

THE MEDIATION OF CRITICAL THEMES OF MOTHERHOOD STUDIES IN STORYTELLING:  
THE CASE OF *THE GIRL WHO DRANK THE MOON*

*La mediación de temas cruciales de los estudios sobre la maternidad:  
el caso de The Girl Who Drank the Moon*

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### **Abstract**

By contemplating the emotional and intellectual link between the reader and the book, this article considers how a contemporary text might respond to current motherhood studies' issues, and how these studies are mediated to be considered appropriate for an audience of young readers. A psychosocial research strategy is used, through a feminist theoretical framework, to analyze how the young adult novel *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* incorporates key ideas of motherhood studies through characters' agency and the storytelling arch. Motherhood is represented as an institution, an individual identity and an emotional experience, and the novel offers the young reader a nuanced vision into an ongoing discussion. The potential of storytelling to mediate social justice concerns to the young reader is highlighted.

**Keywords:** feminist criticism, motherhood studies, storytelling, fairy tales.

### **Resumen**

Al contemplar el vínculo emocional e intelectual entre el lector y el libro, este artículo considera cómo los textos contemporáneos responden a las cuestiones de los estudios actuales sobre la maternidad y cómo estos son mediados para ser considerados apropiados para una audiencia de lectores juveniles. Se utiliza una estrategia de investigación psicosocial, a través de un marco teórico feminista, para analizar cómo la novela juvenil *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* incorpora ideas clave de los estudios sobre la maternidad a través de la agencia del personaje y el arco narrativo. La maternidad se representa como una institución, una identidad individual y una experiencia emocional, y la novela ofrece al lector juvenil una visión matizada de una discusión en curso. Se destaca el potencial de la narración para mediar en las preocupaciones de justicia social ante el lector preadolescente.

**Palabras clave:** crítica feminista, estudios de maternidad, narración de historias, cuentos de hadas.

## 1. Introduction

A female witch lives in the woods and requires the sacrifice of a child every year to keep peace with the citizens of a town bordering the forest. A mother goes crazy because she must give her daughter away to the authorities for that year's sacrifice. While the initial premise of *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* sounds like a fairy tale based on tropes and stereotypes, the novel offers mediated content on contemporary ideas of motherhood as represented through storytelling.

Since the dawn of Children and Young Adult's literary studies, there has been an ongoing discussion between the educational and the entertainment value of texts. In the last 40 years, this discussion has been linked to the different aesthetical preferences of each synchronic trend and connected intertextually with a literary sphere that has created its own canon and presented its own deviations (Hunt, 1996, 2004; Nikolajeva, 1996). Throughout, Children and YA literature has manifested that it may purportedly intend to offer a pedagogical message or eschew this aim, but it is always immersed in ideology and reflects moral concerns of the sociocultural moment of its creation (Hollindale, 1988; Stephens, 1992). In parallel, literary criticism as a whole has also undergone numerous changes, especially during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: from a purely formal perspective to interdisciplinary approaches, connected to social movements. This openness in literary criticism has offered the possibility to include the reader and their experience, and question the structure of Literary Studies in the context of education, especially higher education (Butler, 2018).

While the connection or distinction between the 'critic' and the 'reader' can be discussed, Butler considers how "many people choose to study literature because they feel a deep intellectual and emotional commitment to the texts they have read" (Butler, 2018: 12). It is for this reason that this analysis of *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* is presented. As a text inscribed in a unique synchronic moment, this examination intends to illustrate the crossing points between feminist studies, specifically motherhood studies, and *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*, the 2017 Newbery Medal winner and a *New York Times* bestseller text. The issues explored are the following: how does a contemporary juvenile text incorporate or respond to current motherhood studies' issues? How are these issues transformed into a storytelling which is considered appropriate for a specific audience of middle and YA readers?

## 2. Methodology

As an interpretative practice, and considering Denzin and Lincoln's (2011: 12) definition, the following analysis intends to follow psychosocial feminist theory as a theoretical paradigm and perspective. The research strategy will compare social theory with a literary example, and how subjectivities, relations, social and institutional practices are portrayed in the storytelling (Charles,

2022). The methodology used is observation and recording of actions and agency of the literary characters, and their effect in the storytelling arch, following categories linked to motherhood studies. These categories are evaluated in relation to their link to psychosocial studies, namely the construction of the subjectivity of the characters through sociocultural and institutional experiences (Charles, 2022: 1).

The feminist philosophical approach of this qualitative research is incorporated into the research design, illustrating how it shapes the research question and the researcher's approach (Huff, 2009), and opening the examination that this paper offers to contrasting philosophies or to different disciplines for discussion. This follows an axiological assumption, as defined by Creswell (2013: 20), since the research presents a clear position towards the analysis of values and power structure. Rooted in a movement that strives towards equity and intersectionality, this analysis can be considered to represent a desire to "bring about change or address social justice issues in our societies" (Ibid: 23), therefore converging with a transformative framework of research (Mertens, 2003).

As Keller (1985: 6) considers feminist theory as "a form of attention, a lens that brings into focus particular questions", this study offers a way of reading *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* that engages both intellectually and emotionally with the elements, representation and agency in the story as an example of a text influenced by the contemporary historical moment.

### **3. An Introduction to *The Girl Who Drank the Moon***

*The Girl Who Drank the Moon* is a young adult fantasy novel that presents a coming-of-age perspective which incorporates different generational points of view. First published in 2016, author Kelly Barnhill creates a choral adventure that reinterprets fairy tale tropes and presents a cross-generational female perspective on what it means to be a hero/ine. Her characters are immersed in a context that displays a state authority power struggle (Haidi, 2020) and illustrates contemporary issues such as public discourse manipulation. In this environment, traditional female characteristics are reassessed: storytelling and the oral tradition, the construction of family structure, the definition of love. The protagonists have a unique connection with nature and the environment, and the use of magic appears to represent the absences and longings related to the link between the female child and her mother. Feminist theory and, more specifically, the theme of motherhood, appears throughout the story and is linked with agency. Additionally, contemporary studies on cognitive development of motherhood are incorporated into the storytelling and will be pointed out.

The story starts to unfold through the perspective of a male character as a child (Antain), when he witnesses how a baby girl is torn away from her mother's arms to be left as a sacrifice for the witch who dwells in the forest surrounding the town. The town, known as the Protectorate, has followed this tradition for the last 500 years – a tradition which is performed by the Elders, an institution of

men who are the ruling governmental body. Gherland is the principal Elder at the beginning the story, and he is also Antain's uncle. The main religious order, the Sisters of the Star, is controlled by women and has its own specialized army. The head Sister Ignatia dwells in the Tower. The Protectorate is surrounded by a bog, a forest and an area with intermittent volcanic activity. The only safe path to reach The Protectorate seems to be the main road.

The witch, however, is a caring and nurturing figure that picks up the children abandoned by The Protectorate and takes them to be adopted to the towns at the other side of the forest, the Free Cities. She lives with a small dragon, Fyrian, and Glerk, a swamp monster. She becomes attached to the baby girl who has just been taken, Luna, and *enmagicks* her by mistake, by giving her moonlight to drink. As a baby, she is unable to control her magic and the witch, Xan, decides to put a spell on her to control her magic – leading to the child being unable to be aware of the existence of magic.

In the meantime, the mother has been taken to the Tower as she is unable to recover from the trauma of losing her child and is called the Madwoman. Antain resists the call to become part of the Elders and decides to become a carpenter, eventually marrying Ethyne, an independent girl who has grown up with stories about the history of The Protectorate. She also becomes the first person in history to abandon the Sisters of the Star order. They have a baby which is marked to be the next sacrifice at the same time that Luna's magic will become unbound. This triggers several actions that reveal who the villain is (Sister Ignatia, also a witch) and how magic can be generated from different sources.

#### 4. Readership: Middle Graders and Young Adults

Studies on the impact of reading YA novels in the Western classroom scenario during adolescence point towards an increase in engagement and reading motivation (Ivey and Broaddus, 2001). Reading age-appropriate novels also seems to have an impact on empathy and world perspective, by generating tools for personal development and vision of self (Bean and Harper, 2016; Glasgow, 2001). Young adults seem to prefer to read YA literature rather than canonical literature, as they offer characters and protagonists created with the adolescent reader in mind while also offering varied perspectives and voices in storytelling (Cole, 2008).

While *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* is catalogued by its publisher as an 8+ novel and received the *Entertainment Weekly* Best Middle Grade Book of 2016 Award, it is built following a polyphonic structure, and subtly disrupting the chronological order of the plot. Upon its start, Chapter 3 takes place before Chapter 2. The use of changing perspectives in each chapter is considered to increase the complexity in its reading comprehension, possibly requiring a competence more sophisticated than the target reader group can manage since it “required systems of thought and modes of cognition such as abstract thought that are not yet developed in concrete operational 8 to 12-year-olds” (Emerson, 2019: 34, 52).

## **5. Motherhood: institution and individual**

The main topic of this analysis is to focus on the concepts of Motherhood as an institution, as an individual identity and as an emotional experience. The subtopics explored are violence against women who are mothers, trauma and sorrow in relation to motherhood and the connection of these ideas to the struggle for power.

One of the key elements of motherhood studies is the distinction between the mother as an individual and the institution of motherhood (Rich, 2021; Hirsch, 1989). Motherhood studies also diverge from maternal feminism (the idea that women as caregivers have a distinct function in society) and include conversations on Reproductive Justice (Morison, 2021). Nonetheless, the incorporation of several of the ideas of maternal feminism are still present in general culture and rhetoric (O'Brien Hallstein, 2017).

### **5.1. Mother as a role**

The institution of motherhood considers the idea of 'mother' as a role, not a person. This institutionalization affects the way we refer to the experience of mothering, the way we share this experience, and how it is recognized by society. Since this multifaceted experience affects the perception and judgement of motherhood, Rich (2021) considers that the institution of motherhood is under the control of patriarchy. This 'motherhood as institution' implies violence towards women and motherhood in general (O'Reilly, 2019). The experience of motherhood, however, has additionally proven to be racialized and non-inclusive, and fails to recognize BIPOC experiences (Hayden, 2017; O'Brien Hallstein, 2017; Nash, 2021) or any other non-normative experience (Gumbs, 2016; Valiquette-Tessier, Gosselin, Young and Thomassin, 2019).

In contrast with the idea of motherhood as an institution, Rich considers that women, above all, should be considered as persons and, therefore, they should not be used as an instrument. They should have a voice in the community and their voice should be participant in decision and policy making (Rich 2021; Gumbs, 2016). This personal embodiment of motherhood raises several other concerns and discussions. On the one hand, women's duality appears as a collision between the autonomous self and the mother that has to 'disappear' as an individual to be in charge of care (Bueskens, 2018). Bueskens considers the duality of this identity negotiation and how it impacts gender roles, the domestic sphere, and the action of mothering. She highlights how women as individuals might become free, while they remain immersed in traditional gender roles as mothers (Ibid). On the other hand, this duality appears as mothers represent the first image of authority in the child's world (Hirsch, 1989: 166) and, therefore, generate an uncomfortable conversation about the struggle between power and feminism. Gumbs (2016: 24) specifically speaks about letting go of the 'm' in 'mother' and refusing to dominate or abuse offspring.

Additionally, motherhood has been sacralized by patriarchal societies, creating an archetype which reduces real women to failures (Rich, 2021). This archetype represents a type of mothering that requires the fulfillment of both the domestic and public spaces and which has received different names throughout history of motherhood studies (intensive mothering, new momism) (O'Brien Hallstein, 2017: 2). It is related to *matrophobia*, considered an inherent element of feminism, especially the second wave (Ibid: 25-45), and mostly linked to a white awareness of motherhood. Matrophobia can be defined as “the fear of *becoming one's mother*” (Rich, 2021: 235 italics original) since the aspiration should be to become better. Additionally, Rich presents the issues raised by Hirsch in relation to the “mother as a constraining rather than an enabling force in the girl's development” (Ibid: 169) by embodying the idealized example of motherhood. New mothering trends complement this idea from diverse perspectives. On the one hand, they suggest reducing the concept of ‘motherhood’ to the experience lived by privileged mothers that do not find their mothering experience threatened. On the other hand, incorporate a new term, the action of ‘mothering’, which is performed by the enslaved and underprivileged women that have historically had to nurture and care for children that were not their own, while they did not have a choice towards their own motherhood. This concept is considered as a place to “grow past the norms” (Gumbs, 2016: 24) beyond the archetype of motherhood.

*The Girl Who Drank the Moon* represents the idea of motherhood as an institution through the initial premise of the story. Motherhood appears to be at the service of the greater good of The Protectorate, with the sacrifice of a child being an accepted violence against women and mothers in the context of the wellbeing of the general population.

One of the female heroic figures found in the book, Ethyne, mother of a baby to be sacrificed, aligns with the archetypal model mother in *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*. After the volcanic eruption and the climatic confrontation between Luna and Sister Ignatia, Ethyne becomes a *de facto* influential agent in The Protectorate's society, as “in the center of these changes stood Ethyne – all reason and possibility, and a hot cup of tea, which a baby strapped to her chest” (Barnhill, 2017: 373). Ethyne is a key female figure in the story, who is able to decipher information in traditional storytelling and who mobilizes the general society when Sister Ignatia has left The Protectorate to hunt down Antain and Luna. Ethyne, therefore, represents an idealization of motherhood and the how it is made to become a “separate sphere” in society (Biss, 2021: xi). When Gherland visits Ethyne to announce that her child will be required for the annual sacrifice, and accepts a cup of herbs he has previously criticized as a useless crop, her welcoming home is described as:

“The baby was strapped to her body with a pretty cloth, which she had embroidered herself, no doubt. Everything in the house was clever and beautiful. Industrious, creative, and canny. Gherland had seen that combination before, and he did not like it. She poured hot water into two handmade cups stuffed with mint, and sweetened it with honey from her hive outside. Bees and flowers and even singing birds surrounded the house. Gherland shifted uncomfortably. He took his cup of tea and thanked his hostess; through he was certain that he would despise it. He took a sip. The tea, he realized peevishly, was the most delicious thing he had ever drunk.” (Barnhill, 2017: 274).

However, this concept of a ‘model mother’ is contested when Ethyne is able to transform others, as well as herself, leveraging her status as a doomed mother in the eyes of other members of The Protectorate. Her character is presented as unique, as she does not respect the structure of power imposed by The Protectorate and she questions the seemingly unquestionable order. The threat to her experience of motherhood seems to let loose a unique strength or, as Factora-Borchers (2016: 155) describes it, a “crazy urge to clean up the world for my son.”

The Madwoman is a contrasting example of the mother archetype. In this case, there are several elements that differ in the experience of motherhood and, therefore, affect the identity of the woman. Most evidently, the Madwoman has lost her daughter, as she was taken away for the sacrifice, even though she also resists the order of things, as Ethyne does (Barnhill, 2017: 7). This character represents the emotional experience of motherhood, which is also part of the active decision of becoming a mother (Rich, 2021). Her sanity is lost with the trauma inflicted upon her as a woman and as a mother, representing Mauclair’s (2019: 41) analysis of ‘self-denial’ attached to motherhood, and how it is generally found in picture books and in children’s literature. However, this madness allows her to connect differently with the world and, eventually, access magic. She represents the entanglement with the body that the experience of maternity implies (Hirsch, 1989: 166). In this way, *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* aligns with the very successful consideration of motherhood as an example of love and self-sacrifice, which is especially idealized as it creates a response to capitalistic, market values, based on self-profit (Hays, 1996), yet it contests these same ideas through the agency of the mothers, which bridge the concepts of motherhood as an institution and as an individual.

## 5.2. Familial relations

*The Girl Who Drank the Moon* presents a love relationship between mother and child that is akin to a mystical link. It does correspond to current scholarship on the effects of motherhood on neuroplasticity, cognition and general endocrine regulation and empathy (Duarte-Guterman *et al.*, 2019, Plank *et al.*, 2021). A special connection appears to exist between child and mother. Luna can feel her mother’s presence, and this helps Luna recognize her (Barnhill, 2017: 344-345). Her mother, the Madwoman, is also able to recognize emotionally that Luna exists.

Alternatively, Barnhill proposes a story in which motherhood, or more accurately, familial ties, are considered a choice. If there is a relationship of love, a family link can exist (Ibid: 352). Contemporary motherhood studies include different perspectives on this idea, by considering adoption and queer/lesbian mothering, while questioning the dynamics of power and perception among birth mothers, adoptive mothers, not-mothers (Latchford, 2012) and the assumption of maternal desire and familial ties as represented in narrative (Greenway, 2016; Millán-Scheidig, 2021). The inclusion of racialized perspectives and the addressing of privilege have proven to be key elements in these discussions.

In *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*, Xan has a budding love for the sacrificial baby when she picks her up. Once the baby has been *enmagicked*, she comments: ““Luna,” she said. “Your name will be Luna. And I will be your grandmother. And we will be family”” (Barnhill, 2017: 27). Becoming family connotes a responsibility towards each other, in which nurturing and education are key. Luna recognizes this role in the figure of Xan when she considers her “the woman who fed her. The woman who taught her to build and dream and create” (Ibid: 347).

Maternal love or the act of ‘mothering’ is not presented as sacrifice and/or competition, but as a choice which entitles responsibilities and consequences. While Fyrian speaks about Luna’s companion saying “I despise that crow. Luna loves me best” (Ibid: 357), Glerk reminds him that the dragon does not hate anyone. Luna must learn that love is not linked to the threat of possession. When she lets the Star Children, all of them adopted, know about their belonging to two families, she reminds them that love can only increase as “My love isn’t divided” [...] it is multiplied” (Ibid: 378).

While motherhood studies highlight how “motherhood [...] works as a “god term” on culture, shaping positive connotations, assumptions and ideals about women, family and society” (O’Brien Hallstein, 2017: 2), Barnhill proposes a construct of motherhood that subverts the traditional roles of stepmothers or stepchildren (Alcantud Díaz, 2021), by integrating diverse family structures into the storyline and highlighting the agency required to be a family. In this way, she deactivates the common manifestation of a reduced status of women through competition (Rich, 2021). Additionally, while most of the characters of *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* are female, Antain does proactively intend to defend his child against the inevitable destiny of becoming the annual sacrifice (Chapter 24). Whether this role crosses over into parenting could be discussed, as he seems to embody a male function of protection through violence.

### 5.3. Trauma and sorrow

*The Girl Who Drank the Moon* represents a unique form of violence against *women* occurring simultaneously to *motherhood*, by illustrating the children being taken away from their mothers after birth. O’Reilly (2019: 1247) considers how “violence immediately prior to, during, and immediately following pregnancy illustrates that the physical and mental health effects of violence against women are uniquely experienced by women who are mothers”. Gumbs (2016: 22) refers to an institutional and systematic violence upon BIPOC mothers, not only in relation to their experience of mothering, but also upon their choice, illustrating issues of power impacting on the mere possibility of experiencing motherhood. The connection between violence and trauma, especially during motherhood, is considered to cause a specific experience of post-traumatic stress disorder where “trauma experienced by an individual is so severe that the individual is unable to cognitively process the experience, they experience repeated and often uncontrollable psychological distress (O’Reilly, 2019: 1247).



Trauma and sorrow are key elements of the *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*, since they are the magical nourishment that the main villain requires to thrive. This element is contrasted with a redefinition of love and family that pivots upon the central idea of motherhood as the need to keep your offspring safe, not necessarily as a means to possession or heritage. In this way, it aligns with the concept of nurturing the freedom of the child, as posed by Jordan (2016). In *The Protectorate*, mothers that had lost their babies drowned in sorrow, since they presumed the children dead. Towards the end of the book, these mothers are filled with hope when they can see visions of their children alive, on the other side of the forest (Barnhill, 2017: 312-314). The story itself starts out with this fight for safety, when the mother of a doomed child, against all tradition, refuses to give her up for the sacrifice (Ibid: 7-8).

The presence of trauma appears at an individual level, through the transformation of Luna's mother into the Madwoman and her journey back to having an identity. It also appears at a collective level, considering how the continuous trauma inflicted upon the family structures of the Protectorate keep the city under a cloud of sorrow and limit the agency of the general population, illustrating issues of power involved in the experience of motherhood. In this way, Barnhill displays how "in patriarchal societies, where resources and wealth are inherited through male lines, a number of patterns emerge that are considered to increase the likelihood that violence against women is normalized" (O'Reilly, 2019: 1245) by presenting the main governmental structure as a male organization, situated in that 'once upon a time' setting where "linguistic clues help the reader construct a fantasy image filled with pictures of castles, magic objects, princes and princesses, and faraway lands" (Palmira Massi & Marcela Benvenuto, 2001: 165).

The idea of sorrow and protection lays a bridge between conceptions of institutional motherhood and motherhood as an individual in *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*, by representing concepts that are being discussed in both areas. Considering sorrow can appear as the type of pain Rich calls "affliction", which prevents the sufferer from managing their time or coordinating a response; or as the pain she calls "suffering", which that can be used to trigger action (Rich, 2021), there is a contrasting way of dealing with loss in the story. Fyrian confronts the loss of his mother right at the same moment that Luna has cracked open the memory of Sister Ignatia. Fyrian is guided by his family (Glerk and Xan) to look past anger and sorrow to confront the feeling of loss and give space to mourning – and the growth that comes with it. Sister Ignatia, however, succumbs to loss: "my mother and my father and my sisters and my brothers. My village and my friends. All gone. All that was left was sorrow. Sorrow and memory and memory and sorrow" (Barnhill, 2017: 365).

When speaking about giving birth in particular, but also about motherhood in general, Rich considers that the relationship between pain and love, at both the general cultural level as well as the linguistic level, is embedded into the ideology of motherhood (2021). In Barnhill's novel, not only does this love/pain relationship affect mothers, but also children. The dragon, Fyrian, is affected by the loss of his mother. He is unable to grow and this impossibility is pinned on the death of his mother when Fyrian was a baby. Glerk considers it might have been "because you stayed too close to where

your mother died. Maybe you couldn't bear to grow" (Barnhill, 2017: 321). When the same events that killed his mother 500 years prior are happening again (a volcanic eruption), Fyrian goes through a growth spurt, as his size as an adult dragon will be needed to protect his current family: Xan, Luna and Glerk and, concurrently, he is forced to face his trauma. Luna also incorporates these ideas into the concept of love. Upon the death of Xan, she ponders how "*there is no love without loss*, she thought. *My mother knows this. Now I know it too* (Ibid: 383, italics original).

#### 5.4. Storytelling and the oral tradition

Storytelling appears as a woman's activity throughout the book. There are several chapters which are one-sided dialogues of a voice that illustrates the story which The Protectorate has built its social structure upon. It is revealed that this voice is the voice of Ethyne's mother in chapter 38. Ethyne's mother is piecing together stories heard from previous female voices before her, echoing knowledge passed down for generations.

The inclusion of metanarrative is a crucial element to decode the structures of power in the storyline. Ethyne considers how "a story can tell the truth, she knew, but a story can also lie. Stories can bend and twist and obfuscate. Controlling stories is power indeed. And who would benefit most from such a power?" (Ibid: 309).

Domestic storytelling has mostly been anonymous, yet current scholarship considers how it was preserved and crossed generations through the voice of women (Medlicott, 2018). In the case of *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*, storytelling is linked with the current status of post truth (McIntyre, 2018) and the idea of discourse manipulation, in the service of power. While Haidi (2020) views this as a conflict between Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA), with Sister Ignatia asserting "I started the stories in the Protectorate. *I did*. They all came from me. There is no story that I did not tell first" (Barnhill, 2017: 329, italics original), the Madwoman says she is wrong.

The metanarrative can also be considered as an example of how stories, interwoven, can remind the collective motherhood of the limits imposed by institutional motherhood (Adams, 2017). It also pays homage to the idea of oral storytelling in contrast with the canonical written story, subverting and offering divergent and necessary perspectives on concepts such as mothering. This offers a framework to question the established order that story starts with, setting in motion the actions and struggles that engage in key themes of motherhood studies.

The Madwoman also refers to stories when she is able to clearly see the role of Sister Ignatia in her downfall. She mentions how "everyone knows that name. [...] it was in a story. About how the Witch ate a tiger's heart. They all whisper it. It's wrong, of course. You don't have a tiger's heart. You have no heart at all" (Barnhill, 2017: 329).

### 5.5. Connection to natural cycles

Motherhood as a unique link to natural cycles accompanies humanity since its early belief structures. Rich mentions a mother “whose power radiates out from her maternal aspect to the fertilization of the whole earth, the planting and harvesting of crops, the cycle of seasons, the dialogue of humankind and nature” (Rich, 2021: 33). While this concept is one supported by a patriarchal perspective, *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* represents it often. The moon is the main culprit of the *enmagickment* of the sacrificial baby, and her corresponding name of Luna, aligning with the archetype of the Prepatriarchal religion virgin-mother-goddess linked to the worshipping of the moon and its cycles, associated generally with women (Rich, 2021).

Barnhill highlights the idea of cycles, as she mentions how “everything you see is in the process of making or unmaking or dying or living. Everything is in a state of *change*.” (Ibid: 333, italics original). Dyer considers how the cycle of life and death is embodied in the woman’s menstrual cycle (Dyer, 2020: 70). She uses the example of the myth of Persephone and Demeter to link this conception of natural cycle, concretized in the woman’s body, and to illustrate the mother-daughter bond (Ibid: 100, 105). This idea is picked up in the book with Xan’s death being related to the rise of Luna’s magic, at age 13. Glerk comments on the fact with: “Poor Xan. She did her best to hold on to Luna’s childhood, but there was no escaping it. That girl is growing. And she won’t be a girl for much longer” (Barnhill, 2017: 323). Her coming of age happens magically, with her ability to create, her coming into her own powers, and physically, her ability to procreate, coming into menstruation and a different connection with reality. Barnhill extends this power to every character that is able to love when Luna considers:

“[...] how many feelings can one heart hold? She looked at her grandmother. At her mother. At the man protecting his family. *Infinite*, Luna thought. The way the universe is infinite. It is light and dark and endless motion; it is space and time, and space within space, and time within time. And she knew: *there is no limit to what the heart can carry*.” (Barnhill, 2017: 364, italics original).

## 6. Conclusions

As an example of feminist literary criticism, this article intends to illustrate the synchronicity of issues that are central to motherhood studies as they appear in storytelling, and consider how these issues are mediated for a young readership, specifically in Barnhill’s novel *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*. To this purpose, characters’ agency and the storytelling elements have been examined in parallel to axioms of motherhood studies, to identify how these ideas were represented from a psychosocial perspective.

Tucker (1981: 19) highlights how “children [...] with their essentially moral imagination, still demand big themes in much of their literature: dealing, for example, with heroism, personal salvation, or good and evil” and these themes appear regularly in fairy tales (Bettelheim, 1977). As a

contemporary fairy tale, *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* proves to be inscribed into a synchronic moment where feminism and motherhood studies are reflected in storytelling. A mediated view on the complex status of motherhood as an institution, as an individual identity and as an emotional experience offers the child reader a nuanced vision into an ongoing discussion.

The following figure collects a list of the critical issues from Motherhood studies represented in *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*. Both the concepts from “motherhood as a role” and “motherhood as an individual” appear to impact the construction of subjectivity of the characters and affect the storytelling in relation to the institutional experience and the sociocultural reality within the narrative.

**Figure 1: Critical issues of motherhood studies, as represented in *The Girl Who Drank the Moon***

Motherhood as a role							
Maternal feminism	Reproductive Justice	Traditional gender roles familial relationships	Sacralized motherhood archetype	Systemic violence against women	Mothering as a choice: adoption	Motherhood and femininity as connected to natural cycles	Racialized, non-normative experiences
Represented (and contested) by Ethyne	Represented by Ethyne and the Madwoman against the interest of The Protectorate	Represented and enforced by The Protectorate	Represented by Ethyne	Represented by The Protectorate (upon pregnancy and birth)			
Motherhood as an individual							
Duality in agency and independence between autonomous self (individual) and mother (traditional gender roles)	Authority in mother/child relationship	Mystical link between mother/child: physiological effects of motherhood		Trauma related to motherhood			
Represented by Ethyne: appears to have both roles coexist  Appears with the Madwoman: representation of self-denial  Madwoman represents the entanglement with the body  Madwoman and Xan represent relationship between love and self-sacrifice.	Tangential representation through the relationships between the Madwoman, Luna and Xan	Represented by the Madwoman and Luna		Represented by the Madwoman and the other mothers of the Protectorate	Represented by Xan and Luna familial relationship  Represented by Xan and Glerk's familial relationship	Found throughout the story, explicitly mentioned as a cyclical reality; linked to sexual maturity	Not addressed at any level

Source: Summary of key Motherhood Studies' topics as represented by characters' subjectivity, sociocultural and institutional relations in *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*, own work.

Barnhill's novel focuses on motherhood studies' topics in relation to power, as illustrated through governmental structures and the role of storytelling. Several archetypical topics contested by feminism and motherhood studies are also found in the book, such as (1) the archetype of motherhood as the "source of angelic love and forgiveness in a world increasingly ruthless and impersonal [...] the symbol and residue of moral values and tenderness in a world of wars, brutal competition, and contempt for human weakness" (Rich, 2021:52) and (2) the link to femininity and natural cycles.

The construction of family, however, incorporates a broader perspective by deconstructing stereotypical family structures and giving the characters the agency to create their own version of family and love, following a trend that is shyly appearing in children and young adult's literature (Ramos & Ferreira Boo, 2013). Barnhill highlights the agency of diverse female characters and asks the reader to question the position of mothers and children in the story. An intersectional perspective on motherhood and the sociocultural elements that surround it, however, is mostly not included in the story, which does not reflect contemporary trends in racialized and minority motherhood experiences at any level.

Numerous additional considerations can be taken into account as limitations to this research. The synchronic flow between scholarship, dissemination and creation indicates that some theoretical concepts are in constant expansion and can change with new research. The awareness of specific topics by the author is not quantified: why are some perspectives from motherhood studies incorporated while others are not? How does this reflect the general circulation and echoing of scholarship on the topic? In relation to future research, there are several other key themes in *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* which are related to its synchronic moment of publication and which could also be examined, namely the mechanisms of sorrow, coping and hope (at a moment when cognitive functions are being explored in depth); storytelling, rhetoric and manipulation or censorship (at a moment where post-truth is present in mass media) and education or memory.

The impact of the novel, albeit being awarded a Newbery medal, could also be quantified. Is the readership affected by the title (which includes the key word 'girl') and main female protagonist? If the readership is restricted by gender, to what extent does the incorporation of feminist or motherhood studies issues impact upon education or reader's knowledge? Lastly, as Hirsh (1989: 176) considers: "if maternal voices are not to be found in feminist theoretical writing, is it possible to turn to feminist fiction for an articulation of maternal subjectivity? Do mothers write their own experience *as mothers*?"

This article compares a field of study (motherhood studies) with a creative writing piece (*The Girl Who Drank the Moon*) through the lens of feminist theory, to discover whether and how critical issues are represented in storytelling. Since stories have the potential to create a strong emotional response, and impact upon identity and representation, their potential to bring social justice concerns to the young reader is fundamental.

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