hewlett, 2002) and the ways that children are shaped or misshaped at the hands of their mothers (Dadds, Mullins, McAllister, & Atkinson, 2003; Johnston & Mash, 1989).

Young adult (YA) literature tells its own stories about mothers. These stories are important because, as Coats and Fraustino (2015) point out, they “encode powerful schemas that tell us how mothering should and should not be performed in the larger world” (p. 107). They tell us who gets to be considered a mother and the qualities that mothers are supposed to possess. They frame our beliefs about what a “good” or “bad” mother is (and who is considered a “good” or a “bad” mother). Varying possibilities, particularly around highly contested, highly genderized roles like motherhood, matter for all young adult readers as they continue to explore their own gender identities and possibilities through a critical lens. A careful analysis

of what adolescents are learning through YA literature about what it means to be a mother and who gets to be portrayed as a “good” mother can lead to a discussion about productive disruptions of these narratives, both in literature and in life.

The purpose of this article is to explore the representation of motherhood constructs in YA literature that has been awarded the Printz Award or the Printz Honor Award for the years 2016 and 2017. The following research questions guided this analysis:

1. How are mothers marked as good or bad in the selected YA literature?
2. What disruptions of motherhood narratives are found in the selected YA literature?

Theoretical Framework

An initial literature review of mothers in YA literature reveals that some work has been done on the relationship between mothers and daughters or mothers and sons. Nadeau (1995) examines the relationship between mothers and daughters in six YA novels to look at how mothers and daughters navigate the tensions and joys of their relationships. Bray (2015) examines middle-grade fantasy literature for boy characters who resist gendering structures and take on roles of nurturing and caretaking. Bray identifies these literary characters as mother figures. Additionally, there are several studies that explore the portrayal of motherhood in literature, although not specifically in YA literature (Deszcz-Tryhubczak & Marecki, 2015; Hicks, 2015). While these studies explore the constructions

of motherhood in rich and critical ways, many of them look at only one kind of motherhood experience (for example, Miller's 1994 study that surveys the ways that working mothers in particular are portrayed in children's literature).

One of the common plot devices in YA literature has been absent parents, a situation that allows youthful protagonists to engage with independent problem

solving. Rawson (2011) found in a survey of Printz Award winners, Printz honor books, and YALSA (Young Adult Library Services Association) Top Ten Books for Young Adults from 2000 to 2009 that 20% of the protagonists in these books were orphans or had no guardian. This is a vast overrepresentation, as the actual national percentage of young adults in the same situation is 0.4%. Authors may choose to minimize or remove mothers to allow teenagers more independence to solve their

own problems. However, as Nadeau (1995) points out, "This device does not describe the situation of most young adult women. All women are daughters and must resolve the conflicts inherent in the mother/daughter relationship if they are to understand themselves and ultimately to establish their own identity" (p. 17).

One can easily extend this observation to all young adults—the relationship between adolescents and mothers is both important and complex. Because parental absence in YA literature is so often used to simplify protagonists' independence, it does not reflect the experience of the young people who read it: mothers, even in absentia, impact identity formation. The problem with absent mothers (and fathers) in YA novels isn't just that most teenagers simply do not have that experience; it is also dismissive of how mothers in absentia shape and change the experience of the youth who *do* experience it. If YA literature is meant to reflect, challenge, and enrich the understandings of the young adults who read it, then YA literature

should engage with the complex relationship of youth with mothers, even in absentia.

I frame this analysis by using Jung's (1934/1971) work on archetypes to shape my understanding of how a good mother (or alternately, a bad mother) might be portrayed in YA literature, particularly as such representations relate to Jung's work on "psychic systems" being taken up by literary critics (Young, 1992). Jung argued that archetypes (in dreams and literature) are markers of a collective unconscious—that is, a body of knowledge and a way of knowing that do not come from personal experience but are instead inherited parts of the human psyche. Archetypes, according to Jung, are universal ideas that transcend culture and tradition.

In literary analysis, Jung's archetypes are understood to be already laden with meaning when they are encountered in a text. For example, a serpent can be understood to represent temptation or evil, even when the direct parallel is not drawn in the story. In this way, good mothers (who are identified by Jung as a universal archetype, and also as the single most important archetype) are already *meaningful* in literature: they are already imbued with nurturing characteristics, patience, empathy, and selflessness. The negative archetype of a bad mother is also fully formed: bad mothers are easily recognized by their destructive, selfish, and detached parenting. Because archetypal motherhood in literature is fraught with heavy but implicit meaning, it is important to consider the constructs that surround these fictitious yet still socially constructed mothers. Jungian archetypal theory further allows me to use an already established language (nurturing versus destructive) to describe the patterns and themes that emerged throughout my analysis.

However, I also wish to critique the very notion of the archetypes of "good mothers" and "bad mothers" from a post-structural feminist perspective by examining the ways that mothers in YA literature may conform with or alternately trouble the societal expectations of motherhood. Although Gibson (1988) argued that archetypes are very different from stereotypes in that they "provide foundations to build on and allow endless variety" (p. 177), feminists critique Jung for the androcentric push of his archetypes. In particular, feminist scholars critique the mother archetype as essentializing, and they criticize Jung's concept of the

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Feminine as stereotypical and limiting (Wehr, 1988).

Cixous (1976) encouraged women to write themselves, arguing that writing is a more influential creative force in the construction of gender than biology. If this is so, an examination of the ways that motherhood (or the absence of motherhood) are constructed in YA literature would hopefully offer a range of possibilities that young adults may choose to construct themselves within (and without). I find myself in sympathy with “deconstructive currents in interactionism and feminism that encourage provocative and productive unpacking of the taken-for-granted ideas about women in specific material, historical, and cultural contexts” (Oleson, 2000). In other words, troubling the binary of motherhood as good/bad allows an examination of not only the social construction of motherhood, but opens also the possibility of new constructions of motherhood. It is further useful to question how these taken-for-granted ideas about the experience and act of motherhood are reproduced or refigured in YA literature.

Judith Butler (1990) argues that there is a “proliferation” of gender roles that “already exist,” but which our culturally informed ways of performing gender do not equip us to cope with in a productive way (p. 203). Many feminists would argue that literature (often written by and about men) has traditionally propped up essentialist ideas about womanhood, including the notion that women are “naturally” selfless and nurturing and thus more suited to mothering and childcare. These archetypal ideas, broadcast in literature and media, undergird social practices that shape the way motherhood is constructed. Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2011) described this discourse around motherhood as “maternal splendor” (p. 491), a discourse that still pervades much of the modern construction of motherhood. Scarth (2004) argues more recently that even if “the dominant ideology is no longer blissful fusion [between mother and child] and reproductive destiny, it often still fails to recognize the mother as subject” (p. 155). YA literature, which has increasingly portrayed teenaged girls (particularly in speculative fiction) in a proliferation of gender roles (Bray, 2015), may stop short of offering the same proliferation of gender roles to women who also happen to be mothers and may even fail to recognize mothers as subjects.

Methodology/Method

For my analysis, I selected the Printz Award winners and honor books because these reflect a well-recognized, well-respected selection of books that appeal to young adult readers. The prize is awarded annually for the best book written for teens, based entirely on its literary merit. Rawson’s (2011) survey of YA literature has shown that lists of award-winning books have often more closely mirrored the actual demographics of the United States in terms of diversity and representation than, for example, a list of best-selling young adult books or a list of teen-selected, Internet-crowd-sourced best books. (A major exception is the underrepresentation of Hispanic and Latinx populations across all lists.) If award-winning book lists are more likely to have protagonists who are diverse in terms of gender, race, and sexuality, I expected that this trend might follow for the mothers portrayed in award-winning books.

I examined the Printz winners and honor books for the two most recent years (2016 and 2017) in an attempt to make my analysis as timely and current as possible. Additionally, I worked from a smaller sampling of books to allow for deeper iterative and comparative reading processes, where themes of analysis could be fleshed out more fully. The selected books included: *March: Book 3* by John Lewis and Andrew Aydin (2016), *The Sun Is Also a Star* by Nicola Yoon (2016), *Out of Darkness* by Ashley Hope Pérez (2015), *Bone Gap* by Laura Ruby (2015), *The Ghosts of Heaven* by Marcus Sedgwick (2014), *The Passion of Dolssa* by Julie Berry (2016), *Asking for It* by Louise O’Neill (2016), and *Scythe* by Neal Shusterman (2016).

A natural choice of methodology for this study is textual analysis, which considers texts as “social facts [that] are produced, shared, and used in socially organized ways” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 632).

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Textual analysis becomes a useful tool for considering the social construction of gender in these social artifacts, particularly as a way to analyze how they serve to illuminate gendered roles in society at large. Additionally, psychoanalytical theory clarifies that many of these constructions are not *conscious* choices, but instead reflect *unconscious* structures that mirror

near-universal societal constructions. Textual analysis allows space to consider both explicit and implicit constructions of motherhood.

One of the benefits of analyzing books from an award list is that the list itself adds another level of societal construction. If a panel made up of YA literature educators and librarians has deemed these books to be some of the finest examples of new YA literature, the themes around motherhood and gender construction take on even more weight as a social critique. Because these books are selected as some of the best new YA

literature, the representation of mothers indicates not only a social construction of motherhood at the author and reader level, but also at the educator and list-curator level. My choice to use award- and honor-winning books allows me to survey a sampling of current YA literature and also to consider how motherhood is constructed in novels that have been judged as high quality by people who are generally considered qualified to do so.

As to process, during the first read of the eight texts, I noted places where mothers were being discussed or playing a role in the action of the novel. I noted my initial reaction to what was happening and how the mother was being portrayed. During this stage of analysis, my purpose in reading was to form initial ideas of emerging themes around the construction of mothers in the texts and also to note moments of import in the relationships between the protagonists

and their mothers. In my second stage of analysis, I reviewed the novels to determine whether mothers were being portrayed as nurturing and self-sacrificing (Jung's good mother archetype) or whether mothers were behaving in destructive and selfish ways (Jung's bad mother archetype). Most important, I looked not only for instances of "good" mothers or "bad" mothers, but *how* those characteristics were communicated to readers. In short, I looked for the discourse of motherhood as communicated in this award-winning YA literature.

It would be a mistake to assume that the tables that accompany this article encapsulate all of the data collected and analyzed, as these are meant only to communicate to the reader the patterns that were identified in both the first and second stages of analysis. In both of these phases of analysis, and even extending throughout the writing of the manuscript, the process of analysis might best be described as "poring over the data, annotating, describing, linking, bringing theory to bear, recalling what others have written, and seeing things from different angles" (MacLure, 2008, p.174) in an iterative process that allowed me to identify patterns and their exceptions.

Findings

YA literature marks "good" and "bad" mothers in very specific ways. Many of the markers of good/bad motherhood follow Jungian constructions around nurture/destruction or sacrifice/selfishness. However, there were additional constructions of good/bad mothering, including death (most of the "good" mothers are dead) and sexuality (only "bad" mothers are sexual beings), that emerged in the analysis. For the purpose of this article, I will focus on several markers of good/bad mothering that were particularly interesting, namely: presence/absence, traditional gender performance/nontraditional gender performance, asexuality/sexuality, and nurturing/destructive. (I organize these binaries here to mirror how the markers align with designations of good/bad mothering.)

Good Mothers

I explored several markers of "good" mothering throughout the selected YA literature (see Table 1 for an overview of discussed codes for each novel). If there is a lesson within these titles about how to be a good mother, the overwhelming message is this: it

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is much easier to be a good mother if you are dead. Shakespeare (1599/1974) wrote in his play *Julius Caesar* that “the evil that men do lives after them / The good is oft interred with their bones” (III, ii, 75–76), and while this may be true for men, the YA literature examined here seems to tell a different story about mothers. Dead mothers were almost never portrayed as selfish, and were most often portrayed as nurturing, wise, and selfless. The three novels that typified this sanctified dead mother (although to varying degrees) were *Out of Darkness*, *The Ghosts of Heaven*, and *The Passion of Dolssa*.

In all of these novels, the deceased mother is remembered with fondness, even reverence, and may

even be imagined to still be involved in the protagonists’ lives as some kind of guardian spirit. In Berry’s *The Passion of Dolssa*, the main character Botille feels deeply connected to her deceased mother, especially during her most difficult times. At one point when she has been chased out of her home, has lost her sisters and everything that is most important to her, and is terrified for her life, she falls asleep in the woods while envisioning her mother comforting her: “I rocked to sleep in my mama’s arms. ‘Who’s my girl?’ whispered she, ‘Who’s my pretty girl?’ I nestled down in her comforting lap and let her put me to sleep” (p. 402). Botille’s mother appears as a protector even in death, comforting Botille from beyond the grave.

Table 1. Good mother markers

Good Mother Markers							
Book Title	Mother	Child(ren)	Cooking/Domestic Chores (and page of first occurrence)	Presence/Absence		Nurturing/Destructive	
				Present	Absent	Nurturing	Destructive
<i>Asking for It</i>	Nora O’Donnell	Emma O’Donnell	Cooks muffins (p. 8)	X			X
<i>Asking for It</i>	Karen Hennessey	Ali Hennessey	None	X			X
<i>Bone Gap</i>	Didi O’Sullivan	Sean & Finn O’Sullivan	None		X (Abandoned)		X
<i>Bone Gap</i>	Mel Willis	Petey Willis	Makes tea and honey clusters (p. 139—Mel is introduced on p. 134)	X		X	
<i>Ghosts of Heaven</i>	Grace Dolen	Deceased infant	None/works as a wet nurse	X			X
<i>March 3</i>	Fannie Lou Hamer	Unnamed	Not enough information to complete the chart	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<i>Out of Darkness</i>	Estella Smith	Naomi Vargas, Beto and Cari Smith	None		Dead	X (in life)	X (after death, actions hurt her children)
<i>The Passion of Dolssa</i>	Mamà (unnamed)	Botille, Plazensa, and Sazia			Dead	X	
<i>The Passion of Dolssa</i>	Maire (unnamed)	Dolssa de Stigata			Killed	X	
<i>Scythe</i>	Jenny Terranova	Citra Terranova	Bakes ziti (p. 8)		Separated by Scythes	X	
<i>The Sun Is Also a Star</i>	Min Soo	Daniel Jae Ho Bae	Prepares breakfast (p. 28)	X		X	
<i>The Sun Is Also a Star</i>	Patricia Kingsley	Natasha Kingsley	None	X		X	

Throughout the novel, Botille's mother is spoken of with great fondness. Her loss, according to Botille, "left each of us her love, her reputation, two sisters, and [our father]" (p. 6), and Botille and her sisters attribute all of their best qualities (good-naturedness, beauty, intelligence, and resilience) to their mother's influence.

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so that their children can live. It is no different in the selected literature. In *Out of Darkness*, Estella is told that she will die if she gets pregnant again. Despite this, she gives birth to twins, Cari and Beto. As predicted, she dies a few days after giving birth, but even as she dies, "the babies lay curled on [her] chest, their small bottoms rising and falling with her breath. Then there was no

more rise and fall" (p. 69). Estella's death is directly tied to giving life to her children, a self-sacrifice that is a common construction of "good" mothering. And Estella is not the only mother in the selected texts who sacrifices her own life so that her children can live. In *The Passion of Dolssa*, Dolssa's *maire* (*maire* is the Old Provençal word for mother) is burned at the stake, a fate from which Dolssa herself is spared. During the confusion after her mother's execution, a friend loosens Dolssa's bindings, and she is able to disappear largely because of the smoke of her mother's execution. The ultimate marker of "good" mothering, then, is not just dying, but *sacrificing*: offering a mother's death upon the altar of a child's life. Mothers' lives, the literature seems to say, are most valuable when they are given up to their children, both figuratively and literally.

Another important marker of "good" mothering in YA literature is a willingness to follow traditional gender roles. "Good" mothers are the ones who prepare meals, whether they have careers or not, and this act of food preparation by "good" mothers was almost bizarrely universal. Perhaps most surprisingly, even Shusterman's *Scythe*, which is set in a utopic

future where technology has solved all of the world's most pressing problems, features a mother who comes home from work to cook from scratch, despite her profession as a food synthesis engineer—a job that apparently eliminates the need to cook from scratch at all. Her children wait for her to serve the dinner, and her husband comes home just in time to sit down for dinner. "Good" mothers in Shusterman's future, then, look fairly similar to "good" mothers of the 1950s.

Other novels also have mothers who are marked as "good" by engaging in cooking for their children. In Yoon's *The Sun Is Also a Star*, Min Soo is constructed as a "good" mother in the first few scenes of the novel when she cooks breakfast for her family, even though she is often critical of her sons. When Min Soo's son Daniel is asked about his relationship with his mom, he says, "Pretty good. . . . She's kind of like me. She paints. She's artistic" (p. 151). Min Soo is marked as a modern, intelligent, and artistic woman by her painting, but she is marked early on in the novel as a "good" mother by cooking for her children.

O'Neill's *Asking for It* features the only mother who is coded as destructive *and* who is featured in the first pages of the novel as cooking for her children. Early on in the novel, Emma takes her mother's muffins for her friends to eat as they drive to school. "They're still warm. God, your mom is amazing" (p. 8), her friend Maggie says. Emma's mother is such a good baker that she earns extra money by selling her baked goods on market day to tourists and locals. If, in fact, the act of baking and feeding one's children is an important marker of good mothering, then two scenes in the middle of the novel take on greater symbolic and archetypal meaning: the first (p. 178) takes place directly after Emma's rape, where Nora burns a batch of her muffins; the second, also after the rape, occurs when Emma accompanies Nora to the market to sell her baking, only to have very little of it sell. On the way home, Emma describes her mother stopping at various supermarkets and dumping the unsold portion in the garbage bins, a little at each place so that people won't notice and spread gossip. Emma reflects, "Maybe my mother's baking isn't that great after all. Maybe it has nothing to do with me" (p. 193). Nora, who up until this point, displayed both nurturing (baking for her children) and destructive markers (sensuality, selfishness), symbolically burns up and throws away the product of her nurturing. From this

point on, Nora becomes a much less complex character and is marked as wholly destructive.

Bad Mothers

If “good” mothers are recognizable because of their adherence to traditional gender roles, then “bad” mothers are just as easily recognizable in YA literature. (See Table 2 for an overview of discussed codes for each novel.) Most important, their identity as a “bad” mother is most easily communicated by their unwillingness to give up their identity as sexual beings when they become mothers. Every single mother represented in the selected YA literature who is portrayed as both a mother and a sexual being was also coded as destructive or a “bad” mother. In *Asking for It*, the main character, Emma, notes that her mother has a

“special voice that she used with [Emma’s father], with all men. (And I would wonder why she never used that voice with me.)” (p. 5). Emma recalls, too, that when she was a small child, her parents would be so engaged in one another before they went out for the evening that there would be no space for her. Her father would watch her mother’s “hips move under the silk as she walked down[stairs],” and Emma was ignored “even when I started to cry as they left, arms flailing as the babysitter restrained me” (p. 5). Emma’s mother’s sexuality comes at the cost of Emma’s connection with her mother.

Naomi’s mother in *Out of Darkness*, Estella, is one of the more complex mothers in the selected literature. Like other dead mothers, she is remembered with fondness by her children. Naomi wears her dress to

Table 2. Bad mother markers

Book Title	Mother	Portrayed as Sexual	Nurturing/ Destructive	
			Nurturing	Destructive
<i>Asking for It</i>	Nora O’Donnell	“ . . . she would reply, ‘I’m coming, dear,’ using that special voice she used with him, with all men.” (p. 5)		X
<i>Asking for It</i>	Karen Hennessey	“Karen, never breaking eye contact with the camera, emerges from the water, her chestnut hair slicked back off her angular, fine-boned face. She is completely naked.” (p. 38)		X
<i>Bone Gap</i>	Didi O’Sullivan	“Your mother has always been able to wrap men around her little finger!” (p. 32)		X
<i>Bone Gap</i>	Mel Willis	Recounts sexual history <i>before</i> she became a mother, but not after	X	
<i>Ghosts of Heaven</i>	Grace Dolen	“He stood up straight, his eyes wide, and then, as his stepmother’s wet nurse came in, shut the door behind her, with the top half of her dress way down from her shoulders, his eyes grew wider still . . . She said, ‘Hello, Master Robert,’ and smiled what she supposed was an invitation.” (p. 111)		X
<i>March 3</i>	Fannie Lou Hamer	Not enough information to complete the chart	N/A	N/A
<i>Out of Darkness</i>	Estella Smith	“ . . . flecks of light caught on the shimmering red of her dress. Her hand was hot in his. He felt her breasts against his chest when he pulled her close, missed them when she moved away. . . . she did not pull away from him.” (p. 190)	X (in life)	X (after death, actions hurt her children)
<i>The Passion of Dolssa</i>	Mamà (unnamed)	No portrayal of sexuality or sexual desire after becoming a mother (particularly interesting since she was a <i>courtesan</i> by trade)	X	
<i>The Passion of Dolssa</i>	Maire	No portrayal of sexuality or sexual desire after becoming a mother	X	
<i>Scythe</i>	Jenny Terranova	No portrayal of sexuality or sexual desire after becoming a mother	X	
<i>The Sun Is Also a Star</i>	Min Soo	No portrayal of sexuality or sexual desire after becoming a mother	X	
<i>The Sun Is Also a Star</i>	Patricia Kingsley	No portrayal of sexuality or sexual desire after becoming a mother (flashbacks to youth)	X	

remember her mother, she tells her younger twin siblings stories about their mother, and she remembers Estella as caring and nurturing. However, Naomi's mother is also portrayed as a sexual being—wearing a red dress, out dancing with men even though she has a small child at home. This sexuality, passion, and desire set off a chain of events: marriage to Henry—the kind of marriage that you can tell won't go well, since, even in wedding photos, “her mother's expression was already tinged with regret” (p. 154); unwelcome

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pregnancies that make her sicker and sicker until the doctor tells her she will die if she gets pregnant again; and then Henry molesting Naomi because, in her words, “my mom was sick and she couldn't, wasn't supposed to, you know, and so he started coming to find me” (p. 257). Naomi's mother,

then, is remembered by her children as a nurturing “good” mother, but her identity as a sexual being and a mother leads to disastrous consequences for Naomi. A mother's sexuality, it seems, is always punished. In the selected literature, it is often the young adults, like Naomi, who pay the price for their mother's transgression of cultural discourses around motherhood and sexuality. For Naomi, Estella's sensuality while occupying the role of motherhood has disastrous results, culminating in the death of both Naomi and her lover at the hands of her stepfather.

“Bad” mothers are also constructed as selfish or unfeeling; mothers who were coded as destructive consistently made choices based on their own interests and desires. For example, in Ruby's *Bone Gap*, Didi O'Sullivan, the mother of Sean and Finn, “took up with an orthodontist she'd met over the Internet and announced she was moving to Oregon” (p. 21). Sean, at 21, was planning to attend medical school, but when Didi announces that her new husband doesn't like kids and so the boys would not be moving with her, he gives up his dreams of becoming a doctor to support and take care of 15-year-old Finn. Didi's selfishness is highlighted in her insistence that “they were old enough to look after themselves. Hadn't she given up so much already? Didn't she deserve to be

happy, too?” (p. 21). Throughout the selected YA literature, a mother who expresses a desire to have her own identity supersede her identity as a mother was coded as destructive or “bad.”

Sexuality, selfishness, and cruelty seem to be tied closely together for the “bad” mothers in the selected YA literature. In *Asking for It*, Nora O'Donnell (Emma's mother) has difficulty dealing with her daughter's rape. “Oh, wouldn't I have loved the luxury of a nervous breakdown” (p. 248), she says when she hears that a friend had a nervous breakdown when her child died. Her insistence that she is just as much a victim of the rape as her daughter causes her to turn against Emma, who is caught up in a media firestorm about the rape and has tried to commit suicide. As the town they live in increasingly takes sides in the rape case and the pressure intensifies around their family, Nora drunkenly lashes out at Emma:

Maybe I'm sick of having to keep my medicine cupboard locked, did you ever think of that? Maybe I would like to be able to relax in my own fucking house without worrying about what you're up to in your bedroom. Whether I'm going to go upstairs and find you lying in a pool of your own blood. The *mess* of it. . . . Selfish, that's what you are. (p. 268)

This incident with Nora is key to Emma deciding that she would like to drop the rape charges, that she will refuse to testify against her rapists. Without her mother's support, she finds it unbearable to face the media scrutiny and judgment. Nora's cruelty here is particularly troublesome coming from a mother, mostly because of the societal expectations for motherhood. Mothers are always supposed to put themselves second, and Nora transgresses this expectation. Nora's deep humanity, the ways in which she has been hurt and ostracized through the community's response to the rape of her daughter are unimportant; as a mother, she should be able to ignore any personal needs and focus all of her energy on her daughter.

Early Markers

One of the most interesting findings was how early these markers of “good” and “bad” mothering were communicated to readers. In nearly all of the novels, mothers were portrayed as either cooking for their children (“good”) or as selfish or sexual beings (“bad”) within the first 20 pages. In *Scythe*, Jenny Terranova cooks for her family in the novel's opening

scene; in *Asking for It*, Nora's sensuality is discussed on page 7 and is presented as one of the early memories that Emma has of her mother. This early marking of mothers as "good" or "bad" seems to support Jungian literary analysis of these mothers as already meaningful—marked early on as an archetype of a specific kind of mothering. It is also interesting to note that in the selected YA literature, nurturing behavior is directly linked with food preparation in line with traditional gender roles. This early marking, however, also seems to indicate a lack of fluidity in the ways that mothers are constructed in YA literature. None of the mothers who were marked early on as destructive redeemed themselves, and only one mother (Estella from *Out of Darkness*) who was marked as nurturing in early coding was determined to later be destructive.

Family Dynamics

Family dynamics did not seem to be a direct marker for whether a mother was "good" or "bad." Across the selected novels, there were three mothers who, during the time period of the novel, were unmarried or widowed. Of these three, one was coded as destructive (Grace Dolan from *Ghosts of Heaven*) and two were coded as nurturing (*maire* from *The Passion of Dolssa* and Mel Willis from *Bone Gap*). The remaining nine mothers were either married or partnered during the time period of the novel; four were coded as destructive, four were coded as nurturing, and one was coded as neutral (Fannie Lou Hamer from *March* 3, whose coding was neutral because her identity as a mother was mentioned only once and did not appear as an important part of her representation in the text; the neutral coding does not reflect any judgment on her substantive and positive contributions to the Civil Rights Movement). The most notable aspect of family dynamics from a mothering standpoint was the lack of diversity; there were no queer mothers and only three mothers of color (two in the same book), and overwhelmingly the mothers were married (even if it wasn't to the father of their children, as is the case with Didi O'Sullivan in *Bone Gap*, who ran away to marry an orthodontist). This lack of diversity in motherhood and family experience in award-winning YA books highlights the need for more diversity in representations around what family might look like, how mothers might construct themselves, and how the act of mothering might be performed.

Binary-Troubling Mothers

In framing this study as an exploration of the binary construction of mothers, my analysis of these mothers is in many ways a re-inscription of the very binary I wish to trouble. It is worth noting that many of these mothers are complex characters, while still conforming to binaries around femininity, motherhood, and family makeup. I fully expected (and hoped) to find mothers who pushed against strictures of "good" performances of motherhood without being portrayed as destructive forces in their children's lives. The mother who comes closest to this would perhaps be Mel Willis in *Bone Gap*, who demonstrates both a deep care for her daughter Priscilla and a deep sense of self. She is a beekeeper, a single mother, runs her own business, and speaks frankly with her daughter about sex, often reminiscing about her own experiences. As Priscilla says, "She likes to think she's hip about all that stuff. Which she is, I guess, but it's sort of weird to listen to a thirty-six-year-old woman reminiscing about all the boys she made out with under the bleachers when she was in high school" (p. 141). Mel is characterized as a free-spirited, carefree, and even self-absorbed woman, but she is also characterized as a nurturing, interested, and caring mother.

Other mothers, such as Estella in *Out of Darkness* and Nora O'Donnell in *Asking for It*, seem to fit more closely to binary-driven expectations of motherhood (staying at home with the children, engaging in traditionally gendered activities like baking and cooking), and yet they constitute some of the most highly developed and complex mother characters of the group. Nora, for example, not only cooks for her children, but she also seems to be deeply interested in their lives. She brings Emma vitamins every morning,

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tells her she's beautiful, calls her "pet," and demonstrates a deep interest in her school life—actions that certainly could be construed as markers of nurturing motherhood. At the same time, her obvious pride in Emma's beauty and her achievements in school could also be read as a preoccupation with the ways that her children add to her own prestige, which might be interpreted as selfishness. These kinds of complexities do not explicitly push against binary constructions of motherhood, but they do offer spaces for more complicated readings and open up possibilities for interpretations that are both thoughtful and nuanced.

Pedagogical Implications and Discussion

The discourse around motherhood in young adult literature as a whole could provide rich opportunities for both thematic and critical explorations in classroom settings. Although the selected literature is award

winning, any classroom study of family and family units could provide a more diverse outlook on what a family looks like, who is represented in families, and the roles that people can take on in families other than what has been explored here. For this reason, this research may be most helpful to teachers as they work to build their classroom libraries, offering a perspective on another kind of diversity

they might consider as they choose novels for individual and classroom reading.

Certainly, Jungian archetypes and the ways they have been picked up in literary analysis lend themselves well to classroom discussion and study. Teachers could use examples from a variety of media and genres that represent mothers to examine the ways that motherhood is performed in popular culture and in young adult literature: movie clips (Disney princess movies tend to be rife with archetypal motherhood, for example), songs (like LunchMoney Lewis's (2015) "Mama" and Reba McEntyre's (1990) "Fancy"), poems, art, and excerpts from novels (certainly including

the novels examined here). Adding a critical element to students' explorations would be important to challenge current binaries around good/bad mothering. To this end, students could complete a chart mapping the mothers they encounter in literature and pop culture, then talk about how the discourse of *maternal splendor* has been created, how it continues to be inscribed, and where they see representations of mothers who are pushing back against these mothering norms.

Returning to the research questions that guided my study, the findings indicate that mothers are strongly marked very early on in the selected YA literature as either "good" or "bad," and these markers are fairly cemented throughout the story. There is very little complexity in this marking: nurturing behaviors include following traditional gender performances of mothers—handling household chores or preparing food for their children and dying (especially as a way to save or give life to their children). Destructive behaviors include attending to self as a sexual being and putting one's desires and wants before those of one's children. In this article, I use the Jungian analysis and binary framings of archetypal motherhood in YA literature to establish current social constructions around motherhood, but I also wish to trouble the good/bad mother binary using poststructural feminism as a means of opening up new readings of YA texts around motherhood. Perhaps, most important, poststructural feminism invites an interrogation of the Jungian and cultural discourses of "good" and "bad" mothers as the only options for analyses of motherhood experiences. Poststructural feminist thinking encourages a reading of maternal splendor and nurturing versus destructive motherhood binaries as only *some* of the discursive possibilities around mothers and mothering, possibilities that have been reified and solidified through iterations and reiterations of those discourses in policy, pop culture, literature (including children's literature and YA literature), and cultural mores. Further examination of the discourse of motherhood might question why acts of mothering are so value-laden (e.g., nurturing or destructive), or who gets to be counted as a mother or a mother figure.

Using a Jungian frame of analysis, the findings indicated that for the selected YA literature, there were very few instances where mothers disrupted normative motherhood narratives without careening into "destructive" ways of being. Part of this, of

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course, is that these norms are so interwoven into the ways that motherhood is defined and judged that any disruption of these norms is, in itself, viewed as destructive. It does seem odd, however, that in a time when, as a general trend, female YA protagonists are consistently pushing gendered boundaries, including being portrayed as deadly assassins (Maas, 2012), clever business owners (Berry, 2016), driven Internet personalities (Zentner, 2016), and enlightened mystics (Berry, 2016), the mothers in these award-winning novels are performing more traditionally: selling their baking (O'Neill, 2016), working in the family store (Yoon, 2016), and sacrificing themselves in the ways that mothers have always been required to sacrifice themselves to prove they are really, truly good mothers, even with their very lives (Berry, 2016; Pérez, 2015). The message appears to be a little mixed: young women can be whatever they want while they are young, single, and free, but once they become mothers, the traditional and essentialist framings of what it means to be a woman are still in full force. In other words: rebel against traditional gender roles now, but settle down later, or your children pay the price for your selfishness.

Poststructural critique of the same novels leads to other possible interpretations and critiques of the performance of motherhood. If binary thinking and analysis are challenged, the discourse of motherhood could, in fact, offer the proliferation of gender roles that Butler (1990) talks about. Motherhood, then, might include all the ways of being that women who care for children embody. When the assumption of mothering as either good or bad or as nurturing or destructive is troubled, then complicated mothers like Nora O'Donnell in *Asking for It* can be recognized as subjects in their own right, instead of as objects or as symbols of oppression. If Nora's acts of mothering are not viewed through destructive framing, she herself can be constructed more generously and read as a subject who is exercising her own agency within the same patriarchal discourse that her daughter experiences so negatively.

Although moving away from a binary representation or analysis of motherhood allows for multiple readings of the performance of mothering in the selected literature, there remained a lack of diversity in the family structures within these texts. This is par-

ticularly problematic in award-winning YA literature. These committees do, I generally believe, attempt to select diverse, representational YA literature that tells rich and nuanced stories from a variety of experiences and viewpoints. Future research may focus on the diversity of the makeup of these committees' members in order to determine whether these committees are themselves representational of diverse and nuanced experiences—not only in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality, but also in terms of family structure. I suspect that a large part of why motherhood can be constructed in such binaries in award-winning YA literature is not only related to archetypal literary portrayals of women, but also because a certain kind of motherhood (white, middle class, stay-at-home) is normative and therefore invisible in its ubiquity.

YA literature is uniquely positioned to challenge gendered roles. If women truly can be written or write themselves, then YA literature (and children's literature, too) is a particularly powerful place to challenge binary thinking around gender. Literature that shapes and guides young adults as they are forming their ideas about themselves, the world around them, and their role in that world could offer a proliferation of gender roles that invites young adults to consider additional possibilities in the discourse and performance of both womanhood *and* motherhood. Judging from the selected literature, YA literature is not currently presenting a proliferation of gender roles beyond young adulthood to young women (and one might argue in a different article, this proliferation of gender roles is not being written for young men, either), but I believe that YA literature *can* and *should* allow young women and men to question the narrative of "good" motherhood, recognize mothers as subjects who exercise agency and power, and open up additional possibilities in the performance of gender.

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