



<http://www.diva-portal.org>

## Postprint

This is the accepted version of a paper published in *Feminist Media Studies*. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Åström, B. (2015)

The Symbolic Annihilation of Mothers in Popular Culture: *Single Father* and the death of the mother.

*Feminist Media Studies*, 15(4): 593-607

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2014.994100>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-97709>

## The Symbolic Annihilation of Mothers in Popular Culture:

### Single Father and the Death of the Mother

This article takes as its starting point the paradoxical representation of mothers in popular culture. On the one hand the mother is constructed as central to the physical and emotional development of the child; on the other, she is routinely rejected or elided, questioned and vilified. One expression of this ambivalent attitude is the re-circulation of the trope of the dead mother. The trope, which ostensibly is employed to create sympathy for a character, or simply to drive the plot, often also privileges fathers, suggesting that children are better off without mothers. After a brief genre overview of the use of the trope of the dead mother on film and television, the article analyses how the BBC serial Single Father (2010), with its repeated depictions of the mother's violent death, develops the trope, by not only privileging the father and vilifying the dead mother, but also reducing her death to a plot point, a backdrop for romance.

Keywords: dead mothers; film; television; literature; popular culture

#### **Introduction**

In October 2010, the BBC broadcast the four-part drama Single Father, which features the death of a thirty-something mother, ten minutes into the first episode. The death is spectacular – without warning a police car crashes into her when she is cycling, catapulting her into the air. Tumbling through the air in slow motion, staring into the

camera, she ends up lying broken on the ground. This scene is so central to the programme that it is shown twice in the first episode and twice in the last. The episodes in between follow her family adjusting to life without her.

The programme generally received good reviews, both from critics and viewers (Cumming 2010, Dowling 2010, McEwan n .d., TotalFilm 2011, Frank 2010, IMDb 2011). Comments tended to focus on issues of veracity and sentimentality, as well as the quality of individual performances, but no one queried the way the dead mother's character is undermined step by step throughout the four episodes. The narrative presents her as a bad mother, questions her parenting decisions as well as her moral character, and reduces her importance, so that after less than six months she can be replaced by another woman in the affections of both her partner and her children.

A family romance and a sentimental melodrama, Single Father is also a good example of the paradoxical attitude towards mothers and motherhood presented in contemporary western literature and visual texts, punishing mothers for not living up to a culturally produced ideal. On the one hand the mother is constructed as central to the wellbeing of not only the child, but of the whole family, and by extension, society. She is the constant on which everything else is built, or, in the words of Luce Irigaray, "The substratum... who reproduces the social order, who is made this order's infrastructure" (1991, p. 47). On the other hand, the mother is routinely rejected or elided, questioned and vilified. As Lynda Haas has noted in a study of the representation of mothers in the cultural imaginary: "mothers are either sentimentalized or disdained; in either case, their identity and their work are simultaneously erased, naturalized, and devalued" (1995, p.196). This is evident in contemporary film and television, which "simultaneously devalue mothers as they sanctify the institution of motherhood" (Ristovski-Slijepcevic

2013, p. 631). The narratives present a “romanticised maternal ideal,” holding the mothers up against what Rebecca Feasey terms “the ‘good’ mother myth,” only to deride and denigrate them for failing (2012b, p. 11, 6).

The most powerful way in which a mother’s work is erased and devalued is through her death or absence, in an act I term “symbolic annihilation,” borrowing Gayle Tuchman’s phrase (1978, p. 8). Tuchman used it to describe the way US media in the 1970s trivialized, condemned or simply failed to include women in, for example, news broadcasting, but I extend it to the way mothers are routinely removed from narratives, through the re-circulation of a set of themes and clichés, forming a very resilient trope of the dead/absent mother (p. 8-17). The trope comprises a number of, sometimes contradictory, features. In some texts, the mother is only important as a negation or as a “meaningful absence,” to borrow a term from Felicity Dunworth (2010, p. 5). The mother’s death or disappearance might initially constitute an emotional crisis for the child, or it may merely be referred to in passing, but regardless it is presented as a temporary setback only. In other stories, her absence enables father and child to forge a deeper emotional attachment than they previously had, suggesting that the mother is an obstacle they need to overcome in order to bond. In some narratives, the mother is even presented as a harmful influence on the child, and her death saves the child from emotional or physical injury. In short, the dead/absent mother trope suggests that the mother-child bond must be broken.

The lack of mothers in literature and visual texts has been discussed by some scholars, both in relation to present-day texts (Worthington 2009, Wilson 2010) and to older texts (Rose 1991, Warner 1996, Dever 1998, Frankus 2012). It has also been debated on the internet and in discussion fora, in particular the missing mothers in

animated Disney films, and a number of answers have been proposed to explain why the trope is employed, from high mortality in childbirth in earlier periods (Warner), early modern changes to the family structure (Rose), socio-economic changes in the post-war US (Wilson), to Walt Disney's conflicted relationship with his mother (Axelrod 2003). Some scholars view the dead mother as a psychological necessity, since it allows the protagonist to break the potentially destructive bond with the mother and establish a separate identity (Anolik 2007). However, most analyses, regardless of whether they are conducted within the framework of psychoanalysis, social and economic history, or media studies, point to an underlying "general anxiety of female influence" (Henneberg 2010, p. 126). Such an anxiety is also reflected in the narratives Hannah Hamad has analysed as representative of "postfeminist fatherhood" (2012, p. 1).

Using Angela McRobbie's definition of postfeminism as the undermining of feminist achievements, suggesting "that equality is achieved" and that feminism is a "spent force" (McRobbie, 2007, p. 28), Hamad interrogates a number of films, including Minority Report (2002), Road to Perdition (2002) and Signs (2002), produced in the first decade of the twenty-first century, noting how they valorise fatherhood through "the appropriation and/or marginalization of motherhood" (17). Hamad points in particular to "the ubiquitous figure of the widowed single father," which "engenders audience investment in melancholic fathers and their emotional trajectories" (17, 24). I read Single Father as taking part in this articulation of postfeminist fatherhood. Whilst drawing on sentimentalizing notions of motherhood, the programme reproduces the idea that mothers are expendable, untrustworthy and dangerous, whereas fathers are reliable and irreplaceable. This is achieved by not only removing the mother from the narrative and undermining her motherwork, but also by obsessively showing her death, again and

again. Unlike most other narratives employing the trope, Single Father goes beyond simply negating the mother before moving along with the narrative. The death of the mother is instead invoked repeatedly as a romantic necessity, creating a narrative which viewers perceive as a love story with a happy ending (IMDb).

### **The many functions of a dead mother on screen**

Different visual genres employ the dead mother trope to achieve different results. For example, the death of a mother is often used as the starting point of an adventure. It is seeing his mother's death that makes Dexter a serial killer in the eponymous television programme (2006-2013). It is their mother's death at the hands of a demon that makes Sam and Dean Winchester demon hunters in the television programme Supernatural (2005-).

Dead or absent mothers can also be the cause of comedy, as in a number of television situation comedies during the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> These programmes feature widowed or divorced fathers raising their children alone and although the mistakes they make produce the comedy, the fathers are usually presented in a forgiving light, suggesting that mothers are not needed. More recent examples include the films Old Dogs (2009), Daddy Day Care (2003) and Cheaper by the Dozen (2003). Old Dogs and Cheaper by the Dozen feature men who are required to take over the childcare to cover for absent mothers who fail their responsibilities: one mother has to go to prison (for environmental activism), the other privileges outside commitments over family needs by going on a prolonged book tour. Daddy Day Care also features a mother who chooses work over the family, but the main message, conveyed through the running of the day care centre of the title, is that when it really comes down to it, men are better at childcare

than women. All three films show mothers not fulfilling the expected roles of the “good” mother, requiring the men to step in and sort things out.

The missing mother can also call the concept of family into question. The UK crime drama Conviction (2004) and the US police drama Blue Bloods (2010-) have both been billed as dramas featuring crime fighting families: police officers and lawyers in the UK drama, police officers in the US drama. However, there are no mothers in these families: they are made up of widowed fathers and their adult children. This raises a number of questions of genealogy, patriarchal inheritance and cultural assumptions of what constitutes a family.

The death of the mother may also be downplayed and used as a means to create closer bonds between father and son. This is most overtly articulated in children’s animated films, such as Chicken Little (2005), Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs (2009) and How to Train Your Dragon (2010). In Chicken, the mother is dead before the narrative begins, and the drama focuses on Chicken’s father, Buck Cluck, learning to support his son emotionally. In Meatballs, the mother dies eight minutes into the film, but her death does not have a strong impact. Instead, throughout the rest of the film the protagonist, Flint, is trying to make his father proud of him. In Dragon the mother’s absence is not mentioned until 47 minutes into the film, and then quickly brushed aside with a joke about the size of her breasts. The main drama is the troubled relationship between the boy Hiccup and his father.<sup>2</sup> In all three films, the focus is on the successful resolution of a troubled father-son relationship, whereas the mother’s death is easily dismissed. Films in which the child is a girl, usually adolescent, such as The Little Mermaid (1989), Beauty and the Beast (1990) and Aladdin (1992), tend to devote less space to father-child interaction and the resolution is more ambiguous (Wynns and

Rosenfeld 2003). Instead, the daughters are successfully transferred from father to prospective husband. However, in both types of films, the mothers' absence become an irrelevance.

Maternal death and father-child bonding also feature in live-action films, such as The Road (2009), Real Steel (2011) and Broken (2012), as well as the television drama Touch (2012). In Real Steel and Touch the absences can be said to be "acceptable," since the mothers are dead at the outset; indeed the mother in Touch died during the attack on the World Trade Center, whereas in Broken and The Road the mothers abandon their families. Regardless of what causes the absences, however, the result is that in each case the father and child develop a close relationship, showing that a mother is not necessary for a child's health and development.<sup>3</sup>

There are, of course a number of texts where it is the father who is absent, but his absence is usually not as easily dismissed as a mother's. Instead, it structures the whole narrative, as in, for example, The Lion King (1994), where Simba mourns his father and sets out to avenge him, before taking his place as rightful leader of the pride. Unlike Chicken, Flint and Hiccup, he does not spend the film developing a close relationship with the remaining parent. Similarly, the first series of the UK drama Life on Mars (2006-2007), is devoted to the main protagonist, police officer Sam Tyler, trying to solve the mystery of his father's disappearance when Tyler was a child. Throughout the series, the very strong impact the father's absence has had is underscored by Tyler's repeated flashbacks to memories of his father.

When living mothers feature in the texts, they often fail to live up to "the 'good' mother myth" with damaging consequences for their children. As Feasey has shown, mothers in teen drama are often shown to "dismiss, disappoint and deride" their children

(2012a, p. 157), whereas mothers in melodrama tend to be “hard, strong and selfish,” not showing enough affection, thereby damaging the child (Harper 2010, p. 159). In horror films, mothers may care too much, so that the child is “overmothered,” which invariably leads to a deep psychological trauma and homicidal tendencies (Lo 2010, p. 143). Lucy Fischer has shown how the controlling, suffocating mother prevents the child from maturing and becoming a separate individual (1996, p. 151). As Sarah Arnold states, the mother’s “prohibitive and overpowering nature produces violent tendencies in her children” (2013, p. 68). Fischer notes that, in general, mothers in films are chastised either for too great a detachment or too much involvement (1996, p. 30). In short, no matter what the mothers do, they will end up damaging their children. In some cases, the mothers are so bad that the children themselves tell the mothers to go away, as in the UK drama Shameless (2004-2013) and in the US crime drama Veronica Mars (2004-2007). In both programmes, the children decide that they are better off without their mothers, opting to live with their fathers instead.

The only genre that accords mothers a non-damaging role seems to be that of domestic sitcoms, where the mother’s role is to provide a stable environment, in which the charming but childish and inept husband, together with the children, may provide the comedy (Neuhaus 762-763).<sup>4</sup> However, as Feasey has discussed, the domestic sitcom, such as the UK programme Outnumbered, tends to present motherwork as “ignored, overlooked and unthanked” and the mother as dismissed and derided, so even though she may appear to be harmless, she is still not valued. (2012b, p. 43, 47).

As this brief overview suggests, the symbolic annihilation of mothers on film and television through the use of the dead mother trope recurs in a number of genres, fulfilling various functions. However, all genres recycle the notion that not only is a

mother not essential for a child's wellbeing, but in many cases she is a source of physical or emotional harm. As will be shown, Single Father incorporates traits not only from romance, but also melodrama, teen drama and soap opera, all of which incorporate the condemnation and removal of the mother (Feasey 2012b, p. 179). What makes Single Father particularly worthwhile to investigate is the way the programme, unlike most of the other narratives discussed above, overtly displays its heavy investment in removing and rejecting the mother, devoting much time and space to not only her death, but demonstrating how such a death can produce "heartstring tugging romantic drama" with a happy ending (Total Film n. pag.). In doing so, the programme builds on the audience's familiarity with, and acceptance of, the dead mother trope, transforming maternal death from an unacknowledged narrative baseline to a central necessity.

### **Single Father**

The father in Single Father is Dave/David Tennant, who lives in Glasgow, Scotland, with his common-law partner Rita/Laura Fraser and their three children, Paul/Chris Hegarty, Ewan/Robert Dickson and Evie/Millie Innes, as well as Rita's teenage daughter Lucy/Natasha Watson, presented as the result of a one-off sexual encounter with an unknown man.<sup>5</sup> The first episode opens with Rita, teaching assistant at a nursery school, setting off to sit an exam, which will allow her to become a teacher. When she is cycling to take the exam, she is hit and killed by a police car. The programme follows the family for 22 weeks, as they cope with a life without her. Dave falls in love with and initiates an affair with Rita's best friend, Sarah/Suranne Jones. Lucy's father is found, and turns out to be a successful barrister, a man Rita selected when she wanted to have a child without having a partner. At the end of the series, all the

children have come to terms with their mother's death. They have also accepted Sarah as Dave's new partner, and she is pregnant with Dave's child. In the final scene of the final episode, Rita has become no more than a distant memory: "she's gone and we're here now" as Dave says. Rita has been reduced to a "meaningful absence" that blesses the new family.

### **Deconstructing Rita**

The subject matter of Single Father, the way a family heals itself after the mother's death, creates a narrative dilemma, where two conflicting images of motherhood need to be reconciled. On the one hand, the mother's death would have no emotional power if she were not central to the family. Therefore the narrative draws on the notion of a culturally stable view of motherhood, on a universal image of Mother as the family's "reliable moral compass" (Dever 1998, p. 18). This functions as narrative shorthand, removing any further need to establish the mother's character, or her position in the family. It is assumed that the audience is already familiar with the construction. On the other hand, since the result of the programme is a family that has recovered and moved on, the narrative is also required to demonstrate why the mother's death is not only a surmountable obstacle, but that it is, in fact, in the best interest of the family that she dies. This is done by showing all the ways in which she does not live up to the expectations patriarchal culture places on her. Far from being a reliable moral compass, she has not been reliable at all. Since Rita was such a bad mother and untrustworthy lover, Dave falling in love with her best friend only a few weeks after her death becomes very plausible. It thus becomes possible for the viewer to take pleasure in the budding love affair, and hope that Dave and Sarah will live happily ever after.

### An angry, selfish mother

The myth of the good mother dictates that she should be kind and self-effacing, or in Shirley Neuman's words, "mothers are socially constructed as self-sacrificing and selfless" (1996, p. 53). A mother should be patient and attentive to her children's needs. Rita, however, is presented as selfish, inattentive and angry.

The opening sequence of Single Father introduces the family, showing them getting ready for school and work, but it also establishes Rita as shirking her responsibilities. Scenes of Dave rushing about in the kitchen, putting breakfast on the table, answering questions and making sure the children have everything ready for school are intercut with images of Rita, sitting leisurely in the doorway to the house, playing with Evie, the youngest child. The editing suggests that Rita is not pulling her weight, choosing to play rather than making sure that all her children are fed, dressed and ready for school. In short, she is not fulfilling the demands of "the ideology of intensive mothering," as described by Sharon Hays, which dictates that mothers should exert "a tremendous amount of time and energy" on their children (1996, p. x). Dave, on the other hand, is presented as an example of the postfeminist father, fulfilling the duties of both mother and father, rendering the mother expendable.

After the shocking death scene, the narration moves back to the day before Rita dies, and again the stress is on her failure as a mother. She is shown as angry and testy with the children, because she is revising for her exam; that is, she puts her own needs before those of her children. She arbitrarily decides that Ewan will not take part in a football game that is particularly important to him. In the end, Ewan does play, but when he seeks Rita's praise afterwards, she withholds it, ignores him and further upsets him

through ill-judged decisions. Throughout these scenes, Dave is presented as the parent who tends to the children's physical and emotional needs. It is further suggested that Rita has no authority unless it is backed up by Dave: it is not until he intervenes that the children obey her. These scenes not only establish Rita as a selfish, angry and capricious mother, but they also demonstrate that she has no power within the household.

This portrayal of Rita creates a jarring effect, coming as it does directly after the accident. While the viewer is still recovering from the unexpected death of what, at this stage, must still be assumed is a good mother, her character is dismantled step by step. Thus her death serves a dual purpose. First it shocks the viewer and triggers grief. Then, as the destruction of Rita's character carries on, it comes more and more to take on overtones of rational necessity.

Rita's tenuous authority in the first episode is overruled completely after her death. First her ban on mobile phones for children is overturned by her sister, Anna/Neve McIntosh (Episode 2). Dave's immediate reaction is one of outrage: "How dare you go behind my back!" Although initially referring to how Rita "hated" mobile phones for children, he quickly gives in, and in the end the confrontation seems to have been more about the potential undermining of his authority than about respecting Rita's opinions.

Later, it is Dave himself who ignores Rita's wishes when he buys a PlayStation for the children (Episode 3). Paul becomes upset, shouting "Mum hated PlayStations. Hated them!" but Dave dismisses his outburst. This exchange occurs twelve weeks into the narrative and is the last time anyone makes any references to what Rita liked or disliked. From this point on, her parenting decisions no longer matter.

This undermining of Rita's authority is in keeping with how mothers generally are treated on television, where their opinions and actions are routinely undermined and

devalued (Feasey 2012b). Rita is only obeyed when supported by Dave, and Dave overrules decisions he does not agree with. Although Dave and Rita notionally have equal responsibility for the children, as parents in a postfeminist world where “equality is achieved,” it is evident that Dave has the authority in the family (McRobbie, p. 28). Rita’s death could thus be understood as a logical extension of her lack of authority: her decisions do not matter, so she might as well not be there to make them.

#### A bad role model

A good mother is honest, hard-working and not overtly sexual (O’Reilly, 2004, p. 5). As the programme develops, it becomes clear that Rita was none of those things. Before she is killed again in Episode 1, she is shown struggling with the revision for the exam; the subject is too complicated for her, suggesting that she might not be suitable as a teacher. She then admits to her friend Sarah that she does not really want to sit the exam and become a teacher. Instead she wants to have another child and the viewer is left wondering whether she wants the child because she likes children, or because it would mean that she would not have to work. The fact that Dave does not want any more children is of no consequence; Rita claims that she will simply trick him into fathering another one. She then encourages Sarah to do the same to her partner, who does not want children at all.

It is also revealed that Rita has lied about Lucy’s conception. The pregnancy was not the result of a one-off encounter. Rita deliberately chose a fellow student at university, Stuart/Rupert Graves, to father her child, because she wanted to have a baby, but not enter into a relationship. As Stuart explains: “She just wanted to be pregnant” (Episode 2).<sup>6</sup> Rita kept Stuart apprised about Lucy over the years, but lied about her

name, and did not tell him when she found a partner and had more children. These lies not only deprive Lucy of a father, but also of roots and identity, and it is only through Rita's death that Lucy can bond with her biological father, who turns out to be not only rich and successful, but also kind and committed, offering to adopt her, if she wishes.

The lying also causes Dave to question his and Rita's whole relationship. "She deceived me," he says, and adds that "I fucking hate her for that" (Episode 3). The fact that she chose to conceive outside accepted societal norms causes him to doubt that he is the father of Ewan, Paul and Evie. Echoing the centrality of paternity issues found in the soap opera genre, Dave obsesses about this question to the extent that he secretly collects DNA samples from the children and sends them off for testing (Feasey 2008, p. 16). It turns out that all three are indeed his children, but the fact that he thought it possible that Rita might have deceived him still leaves lingering doubts about her character, as does her choice not to marry him, but simply co-habit. Through this refusal to marry, Rita endangers Dave's relationship with his own children. After her death, there are concerns that social services will not recognize him as their legal guardian. Although nothing comes of this threat, it is there, presented as yet another criticism of Rita's beliefs and actions

Rita's sexuality becomes a major issue as the programme develops and a source of fear in relation to Lucy. It is revealed that Rita was sexually active by the age of 15 and, according to her sister, she made a point of seducing her teachers, suggesting that not only was she sexually promiscuous, but that she chose inappropriate partners (Episode 2). In this way, Single Father echoes mothers in teen drama, who are often depicted as not only "impotent, ineffectual and uninvolved" but also sexually irresponsible (Feasey 2012b p. 56, 53). When Rita dies, Lucy becomes unruly and

secretive, skipping school and disappearing without letting anyone know where she is. Although a troubled present-day teenager in real life is surrounded by many dangers, such as drugs, alcohol and different types of physical abuse, such concerns are not addressed in the programme. There the focus is on the topic of sex. Rita's sexuality, particularly in the form of her early sexual debut, is constructed as a threat to Lucy: "like mother like daughter" as her aunt says (Episode 2). Concerns for Lucy's mental and physical wellbeing are thus reduced to a fear that she might conceive.

Although Lucy shows no signs of being, or wanting to be, sexually active, the spectre of her mother's sexuality, reckless fertility and deceptive nature hover over her. The way this threat is dispelled is by emphasizing her child status by connecting her to her biological father. Through him she is slotted into another family context, with two younger sisters and a step-mother who is shown to be everything Rita was not: married, quiet, self-effacing.

In this way Lucy is set free from her own dangerous mother and is instead brought up by three, more suitable mother substitutes: her aunt Anna, who, being childless, does not display any dangerous fecundity, her father's wife, and Sarah, who is not only a qualified teacher, but also kind and attentive to the children's needs.<sup>7</sup>

### Rita's redemption

The death that was such a devastating shock at the beginning of the series has at the end been reinterpreted as a blessing. Not only has it removed the threat and bad influence that Rita has turned out to be, but it also, paradoxically, gives her a chance to redeem herself. Because it is judged that the police were to blame for Rita's death, and because she was a mother of four children, Dave is given monetary compensation on

such a scale that he and the children become more or less financially independent. Throughout the four programmes, Rita has been presented as refusing the wifely and motherly duty of self-sacrifice. She has not been prepared to put her children, or her partner, before her own wishes and desires. She has denied Lucy a father, because she did not want a partner; she arbitrarily decides that Ewan cannot play in an important football match because she is angry with him; she decides to become pregnant again, disregarding her partners wishes. Yet by dying, Rita has given her children a prosperous future, and finally proven herself to be a self-sacrificing mother.

#### Killing the mother, again and again

During the course of Single Father, Rita's death is shown four times. Although each screening ostensibly is required, it can seem almost obsessive. However, there is a trajectory within these retellings. The first time, it comes as a shock to the viewer – time seems to stop when Rita tumbles through the air in slow-motion, mouthing “I love you” in close-up towards the camera. The second time, not only is the viewer prepared, but Rita has also been shown as angry and selfish, reducing the effect of the scene somewhat. The third time her death is shown is when the court is viewing evidence from the camera in the police car that killed her, and the fourth is CCTV footage taken from a camera in the street (Episode 4). These two clips are in black and white, shot from a distance, lessening the shock even further. By this stage the emotional impact has been greatly reduced and the concern is not the characters' feelings but who was at fault, the police officer or Rita, and consequently how large the monetary compensation should be. Thus, the tragic death of a beloved mother and lover has been reduced to a question of culpability and remuneration.

### From death to romance

As noted above, the first episode features an extended flashback, showing the various ways in which Rita fails not only the children but also Dave. After he has made sure to keep the children away from her all day, so that she can revise for an exam she does not even wish to take, he wants to go and play football with his friends. Rita's response is to call him a "complete, selfish wanker." Later that same evening she tells Dave that, against his express will, she has promised the children a puppy. At this stage the viewer could be forgiven for wondering why Dave puts up with her. By presenting Rita as an unsatisfactory lover and partner, who disregards Dave's emotional needs, the groundwork is laid for the love affair between Dave and Sarah, who does satisfy those needs, caring for him when he needs emotional support.

After Rita's death has been shown for the second time, there are no more flashbacks to her alive. Instead there are scenes of Dave looking at photographs of her, in which she poses in an almost sexually aggressive manner. From the second episode onwards, he begins to have fantasies which start out as images of Rita but morph into images of Sarah, suggesting that he is now getting ready to move on. By the end of the second episode, ten weeks after Rita's death, Dave and Sarah attempt to have sex in his house, but are interrupted by Evie, who has had a nightmare. The way the scene is set up, showing the characters' anticipation and planning, and their disappointment when they are interrupted, suggests that the audience is expected to interpret the interruption as a pity, that the characters should have been allowed to consummate their relationship, rather than that Dave is going through the grieving process at record speed.

Rita is thus silenced, reduced to a sexual object only, and finally replaced. From the third episode onwards, the narrative is only concerned with the mystery of Lucy's father, and the development of Sarah's and Dave's relationship. What started out as a tragedy with the death of a mother with her whole life ahead of her has become a romantic love story where Dave and Sarah have to overcome a number of obstacles, in the form of Sarah's partner and Dave's children.

The children's protests at their father's new relationship only last long enough to serve as a plot device to defer the happy ending for a little longer, and the final episode ends with Dave and the children racing to catch Sarah before she moves away from Glasgow and from their lives. They catch her as she is about to leave with the removals van and Dave pleads with her to stay with him and the children. Sarah brings up Rita, seemingly asking for confirmation that Dave loves her more than his dead wife: "What about Rita? She's with us all the time and always will be." Dave's response is that they all love her, but "she's gone, we're still here." As a "meaningful absence", Rita, through her death, has enabled their love, and Dave and Sarah can now build a new family and a new life on the foundation of that death.

### **Escalation**

Single Father thus develops the trope of the dead mother by making it central to the narrative. In doing so, it may be seen as part of a trend, in which the death of the mother is becoming increasingly important for the narrative. As noted above, many animated films for children include dead mothers, but what is particularly noteworthy of some of the films produced in the first decade of the twentieth century, Chicken Little (2005), Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs (2009) and How to Train Your Dragon

(2010), is that they are all adaptations of narratives that do not feature dead mothers. The picture book Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs (1978) is about a grandfather telling his grandchildren a bedtime story. The book features a mother, but no father. How to Train Your Dragon (2003) is a young adult novel, where the protagonist has both a mother and a father, and both remain alive throughout the book. Chicken Little is based on a folktale, also known as Chicken Licken or Henny Penny (Aarne-Thompson type 20C), which in various versions has a chick, a hen or a cockerel as the main protagonist. It does not usually feature any parents at all. Yet, when these stories were turned into films, the filmmakers decided to introduce the trope of the dead mother, and it is used as a device to bring father and child closer together. In short, the happiness of father and child is predicated on the death of the mother

In their various ways, these films and programmes suggest that mothers make children and husbands unhappy and that the solution is for the mothers to die. The reasons for such a development are complex, but one contributing factor may be the increased public discourse of fathers' feelings of exclusion. Such feelings are obviously not new, as noted by, for example John Tosh (2007) and Ralph LaRossa (1997), but they are increasingly voiced in public, as discussed by, for instance, Esther Dermott (2008), Barbara Hobson (2002) and Collier and Sheldon (2008), and exemplified by fathers' rights organisations such as Fathers4Justice and Families Need Fathers in the UK and National Fatherhood Initiative in the US. The visual narratives' changing use of the dead mother trope may thus, in part, be a reflection of a cultural notion that mothers are preventing fathers and children from bonding.

## **Conclusion**

In Single Father, Rita's death seems to be an almost unqualified blessing. Lucy is protected from her mother's dangerous sexuality, fertility, lies and deception; she connects with a father she never knew; in Sarah, Dave finds a new partner and the children a mother substitute who is less angry and more attentive. Furthermore, through Rita's sacrifice, the family is now financially secure. That the happy ending of the story is predicated on Rita's death may seem incongruous, but because the audience is accustomed to dead mothers in popular culture, and because the programme so successfully invokes romantic and melodramatic themes, that death becomes a narrative requirement, losing most of its emotional power.

Single Father can thus be viewed as an escalation of the symbolic annihilation of mothers in popular culture. Rita's death is a requirement for the happiness of her children and her husband. Such a development gives pause for thought. Although there are, albeit few, films and television programmes which feature living, good mothers, as opposed to alcoholic, weak or abusive ones, there appears to be a reflex in mainstream popular visual culture to kill off the mother. Demands have been made for "a family romance which does not feature a deceased mother" (Smart 2000, 392), but this does not appear to be the general trend. Rather, if Single Father is anything to go by, we seem to be moving in the opposite direction, towards more stories that suggest that a family can only find happiness over the dead body of the mother.

## **REFERENCES**

- ANOLIK, RUTH BIENSTOCK (2007) "The Absent Mother: Negotiations of Maternal Presence in the Gothic Mode," in The Literary Mother: Essay on Representations of Maternity and Child Care ed Susan C. Staub, Jefferson, McFarland Publishing, pp. 95-116.
- ARNOLD, SARAH (2013) Maternal Horror Film: Melodrama and Motherhood, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- AXELROD, MARK (2003) "Beauties and Their Beasts & Other Motherless Tales from the Wonderful World of Disney," in The Emperor's Old Groove: Decolonizing Disney's Magic Kingdom ed Brenda Ayres, Peter Lang, New York, pp. 29-38.
- BADINTER, ELIZABETH (1981) The Myth of Motherhood: An Historical View of the Maternal Instinct, Souvenir Press, London.
- BARRETT, JUDI (1978, 2011) Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs. Little Simon, New York.
- BLUE BLOOD (television series) (2010-) CBS, USA.
- BRAVE (2012) Film. Directed by Mark Andrews, Brenda Chapman & Steve Purcell. USA: Walt Disney Pictures.
- BROKEN (2012) Film. Directed by Rufus Norris. UK: Wild Bunch.
- CHEAPER BY THE DOZEN (2003) Film. Directed by Shawn Levy. USA: Twentieth Century Fox.
- CHICKEN LITTLE (2005) Film. Directed by Mark Dindal. USA: Walt Disney Pictures.
- CLOUDY WITH A CHANCE OF MEATBALLS (2009) Film. Directed by Phil Lord & Chris Miller. USA: Sony Pictures.
- COLLIER, RICHARD & SALLY SHELDON (2008) Fragmenting Fatherhood: a Socio-Legal Study. Hart Publishing, Oxford.

CONVICTION (television series) (2004) BBC, UK.

CONWAY, ELLIE (2010) "Poor cows or dangerous beasts? The representation of 'underclass' women in broadsheet newspapers: media portrayals, political identity and policy." [Online] Available at: <http://www.social-policy.org.uk/lincoln/Conway.pdf> (22 January 2014).

COWELL, CRESSIDA (2003) How to Train Your Dragon. Hodder, London.

CUMMING, ED (2010) "Single Father, BBC Two, review," The Telegraph, 8 October. [Online] Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/bbc/8051691/Single-Father-BBC-Two-review.html> (22 January 2014).

DADDY DAY CARE (2003) Film. Directed by Steve Carr. USA: Revolution Studios.

DARKWARRIOR (2012) "Brave is nothing short of an epic fail," Metacritic, 7 September. Available at: <http://www.metacritic.com/movie/brave/user-reviews>.

DERMOTT, ESTHER (2008) Intimate Fatherhood: a Sociological Analysis. Routledge, Oxford.

DEVER, CAROLYN (1998) Death and the Mother: from Dickens to Freud: Victorian Fiction and the Anxiety of Origins, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

DEXTER (television series) (2006-2013) Showtime Networks, USA.

DOLAN, ELIZABETH A. (2009) "Collaborative Motherhood: Maternal Teachers and Dying Mothers in Charlotte Smith's Children's Books," Women's Writing, vol. 16, no 1, pp. 109-125.

DOWLING, TIM (2010) "TV review: Single Father and Louis Theroux: law and disorder in Lagos," The Guardian 11 October. [Online] Available at:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/tv-and-radio/2010/oct/11/single-father-louis-theroux-tv-review>.

DUNWORTH, FELICITY (2010) Mothers and Meaning on the Early Modern English Stage, Manchester University Press, Manchester.

FEASEY, REBECCA (2012a) “Absent, ineffectual and intoxicated mothers: representing the maternal in teen television,” Feminist Media Studies, vol. 12, no 1, pp. 155-159.

—. (2012b) From Happy Homemaker to Desperate Housewives: Motherhood and Television, Anthem Press, London.

—. (2008) Masculinity and Popular Television, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.

FISCHER, LUCY (1996) Cinematernity: Film, Motherhood, Genre, Princeton University Press.

FORNA, AMINATTA (1998) Mother of All Myths: How Society Mould and Constrains Mothers, Harper Collins, London.

FRANK, DANA (2010) “Talking telly: review of David Tennant’s ‘Single Father.’” Anglotopia.net. 10 October. Available at: <http://www.anglotopia.net/british-entertainment/brit-tv/bbc/talking-telly-review-of-david-tennants-single-father-episode-1/>.

FRANKUS, MARILYN (2012) Monstrous Motherhood: Eighteenth Century Culture and the Ideology of Domesticity, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

HAAS, LYNDA (1995) “‘Eighty-six the mother’: murder, matricide, and good mothers,” in From Mouse to Mermaid: the Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture, eds Elisabeth Bell, Lynda Haas & Laura Sell, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, pp. 193-211.

- HAMAD, HANNAH (2013) Postfeminism and Paternity in Contemporary U.S. Film: Framing Fatherhood, Routledge, New York.
- HAYS, SHARON (1996) The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood, Yale University Press, New Haven.
- HARPER, MARK (2010) "Paranoia, cold surveillance, and the maternal gaze: reconsidering the 'absent mother' in Ordinary People," in Motherhood Misconceived: Representing the Maternal in U.S. Films, eds. Heather Addison, Mary Kate Goodwin-Kelly & Elaine Roth, State University of New York Press, New York, pp. 157-176.
- HENNEBERG, SYLVIA (2010) "Moms do Badly, but Grandmas do Worse: The Nexus of Sexism and Ageism in Children's Classics," Journal of Aging Studies, vol. 24. pp. 125-134.
- HOBSON, BARBARA (2002) Making Men into Fathers: Men, Masculinities and the Social Politics of Fatherhood. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON (2010) Film. Directed by Dean DeBlois & Chris Sanders, USA: DreamWorks.
- INTERNATIONAL MOVIE DATABASE (2011) "Single Father: reviews & ratings," 17 January. [Online] Available at: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1605467/reviews-index?>
- IRIGARAY, LUCE (1991) The Irigaray Reader, ed Margaret Whitford, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- LAROSSA, RALPH (1997) The Modernization of Fatherhood: a Social and Political History. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- LIFE ON MARS (television series) (2006-2007) BBC, UK.

- LO, MUN-HOU (2010). "Alfred Hitchcock and the phobic maternal body," in Motherhood Misconceived: Representing the Maternal in U.S. Films, eds. Heather Addison, Mary Kate Goodwin-Kelly & Elaine Roth, State University of New York Press, New York, pp. 139-155.
- MARS NEEDS MOMS (2011) Film. Directed by Simon Wells. USA: Walt Disney Pictures.
- MCEWAN, CAMERON K "Single Father: Episode 1 ," Last Broadcast. [Online] Available at: <http://www.lastbroadcast.co.uk/drama/reviews/v/14826-single-father-episode-1.html> (22 January 2014).
- MCROBBIE, ANGELA (2007) "Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime," in Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, Duke University Press, Durham, pp. 27-39.
- NEUHAUS, JESSAMYN (2010) "Marge Simpson, blue haired housewife: defining domesticity on The Simpsons," The Journal of Popular Culture, vol. 43, no. 4, pp. 761-781.
- NEUMAN, SHIRLEY (1996) "'Your past...your future': autobiography and mothers' bodies," in Genre, Trope, Gender: Critical Essays by Northrop Frye, Linda Hutcheon, Shirley Neuman, ed Barry Rutland, Carleton UP: Ottawa, pp. 51-86.
- OLD DOGS (2009) Film. Directed by Walt Becker, USA: Walt Disney Pictures.
- O'REILLY, ANDREA (2004) "Introduction," in Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering, ed Andrea O'Reilly, Toronto: Women's Press, pp.1-28.

RATTIGAN, NEIL & THOMAS MCMANUS (1992) “Fathers, Sons, and Brothers: Patriarchy and Guilt in 1980s American Cinema,” Journal of Popular Film and Television vol. 20, no 1, pp. 15-23.

REAL STEEL (2011) Film. Directed by Shawn Levy, USA: DreamWorks. 2011.

RISTOVSKI-SLIJEPCEVIC, SVETLANA (2013) “The dying mother: film portrayals of mothering with incurable cancer,” Feminist Media Studies vol. 13. no. 4, pp. 629-642.

ROSE, MARY BETH (1991) “Where are the mothers in Shakespeare? Options for gender representation in the English Renaissance,” Shakespeare Quarterly, vol.42, pp. 291-314.

SHAMELESS (television series) (2004-2013) Channel 4, UK.

SINGLE FATHER (television series) (2010) BBC, UK.

SMART, ANNIE (2000) “Luce Irigaray and the Mutterdämmerung,” Psychoanalytic Studies 2, pp. 385-394.

SUPERNATURAL (television series) (2005-) CW, USA

THE LION KING (1994) Film. Directed by Roger Allers & Rob Minkoff. Buena Vista Pictures, USA.

THE LITTLE MERMAID (1989) Film. Directed by Ron Clements & John Musker. USA.

THE ROAD (2009) Film. Directed by John Hillcoat. Dimension Films, USA.

TOSH, JOHN (2007) A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England. Yale University Press, London.

- THOMPSON, STITH (1961) The types of the Folktale: a Classification and Bibliography: Antti Aarne's Verzeichnis der Märchentypen. Helsinki: Suomalainen tiedeakademia.
- TOUCH (television series) (2012-2013) Fox, USA.
- TOTALFILM (2011) "Single Father ," 24 February, [Online] Available at:  
<http://www.totalfilm.com/reviews/dvd/single-father>.
- TUCHMAN, GAYE (1978) "Introduction: the symbolic annihilation of women by the mass media," in Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media, eds Gaye Tuchman, Arlene Kaplan Daniels & James Benét, Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 3-37..
- VERONICA MARS. (television series) (2004-2007) UPN/ CW, USA.
- WARNER, MARINA (1996) "The absent mother: women against women in old wives' tales," in Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature, ed Sheila Egoff, Oxford University Press, Toronto, pp. 278-87.
- WILSON, NATALIE (2010) "The Mother must die so daddy can deliver (musings on the dearth of mothers in recent children's films)," Pop Goes Feminism, 7 May.  
 [Online] Available at: <http://girlwpen.com/?p=1882>.
- WORTHINGTON, MARJORIE (2009) "The motherless 'Disney princess': marketing mothers out of the picture," in Mommy Angst: Motherhood in Popular Culture, eds Ann Hall & Mardia Bishop. Praeger, London, pp. 29-46.
- WYNNS, SCARLET L. & LAWRENCE R. ROSENFELD (2003) "Father-Daughter Relationships in Disney's Animated Films," Southern Communication Journal, vol. 68, pp. 91-106.

---

<sup>1</sup> Examples include Bachelor Father, (1957-62); Diff'rent Strokes, (1978-86); My Two Dads, (1987-90); Full House, (1987-95) in the US and Bachelor Father, (1970-1); Father, Dear Father, (1968-73); Me and My Girl, (1984-88); Home to Roost (1985-90) in the UK.

<sup>2</sup> The films Mars Needs Moms (2011) and Brave (2012) may signal a change in that they both feature mothers who survive the narrative. However, although the mother in Mars Needs Moms is said to be important, she is unconscious throughout most of the film. Brave, on the other hand, although praised by many reviewers, was also criticised for centring on the mother-daughter relationship, which was seen as annoying and predictable (Darkwarrior 2012).

<sup>3</sup> In live-action films, as in animated ones, it appears that most father-child relationships depicted are those involving sons, as has been discussed by, for example, Rattigan and McManus, who note a “virtual obsession with father-son relations” (1992, p. 1). Why this should be the case needs to be interrogated much more extensively than there is room for in this article.

<sup>4</sup> Examples of such sitcoms include According to Jim and Everybody loves Raymond in the US and 2.4 children, and My family in the UK.

<sup>5</sup> The title Single Father is a misnomer, since Paul is never alone in caring for the children. After Rita’s death, a number of others step in to help him: Rita’s sister, Rita’s best friend, Dave’s ex-wife and their teenage daughter, who has a toddler of her own. These women free up Paul’s time so that he can continue with his work and hobbies, as well as pursue a new love interest and track down Lucy’s biological father.

<sup>6</sup> Although this could be construed as Rita being maternal, it also taps into UK cultural fears of the “promiscuous, obscenely fertile” single mother (Forna 1998, p. 109, Conway 2010, n. pag.). It should be noted that although the phrase “single mother” carries a social stigma in the UK, no such stigma attaches to the phrase “single father.” Instead, the title of the programme is most likely intended to evoke sympathy.

<sup>7</sup> Svetlana Ristovski-Sljepcevic has discussed how dying mothers on film are required to find substitutes for themselves, but since Rita is killed in an accident, she is not afforded this opportunity. The topic of substitute mothers in visual narratives warrants a similar investigation to that of Elizabeth Dolan’s analysis of dying mothers and collaborative motherhood in eighteenth century literature, which suggests that biological mothers are presented as flawed, requiring surrogate mothers to step in. For reasons of space, however, such an investigation cannot be undertaken here.