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Shaping Truth: Narratorial Control in Mother-Daughter Memoirs

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Abstract

This thesis explores narratorial control in three mother-daughter memoirs: *Mommie Dearest* (1978) by Christina Crawford, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011) by Amy Chua, and *I'm Glad My Mom Died* (2022) by Jennette McCurdy. The focus rests primarily on the relationship between the mother and daughter in each memoir, with two of the memoirs (Crawford's and McCurdy's) being narrated by daughters and one (Chua's) by the mother. In this, I assess how the authors use standard literary techniques (narrative voice, tone, language, titles) to control the perception of the people, places, and events about which they write. I achieve this by extended close reading of each of the texts, while also contextualising these personal narratives with relevant cultural and social contexts and histories. More broadly, I deploy G. Thomas Couser's definitions of the subgenres of testimony, conversion narrative, bildungsroman, and apology to identify the persuasive strategies involved in the narratives and to consider the potential significance of narrative gaps and omissions.

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Introduction

The genre of the memoir is neither complete fiction nor complete fact but rather lingers in the liminal space between the two, fully dependent on individual memory. The use of the word “fiction” here is not to imply that memoirs are “made up” but underlines that they are only as truthful as memory and language permit, and the author’s own disposition towards the people, places, and events which they write about, shapes them. Acknowledging this, it must then be said that authors of such autobiographical narratives seek to frame the understanding of their readers. Thus, making it worthwhile to consider how these frames contribute to the telling of these stories as they are indeed the root of them.

This project seeks to understand what sorts of narratorial framing devices are at the root of three twentieth- and twenty-first century mother/daughter memoirs: *Mommie Dearest* (1978) by Christina Crawford, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011) by Amy Chua, and *I’m Glad My Mom Died* (2022) by Jennette McCurdy, and asks what sorts of narratorial control guide the perception of the events and people within the memoir. This will be done by analysing the content of each memoir—particularly the relationship between daughter and mother—to see how the author’s narration exercises control over the understanding of the power relationships depicted. Different histories will be explained in each chapter to give further context to the various lives represented. This is not to undermine the validity of the stories told, but rather to analyse the narrator’s attempts to control the understanding of a story using standard literary techniques such as tone, tense, and humour. My analysis expands upon discussions surrounding the analysis of memoirs and how they differ from other genres of literature—with the rise of the memoir, these differences are critical.

The memoir, as a genre and regardless of subgenre, attempts to reconstruct a personal historical narrative; with this reconstruction comes subjective understanding from the author regarding the people, places, and events about which they write. This subjective bias, though

seldom addressed by the authors, must be noted in the process of interpreting this history. In memoirs, as in any narrative, what is left out can be equally important to what is included. To acknowledge this, my analysis deploys the term “persona” to refer to the people presented within the memoir. Not all information on each person’s life is ever available, and the view of each person is necessarily limited. “Character” is not an appropriate term—though perhaps caricature in some instances would be appropriate—because these are not literary “characters” but representations of real people. ‘Persona’, then, captures the sense that these are figures as they are seen and understood by the author.

To begin, the genre of the memoir will be examined for clarity. Memoirs are a subsection of the wider genre autobiography—often now generalised and referred to as “life-writing”—this incorporates journals, letters, diaries, autobiographies, memoirs and other personal narratives even extending to social media. Memoirs, historically, pinpoint a singular period of one’s life to reflect on rather than the entirety of their life (Smith and Watson 6). These highlighted stories typically depict a turning point that might not be considered typically in the larger scope of their life (as sometimes these events may not stand out on first glance without retrospective self-analysis). The difference between autobiography and memoir beyond the time span which is covered within the writing is further evaluated by Smith and Watson, who claim that, “categorization of memoir often signals autobiographical works characterized by their density of language and self-reflexivity about the writing process” (Smith and Watson 7). These stories, because of their personal nature and reflexivity along with them being key moments in the lives of the authors, frequently share details which reveal the mentality of the author. Howes identifies that, “Vulnerability and precarity are central concerns for many life-writing sub-genres” (Howes 12). Such vulnerability lends itself to creating environments in which people may be invited to see themselves within the relationships depicted.

The examination of this genre is complex because, as suggested by initial studies of it, “autobiographies were reflections, not of events in someone’s life, but of an author’s personality” (Boon, McNeill and Rak 2). This to say that the core of the stories, though it may or may not be truthful, is not necessarily the purpose of reading or writing autobiographies; rather it is to construct lens through which the author reveals themselves. This is complicated as it then becomes an analysis of the author and their own morality which is subject to change depending on who is participating in the analysis. Knowing this, the author/narrator of these stories becomes the primary subject of wonder and critique as the construction of the text is analysed. As Boon, McNeill, and Rak argue, “Reading auto/biography as literature asks us to focus on how the author creates and interprets themselves and the world through and in their texts” (Boon, McNeill and Rak 9). Thus, the focus of my analysis is on how the narrative is structured and the tools used by the author in order to craft the semi-fictional world they want readers to enter and witness.

Since memoirs are analysed based on the techniques of narration as well as the content, narratology becomes a critical aspect of memoir study. Narratology is the study of narratives, as defined by Monika Fludernik, it describes, “the constants, variables, and combinations typical of narrative and to clarify how these characteristics of narrative texts connect within the framework of theoretical models” (Fludernik 8). In memoirs, the relationship between story and discourse is complicated as the events are typically individual or familial stories based on personal history, meaning that the story itself is only verifiable with reference to how the author presents it. The study of the narrative can be traced back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which laid the groundwork for modern Western story-telling notions—though his theoretical work is primarily based on tragedy his analysis can be applied more broadly. Aristotle charts what he deems most critical in narrative; in doing so he lays out four distinct categories, which are as follows: Plot, character, reasoning, and diction (Aristotle,

Poetics 12). The combination of each of these is then what forms a coherent narrative. These points, as noted by Fludernik, are not only seen in literary work, but are also seen in everyday life (Fludernik 1). Fludernik further defines narrative as a, “representation of a possible world in a linguistic and/or visual medium, at whose centre there are one or several protagonists of an anthropomorphic nature who are existentially anchored in a temporal and spatial sense and who (mostly) perform goal-directed actions” (Fludernik 6). Thus, the messy material of real life, shaped (or misshaped) by memory, must then be transformed via these representational conventions and techniques, all established quite separately from the author, to convey this intimate material to readers. In this sense, a memoir is always a mediation between the uniquely personal (and sometimes traumatic) and longstanding conventions of organising and understanding the public sharing of personal experience.

Published authors are perhaps by definition a form of professional narrator¹, but perhaps more importantly, memoirists possess a unique credibility as someone writing about their own life from a point of view that, by definition, no one else possesses. In this sense, narrative, or narratological, control reflects the author’s desire to convince the (general) reader of the authority and veracity of their testimony. This is as much a question of the *how* (tone, narrative, order, perspective, tense, etc.) of their narration as it is the ‘what’ (what takes place). For example, it would be easy to say, “my mother missed my birthday” and for that to be interpreted as rude or uncaring; however, this leaves out the detail of why the birthday was missed which could change how the action is perceived. If the mother was working or was sick those might be reasonable excuses. By leaving this detail out, the author expresses their own sadness or anger at this event without defending the person the author believes to have

¹ As much is said by Fludernik when she lists other “professional narrators” to begin her book, “We are all narrators in our daily lives, in our conversations with others, and sometimes we are even professional narrators (should we happen to be, say, teachers, press officers or comedians).” (Fludernik 1). It can easily be assumed that authors would be under this umbrella as well as their job is to convey the plot, characters, reasoning, and dictation in the story they create.

wronged them. But just as memoirs treat events and relationships taken from life, these narratological techniques have real world impacts. In *We Shall Bear Witness: Life Narrative and Human Rights*, Margaretta Jolly discusses how life narratives impact communities and can lead to legal change: “life writing, though ontologically often indistinguishable from fiction, can act directly as evidence, teacher, judge, witness, community maker, or, indeed, community breaker” (Jolly 15). At stake in these memoirs, then, is not just the analysis of literary tropes (character, scene, rhetoric, narration, and genre), but the understanding of power relationships in the real world, especially the changing of relative degrees of power and powerlessness experienced by women in the public and private spheres and the way these are encountered by different generations and ethnicities of women and girls.

It is common for memoir narratives to be framed as testimonies to forms of trauma, in the case of this study, all are familial testimonies. Jolly defines testimony narratives in the following terms:

What initiates the transformation of story into testimony is the context of the claim.

This claim may be general, appealing for recognition or empathy, or it may be specific, setting out a crime or abuse, something for which judgement and justice are required (Jolly 10).

If a narrative is dependent on the requirement of an inner or informal justice system to acknowledge a right and a wrong, then it is testimonial. Due to this, testimonial narratives are particularly of interest as they frame the reader(s) as witness to the events presented. Jolly argues that with this position of witness comes a habit of identification and empathy, “people are not motivated to care for strangers by logic but because a sense of identification has been stimulated” (Jolly 7). Craig Howes goes further when he claims that “Trauma can also be collective and global, and life writing often proves to be a crucial factor in judgement and restitution” (Howes 13). Readers may begin by acting as witnesses to local and personal

events or life stories, but in doing so, they usually also participate in much bigger debates about power and injustice, which are being acted out on national and international levels.

In the past thirty years, the number of memoirs published has grown greatly in what is now commonly referred to as “The Memoir Boom.” The Memoir Boom began in 1989 and continues (and indeed has accelerated) to this day. As Julie Rak points out, one especially notable contemporary characteristic of this boom is the phenomenon of previously unknown authors who have huge success with memoirs as their authorial debuts. For Rak, “the success of memoirs by previously unknown writers is a major reason why memoir is one of the most highly visible and popular non-fiction genres today” (Rak 8). It is a genre, then, which is partially validated by the sense of it being produced by writers unshaped by the publishing industry, voices that are young, new, direct, and freshly discovered, and therefore closer to the readers who enjoy them. Leigh Gilmore implies as much when she argues that the memoir genre has now been overtaken by youth, “memoir is now dominated by the young, or at least youngish in memoir’s terms, whose private lives are emblematic of a cultural moment” (Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* 1). Memoir is a genre which pitches itself as reflective, imperfect, vulnerable, and honest (or as honest as it can be given its own limitations due to memory) in a cultural landscape which promotes resilience and perfection (as seen on social media).

This market growth of the memoir genre is remarked upon by Ben Yagoda who observes that between 2004 and 2008 the total sales for Personal Memoirs, Childhood Memoirs, and Parental Memoirs increased by more than 400 percent (Yagoda 6). Speculation about the causes of this “boom” varies from critics, such as William H. Gass, who declare that it has its roots in self-absorption:

He [the autobiographer] will think of himself as having led a life so important it needs celebration [...] Are there any motives for the enterprise that aren’t tainted with

conceit or a desire for revenge or a wish for justification? To halo a sinner's head? To puff an ego already inflated past safety? (Gass)

This condemnation of egotism is reinforced by Yagoda as he identifies that there is: “one remarkably common objection related to egotism and vanity inherent in writing an entire book about oneself” (Yagoda 67). Additionally, since memoirs are based on memory there is scepticism on how exact the recounting can be. However, this should not be a reason in itself to discredit the substance of a memoir. Memory is faulty, and emotional experience is necessarily subjective; if something is forgotten or exaggerated by the author, is this not also part of any story? This thought is echoed by Vivian Gornick who observes that “Truth in a memoir is achieved not through a recital of actual events [...] What happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the large sense that the writer is able to *make* of what happened” (Gornick 91). Philippe Lejeune argues a similar sentiment as he claims “their aim is not simple verisimilitude, but resemblance to the truth” (Lejeune 22). In other words, the point is the quality, honesty, and success of rendering of representation, not the guarantee that it is the only true version of an experience. Furthermore, Leigh Gilmore claims that it is the very vulnerability discernible in these texts that makes them attractive to their readers. For Gilmore, then, “life writing has proven to be an especially compelling form of testimonial empowerment for those who are marginalized” (Gilmore, #MeToo and the Memoir Boom: The Year in the US 162). Memoirs, therefore, have given people (both as authors and readers) a therapeutic and sometimes a practical outlet. She expands upon this notion in her book *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*:

Women, people of color, gay men and lesbians, the disabled, and survivors of violence have contributed to the expansion of self-representation by illuminating suppressed histories [...] the media confessional, and also ‘real life’ media that posit a naturalized speaker who is simply telling his or her story, have come to permeate

contemporary culture (Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* 16, 17)

Regardless of the reason for the sudden rise in popularity of memoirs, it is a fact that they have gained popularity over the past few decades.

Within the rise of the memoir has come a plethora of memoirs regarding childhood. My project deals with the depiction of the mother/daughter relationship, which has become the topic of many memoirs, especially within the past fifteen years. These memoirs typically include details of a difficult upbringing, then a reflection on the tensions in the mother and daughter—often their dysfunctional relationship. Alzagal and Hamamra explain that it is the closeness of the relationship that makes it both dysfunctional and co-dependent (Alzagal and Hamamra 803). In order to discuss these deeply personal and complex relationships properly, an explanatory frame must be put in place within the texts. One of the ways in which these authors are able to write about their relationships, therefore, is by giving their counterpart (whether that be mother or daughter) a voice within their narrative. As Alzagal and Hamamra argue about *I'm Glad My Mom Died*, “Although the memoir was written by McCurdy, two voices are perceived, those of the daughter (author) and the mother” (Alzagal and Hamamra 802). This can be achieved in several ways either their direct voice is represented through the dialogue of the story by conversation or letters, or by their voice as a pertinent inner voice experience by the author. For example, in McCurdy’s memoir her mother’s voice is represented in McCurdy’s struggle with anorexia nervosa which persists in the text following the death of her mother.

Alternatively, if the text is written by the mother, as is the case in *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*; they are able to fall under the category of “mo-moir” (Zehelein 94) in this category they are able to explore motherhood, “The core element of this genre is that a woman ‘tells it how it is’, explores the ‘truth’ about being a mother and challenges

accompanying all practices of motherhood” (Zehelein 94). In this, they are able to express the ‘truth’ no matter how brutal it might appear under the guise of ‘telling it how it is’.

Subgenres are another valuable tool that authors are able to use in order to convey their story the way they desire. Within this thesis, for the purposes of defining the different subgenres that memoirs can fall into, I will draw on G. Thomas Couser’s definitions from his book *Memoir: An Introduction* (2012). Here he distinguishes and defines several subgenres while also considering what makes the genre of the memoir as a whole. For this thesis, the most important subgenres that memoirs fall into are: testimony, conversion narrative, bildungsroman, and apology.

The memoirs analysed in this thesis are: *Mommie Dearest* (1978), *I’m Glad My Mom Died* (2022), and *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011). These texts have been selected specifically because they cover a lot of common ground, though in very different ways. Each of them explores issues of control, success, and public perception in the North American context. They have also all been identified as ‘extreme’ in some way in their depiction of the mother-daughter bond. For example, *Mommie Dearest* by Christina Crawford, originally published in 1978, was one of the first memoirs to reflect on the life of an abused child and did so by openly discussing the horrific things that were done to Christina Crawford as a child. Her delivery of these accusations towards her mother—actress Joan Crawford—who had died one year before the publication of the memoir, was regarded as shocking by the public, and *Mommie Dearest* received considerable public backlash because the memoir gave a very different view of Joan Crawford than the public had previously entertained. *I’m Glad My Mom Died* by Jennette McCurdy, initially published in 2022, parallels *Mommie Dearest* in many ways in that both are, in different ways, Hollywood memoirs. But a crucial distinction is that McCurdy delivers the memoir with humour (as opposed to Crawford’s venom), though it was still criticised upon publication. Finally, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger*

Mother by Amy Chua, published in 2011, had the most polarizing reception and is the only one of these memoirs to be written from the perspective of the mother and, in addition to this, Amy Chua is a second generation Asian American adding the nuance of being an immigrant to her work. Although *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* cannot offer the same celebrity dichotomy of public and private personae, it shares the same rhetorical persuasion that the previous two texts contain which allows for discussion about who is able to tell stories about abuse. *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* was written satirically and has humour throughout; the nature and impact of its satire is both unstable and, at times, uncomfortable, thus raising questions about the relationship between trauma and humour.

Chapter One: *Mommie Dearest*

Mommie Dearest by Christina Crawford (1978) is one of the most famous mother-daughter memoirs in Hollywood history. It details the harrowing relationship between Joan Crawford (1904-1977)—who, for purposes of this thesis, will be referred to as Joan—and her daughter, Christina Crawford (1939)—who will be referred to as Crawford. In this memoir, the relationship between Crawford and Joan—as told by Crawford—evolves from the innocent admiration of a child for their parent, to a battle for freedom and power. Crawford divulges the inner workings of her family dynamics, including how her mother used her children as pawns to assist her career, shaping the perfect public family while privately abusing Crawford and Christopher—Crawford’s adopted brother—at home. This vitriolic public critique of Joan, one of the most famous stars of classic Hollywood cinema, meant that Crawford received an onslaught of criticism from the media, including Crawford’s own siblings. Her story is remarkable for many reasons. *Mommie Dearest* needs to be interpreted not only through the words that are written, but by the things that Crawford neglects to mention. This, along with the additional testimonies within the memoir, and Crawford’s use of titles, all contribute to the effigy of Joan and Crawford within this memoir.

Trauma and Testimony: Impacts on Narratology

Before beginning to analyse Crawford’s memoir, it is important to recognise and understand the subgenre of memoir that *Mommie Dearest* falls under. This memoir closely resembles Couser’s definition of the testimony memoir. Here he claims: “that it is not distinguished so much by the relation between narrating I and the narrated I as by the relation between the I and the world” (Couser 40). In other words, the narrator is more concerned with their relationship with the world around them rather than their personal relationship with the version of themselves that they write about. The writing in *Mommie Dearest* is inarguably

personal and reads as an account of Crawford's daily interactions with the world around her through her narration of her ever-changing relationship with it as she grows up. In her narration, Crawford is not retroactively analysing her own behaviour or Joan's—she is writing about a string of injustices and the effects they had on her.

As Couser suggests, the narratives of testimony memoirs, because they deal with injustice, are often accusatory because they frequently deal with abuse and trauma. This then raises questions about the subjectivity and the motives of the narrator, especially when they may be the victims of the injustice (Couser 41). Crawford discussed why she wrote *Mommie Dearest* in the *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1979 where she claimed that it was her first attempt to speak the truth about the trauma that she had experienced as a child: "I was doing the one thing that I had never been able to do before—I was claiming the right to tell the truth" (Crawford, How "Mommie Dearest" Changed My Life 77). As exemplified by her freedom in the writing of the events in the memoir, Crawford claims she can now be open about her emotions from her childhood. Yet, Couser warns that narratives where the narrator is the victim must be examined with caution: "When the injustice has been perpetrated on the narrator, of course, the subjectivity of the I is also an important concern" (Couser 41). The need to remember the subjectivity of the narrating "I" is continued by Roger Luckhurst who argues, "the passage through trauma often works here not to undermine but rather to *guarantee* subjectivity" (Luckhurst 119). Testimonies such as this against abusers are shot through with the emotion of the narrator, and as a result, testimony memoirs are often met with scepticism about their legitimacy and integrity. *Mommie Dearest* was no exception.

Although this memoir falls into the testimony subgenre, there are times when Crawford extends beyond it. The narrative structure of *Mommie Dearest* also resembles a bildungsroman, a genre typically associated with coming-of-age stories, because it tells the

story of Crawford's life growing up and her journey towards becoming independent. As Couser explains:

Bildungsroman is a German term for a subgenre of fiction, the novel of growth, which recounts the protagonist's life from childhood to some moment of stasis in early adulthood [...] Another relation between the narrator and the earlier self: they are different but not radically so. *Bildungsroman* tells how an identity was formed through steady growth, or growth in stages, rather than a sudden abrupt reversal or illumination (Couser 40, 41).

Likewise, *Mommie Dearest* is written as a day-by-day account of Crawford's childhood and the progression, or regression, of her relationship with her mother. In this, she shows the events throughout her childhood that shaped her until her mother's death. Even though Crawford does change throughout the memoir, the change is more evident in relation to her personal freedom than her psychological development. As a result of her newfound freedom, Crawford comes to accept things she had previously believed were untrue: "Those qualities I heard so often as a child—selfishness, ingratitude, dishonesty, dirtiness, etc.—those weren't me and it took me a lot of years and a lot of pain to discover that" (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 477). In this, Crawford reflects on how her view of herself entirely shifted. Crawford's identity was originally formed by her relationship with Joan, but now, instead of entirely believing Joan's word, her independence grants her the ability to see herself with greater clarity.

Finally, the structure of *Mommie Dearest* is notable for its film-like narrative sequencing. Crawford begins the book with Joan's death, then reverts the timeline of the memoir to when Crawford was a child before proceeding to recount their relationship from childhood to adulthood. This structural choice parallels one of Joan's most famous films, *Mildred Pierce* (dir. Michael Curtiz, 1945) where the end of the film is shown in the first

scenes, following which the narrative jumps back to the beginning of the plot through an extended flashback, and is echoed in other film narratives of the classic period, such as *Sunset Boulevard* (dir. Billy Wilder, 1950) and *Citizen Kane* (dir. Orson Welles, 1941). In *Mommie Dearest*, Joan's death at the start has the dual effect of confirming her real-life death and setting her ghost in motion for the rest of the book.

In addition, the scene works to set up expectations about the relationship between the two. For example, in the first chapter, Crawford dramatises her forgiveness of her mother for what has transpired between them: "I just want to tell you that I love you...that I forgive you" (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 10). Starting with this apology sets up the expectation that something is wrong, or more specifically, that it is Crawford who has been wronged, and that her mother needs this forgiveness. Additionally, Crawford uses the first chapter to assert her belief that her mother was a stern parent, always needing to be in control: "Nothing in anyone's relationship with Mother prepared them for making decisions for her" (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 7, 8). This view of Joan as fiercely independent is paired with Crawford's description of her as being "fanatically organised" (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 7) and reluctant to leave decisions to others, particularly Crawford and her siblings (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 7). Thus, Joan appears immediately as controlling, even before any specific evidence of this tendency has been presented.

The first chapter introduces the concept of public perception because Joan Crawford's death is presented as a matter of public, not just familial, grief. As Crawford puts it, "The closet door will open and every weirdo in America will be on parade waving their faithful notes signed 'God Bless...Joan'" (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 5). Crawford, who has for so long been a public figure due to her mother, states that this public despair angered her; she was not upset alongside these people but angry with them for loving her mother: "I cried. But it wasn't sorrow, it was anger" (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 5). This is a curious dynamic

because Crawford is articulating her anger and resentment toward a public who are intensely interested in Joan, even while communicating with this same public in her own narrative. But there is also evidence here of a desire to define her own knowledge of and grief for Joan as intensely unique – both distinct from the popular misconception of Joan and an exclusive selling point for the book.

This is the first time in the memoir where Crawford indicates her displeasure with fame and its implications. She complains that she has not been given space to mourn her mother before people bombard her with requests: “She’s barely cold and someone wants the *dog!* It was the same story all over again—the old clothes and the anklestrap shoes and the 8 x 10 autographed glossies and the goddamned dog” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 5).

Crawford’s tiresome exasperation is evident in her delivery, and this only adds to the notion that she resents her mother’s celebrity status, but perhaps also enjoys complaining about it. These introductory pages, therefore, already suggest a complex and sometimes contradictory set of desires in the mother and daughter relationship, involving resentment, jealousy, self-dramatization, and power.

A Note on Narration

One immediate issue which presents itself in the narration is Crawford’s assumption of knowledge. In *Mommie Dearest*, there are sections of the narration when she writes as though she is an omniscient narrator, speaking for her mother and sometimes those around her, even when her mother has said nothing. Clearly, this is ironic given her ongoing complaint about her mother’s overbearing tendency to want to control everything. As a narrator, she seems capable of reading others’ thoughts, though on closer examination, she is merely making assumptions about them while making these instances appear as though they were factual. Thereby, it must be determined if one is willing to suspend their disbelief in order to

acknowledge a potentially greater truth that Crawford is attempting to convey in her relationship with her mother. For example, when Joan is unable to attend Crawford's high school graduation ceremony, "Everybody knew I was the only girl in the graduating class without any family at graduation. Everybody knew that I was being punished" (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 273). The implications of the word "punished" are clear: Joan's action was deliberate and malicious. This is one of the ways in which Crawford structures the narrative to work in her favour. She cites assumptions—such as "everyone knew"—then labels them as factual or common knowledge without providing any evidence or third-person testimony to verify this.² Immediately before this accusation, Crawford transcribes a note from her mother, which explains that she cannot attend Crawford's graduation due to her work: "I'm so very sorry, but I am working, and I won't be able to attend your graduation exercises" (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 272). Crawford goes on to claim this was nothing but an excuse to miss her graduation, with no evidence to suggest that this is anything other than her own opinion. Crawford cannot be an omniscient narrator because no one in life is all-seeing or all-knowing; this is only a possibility in fiction (Couser 62), but her assumption of this position is an indication of her strong desire to speak for, or at least anticipate, the speech of others.

This behaviour raises questions about the reliability of Crawford's testimony in these instances since it appears to exclude alternative perspectives from those directly involved in Joan's career, those who could directly verify or deny some of these claims. Crawford repeatedly notes the people in her mother's life who were there because of the glamour of knowing an actress, or there because Joan let them adore her:

They never disagreed with anything Mother said or did, even when she pushed them to the limit. They always said yes to whatever she asked of them, even if it meant

² There is third-person testimony included in the memoir; however, these testimonies are written following the publication of *Mommie Dearest* and are from people who were close to Crawford and not Joan. They do not verify individual events, but rather the treatment that Crawford received as a whole.

giving up their spare time and energy. They were like a small band of puppets moving and swaying to her every wish and whim [...] They wanted no money, no praise [...] they only wanted to serve. That's really what Mother secretly wanted from everyone around her (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 160, 161).

This is another instance of Crawford making a claim that paints her mother maliciously without having any basis for the claim beyond her own thoughts. Crawford's use of the word "secretly" suggests that Joan had grown accustomed to constant praise and, indeed, silently demanded it. Yet, Joan Crawford, as an actress, was a product of the film industry, which revolved around the construction and perpetuation of star images, so in many ways it would be more extraordinary if this were not the case.

Language and Titles: "Mother" As a Role

In *Mommie Dearest*, the way Crawford addresses people indicates her feelings toward them, and her different use of titles conveys those feelings without her having to state them outright. Each use of these titles then sets the tone in the given situation. The most obvious example of this is her address of Joan; in her head, she almost exclusively refers to Joan as "Mother", though when she is happy with her, she will sometimes refer to her as "Mommie" mentally. Conversely, when she is angry with Joan, she will refer to her mother as "Mommie Dearest" in her head seeming to juxtapose the actions being perpetrated against Crawford with what she deems to be an overly sweet and unfitting title for Joan. Out loud, however, she refers to Joan as "Mommie Dearest" or "Mommie" with very few exceptions.³ Each of these indirect communications conveys the power dynamics between her and her mother, the sense

³ Crawford herself addresses this following receiving a letter from her mother signed "Mommie": "I was nearly eighteen years old now. Whenever I thought about her it was as 'Mother', but what I called her was still 'Mommie'" (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 305).

of cynicism, sarcasm, and a patronising demeanour all informing her use of these empty endearments.

Crawford claims Joan decided what she wore, how she behaved, and how she presented herself to the general public. This behaviour is part of what shapes Crawford's opinion of her mother. One of the most recognisable ways that Crawford establishes this is the way she uses capitalisation. Crawford capitalises proper nouns and beginnings of sentences as normal, but there are two words throughout *Mommie Dearest* that are repeatedly capitalised: God and Mother, along with any variation of the words, and specifically when she is speaking about her own mother. Throughout *Mommie Dearest*, Crawford makes it abundantly clear that she views her mother as a God figure in her life—as someone who creates and controls the universe in which Crawford exists. She never directly says this; however, it is implied through her continuous capitalisation of “Mother” when associated with Joan. By doing so, she affirms the power dynamic between them—herself as Joan's inferior. Crawford shows Joan's “control” over those around her but commonly does so by citing times when she was instructing her children or employees on what to do: “She told everyone what to wear and what to eat and tried to tell them what to think” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 162). This suggests Joan had total power over not only Crawford, but the other people in her life as well, even though evidence of this beyond reason has not been given. This to say, it should be noted that in the memoir, we are not exposed to Joan ordering people around beyond her employees and family.

Crawford accentuates this by saying that she felt as though her mother liked Crawford and her siblings more when they were easy for her to control. As Crawford observes:

We made a fatal error: we started growing up. We started becoming people. It was no longer possible to control our every thought, our every gesture, our every move. We were no longer the perfectly mutilated, camera-ready puppets that spouted “I love

you, Mommie dearest” at the slightest indication of her whimsical displeasure (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 220).

Crawford’s use of the words “becoming people” further emphasises how devoid of individuality Crawford was prior to realising the power that her mother held over them, so much so that she felt she was not a person at all but a puppet for which her mother held the strings. This implies that Crawford only became a person when she developed her own views, at which point she was no longer of value to her mother. In a letter Crawford writes to her mother before Joan’s death she details exactly how she felt growing up in their house: “I grew up feeling that the thing I’d really done wrong, aside from the never ending stream of things you created, the thing you were really furious with me about—was simply being alive—existing as a human being” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 477). Crawford believes her mother did not care for her once she became her own person. The phrase “existing as a human being” suggests that it was not entirely the opinions that Crawford had which made her mother angry—it was that she was capable of having opinions at all that was the problem.

Although the capitalization of “Mother” when combined with the capitalization of “God” seems to signify the godlike status of Joan in Crawford’s mind, it is also worth noting that Joan Crawford was an actress, and this capitalization could additionally suggest that Crawford (or indeed Joan) saw being a “Mother” as a part that Joan played—a role that she embodied for the public. Crawford mentions her mother adopted children, herself included, to look caring in the eyes of the public. This idea is illustrated when Crawford recounts a time when “(m)other placed another order for a baby boy [...] She insisted that they needed a ‘family.’ What she meant was that she needed a positive image for her fans and the publicity generated” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 27, 28). This underlines the idea that motherhood was a role that Joan felt she needed to play for the public rather than something she truly wanted for herself. Crawford describes the addition to the family as though it is nothing more

than a transactional exchange, with the phrase “placed another order” having a chilling rather than heart-warming effect by suggesting that even in adopting her children Joan’s career was the motivating factor.

On another occasion, Crawford remembers Joan had signed a letter “Mother” instead of “Mommie” after they had got into an argument: “It was interesting, however, that this was the first time she’d signed any of her letters to me as simply ‘Mother.’ Always before, she had signed them ‘Mommie’, and she had always put the quotation marks as though it were a pseudonym. Perhaps it was” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 280). The event draws attention not only to the coldness of ‘Mother’ over ‘Mommie’ but also to Crawford’s suggestion that Joan used these terms strategically to indicate but also withdraw love, or at least approval. Which Crawford then seems to do in her memoir as well to her mother. This could be seen as a change in the power dynamic between them as now it is Crawford who is now able to turn Joan’s behaviour back on herself by Crawford’s own giving and taking away of endearments. It also further indicates that Crawford’s choice of ‘Mommie’ in the title of the memoir is double-edged and more sarcastic than sincere.

These maternal titles, therefore, function as a register of both Crawford and Joan’s feelings toward each other. When Crawford sees her mother happy, or being a “good mother”, Joan is then rewarded with the title of “Mommie”. For example, when Crawford speaks about a winter holiday they had following Joan’s marriage to Alfred Steele which was, as Crawford says, better than any Christmas she could remember (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 227), she calls Joan “Mommie” for the majority of the chapter: “Mommie, the girls and I went to Bonwit Teller...for *more* clothes! I couldn’t believe it” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 228). Whereas, if Crawford believes her mother is doing something wrong, or if her mother is working, then she is referred to simply as “Mother”. When this is used while Joan is working, it reiterates the idea that “Mother” is simply a character that Joan plays for the

public or for her career. This is evident in the aforementioned chapter when Joan had to work during that vacation: “Mother had to be an usherette at the benefit premiere of *Rose Tattoo*” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 228). Using this title to express happiness or displeasure with Joan creates an association between the two, which alters the sense of their relationship in these scenes.

Although the primary focus of the memoir is Crawford’s relationship with Joan, there are times when Crawford uses significantly different names for her two stepfathers, but most notably with Alfred Steele. At the beginning of the memoir, there is a brief mention of Crawford’s stepfather, Phillip Terry, whom she referred to as “Stepfather Phillip” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 28) or simply “Phillip” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 26). By never granting him a more personal name, she creates a sense of distance between them. He was someone who was in her mother’s life and, by association, Crawford’s. Their distant, somewhat impersonal relationship could be attributed to the fact that he was only there temporarily when she was a child—Joan and Phillip Terry were only married for four years when Crawford was young. This non-personal address of Phillip would not be especially noticeable if did not contrast with Crawford’s relationship with Alfred Steele, whom she adored.

Upon introduction to Alfred Steele, Crawford expresses discomfort with the name she, herself, chooses for him: “The problem was that it seemed positively weird to call a total stranger ‘Daddy’. I’d never even been introduced to him as Mr Steele. It was very confusing, but I wanted to be as polite as possible and do anything I could to please her, so I finally decided on calling him ‘Daddy’” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 224). This comes after Crawford was unsure of what to call Alfred Steele, her mother’s new husband whom she had yet to meet. Although Joan never told Crawford to use the term “daddy”, Crawford still blames her mother for her discomfort, though she never again mentions her discomfort with

the title following this. Thereafter, she calls Alfred Steele “daddy”—never “father”. However, there is one instance where she is angry with him and calls him “stepfather”, which is in the instance of her high school graduation ceremony when she reports that “(n)either my mother nor my stepfather were coming to my graduation” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 272). This is the only time she mentions being displeased with Alfred Steele, and it is the only time past their introduction that she refers to him, in his relationship with her, as anything other than “Daddy”.⁴

Crawford uses her relationship with Alfred Steele and his behaviour as a point of comparison with Joan’s behaviour, with Joan’s always appearing more restrictive. While on vacation, Crawford is invited out with people she had met in the area and declares she is nervous to broach the subject with her mother and Alfred Steele. When she finally decides to ask their permission, she writes their encounter in a way that makes Joan seem disobliging: “Mother frowned slightly, but before she said anything, Daddy laughed. They agreed I could go on two conditions: First, I must introduce my date to both of them, and second, I had to be home by midnight [...] the restrictions were so reasonable I was astounded” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 233). Although there is nothing directly critical about Joan here, the implication of the scene is still negative because it implies that being ‘reasonable’ was highly unusual for Joan. Joan’s frown also indicates that she was perhaps less receptive to the idea of Crawford going out than Alfred and was swayed by Alfred’s laughter.⁵

⁴ There is one time later in the memoir when Crawford is explaining her relationship to Alfred once again and refers to him as her stepfather. “He reminded me in many ways of my stepfather, Alfred Steele” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 442). But this serves more as clarification as to which stepfather she was referring to. In the next sentence she returns to calling him “daddy” once more.

⁵ It is worth noting that in the section in *Mommie Dearest* titled “Recollections From Judy” the idea of Crawford being kidnapped is mentioned which gives context as to why Joan might have been hesitant in allowing Crawford to be around people she, or Joan, had never met before: “I realized that Christina had less freedom than I and my other friends as a security measure. For in those years, the fear of kidnapping the child of a famous star was realistic” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 108). Even though this was a possibility, it is not something that Crawford seriously considers here, even though it would make her mother’s reaction more reasonable.

What is Left Out: The Working Mother and Hollywood Expectations

As mentioned in the introduction, what is left out of memoirs, especially if it is common knowledge, can be as significant as what is included. Context to memoirs is important in having an in depth understanding of their content as Phillip Lopate suggests, “in personal essays and memoirs, we must rely on the subjective voice of the first-person narrator to guide us, and if that voice never explains, summarizes, interprets, or provides a larger sociological or historical context for the material, we are in big trouble” (Lopate 29). Memoirs cannot be fully understood without the culture they were published into or written during being examined as these external factors have a significant influence on the author whether or not they are aware of it at the time of their writing. Thomas Larson mirrors this sentiment of culture and self being equally important in understanding one another as he says:

On the one hand, we think that any memoirist is a product of her era, and thus her book is inherently critical of that era. On the other hand, we think that because the subject is the self, the era is or should be relegated to the backseat. But I would argue that this simple divide limits a memoir’s potential. Culture and generation as much as individual experience instruct memory, no matter how much the writer may ignore or sublimate those larger contexts in the writing (Larson Loc. 2010-2016).

In *Mommie Dearest*, Crawford mentions frequently that Joan was constantly working; however, she does not adequately discuss the era and industry in which Joan worked and why this might have contributed to Joan’s need for the public to see her as a successful mother and, by extension, give understanding to some of her behaviour. Joan worked as an actress during the height of Hollywood’s studio system, a period famous for the way star images (personality, style, lifestyle) were carefully constructed and controlled by the studios that employed them. But this important backdrop of the control behind Joan’s control of Crawford is never considered or offered as part of the rationale for Joan’s decisions or lack of presence

at home. In leaving these details out, Crawford assumes more power over how the story is told.

Typically, when Crawford mentions Joan being a working mother, it is presented negatively with the inference that Joan is not there for her children in the ways that she should be, or at least the culture of 1940s and 1950s America thought women should be. For example, the previously mentioned time when Joan is unable to attend Crawford's graduation ceremony from high school due to her working, Crawford does not accept her mother's excuse and is adamant that her missing her graduation is a punishment: "She and Daddy were both right here in Los Angeles ... and no one but the secretary was coming to my high school graduation [...] less than one hour's drive away from my school and neither one of them were coming to my graduation" (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 272). Crawford villainises Joan's work and presents it as an excuse rather than a job. This makes Joan seem as though she is not a good mother, while not accounting for the fact that she does have a demanding full-time career outside of being a parent. Shortly after this episode, however, Crawford quotes Joan defending her occupation: "It so happens I stood for seven hours that day, having fittings for a film so I can pay for your education" (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 274). Allowing this defence would seem to undermine Crawford's criticism of Joan's work, yet Crawford frames this defence as an admission of Joan's guilt, "The first part of the letter was something else. From long years of experience I knew that somewhere in her being Mother felt guilty" (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 276). By classifying Joan's letter as guilt rather than self-defence it makes Joan then appear to prove Crawford's claims that her absence was a form of punishment rather than a necessity for her job.

As exemplified above, Crawford does not support Joan's commitment to being a working mother during a period when this role was still highly controversial, especially in popular culture, as one of Joan's most famous roles, *Mildred Pierce*, clearly demonstrates.

Crawford does not attempt to address any of the challenges that working mothers might face especially in the beginning stages of entering a male dominated work force but suggests instead that Joan's work is to blame at least partially for her anger and lack of availability to her children. Although this is not directly voiced in *Mommie Dearest*, it seeps through the narration. The weight placed on working mothers was (and is) heavy; they were still expected to manage many responsibilities around childcare while working. As Wang notes in her article discussing the differences between full-time homemaker mothers and full-time working mothers: "While norms and values now encourage women to be out working, the realities of work and parenting have not changed" (Wang 23). Even though the standard for what women should be doing had changed from the pre-war period, the culture remained as it was while the amount of work expected of mothers expanded. Joan not only had to deal with the standard expectations placed on working mothers, but in addition she also had to abide by the strict rules of Hollywood's expectations regarding her star image.

The restrictions on Joan's life as an actress are addressed in Jeanine Basinger's *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930-1960* (1993), which discusses actresses in the film industry during the period in which Joan worked. Basinger presents a valuable context for Joan's behaviour in her account of the treatment of female actresses in Hollywood. Joan was presented with a unique set of circumstances as a working mother because Hollywood was demanding of perfection from women in the 1920s and 1930s when Joan entered the profession. As Basinger says:

The majority of them [actresses] came from poor, even sordid backgrounds [...] In order to become successful, they had to do whatever it was they had to do [...] The truth is that becoming a movie star was not easy, and remaining a star was even harder. Most of them submitted to whatever was necessary (Basinger 276).

Women who wanted to become “stars” had to abide by industry rules that were set, and one of those was always to portray an ideal image. Richard Dyer expresses a similar idea in his book *Stars* (1998) in which he says, “The general image of stardom can be seen as a version of the American Dream, organised around themes of consumption, success and ordinariness” (Dyer 59). If stardom is a version of the American Dream, then this means that the “Stars” had to then be active participants in the selling of the “American Dream” that their image portrayed. In the aspect of “consumption”, that is the stars need to promote the idealisation of the American Dream, Dyer then claims that what it achieves beyond sale is somewhat of an objectification of the stars, “all of this promotes the notion of women as a spectacle” (Dyer 62). The loss of this star image, or their specific niche in the selling of the American Dream, could mean they lose their appeal and thus their job.

There are times throughout the memoir when Crawford mentions that, whenever Joan’s career began to slow down, she became frantic about making her public appearance better:

She felt like she was backsliding, a slow and painful descent brought on by forces she couldn’t see and circumstances she couldn’t control [...] clinging desperately to the maintenance of her previous image as a real star [...] it was then she became a fanatic about her public appearances (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 75, 76).

Although Crawford seems to grasp how significant the public image was to her mother and how vital it was to her career, she seldom approaches it with any sympathy. Crawford talks about her mother’s near obsession with public appearances earlier in the narrative, but from this point, it becomes more intense. Since her career was heavily dependent on how she was seen by the public, it is no stretch to say that Joan wanted everything about her to appear perfect—family included – and she clearly wanted to avoid anything that could cause the media to turn on her. Under the era of studio contracts Joan would have been dependent on

the studio to give her roles. If the studio was not utilizing her then making herself relevant to the general public might have, in some ways, forced their hand in giving her roles.⁶ As is suggested by Dyer, “it has been argued that a more determining force in the creation of stars is the audience – that is, the consumers – rather than the producers of media texts” (Dyer 31). If her livelihood was dependent on public opinion, then not appearing perfect could have cost Joan her career.

Crawford does not seem to consider that Joan might have felt just as trapped and controlled as Crawford did, just by a different source. As an actress, Joan was not allowed to age or show any sign of a temperament in public. As Basinger notes:

(i)n order to get their faces on the pages of the fan magazines and on the screens of every small town in America, most of them had to put aside home and hearth. There they were in the photos they were forced to pose for, slim, beautiful, well-dressed, standing beside their swimming pools looking radiantly happy (Basinger 277, 278).

The combination of this with her being a working mother amounts to an extreme amount of pressure to appear flawless. Being a woman in the public eye created the challenge of remaining constantly popular, even if it required sacrificing some part of themselves. In *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (1973), Molly Haskell considers the relationship between film actresses and the general public:

To women, being more dependent on the love of their public [...] and anxious not to lose their ‘few good years’[...] To survive, Monroe, Crawford, and others became

⁶ Studios had a considerable amount of control over the talent that was signed to them. As Carman and Drake write in their chapter regarding Hollywood contracts: “If there was a dispute about roles or salary, these long-term option contracts enabled the studios to suspend talent without pay if they refused to film assignments, disputed the terms of their contract, or desired to become freelance artists” (Carman and Drake 376). Furthermore, the studio even controlled Joan’s name. She was born Lucielle LeSueur, but the studio did not like that name and wished to change it. As Bret writes, “In April of that year, the readers of *Movie World* were invited to write in with their suggestions for an alternative moniker.” (Bret 14). This further emphasises the lack of control that Joan had in her own life as even her name was beyond her power.

caricatures of themselves, yielded to the pressure of mediocrity that emanated from the American public (Haskell 10).

These women in Hollywood needed to please the public to remain relevant in the film industry. As Joan was a successful actress, there was pressure to maintain the status that she held.

Joan's role as a mother within the context of a family was, then, a crucial dimension of her public image. But it is also clear that Crawford's antipathy towards Joan's success is that she used her children in order to maintain her status. According to Crawford, much of the strife in their relationship originated from Joan also wanting her daughter to appear perfect for the cameras that were constantly around them, which resulted in Crawford having little independence. When Crawford writes about her role in her mother's career, she exclusively accounts for her own annoyance with being shown off in public while her mother receives credit for their composure:

Millions of unsuspecting fans thought: 'What a wonderful woman...'. Hundreds of pages of movie magazine garbage were turned out on what a wonderful mother she was. We were paraded out, one by one [...] photographed from every angle and cooed over by pandering publicity hacks [...] we were the best mannered, best behaved, most perfect child-mannequins the queen bee could produce (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 220).

Crawford's exhaustion with the media is present throughout *Mommie Dearest*, but it is most prevalent when she mentions agency and identity being taken away from her. In this quotation, she implies that she is not able to be anything other than exactly what is expected of her by her mother. However, given what we know from Basinger about how actresses were treated, the claim could easily be made that Joan was facing a similar struggle, a perspective

which grants her more sympathy. If her children were not well-behaved in public, it could reflect poorly on Joan and her career.

This is not the only time that Crawford comments on how she felt as though she and her siblings had a purpose to serve for their mother when they were young to paint her as a good mother to the media. She begins to suggest that as her children grew up, Joan was not quite sure what she was meant to do with them: “We served a purpose when we were adorable babies. She got a hell of a lot of publicity out of us. She built an image on us” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 220). Crawford’s use of the word “purpose” frames her siblings appear as disposable objects, a necessary placeholder in Joan’s life in order for the public to further adore her.

One way in which Crawford felt more like an object than a person was in how little she was able to make her own choices. Crawford was not able to shop by herself because she needed to fit the image her mother chose for her which included wearing clothes that her mother picked out. In Crawford’s account, this caused her to be seen and treated as a child: “She also didn’t seem to realise that I’d grown up a lot and the baby dresses she chose for me were totally inappropriate. I was *never* allowed to go into a store and choose clothes for myself” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 154). The use of italics on the word “never” is not only for emphasis but also demonstrates her displeasure about the need to constantly be presentable in the ways that her mother wanted (or needed) her to be. Crawford claims that she wanted normality, but it was never given due to the public nature of her mother’s high-demand career. There is somewhat of a contradiction in this later when Crawford becomes an actress herself and is placed in the very circumstances that she claimed she wished to escape.

Crawford’s discussions of Joan’s career usually make Joan appear less motherly. Even when working at home, there was never a moment to spare: “Mother never left California [...] Even when she wasn’t working, she didn’t take vacations as such. She’d create busy

work at home... cleaning out the basements and endless correspondence” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 37). The concept of “busy work” suggests that there were just endless amounts of work that Joan had to complete. This work may have involved responding to letters—as she did frequently by Crawford’s own account—or doing household tasks that she believed needed to be done. Crawford claims she often helped: “On weekends that I did come home from school, there was plenty of work to be done [...] I started reading some of the scripts [...] After I finished a script or treatment, I’d tell her the plot, outline the characters in some detail” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 151, 152). This passage shows her recognising the amount of work involved in Joan’s career, though only when Crawford was needed to help with it.

Another way that Crawford minimises her mother’s career is in regard to her mother’s success. Crawford claims that her mother is an actress still clinging to the success that she has outlived, “Her career was careening toward the toilet” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 28). This trivialization of her career makes all the effort Joan put into her career and her children seem as though it were fruitless because her career had ended. By doing this, Crawford makes the appearances, demands, and labour all seem superfluous, which makes Joan’s obsession with it seem unwarranted because it is ultimately an effort that Crawford believes was in vain.

Periodically, Crawford will make comments about her mother which appear complimentary regarding her work and the amount of effort she puts into her career: “Two days later, I received this letter from my hard-working Mother” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 273). Although this seems like a compliment, its tone is sarcastic, especially in the context of all the other negative things she remembers. Using the word “hard-working” when she constantly insinuates that her mother’s work is at the expense of other people in her life, reiterates her criticism. Additionally, after saying this she wonders if her mother even wrote the letter, which further discredits her mother’s ethic because it implies that she would not

even take the time to write a letter to one of her children: “I seriously wondered if Mother had written that letter. It sounded more like the way Betty talked and I wouldn’t have doubted it if Mother had said ‘you were there, you write the letter and I’ll sign it’” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 273). Not even one-page later, then, Crawford makes this damning accusation that Joan is delegating motherhood.

In this, Crawford also distances her mother from her by the use of the word “mother” because there is no possessive ‘my’ attached to it, which underlines that, to Crawford, Joan is a kind of anonymous “Mother”. The lack of the possessive term not only distances her from her mother but also confirms the previous analysis that “Mother” does not stem from the connection Joan has with her children, but from her place of power. “Mother” is her title in name only, not for its emotional meaning.

Joan’s behaviour concerning her career, as described by Crawford, is never justified because Crawford refuses to give her mother any semblance of humanity or motherliness. Ironically, it is as though Joan and Crawford have switched places through the medium of the memoir, this time with Crawford using Joan to present herself to the media by means of the book. Even though Joan was unnecessarily cruel to Crawford by means of her absence and desire for control over Crawford’s public presentation there is reasoning behind some of her behaviour. Joan was in the public eye and had previously faced criticism from the public; it would be natural for her to want her children to have the best chance of avoiding the same exposure. An easy way to control this would be by making sure her children were dressed and behaving properly in front of the cameras; the control she tried to exert over her children could have been an attempt to protect them. This does not justify Joan’s actions, but it does make them appear less extreme when they come from a place of care rather than abuse. It is

also important to note that by the 1950s, Joan was clinging to the career that she used to have, and had been in the film industry since 1925, when she was just nineteen years old.⁷

Crawford takes all the struggles Joan went through and reframes them in the context of her own life, because the memoir is, after all, about Crawford's life. As Crawford grows up, Joan has much less critical attention to her acting, so she must have feared losing her career and her source of income. Crawford discloses how the reviews were becoming less about her acting: "The reviews mentioned her clothes more than her acting" (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 25). However, she only discusses how this directly impacted her, not the implications it might have had for her mother. This is not necessarily done with the intention of belittling her mother's own struggles, but to show Crawford's life as it was. Crawford only gives her mother grace once they have limited contact:

God only knows what she had to go through during those long years, just to hold onto her position. I know only some of it, only what spilled over at the top of what she was determined to keep inside of her (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 483).⁸

Here, at the end of the memoir, Crawford gives Joan depth of character in her persona as she acknowledges the internal struggles that her mother had been facing throughout her life and career. By Crawford making the claim that Joan kept her emotions inside it works to reiterate the habit that the years spent in Hollywood had given Joan to not let her mask of composure publicly slip.

⁷ This age could vary depending on what narrative is believed regarding Joan Crawford's birthyear. As discussed in the biography written by David Bret there are discrepancies in regard to how old Joan Crawford was, "She was born [...] most likely on 23 March 1904 (though she always maintained it was 1908)" (Bret 1). This could serve as another materialization of the expectations that Hollywood placed on her to stay young.

⁸ It should be noted that the use of "her position" is not in reference to acting but rather to Joan's position on the board of the Pepsi-Cola company, a position she held for twenty-four years. Another job she had that demanded her time, attention, and for public appearances to be made frequently.

Mommie Dearest: Snark or Sincerity?

Crawford is fixated on her “purpose” in Joan’s life and is uncomfortable with being used as a tool for the press to create what she views as a false image of Joan. This is the root of the first tonal shift in the memoir, which is the transition that occurs when Crawford describes her changing feelings toward Joan as a teenager. At that point, the narration turns from adoration to near-vehement anger in any of their negative interactions. When this shift comes, Crawford is no longer sad when her mother is upset with her; instead, she becomes angry at the situation itself. Crawford mentions “nightly raids” where her mother would wake Crawford and Christopher and demand they complete some chore or punish them for not having done a better job at a previously assigned one. One night when this happened, Crawford had been instructed to clean the floors—and she did—however, Joan insisted she still saw streaks in the floors and attacked Crawford with a Bon Ami can. Crawford began to fight back: “Wielding the can of Bon Ami like a baseball bat [...] She was still screaming and beating me with the mutilated can. But this time I know I was yelling back” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 53, 54). This altered the relationship between the two, and this is when the battle for power over Crawford’s life truly began. This change is abrupt and gets gradually worse throughout the remainder of the memoir.

As previously established, Crawford claims that once she was old enough to form opinions of her own, her mother’s control grew more intense. This is the first time that the tone of the memoir shifts Crawford changes from recounting her childhood with relative neutrality to being actively critical of her mother’s treatment of herself and Christopher. From this point on, Crawford is angry when her mother mistreats her—or when she suspects her mother is attempting to punish her. The experiences Crawford detailed before this seemed to come from a place of fear and longing, but afterwards, she is furious with her mother, underlined by the start of her mocking use of “*Mommie Dearest*”. This represents an abrupt

change in Crawford's narrative. Her first usage of "Mommie Dearest"—aside from when she sees her mother dead in the first chapter—is in the fifth chapter following Joan telling a young Crawford about her own difficult upbringing, "I wished with all my heart that I could make it all right for her. 'I love you Mommie dearest' is all I could say" (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 39). Here it seems sincere and this sense continues until, as outlined above, their relationship became more destructive, and Crawford begins to mock the love she once held for Joan.

This mocking framing of "Mommie Dearest" raises questions about the title of the memoir itself. As noted, the only times Crawford seems to address her mother as "Mommie Dearest" is at the beginning of the memoir and when she mocks her mother in her head. This mocking is usually accompanied by Crawford's resentful tone:

Mommie dearest got her feelings hurt. Mommie dearest became distressed. Mommie Dearest became enraged when she perceived that all was not well in mannequin-land. The children, the babies were in a state of mutiny! Mommie dearest has to punish bad babies... Mommie dearest beat bad babies... Mommie dearest try to kill bad babies... Mommie dearest doesn't want to have anything more to do with bad babies... Mommie dearest put away bad babies from her... Mommie dearest found a prison for bad babies and locked them up to punish them for being such bad babies (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 220).

This raises questions about whether the memoir was written to be a letter to her mother or was couched in the same mocking tone which she uses periodically throughout the memoir. The title could also be credited to the illusion of the name "Mommie Dearest," when Crawford first begins using this to address her mother—it is done with care and seems as though it would indicate a good relationship between the two. However, over time, Crawford grows to resent the title because she feels it does not represent their relationship.

It is important to note that the majority of Crawford's letters from her mother are signed "Mommie" and the few times Crawford is seen addressing Joan out loud she uses "Mommie dearest" or "Mommie". It would be safe to assume, therefore, that Crawford's letters address Joan as "Mommie" or "Mommie Dearest", though this is necessarily speculative because, aside from one, Crawford's letters are not fully reproduced book, presumably because they are no longer in her possession. Yet, this change of meaning in the title could imply a different intent; the publication of the memoir intended as a final goodbye to her mother rather than an exposé.

A review column in *The New York Times* that discusses the early days of writing this memoir indicates that an editor originally suggested the title *Mommie Dearest*: "Judy Feiffer, who edited the manuscript down to size, suggested 'Mommie Dearest' instead of the original title, which had been 'The Hype'" (Mitgang). If this is true, then the original title of "The Hype" could have been in reference to the idealisation of Crawford's life as a celebrity's daughter when it was, in fact, not as glamorous as the hype around it would attempt to imply. Smith and Watson suggest that this type of reflection on stardom is common in celebrity memoirs as expressed by Smith and Watson in their book on reading autobiographies, "narration of involvement in the cult of celebrity focuses on an inability to live the 'star' life that turns dream into nightmare and reflects ambivalence about stardom" (Smith and Watson 219). Normally narration such as this would come from the celebrity themselves, but it is equally valuable to consider how the "cult of celebrity" affected those who were not the centerfold of the stardom they object. Crawford seems to have the same notion of disillusionment with Hollywood as she contrasts how people assumed her life with how it really was. Crawford does include mention of this "hype" in her memoir as she says, "The hype is the big lie. The big lie seducing unknown souls into believing that for a few moments they can be associated with greatness...vicarious greatness, glamour, excitement" (Crawford,

Mommie Dearest 423). Having the hype be described simply as the “big lie” is possibly the most clear way that Crawford mentions the idealization of the “star image” that she, by association, had to maintain throughout her life. She goes on to explain that it is about “the care and feeding of the fantasy” (Crawford, Mommie Dearest 423). If she had titled the book “The Hype” it would have worked in focusing the book more on explaining the realities of stardom to a misinformed public.

External Reflections: Multiple Perspectives

Mommie Dearest is distinctive among the other memoirs I analyse for its use of witnesses in the text, though they do not always work to verify individual events; they do often corroborate Crawford’s story. This was helpful to her when others who had known her, such as her family, came forward to state that the memoir was not true. In the re-publication of *Mommie Dearest*, there are notes included by people who had known Crawford during various parts of her life, from elementary school, boarding school, to the year of *Mommie Dearest*’s original publication. This includes sections titled “Recollections from Judy” (Crawford, Mommie Dearest 107-110), “Reflections From Nicki Bailey” (Crawford, Mommie Dearest 282, 283), “Reflections From Robert Martin” (Crawford, Mommie Dearest 283-285), and “Recollections from Deanne Tilton and Michael Durfee” (Crawford, Mommie Dearest 503-505). For example, Judy Clayton, a friend of Crawford’s since elementary school, writes that she noticed Joan’s change in behaviour when the press was present:

I do not remember ever seeing Joan, “Miss Crawford”, as I carefully addressed her, display any affection, not even the smallest gesture, except when adult visitors, especially movie industry dignitaries or photographers, were present (Crawford, Mommie Dearest 109).

Nicki Bailey adds to this in her own testimony as she claims: “I made the mistake of raving to Miss Crawford about Tina’s presentation, remarking that she, Joan Crawford, must be terribly proud of her daughter, at which point she turned her back to me and there was absolute silence” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 283). Nicki does add a unique element in her addition to the memoir when she mentions a time when Joan took Crawford’s clothes, “I remember a time when Tina’s mother took nearly all her clothes away because of a disagreement and Tina was left with almost nothing to wear to school” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 282). This description of Joan seems at odds with the version of Joan that Crawford frequently describes as wanting to present the perfect image. If any news outlet discovered she had taken away her daughter’s clothes, then surely there would have been backlash towards Joan for her cruel mistreatment of Crawford. Finally, there is praise from Robert Martin about the book being a detailed account of facts he knew to be true: “The book articulated what Christina and Joan’s relationship was actually like. It squared with facts I knew” (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 285). By having an outside party write about the validity of Crawford’s story, it becomes difficult to argue its total inauthenticity—even when others, such as Crawford’s own siblings, come forward to dispute her claims.

Critics and Praise

Crawford attempts to win over her readers through her inclusion of specific letters. Mentioned throughout the memoir are various letters written between Crawford and her family. The most common are those between herself and her mother. These letters are highly significant because they are the main source of direct evidence about their relationship that goes beyond Crawford’s word regarding how Joan had treated her. However, it is crucial to note that these letters are presented on the page as typed transcriptions by Crawford rather than facsimiles of the original letters. Inevitably this immediately raises questions about the

integrity and provenance of their content. Why would Crawford withhold the original letters, and what benefit does typing them out provide? This small detail could be easily passed over if not for the fact that in the middle of the memoir there is a section in which there are images included on the page from Crawford's childhood. If this is possible, why not include the letters as well? If it was not possible to include all of the letters, then why not include at least some of the more significant ones? The failure to produce the original letters does not necessarily cast doubt over the existence of the letters *per se*, but it does raise questions about the content of the letters, specifically what may have been omitted or recast through Crawford's writing and editing.

Upon its publication, *Mommie Dearest* was met with intense criticism. One of the main objections comes from the idea that Crawford was attacking her mother when Joan was no longer there to defend herself, which was deemed to be morally wrong. Even Joan's granddaughter (Cathy—one of Crawford's sisters—daughter) came forward when Crawford was republishing *Mommie Dearest* in 2008 to discuss what she regarded as its unfairness: "The worst part was that Joan wasn't around to defend herself, which was the most horrible thing ever to have done. It wasn't courageous" (Day). Cathy's daughter firmly believes that Crawford was cowardly in not publishing the memoir while Joan was alive. Other critics simply believed *Mommie Dearest* was a string of complaints from an unappreciative daughter: "Still, there's something about 'Mommie Dearest' that leaves a bad taste in my mouth [...] Everything about the book tastes bad—from its whining, self-dramatizing tone to its seizures of preposterous stuffiness" (Lehmann-Haupt). Despite their criticism, articles would sometimes end with some sympathy for Crawford: "This of course does not deny or diminish what Christina experienced. To know why the hammer is swung does not remove the pain of its impact" (Lehmann-Haupt). By this being added it provides a sense of belief in Crawford's story while acknowledging the likeliness of slight dramatization due to the

memoir necessarily being based on memory and covering deeply emotional experiences. As is suggested by Robin Freeman and Karen Le Rossignol, “We continually – often unconsciously – renovate our memoires, shaping them into stories that bring coherence to chaos” (Freeman, Le Rossignol 4). Memories can change in order to bring a sense of purpose to the chaos in which we were previously entrenched.

Even in 2024 people continue to write about *Mommie Dearest*, mainly discussing the Joan Crawford of her work in contrast with the Joan of Crawford’s book. *Vanity Fair* published an article in March of 2024 entitled “A Daughter’s Revenge: Joan and Christina Crawford’s Toxic Bond” (Meares). It seems to call *Mommie Dearest* an act of “revenge”, which suggests it was written purely out of spite and hatred, rather than seeing it as a memoir about overcoming a difficult upbringing or navigating an imbalanced relationship. In interviews, Crawford almost exclusively says that she wrote the book with the intention of it being a cathartic experience following the death of her mother—something that would help her to grieve while reflecting on their relationship. Even in interviews, she does not use it as a way to villainise her mother, but to talk about abuse and the lasting effects it can have on children. In 2019, Crawford gave an interview to *The Guardian* newspaper in which she was asked about how she felt about escaping an abusive situation and writing about it: “I’m not a martyr, but I think, looking back, it is truly amazing to me what one person can do” (Brookes). Crawford rarely went into detail without prompting from the interviewer. Belittling Crawford’s story as “revenge” makes it seem as though stories of abuse are written only with vengeance in mind, which is both dangerous and inaccurate.

In addition to the image Joan shaped throughout her career, other public knowledge about her has been derived from the books she wrote about her relationship with her children, in which she portrays herself as a kind, loving mother. This, combined with Joan being seen as a good mother publicly for her entire career—and life in general—makes it a difficult

image to tackle, especially when it looks as though Crawford was complicit in the construction of this image and the only time she spoke out was following her very public disinheritance. With Joan's entire career pushing the narrative of her being a good mother, and her books presenting her as the loving mother, naturally, the media leaned towards the person that they believed they knew best, which was Joan.

Potentially more harmful to the credibility of *Mommie Dearest* is the fact that Crawford's own siblings have come forward to challenge her story, saying that she lied about many of the events that occurred in the memoir. For example, one night, Crawford was pulled from her bed by her mother. When she looked to the bed next to her, she saw her brother, Christopher: "He couldn't get up because he was tied down to the bed. Mother had a barbarian device she called a sleep safe with which she made sure Chris could not get out of bed [...] It was originally designed to keep babies from falling out of bed, but Mother had the thing modified to accommodate a growing boy" (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 51). In contrast to this, Cathy describes how Joan "ran off the set in the middle of filming...and took me to the doctor, and then we went home" [...] "She was still wearing makeup that she had on for the film. That's how I remember her" (Closer Weekly). This behaviour clearly contradicts how Crawford depicts Joan in her memoir. Indeed, in *Mommie Dearest*, Crawford implies that her siblings were also directly affected by their mother: "If the weather was bad and we had to stay indoors, whispering was a torture because we weren't allowed to play the radio or any of our records. In addition to whispering inside the house, we also had to walk on tiptoes" (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 44). When Crawford mentions pieces of her childhood that seem routine she will sometimes say "we", which indicates her other siblings are part of this misfortune as well. The most frequently mentioned sibling to experience abuse in *Mommie Dearest* is Christopher, who did not denounce the memoir as fictitious, which does lend validity to Crawford's version of Joan. However, her siblings' stories were used to cast

doubt on Crawford's claims. In fact, many people speak affectionately of Joan Crawford and their experiences with her. This does not necessarily mean this is representative of their interactions with her, but publicly, she was not seen as a vicious figure before the publication of *Mommie Dearest*.

Yet, although her story faced criticism, and many critics believed it was written merely to take one final shot at her mother, there is a therapeutic element to Crawford's story that reaches far past the mere repeating of gossip. In several interviews following the release of *Mommie Dearest*, Crawford discusses how this book, in many ways, felt like the first time she could freely speak her mind. She additionally states that she began writing *Mommie Dearest* for her own benefit and with no intent to publish: "[I] decided to write a journal of my childhood, setting the record straight for my own benefit. Never in a million years did I think it would be a book, nor that it would be published" (Early Bird Books). This is indeed common in trauma narratives, as said by Smith and Watson: "Narrators suffering from traumatic or obsessional memory may see the act of telling as therapeutic in resolving troubled memories, acknowledging how the process of writing has changed the narrator and the story itself" (Smith and Watson 47). With what she says happened in her childhood, it is just as likely that Crawford felt this sense of freedom because she could now write about her abuser without fear of repercussions from that person.

Crawford claims that prior to its publication she felt isolated because people loved her mother—someone she saw as an abuser. She felt as though she was not allowed to tell her story because people would be hesitant to receive it well: "It was all about power and deprivation. As a child, I was totally without trust. I felt entirely alone" (Brockes). However, following the publication, she realised this was therapeutic not only for herself while writing *Mommie Dearest*, but there were many people who related to Crawford's life and found comfort within her words as they now saw aspects of their own lives reflected in her writing.

Readers also wrote letters directly to Crawford—which she then brought with her to her interview with the *Ladies' Home Journal*—to express their appreciation for her narrative and writing about things that they had experienced. One letter claimed:

No one—except one such as you who has experienced it—can imagine the deep hurt inside that will not go away. Doctors have not helped, pills have not, prayers have not, but you have. Now, perhaps, I can go on normally and, in time, forget (Crawford, How "Mommie Dearest" Changed My Life 146).

People were eager to tell Crawford how her work helped them and encouraged them to speak about what they had experienced.

Mommie Dearest was the first Hollywood mother-daughter memoir that made waves in the media due to its focus on such a beloved actress. Even though the memoir gained momentum and popularity, after the film was made, it got further publicity and at this point Crawford's siblings began to comment on what they saw as its inaccuracies and unfairness to Joan. After this, Crawford continued her career by writing about the experience of abuse and how to live life after such a formative experience. Crawford is dedicated to telling these stories and sharing how life can continue afterwards, which is the premise of her subsequent book, *Survivor* (1988), which details her life the ten years following the events of *Mommie Dearest*. Crawford's other books have not had the same amount of traction as her debut memoir; however, there are still people who find solace in her words. Her work emboldened people who experienced abuse as children to come forward with their stories during the 1980s, though mainly because of the wider change in culture regarding child abuse. Nonetheless, Crawford's was certainly influential in the process of people beginning to write testimonial memoirs about their relationships with their parents. Most notable of these is *My Mother's Keeper* (1985) by B.D. Hyman, daughter of actress Bette Davis.

In the context of the culture in the United States at the time *Mommie Dearest* was being published a shift was happening regarding the prevention child abuse. This can be seen, on a legal level, by the enactment of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act in 1974 (Stoltzfus 1). One of the primary goals in CAPTA was funding research regarding the identification and handling of child abuse, “Funds are awarded competitively to support an ongoing research program and other work related to better identifying, preventing, and treating child abuse and neglect” (Stoltzfus 14). These changes to federal legislature to help children who were being abused is indicative of a wider cultural shift in terms of child abuse. The publication of *Mommie Dearest* happening following these changes makes sense with the content of the book. Moreover, *Mommie Dearest*'s perceived influence on people writing and publishing testimonials about child abuse could also be partly attributed to this cultural change in the legal protection of children.

Additionally, the second wave of feminism was occurring (1960s-1980s), which was mainly focused on civil rights and labour rights; one focus of this was domestic violence. This is discussed by Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon, who argue that “By the mid-1970s feminist politics was occurring primarily in single-issue organisations focused on, for example, reproductive rights, employment discrimination, health, domestic violence, and women’s studies” (Baxandall and Gordon Loc. 7180). With this new wave of feminism, women had more places and resources to receive help, “Women’s liberation also revolutionized the common understanding of rape and domestic violence, creating crisis hotlines and shelters, and forcing law enforcement agencies to stop blaming rape and battering victims” (Baxandall and Gordon Loc. 7133). A flaw that Crawford mentions regarding the system from her experience with abuse is that no one helped her when she asked, not even the police: “He [police officer] said there was nothing he could do to help me. He said that I’d have to try harder to get along with my mother because if she called the

authorities again, he'd have no choice but to take me to juvenile hall as an *incorrigible*" (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* 171). This happened after Crawford claimed that Joan had strangled her and had to be removed by an employee. Following the publication of the memoir, people who had known Crawford came to her defence to give her story the credit they believed it deserved as is seen by the additional testimonies within the republication of her memoir. This jump to her defence could represent an acknowledgement of the change of culture concerning the blaming of victims.

Mommie Dearest is an analysis of the mother-daughter relationship in which parental control and the child's struggle to gain autonomy are depicted in the context of a relationship lived through the desire for public approval. This memoir provides a prototypical structure for many later memoirs which involve mothers and daughters. Crawford claims that she broke the taboo about speaking about what happens behind the closed doors of public lives. As she claims: "This was the first time anyone had raised the issue of child abuse and family violence to the level of widespread public discourse" (Crawford, *Mommie Dearest* V). Despite her fierce criticism of her mother's faults, she also confirms her love for her. As Brockes points out, it is "perhaps the first memoir ever to document child abuse from the point of view of the child" and as such it "changed the landscape of victim representation and was an early precursor to today's more robust state of victims' rights" (Brockes). This examination of the relationship between mothers and daughters, therefore, established the genre as a whole. Additionally, while Crawford's memoir confirmed some harmful stereotypes about working mothers and their ability to be both parents and successful in their careers, it does also make clear the pressures that mothers feel, even (or especially) extraordinarily famous ones such as Joan. As such, this memoir has been a discussion piece for nearly fifty years. It has acted as the reference point for subsequent memoirs about mother-daughter relationships, allowing them to be more critical of motherhood. Abuse is

commonly seen in testimony memoirs, and since *Mommie Dearest* became such a sensation, it has allowed others to speak freely about their experiences in imperfect childhoods involving abuse or trauma.

Chapter Two: *I'm Glad My Mom Died*

In the twenty-first century, a memoir that thematically parallels *Mommie Dearest* is *I'm Glad My Mom Died*, published in 2022 by Jennette McCurdy (b.1992). This memoir is based on the one-woman show that McCurdy wrote and then performed in 2020 and 2021. Since this was initially a one-woman show based in humour, it must then be read through this partially comedic lens. The memoir follows a young McCurdy from when her mother began insisting that McCurdy pursue an acting career, to more recently, when she has overcome her disordered eating, her struggle to grapple with fame, and her harsh childhood. McCurdy details her strained relationship with her mother and how this relationship has influenced her life. McCurdy and Crawford have similar experiences; however, McCurdy does not structure her material in the same way as Crawford. Instead, she uses present tense narration to exemplify the love and appreciation she had for her mother, even while her mother is actively displaying abusive behaviour towards McCurdy, only for McCurdy to later realise, as she grows up, that she perhaps should have been more critical of her mother throughout her childhood.

McCurdy writes in diary form; in that she discusses her life in the present tense as if the reader is experiencing these traumatic events with her as an observer of the abuse. By writing in this way, McCurdy's narratorial voice remains naïve to her mother's manipulation, and she writes about her experiences with a tone of humour until later in the memoir.

Although McCurdy and Crawford use similar devices, their memoirs—even though the substance of them is similar—are very different from one another in terms of delivery and public reception. McCurdy uses tone, perspective, and language to cover issues such as success, control, and public perception; more crucially, she uses these devices in order to shape the narrative in her favour.

Subgenre and Structure: Testimony and Conversion

Just as in *Mommie Dearest*, the subgenre McCurdy uses is significant. *I'm Glad My Mom Died* falls under three different subgenres throughout the development of the memoir, though its proximity to these three shifts within the text. Like *Mommie Dearest*, McCurdy's memoir mainly falls under the category of testimony, as is the case for most memoirs that deal with trauma. McCurdy is recounting an injustice that was done to her and that she seeks to expose. Yet, unlike *Mommie Dearest*, McCurdy's memoir has a less accusatory tone; the accusations are replaced by a tone of understanding and love, which at times causes McCurdy to appear more naïve and childlike. With this naivety, the reader witnesses a younger version of McCurdy endure abuse through her wide-eyed, unknowing perspective. Gilmore argues that autobiographical narrations on trauma make the reader act as an uncomfortable witness, "autobiography about trauma forces the reader to assume a position of masochism or voyeurism" (Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* 22). This is especially true with McCurdy's use of present tense as the reader is forced to bear witness to these events as they occur.

As McCurdy grows in the memoir, her perspective changes as she begins to comprehend that she is, in fact, being mistreated, which leads to a change of tone to anger. Yet even her anger is coated with regret, which dilutes the sense of outrage. Due to the lack of outright accusation, the testimonial aspect of the memoir is more subtle, less overtly framed by McCurdy's writing itself. As Couser says within his definition of testimony, "the emphasis is on the I as an *eye*, a witness, of some injustice that the narrative seeks to put on record, if not redress [...] but much depends on the direction of the narrator's gaze –whether inward toward the wounded psyche or outward toward the traumatizing event" (Couser 41, 42). In other words, the text constructs the narrator as a witness to the events which they report, though their position as both narrator and object of the trauma narrated naturally then

raises questions about their ability to narrate objectively. This is not to say their story is not truthful, but it is necessarily an intensely subjective truth, which is likely to speak simultaneously of the many emotions involved. McCurdy deals with this by shifting the narrative focus in the two halves of the memoir: in the first half (“before”), she focuses outwardly, not recognizing the events as traumatic and simply stating them as events that have occurred; in the second half (“after”) she focuses on her psyche, processing the emotional and psychological damage caused by these events and the aftermath of them. In this section she speaks about therapy to a great extent. Although the first half is not written in a directly accusatory tone, it is the section of the memoir that falls most clearly under the subgenre of testimony.

McCurdy’s memoir shows her childhood through adulthood, infusing this with humour in the telling so that it frequently reads as a coming-of-age story or bildungsroman. It follows the timeline of the bildungsroman narrative as she explains her life story from early childhood to her now adult life. In bildungsroman narratives, Couser claims that there needs to be a specific moment in adulthood where an equilibrium is reached, “which recounts the protagonist’s life from childhood to some moment of stasis in early adulthood” (Couser 40). McCurdy begins *I’m Glad My Mom Died* when she is around six years old—though sometimes through brief analeptic narration she writes about when she was even younger—then the story continues until she speaks of her life in recent years. The last observable year is 2020, when the reboot of the show *iCarly*—a show that McCurdy was on from ages fifteen to twenty—was first announced.

Additionally, bildungsroman is defined by Thomas Larson as a complete story from a point of innocence to a point of reflection:

The story of how I grew arises because the adult, the survivor, is ready to tell it. She's also ready because her memory has given her tale wholeness: frames of era, place,

generation. We grow from innocence to experience, and, when written, such pieces may reflect what's finished, what's learned (Larson Loc. 554).

Larson's definition is more concerned with the reflection offered in coming-of-age stories rather than the individual events within the story itself. The emphasis in his definition is on the learned experience in the story being told. In short, bildungsroman is about reflecting on what has been learned over the course of one's life and the evolution that the author has gone through to reach this point in adulthood. This journey is captured in the final chapter of the book when McCurdy visits her mother's grave and thinks of how mutilated her perception of her mother was as a child—how she believed their relationship was good because her mother told her it was. She contemplates the trial that it took her to reach this point in her life and the significance of her now being able to stand up for herself. The memoir therefore ends with McCurdy standing up from the grave and mentally swearing that she would not return. At this point, she—or the persona she presents herself as—has made a recovery, has reached a point of stasis.

Along with being a testimony and a bildungsroman, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* can also be classified as a "conversion narrative". Unlike most conversion narrative memoirs, however, it does not include a religious intervention. It is most likely a conversion narrative in the second half of the book, which is titled "after", where McCurdy works on self-discovery and recovery. In this time of recovery, her opinion and the narrative she had mentally written and always believed about her mother and their relationship has changed. This alteration in perspective is crucial to conversion narratives. According to Couser, "conversion narrative tells the story of a radical (and usually sudden) reversal in the narrator's perspective" (Couser 38). Although McCurdy's realisation is not "sudden", it is radically different from the original tone which she uses to describe her relationship with her mother. Additionally, the things that McCurdy values change between the start of the book

and the end. McCurdy constantly struggles with putting her needs before others', but by the end of the memoir, she prioritises her mental state above what others want or expect of her. But as Couser explains, "The result of the conversion is that the values of the narrator are directly opposed to those of his or her past self" (Couser 39). Although not all of McCurdy's views are different, her perspective on the thing she claims was the centre of her life alters drastically, following the period of her life that involves self-rediscovery and recovery.

Lastly, the structure of *I'm Glad My Mom Died* is different from the other two memoirs in that it consists of two sections: Before and After. These are the defining timelines of her life: "before her mom died" and "after her mom died". McCurdy defines her life through the closeness of her relationship with her mother and attributes her success to this relationship, as she determines her success by whether or not her mother is happy with her. For example, when McCurdy books a speaking role for the first time, she does not say she is happy about the role, but rather that her mother is happy, "I'm so happy she's happy" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 43). She does not measure her own success through her career, but rather through how her mother felt about her career. Following her death, in the "after" section, she tried to honour her mother's legacy through McCurdy's own eating disorder: "I look like a kid again. I'm determined to keep this up. I'm honouring Mom" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 189). McCurdy is still determined to live her life by means of what would make her mother happy —this is, of course, until McCurdy begins therapy and unpacks the weight of her chaotic upbringing.

Tense and Memory: The Implication of Present Tense in Personal History

McCurdy's perspective is not only compelling due to her ability to shift between different subgenres, but it is also unique in the sense that she uses the present tense when writing about

these events that have clearly happened in the past. As suggested by Couser, this use of tense has the ability to heighten the vivacity within the text as the reader experiences the events more immediately: “in contemporary narrative [...] this impression is often heightened by the use of present tense for narration” (Couser 70). This heightened dramatic sense is utilised to make the narrative work in favour of McCurdy. It allows her to appear less accusatory and creates the impression that she is simply telling what happened through her immediate emotional reaction to those events. This, in turn, gives her a greater sense of credibility, as if she is showing what happened as it happens, rather than reconstructing the events through hindsight (which, in fact, she is). A complication in this technique is examined by Phillip Lopate when he discusses the present tense personal writing form, “The current fashion for present tense helps writing students sustain the illusion that they are still in the dreamy trance state that a recalled memory resembles, even as it destroys the possibility of judging its meaning through hindsight” (Lopate 29). In this, Lopate points to the problem with writing in the present tense in personal history, which is that there is no room for analysis or reflection beyond what would have been instantaneous, because the narrator has set themselves to be experiencing the event as it currently unfolds. The author now must work in a restricted space where introspection—if it is to be had—must happen later in the book. However, there is some contradiction in this as McCurdy, as an author, is aware that she had previously been mistreated. In her writing she has the ability to include or omit any details that she chooses, and, in these details, she can make subtle allusions to the knowledge she has now.

This is where conversation around the “narrated I” and the “narrating I” becomes relevant. As said by Smith and Watson, “the narrating ‘I’ who speaks and the narrated ‘I’ who is spoken about. This differentiation assumes that the ‘I’-now inhabits a stable present in reading the ‘I’-then” (Smith and Watson 111). The narrated ‘I’ works as a protagonist which the narrating ‘I’ aims to write about (Smith and Watson 112). In this context, the narrated

McCurdy is unaware of what is to come; however, the narrating McCurdy has a birds-eye view of the portion of her life which she is writing about.

Yet, despite the potential incongruity between nonfiction and the present-tense narrational voice, McCurdy finds a way to use the present tense to her advantage. This creates a distinction between *Mommie Dearest* and *I'm Glad My Mom Died*; Crawford was able to make commentary from what she now knows as the story progressed, and McCurdy is unable to do so. Where Crawford knew in the moment of her narration that she was being abused, the narrated McCurdy only knows she is being abused in hindsight. Therefore, if McCurdy had begun the memoir in the past tense, she would have foregrounded the knowledge and understanding gained later in life, but the present tense gives her narration a tone of naivety that earns her more sympathy, or even dramatic irony, because a reader is able to see that her mother's behaviour is wrong, even though McCurdy herself does not point this out critically. Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola provide additional evidence as to how present tense can be used beneficially in nonfiction: "by virtually 're-inhabiting' a memory, both writer and reader can allow the scene to unfold more deeply [...] the writer refrains from *telling* us how to interpret the scene, instead providing images as clues that allow the reader to make connections" (Miller and Paola 6). By using present tense narration, the narrating McCurdy is able to then write the scenes in a way that shows her mother's behaviour as abusive while not having the narrated McCurdy criticise her in the text.

In addition, this narratorial technique influences the narrative through its odd framing of the reader's understanding of her mother's motivations. During the first section of the memoir, McCurdy makes repeated attempts not to stage her confidence in her mother's actions, mentally noting that her mother must be doing these things for a good reason and praising her ability to do so. This is seen in the "Before" section of the memoir where McCurdy always follows up anything that could be seen as negative towards her mother—or

prefaces it—with how wonderful her mother is or how wise she is: “It is an honor that Mom cares about me so much that something like me having my own favorite color would devastate her” (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 87). Although nothing directly critical is said about McCurdy’s mother here, it does point to a weird power relationship within which McCurdy is excessively grateful for something which is actually a sign of control (of her selection of colours). On the one hand McCurdy sounds alarmingly grateful for the ‘honour’, and her mother sounds hyper controlling when something so clearly minor as a choice of a favourite colour could still have the power to “devastate” her.

Though there are many points throughout the memoir where something happens that would be easily understood as accusatory, McCurdy rarely does so overtly. Instead, she often leans into the naiveness of her youth and tries to emphasise how she believed that her mother was always doing what was best for her: “She just wants me to be as impressive as I can be. She’s just being a good mom” (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 70). McCurdy’s apparent commitment to making her mother appear as an idyllic figure, however, often has the opposite impact on the reader. Reiterating Lopate’s point about narrowed introspection, Patrick Madden writes about J. M. Coetzee’s avoidance of the first-person pronoun in his memoir, referring to himself instead as ‘he’ and also sticking to the present tense which Madden then says, “thereby foreshortening the space available for reflection on his past” (Madden 230). Even though this suggestion that present tense naturally limits the narrator’s ability to reflect on the events happening is likely to be true generally for memoirs written in the present tense, in McCurdy’s memoir, it has the opposite impact. The present tense allows an outsider to better understand the effects of the previous abuse that McCurdy endured by seeing its origins McCurdy’s deferential mindset in relation to her mother. The tone of present innocence is crucial to the construction of readerly empathy for her, but it requires some decoding, as suggested above, because it invites the reader not to take McCurdy’s word

at face value and to read beyond her apparent naivety to apprehend her mother's aggressively controlling and unreasonable behaviour, thereby in fact amplifying her mistreatment of McCurdy.

McCurdy continues to use this innocence to introduce the reader to different factors within her life that, if introduced with her present knowledge, might have framed her narrative as a complaint. McCurdy's familial background is important in understanding the amount of pressure she had placed on her to succeed when she was a child. She lived with her three brothers, mother, father, grandmother, and grandfather, all in a small "hoarder house" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 183, 196, 244) in what she refers to as "Garbage Grove" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 21, 183, 196). Although her father worked at Home Depot and Hollywood Video, McCurdy was the main breadwinner in her family. From a young age, she was expected to care for her family. This fact is unveiled not through McCurdy's own realisation but was told to her by her grandfather: "A little girl shouldn't have to worry about her entire family' Grandpa says to me one afternoon" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 81). This simple line works to establish several things about McCurdy's life: first, that she is expected to care for her entire family; second, that she is not the one who finds error in being the one who is responsible for them—her grandfather does. She adds to this when she mentally processes his claim with confusion, "I'm confused. Of course a little girl should worry about her entire family. That's what little girls do" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 81). Here McCurdy, in an act of double-dealing, awards her compassion, still portraying herself as the obedient daughter helping her family, while also pointing out the flaws in the way she was expected to take care of the adults in her life. In doing so she escapes any potential criticism about her being "ungrateful" for the opportunities that she had as a child. Despite the fact that she finds herself in an abnormal situation, McCurdy makes no

direct accusations. Instead, she uses the figure of her grandfather to raise the objection to escape doing so herself.

McCurdy also sets up a compelling tension between this naïve narratorial style and her ability to function as the adult in the majority of her relationships. McCurdy characterises herself as the parent or adult in her relationship with her mother throughout the memoir. For example, she reports that she felt as though she had to cater to her mother's needs as though her mother was a child: "she says timidly, like a child would to seek reassurance from an adult [...] I say with loaded positivity, the way an adult would to reassure a child" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 143). This scene does induce sympathy and shows how quickly McCurdy had to grow up within her family. The comparison of her mother to a child and herself to an adult exemplifies how McCurdy felt she needed to take care of the people around her. This characterisation of her mother makes her seem emotionally dependent on McCurdy and in need of the reassurance that McCurdy offers. This is uniquely intriguing when considering that for the majority of her narration, she presents herself with a youthful undertone in all of her interactions. The implication is that McCurdy has to transform depending on the mood of those around her, and that the adults in her life were more like children than McCurdy.

Tonal Control: Humour and Docility in Theme

Throughout *I'm Glad My Mom Died* McCurdy's tone fluctuates between being humorous around sensitive topics to docile—as seen in scenes where she is interacting with her mother—to innocence. McCurdy's tone changes depending on who she is engaging with, which also suggests something about how she feels about these people without her having to plainly state her feelings. The graphic scenes in the memoir where McCurdy depicts her eating disorder and any abuse she endured in detail are balanced by the, admittedly dark,

humour that is spread throughout *I'm Glad My Mom Died*—even extending to the cover. This use of humour provides a glimpse of the present-day McCurdy rather than the child-self she presents in the memoir. An event that is traumatising in the moment is reflected on with humour, even if humour was absent during the moment the trauma was inflicted. As Karr suggests, “painful events told for humor can be drained of the real pathos or terror they first registered with” (Karr 7). This meaning, when McCurdy is writing about a traumatic event in a humorous tone it is a reflection from her “future” narrating self. This idea of humour being a device used to look back on traumatic events is echoed by Rueda-Ramos and Jiménez Placer who say that “these authors resort to humor not for mere entertainment but to construct a version of self that is stronger and more able to cope with adversity” (Rueda-Ramos and Jiménez Placer Loc. 581). In her using humour McCurdy, as the narrating ‘I’, shows a developed sense of self since she was in the place of her narrated counterpart. McCurdy uses these different narrative tones around different people to identify who she feels comfortable with and who she is on guard around.

An example of this is in her introductions of the various personas in her memoir. In these, McCurdy sets up standards for how they will behave throughout the memoir. Memory, however, is always selective, and narrators always control what is included and not included in their work. Freeman and Le Rossignol explicitly address this issue when they point out that: “The writer also makes choices, consciously or subconsciously, about which memories to include in life narratives, and how they are portrayed” (Freeman, Le Rossignol 3). With this also comes the realisation that McCurdy sets up the reader’s first encounter with each persona. These first impressions contribute to how these figures are seen for the rest of the memoir.

The first impression McCurdy gives of herself provides some insight into how McCurdy views herself and her role in the lives of those around her, but of course, mainly her

mother. The first time this happens is in the prologue, where there is an immediately recognisable disruption in the narratorial timeline, wherein the only aim is to introduce these figures. It begs the question of why McCurdy felt the memoir needed to begin with this scene, and what it says about the various personalities being introduced. The prologue takes place in a hospital room where McCurdy's mother lies in a coma and her children surround her trying to wake her with various pieces of good news (one is moving back to California, one is getting married) when McCurdy comes forward to deliver her good news, the nature of which is drastically different; "Mommy. I am... so skinny right now. I'm finally down to eighty-nine pounds. [...] finally, I have achieved Mom's current goal weight for me. [...] If my weight isn't enough to get Mom to wake up, then nothing will be" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died X*). By starting with this shocking scene, McCurdy establishes two things: firstly, that her relationship with her mother and her weight are intertwined. Secondly, McCurdy believes her weight is significant enough that the news of her being malnourished will excite her mother to the point of her waking from a coma. In addition to this, the use of ellipsis following "I am" sets up a dramatic unveiling of a profession of love or admiration or even an accomplishment equal to that of her brothers, but instead McCurdy chooses to tell her mother about her weight. This misdirection of the flow of the narrative is commonplace in the memoir and adds humour to an otherwise grave scene. Following this, McCurdy realises her mother is not going to wake up, which leads to her own introspection, "My life purpose has always been to make Mom happy" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died X*). In this, McCurdy's persona is introduced: she sees herself less as a person and more as a tool to make those around her happy.

McCurdy uses the same tactic for introducing others in her memoir—most obviously in the introduction of her mother. There is a tone of bitterness when discussing her mother in some instances, which provides a glimpse of present-day McCurdy in the narration. In this

introduction, the theme of control is addressed for the first time because McCurdy feels as though her mother controlled her life, not always by exerting power over McCurdy directly, but by insisting upon being the central focus of her life. In McCurdy's establishing of her mother's persona, she writes about how her mother loved to tell her cancer story:

Mom loves recounting her cancer story—the chemotherapy, the radiation, the bone marrow transplant, the mastectomy, the breast implant, the stage fourness of it, how she was only thirty-five when she got it—to any churchgoer, neighbor, or fellow Albertsons customer who lends her a listening ear [...] Mom reminisces about cancer the way most people reminisce about vacations. She even goes as far as to MC a weekly rewatch of a home video she made shortly after learning of her diagnosis (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 7).

In this, there is no forthright accusation of McCurdy's mother loving the pity she receives upon reciting her story. However, the reference to 'reminisces' indicates that her mother enjoyed people's reactions. Furthermore, McCurdy makes the comparison to people vacationing, emphasising how glad her mother was to be telling this story to people.

Yet, at times McCurdy's mother goes beyond simply enjoying the sympathy she received to determining people's goodness or worthiness based on how much concern they show for her:

Every single time we rewatch this video, Mom comments on how the heaviness was just 'too much for Marcus to handle,' so he had to keep going off into the hallway to collect himself and come back in again. She says this in a way that lets us know it's the highest compliment. Marcus being distraught about Mom's terminal illness is a testament to what an incredible person he is (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 7, 8).

Again, though there is no direct accusation in this, the strong implication is that her mother is delighted in seeing somebody clearly being upset by her illness. Because this is the first

glimpse of McCurdy's mother, it instantaneously illustrates how her mother determines the value of people in her life by how they function in relation to her. In addition, it is the only point in the memoir where McCurdy refers to her mother's cancer as a "terminal illness" rather than simply saying "cancer", which would then indicate that she used it here to magnify the absurdity of what her mother is silently demanding of them as, of course, they would be upset by their mother having cancer. They should not be in competition over who feels the most pain for their mother's illness.

Following this, there are several times throughout the memoir that McCurdy's mother uses this "cancer story" as a way of achieving whatever current goal she is set on. When they were running late to an audition and wanted to park in a lot that was usually reserved for cast members, McCurdy's mother asked the guard for an exception and brought up her illness, "Is there any way to make an exception? I'm a cancer survivor, stage four, and sometimes my bones—'fine'" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 66). Or before speaking to a television producer, she suggested bringing it up to make him more sympathetic to them and thus more likely to give them what she wanted, "One of us should bring up my cancer, too, to really get him on our side" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 114). Throughout the memoir, whenever McCurdy's mother wants to get her way, she brings up this traumatic event and uses it to her advantage.

Once McCurdy moves away from home and lives by herself, or when she is touring, she begins to view her mother's behaviour with far more scepticism. For example, when McCurdy's mother was diagnosed again, she asked if McCurdy would sing at her funeral but when McCurdy did not want to sing the song her mother picked out, her mother attempts to make her feel guilty: "Mom urges as she removes her Ugg hat to scratch her bald head. On the surface, it seems like such a sad gesture, but I could swear she's doing this manipulatively" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 160). McCurdy has no evidence that her

mother was doing this manipulatively, however, the introduction discussed above leaves little room for doubt.

Emails are also included in this memoir from McCurdy's mother to McCurdy. These emails are sent to tell McCurdy that her family is disowning her because McCurdy made the grave error of having a boyfriend and not disclosing this information to her family. The content of the emails is extreme and focuses on the hatred directed at McCurdy by her mother. For example, one email includes this accusation:

Add to the list of things you are—LIAR, CONNIVING, EVIL. You look pudgier, too. It's clear you're EATING YOUR GUILT [...] What happened to my good little girl? Where did she go? And who is this MONSTER that has replaced her? You're an UGLY MONSTER now. I told your brothers about you and they all said they disown you just like I do. We want nothing to do with you. Love, Mom (Or should I say DEB since I am no longer your mother) P.S. Send money for a new fridge. Ours broke (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 155).

This email works in several ways. Firstly, it establishes that McCurdy is punished by degradation when she does something that her mother does not approve of. Secondly, it shows that McCurdy's physical appearance, as pre-established something McCurdy's mother took incredibly pride in, is immediately mentioned when faced with her mother's anger. This then instantly operates to show how her mother would attempt to hurt McCurdy emotionally at any sign of what she believed to be McCurdy's betrayal. Lastly, it reiterates that McCurdy is financially responsible for her family and has been throughout this memoir—since her acting career began. It illustrates the abuse that McCurdy is subjected to while reminding people that she is contributing more to her family's lives than they are to hers. The inclusion of the "postscript" adds a sense of absurd humour because, though McCurdy is being disowned, she is still expected to bear her family's financial burden which is a grotesquely

irrational request. Each email that is written by McCurdy's mother seems to be more personal and direct to McCurdy, "YOU caused my cancer to come back. I hope you're happy knowing this. YOU have to live with this fact. YOU gave me cancer" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 156). The repeated capitalisation of the word "you" works as emphasis on the guilt that McCurdy's mother is attempting to, and succeeding at, make McCurdy feel.

In contrast to her mother, McCurdy's tone regarding Miranda Cosgrove, McCurdy's co-star on the Nickelodeon show *iCarly*, is far more settled. Cosgrove is not directly present in the introduction of her persona, in her place there is a gift basket which she gave to McCurdy when they were beginning to shoot *iCarly*, "This one's filled with movie theatre snacks: Milk Duds and Twizzlers and a few packets of popcorn. In the middle of the basket is a hundred-dollar gift card" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 103). Despite her physical absence McCurdy presents Cosgrove as thoughtful enough to get her a gift, something she claims she has not received in her years as a guest star (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 102). McCurdy then goes on to explain how glad she was that she and Cosgrove were becoming friends: "Even though in person Miranda seemed shy and quiet, she had a distinct and hilarious personality through her written words. So many of the things she said made me laugh [...] I loved her. And I was so excited we were becoming friends" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 107). McCurdy's tone is appreciably lighter when speaking of this relationship. In all the events when she brings up this friendship, the only time her tone darkens is at the thought of losing it.

Past the introductions of the various figures in her memoir, McCurdy goes on to define her relation to these personas. When specifically looking at how she reacts to her mother, her tone of docility is very apparent. This is mainly exemplified by means of her mother's assertion of power through control and McCurdy's willingness to submit to her mother's whims. Similarly to Crawford, McCurdy writes that she was given very little choice

in her decisions—from not being able to shower alone to not being able to dress herself. To begin, McCurdy uses a moral defence to insist that her mother knows best and everything she is doing is for McCurdy's benefit. McCurdy rarely objects overtly to her mother's abuse; instead, she nods in agreement or capitulates to her demands. It is rare to see McCurdy advocate for herself in the "before" section of the memoir. However, she does present her internal complaints, which then provides insight into her thoughts in a way those around her would not have access to, since they cannot listen to her internal dialogue.

For example, before each audition, McCurdy is dressed in the same outfit, which she proclaims makes her feel uncomfortable: "I nod along and look down at the outfit again. I dread putting it on. It makes me feel embarrassed and not like myself" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 62). She carries this submissive tone to most accounts of her relationship with her mother. There are places in the memoir where McCurdy attempts to question her mother's motive for specific events; however, she rarely verbalises her discomfort to those around her, though she does write about how uncomfortable or upset she is frequently. This makes her mother's repetition of the behaviour McCurdy does not like seem more vicious and intentionally harmful, when narratively McCurdy has yet to make explicit that she does not like what is happening. This is another way that McCurdy appears childlike, as though she is expecting her mother to read her thoughts in the same way that she feels she must read her mother's in order to know how to please her. McCurdy mainly makes these comments when regarding the clothes she is forced to wear, and often, this is followed by her claim that her mother always overrules her dislike of the outfit or hairstyle: "I hated this hairstyle, the rows of tightly wound hair fastened into place with painful, scalp-gripping little clips. I'd rather be wearing a baseball cap, but Mom loves this style and says it makes me look pretty, so butterfly clips it is" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 9). It is apparent, then, that McCurdy has a strong sense of voice when regarding her inner thoughts; it is in the lack of

externalization which makes McCurdy's tone docile and submissive. McCurdy redirects attention back to her mother and her mother's demands. She is wearing butterfly clips because that is what her mother expects from her. This idea of McCurdy being "overruled" by her mother appears consistently throughout the memoir but is most frequently mentioned within the first fifty pages, which sets the tone of the dynamic between her and her mother. If her mother demands something, McCurdy does not protest, "'Quiet, Net' And I'm out. She has spoken. I am silenced" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 28). This makes it seem as though her mother's word is McCurdy's absolute law and confirms McCurdy's first account of herself in which she claims that she merely exists to make those around her happy, and the way she makes her mother happy is by being fully obedient.

When McCurdy's mother first suggests she become an actress, McCurdy is hesitant. But then she describes how her mother makes a show of the effort that she would have to put in and what she—McCurdy's mother—would have to sacrifice, thus making it sound like the burden would fall on her, not on McCurdy, who would be doing the laborious work: "An hour and a half [...] I would have to learn how to drive freeways. But it's a sacrifice I'm willing to make for you, Net. 'Cuz I'm not like my parents. I want what's best for you" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 11). With the knowledge that McCurdy is not particularly keen on acting and that her mother is attempting to force upon her the life that she wishes she was able to have, the use of the word "sacrifice" is revealing. It is obvious that this is no "sacrifice"—in fact, it is the opposite.

Following this, when McCurdy is asked if she wants to act, her reflection on the question indicates that she felt as though saying 'no' was not an option: "There's only one right answer" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 11). This shows that from the start of her career, McCurdy has lacked autonomy of voice. Whatever was expected of her is what she was going to do. There was no option for her other than to agree to become an actress. This

supplements the idea that McCurdy's career as an actress is an extension of her mother, another way that McCurdy was controlled by external forces.

There is a significant moment in the "before" section where McCurdy mentions to her mother that she might not want to act. This is one of the few times McCurdy outwardly expresses her distaste for acting, though she mentions it several times in her internal monologue. Although exact ages are not provided, since she is not yet on *iCarly*, McCurdy is likely under fourteen years old when she tells her mother she does not want to act: "'I don't want to act anymore,' [...] 'Don't be silly, you love acting. It's your favorite thing in the world,' Mom says in a way that makes it sound like a threat [...] maybe she's right, maybe it is my favorite thing I just don't know it, I just don't realize it" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 79). This is another instance where the use of the present tense makes a difference. McCurdy is writing with the knowledge she had at the time, when she says, "makes it sound like a threat", McCurdy was anxious about bringing this topic up with her mother, so there is a sense that her own anxiety is being projected onto her mother, making her seem angrier than she was. Additionally, her believing her mother knows better than her is very childlike; by questioning her own actions and thoughts, McCurdy appears both anxious and trusting, and thus she presents this situation as her trust being used to fulfil her mother's unfulfilled dreams, while it makes her mother seem more controlling. This discussion is followed by her mother crying in the car and insisting that McCurdy did, in fact, want to act and did not know what she was saying.

McCurdy goes on to say that she even feels out of control of her own body and even goes so far as to say her body was almost trained to obey any command that her mother gives her—even if McCurdy does not want to obey: "Involuntarily, my singing voice starts pouring out of my mouth. My body is programmed to Mom-on-Demand" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 159). McCurdy's claim that her body is "programmed" already asserts a sense of

her having a lack of choice in how her body behaves, and this is paired with the knowledge that, prior to this, she is hesitant to sing in a restaurant. Both create a picture of the extent to which McCurdy is willing to make herself uncomfortable to please her mom: “Mom, we’re in a Panda Express, I’m not gonna-” (McCurdy, *I’m Glad My Mom Died* 159). McCurdy shows her hesitancy prior to immediately jumping into song when her mother presses the issue, which shows not only how McCurdy feels as though her life is out of her control to the point of her body betraying her, but also how she is willing to sacrifice her own comfort for something seemingly unimportant. At the same time, this is a humorous account of McCurdy’s own lack of comfort. Being cut off in the middle of her sentence and then immediately beginning to sing in a restaurant after her mother requests she sing at her funeral is an admittedly preposterous situation, which McCurdy conveys through her use of specified setting and by referring to settings in her body as “Mom-on-Demand” (McCurdy, *I’m Glad My Mom Died* 159).

The sense of humour that McCurdy employs in her writing takes advantage of the dark and often uncomfortable situations that she finds herself in. When addressing this humour in *I’m Glad My Mom Died* it is important to remember that much of it comes from the way that the memoir is written not in the events themselves. Humour is a powerful tool in trauma memoirs and as Cardell and Douglas suggest, “Humor plays a significant role in the representation of trauma and memory: memories can be playfully mocked or set up in humorous contrast” (Cardell and Douglas 310). McCurdy makes use of contrasting uncomfortable events with a humorous tone by emphasising dramatic build-ups and including seemingly minor details in order to point out the overall absurdity of the circumstances in which she finds herself. It is also suggested that humour is used as a way of reflection, “a pedagogical tool, as a catalyst for ‘self-reflection’ and critical insight” (Cardell and Douglas 311). This could then indicate that the self-reflection that McCurdy supposedly lacks from

her use of present tense she then makes up for in her use of humour, as this humour is retroactively added to the scenes. It should also be noted that Karr suggests the inclusion of details that appear minor helps to achieve a sense of truth in the writing:

Every memoir should brim over with the physical experiences that once streamed in—the smell of sticky gumbo, your hand in an animal’s fur, the ocean’s phosphor lighting up bodies underwater all acid green [...] A great detail feels particular in a way that argues for its truth. A reader can take it in (Karr 71, 72).

Then, not only do these details work to introduce humour or to set the scene for the reader, but by McCurdy’s continual inclusion of sensory details it aids in reaffirming a conceived truthfulness of her story.

McCurdy has an interesting opportunity not given to the other figures in the memoir which is the chance to reinvent herself. This is because her initial persona was based on pleasing her mother; once her mother dies—unless the energy is diverted to a new person or thing—McCurdy herself must start again. Following her mother’s death, McCurdy realises for the first time how dependent her personality has been on keeping her mother happy. She had known this was her role before, as discussed in the prologue, but it appears she only now realises how devoid she was of life outside of this relationship. Yet, as indicated above, this position of knowledge is available to the reader from the start. Not overtly owning this realisation until later in the narration has the effect of making McCurdy seem more lost following this death, but also invites a revision of her initial naivety because, at the point at which she embarked on the memoir, we now know she is no longer naive. Still, even at this point, McCurdy is hesitant about redefining her life on her own:

My entire life’s purpose, keeping Mom alive and happy, was for nothing. All those years I spent focusing on her, all the time I spent orienting my every thought and action toward what I thought would please her most, were pointless [...] I tried

desperately to understand and know my mother—what made her sad, what made her happy, and on and on and on—at the expense of ever really knowing myself

(McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 222, 223).

The use of docility rather than anger in her own acknowledgement and realization of her lack of self acts as a reminder of the naivety of the narrator. This example shows where the present tense does, in fact, allow McCurdy to present her self-reflection, by analysing her own behaviour from earlier in the narrative.

In having a distinguishable narrating and narrated “I” throughout her memoir which allows for self-reflection, McCurdy is creating a conversation between her narrated and narrating self. Vivian Gornick states that this type of interaction with the self is what creates movement within the narrative:

It is the other in oneself that the writer must seek and find to create movement [...] the piece builds only when the narrator is involved not in confession but in this kind of self-investigation [...] Here, it is self-implication that is required. To see one's own part in the situation—that is, one's own frightened or cowardly or self-deceived part—is to create dynamic (Gornick 35, 36)

By the narrating McCurdy's acknowledgement of her previous contentedness to submit to her mother's every demand she shows herself as a complacent part in her relationship with her mother. This is displayed by the various things that the narrating McCurdy knows are wrong or bad, such as her habits in regard to her disordered eating, but that the narrated McCurdy continues to do with the self-deceived (though greatly encouraged by those around her) notion that these habits will lead to a desired outcome. By these two things contrasting it creates a conversation between them around the process of healing from extensive trauma.

Finally, there are parts of the memoir where the narrating McCurdy knows that her opinions are wrong or not as progressive as the twenty-first century might demand. In

addressing these, she does not retract her statements but instead attempts to explain why it is that she thinks those things, which are often tied to how she was raised. For example, according to McCurdy, her mother did not have close female friendships “She doesn’t have many friends her age” (McCurdy, *I’m Glad My Mom Died* 45) and would oscillate between speaking terribly and wonderfully about the one female friend that she did have: “One minute she’ll say Karen is this amazing person and so wonderful and so sweet, and then the next she’ll say that Karen is actually kind of a B-I-T-C-H” (McCurdy, *I’m Glad My Mom Died* 45). Later in the memoir, when McCurdy addresses women—both being one and having friends that are women—she speaks of them in a negative manner (aside from Cosgrove who she praises for being a good friend to her):

I hate when females are so obvious with their crushes. If you’re obvious, some other little bitch can come along and exploit that crush, use it against you, betray you with it. I learned this from Mom’s long-winded speeches about trusting women even less than men [...] And so I don’t trust women. I just observe them. I watch them act desperate and weak and pathetic. It’s so embarrassing to be a woman (McCurdy, *I’m Glad My Mom Died* 200).

McCurdy subtly pushes the blame towards her mother without accusing her in a way that initially sounds vicious or too obvious. She says that she “learned this”, distancing the sentiment from her, even though she is the one who is having these thoughts and feelings. It is no longer shameful for McCurdy to feel this way, but shameful for her mother to have taught her this.

Another point worth mentioning regarding McCurdy’s depiction of control, or her lack of it, is when she speaks of her regression in the Mormon church⁹ and how it is closely

⁹ McCurdy specifically says to have attended “Garden Grove Sixth Ward of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” (McCurdy, *I’m Glad My Mom Died* 20)

attached to her rise in fame. When McCurdy first brings up the church, she describes it as a place of peace—a place away from her intensely chaotic home life: “I love the escape. Church is a beautiful, peaceful, three-hour weekly reprieve from the place I hate most: home” (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 21). McCurdy claims to find solace in church, something she never mentions finding anywhere else aside from in her writing, both of which were discouraged by her mother. Eventually, as her fame grows, her family stops attending church: “We haven’t been to church in six months, our longest stretch ever [...] I’ve brought it up to Mom as much as I can without making things uncomfortable” (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 124). McCurdy never states why she is unable to attend church on her own without her family, but since her mother no longer attends, neither does she. Not only does this show yet another way that McCurdy’s mother influences her life, but it also revokes McCurdy’s only sanctuary of peace from her life. She never directly says that this is a loss, but as the visits get less frequent, her life gets increasingly more chaotic and less peaceful.

The Child Star

Prior to the publication of this memoir, McCurdy was most well-known for her role on the Nickelodeon show *iCarly*. In *I'm Glad My Mom Died* McCurdy presents a new perspective on the impact that being a “child star” had on her mental health at the time and following the show’s ending. In this, she also explains how her career as an actress was not one that she had ever asked for or desired, but something she did to appease her mother and to take care of her family. In understanding the pressures that are put on child actors and actresses, it works to emphasise how the anxieties McCurdy’s mother instilled in her might have been accentuated by her work in Hollywood, specifically in relation to body image and disordered eating.

As discussed above, McCurdy’s introduction of her mother mainly focuses on how her mother influenced her career. Although typically, she alludes to things without directly

stating them, at one point in the narrative, she comes close to a direct accusation. This is when McCurdy suggests that she was inspired by her mother's behaviour while performing a scene in an audition. In this scene, her behaviour needed to be erratic, near uncontrollable:

I'm screaming at the top of my lungs. Hysterical. I'm yelling that my stuffed animals are gonna kill me, I know they're gonna kill me. I'm rolling around on the floor [...] 'Wow, Net [...] where did you learn to act like that?' [...] I know better than to tell Mom that I got my character inspiration from her erratic and violent behaviour (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 66).

This is the first time that McCurdy makes a direct accusation against her mother without a preface or immediate follow-up of defence. Though even in this she does not state that her mom's behaviour is unjustified. This is, to some extent, an acknowledgement of McCurdy being disillusioned by her mother's behaviour. Although she normally merely suggests this, here she seems to fully understand that her mother is dangerous to her, even though she does not broach this topic frequently. This could also be an injection of author McCurdy's realisation is that her mother's behaviour is "violent" and "erratic", though at the time she had not known this. By saying things such as "I know better", the implication is that there would be a dramatic reaction to McCurdy telling her mother this, which in itself is another sort of accusation.

This is the one time that McCurdy says she feels proud of herself and the work she did, even though it is only in an audition: "There's a part of me that almost feels good doing it. Like this has been waiting to come out for a long time [...] I'm proud. I did a good job kicking and screaming" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 67). Even in her declaration of pride, she remarks on the fatuousness of what she has done by demeaning it to merely "kicking and screaming" rather than a performance. This raises questions about children who are thrust into the entertainment industry from a young age, and whether they have the ability

to understand the environment they are in and the work that they do. McCurdy remarks that her pride is not based on her performance but instead upon the approval of the director: “The director stares at me and says he’s blown away and doesn’t know what to say” (McCurdy, *I’m Glad My Mom Died* 67). McCurdy does not value her performance in terms of acting, but rather for the way it pleases the adults around her.

She continues by claiming that, despite the negative aspects of acting, it still feels good to be good at something: “It’s also nice to feel good at something. Even if that thing makes you very uncomfortable at times. Even if that thing puts a lot of pressure on you. Even if that thing is very stressful. Sometimes it’s just nice to feel good at something” (McCurdy, *I’m Glad My Mom Died* 68). This reaffirms that she is passive in relation to the adults in her life, always to the point of sacrificing her own comfort, something which has now transferred from her mother to the people around her in the entertainment industry. This begs the question of whether McCurdy would have been more aware of her mother’s abuse had she been in an industry that did not reflect her mother’s beliefs. Leslie Anderson analyses the lack of research in reference to the ability of child actors to have a strong sense of self. They argue that children being surrounded by adults and having a parent involved deeply pushing their success can affect how the child sees themselves: “Even though a relationship between a mother’s level of caring for her child’s success, as well as a child’s lack of same-age friends, would presumably have a large impact on how the child views him- or herself” (Anderson 147). Not only does this imply, in McCurdy’s case, that her lack of agency is detrimental to her development as a child because it gives her no place to have self-expression and identity;¹⁰ it also confirms that McCurdy’s career itself causes her anxiety; she is entirely

¹⁰ McCurdy later comments in agreement with this sentiment stating: “I was not equipped to handle the entertainment industry and all of its competitiveness, rejection, stakes, harsh realities, fame. I needed that time, those years, to develop as a child. To form my identity. To grow” (McCurdy, *I’m Glad My Mom Died* 303).

cognizant of the pressure that it places on her, but she surrounds this confession with evidence of why the pressure is a demand from all the adults around her.

Furthermore, McCurdy is forced to manage the same expectations as Crawford. Though she does not say it, McCurdy needs to be presented perfectly to the public, which causes her additional stress, and on a global scale, she has to constantly perform for the public. Anderson suggests that this expectation is more harmful to children than adults because when adults face this audience they already have an established self: “Considering that children are still developing their sense of self and exploring their place in the world, public self-presentation may actually have more of an impact on a child’s self-concept than it would on an adult’s” (Anderson 147). Thus, McCurdy’s desperation for purpose by pleasing her mother derives from her lack of autonomy, being not only legitimised but encouraged by the other environments she was in due to her job.

McCurdy’s discomfort with her job is displayed more powerfully whenever there is a demand for her to show her body. In one scene, McCurdy is in a fitting room working on *iCarly*, when she has to be photographed in bikinis for the producer of the show, whom she refers to as “The Creator”. Here, McCurdy does not question his need for the pictures of her barely clothed body for what the costume designer called “options” (McCurdy, *I’m Glad My Mom Died* 109). Instead, she shows her discomfort with being seen as something sexual rather than as a child: “I’m terrified of being looked at like a sexual being. It’s disgusting. I’m not that. I’m this. I’m a child” (McCurdy, *I’m Glad My Mom Died* 109). This demonstrates the control that people had over McCurdy to the point where her own body was not her own. In the book *Hollywood and the Female Body: A History of Idolization and Objectification*, Stephen Handzo expresses how the sexualization of women in Hollywood is common and has happened throughout its history. He gives an example of how women, even when they were not nude, were still sexualised by other means:

Denied nudity and realistic sex, Hollywood sublimated its libidinous impulses through the three “c’s” of creativity: cinematography, costume, and choreography.

Directors of photography learned how to frame and light women for maximum allure (Handzo Loc. 85)

His reference point is classical Hollywood when nudity was banned. However, similar tactics are still utilised today in the film industry in order to sexualise women on screen. McCurdy’s fear of being sexualised was not unfounded, as her experience during her career demonstrates.

This idea of McCurdy being sexualised in Hollywood can be seen earlier in auditions that she attended where her mom made her wear the same outfit repeatedly despite McCurdy’s discomfort: “a fuzzy pink shirt with a rhinestone heart in the center of it, black faux-leather skorts, and black gogo boots [...] ‘I feel like a streetwalker in it’” (McCurdy, *I’m Glad My Mom Died* 62). Her mother had her wear this outfit to make her appear “prettier” to casting directors, as is implied, because she only began wearing it following an audition where they had called McCurdy “homely” (McCurdy, *I’m Glad My Mom Died* 61). McCurdy’s mother seemed to care more about how strangers perceived McCurdy’s beauty than she did about her own child’s comfort. This idea is furthered when McCurdy does not get a role on account of her being “too pretty” she notes the drastic difference in her mother’s behavior: “There’s no swearing, no screaming, no crying. There’s almost a joy to her. I’m shocked. I’ve never seen Mom be happy I didn’t get a role” (McCurdy, *I’m Glad My Mom Died* 63). This implies that when McCurdy would not get a role before her mother would swear, and scream, and cry, which further illustrates the pressure that was placed on McCurdy to succeed. Additionally, since the one time her mother displayed a calm, even happy, reaction to her not getting a role was because they declared McCurdy “too pretty” it shows that McCurdy’s mother was more concerned with appearances than anything else. This

introduces McCurdy to the implication that her beauty and body are determinants of her self-worth and can be used for work, more for the enjoyment of others than for McCurdy herself.

The idea of her body being out of her control is seen throughout the memoir, but is most in evidence in the depiction of her struggle with her disordered eating. McCurdy speaks candidly in *I'm Glad My Mom Died* about how she believes her eating disorder controlled her life. This begins at the start of the memoir when she makes it implicitly clear that physical appearance is important to McCurdy's mother, and therefore, McCurdy. This notion is mentioned repeatedly, not only in how McCurdy's mother presents herself but in how she believes McCurdy should present herself as well. This is primarily associated with auditions, but it becomes a more general restriction on her growing up. McCurdy mentions fearing that once she grows up, her mother will no longer love her, "If I start to grow up, Mom won't love me as much" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 89). Since she wants to keep her mother's affection, she asks her mother how to stop herself from growing up. There is a contradiction in the need for McCurdy's mother to sexualise McCurdy while also demanding that she stay a child. This contradiction might imply that McCurdy had to know when her mother expected which persona from her, that of the adult or that of the child. This is when her mother first suggests McCurdy should restrict her eating: "If you really want to know how to stay small, there's this secret thing you can do... it's called calorie restriction" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 90). This begins when McCurdy is eleven years old. The build-up to this introduction shows McCurdy's naivety, in which she believes this diet will further encourage her and her mother's closeness—that it is, "something that will cement and validate our wonderful best friendship" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 90). By unveiling her mother's encouragement of an eating disorder in this way, the revelation is much more sorrowful to read. It is sad that what McCurdy believed would enhance the mother-daughter relationship resulted in her mother introducing her to a dangerous food restrictive lifestyle

that took McCurdy years to overcome. As the memoir progresses and McCurdy becomes more cynical, she continues to reiterate that her mother introduced her to her eating disorder: “I’ve put on ten pounds since those first few months of bulimia, when I was Mom’s goal weight for me” (McCurdy, *I’m Glad My Mom Died* 221). It is “Mom’s” goal weight for McCurdy, not McCurdy’s goal weight for herself, but it seems as though these two goals often combine throughout the memoir. This, then, distances McCurdy from accountability for her own habits as she is doing them in order to please her mother, even after her mother dies.

Since McCurdy’s eating disorder and career were both campaigned for by her mother it makes them, to some extent, an extension of her. As is suggested by Noor Alzaghaf and Bilal Hamamra in their evaluation of co-dependency between McCurdy and her mother, “As the mother controls the daughter’s eating, we contend that the mother is the embodiment of the anorexic voice” (Alzaghaf and Hamamra 802). Furthermore, they argue that anorexia often illuminates a co-dependency between the two: “The abuse [eating disorder] McCurdy describes is rooted in the co-dependent relationship with her mother” (Alzaghaf and Hamamra 805). When McCurdy’s mother dies her voice continues to live on through McCurdy’s eating disorder. Since McCurdy uses present tense narration, she seemed to be unaware that the relationship she had was abusive; as a result, many of these instances of control are not spoken about negatively as they occur, but still in a state of rationalisation that her mother knew better than her. In maintaining her mother’s goals for her even after she has died McCurdy’s reiterates that McCurdy’s mom is a prominent persona throughout the entirety of the memoir even following her death her voice lives on in McCurdy’s head determining her relationship with her career and eating disorder. Through this carefully thought narration McCurdy shows the longevity of trauma and how it can last for years past the death of the abuser or the end of the traumatic event. Leigh Gilmore claims that “the power of trauma to outlast the duration of its infliction is crucial to the sense of wounding

that makes the term so resonant” (Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* 27). Trauma is then a lifelong term, in McCurdy’s case, she will never be able to get the years back which she lost to abuse, both perpetrated by her mother and then later by herself by means of her disordered eating.

Her battle with her eating disorder extends beyond her mother, and though it might not have been directly caused by McCurdy being an actress, it was not helped by this environment. As mentioned in the first chapter on *Mommie Dearest*, Hollywood has a strict set of rules that actresses must follow in terms of perfect public presentation; being exposed to this as a child without someone around who would tell them the behaviour is wrong could do irreparable damage to a person’s relationship with eating. The culture of eating disorders or, in some instances, the glorification of them in the entertainment industry is discussed by Emily Fox-Kales: “In fact, celebrity narratives glamorize pathological practices such as obsessive self-scrutiny as an expected part of the beauty regimen necessary to ‘sell yourself and your image’” (Fox-Kales 42). The idealisation of negative practices regarding the body is something that McCurdy’s mother very clearly pushes McCurdy into, which then leads to the speculation about the work environments she inhabits. She was repeatedly told by all the sources in her life that these weight loss behaviours were not only perfectly normal, but further than that, they were desired, or at the very least, resulted in a desired outcome.

This then helps McCurdy escape responsibility by identifying that these ideologies were promoted by those close to her. Furthermore, this demonstrates why she spirals after her mother dies into, what appears to be, an even more strict regimen regarding her disordered eating. This could be due to the fact that McCurdy had no sense of control when her mother was alive aside from her mother’s rules so when her mother, the enforcer of these rules, died McCurdy was aimless. She must now obey the scale. McCurdy then defines her relationship with the scale in a similar way to how she defined her relationship with her mother. When

McCurdy was in recovery from her eating disorder and worked up the courage to throw out her scale she faced the same struggle as she did when her mother died, “My scale has defined me for so long. The number it shows tells me whether I’m succeeding or failing, whether I’m trying hard enough or not, whether I’m good or bad” (McCurdy, *I’m Glad My Mom Died* 288). McCurdy determines her worth based on external factors, just as her mother defined McCurdy’s worth when she was alive. Although she never makes this comparison herself in writing, it is difficult not to connect the two, especially when McCurdy’s eating disorder originates with her mother.

This makes it all the more meaningful to see McCurdy’s progress in the “after” section of the memoir when McCurdy decides to finally take therapy seriously and take control of her life:

So much of my life has felt so out of my control for so long. And I’m done with that being my reality. I want my life to be in my hands. Not an eating disorder’s or a casting director’s or an agent’s or my mom’s. Mine (McCurdy, *I’m Glad My Mom Died* 293).

This moment of clarity is the first time that McCurdy’s frustration leads to change. Her use of short, clear sentences creates a tone of determination, which then continues throughout the short remainder of the memoir.

Generational Cycles: Forgiveness and Fortitude

Another key aspect of this memoir is the generational cycles and patterns which impact McCurdy and how she uses them as a form of critique. Although there is only a brief and scattered mention of her grandmother, McCurdy does discuss the behaviours that her grandmother exhibited, which are similar to those of her mother. There are several instances where McCurdy’s grandmother’s behaviour parallels that of McCurdy’s mother. However, in

these instances, even when McCurdy is a child, she immediately identifies her grandmother's behaviour as being bad or a form of manipulation: "'Why do you hate me!' Grandma yells. She always does that when she's on the phone with someone. Tries to make herself look like a victim" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 25). McCurdy's use of her grandmother acts to vilify her mother, who exhibits similar behaviour. The difference lies in the way that McCurdy seems to be able to openly criticise her grandmother from the start of the book. A reader is able to see that McCurdy's mother and grandmother are indubitably similar, even though the young McCurdy makes no connection between the two. By having these two figures work as "good" and "evil" versions of one another, McCurdy invites a critical appraisal of her mother's behaviour with having to point the critique at her mother. In addition, this narrative structure is able to show McCurdy's almost blind loyalty to her mother, which, at the time, meant she was unable to see the resemblance in the common manner her mother and grandmother behaved.

In the "after" section of the memoir, McCurdy uses her grandmother as a substitute for her mother following her mother's death. However, in this section, McCurdy is not the same wide-eyed, easily manipulated child she was in the "before" section. In the "after" section, she learns to set boundaries with her grandmother, something she was never able to achieve with her mother: "My grandma frequently refers to me as 'bitch.' [...] 'Grandma, like I've said before, if you keep calling me names and guilting me every time we get on the phone, I'm gonna block you'" (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 211). This makes it appear as though McCurdy is breaking the generational cycle of drama and fighting that her mother and grandmother fell into.¹¹ This new introduction of boundaries demonstrates McCurdy

¹¹ Behaviour's such as this are common in generational cycles an example of which is in the 2020 journal article "The Family Cycle: Breaking the Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma through Mentalizing", where a mother and son (Monique and Elijah) were asked to write out responses to questions about their home lives as children to which they both expressed similar sentiments in regard to how they felt and how they were treated. (Stobb, Slade and Adnopo 265).

moving away from the things she was taught when she was younger, as McCurdy states that previously boundaries were seen as a betrayal (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 303) by now being emboldened to have them anyway shows McCurdy's growth from the beginning of the memoir. This part of their relationship contrasts with the version of McCurdy that is shown in the first half of the memoir, who will bend to the whim of the people around her to make them happy. Moreover, this shows the McCurdy finally being able to stand up to her mother, something she could never quite achieve when her mother was alive.

By not repeating this cycle, McCurdy achieves a sense of growth. Here and now, once she is finally independent, she is new. It shows recognition of the cycle that has happened, and an effort made not to repeat the mistakes of her predecessors. In this, there is an opportunity for reflection. In *Mommie Dearest*, this happens when Crawford forgave her mother. McCurdy's memoir is perhaps unusual because its focus is not on forgiveness, but rather on coming to realise in the first place that there was a wrong that required forgiveness. Whereas *Mommie Dearest* begins with the conflict that the end of the book attempts to resolve, McCurdy's begins with contentment and then moves towards contempt. McCurdy only faces her moment of full realization during the final chapter of the memoir, where she discusses her trauma plainly and finally recognises the abuse she has endured:

My mom didn't deserve her pedestal. She was a narcissist. She refused to admit she had any problems, despite how destructive those problems were to our entire family. My mom emotionally, mentally, and physically abused me in ways that will forever impact me (McCurdy, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* 303).

This is comparatively unique because, as previously mentioned, there is no thought of forthright forgiveness for past wrongdoings; instead, in McCurdy's case, it is a realization that the wrong was always there.

I'm Glad My Mom Died: The Title's Direction of the Narrative

It is not solely the narration that begins pressing the idea of her mother acting as an antagonistic “character” in her life; this work begins with the cover and title of the memoir. The title, *I'm Glad My Mom Died*, raised eyebrows upon publication. Though it is indisputably dark, it was not the root of criticism. In fact, the title encouraged intrigue. For example, as stated in a review: “The title is provocative but don't be deceived: rather than a flippant chronicle of childhood resentment, McCurdy's memoir an insightful portrait of narcissism, familial dysfunction and the ways cruelty can be mistaken for love” (Sturges) The title also establishes, or perhaps predicts, McCurdy's identity within the memoir, as Smith and Watson say, “titles announce a limit of identity that the narratives explore, exploit, and explode” (Smith and Watson 67). McCurdy uses the title *I'm Glad My Mom Died* in order to convey not only her identity as being in relation to her mother which will be explored through the memoir, but to declare a joy in her detachment from this identity once her mother dies. The dark nature of the title is contrasted by the Easter pastels used to decorate the cover with the words “mom died” being underlined. Even though the title is a direct accusation of the conflict that McCurdy endured, the joyful nature of the colour scheme on the cover adds a humorous tone to what is obviously a dark memoir.

The cover design of the book could be mistaken for blasé mockery when, in fact, it is a testament to McCurdy's strength of character to have survived such horrible circumstances and to be able to look back with a sense of humour on that period of her life. McCurdy herself states that the title was meant to draw people into her story, “I earned that title through the writing of the book [...] I wanted it to be something that would grab people's attention and get them to pick up the book” (McCurdy, Jennette McCurdy shares the stories behind the memoir "I'm Glad My Mom Died" 2:46-2:53). Additionally, the cover is brightly coloured with pastel yellow and pink, with McCurdy framed in the middle, with a hopeful look on her

face, holding a hot pink urn filled with confetti. When McCurdy was questioned about the cover of the memoir during an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* McCurdy responded by saying:

Confetti spilling out of an urn felt to me like a good way of capturing the humour in the tragedy, but I knew I didn't want to go as far as throwing the confetti or jumping in the air with a huge smile on my face or doing any other kind of body language / facial expression that could read as flippant (McCurdy, See the cover for former Nickelodean star Jennette McCurdy's memoir *I'm Glad My Mom Died*).

As McCurdy states, she not only balances tragedy and humour in the title, but throughout the memoir, as she learns to decipher the good and the bad in her relationship with her mom.

Critics and Praise:

As with any memoir, the reliability of the content is questionable because it is based predominately on the author's memory. As Couser states, "memoir usually signals that it is based primarily on memory, a notoriously unreliable and highly selective faculty. In turn, this creates the expectation that the narrative may be impressionistic and subjective rather than authoritatively fact-based" (Couser 19). In analysing a memoir, therefore, the accuracy and perspective of the details being provided by the narrator are constantly in question because memory is not a reliable source. Additionally, in *I'm Glad My Mom Died* there is a lot of dialogue between McCurdy and her mother which is unlikely to have been recorded with complete accuracy but rather recreated from events from her teenage years. This is not to say that McCurdy did not replicate the essence of these conversations as best she could, but it is unlikely verbatim conversations from memory are remembered with precision.

Although the use of the present tense is uncommon in memoirs, it creates some problems when the author is attempting to recall events that happened when she was under

ten years old, especially when considering that there is a substantial amount of trauma and grief within the memories that are being written about. As suggested by Leigh Gilmore, it is possible that the combination of these two aspects, grief and trauma, can alter the memories being written, even if it is done unintentionally: “Memory combines with grief to produce a discourse in which the partial presences conjured by memory combine within the sliding invention of imagination” (Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* 135). In memoirs, a history based on memory cannot be recited with absolute veracity; therefore, there is a certain amount of allowance given to the author to tell their story to the best of their personal emotional history. This means, when exact conversations are placed in the text with quotation marks, this is necessarily a conversation replicated to convey the nature and context of what was said, not an exact account of the conversation.

McCurdy’s memoir was not met with the same criticism as *Mommie Dearest*, but it was not without its critics; it was simply more limited. But whereas people didn’t always believe Crawford, most believed McCurdy. This could be due to several factors. One is that the culture around this type of memoir is now more familiar, so the reading public is more familiar with the concept of the abused child in show business. People were eager to praise McCurdy’s memoir for its tackling of a very complex relationship: “This will not be a flippant exposé of childhood stardom, nor an angry diatribe directed at an abuser. This complexity is what makes *I’m Glad My Mom Died* feel real” (Coomes). This reaction is far different from the cold welcome that *Mommie Dearest* received from the media. It would be easy to speculate that the public might have been more inclined to be on McCurdy’s “side” because she was the person that they were most familiar with (not the mother, so the reverse of Crawford’s narrative). It is entirely possible that this is not, therefore, a debate over rightness or wrongness, but one of relative familiarity with the author or the accused. Another factor could be McCurdy’s strong sense of voice. As Karr says “the more memorable the

voice, the *truer* a book sounds, because you never lose sight of the narrator cobbling together *his* truth” (Karr 41). This meaning that due to McCurdy’s uniqueness and strength in voice, her narrative is less likely to be questioned because the reader is aware that she is telling *her* truth as she remembers it. In this same regard, another aspect that potentially contributes to the public being more willing to believe McCurdy is due to her use of present tense narration. By using present tense, it immediately informs the reader that this is not an exact account of McCurdy’s childhood only a recreation in order to explain her relationship with her mother.

McCurdy does mention having taken a liking to writing when she was younger. As she was constantly reading lines other people had written, wearing clothes picked out for her, and faking emotions for a scene, writing came as the one form of honesty and truth, it gave her a sense of power: “Through writing, I feel power for maybe the first time in my life. I don’t have to say somebody else’s words. I can write my own. I can be myself for once. I like the privacy of it. Nobody’s watching” (McCurdy, *I’m Glad My Mom Died* 86). Perhaps for this reason, McCurdy’s writing was discouraged by her mother, so from this perspective, the book constitutes the ultimate act of defiance. McCurdy is finally able to do with her career, or moreover, with her life, as she pleases without needing approval from others. When she first wrote a screenplay when she was a child, it was immediately disregarded by her mother. McCurdy felt freedom in the self-expression her memoir allowed, as she told *Entertainment Weekly*: “I feel I didn't have the tools, language, or support necessary to speak up for myself back then, so this book is a way for me to not only honor that experience and give voice to my former self” (McCurdy, See the cover for former Nickelodean star Jennette McCurdy's memoir *I'm Glad My Mom Died*). As mentioned in the previous chapter, the act of writing about trauma can be a therapeutic experience especially if someone, like McCurdy, had been silenced for so long, “telling personal stories of victimization can be both therapeutically beneficial for the victim and essential as a public testimony to provide a balance to the

abstractions of politics and historiography” (Rothe 23). McCurdy writing as a means to give a voice to her former self is a way of reclaiming authority over her past. McCurdy giving a voice to her younger self subsequently helped encourage other people to write about their own lives as well, or at least to feel that their story is being shown through McCurdy’s writing.

In writing her story, McCurdy not only gave a voice to the younger version of herself, but to others who have experienced or are currently experiencing the same kind or a similar kind of abuse as her. In an interview with *Vogue* magazine, McCurdy claims people were always thanking her for saying what they were unable to: “A lot of people have been coming up to me saying, ‘Hey, my mom’s alive. I can’t say this. Thank you for saying this for those of us who can’t’” (McCurdy, Jennette McCurdy on the Runaway Success of Her Fearless Memoir, *I’m Glad My Mom Died*). This suggests that, although perhaps some of the details of the memoir are not necessarily reliable or accurate, readers recognised the greater value of the position the book took in articulating a resistance to maternal controls and childhood abuse more generally. Additionally, people finding representation in McCurdy’s memoir is part of the appeal to a wide public, as Gilmore suggests, “the reader is invited to find himself or herself in the figure of the representative” (Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* 22). McCurdy acts as a representative for the people who are in a similar situation to what McCurdy had been in. Thus, making McCurdy an empowered version of the represented reader. Beyond the people who approach McCurdy in public, there are many online forums in which people discuss McCurdy’s memoir and how they find it valuable for the way they recognise an empowered version of themselves in her work.

McCurdy’s memoir covers difficult themes about her complex relationship with her mother with humour. She skilfully directs the narrative through her use of tone, tense, and the testimony subgenre. She details her life as a child star who never asked to be placed in the

spotlight but now has to deal with the ramifications of a career that she did not choose for herself. Additionally, she presents her story of self-discovery after a life controlled by others, concentrating on how she rebuilt herself once she realised that the relationship she had based her life and personality on had been toxic and abusive. Her treatment of her eating disorder and how she learned to overcome external forces controlling her has provoked conversations in popular culture about the pressures placed on child stars. Unlike the other memoirs within this thesis, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* was praised upon publication for its ability to tackle delicate subjects with humour and authenticity. Although there has been criticism of the memoir, its relatively positive reception is related to the way it clearly contributed to other child actors speaking out. This makes her book the precursor to shows such as *Quiet on Set: The Dark Side of Kids TV*, which discusses in detail the trauma that child actors have endured in the industry. McCurdy discusses the complexity of death and how relationships continue to evolve beyond it, even while it also dramatises the possibility of gaining autonomy and removing oneself from the cycle of generational trauma.

Chapter Three: *Battle Hymn of The Tiger Mother*

One of the most notable memoirs of the twenty-first century that involves mother-daughter relationships is Amy Chua's *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. This memoir, originally published in 2011, is the only memoir in this thesis that is from the perspective of a mother, Amy Chua, in which she narrates the nature of her relationship with her daughters: Lulu (Louisa) and Sophia, though the main focus is on Chua's relationship with Lulu. The memoir is centred around Chua's controversial parenting style called the "Tiger Mother" which then sparked controversy focusing on a parent's accelerated pressure on their children to succeed. This discussion is evident in Chua's interview with National Public Radio on the show *Tell Me More* where the introductory topic was introduced as "the pressure to perform [...] pressure is good, that demanding perfection is good, nothing is fun until you're good at it, even if you have to take extreme steps to get there" (Chua, "NPR. Battle Hymn"). The interviewer, Michel Martin, quotes Chua's own words back to her before they begin their discussion on the ethics of the intensity that Chua displayed in her memoir while considering some criticism that Chua's memoir faced. Chua's stance on the expectations that parents are permitted to place on their children, which she defines and defends throughout *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, ignited a widespread debate.

In this memoir, Chua utilises the "Apology" subgenre, derived from apologia, through this subgenre she crafts a defence of her parenting style and its effectiveness, as the aim of an apology, despite its name, is not to apologise, but to defend oneself. Chua uses this aspect of self-defence to explain why she was justified in her way of parenting, despite it being controversial. Chua's use of a satirical voice when discussing different events within the memoir, however, raises questions about the power dynamics involved in this mode of humour. It should be noted that her daughters have both come forward to state that they would be raising their children the same way. Yet Chua's light-hearted tone works to diminish

the drama of these dramatic fights between herself and (mainly) Lulu. Chua's lexicon is highly indicative of her perspective on each of her daughters and on herself; that is, the language she uses to explain her and her daughters' actions (though primarily Lulu, who rebels against her mother).

A Brief Note on Cultural Differences and Definitions

There are several aspects of cultural difference that must be addressed prior to examining this memoir. Chua's own account of the cultural differences between Western and Eastern parenting is central to the overview of the memoir, which also functions as a defence of Chua's culture. There are many comparisons throughout the memoir regarding Western and Eastern parenting and how greatly they differ from one another. Chua makes clear at the start of the book—as I must now as well—that though she uses the terms “Chinese mother” or “Eastern parent” and “Western parent” to generalise about groups of people, there is more than one way for people to parent within these different groups:

I recently met a super successful white guy from South Dakota [...] After comparing notes we decided his working-class father had definitely been a Chinese mother [...] Conversely, I know some mothers of Chinese heritage, almost always born in the West, who are *not* Chinese mothers [...] Western parents come in all varieties. In fact, I'll go out on a limb and say that Westerners are far more diverse in their parenting styles than the Chinese. Some Western parents are strict; others are lax (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 4).

For purposes of this thesis and the sake of clarity, I will use the same definitions and wording that Chua uses within her memoir. In this same regard, the titles “Tiger Mother” or “Tiger Parenting” require some definition. The term “Tiger Mother” was coined by Amy Chua with the publication of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* in 2011. However, it stems from a

traditional style of parenting that is found in East Asia. Chua's definition comes from the year of the Tiger, which she mentions several times is the year in which she was born. At the start of each of the three parts of the memoir, she gives a definition of what "The Tiger" means: "The Tiger, the living symbol of strength and power, generally inspires fear and respect" (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 2). This first one, however, most closely coincides with Chua's parenting style as she seems to also inspire the same things as the Tiger: fear and respect. This combines with what she claims is the traditional style of parenting in China to create the "Tiger Mother". Chua does not critique this stereotype of Eastern parenting but rather leans into it. What she does resist, however, is the idea that being raised this way, or raising children in this way, is bad. Yet, the book was also clearly written to be satirical, so the endorsement of this parenting model is not straightforward.

Cultural differences in parenting styles play a large role within this memoir because many of the parents around Chua are what she labels as "Western parents". There are many points throughout the memoir where Chua refers to Western parents and their style of parenting in contrast to her own. Though she never provides definitions of these, she makes her views known through her accounts and examples of parenting differences. She often refers to Western parents as somewhat weak-spirited, not necessarily because they are bad parents, but because they are not willing to let their children dislike them in order for their children to succeed later in life. Chua, in contrast to this, makes it clear that she does not fear her children's hatred:

Sophia and Lulu were very close: comrades-in-arms against their overbearing, fanatic mother. "She's insane," I'd hear them whispering to each other, giggling. But I didn't care. I wasn't fragile like some Western parents. As I often said to the girls, "My goal as a parent is to prepare you for the future—not to make you like me" (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 49).

In an age in America that has moved towards terms like “gentle parenting”, a term coined in 2016 by Sarah Ockwell-Smith,¹² Chua’s warm embrace not just of being *a* “Tiger Mother” but *the* “Tiger Mother”, is a proud cultural reclamation. Especially when considering that Chua believes she is surrounded by Western parents who do not seem to have a grasp on her parental responsibilities and who will not or do not try to understand her motivations. She identifies a definitive difference between Eastern and Western parenting when she compares herself to her husband’s (American) mother, Florence, who saw childhood as something to be cherished, whereas Chua sees it as a formative training period: “Florence saw childhood as something fleeting to be enjoyed. I saw childhood as a training period, a time to build character and invest for the future” (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 97). Although Chua does occasionally consider the happiness of her children, her conclusion is usually that success is more important than ephemeral adolescent happiness.¹³ She never wavers from her resolve that her parenting style will suit them later on in life, and that childhood is her opportunity to shape her children into high-functioning adults.

Chua explains the difficulty of being surrounded by other parents who lack a complete understanding of how she decided to raise her children. This difficulty comes from their inability to comprehend why Chua was choosing to raise her own daughters in this way:

What I used to dread most was when other parents invited one of them over for a *playdate*. Why why why this terrible institution? I tried telling the truth once, explaining to another mother that Lulu had no free time because she had to practice violin. But the woman couldn’t absorb this. I had to resort to the kinds of excuses that

¹² In her book, *The Gentle Parenting Book: How to Raise calmer, happier children from birth to seven*, she states that gentle parenting is “all about finding a balance – giving children just enough control, at a time when they can handle it, while putting appropriate boundaries and limits in place. It is about being ever mindful of the long-term effects of your actions, as well as your child’s safety and the expectations of society” (Ockwell-Smith 11).

¹³ Her conclusion, specifically, is that she does not believe that the “Western” parenting style will guarantee her children’s happiness any more than the “Eastern” parenting style will. Therefore, if she cannot guarantee happiness, she can attempt to guarantee success. (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 101).

Westerners find valid: eye appointments, physical therapy, community service (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 161).

Though it is never stated, it is possible that this defence of her own parenting is provided to validate herself among other parents, as she was surrounded by people who were unfamiliar with or disapproving of these cultural practices. As such, her defence raises questions about North American responses to cultural difference, something I will discuss later in this chapter.

Chua's location during the writing of the memoir (the Northeast of the United States) is also an important context because of regional differences in the United States. Katherine H. Rogers and Dustin Wood conducted an analysis of regional stereotypes in 2010: "The results of our study show that generally people agree on regional personality stereotypes and that there is at least a kernel of truth to regional stereotypes for most Big Five traits" (Rogers and Wood 710).¹⁴ The stereotypes involve people from the Northeast being more neurotic and people from the West Coast, California specifically, being more open to new experiences. Interestingly, Chua was raised on the West Coast and in the Midwest, but she had strict first-generation Chinese parents, so there are potentially a lot of cultures and stereotypes at play in the memoir.

Subgenre and Structure: Apology Memoir

The subgenre of the apology memoir works differently from those treated earlier in this study. Unlike the other memoirs, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* is most easily classified in only one of Couser's subgenres. The apology or apologia, is defined by Couser as a memoir that "does not involve admitting wrongdoing and asking forgiveness [...] Apology in the lit-crit sense undertakes to *defend* the self [...]. The key to apologia is that the narrator stands

¹⁴ In this study they further contextualise what the "Big Five" traits are: Agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism, and openness. (Rogers and Wood 706).

behind his previous conduct” (Couser 38-40). Chua certainly does not beg forgiveness in this memoir; at no point does she even admit that any of her actions are wrong. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson confirm Couser’s definition of apology as: “A form of self-presentation as self-defence against the allegations or attacks of others, an apology justifies one’s own deeds, beliefs, and way of life” (Smith and Watson 207). Chua does indeed construct a narrative which explains why her behaviour was right and provides justification for those who might think otherwise. Smith and Watson additionally refer to apology as making the text into somewhat of a courtroom, which makes sense for Chua, as a law school graduate, to set up an analysis, or defence, of her parenting in this manner, “the apology, often uses the courtroom as a spatial metaphor, imagining the setting of a trial at which arguments for and against the speaker are rehearsed and the reader is invited to act as a jury rendering the verdict” (Smith and Watson 81). Although her memoir is not a response to an attack that we have been privy to, it is a pre-emptive defence to potential critiques of her parenting style. In this, the apology subgenre is more embedded into the entire structure of the book as the defence is the memoirs premise. This is also where the key difference lies between her narrative and Crawford’s and McCurdy’s: where the latter two both present themselves as victims of trauma, here it is Chua who is potentially the mother inflicting traumatic experiences on her daughters.

In this act of anticipation, Chua goes beyond simply explaining her behaviour; at times, she seems to offer herself forgiveness by claiming that other parents are similar to her, either in the way they themselves were raised or in the way they raised their own children, but that they are just not willing to admit it. Some of this reflection emerges after the publication of the memoir and following the public backlash it received. For example: “Three different female morning television anchors whispered to me just before we went on the air that they’d been raised by tiger parents themselves [...] But as soon as the cameras rolled,

each host spun around and demanded, ‘Did you *really* deny your children *sleepovers?*’” (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 235). Chua is at pains to prove that she was not alone in acting this way towards her children and that, in fact, many successful people—in this case, television hosts—were grateful that they had grown up with parents who were similar to Chua. This example is also interesting for the way it illustrates Chua’s downplaying of the cultural differences involved in the idea of ‘tiger parenting’: that it is not a concept which separates Eastern from Western cultures, only certain kinds of parents from others. This is important because it underlines the fact that the self-defence or apology/apologia involved in the memoir is not consistently an apology for or defence of a culture, or perhaps more accurately, the cultural stereotypes which attend those cultures.

The narrative structure of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* also works to vindicate Chua’s actions. The backlash against the book was clearly due to the account it gives of the immense amount of pressure Chua placed on her children to succeed, and how she attempted to ensure their success. On the first page, Chua gives a list of what she did and did not allow her daughters to do while they were growing up:

Here are some things my daughters, Sophia and Louisa, were never allowed to do: attend a sleepover, have a playdate, be in a school play, complain about not being in a school play, watch TV or play computer games, choose their own extracurricular activities, get any grade less than an A, not be the #1 student in every subject except gym and drama, play any instrument other than the piano or violin, not play the piano or violin (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 3, 4).

From this list, it can be inferred that Chua wanted her daughters to be outstanding in academia and in what Chua considered to be worthwhile activities. Sports and drama, notably where people often find a form of self-expression, were not allowed. By saying they were not allowed to be in school plays, and then adding the stipulation that they were also not allowed

to complain about not being in school plays, it adds humour to the list as a way to tone down the potentially jarring nature of what her children were and were not allowed to do. What stands out in this is that her daughters were not allowed to “choose their own extracurricular activities”. Every portion of their life was under the firm and unwavering control of their mother, which Chua insists was for their benefit. She prefaces this list with a comparison between her children and mathematical and musical prodigies: “They wonder what these parents do to produce so many math whizzes and music prodigies, what it’s like to be inside the family [...] Well, I can tell them, because I’ve done it” (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 3). This confirmation of her success retrospectively validates the list of rules because they clearly produced a successful outcome.¹⁵ It also credits Chua’s parenting style because she shows that her children are examples of what other parents wish their kids were. Chua states the purpose of the list in advance, thereby providing a glimpse of what she values before then showing how these values impact her daughters. This structure exemplifies the apology mode because Chua is not apologising for the list itself but is rather explaining why her adherence to it was such a good thing.

Generational Decline: The Pre-emptive Defence

At the beginning of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, one of the ways that Chua assumes narratorial control is by the pre-emptive defence which she sets up for her actions. This is seen in numerous places throughout the memoir but is most clear within her introduction to what she calls “The Generational Decline”. After the introductions, but before the core of the narrative, Chua mentions her life as it was before she had children. She is a Harvard Law graduate turned Yale professor who is the child of immigrants, something which becomes

¹⁵ Both of Chua’s daughters were undoubtedly successful with Sophia playing Carnegie Hall at fourteen (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 137) and both Lulu and Sophia playing at Old Liszt Academy in Budapest. (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 153).

relevant when she discusses the aforementioned “generational decline” in which she claims that after immigrating to America, each generation following the first to be born in America becomes less and less successful:

The next generation (mine), the first to be born in America, will typically be high-achieving. They will usually play the piano and/or violin. They will attend an Ivy League or Top Ten university. They will tend to be professionals. [...] The next generation (Sophia and Lulu’s) is the one I spend nights lying awake worrying about [...] this generation will be born into the great comforts of the upper middle class [...] finally, and most problematically, they will feel that they have rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution and therefore be much more likely to disobey their parents (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 21, 22).

In short, Chua claims that she was raised to be high achieving, which is what she will demand of her children as well. Although there is humour in the fact that one of Chua’s “greatest fears” is her children’s disobedience, there is a sense of vulnerability in her anxiety that they might not be successful. Elsewhere, Chua follows openness, vulnerability, or seriousness with humorous undercutting. Despite this humour, her fear of the generational decline is set for the remainder of the memoir, and many of her actions are justified by her determination not to allow her family to fall victim to generational decline.

This fear of “generational decline” is confirmed in Chua’s account of her own childhood: “We drilled math and piano every afternoon and were never allowed to sleep over at our friends’ houses [...] our report cards had to be perfect; while our friends were rewarded for Bs, for us getting an A-minus was unthinkable” (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 16). Part of Chua’s apology, therefore, is that her parents were similar in their parenting style to her. Chua has found a way of granting herself leniency, as she had grown up experiencing the same treatment she was now giving her daughters.

It is crucial for Chua, therefore, that her daughters will be just as hardworking, thereby providing a point of resistance to the concept of generational decline: “one of my greatest fears is family decline” (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 20). This justification is positioned in the narrative before any account of how she actually raised her children, aside from the list seen on the first page, thus making it clear that no matter how she behaves, she does so not out of malice but to ensure that her children are successful. This sense of pre-emptive defence happens in other places in the text, particularly with reference to Lulu, whose attempts at ‘rebellion’ against Chua are the central focus of the memoir. In one instance, Lulu is not playing a song, “The Little White Donkey”, on the piano properly, prompting Chua to threaten to give away all her toys, and when that threat does not work, she goes further:

I threatened her with no lunch, no dinner, no Christmas or Hanukkah presents, no birthday parties for two, three, four years [...] I told her to stop being lazy, cowardly, self-indulgent, and pathetic. Jed took me aside. He told me to stop insulting Lulu—which I wasn’t even doing, I was just motivating her (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 61).

Here, Jed, Chua’s husband, acts in place of a reader in the text—he tries (unsuccessfully) to provide the corrective that a reader might. By including this interaction, Chua anticipates and defends her role in the scene of potential abuse. Knowing that Chua’s tone is (self-) satirical reframes the multitude of threats made against her daughter for something as innocent as not being able to play a song on the piano. However, the humorous reframing of verbal abuse as motivation may point to a self-awareness in Chua about her actions towards her daughter (and thus a form of excuse for them), but it does not change the reality of her use of these threats.

With reference to the subgenre of “Apology”, then, Chua is not so much aiming to apologise for her mistakes, but to excuse them. When her husband Jed claims Lulu might not be able to do what Chua is demanding of her, Chua responds by saying, ““ You just don’t believe in her”” (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 61). Chua emphasises that she is only treating her children this way because she has so much faith in their capabilities, and when someone tries to tell her otherwise, they are in the wrong because they lack faith in them. Even in the face of criticism from her husband, Chua does not relent on her actions instead she doubles down: “I used every weapon and tactic I could think of. We worked right through dinner into the night, and I wouldn’t let Lulu get up, not for water, not even to go to the bathroom. The house became a war zone, and I lost my voice yelling” (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 62). Lulu then finally realises she can now play the piano piece, a fact that Chua uses again to excuse the cruelty of her previous actions as Lulu is now able to play “The Little White Donkey” on the piano.

How Chua’s Lexicon Constructs the Narrative

Chua’s use of language and tone in the memoir is critical in grasping the complexity of her defence. As demonstrated above, her humour through self-dramatization serves to remove some of the ferocity of her portrayal. At the start of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, after addressing the list of rules that Chua has for her children, she introduces her two daughters. She begins with her eldest, Sophia, who she proclaims is even-tempered and rational: “She displayed a rational temperament and exceptional powers of concentration. She got those qualities from her father” (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 6, 7). In Sophia’s introduction, Chua introduces a portion of her own persona as well. As soon as Chua says Sophia is calm and focused, she immediately directs those qualities toward Jed and away

from herself. This not only gives a foundation to Sophia, but it also shows Chua as someone who is self-critical and aware of her own faults, even when she points them out in humour.

The introduction to Lulu is very different. When Chua introduces Lulu, she immediately compares her to a wild animal: “When I think of her, I think of trying to tame a feral horse” (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 10). Using a word like “feral”, especially in contrast with the ‘rational’ Sophia, makes Lulu immediately seem like she requires control. Beginning with this negative—though humorous—introduction of Lulu’s persona, it acts as another defence for some of the extreme steps that Chua takes to ensure her daughter’s success. She makes it known that she needs to go to such extreme measures because otherwise her “uncontrollable” daughter would not be able to succeed. She also sets up the expectation of where the conflict will fall in the memoir and who will act as the primary antagonistic centre.

As previously established in the section on her pre-emptive defence, success is the driving factor behind Chua’s decisions throughout the memoir, which she uses as both justification for her behaviour and to confirm the origin of her sense of determination. In contrast to Crawford’s memoir, this memoir not only discusses how their mother’s success impacted the children—this is mainly from her upbringing, which shaped the way Chua decided she would parent her own children—but it also discusses the ways that Chua’s children’s success impacts her.

One of the ways this notion is exemplified is in the way she raises her children: Chua seems to have professionalised their lives from a very early age, assigning them tasks such as piano, and giving them personalised feedback on the drives home, or leaving notes on the music stand. This would happen while she supervised their at-home practices as well. Although Chua writes about these events as though they are mundane practices, they are clearly indicators for the way she comes to see her children as tools for her own success.

When faced with her daughters' accusations against her, Chua makes light of them by over-dramatizing them. Chua writes that Sophia did not like Chua's supervision of her practices because Chua would become critical of her. At one point, she reports that Sophia accuses her of saying the following: "Oh my God, you're just getting worse and worse [...] If the next time's not PERFECT, I'm going to *TAKE ALL YOUR STUFFED ANIMALS AND BURN THEM!*" (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 28). This is the first glimpse of what Chua's extreme parenting is; although Chua uses a humorous tone, it works to undermine the brutality of the threat that she is making against her child. Yet her use of the phrase "According to Sophia" (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 28) to preface this scene casts some doubt over the authenticity of Sophia's memory and accusation, with the humorous capitalisation and exaggeration within the italics trivialising Sophia's experience.

Although Chua briefly discusses Sophia, seemingly only for comparison's sake to show how obedient one of her children is in contrast with the other, the main part of the story revolves around her other daughter, Lulu.¹⁶ Chua is indiscriminate about her children's success. She wanted both to be as high achieving as she had been in order to preserve the family and not fall victim to the generational decline. Chua mainly focuses on their musical ability; though school is mentioned, it is not at the forefront of the memoir. Chua makes it apparent that she wants Lulu and Sophia to both be successful; she talks about favouritism and how it is semi-normal but highly problematic in "Eastern" families: "I know now that parental favouritism is bad and poisonous" (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 43). She admits that something she had previously done is now recognised as wrong. However, she follows this by defending it and going on to say that her model of favouritism is distinct from

¹⁶ Lulu noticed the comparison between herself and Sophia throughout the text as well, as Chua reports, that Lulu suggested she name the memoir "The Perfect Child and the Flesh-Eating Devil" she then also suggested "Why Oldest Children Are Better" (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 225).

other parents'. Furthermore, she makes the claim that favouritism is not about favouring one child over the other, but rather is a way of helping each child's self-esteem:

But Westerners misunderstand [...] I am not favoring Sophia; just the opposite, I'm expressing confidence in Lulu [...] I also know that Lulu compares herself to Sophia anyway. That's why I'm sometimes so harsh with her. I won't let her indulge her own inner doubts (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 43).

This quotation, again, comes before Chua shows herself to be harsh with Lulu by making a direct comparison of her to her sister. By prefacing that scene with her claim to be misunderstood it works to mitigate some of the blame in terms of her critical words towards her daughters before they have been directly reported. Furthermore, by Chua making this a claim about instilling self-confidence in her daughter it attempts to make her seem as though this point of comparison is from a place of belief in Lulu.

Lulu's acts of 'rebellion' are written by Chua, so it is hard to judge the extent to which they have been exaggerated for the benefit of Chua's own self-defence. When Lulu rebels, Chua takes her act of defiance personally and fights back equally. The first of their arguments takes place when Lulu was only three. Chua was instructing Lulu on how to play one single note on the piano, Lulu instead decided to "smash at many notes" (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 12). When Lulu refuses to stop their arguments escalates:

When I asked her to stop, she smashed harder and faster. When I tried to pull her hand away from the piano, she began yelling, crying, and kicking furiously. Fifteen minutes later, she was still yelling, crying, and kicking, and I'd had it [...] I dragged the screeching demon to our back porch door, and threw it open. The wind chill was twenty degrees, and my own face hurt from just a few seconds' exposure (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 12).

Chua's threat of kicking her daughter out into the cold for disobeying her makes it clear that her authority is not to be questioned, even by a three-year-old. Using language like "screeching demon" when having previously compared Lulu to a "feral horse" only adds to the idea that she is something wild in need of control. Lulu then deciding to step out in the cold instead of submitting to Chua's will then makes Lulu seem irrational and temperamental. In this, Chua makes Lulu seem the ever-distraught three-year-old throwing a tantrum, as most parents likely experience at some point, but she uses it as a way of criticising Lulu's behaviour.

In this memoir, as mentioned previously, control plays a critical factor in the relationship between Chua and her daughters, primarily Lulu. Chua, however, never seems to recognise her own behaviour as needing control, or if she does, then she does not recognise it as an extreme. She is only focused on the fact that her children succeed. All of the things that could be seen as "controlling", she excuses as being necessary steps in order to make Sophia and Lulu successful. This control appears before Lulu begins arguments with Chua, as seen earlier when they were not allowed to pick their own after-school activities, but it impacts Lulu more singularly once she begins to rebel against her mother, which in turn leads to Chua exerting more control over Lulu. Prior to this, however, Chua shows what little choice her children have in their own lives. Lulu originally played piano like her sister, but Chua made her play the violin instead to reduce competition between the two and keep peace in the family. Nevertheless, Chua compares them anyway: "Jed is constantly criticising me for comparing Sophia and Lulu" (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 43). Which would seem to defeat the purpose of making them play different instruments. The only thing truly notable about this is that there was a lack of consultation with Lulu: "That's why I chose the violin. The day I made that decision—without consulting Lulu [...] was the day I sealed my fate" (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 41). Here, Jed once again acts as an outside

perspective as he gives Chua a way to respond to the potential criticism she would receive. This further enforces that her children were given instructions and expected to perfectly follow without being able to have any say in it themselves. The final comment of this quotation regarding the sealing of Chua's fate overdramatises it, which could be for comedic effect, but the way it is written makes it seem as though Chua made an inconsequential decision on behalf of her daughter and then, for no reason, she was met with push back and rebellion, which, much like the previous evidence, works to deflect blame from herself.

There are many points throughout this memoir where Chua presents herself as having sacrificed her time for her children to give them the best life she could offer. She mentions the difficulty of balancing being a professor with parenting to show how much effort went into raising her daughters: "I would get up at five in the morning and spend half my day writing and acting like a Yale law professor, then rush back home for my daily practice sessions with my two daughters" (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 38, 39). By her own account, she has done so much for her children and works so hard in order to parent them. Additionally, there are times when she mentions things happening for her daughter—like being taught by a renowned violinist—and makes a point of proclaiming the magnitude of this success: "I couldn't wait to start practising—what an opportunity!" (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 118). Several things about this statement are striking. Firstly, Chua makes it sound like she is the one who is doing the scales and études, which shows how invested she is in her daughters' lives to the point that she feels that she is practising with them. Secondly, the exclamation at the opportunity, though it is a very big opportunity for Lulu, then makes Lulu's inability to practice for more than five hours straight come across as ungrateful. So, when Chua says that she was exhausted after arguing with Lulu: "I don't know where I got the strength and temerity to fight Lulu. Just the memory of that evening makes me feel exhausted" (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 118, 119), it almost

seems irrelevant that Lulu is the one who has been practising and putting in work to make her technique better. There is also humour in this as Chua knows that she is not the one putting in the labour in order to become a more skilled violinist, so her declaration of exhaustion is—though perhaps not disingenuous—said with an undertone of humour.

As the evidence above indicates, therefore, Chua’s narrative structure always precedes an account of her controlling behaviour with a rationale for it while also introducing humour into the account. Although much of the book has a self-satirical edge, the final argument between Lulu and Chua is anything but, with Lulu screaming in a public café that she hates her mother and that, in turn, her mother hates her:

‘You don’t love me’ [...] ‘You think you do, but you don’t [...]’ You’re a *terrible mother*. You’re selfish. You don’t care about anyone but yourself. What—you can’t believe how ungrateful I am? After all you’ve done for me? Everything you say you do for me is actually for yourself.’ She’s just like me, I thought, compulsively cruel. ‘You are a terrible daughter,’ I said aloud (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 205).

This is one example of many where Lulu stands up for herself against her mother; however, none so public as this final argument between them. In this argument, there are several things that Chua does to dramatize Lulu. She immediately defines Lulu as being “compulsively cruel” as a teenager. But beginning her response by thinking “she’s just like me”, demonstrates she recognises the similarities between herself and Lulu’s cruelty and this self-awareness of the words retrospectively frames Chua as more rational and self-aware. As expressed by Mary Karr when regarding Tobias Wolff declaring himself a liar in his memoir *This Boy’s Life* admission such as this do not ruin an author’s credibility, “Rather than ruining the reader’s confidence in the author’s pages, the confession actually bolsters her belief. We can accept anything from a memoirist but deceit” (Karr 43). This to say, Chua’s admission of

being “compulsively cruel” does not make her persona in the memoir appear any less honest but rather emphasises her sense of self-awareness.¹⁷

After this, Lulu breaks a glass at the café, and Chua, before running out in tears, thinks: “I’d made a career out of spurning the kind of Western parents who can’t control their kids. Now I had the most disrespectful, rude, violent, out-of-control kid of all” (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 206). This dramatic statement is also part of Chua’s self-satirical tone; however, the scene is the most serious of the arguments shown in the memoir, which lends a gravity to it that the humour does not quite remove. With how Chua structured the narrative framework in this scene it could almost be forgotten that this argument, in fact, began because Chua called Lulu “an uncultured savage” (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 204) because she was trying to force her to eat caviar when Lulu refused.

Self-Awareness and Influence

In addition to this being the only memoir of the three examined from the perspective of the mother, Chua’s perspective is especially thought-provoking because there are times she shows she is aware of her intensity and attempts to soften her image by reiterating that it’s all for her daughters’ own good: “Because I tended to be too harsh in person, I’d leave little notes for them everywhere—on their pillows, in their lunch boxes, on their music scores—saying things like ‘Mommy has a bad temper, but Mommy loves you!’ or, ‘You are Mommy’s pride and joy!’” (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 166). But these self-conscious additions do not take away from the more cruel things Chua says, even though they

¹⁷ However, it should be noted that Chua characterises herself very differently from Lulu in this scene. While they are having this public argument Chua proclaims that Lulu “spat out” and spoke in an “all-out shout at the top of her lungs” (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 205) Whereas, Chua simply “said”. This difference in their portrayal does not make them appear equals in this scene. Although Chua’s portrayal of Lulu here does seem to replicate similarities to Chua’s previous unnecessarily harsh behaviour towards Lulu.

contribute to her defence that she is only acting out of love, and she makes sure that her daughters are aware of this.

Chua shows she is aware of the potential harm her actions cause once again when she provides an account of her treatment of her students: “I treat my law students (especially the ones with strict Asian parents) the exact opposite of the way I treat my kids” (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 162). Chua assumes their parents act like she does with her children, so they need someone more understanding or compassionate than their parents in their lives, which somewhat undermines her previous claim that she believes in her daughters and instils confidence in them through her actions. If that were true than she would likely feel the same way with her law students and treat them similarly. This disclosure happens after Chua mentions that when her students come over, her daughters often take note of the way that she treats her students in direct contrast to how she treats them: “They have no idea what you’re really like. They all think you’re *nurturing* and *supportive*” (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 162). By using italics in this quotation, it makes it seem as if Lulu and Sophia are being unfairly sarcastic when making these remarks; however, it speaks largely about their perception of their mother’s the treatment of them, that they do not see their own mother as supportive, especially when she has, at several points, attempted to make it obvious that is all she was ever trying to be. Even though there are moments such as this, where Chua makes it known that she is aware of her criticalness, and sometimes cruelty, she still refuses to apologise for it. She firmly stands by the belief that she is helping her children during a developmental period in their lives. Even in the face of public scrutiny for what she has detailed in her writing, she stands by her parenting decisions.

As in Crawford and McCurdy’s memoirs about mother-daughter relationships, there is a point of self-realisation. In this memoir, however, it comes from Chua, not her daughters. This adds nuance to the subgenre which *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* falls under, as she

is not exclusively justifying her actions but admitting once they have failed and attempting to change—admitting they have failed does not mean that she is apologising for what she had done. Once she had this very public, very intense argument with Lulu, she seemed to realise just how little ground she had covered throughout the years in terms of forcing success on her children. Chua, disapprovingly, let Lulu quit the violin as she realised that though it symbolised something strong to her, Lulu did not share the sentiment, “The violin symbolized control [...] for Lulu, it embodied oppression” (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 208). This difference in the viewing of the violin is representative of Lulu and Chua’s relationship as a whole. Where Chua sees herself as helping her daughter by assuming a position of control in her life, Lulu could easily see Chua as her oppressor. In this understanding and reluctant allowance for quitting, Chua exhibits understanding of how, though successful for one of her daughters, this parenting had not worked, and would not work, on Lulu. Following this argument, she caves in on her overbearing parental tendencies and relents. This leads to Lulu being able to play tennis without needing to be the best at the sport. Even though she claims she would no longer interfere, Chua admits she still gives her advice when she sees her play but makes an effort to minimise it. Additionally, although it is brief, Chua still offers criticism of Lulu’s playing in the memoir, when Lulu tells her that she lost but only because her opponent was “really good” Chua thinks bitterly to herself: “If she’s so good, why is she playing in a Novice tournament?” (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 214). Although Chua still includes this criticism in her narrative, she does not say it out loud which does demonstrate a slight improvement from her previous inclinations.

This memoir gave Chua the opportunity (not available in the other two memoirs, where both mothers are dead at the time of writing) to present a new ending containing moments of realisation or mutual forgiveness. Chua’s memoir was published when her daughters were still in high school, so the opportunity was there to show how their

relationship grew following the cessation her overbearing behaviour. Unfortunately, Chua only briefly discusses the evolved relationship she now has with her daughters, which is still not something that can be seen in the other memoirs. Chua claims she settled down and stopped forcing her opinions on her daughters—even when she disapproved of their choices and notes that others do too¹⁸—which eventually led to a healthier relationship between them.

Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother: A Loss or Injection of Culture?

The resemblance of this title to “Battle Hymn of the Republic” raises questions about how the title relates to the rest of the memoir. The song (by female abolitionist, Julia Ward Howe) is about a fight for freedom and specifically against slavery and injustice. The song paints a vengeful God casting judgement and assuring retribution for the wrongs done, “He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored / He hath loosed the fateful lightening of this terrible swift sword” (Howe 2-3). By using such a piece to draw the title from Chua compares herself to this angered God dealing her own form of reprisal, not to be derailed or disrupted by her daughter whose will she is aiming to trample and tame. The lyrics continue, “He is sounding forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat / He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgement seat” (Howe 13-14). In this it would seem to affirm, once again, Chua’s intention of wielding her will against her daughter to lead to “justice”. This begs the question of how Chua sees herself as a mother and how this hymn she sings resonates with other parents. Is she herself attempting to free her daughters from the cycle of the “generational decline”? Or does this parallel part of the memoir’s sometimes

¹⁸ When Lulu gives up the violin to take up tennis Chua mentions a conversation that she had with someone asking about her children and if they are still playing their instruments when Chua informs her that Lulu no longer plays the violin she writes as though this person is disappointed by the news, “Oh no! [...] that’s too bad. I remember she was so gifted. She inspired my two little ones” (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 214). By including this it, again, makes Chua appear as if she had a reason in putting so much pressure on Lulu because not only was she “gifted”, but an “inspiration”. Additionally, it works to undermine Lulu’s decision to quit as it makes it seem as though she is wasting her natural talent.

sardonic humour, or is she fighting against the standard of “Western” parenting in order to preserve a piece of her own heritage? Furthermore, if this is against “Western” parenting the irony of Chua using a song filled with American imagery is not lost.

Chua often writes as though she is an outcast among the “Western” parents that surround her and who fail to understand the significance of her style of raising children. By not allowing them to force her to submit to “Western” parenting styles, though her daughter unwittingly drives her mother to do so, she is endorsing the validity of “Eastern” parenting in the West despite the criticism she received. But it is also possible that she is addressing an upper-middle-class audience of American parents keen to learn how to preserve their capital through their children. In the success of her children, Chua secures the continuance of her emotional, financial, and cultural investments in them.

Critics and Praise:

Although all the memoirs here faced various sorts of public backlash on their publication, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* stands out for the way her actions themselves (rather than her exaggerated depiction of them) were criticised. Despite her retrospective clarification that her book was intended to be satirical, reviews and comment pieces are consistent in taking her words at face value, and it was immediately assumed everything she wrote—or at least most of it—was fact. Many newspapers and children of immigrants loved the book, with *The New York Times* calling it “a diabolically well-packaged, highly readable screed ostensibly about the art of obsessive parenting” (Maslin), but the general public of the United States did not agree. The main criticism of her parenting was that it was “abusive” and “overbearing”. This approach is typified by an NPR interviewer: “There are those who really think your behaviour was abusive” (Chua, “NPR. Battle Hymn”). Chua’s response to these allegations was disgust and vehement rejection: “Some of the same practices in other contexts, where

there's not a foundation of love and respect, could be abusive" (Chua, "NPR. Battle Hymn"). This accusation of abuse raises the question of whether these criticisms mask intolerance for "Eastern" cultures, just as Chua herself suggests in the memoir when she depicts the horrified "Western" parents. It is also worth noting that this memoir was published in the age of social media, where ideas, claims and events are often deliberately exaggerated to attract controversy, especially online, where people are often less reluctant to share extreme views in communities of like-minded people.¹⁹

Much of the widespread public criticism has died down since the initial publication of the memoir in 2011, though it should be noted the uproar was instigated by an article Chua published in *The Wall Street Journal* titled "Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior", in which she plainly states the hypothesis that she carries through the book in regard to Eastern vs. Western parenting. Following this publication, the criticism of her memoir intensified. Even people who do not object to Chua's narrative still define the way she controlled her daughters as an "abusive regime" (Shuyun).

Like the other memoirists discussed here, however, Chua's widespread criticism was balanced by parents who wrote to support her:

I was a single mom of twins. I was eighteen when I had them, and I made it my mission that my daughters would never follow in my footsteps [...] I was known by my family and friends as the MEANEST, TOUGHEST, and most DEMANDING mother to give birth [...] I broke the cycle. My daughters are twenty-six and both have MAs [...] I just wanted you to know that there are other moms out there (I am Polish/Irish) like you (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 237).

¹⁹ As can be verified by the 2021 publication of "Social Media, Sentiment, and Public Opinions: Evidence from #Brexit and #USElection" by Yuriy Gorodnichenko, Tho Pham, and Oleksandr Talavera: "These results lend support to the "echo chambers" view that Twitter and other social media create networks for individuals sharing similar political beliefs so that they tend to interact with others from the same communities and thus their beliefs are reinforced. By contrast, information from outsiders is more likely to be ignored" (Gorodnichenko, Pham and Talavera 20).

Despite the loud and angry reviews from critics, Chua also gave a voice to other mothers like herself who were not afraid to face their children's hatred and wrath if it meant giving them a better life. Chua's memoir opened the door to a wider conversation about parenting and how important cultural differences are in raising children.

One of the ways in which Chua attempts to justify her behaviour is to emphasise resilience and hard work over nurturing: "Western parents worry a lot about their children's self-esteem. But as a parent, one of the worst things you can do for your child's self-esteem is to let them give up. On the flip side, there's nothing better for building confidence than learning you can do something you thought you couldn't" (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 62). This highlights her main motivation throughout the memoir, which is to not let her children give up, in other words: not succeed, on any task that is assigned to them. Claiming she even threw out birthday cards that they had made for her because she believed they could do better. Although this was taken critically by the general public, there is a stronger underlying message of hard work leading to success, or hard work being what creates self-esteem, rather than it being dependent on the opinions of others.

This book became highly successful upon its publication because it was, perhaps deliberately, highly controversial, something which all three memoirs have in common. In the "Afterword" section of a republished version, following the backlash, Chua overtly makes the claim that the book was meant to be satirical: "My book is a satirical memoir. It's intentionally self-incriminating. And it's filled with intentional contradictions" (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 234). It is certainly significant that this declaration of satire was only presented after she received mountains of public backlash. It also raises the question of whether she is declaring this to avert the accusations of abuse she faced. If this is the case, then Chua's claims throughout *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* in regard to her infliction of trauma on her children is worse.

Nowhere in this memoir—even when she changes her behaviour towards her daughters—does Chua admit any wrongdoing. In fact, in the Afterword, she uses her daughters to defend her by pulling quotes of them saying they would be a mother like her one day: “Lulu, meanwhile, edited all my op-eds and Facebook posts [...] blew away a two-hour interview by NBC, and told the U.K. *Guardian* in an interview that she’d definitely be a strict mother herself” (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 238). These points, again, to the memoir being an apology memoir because her behaviour is not explained but excused. Chua seems to pardon herself from any wrongdoing by claiming that her daughters now vouch for her treatment of them. Additionally, this brings about the question of the age at which Chua’s daughter gave consent for this memoir to be published. Although Chua says her daughters both read and approved of the memoir being published, they were still underage when they were asked. Upon publication, Lulu was fifteen, meaning consent was given when she was even younger. This is to say that it is worth considering that they felt they were not able to refuse the publication of the memoir, as they know their mother and with what is shown in *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, there is typically a negative reaction if they do something that displeases her or act against her.

In addition to her book being controversial due to her personal style of motherhood there are also critical issues with how she presented the “Eastern” and “Western” parenting within her memoir. Yerin Pak examines parenting in *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*: “Chua seems eager to point out how strict and demanding she is compared to her Western counterparts [...] Not only does Chua describe her daughters and herself as walking Chinese stereotypes, she typecasts the Western mothers she discusses in her book” (Pak 30). There was notable criticism of Chua’s choice to lean into stereotypes and the binary descriptions that she provides for “Eastern” and “Western” parenting. But just as the mode of satire provides Chua with a way to have it both ways (to describe abuse but reframe it as satire),

Chua's claim that her model of Tiger parenting is not culturally stereotypical because it applies to any tough parents who are ambitious for their children, also provides her with a defence and with a way of having it both ways.

Although in the United States the book was received as a shocking story of abuse in a family, its reception was very different elsewhere. The various covers for the book worldwide, however, say something about how it was targeted in each country. In the United States edition of *Battle Hymn of a Tiger Mother*, the cover is plainly red with a decorative symbol in the centre. In the Chinese edition, Chua stands in front of an American flag with the claim that it promotes the relaxed parenting style of Americans:

The cover of the book featured a photo of me in front of an American flag, and the title was *Parenting by a Yale Professor: How to Raise Kids in America* [...] my memoir, seen as in the West as a story about 'extreme' parenting, was being marketed the exact opposite way in China—as a story about the importance of giving kids more fun and freedom (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 236).

This is very different from the reception of the memoir in the United States, where people were adamantly calling Chua abusive. If, as she stated, the standard in China is far more strict than the United States to the point that she is considered a relaxed parent, then the reception to her book from the United States press seems—at least to a certain extent—a rejection of a culture different from its own.

Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother is a thought-provoking memoir that discusses the differences in Eastern and Western parenting—as defined by Chua—while showing Chua's own relationship with her daughters and what she would do for them to ensure they were successful, or rather what she would do to ensure that her family is not a victim of the generational decline that she claims to fear. Although Chua faced heavy criticism by sharing her story, she was also greeted with letters from parents who were raising their children the

same way to enable them to succeed in the future which showed Chua that she was not alone in her intensity and desire for her children to succeed, as she herself states she received “thousands of supportive emails” (Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* 237). Success is the most critical factor in *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* because it is the driving force behind the mother-daughter relationship in the memoir.

In the process of writing and publishing the memoir, Chua, to some extent, must have known that her parenting style would face some degree of criticism from the North American public, as is indicated by the other parents around her who were unable to understand why she raised her kids the way she had. Her sense of knowledge about how the public might have seen her and her parenting is evident in the delivery of the memoir. However, despite the criticism it received, Chua’s memoir gave way to a broader discussion of the impact that parenting has on children and the influence of culture on the decisions that parents make in raising their children. Additionally, it addresses the debate that parents go through mentally in order to try to give their children the most successful future, though there is little consideration of whether it is the happiest future in this memoir. *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* contributed to altering the way that harsh parenting was viewed—though initially the reception was poor—this book stood up for the cultural significance of parenting and how it can be beneficial for children to have someone who is continuously encouraging them throughout their childhood, even when that encouragement appears to be more similar to criticism at the time. Chua provides a defence for parenting like hers by showing how the most extreme version of this parenting, by the standards of the United States, benefited her children.

Conclusion

Memoirs, testimonial and trauma memoirs specifically, are crucial in the uncovering and understanding of not only independent personal histories but also in the alteration and functionality of different aspects of culture over time. They detail personal stories as they interact with the broader culture, which is then indicative of what the social values, norms, and expectations were at the time and place in which the memoir occurs. This is suggested by Smith and Watson who say that life narratives, “may serve as repositories for preserving memory against the erosion of time and the revisions of new generations of historians” (Smith and Watson 81). The genre of the memoir has the ability to act as a way of preserving memory and, therefore, history.

The primary goal of my thesis has been to analyse how the authors—necessarily also the narrators—of mother-daughter memoirs control their narratives and how this, sometimes subtle, control by way of tone, tense, and language impacts how the text is read and then received by the public. It has also worked to further contextualise these memoirs in relation to specific histories that might have been excluded from the original text of the memoirs themselves but are significant in understanding each text as a whole. The analysis of the histories surrounding each memoir was also done with the intention of elaborating on the influence of external factors and how these can alter the way of reading the narration of the memoirs.

Along with this there are cultural, societal, and historical points within all the texts that needed to be understood to adequately address the topics presented in each of them. For example, in *Mommie Dearest* the climate around working mothers and the demands of actresses in Hollywood during the Golden Age of film must be understood. As developing this understanding then gives Crawford’s memoir an important set of reference points for

explaining her mother's behaviour. By doing this, it illuminates how the initial exclusion of this information worked to further villainise Joan and her career in Crawford's narration.

In the same regard, the expectations that the entertainment industry has for women's bodies in the twenty-first century must be taken into account to understand how McCurdy's memoir shows the cultural encouragement of her eating disorder. This, then, went on to show how external factors impacted not only her life, but then affected her relationship with her mother, specifically regarding her acting career. The sexualization of women in film is important to the understanding of McCurdy's lack of attachment to and autonomy of her own body.

Finally, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* presents a complex and unstable depiction of "Eastern" and "Western" parenting, as defined by Chua, which needs to be acknowledged to comprehend the struggle that Chua faced in being an outlier on the graph of North American parenting. Additionally, Chua using the apology subgenre makes her memoir plainly read as a defence of her parenting style, and culture by attachment. The difference in these parenting styles explains the rejection of the memoir—particularly in the United States.

Despite the content of these memoirs being similar in that they all discuss nuanced mother-daughter relationships, they each present remarkably different results, both in the way the narrator assumes control of the narrative and in how these were received on a broader scale by the public. Each of the memoirs discusses struggles with external cultural and social forces and how these work to impact their relationships. Further, I have analysed how each of these memoirs uses language, tone, tense, and their respective subgenres to shape their individual stories, while also suggesting how these literary devices have specific effects in shaping the understanding of the fraught relationships depicted.

In the previous chapters, I have demonstrated how *Mommie Dearest*, *I'm Glad My Mom Died*, and *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* each provide an insight into the different

aspects of narratorial control within testimonial and trauma memoirs—specifically those regarding mother-daughter relationships. Sometimes this is through the strange absence of necessary details (or details that would allow for deeper examination of specific themes or events), at others through the use of a specific subgenre, tense, or tone. I also discussed the media reception of these stories and speculated that the difference in reception of the memoirs might have been due to the manner in which the stories were narrated and the narrator's position of power. These three memoirists have very distinct voices, each developing a narratorial style that is their foundation.

A future study might tackle the same issues of narratorial control in life writing with reference to father/son memoirs to ask whether they mobilised any of the same tropes in terms of apology, confession, and pre-emptive defence. If there are parallels, then examining common features and distinctions in nonfiction, fiction, and memoir writing could be very revealing in terms of cultural expectations around gender and sexuality. Additionally, there is room to explore other relationships that are written of in testimonial and trauma memoirs to compare how they each differ in their construction of narrative. These could be trauma memoirs containing spousal, friend, or other parental figure narratives. This would also allow for even more research into trauma writing—specifically in memoirs—to investigate how the author's traumatic experience shapes their narrative structures.

The understanding of how nonfiction writing, specifically memoirs, is shaped through different techniques of narratorial control has always been important in the analysis of memoirs and their significance to a wider cultural history. These individual and personal histories are, however, helpful in the examination of a culture as a whole. Since nearly all nonfiction writing is simultaneously structured narratively, narratological analysis is required to understand its impacts and effects. This is especially true of autobiographical narratives where the author has a direct personal relationship to every person, place, and event within

their writing, which means both their desires and traumas frame their stories, often in controversial ways, as demonstrated in all three memoirs.

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