

MONSTROSITY AS RESCUE: CHALLENGING THE INSTITUTION OF
MOTHERHOOD IN RACHEL YODER'S *NIGHTBITCH*¹

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ABSTRACT: This article examines Rachel Yoder's contemporary novel *Nightbitch* (2021) –a literary debut about a mother who evolves from a miserable, anxious, lonely stay-at-home mom to a furious, howling monster, expressing motherhood's injustices by metamorphosing at night into a wild dog–. In the pages that follow, after briefly exposing the connection between the patriarchal institution of motherhood (Rich, 1986) and maternal mental health and introducing the recent feminist use of the fantastic genre, the article explores how the transformation of the protagonist influences her recovery. Additionally, it examines the development of a way of mothering that is rebellious against patriarchal power.

KEYWORDS: motherhood, monstrosity, maternal mental health, fantastic literature, contemporary narrative.

LA MONSTRUOSIDAD COMO RESCATE: EL DESAFÍO A LA
INSTITUCIÓN DE LA MATERNIDAD EN *NIGHTBITCH* DE RACHEL YODER

RESUMEN: Este artículo analiza la novela contemporánea *Nightbitch* (2021), de Rachel Yoder –un debut literario sobre una madre que pasa de ser una miserable, ansiosa y solitaria ama de casa a un monstruo furioso y aullador que expresa las injusticias de la maternidad metamorfoseándose por la noche en un perro salvaje–. En las páginas que siguen, tras exponer brevemente la conexión entre la institución patriarcal de la maternidad (Rich, 1986) y la salud mental materna e introducir el reciente uso feminista del género fantástico, el artículo explora cómo la transformación de la protagonista influye en su recuperación, así como en el desarrollo de una forma de maternar rebelde contra el poder patriarcal.

PALABRAS CLAVE: maternidad, monstruosidad, salud mental maternal, literatura fantástica, narrativa contemporánea.

INTRODUCTION

In 1976, Adrienne Rich, in her groundbreaking book *Of Woman Born*, first described the institution of motherhood, detailing what it was, who controlled it, and its effects on mothers' lives. Since then, Rich's theorization has been revised by subsequent motherhood scholars who have dedicated much of their research to defining patriarchal motherhood or the patriarchal institution of motherhood. According to Andrea O'Reilly, «Motherhood functions as a cultural/ideological institution to oppress women in patriarchal society» (2014: 8). Similarly, Sarah Trimble states that «the patriarchal

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institution of motherhood identified by Rich is a set of prescriptive ideologies and sociopolitical policies outlining the ‘good mother’» (2014: 178). There is consensus that motherhood is an institution founded on gender inequity, encompassing the systems, ideologies, assumptions, and expectations within which mothers operate. Furthermore, a key element within the institution is the powerful and prevalent image known as the ‘good mother’ or the ‘perfect mother’ composed of unwritten rules that mothers strive to follow. Patriarchal motherhood defines who the ‘good mother’ is: what she does, what she looks like, and how she acts. In this sense, Adrienne Rich stated that,

typically, under patriarchy, the mother’s life is exchanged for the child; her autonomy as a separate being seems fated to conflict with the infant she will bear. The self-denying, self-annihilative role of the Good Mother (linked implicitly with suffering and with the repression of anger) will spell the ‘death’ of the woman or girl who once had hopes, expectations, fantasies for herself. (1986: 197)

The Good Mother myth directly impacts the motherhood experience. As a result, mothers frequently encounter symptoms such as rage, burnout, trying to ‘do it all’, reluctance to seek assistance, strain, lack of sense of self, feelings of inadequacy, or a persistent sense of failure –a cluster of symptoms that exerts a pronounced and significant impact on mothers’ mental health–.

Although it is a widespread transnational reality (Wahlström, Williams and Fahlgren, 2023), I will focus on the contemporary North American context where, these days, mothers face enormous mental health challenges (Forbes et al., 2022; Ko et al., 2012). Mothers experience the added «expectations of an intensive mothering culture, which pressures women to be emotionally and physically available for their children at all times; take responsibility for their children’s emotional, cognitive, social, and physical well-being; and prioritize their children’s needs above their own» (Hays, 1996). These intense and unrealistic standards placed on mothers can complicate their mental health (Lamar et al., 2024). In light of this, my proposal for this work focuses on literary analysis, specifically examining the contemporary American writer Rachel Yoder’s *Nightbitch* (2021) as a novel representative of the damaging impact of the patriarchal institution of motherhood on mother’s well-being. In *Nightbitch*, the protagonist, known simply as «The Mother», undergoes a transformation from a miserable, anxious, lonely stay-at-home mom to a furious, howling creature that expresses the injustices of motherhood by metamorphosing at night into a wild monster.

Historically, monsters in fantastic literature have often been used to represent fears. As societal anxieties and concerns evolve and adapt but never disappear, the figure of the monster remains an essential element in fantastic fiction. In this regard, Cohen argues that monsters must «be examined within the intricate matrix of relations (social, cultural, and literal-historical) that generates them» (1996: 5). Hock-Soon supports this view, asserting that «monsters are always, in different degrees, the product of cultural, social and historical anxieties» (2004: 5). In particular, female monsters have frequently served as manifestations of men’s fears regarding women’s potential for subversion. In that regard, Cortés states that «the existence of female monsters says more about male fears (among other things because it is men who have created them) than about women’s desires or female subjectivity» (1997: 4, my translation). Creed (1993) warns that the use of female monsters has often served to express men’s apprehensions about women, particularly during periods when women began to challenge the roles imposed by patriarchal structures. In the twenty-first century, however, the functionality of the female monster in fantastic fiction by female narrators reflects feminist developments. Roas

identifies a feminist use of the fantastic among contemporary women writers, characterized by the recurrence of three essential aspects:

1) a cosmology of themes specifically linked to the female experience; 2) female narratorial voices to expose in the first person the experience of the fantastic; and 3) the presence of women as agents of action: their stories translate a constant movement of identity reconstruction in the face of the stereotyped identity constructed by the heterodesignation of the hegemonic patriarchal discourse, which, at the same time, implies the inversion of the roles attributed to women (with the consequent deconstruction of those stereotypes) and the prominent presence of female monstrosity as a form of denunciation and transgression of traditional models. (2022: 108, my translation)

As Roas concludes, these three aspects fundamentally imply a «re-actualization of the monster, where female monstrosity moves beyond its patriarchal association to become a manifestation of rebellion against such patriarchal power» (2022: 108). Figures traditionally deemed abominable now represent women who challenge the power and the established order. Through this approach, authors also succeed in «reappropriate[ing] the female monstrosity and strip it of the centuries of misogyny that it carries on its back» (La nave invisible 2018: 12-13, my translation). This transformation is also evident in cinema. In *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, Barbara Creed discusses a new wave of films that «constitute a specific historical movement» (2022: 1) that she terms Feminist New Wave Cinema. Creed argues that a unifying figure in these films is the monstrous feminine, who «is represented as a liberating and transformative figure» (4). As in literature, historically, the female monster in cinema was a «misogynistic fantasy, a construct of patriarchal ideology, and male directors, designed to enable the male viewer to explore his own deeply embedded fears about female sexuality» (4). Yet, in contemporary texts, both film and literature, monstrosity has evolved into a concept of empowerment.

The female monster adopts several innovative forms in the work of female authors, and because of the explosion of writing about motherhood in contemporary narratives (Wahlström, Williams and Fahlgren, 2023), the monstrous mother is a relevant character. This figure is central to the present article's analysis. The association of motherhood and monstrosity in mythology, religion, literature, and popular culture is well established (Kristeva 1982, Creed 1993, Huet 1993, Caputi 2004, Wood and Schillace 2014, Santos 2017). Frequently, depictions of maternal monstrosity—whether physical, emotional, or both—shock and unsettle the reader. However, in *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, Barbara Creed (2022) draws on Kristeva's theory of abjection and writings on revolt, to offer an alternative lens. Creed illustrates how, through monstrosity, women «undertake a journey into the dark night of abjection where their sense of coherent identity is threatened and from where they emerge changed, and often reborn» (14). New female authors depict motherhood through the archetype of the monstrous mother, but unlike their misogynistic predecessors, in their representations, they manage to challenge the tropes by positively vindicating a historically negative figure, thus conferring a subversive function to the texts. While society typically praises motherhood, these authors illuminate its complexities, juxtaposing it with the concept of monstrosity. Accordingly, what was once a tool of patriarchy now becomes a place of resistance. The fantastical narratives thus adopt a feminist and a socio-political perspective, affirming the political potential of fiction.

Such is the case of *Nightbitch*, the debut novel by American author Rachel Yoder.² It is an extravagant yet compelling Kafkaesque fable, rich with metaphors that provide an acid reflection on motherhood in the twenty-first century. This rather disturbing and subversive novel employs a third-person omniscient narrator to depict the process of transformation of its central and unnamed character, referred to simply as the «The Mother». The house, serving as the main setting, shelters the protagonist—a woman in her thirties who takes care of her two-year-old son alone, because her husband works abroad and only comes home on weekends—. Despite previously thriving in her «dream job at a local art gallery» (Yoder, 2021: 10), after the birth of her son and due to the impossibility of reconciling her job and family life, she abandons her career and relinquishes her aspirations. However, there comes a moment in the child's upbringing when she grapples with overwhelming physical and emotional turmoil. In a surreal turn of events, she begins to suspect she is metamorphosing into a dog, a process that culminates one night when, with her husband away and her son asleep, she discovers a peculiar pack of dogs outside her window. Yielding to an inexplicable urge, she joins them, undergoing a startling transformation into an animal. However, it is not until a few nights later that she becomes a raging and howling monster that expresses the pains and furies of motherhood, by metamorphosing into a feral dog. From that moment on, she begins to strongly identify with being a dog, finding increasing fulfillment in motherhood as she embraces her new identity. However, halfway through the novel, *Nightbitch* is invited to have dinner with two grad-school friends—accomplished artists adept at balancing career success with motherhood—. Their reality, so different from hers, forces her to confront all her repressed feelings and desires, triggering a violent canine outburst. After days of great anguish and rage, including the unintended killing of the family cat, she is determined to take decisive action. The novel concludes with a wild and feral performance of the art project she has been working on for the past few weeks and that, in her own words, «is meant to underscore the brutality and power and darkness of motherhood, for modern motherhood has been neutered and sanitized» (237).

This article examines how the protagonist's transformation into a dog acts as a coping strategy that saves her from intense psychic suffering. More specifically, it explores how the use of the fantastic genre facilitates powerful scenarios, such as the refusal of the patriarchal institution of motherhood through monstrosity. To do so, the article is structured into three analytical sections. The first section analyzes monstrosity as a resource to confront the violence imposed on the protagonist within the patriarchal institution of motherhood. Following this, I discuss how the protagonist's wild transformation liberates her mothering experience from patriarchal constraints. The final section investigates the recovery of the mother's subjectivity after embracing her transformed self, while confirming the capacity of fantasy to envision such hopeful futures as a rebellion against patriarchal power.

FROM DESPAIR TO HOPE: VIOLENCE AND A PATHWAY TO LIBERATION

At the novel's outset, the mother is overwhelmed by an increasing load of emotional strain that makes it difficult for her to live serenely. One of her primary

² Yoder grew up in a Mennonite community in the Appalachian foothills of eastern Ohio and now lives in Iowa City. She is co-publisher and founding editor of *draft: the journal of process* and holds MFAs from the University of Arizona (fiction) and the University of Iowa (nonfiction), where she was an Iowa Arts fellow. Her writing has been awarded with The Editors' Prize in Fiction by *The Missouri Review* and with notable distinctions in *Best American Short Stories* and *Best American Nonrequired Reading*.

grievances is sleep deprivation; throughout the first part of the novel, she frequently asserts that she «just need[s] a good night's sleep» (Yoder, 2021: 5). Her child is just two years old and does not sleep independently, compelling the mother to manage the «do the night-nights» (109), alone during the week because of her husband's work-related absences. Even when he returns on weekends, he still has some work to finish or is too tired because of his week of work, which results in the mother's complete assumption of the care tasks. In this family, childcare is provided almost exclusively by the mother, reflecting an imbalance of responsibilities and a structural breakdown of care. Likewise, the mother's unrelenting dedication to care extends to household duties, leading her to internalize these obligations and overlook their substantial mental burden and invisible cost. This inequity correlates with a profound sense of loneliness, as she is effectively mothering in isolation. As the mother confesses: «yes, it had been June, and, yes, her husband had been gone the entire week. In fact, it was his twenty-second weeklong absence that year, a year in which only twenty-four weeks in total had passed, not that anyone was counting» (6). Far from being an isolated comment, the husband's frequent absences are a recurring theme throughout the first chapter of the novel, underscored by references such as, «when he arrived home after a week away for work» (3); «every night, when her husband was gone» (4), «it was Monday yet again and, yes, her husband was gone again» (21). The evident frustration in these brief references evolves into more painful confession, comparing the burden of caregiving with the weight of near-total abandonment: «in such moments, she could almost touch her loneliness, as if it were her second child» (55). She stands alone as a mother. She feels abandoned in her new role, not only because of her husband, but also due to deeper societal structures. As Aimee E Berger writes, «the patriarchal institution of traditional motherhood is an isolating and limiting expression of maternal experience» (2014: 92). This institutional framework contributes to the mother's pervasive sense of isolation and the severe psychological strain she endures.

Yoder constructs her protagonist as a character enduring sleep deficiency, lack of co-responsibility, and isolation, manifold injustices inherent in the experience of motherhood in a patriarchal system. However, she also places the mother in a paradoxical situation, wherein the protagonist appears to be simultaneously resisting and acquiescing them. While the mother acknowledges the mental strain and physical exhaustion that her current situation is causing her, she also recalls how, since the integration of her new maternal identity, she had been willing to adapt to what was expected from her. Driven by a profound desire to be labeled as a 'good mother', she endeavored to meet the myriad expectations and demands that the ideal entailed. As the protagonist reflects in the novel,

for years up until that point she had been the very picture of a mother, self-sacrificing and domestic, un-gripey, un-grumpy, refreshed even after unrefreshing nights of nonsleep, nursing the baby and rocking the baby and shushing the baby while her kind husband snored and slept or, actually, most of the time, was not even there. (Yoder, 2021: 9)

Indeed, she had undertaken all those responsibilities, exerting considerable effort to fulfill each one, while trying to balance her professional obligations with the demands of caring for her son. This relentless self-imposed pressure resulted in complete depletion, «she was, in a word, exhausted» (35). Despite this, she persisted with increasing determination, driven by the belief that she was, at the very least, a 'good mother':

Yes, indeed, she was a good mother, one of the very best. A testament to her goodness: that preternatural ability to wake and wake and wake again, night after night, ever since the day the boy was born. Her husband—bless his heart—had never done well with sleep

deprivation, yet she, surprisingly, had taken to it as if she hadn't been a lifelong oversleeper, as if waking at all hours of the night and getting up at 5:30 a.m. was something she was somehow genetically programmed for. [...] Overworked, pushed to her limit, bedraggled and bitter and on the verge, indeed, but each morning she rose and stayed upright for the entire day. (37-38)

Despite acknowledging her utter weariness and despair, she adheres steadfastly to the idealized image of the perfect mother as if it were an unspoken duty. As noted by Kelsey E. Henry, «once a woman is a mother, she is no longer expected to dream herself beyond her scheduled vanishing point, that time and that place where “Mother” emerges, and woman recedes» (2005). At this point of the novel, the protagonist demonstrates a willingness to do whatever is seen as evidence of being a ‘good mother’, a central identity issue for the protagonist, and in this, the novel foregrounds how the cultural beliefs concerning the role of the ‘good mother’ propel women to prioritize meeting patriarchal standards over their own physical and mental health.

The initial section of the novel intermingles the present with the protagonist's narration of past events that led her to her current state. Reflecting on her past experiences, the mother recounts how, despite her concerted efforts to conform to societal expectations and her insistent neglect of self-care, she reached a point of desperation in her endeavor to balance her roles as both a worker and a mother. She was «always in a hurry. Hurry, breast. Hurry up» (Yoder, 2021: 13), feeling the pressing need to «figure out a way to minimize stress» (13) and «balance it all» (13), yet consistently falling short. She was trying hard, but «that night, the mother cried as she held her sleeping baby after work, because she saw him awake for only an hour, maybe two, each day. [...] She cried holding him, and then he cried when she put him down» (16). She found herself compelled to take action; she felt inadequate in her role as a mother and recognized the urgent necessity to fulfill societal expectations, before succumbing to overwhelming guilt and sorrow. As articulated by Rich, «grief at all we cannot do for our children in a society so inadequate to meet human needs becomes translated into guilt and self-laceration» (1986: 52). And after so much crying, and after bearing all the maternal guilt, she quit her job, even though «it was a job she had always wanted. She was advancing in her career. She was growing up. She was succeeding» (Yoder, 2021: 11). But she also had a baby and guilt is a powerful mechanism of control and oppression. As Suzan Lewis explains, «the “ideal” mother does not work outside the home when her children are very young, nor does she ever allow paid work to take precedence over mothering» (1991: 196). The mother in *Nightbitch* is determined to become the ‘ideal’ mother; indeed, if she wishes to maintain her sanity, she cannot bear any more guilt, or is it the other way around? Was it perhaps her obstinacy to be seen as a good mother that will ultimately destroy her?

After quitting, the mother transitions from being a «working working mother» (Yoder, 2021: 16) to a working mother, having ceased only the job that provided financial compensation. She leaves her job and spends a year in her new role as a stay-at-home mom. However, after two years devoid of rest, filled instead with profound loneliness, extreme exhaustion, stifling anxiety, lacerating worry, and pervasive guilt, one day she experiences a sudden, unexpected realization of feeling deceived and cheated. On this particular day, as night falls, so does the rage and anger, which had lingered in the background for years, but now assert themselves as permanent companions:

her child's screams fanned a flame of rage that flickered in her chest. That single, white-hot light at the center of the darkness of herself—that was the point of origin from which she birthed something new, from which all women do. You light a fire early in your girlhood. [...] You tend the flame because if you don't you're stuck, in the cold, on your

own, doomed to seasonal layers, doomed to practicality, doomed to this is just the way things are, doomed to settling and understanding and reasoning and agreeing and seeing it another way and seeing it his way and seeing it from all the other ways but your own. And upon hearing the boy's scream, the particular pitch and slice, she saw the flame behind her closed eyes. For a moment, it quivered on unseen air, then, at once, lengthened and thinned, paused, and dropped with a whump into her chest, then deeper into her belly, setting her aflame. (7)

The mother had been invalidating her emotions for too long, downplaying the importance of all the contempt and aggressions she had accumulated. And it is precisely this emotional repression that had turned her into a pressure cooker, primed to explode at the slightest provocation. And it explodes. Once the anger erupts, the mother struggles to prevent it from settling with the rest of the emotions that had been making her existence so arduous. Simultaneously, as the anger grows, so do the subtle canine traits that have long made her suspect that she is turning into a dog. From the initial «patch of coarse black hair sprouting from the base of her neck» (3), her body undergoes further changes: a swollen lump from which a flurry of hair emerges and which she could only describe as a tail; pointy teeth, new hair on her shoulders, and «four new spots on her torso» (56) that she is absolutely sure «could only be nipples» (56). Through simple yet effective language, the process of animalization is precisely and subtly interspersed with the exposure and worsening of the symptoms of the protagonist's distress. The mother in *Nightbitch* is entrapped within an institution that, having demanded everything from her, is now about to destroy her sanity. Overwhelmed and desperate, she feels her body unable to contain the turmoil within. Yoder, thus, shows that «if you try to achieve perfection in motherhood, you can break. It's too much» (Alonso, 2022, my translation). The myth of the 'Perfect Mother' is a risk to the mother's mental stability and therefore the patriarchal institution of motherhood poses a threat to the mother's mental health.

However, the mother is about to find a surprising relief. One night, when she is very nearly asleep, she sees a group of dogs outside her window, whom she is convinced have arrived for her. Despite her initial resistance, she finds herself powerless to prevent the dogs' attacks, during which they strip her of her clothes and leave her naked on the ground, just moments before her transformation into an animal. Up until now, the mother had been extremely worried, even a bit scared about the canine traits she was discovering all over her body and spirit. She had tried to rationalized them as mere products of her imagination. However, at this point, the transformation is undeniable and, besides, it feels so good to feel free from all (self-)imposed demands that

though she knew she should be worried, should wonder whether she was losing her mind[...]—knew she should call the doctor immediately and make an appointment, should probably be evaluated by a psychiatrist, should probably be placed on an assortment of drugs, should confide in her husband as soon as he returned home and relate to him this break in reality she had experienced, the coming of the dogs [...]—even though she knew all this, as she lay there in bed, the boy crawling over her, she could not her core. (Yoder, 2021: 75)

The protagonist's metamorphosis is an enormous liberation. The mother, previously burdened by uncertainties regarding peculiar bodily changes, finds validation in her transformative process, and now she confesses, «I feel wonderful. Better than I have in months» (81). This pivotal moment marks the beginning of the evolution that vertebrates the entire novel—a progression from societal alienation to a state of magical emancipation and personal liberation—.

The novel serves as a poignant critique of contemporary maternal mental health. In this regard, the text also presents a critique of patriarchal motherhood. Specifically, it expounds how the patriarchal institution of motherhood –in demanding absolute dedication, joyful abnegation, and relentless contention– drives the mother to the brink of a mental breakdown. This is a double and inseparable critique because the poverty in which maternal mental health finds itself cannot be fully comprehended without addressing the institution of motherhood. Adrienne Rich noted that «instead of recognizing the institutional violence of patriarchal motherhood (=institution of motherhood), society labels those women who finally erupt in violence as psychopathological» (1986: 263). In Yoder’s narrative, this critique becomes evident as she unveils the patriarchal system that first denies its violence and immediately blames mothers for its inevitable consequences. In this sense, monstrosity in the novel reflects the re-actualization of the monster in contemporary female-authored fiction, a concept supported by Roas, who argues that «the monster in current fantastic fiction of female authorship shows its updating to denounce the cultural, social and political conditioning factors imposed on women, specifically concerning the experience of the motherhood» (2022: 105). Moreover, I suggest that Yoder transcends denunciation by providing her protagonist with a pathway to liberation. Although motherhood is presented as a psychic battlefield in which the mother’s sanity is at stake, metamorphosis emerges as a lifesaver.

WHEN THE TRANSFORMATION SAVED THE PROTAGONIST’S MOTHERING

The second section of the book opens with the mother transformed into *Nightbitch*: «she heard her husband in the backyard call for her, but she was not that woman anymore, that mother and wife. She was *Nightbitch*, and she was fucking amazing. It seemed she had been waiting for this for a very, very long time» (Yoder, 2021: 89). Immediately after this statement, the narrative plunges into *Nightbitch*’s inaugural, savage, and inhuman nocturnal immersion into the wilderness. As Yoder explains, «in my own writing, I needed something that was searing and embodied and not careful. I avoided being careful at all costs. That seemed important» (Fox and Valez, 2023). Monstrosity allows Yoder to endow her protagonist with this unrestrained abandon during the moments of transformation. The mother in *Nightbitch* turns into a dog but a wild dog, an untamed creature –a monster–. Throughout her first night of escapade, she «ripped up» (Yoder, 2021: 89), «bared her teeth» (90), «slung [a rabbit] violently back and forth» (90), and finally «carry the dead animal in her mouth back through the night» (90). Through the use of violence, Yoder grants her protagonist the ability to expel all that threatened to overwhelm her: the near-constant worry, the stress, the permanent fatigue, the sadness, the exhaustion, the rage. What might have befallen her had she retained all of this inside her? Her first metamorphosis, her initial «expan[sion] into a monstrous spectacle» (74), leaves her with a profound sense of satisfaction. However, this feral experience, marked by unprecedented violence, hair-raising brutality, and unleashed ferocity, represents something altogether different. The next morning, upon awakening, the protagonist finds herself embraced by:

an overwhelming sense of well-being heretofore unknown to the mother [...] She was well rested despite her few hours of sleep beneath the crab-apple tree. Her body felt strong and alive, and she was not chilled even though she was naked. She was awake in a way she had not been since her child was born, maybe even before, not groggy, not grumpy, but enthusiastic and, she imagined, completely capable of going on an early-morning jog, though she had never done this in her life. Her sinuses were clear and her eyes bright. Her hair felt clean to the touch, and she imagined her skin dewy and unmarked by the years

of not enough sleep and not enough water and not enough sunscreen and not enough salad [...] She didn't know she could feel this good, this happy, this awake and sated. (92-93)

She cannot recognize herself because it has been too long since she has felt like this. And yet now, as if by magic, she feels truly but surprisingly fine after the supernatural metamorphosis she has just undergone. Following an extensive first section in which Yoder uses the unnamed protagonist to expose the violence that the institution of motherhood inflicts on the mental health of mothers, in this second section the violence emanates from the protagonist's own body after her transformation into Nightbitch. Once she becomes a wild dog, the mother is able to brutally expel all that had been gradually depleting her since the birth of her child, and even before. The transformation allows her to rebel against this system. It is a rejection of the ideas of gender, marriage, and motherhood, but above all, it is a salvation from the pain that had been growing inside her for a long time.

The process of transformation, although liberating, is also painful. There is too much resistance. It is external but also exerted by the mother herself. As defended by Hustvedt, «because the institution is not a building or a rule book but a way of being that is part of collective life itself, it is also a weapon that strikes mothers from the inside as shame or guilt» (2021: 26). Right after the feral night, in an attempt on the part of the husband to hold her accountable for her leaving, she feels strong enough to «refuse to apologize, refuse to concede» (Yoder, 2021: 96). That same morning, she feels relaxed enough to play, laugh, cuddle, and read with her child. During the afternoon, Nightbitch and her husband make love and she feels them «united as they never had» (99). However, the next morning:

though the animalness of her being remained, she was also inside her full human-mother being, back to the usual worries and insecurities, the thoughts of career success, the burden of failure, the marital resentments, feminist rage, and so on and so forth. All of this was back, yet somehow transformed. She felt she could abide it as long as she still had Nightbitch. As long as she had that. (102)

For the first time, the mother consciously considers what changes she is going through. She acknowledges that even though all that hurts, torments, distresses, irritates, and angers her has not disappeared, she now knows that thanks to her miraculous transformation, she can get rid of the discomfort and even begin to enjoy her mothering:

And in this moment of full-armed embrace of the unknown, she found herself inspired to play—to real, fullhearted play—with her son on the playground next to the library on a late and sunny summer afternoon. Certainly, she had played with him before, but all too often, her efforts were uninspired and weary, unable as she was to shirk the burdens of adulthood and reality. On this afternoon, however, they slid from her as easily as a silk robe, and there she was, resplendent in the afternoon light, hair unspooling behind her as she dashed toward the small boy, who screamed with delight. (114)

Childrearing becomes something rewarding instead of oppressive. She recovers her maternal desires, the most intimate ones, the ones that do not respond to demands and expectations, the ones that only reflect the genuine love she feels for her child. Monstrosity brings the mother a way of mothering that is hers, unique and instinctive.

The novel explores a way of mothering rebellious against patriarchal motherhood, one based on instincts and subjectivity. Instincts are not allowed in the institution; they are seen as dangerous because they mean lack of control, and precisely, the image and

myth of the 'Good Mother' is a powerful mechanism of control. I suggest that it is precisely through her metamorphosis that the mother rebels against the imposed patriarchal motherhood and begins to live her motherhood according to her own values and not those of others. Thus, I argue that the fantastic offers new ways of representing—and thinking about—motherhood. These representations challenge the patriarchal impositions and demands associated with the experience. In *Nightbitch*, the mother's transformation into a monstrous figure turns the mother into a «subject with the temerity to embark on her own journey, her own personal revolt» (Creed, 2022: 12), against her former role of the Good mother.

WHEN THE TRANSFORMATION SAVED THE PROTAGONIST

In the last part of the second section, the mother notices that since becoming *Nightbitch*, she is a better mother. After two years of intense suffering, since *Nightbitch*'s arrival, she has been able to leave much of the pain behind and enjoy her mothering. Yet, after a night out with two grad-school friends, the mother realizes she is not as well as she thought she was. She kindly tries to listen to the two working mothers attentively, but there came a moment when

she needed to counteract the cud that rose from down in her guts, for it was there, she discovered with a startling pang of nausea, that she had pushed all the anger and sadness, all the disappointment about how her life had turned out. It was there she had buried the talented and plucky young woman with big ideas and an unusual point of view. That young woman was down in her intestines, biding her time, or perhaps dead, suffocated in all the shit. (Yoder, 2021: 144)

Rage, helplessness, dissatisfaction, frustration, and tiredness all welled up together. With them, *Nightbitch* returns in its most violent form. So far, she was doing great with her mothering, she had been «so, so close to true and completely unconflicted contentment, thanks to her disavowal of art, her arduous psychological work of the past weeks to get a handle on her urges, to harness her desires» (149). She had managed to convince herself of the futility of her ambitions and dreams. She had almost succeeded in denying herself, her individuality, her identity beyond her role as a mother. But then «all the rage and sadness and insanity of these years since her son was born» (148) resurface and with them her canine features, her monstrous traits:

she pushed a sound from herself she had not heard before, a long raspy growl made up of rage and breath, yearning and sorrow. There was a great and horrible power to the sound, as every muscle strained to expel it, her abs tightening and throat constricting. Her toes tensed, and her hands curled to claws. A blind animal-cry toward something else. An expulsion of all that had been inside her. (149)

Nightbitch reemerges to offer her support, serving as a reminder of the life the protagonist led before motherhood and urging her to reclaim it ungently. Yoder emphasizes that it is «important to hold tight to the most essential parts of yourself in parenthood, even if it's hard [as] it will make you more sane in the long run» (Luce, 2023). The mother had been an artist before motherhood arrived and swept everything else away. And now, just as her monstrous transformation had enabled her to fend off mental collapse and reject societal pressures imposed upon motherhood, it proves instrumental in her journey to recover herself. After all, *Nightbitch* has appeared in her life to save her.

The metamorphosis, thus, empowers the mother to break with the patriarchal system, to question what she wants for herself and her life. It allows her to think about what to do with her outbursts of violence. She cannot invalidate them when they occur, because otherwise they would always come back, for Nightbitch always comes back. She has to think about what she does with these reactions, and how she filters them and transforms them into decisions and actions. Yoder explains, «Nightbitch's anger demands she made a choice: destroy yourself or transform» (Fox and Valez, 2023). And the mother makes a choice; she commits herself to transformation. So far, the violent, physical, embodied transformation has proven immensely beneficial. Yet, she now understands that it will not facilitate the recovery of a subjectivity that she had been denied in her role as a wife and mother. Instead, this time, she needs a deeper, inner transformation; it is not just about returning to her self, but to «a transformed self that owned her dreams and desires, but wielded her power with even determination» (Yoder, 2021: 191), a mutation that would allow her to create a self deprived of patriarchal burdens:

for Nightbitch, there truly was something so enticing and exhilarating at the thought of rejecting all established society for something remote and magical [...] Was being free to do what you needed and be who you wanted—truly free—monstrous? If so, it was not a wrong kind of monstrous, but a beautiful one. A way of being to celebrate rather than run from. (179)

Monstrosity—a mode of existence that initially drove the mother to rebel against the demands and expectations of the system that had been on the verge of destroying her—ultimately becomes a vehicle for her to «re-emerge with new resolve and renewed strength» (Creed, 2022: 15); it enables a profound rebirth. This embrace of monstrosity allows the development of the mother's subjectivity and, thus, the return of her desires, her ambitions, and her artistic impulses. Now, she is ready, she is eager to create art, yearning to be an artist again.

One night, during a phone call with the husband, the mother confesses: «I've felt for so long alienated from my work, from myself, but I see now that the work and the life are of a piece and it's simply my job to find the connections» (Yoder, 2021: 199). Becoming a mother had been equivalent to losing her sense of self and her identity as an artist. Yet through her recent and intimate transformation, the mother regains her agency and with it, her ability to make self-conscious decisions, such as embarking on the production of a work of art, after becoming aware that devoting herself to art means devoting herself to her development as a self.

The completion of the piece of art signifies the restoration of the mother as an individual. The novel culminates in a remarkable and disruptive artistic performance that leaves the audience captivated and bewildered:

the audience will report they could have watched endlessly, so rapt were they by the animal movements of the woman and the bones—which seem to float effortlessly about the stage all on their own, how did she do it?—so stupefied were they by the spectacle, so perplexed by what they were seeing, unable to separate reality from artistry. (235)

This integration of reality and artistry underscores how the performance serves as both a literal and metaphorical expression. The mother exposes her monstrous transformation as a piece of performative art and in doing so wields a harsh critique of the violence that the patriarchal institution of motherhood exerts on mothers. Yoder explains it in the following terms:

I loved and love being a mom. But then there is this other thing, which perhaps is what we are calling ‘motherhood’, which is a situation you enter into as a woman with a child in which your identity as a woman and your role as caregiver for young child begin to lock you into gendered scripts and financial quagmires and workplace inequity and you see that this ‘motherhood’ feels very different than mothering. ‘Motherhood’ is a status that begins to limit you in so many societal arenas, and I guess *Nightbitch*’s art arises as a response to this limitation. (Fox and Valez, 2023)

Indeed, *Nightbitch* manages to survive the limitations of patriarchal motherhood by developing her piece of art. The novel shows that mothers’ recovery of their subjectivity, and therefore of their well-being, will not be achieved by surviving within patriarchal motherhood, but by challenging it, by being mothers against it, by transforming themselves and transforming the institution as a whole. Yoder articulates this intent: «I refused to write another narrative about a woman’s self-destruction. We need shapeshifting, magic, narratives of transformation» (Fox and Valez, 2023). The fantastic, through the feminist updating of one of its central topics such as the monster makes possible the creation of emancipatory narratives that allow us to imagine new futures in which it is possible to overcome patriarchal sociocultural impositions and gender norms. The novel, through the mother’s monstrosity, contests, challenges, and counters the patriarchal oppressive institution of motherhood, while enabling to fantasize about the transformation of the patriarchal and prevailing model of motherhood into a non-harmful, non-fatal version for mothers.

CONCLUSION

As Yoder argues, «motherhood is beautiful, but it is undeniable that they hide their shadows from us, and this book goes against that, because they had only given us images of clean, perfect, rested and happy mothers» (Alonso, 2022). In her first novel, the American writer, however, offers a demystifying and savage vision of motherhood, as well as a denunciation of the injustices and a warning of the risks that surround the experience. Consequently, *Nightbitch* can be read as an example of the feminist use of the fantastic in contemporary literature, wherein women authors re-actualize the female monster to denounce and undermine patriarchal myths surrounding motherhood.

Through the murky, surprising, and disturbing transformation, the novel not only makes a scathing and raw critique of twenty-first-century motherhood, but it also offers the liberation from the institution of motherhood to the experience of mothering, as well as the recovery of the protagonist’s subjectivity and thus her well-being. It is a fusion of fantastic literature with social criticism that gives rise to a political fable, demonstrating that the fantastic and magic are compatible with political discourse. The author’s choice to employ the fantastic as a medium to propose an alternative to patriarchal power highlights the notion that while a happy ending can be envisioned, it remains elusive in reality. Despite the potential for change, contemporary motherhood is still marred by inequality, control, and violence.

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