Family Ties?

Parent-Child Relationships in a Selection of Young Adult Critical Dystopian Texts

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Within critical dystopian fictions for young adults, there has always been a tension in the ways families are represented. From the struggles of orphans to accusations of generational responsibility, dystopian texts are often fundamentally interested in the relationships between parents and children, and the role and construction of the family. According to Bradford, Mallan, Stephens and McCallum in *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian Transformations*, young adult critical dystopian narratives tend to hover in a liminal space between the transgressive and the conventional. As Bradford et al observe, while “substitute families or alternative homes replace kin-based networks and blood ties with other intimate (or coercive) relations with their own networks, norms, and social practices” (131), at the same time “the experience of a single universalising notion of family” is just as often given legitimacy (136). Since writers seem hesitant to “propose or endorse an alternative familial arrangement to those that are conventionally experienced” (153), many dystopian fictions for young adults highlight an ambiguous yet critical shift in conceptions of family ties.

This paper demonstrates how critical dystopian texts for young adults demand a re-structuring of familial bonds, frequently with an emphasis on parent-child relationships. Set within a society that the reader is positioned to see as substantially worse than his or her own, critical dystopian texts suggest within the narrative that there is the possibility of hope for the protagonist (Sargent 16). The paper will argue that in critical dystopias for young readers, a renegotiation of relationships between parent/quasi parent and child is often a key element of that hope. Three critical dystopias for young adults will be examined: *Why Weeps the Brogan?* (Scott [1989] 1991), *Waterbound* (Stemp 1995) and *The Sea-wreck Stranger*
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(Mackenzie 2007). We chose these texts in order to demonstrate the wide range of ways in which parent-child relationships are depicted as well as the centrality of these relationships to the genre and the gendered nature of these relationships.

As Trites argues, protagonists in young adult texts need a parent figure against whom they can rebel (see 57). She outlines three types of parent-adolescent constructions which occur in young adult texts. The first involves the actual parent, the second concerns quasi-parent(s), and the third invokes “in logos parentis”, in other words “a parent of words” whose function is to fill the absence of a real parent (see 57–58). This is a particularly useful model to examine how adult/young adult relations are constructed and renegotiated in critical dystopias written for young adults, given that in many of these texts parents are disempowered by the ruling authorities, or by a major disaster that has precipitated the dystopia. Waterbound involves actual parents, whose actions are often contrary to the wellbeing of their children in the terms that the text sets up. Why Weeps the Brogan? calls upon what is clearly a “parent of words” although that parent is only named as such at the very end of the novel. This “parent of words” stands in marked contrast to the broken creature who is eventually revealed to be the mother of the two children in the novel, and thus foregrounds the constructed and contested nature of parent/child relationships. The Sea-wreck Stranger combines all three of Trites’ categories, with the moral influence of the deceased paternal “in logos parentis” privileged over that of the two deceased mothers and all actual and quasi-parents.

One of the key tasks the young adult protagonist often faces in the critical dystopian genre is to reveal the truth behind the deceptions that have been set up, not always consciously, by adults. Nikolajeva writes that the notion of children being able to see through the lies of adults has been a key concept in children’s literature, but that in texts with a dystopian setting it takes on a strong element of social consciousness (see 78). Critical dystopian fictions for young adults can therefore be seen to critique the family ties that comprise our world as well as the world as a whole.

**Waterbound – Binds that Tie?**

The dystopia in Waterbound is built on a value system that sees “able-bodied” people as worthy of support in a society with limited resources, and anyone else as expendable. Seeing through the
lies of parents and other adults in authority is one of the key ways that hope is constructed in Stemp’s text, because it enables young adults, particularly sixteen-year-old Gem, to understand and to challenge the principles on which the City is built.

For most of the text, parents of the young people who live in the above-ground city are portrayed as physically present, yet emotionally absent. There is a sense that the parents in the city are exiled from their children because of fear, just as much as the young people in the Waterbound community below the city are physically distanced from their blood relatives because of their disabilities.

Although Gem lives aboveground with her parents, her father is exiled from her because of his fear of Admin (the city authorities), as indicated when he chastises Gem for her poor grades. He berates his daughter not because doing badly in her studies is likely to be detrimental to Gem herself, but because he does not want to be demoted if his daughter “is not making her full contribution to society” (139). Similarly, Gem’s mother is exiled from Gem because of her painful memories of the girl to whom she gave birth some years before Gem, a baby perceived by Admin to be deformed and of whom Gem knows nothing. Gem’s parents believe this baby to be dead, but she was secretly saved and sent to the Waterbound. Gem’s mother has continued to wonder what that child would have been like had she lived, and this has damaged her relationship with Gem (see 140–141). Ironically, the loss of their first daughter has led to the alienation of Gem’s parents from their second child. Freedom for Gem to love whom she chooses, and freedom for the Waterbound, can only come when the lies of the parents and other authorities have been revealed.

The parents of Gem’s friend Jay are wealthy, but this does not buy them agency. Jay sees them as deliberately ignoring much of what he does (see 91), and puts forward two hypotheses for their behaviour. The first is that the freedom they give him is a means of trying to compensate Jay for being an
only child. The second is that they are trying to forget the loss of Jay’s brother, Jon, who had been hidden by the family because he was born without an arm but was taken away as a young child when his existence was accidentally revealed. Jay’s parents were told that Jon is dead, but Jay himself (with the aid of a sympathetic hospital staff member) learned that Jon, usually referred to as J2, is living with the Waterbound (see 90–91). The fact that Jay does not tell his parents that J2 is alive suggests that he does not trust them, and that he fears their allegiance to Admin is more important than family ties. Jay’s determination to hide his brother’s existence due to the social and political loyalties of his parents suggests a dynamic in which the child has autonomously re-negotiated family ties to rectify what the reader is positioned to see as a fundamental injustice.

The strength of names in relation to family and identity is also demonstrated in Gem and Sophie’s discussion about surnames. Sophie does not know her own surname, and when Gem says that if she were in Sophie’s position she would want to know, Sophie retorts, “Why? So you had someone to blame?” (73). Family names are therefore more than labels, more than indicators of where people have come from; they also gesture towards relationships both assumed and articulated. However, whereas Gem regards knowing her surname as a means of knowing who she is, Sophie responds “I know that well enough without a family name” (73). For Gem, her surname gives her a place in a family, and therefore an identity. By contrast, Sophie sees her family as the people who caused her to be exiled from the City. She must look elsewhere for who she is, and she has found this within the Waterbound, which for her is a “substitute family” along the lines outlined by Bradford et al above. Sophie articulates both the positive and negative aspects of the Waterbound to Gem: “Bind, band, bound. As in, binding oath, band of hope, bounden duty, homeward bound, housebound” (25). The Waterbound are thus bound in a positive sense of being linked by compassion, hope, and a feeling of responsibility towards each other, but at the same time by their exclusion from the above ground City. The name thus both reflects the negative side of bound, that is, exclusion, but at the same time demonstrates the positive aspects of being bound, aspects from which the Waterbound community overall is able to draw in order to find freedom. Nonetheless, it is through name, both first name and surname, written on the flowers sent floating
down the river, that various of the Waterbound people are able to be reunited with their families (see 163) and the power of the Ruling that will not accept children deemed undesirable is broken (see 164).

Mel, a member of the Waterbound, demonstrates the power of the parent-child bond to promote or limit agency particularly vividly. Mel was born with a birthmark, which her mother was told would disappear. Nonetheless, her mother would not keep her and placed her on the edge of the water in a cradle (see 57) in an echo of the biblical story of Moses, in which the young baby was saved from destruction by being placed in a basket in the bulrushes, where he was found by Pharaoh’s daughter (see Exodus 2:1–10). Mel used to be happy within the Waterbound community, and it is ironic that her antisocial behaviour of withdrawing into herself and compulsively making paper flowers began when she was told why she had come to live with the Waterbound (see 57). Implicitly, the apparent rejection by her mother has caused deep psychological trauma, and it is no coincidence that Mel disappears before she can be reunited with her mother. In Lacanian terms, Mel has refused to enter into the Symbolic Order, as evidenced by her lack of speech once she realises that she was sent away by her mother. It is one matter for society to reject what is perceived as a less than perfect child, but quite another for that child to be rejected by his or her parents.

Nonetheless, Mel’s mother is not dismissed completely. Children who are found floating on the river in a basket, as was Mel, are referred to by the Waterbound as “Moses babies” (see 73–74), and the novel thus gestures towards mothers as innately resourceful even if they are, as is the case with Mel’s mother and her biblical counterpart, repressed by the authorities in the societies in which they live. In Waterbound it is up to their children to renegotiate the intergenerational relationships: whereas the parents are psychologically crippled by their own fear and grief, the young Waterbound adults are able to take action — namely, sending the flowers — which precipitates their freedom. The notion of the adult disempowered by fear in contrast to the young adult who has the courage to act in a way that will challenge the dystopia, is a feature of many critical dystopias (see Braithwaite 5), and is also central to the next text for discussion.

Why Weeps the Brogan?
— Mother as words, mother as monster
Family bonds are particularly important in Why Weeps the Brogan?, although
they are only rarely named as such. Protagonists Saxon and Gilbert are brother and sister, even though this is only explicitly stated at the end of text during the course of which it is gradually revealed that these children are struggling to survive in the British Museum, following a nuclear disaster. One of the ways the children maintain their sanity in their post-nuclear world is through rituals such as baking, sweeping, keeping their hair brushed, and through polite interaction such as “You may pour me a third coffee” (9). These all suggest a middle class upbringing in the pre-disaster world based around a traditional family in which politeness, cleanliness and order are valued and parental models are internalised by the children (see Braithwaite 11). Parents are thus constructed in terms of words, which form the images of pre-disaster security on which the children rely. However, the terrifying Brogan, towards which Saxon has a curiously ambivalent attitude of loathing and yet fascination (see 26), proves to be the children’s mother, and thus is an actual parent, although the children do not consciously relate to her as such until the point of her death (see 102–103).

Kennon argues that the notion of the “family home”, based on conservative notions of power, is particularly interrogated in dystopian literature and yet there is still a certain nostalgia for the perceived security of this space, which is traditionally aligned with notions of the feminine and of community (see 42). This is borne out in the scene of the Brogan’s death, when Saxon recalls how she and her brother came to be in the museum: through obeying their mother who told them at the time of the disaster to go inside the museum and not to come out under any circumstances (see 102). The monster in the museum, that weeps and throws the heads of statues when it is angry (see 69), and can only offer sustenance to a bronze statue of children rather than to her own offspring (see 69), can be seen as the reverse, or, in Jungian terms, the shadow (see Marlan 5) of the mother who brought her children up to be polite,
clean and orderly before the disaster. In *Why Weeps the Brogan?* the notion of a secure family home is the resource from which Saxon and Gilbert draw their ability to survive. It is both communal and secure in its providing of food and rules for behaviour, but rather than being a site of nostalgia, it is the means of strength.

The true identity of the Brogan, however, is not revealed until the end of the novel, and until this point the children’s feelings about it are ambivalent. For Saxon in particular, the Brogan is a figure of the abject, “a magnet of fascination and repulsion” (Kristeva 1995, 118), and Saxon is drawn to the Brogan in a way that is deeper than she can articulate. When Gilbert asks her why she weeps when they feed the Brogan she responds somewhat defensively that she does not always cry. She then says that she hates the Brogan and yet feels sad, and wonders: “Where did it come from […]? Has it always been?” (26). The answer is, of course, that for both Saxon and Gilbert the Brogan has indeed “always been”, as the mother who gave birth to them and from whom they must physically and psychologically separate. Arousing both fascination and anxiety, the Brogan resembles something of the “monstrous-feminine”, a term used by Creed to describe the “shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” figure of women repeatedly present in film and literature (1). The complicated relationship between the mother and her children is one of fear but also intimacy, which becomes most telling when Saxon and Gilbert leave the womb-like space of the museum and are rescued by a man following the death of this haunting “creature”. As is the norm in texts within the genres of science fiction and horror (see Creed 1–7), within which *Why Weeps the Brogan?* can also be seen to be positioned in the genre of young adult fiction, the “monstrous-feminine” must be destroyed in order for (patriarchal) control to be resumed and harmony to be restored. Drawing on the work of Kristeva, Barrett explains that religion and ritual play an important role in the mediation of abjection and the overcoming of unnameable or primal fear. (94)

The rituals the children have developed, such as Saxon removing some chairs and Gilbert trying to guess how many she has removed (see 8), is one of the subconscious ways in which the children maintain some control over their decaying world. In contrast to the children’s almost obsessive control, the Brogan’s method of survival seems largely based on emotion: she weeps and moans uncontrollably (see 102)
and never speaks, even at the point where Saxon is struggling to save her life. Again, the notion of the monstrous woman surfaces: while Gilbert resorts to a kind of scientific order to control his fears and environment, the Brogan is emotional and violent, idolising the role of the mother in a way that is atavistic or even magical in form.

Kristeva explains that the first experience of abjection is at the point when the child must separate from the mother (1982, 13). Why Weeps the Brogan? can be read as an exploration of the necessity to do precisely that, and it is no coincidence that it is at the point of her mother’s death that Saxon is able to “know many things”, to remember what has led to their being in the museum, and to utter her most articulate statement of the entire novel:

We have been here four years, eighty-five days […]. I am Saxon. This is my brother, Gilbert. Saxon and Gilbert Brogan. Our mother is dead. (103)

In other words, Saxon can only enter into the Symbolic Order – to logical knowledge as opposed to intuition and half-memories, and to articulate speech – once she is separated from her mother, both literally through the mother’s death, and metaphorically. It is therefore unsurprising that she and her brother should be found by a man. The dark, womb-like, decaying museum, which has literally pushed out Saxon and Gilbert as it becomes a place which has given them sustenance but which will kill them if they remain in it any longer, gives way to a world of light, and of words, and of men. As Grigg explains, “The term ‘Name-of-the-Father’ […] is a key signifier for the subject’s symbolic universe, regulating this order and giving it its structure” (9) and for Saxon and Gilbert, literally articulating the “name of their father”, which they have only been able to discover on the death of their mother, enables them to understand how their world has been ordered and what their previous place in it has been. One of the main questions for the children has been their last name: they see it as a marker of identity and believe that its recollection will assist in their redemption (see 64). Just as the pairing of first and surname on the flowers sent by the Waterbound enables them to bring about their own freedom, so too does the understanding of their last name bring to Saxon and Gilbert a sense of identity and by implication a measure of freedom.

It is no coincidence that there is no reference to the father amidst the womb-like, dark museum, with its dominant female character Saxon, the gradual realisation that the Brogan is a woman, and then – ultimately – the understanding that the Brogan is the
children’s mother. However, although the man whom the children see at the end of the novel may be able to free Saxon and Gilbert physically from the decaying museum, it is debatable whether the children will be able to survive in the world outside. Sambell suggests that the world outside, even if it has survived the nuclear disaster, will be such a contrast to the closed world of the museum that the children will not be able to function (see 158). Saxon in particular may have matured psychologically, but the world into which she and her brother now go may be one in which they are unable to survive. The comfort that the children’s family provided in the pre-disaster world will not necessarily protect them in the aftermath of nuclear destruction. Nonetheless, it is still possible to read the ending as hopeful in that the children are free of the decaying museum and have come to understand more of their identity, through the psychological and the physical encounter and negotiation with the woman who gave them birth.

The Sea-wreck Stranger – Blood is more dangerous than water? The Sea-wreck Stranger provides a counterpoint to the parent-child relationships of Waterbound and Why Weeps the Brogan? in both the nature of familial structures and notions of parental responsibility towards children. In this narrative, young people with living parents are vulnerable to moral corruption while those who uphold the ghostly influence of deceased parents possess greater moral character, foregrounding the long-term physical proximity of adult caregivers as the greatest moral and physical threat to young people. The text, which is set after environmental disaster, constructs all caregivers as dangerous to some extent, with each parental representation identifiable with Trites’ actual parent, quasi-parent, or “in logos parentis”. Actual and quasi-parents are depicted as dangerous to young people not just in what they do but also in what they fail to do, and, particularly, in what they impart. Where the strong moral foundation of the protagonist, Ness, is associated with and sustained through her attachment to her deceased parents, negative traits and a weak moral foundation in young characters Jed, Sophie and Ty are directly attributed to the influence of actual and quasi-parents. The physical and familial proximity between parent-figure and child therefore plays a significant role in the moral development, or lack thereof, of young characters.
Of the four young characters in *The Sea-wreck Stranger*, it is Jed Barritt, raised by two living, blood-related parents, who is depicted as the only amoral and irredeemable young adult character. He is constructed as violent and sadistic, for instance throwing a half-dead rabbit in Ness’s face after torturing it (see 66). The text assigns negative traits associated with malice and corruption to both Jed’s mother, Elsie, and father, Ton: “trouble” has been “stirred and thickened by Elsie’s tongue” (109) while Ton is aligned with the controlling, likely-corrupt Council (see 120) and is one of many adult figures hunting Ness as she attempts to flee the island. Jed’s unfavourable characteristics are directly attributed to parental influence, he is described as “the boy who’s been spoiled by his mother into thinking whatever he wants should be his” (65) and his “words sound[ing] as if they’ve come from someone else” (127). The text thus suggests that in imparting negative traits upon their child, Elsie and Ton have created the greatest threat to the protagonist, with their son’s malice surpassing their own. Ness observes:

I look at [Ton], seeing a similarity to Jed in his face, but Ton’s features are both harsher – worn so by the weather – and softer. He hasn’t Jed’s cruelty. (162)

As a product of the long-term influence of two actual parents, Jed’s lack of moral development positions living, biological parents as responsible for the danger he poses to Ness in addition to the threats they pose to her themselves.

In literature for young readers, the absence – or incompetence – of the normative family, including the controlling role of the adult parent, signals a new space for the development of the “journeying” child. Death of parents is frequently a means by which young protagonists can be placed in “new, often precarious, situations” (Gibson/Zaidman 232). In Mackenzie’s text, such danger includes being within the obligatory care of quasi-parents. Quasi-parents are constructed as dangerous to their charges in the traits and morals that they impart though not to the extent of creating a threat like Jed. Under the influence of Tilda and Marn, Sophie and Ty respectively are frequently depicted as at odds with the values Ness privileges in her narration: loyalty to one’s beliefs, respect, honesty and compassion, all of which are associated with deceased parent figures: her aunt Bella, her mother, and particularly her father (see e.g. 42, 173). Ness laments that all she has “left of [her father] are words” that “won’t fit a pattern
that holds steady with [her] life” (51), pre-empting her rebellion against those who are responsible for what she lacks. As Ness proclaims early on, the three central young adult figures have “three dead parents” (10) between them. Nonetheless, in an idolised form they remain as “presences”, and all other adult caregivers are measured against them. All three deceased parents – Pa and Ma for siblings Ness and Ty, and cousin Sophie’s birth mother Bella – are often used as a contrast to the inadequate caregivers with whom the young people have been left. The falling out between Pa and Marn signals a division in their value systems that pre-empts the contrast that is established between Marn and Pa as moral role models. Ness states that

[t]he more time [Ty] spends with Marn, the more he starts to sound like him. Pa would never have spoken that way (62)

and later offers their deceased father as a better adult figure for Ty to model himself on: “Can you not remember Pa, and try to mould yourself a little along his lines too?” (115).

While Marn and Tilda represent individual threats to Ty and Sophie, it is quasi-parent step-mother, Tilda, whose moral influence is strongest in Sophie and thus poses the greatest risk to her. For a significant portion of the text, Sophie is portrayed as physically and ethically weaker than the two orphaned characters (see 10), manipulated by adult rules and ideas (see 18), and reluctant to save another’s life for fear of adult punishment (see 26). As with Jed, Ness directly attributes Sophie’s moral development to Tilda’s influence:

She’s been brought up by Tilda since she was little more than two years old, and Tilda’s harshness is stronger in her than it could ever be in me. (see 19)

It is Sophie, the only one of the three central young characters influenced by both an actual parent (Marn) and a quasi-parent (Tilda), who is portrayed as the weakest of all four young characters. Yet, unlike Jed, Sophie is afforded...
redemption when she rebels against her father and Ton Barritt (the only two specifically stated actual fathers in the text), giving “strength to her” when she sides with Ness and chooses to protect her cousin from first Jed and later the adults who would pursue Ness (see 113). To gain Ness’ approval, Sophie must rebel against parental influence in order to be afforded redemption in the text, while Jed, who does not rebel against the influence of his two parents, is afforded no redeeming qualities and depicted as without any moral substance. The influence of a quasi-parent rather than two actual parents is thus constructed as less enduring in the face of a moral framework established by “in logos parentis” and reaffirmed through the orphaned child. In contrast, the danger Marn as quasi-parent poses to the older Ty is in usurping the morals already imbued by the idolised deceased parents, the same morals that Ness sustains and is disappointed to find Ty and Sophie lacking. Again, when Ness disapproves of Ty’s views or actions she often attributes his behaviour to the influence of her guardians, for instance begging him not to “become exactly like Marn” (115). Ness thus disapproves of Ty assuming Marn’s value system over that which has been bestowed by their deceased (biological) parents.

Ness rebels against the authority of living parental figures who do not conform to her idolised father. She disputes the adult decree of the predominantly male Council that “everything […] from the sea is bad” (19), a statement that covertly attacks her father. He made his living as a fisherman and the enduring connection Ness has to him is evidenced through their shared love of the ocean and the blood-water metaphor that runs throughout the narrative. Even her deceased mother cannot approach this type of attachment, being likened to the land that Ness escapes as opposed to the sea which she escapes to (see 204). Ness’ rebellion against parental figures also extends to a rebellion against the young people who reflect the traits and value systems of their actual and quasi-parents. She deceives both Sophie and Ty about the fate of Dev and eventually chooses Dev – a male whose connection to the water mirrors that of her father’s – over her kin. Finally she escapes the island, leaving behind her whole family to sail to freedom with Dev with “[her] father’s blood […] running like a tide in [her] veins” (204). As such, Ness’ rebellion against her quasi-parents, who threaten the moral framework imbued
by the influence of the idolised “in
logos parentis”, leads to her departure
from her caregivers and their products
(Sophie and Ty) in pursuit of the
ghostly yet enduring influence of her
father. As with Waterbound, in which
freedom for the young Waterbound
community comes about through the
flowers on which first name and sur-
name are written, and Why Weeps the
Brogan? in which the children must
leave the female-dominated museum
into the world of the male, the way
forward for Ness is also in terms of the
power of the masculine, thus suggest-
ing the gendered nature of family ties
in this genre.

Family Ties: Reconfiguring
the Knot?
The works analysed in this paper offer
varying models of parent (or surrogate
parent)-child relationships and thereby
suggest a transformation of ideas
about what it means to be a family, as
well as how generational connections
ought to be structured and function.
Parents in Waterbound are portrayed as
largely powerless, and it is up to the
young people to rectify what the
reader is positioned to see as the fun-
damental injustice of the dystopian so-
ciety. Why Weeps the Brogan? only
rarely mentions family connections by
name, yet the relationship between
mother and child in particular is cen-
tral to the novel. Finally, in The Sea-
wreck Stranger, the protagonist rebels
against the inadequate care provided
by quasi-parents to pursue a future in-
spired by her deceased father. What-
ever the relationship between parent
and child, all three texts suggest that
children in dystopian worlds must ne-
gotiate family ties in order to find
agency and even subjectivity.

Noting that a basic tenet of modern
societies “has been an implicit and ex-
licit responsibility to children”, Brad-
ford et al contend that contemporary
children’s literature often reflects an in-
vestment in young people as representa-
tive of “future dreams and
possibilities” (131). However, the idea
of responsibility towards the child is
demonstrably shifted in critical
dystopian texts, as the young protago-
nists are continually removed from tra-
ditional family networks and made to
re-define the nature of their supporting
networks. While the family offers a
fundamental form of “social capital” –
providing the networks necessary for
“mutual needs and interests” – when
this structure is fragmented, the indi-
vidual must behave in a way conducive
to his or her own success, or in the
more extreme cases posited in
dystopian texts, his or her very survival
(see Bradford et al 131). As this paper
has demonstrated, critical dystopian fiction for young adults offers a range of constructions of family relationships, in particular those between parent and child, but still ultimately privileges traditional, and gendered, notions of family. It would seem therefore, for the young adult protagonists at least in this genre, that parents can be alive, dead, ineffectual or selfish, but they remain a powerful influence which must be negotiated for young adult protagonists to achieve true agency in the terms that the texts set up.

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Notes
1 Lacan writes that a child enters the “Symbolic Order” at the time when he or she is learning language. Language brings with it the Law, that which regulates desire and the rules for communication, and which Lacan terms “the Name of the Father”. He argues that the child’s desire for his or her mother is challenged by the threat of the symbolic father in the form of the phallic signifier, language, a threat which the child must eliminate by some psychological means (see Trites 57).

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