

FEEDING ANXIETIES AND THE IDENTITY OF THE ARTIST: THE
MONSTROUS MOTHER IN RACHEL YODER'S *NIGHTBITCH* (2021)

Laura Álvarez Trigo
(Universidad de Valladolid)
laura.alvarez.trigo@uva.es
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8115-433X>

ABSTRACT: This paper examines the representation of monstrous motherhood in Rachel Yoder's *Nightbitch* (2021) through theorizations of female monstrosity, with a specific focus on the role that food and art play in the narrative. While idealized motherhood is often associated with homemaking—especially food preparations and serving—*Nightbitch*'s animalistic subjectivity leads to a blood thirst that slowly but surely drives her away from traditional sanitized maternal cooking and cleaning. Besides, the loss of her professional identity as an artist caused by becoming a stay-at-home mother is ultimately tackled through performance art. In combination, these attitudes lead her further away from societal expectations of motherly behavior as she welcomes the monster within her.

KEYWORDS: monstrous motherhood, gender, abjection, food, performance art.

LAS ANSIEDADES DE ALIMENTAR Y LA IDENTIDAD DEL ARTISTA: LA
MATERNIDAD MONSTRUOSA EN *NIGHTBITCH* (2021) DE RACHEL YODER

RESUMEN: Este artículo examina la representación de la maternidad monstruosa en *Nightbitch* (2021) de Rachel Yoder a través de teorías sobre la monstruosidad femenina, con un enfoque específico en el papel que juegan la comida y el arte en la novela. Si bien la maternidad idealizada a menudo se asocia con las tareas del hogar, especialmente con la preparación y el servicio de alimentos, la subjetividad animal de *Nightbitch* le provoca una sed de sangre que poco a poco la aleja de la cocina tradicional y la limpieza asociadas a la maternidad. Además, la pérdida de su identidad profesional como artista al convertirse en ama de casa es finalmente confrontada a través de una performance. En combinación, estas actitudes terminan por alejarla aún más de las expectativas sociales de comportamiento maternal llevándola a aceptar su monstruo interior.

PALABRAS CLAVE: maternidad monstruosa, género, abyección, comida, arte performativo.

INTRODUCTION

Rachel Yoder's debut novel *Nightbitch*, published 2021, falls within a trend in female American fiction of the past decade that centers Gothic narratives and complex female protagonists, such as Otessa Moshfegh's *Eileen* (2015) and Mona Awad's *Bunny* (2019). In these narratives, women delve into the monstrous and/or problematic—even into pure evil—, pursuing dangerous paths as they question traditional expectations of femininity. Yoder's novel—and her only one so far—follows a female protagonist, named only as «the mother» at the beginning, who after having trained as an artist leaves her work at a museum in order to take care of her toddler son. During these first months at

home, she starts to notice changes in her body: extra hair growing at the nape of her neck, an (alleged) skin cyst at the end of her back which is really a growing tail, a characteristically canine appetite for raw meat, and an extreme disgust for the family pet cat. While all this is happening, her frustrations with her role as a mother are made evident when she fails at potty training her child and making him go to sleep at a reasonable time. Her anxiety and exhaustion are clearly channeled through the monstrous changes she undergoes which culminate in her capacity to fully turn into a dog. Even though this might be reminiscent of stories that show their protagonist turning to bestiality in order to leave their human responsibilities behind, the change here «extends beyond the allegorical transformations of fairytale» (Schoeff, 2024: 5). The protagonist turns into *Nightbitch*, a name the mother jokingly gives herself in the opening scene of the novel and an identity that she maintains for her human form. With this, Yoder's work reflects on social pressures and the very gendered expectations of raising offspring—more specifically, the particulars of providing care for a toddler—.

There have been representations of maternity in fiction that, since the idealized image of the mid-20th-century housewife, aim to present women who have both successful careers and embody a perfect image of motherhood. Contemporary fictional narratives perpetuate the image of «women who will enter the labour market and stay in it» because the current capitalist economy cannot be sustained having «long-term stay-at-home wives and mothers» (McRobbie, 2013: 121). This, however, comes at a price for career mothers who have two-fold social expectations. Their experience of motherhood and work «[fails to correspond] with such idealized representations, which «[helps] reproduce structures and relations of gender inequality» (Orgad, 2016: 479). In combination with the career mother, we are also confronted with representations of stay-at-home mothers, who have decided to leave their jobs in order to take care of their children, as is the case of *Nightbitch*'s protagonist. Pamela Stone uses the term «forced choice» to discuss how American women opt out of the labor force (2007: 114-115) highlighting the great impact that social expectations have on decisions regarding motherhood that are framed as being individual and willing.

In this context, offering alternative narratives to such representations of expected motherhood and social mandates can be seen as a possible space for empowerment. Erika Horwitz, in her dissertation, studied the experience of women who «believed they were resisting the dominant discourse on mothering» (2004: 44). Her findings are illuminating when looking at literary representations of the struggles of motherhood, particularly, in the case of *Nightbitch*, given that said resistance is connected to a monstrosity that, it follows, embodies the mother's empowerment. Horwitz puts forward several characteristics of empowered mothering. Many of these characteristics are directly linked to the experiences that *Nightbitch* has: the importance of challenging mainstream mothering practices, having to meet her individual needs beyond being a mother, challenging the idea that the only emotion that mothers should feel for their children is love, and questioning the expectations of society. Through her shape-shifting capabilities and canine nature, the mother in *Nightbitch* exercises a form of liberation, of the empowered motherhood that Horwitz finds that «decrease[s] the degree of maternal guilt» by «resisting the dominant discourse» (2004: 53).

At the same time, the novel drinks from the long-standing tradition of shape-shifting in literature, whereby individuals change into various other forms which can embody both suppressed fears and hopeful paths to freedom. This tradition is often connected to witchcraft. In particular, female transformation into wolves (or animals, more broadly) tends to be linked to some form of liberation and a yearning for freedom. In literature, the figure of the female werewolf has been frequently employed to discuss

issues of sexuality as far back as in *The Were-Wolf* (1896) by Clemence Housman (who was also a prominent figure in the suffragist movement). Loïs van Albada, in her analysis of *Nightbitch*, argues that the tropes of the female werewolf and the monstrous mother «become positively configured, moving beyond earlier interpretations» (2024: n.p.) but still connected to said desire for further freedom, for true choice. Andrea O'Reilly argues that the shape-shifting capabilities and canine nature that the mother develops in *Nightbitch* become a unique opportunity to claim an animalistic rage through which «maternal power may be reclaimed» and «empowered mothering may be realized» (O'Reilly 2023: n.p.). Taking this into consideration, this paper examines the representation of monstrous motherhood in Rachel Yoder's novel, interrogating how it explores the frustrations of motherhood, social expectations, gender roles and the artistic impulse by turning the mother character into a beast. The analysis focuses on the role that food-related anxieties (including both feeding herself and the child) and the mother's art play in the narrative.

CONFIGURING THE MONSTROUS MATERNITY OF NIGHTBITCH

Nightbitch is characterized as imperfect, often insecure about her parenting decisions and, in her lowest moments, showing a certain resentment toward a son that prevents her from sleeping, working at the museum, and watching her favorite programs on TV instead of cartoons. Notably, these are things that the father is perfectly able to do since his parenting responsibilities are far less than those of the mother. The disparity in housework distribution and the responsibilities of childcare soon exacerbate the mother's annoyance and resentment at her motherly duties. In spite of the frustration that child-caring causes from time to time, *Nightbitch*'s constant internal monologue lets the reader appreciate that she greatly loves her son and wants to properly take care of him. However, far from idealized versions of sacrificial motherhood, the love she feels for her son is shadowed by the profound alienation that many of her home-making chores generate.

When she feels desperate about her situation and starts considering her potential new dog nature, she attempts to ground herself by going through the expected steps of successful motherhood. As per her husband's advice, who informs her that «Happiness is a choice» (Yoder, 2021: 21), she tries to have a positive attitude toward life. She reminds herself, through repeated sentences that come off as very disingenuous, that this new mindset is somehow helping her, «She loved her positive outlook!» (21). *Nightbitch* goes through the movements of her very repetitive routine while attempting this strategy of self-delusion. A young former co-worker runs into her at the grocery store, and poses quite a charged question about how she feels with her new role as a stay-home mother: «Do you love being home with this guy? I bet it's so fun» (52). Instead of giving an honest answer about how hard and tiring it has actually been, the mother simply provides the socially acceptable expected answer: «I love it. I love being a mom» (53). With that statement she tries to convince both the young girl and herself that she has made the right choice leaving her job in favor of taking care of her son, in a clear representation of what Stone refers to as «forced choice» to become a stay-at-home mother (2007: 114).

Where the positivity her husband advices fails, embracing her new monstrosity opens up new paths of acceptance and a new outlook on motherhood. The love for her child starts to override the frustration and alienation that she feels when she begins to lean into her new canine nature. At home, she plays with her child pretending they are dogs, which causes a behavioral improvement on the boy and relaxes the mother as she lets go of self-control and leaves behind certain mandates of social norms that determine how mothering should look like. Some days after they have started engaging in their private

doggy play, the young boy insists on continuing to pretend he is a dog even when they are outdoors. Nightbitch emphatically tells the boy that he cannot do such things when they are in public, people will see them and she knows that she must abide by the established social norms and present a well-behaved clean child. However, it does not take much to change her mind: «The boy glowed and *arfed* and panted with his little pink tongue. He was horrible, and she loved him» (Yoder, 2021: 119). Her describing the child as «horrible» here shows an acceptance of the wrongful nature of behaving animalistically in public, something that she also desires and will eventually surrender to.

Through small moments like this one, the monstrous motherhood begins to emerge, as Makay C. Walsh argues, caused «by the unfair demands and expectations placed [by society]» (2024: 39). Almost invariably, it allows her to explore a new type of motherly behavior she is far more comfortable with. Through her animal nature she can now embrace both her failures and anger, negating the social obligation of having to look constantly content and put together. Her duty is toward her child, and the monstrous motherhood she is beginning to explore grants her the opportunity to raise her child in her own terms, with freedom and enjoyment, letting the boy have unrestrained fun, even when it means breaking certain social norms and expectations.

The characterization of the monstrous motherhood in Yoder's novel is very compelling. Ideas of evil, neglect, and tyranny come to mind when thinking about monsters. Yet recent scholarship has shown that monstrous women do not necessarily display an evil nature. Their monstrosity is often most importantly characterized by a «violation of gender norms» that becomes grotesque and intolerable because «their acts are deemed criminal and pathological» (Taylor, 2010: 142). Hence, these women are Othered through a process of equating their defiance of gender-appropriate behavior with a monster-like quality. When female monstrosity is combined with maternity, the cruel mother motif is often brought to the forefront—illustrated by Abigail Palko in the introduction to the volume *Monstrous Mothers: Troubling Tropes* (2021) with examples such as the mythological Medea, Shakespeare's Queen Gertrude and Toni Morrison's Sethe (9)—. In *Nightbitch*, although some dangerous behaviors toward the child arise, the depiction of monstrous motherhood does not frame such occurrences as the foundation of the monstrosity. On the contrary, occasional careless attitudes that endanger the child originate in the mother's struggle to fight the animal instincts that drive her toward an alternative way of mothering, opposed to established social norms and exceptions. In her most recent work on the monstrous feminine, Barbara Creed also reminds us that «traditionally, maternal horror is associated with the monstrous mother who loves too much» and is «possessive» and «suffocating» (2022: 23). It is worth noting that this is also not the case of the mother that we encounter in Yoder's novel.

I argue that the changes toward the monstrous that the mother undergoes are triggered by her loss of identity. This loss is made very explicit in the novel, as the main character is never given a name. Her identity is completely absorbed by becoming a mother, as this is how she is referred to at the beginning of the novel, reflecting her lost sense of self, as she leaves behind her career as an artist to take care of her child, while the father can only be home during weekends due to his own job. Later on, as the transformation begins and she starts to accept this new monstrous identity, she becomes Nightbitch and is referred as such (capitalized) throughout most of the novel. This resonates quite profoundly with Kristeva's writings on abjection (1982: 5), as she argues that:

If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of

fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it is none other than abject.

Nightbitch's loss of identity develops in parallel with a constant self-policing based on perceived external expectations, whereby she constantly sees herself and her worth—as a mother and as a professional artist—through the eyes of others. Most notably, her husband, the group of mothers at the Books Babies (a recurrent event at her local library), and the group of former co-workers. The boundary that the monster creates for Nightbitch is that separation between what she is capable of doing with her life and the social expectations about being a good mother, a working mother, a good artist and a happy person. The marginalization that she feels when confronting her perceived failures is the basis for the construction of the monster. This articulates what Cohen proposes in his theorization of the monster as an «abjecting epistemological device» that forms identity through a category that is an «extreme version of marginalization» (Cohen, 1996: ix). That is, Nightbitch's feelings of being left behind, of not being good enough or not doing enough, situate her into a marginalized status, and as she is separating from societal norms, she begins developing a canine nature.

Following Taylor's proposition, the present analysis of *Nightbitch* is done based on the reading that female monsters, in whatever form they might take, are frequently defined by breaking the norms that maintain the power relations between genders in society. Nightbitch's monstrosity appears progressively as she realizes that she is drifting further and further away from society. On the one hand, she does this by losing her sense of identity as she becomes a mother, leaves her professional career to take care of her child, and is not able to create her art anymore, even though she feels like she should be able to do both—as perceived by the world outside the «prison» (Yoder, 2021: 53) of her own house—. On the other hand, she notices that she is failing at what is expected of her mothering. Not only because she does not seem to be able to properly care for the child—feeding him proper food, potty training him at an appropriate age, keeping the child looking clean, etc.—without almost fainting from exhaustion, but also because, being dedicated to the child that she has and loves she thinks she should be happy, as we have seen above in her interaction with the woman at the grocery store after her husband tells her to have a positive attitude. Her transformation into canine form, manifested through growing hair, a tail, an increased appetite for blood and raw meat, and overt expressions of anger, is directly linked to her maternity and, more explicitly to her failure at maternity, seen as such through the lenses of external societal perceptions of for both how the child should be cared for and how she should continue her art career.

It is indeed the break with those social expectations that ignites the emergence of her monstrous/shape-shifting side. As Kristeva argues, «it is not a lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection, but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite» (1982: 4). It is, most notably, the reactions of others that lead her down the rabbit hole of self-rejection that her nature fights by recovering self-confidence and identity through accepting her monstrous side, which embodies her lack of acceptance for certain social norms, her desire for greater community, and her artistic side. The more detailed analysis that follows, focusing on specific passages from the novel, aims to explore how that break with social norms and the emergence of the monster are intrinsically connected in the novel's framing of the mother's identity through food related anxieties and Nightbitch's identity as an artist. The following sections analyze these two key aspects identified in the novel's presentation of the flourishing monstrosity of the mother.

THE NURTURING MOTHER OR HOW A MONSTER FEEDS A CHILD

There are many issues and worries that arise for Nightbitch grouped here under the umbrella of feeding anxieties. These emerge from a combination between the responsibility of properly nurturing your child, societal expectations of cleanness, and acceptable meat consumption. More specifically, the focus is put on the policing of the mother's own diet in light of having to breastfeed her child, the cleanness needed to keep food safe and preventing the child from eating anything dangerous, and the consumption of raw meat mixed with the instinct-caused by the monstrous nature the mother develops—to kill other animals. Margrit Shildrick, in her work on posthumanism and the monstrous body, associates nature with monstrosity: «when set against culture, nature is at best base and unruly—that which must be controlled—and at worst that which is deeply disruptive and uncontrollable» (1996: 2). By looking at this food-related anxieties, it becomes clear that in the monstrosity of the mother there is a deep and powerful desire to not be controlled and to act against certain cultural values.

One of the first excerpts in which the mother's preoccupations regarding food/feeding is made evident relates to breastfeeding. She ponders over various (likely unwelcome) advice on what she should do to make the milk come. The passage stylistically mirrors the mother's anxiety by listing the different advice, which probably has not come from the same person, with short and direct sentences:

It's her fault if the milk doesn't come. Too much coffee. Not enough food. You need to figure out a way to minimize stress. Eat an energy bar. Eat these nuts. Eat an entire bar of chocolate while at the same time holding the device against your breasts. Take these special herbal pills. Eat lots of oatmeal. Figure out how to balance it all. Drink an entire liter of water in the hope of let-down. (Yoder, 2021: 13)

The passage showcases how this anxiety originates in external input and expectations about her behavior and duties as a mother. It is noteworthy that much of the advice that she considers in the passage above has to do with how she feeds herself, making it clear that there is an implicit control of the mother's body in the presumably well-meant advice that she has received and/or read about. However, the exhaustion and general sense of discontent that her life situation causes in her involves preventing her from eating properly, she recognizes that she «was no longer well rested, fell fed, well» (Yoder, 2021: 20). The mother is worried because she knows what she is supposed to be eating, following the script of unwelcome advice and recommendations that would proof that she is socially acceptable and well adjusted.

A similar thing happens with the food that she knows her toddler should be eating. She prepares and plans for a meal with turkey loaf and grated veggies, with roasted potatoes and salad which the boy refuses to eat and screams: «Macaroni, macaroni!, until she relented and made him macaroni and cheese and peas. He ate two bites of each, then dumped the rest on the floor» (Yoder, 2021: 27). The second sentence, noting that the child did not even properly eat the food that he had asked for and throws the macaroni on the floor is particularly impactful. The style of the sentence is also quite telling of the state of mind of the mother. These happenings, which we can identify as really frustrating given the context that the meal is already not going quite as the mother had initially planned, further derails her intentions of not only feeding her son but keeping the house clean (as this would be part of her chores as a stay-at-home mother). The detachment and matter-of-fact tone of the statement represent her sense of giving up, of accepting the extremely disappointing environment that does not leave the slightest bit of space for anything to go her way.

This explicit mention of foods typically given to toddlers and children that they enjoy but are unhealthy is repeated several times in the first part of the novel with different items before we move on to concerns around the consumption of raw meat. We can see through various scenes how *Nightbitch* progressively leans more and more into doing what seems to be easier rather than confronting the desires of the son (which later on will extend to hers). Soon after the passage with the macaroni, they are at the grocery store: «The boy babbled, Cookie, cookie, cookie [...] [The mother] meandered distractedly toward the bakery department» (Yoder, 2021: 50). In this scene, there is not even an initial confrontation or any intention to do the right thing on part of the mother like it happened with the meal for which she had prepared the veggies and the salad.

The attention paid to food, feeding and meal preparation is a far from uncommon topic in contemporary female writing, as Tatiana Golban argues, this trend can be related to the gendered link between women and food since they have «authority in cooking» and the capacity to exert «power through food and acts of eating» (2011: 180). This is a relevant point to consider because, even though being in charge of food might be seen as a form of control (both over yourself and others) due to its highly gendered association with femininity and motherhood, this alleged control is inevitably enclosed within the frame of social expectations of motherhood. In this way, the idea of control, rather than to being in power, is connected to the expectation of being in control and put together as we see through *Nightbitch*'s preoccupation in the novel. Her growing concerns about her transformation are reflected in her trying to cling to socially acceptable things that she should be doing, which inevitably include expectations of healthy eating, opposed both to the infantile desires of the kid, and the canine appetite for meat. «Yes, vegetables were very civilized. Dogs wouldn't buy vegetables» (Yoder, 2021: 51), she utters talking to herself at the supermarket. There is a shift in this moment. The most pressing feeding anxiety that she feels now is related to the monstrous transformation that she knows is happening in her, leaving the concerns about her child (possibly for the first time since she began her stay-at-home role) slightly in the background. Nonetheless, she compares her impulses with her son's. He also desires something that is not the socially-acceptable healthy choice (i.e. cookies), but she realizes that there is something else to her desire that goes beyond childish or even human fancy for sugary treats:

She didn't want cookies. She went to the meat counter and bought three thick rib-eye steaks, the smell of pennies and blood and death spinning her into a depthless hunger. They were so beautiful! How had she never before noticed their beauty, the deep red of the meat set starkly against the white swirls of fat. (Yoder, 2021: 51)

The fact that her welcoming of the monstrous comes first through this kind of hunger highlights the importance that food and motherhood have in *Nightbitch*'s monstrosity.

On the one hand, as it has been already established, there is a strong connection between food and maternity. Not only because of the relation between traditional motherhood and cooking homemade meals for the husband and children but also because motherhood is associated with caring and nurturing, even in its most contemporary and modern conception as well as in the natural world. On the other hand, the animal instinct to hunt embodies a bloodthirst that directly opposes the kind of motherly attitude that is socially acceptable. Besides, the correlation between motherhood and care is associated with empathy and being humane. The humane, in turn, is connected with humanity and hence contrasts with the animalistic nature that *Nightbitch* expresses in the passage above as she speaks of the «smell of pennies and blood», her «depthless hunger», and describes

the smell raw meat as «beautiful». This contrast is precisely what the novel questions with its exploration of maternity through the lenses of the monster.

Considering Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject, blood transgresses the boundaries of what we consider 'inside' and 'outside' so that this particular attraction to bloody raw meat evidences the abjection within *Nightbitch*.

Shall we try this? she asked the boy, taking him the bits of raw meat. Should we be doggies? she asked. He nodded and smiled, his mouth full of food. They each took one of the small red pellets of meat and put them in their mouths, chewed. She growled and tickled him, and he laughed.

We're wild animals! she said. (Yoder, 2021: 76)

She allows herself to enjoy this and leans into her true desires. However, it can be noted that she seems to accept this raw meat to a certain extent because she has bought it at the supermarket, so there is still a certain sense of decency to letting her child consume this product: it must be at least safe and good because it has been bought. The young boy, however, whom we begin to notice embodies the push that she needs to move further away from societal norms and expectations, sometimes goes further than she is prepared to go. The mother is still confronting and confused by her nature as *Nightbitch* which she does not fully trust, as she is afraid that it might lead her to put her child in danger and realizes that some of the things that she does are not natural. Seeing some of her most extreme behaviors in her son tends to bring her back to her senses, as it happens when the boy brings a dead animal inside the house:

He held up a dead mouse, and she screamed and then laughed.

Where did you find that? she asked. Yucky!

No yucky, he said. Come, Mama. (Yoder, 2021: 76)

Despite her rejection of the dead animal and her expression of disgust, the fact that she laughs indicates that there is a part of her that is at least a little bit fascinated and amused by what her child has done, even if it exceeds the limits to which she is currently willing to go. The next paragraph begins with the sentence «Voracious with death» (76), in a clear horrific acceptance of the emerging monster within her that wakes up a hunger that can only possibly be satiated with death. There is a sense of freedom underneath this brutal admission that is evidenced in her behavior toward her son's desires. As they enter a deli place where customers are allowed to put any kind of food mix in their plates, the mother lets the boy point at what he wants and she puts down on his plate «precisely what he desired» (77). These passages illustrate the shift in the mother's attitude and how the acceptance of her monstrous nature is mediated by both food and her child. Allowing herself and the son to eat freely what they truly desire opens up the possibility of letting go of social mandates that were causing the anxieties that we witness at the beginning of the novel. Satisfying her immediate and most animalistic whims, with the mediation of her maternal instincts, sets her free.

Even if she still has to confront those moments when she feels that her animal/monstrous instinct might go too far, both her mood and her relationship with her son are notably improving as their game play turns into pretending to be friendly, playful, and carefree dogs. This new-found freedom and pleasantness that she has found in caring for her child is challenged when their meat-eating is directly confronted by the husband/father when the son crawls into the living room where the parents are sitting together: «A raw steak, beautifully marbled with fat, dangled from his mouth» (125). And, in shock, the father tries to amend the child's conduct: «But, sweetie..., he

continued. We don't put raw meat on the floor. Or in our mouths, for that matter. Yucky, he said, making a face» (125). The same childish expression—«yucky»—that Nightbitch used to refer to the dead mouse her son brings inside the house is mirrored by the father in this scene as he sees the raw steak, reminding us that Nightbitch has already crossed the line that separates acceptable behavior from disgusting one. To add to that separation, the father does not at all laugh at the situation as she did with the mouse.

Nightbitch is scared at this discovery of her behavior from the outside world: «Shit, she said under her breath. Fuck. Shit. Fuck» (126), showcasing the still prevalent concern at the policing of the social norms that she has to live with. As Schoeff argues in her analysis of the novel, the way in which her husband behaves quite dismissively toward Nightbitch and her concerns about her bodily changes at the beginning of the novel, reflects typical male fears and embodies «how male expectations push women to animalistic states» (2024: 5). The rejection of the monstrous that patriarchal social norms mandate is mirrored by the mother, who does not want to be Nightbitch and «wouldn't have chosen it if she felt she did indeed have such a choice» (Yoder, 2021: 18). In the end, that initial rejection, along with the constant anger and frustration that her husband's attitudes toward her concerns causes, drive her deeper into her need to accept a beast-like nature that channels her natural abilities to care for her baby.

Given the feminist outlook of both the novel and the present article, it is interesting to add the frame of the connection between meat eating (especially red and raw meat) with masculinity. Carol J. Adams examines in her influential work *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (2018) «the connections between male dominance and meat eating» (25). Ideas of violence and consumption are strongly connected with maleness and the exert of control that extends to the household. As Adams points out, there are various patriarchal attitudes that are reflected in the consumption of meat, such as «the idea that the end justifies the means, that the objectification of other beings is a necessary part of life, and that violence can and should be masked» (27). Beyond its critique of meat consumption which I will not delve into, this suggestion reveals something interesting about what the novel is doing through this abject inclusion of raw meat and violence. Nightbitch's blood lust is a reversal of gender norms that, as mentioned above, is a key aspect in making a woman monstrous. She is unable to reveal these new feelings that are arising within her and that she can only confess to herself: «I want to run naked through a meadow and catch a rabbit and snap its neck and then rip its throat open and drink the warm blood from the wound» (Yoder, 2021: 178). This attraction for dead things and quite explicit violence is decidedly something that separates her from society and the characteristic aspects of traditional motherhood. There is a clear emphasis on this separation in the violence that she ends up exerting toward the family cat. A system of inter-species domination is at the core in the relationship between Nightbitch and the pet. Combined with her new canine nature, it inevitably leads to the cat's demise:

She jerked the knife through the soft girth of its belly. The animal split open like a pair of tight pants. Nightbitch growled in her chest as she bent to wrap her teeth around the nape of the cat's neck. She rose in blind fury and shook the body back and forth, the cat deflating—squeak by small, breathy squeak—with each fling, blood splattering on the white cabinets and across the worn wood floor. A loop of purple intestine slipped from the wound and flipped back and forth like a wet scarf. A thick warmth spread down Nightbitch's chin and onto her chest, and in this ecstasy, she swung her head back and forth with even greater fervor, intestines and organs slapping her face and falling to the floor. She shook harder, furiously, blood flung to every corner of the kitchen, until a sharp snap, and the body relaxed into ultimate resignation. (Yoder, 2021: 153)

This passage is worth quoting at length because there are several interesting aspects that we can note about Nightbitch's actions. First, there are elements of the body and actions that remind us of her beastly nature such as «growled» and «teeth». Then, there are three notable elements in the way that the violence evolves and lets the reader glimpse at the monster inside, namely, the explicit violence, the anger, and the lust. The explicit and gory violence completely sets her apart from any kind of human empathy and goes beyond the type of killing that an animal would do simply to get the food they need. It is highlighted in the description of the cat's body as it is being tortured and killed which can be observed in expressions such as: «the cat deflating», «blood splattering», «purple intestine» and «like a wet scarf». Her violent attitude and anger are reiterated throughout the passage: «jerked», «blind fury», «furiously», «sharp snap». And finally, a feeling of lust and somehow sexual pleasure can be distinguished in numerous word choices: «breathy squeak», «thick warmth», «ecstasy», «greater fervor», «intestines and organs slapping her face», and «harder». All these elements work together to emphasize the abjection of the monstrous feminine/motherhood that Nightbitch is developing and that she is at this moment fully succumbing to. Another important aspect that this passage brings up and I include here under the concept of feeding anxieties is the obligation that Nightbitch has to keep everything clean and sanitized for the safety of the baby. The cleaning is the backlash caused by her surrender to her inner monster. Through the difficult task of trying to get blood stains out of her kitchen furniture she has to confront what she has done, and she worries «that the doggy games had gone too far, that she herself was out of control and had crossed some line» (168).

The issue with cleanness is present throughout the whole novel. The uncleanness is an important factor in the protagonist's behavior, mostly through dirt and blood, and the fear of presenting her child as dirty is a central concern in her confronting social norms that she does not wish to abide by. This is particularly the case after the episode with the cat since she does not want her husband to find out. These worries begin way before the mother starts turning into Nightbitch with everyday normal motherly behavior. The preoccupation that the mother shows at the beginning surrounding breast-feeding also extends to the capacity to keep everything clean when pumping outside of the house. Before she has made the decision to turn into a stay-at-home mother and is still working at the museum she has to use the lactation room which, to make matters worse, «was not ventilated» (13). The use of this room sparks questions about the social acceptable practice of having to be removed from society to be able to get milk for your child. She wonders, «Who ever thought a mother would need to sanitize a counter of the milk meant for her baby?» (12).

The concern with cleaning and keeping her child clean is only exacerbated after she leaves her job. The responsibilities she has as a stay-at-home mother revolve primarily around food and cleaning, and she thinks about «considerations of what to eat and what to clean» (43). The realization of her failure comes also from physical pain caused by not having done things properly, not being healthy enough, and not keeping herself clean enough, as she finds she has greasy hair and is bloated: «only the physical sensations of exhaustion, a pain in her lower back, greasy hair, a bloated feeling from eating too many fish-shaped, sodium-laden crackers» (43).

Conservative gendered conventions prevent her from continuing being an artist and cause her to leave the professional world behind. Hence, the responsibility of caring for her child falls almost completely on her and not on the father. The level of cleanness and being put together that is expected of very tired mothers goes hand in hand with this role division: since she has left her job, she should have enough time to be the perfect devoted mother and housewife. The fact that she is not able to achieve this ideal, weights

on her. She constantly reminds herself that their house is not properly clean, for instance: «In the morning, she stood, disheveled, in the dirty kitchen» (8) and «The bathroom was, yes, dirty» (101). Additionally, she expresses similar concerns about the state in which she feels that she keeps her son. Some examples from early in the novel include sentences such as: «The boy [...] looked up to offer his own wave with a dirty, dirty hand» (37), «her dirty little son» (39), «clapped his dirty hands» (51). The presence of dirt and impurity evoke Kristeva's ideas on abjection and taboo and hence, the monstrous part of *Nightbitch*. Interestingly, as she starts to play doggy with her child, the perception of dirt starts to be associated with a feeling of happiness and calm: «Their feet were dirty and their noses were dirty, and they ate peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches on the porch steps as the sun eased toward night. Their muscles were hot and tired and happy» (128). The final and most telling change to the association of the word dirty comes when Jen, one of the mothers from *Book Babies* to which *Nightbitch* used to compare herself to looking for socially acceptable references of motherhood, admires her way of raising and playing with her son, and follows her by example, even sporting «bare and *dirty* feet» (187, emphasis added).

This comparison *Nightbitch* does between herself and other women, especially mothers, can be seen often throughout the narrative. Her artist friends from university and her time at the museum represent the successful professional aspirations of middle-class America. All these boil down to respectability, a concept that is very relevant for the present discussion and which Iris Marion Young defines as «norms that repress sexuality, bodily functions, and emotional expressions» (2011: 136). *Nightbitch* clearly struggles with not being able to freely express all those aspects of her identity prior to her monstrous transformation—and even during, as she resists—. In her meeting with other women, she feels left out as they are constantly reiterating the professional standards they meet and their complacency with the lives they are leading, something most notably expected from «women, people of colour, working-class people, and gays and lesbians» (Young, 2011: 136) as opposed to straight white men. In theory, sacrificing her career to take care of her son is presumed by the mother to be something quite positive. Even though she does not do it seeking society's approval, we can identify that there is an idealized conservative image of the stay-at-home mother, of good mothers being in the domestic space always tending to their children (and husbands).

It is noteworthy how the creative power of the artist is framed in opposition to that possibility of maintaining an organized, clean house fitting the idealized standards set by society for a stay-at-home mother. This is showcased in the novel through the dangerous materials she can potentially use for her art, the paint that gets stains in furniture that are hard to get off, and the study that she finally arranges in one of the rooms of the house where she strictly forbids the boy to enter. Her new canine nature allows her to reframe her life by bringing together the monstrous motherhood that she can now perform—which includes embracing her anger, feeding raw meat to her child, and imitating dogs by growling and barking—and her art, as the novel culminates in an artistic performance that is, if not commercially, at least emotionally successful. As Schoeff puts it: «There is no clear understanding of her work, only awe for her art» (2024: 6). Her performance is the ultimate expression of a desire to maintain her own identity which now encompasses both her artistic nature and her identity as a mother, which she has been able to tie together through her feminine monstrosity. Her canine anger is a leeway from the idea of motherhood, with its attached social expectations and norms, «to mothering and the achievement of maternal empowerment» (O'Reilly, 2023: n.p.). Through the final artistic performance she manages to bring together her motherhood and her newfound monstrous nature in a very literal way. The fact that it is a public performance emphasizes the

ultimate decision to bring her abjection and difference to light, hence effectively accepting the monster within her and, with it, the explicit rejection of socially acceptable behavior. During Nightbitch's show «folks bear witness» (Yoder, 2021: 238) to the act that expresses that she will no longer abide by acceptable social standards, as «she delivers the limp body of the bunny, for [her son] to sniff and then caress» (238).

As the dead bunny in this closing scene reminds us, food remains a key element that triangulates the development of said monstrosity. There is a connection between the art and Nightbitch's inner monster as her growing admiration for meat and blood is what revives her artistic impulses. We can clearly see this intended connection when her husband assumes, seemingly taking the opportunity also to criticize her decisions as a homemaker and choices in groceries, that the meat and her return to art are directly connected: «If I had to guess what your next project was, he said, I would say you're training to be a butcher, because we have a fridge full of meat» (53). It seems to him that the only sensible explanation to her desire for meat must be that there is an artistic reason, and that her confessed and explicit desire for the meat itself is undervalued. This, however, ends up working in favor of Nightbitch, as it reminds her that there is a possibility of connecting these different aspects of her identity. From the beginning of the novel there is a desire on the part of the mother to be able to bridge her maternity and her art, to be able to create a more complex identity that combines her artistic persona with her motherhood: «The mother fantasized about staging the birth of her child as an artistic happening» (23), «He was her only project. She had done the ultimate job of creation [...]. To keep him alive—that was the only artistic gesture she could muster» (24). The desire to mediate her motherhood through art, ultimately leads her on the path to develop and embrace her monstrosity and the most comfortable possible maternity for her.

CONCLUSION

The abject, in Kristeva's theorization, does not produce a stable subjectivity, but is situated between the self and the other: in the case of Nightbitch, between a civilized maternity that the public eye expects from her, and an animalistic monstrous motherhood that allows for better self-expression. Nightbitch's profession as an artist—which she never ceases to be despite her perceived loss of identity due to motherhood—is key to the expression of the animalistic instinct that creates her monstrosity. Looking at her behavior beyond the performance and the artistic exploration of the self, the theme of feeding anxieties in motherhood (breastfeeding, sanitation of meals, healthy diets, and the consumption of raw meat) articulates the construction of the mother-monster in the novel. Framing motherhood via the monstrous as a form of abject alterity presents a simultaneously attractive natural inclination to care for the young and a horrific natural blood thirst which, in the end, turns out to be embedded in the maternal.

The idea of the monstrous motherhood can act as a way to highlight how others perceive women as repulsive. This includes all chores related to the feminine sphere, from nurturing and cooking to cleaning and serving food. Given the connection between motherly behavior and food preparation, the role that food plays in this narrative of monstrous motherhood is not coincidental. Food-related issues become the inception of the monstrous motherhood explored in *Nightbitch*, embodying the protagonist's break with acceptable social norms and expectations about child nurturing. Schildrick emphasizes that monsters «speak to both radical otherness and to the always already other at the heart of identity» (1996: 2). Such radical otherness for Nightbitch is found in the raw meat that, despite the largely uncritical consumption of meat in society, is perceived as decidedly abject. The monstrous is employed in the novel to question the performance

of motherhood and to, quite literally, turn it into a monstrous performance that ultimately highlights the positive aspects of female community, solidarity, and communal raising spaces.

As a final note, it is important to note that *Nightbitch*'s transformation might appear as ambiguous throughout the novel, since there is no specific description of her shape-shifting as such. The first time that she turns into a dog she mostly blacks out. Nobody is described as seeing anything weird (besides her behavior) and her husband is very much dismissive of the changes that she observes in her own body. Rather than questioning the transformation itself, I argue that the point that the monstrous nature of the mother makes is relevant within the fiction itself, regardless of its nature as a realist story, as fantasy, or even as a mix of both. The dismissive attitude of the husband, it can be argued, reflects medical violence that women suffer when they are not believed by doctors about what they feel about their bodies. The explorations of these female (and maternal) anxieties and frustrations that the novel proposes go beyond the point of having or not a real shape-shifter in our hands and having to decide whether we believe the protagonist's first-hand experiences of her monstrous changes.

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