

# **Motherhood On Trial:**

## **The American Media's Reception of the Filicide Cases of Susan Smith, Andrea Yates, and Casey Anthony**



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## 1. Introduction

In 2008, two year old Caylee Anthony was reported missing, and a frantic search for the toddler began. In December 2008, the child's body was found in a wooded area close to her mother Casey's parent's house. Casey Anthony was then charged with murder of her daughter. In 2011, Ms. Anthony was found not guilty of killing her daughter. But most Americans – until this day - are convinced that Casey Anthony had gotten rid of her child because she had wanted to continue living her party-life and date men, accusations lined with a loathing of promiscuity and women's sexuality, even though the evidence brought forward against her was not enough to prove the charges pressed against her.

I cannot – and neither do I want to – pass judgment about whether or not Anthony's acquittal was justified. What this study aims to do, however, is to lay out how cases of maternal filicide in the United States are reacted to in the American media, an idea that I had shortly after the Anthony trial ended. Even though I had not followed the Anthony trial in its entirety, it became inescapable for me on the Internet. My Facebook Newsfeed blew up on July 5<sup>th</sup> 2011, the day when Casey Anthony was found not guilty. Many of my friends posted angry statuses about the verdict, several of them calling the outcome of this trial a “crime” in itself. One friend wrote that if Dexter (the homicidal main character of popular TV Show *Dexter* who brutally kills murderers who had gone unpunished) was real, he would pay Anthony a friendly visit. Ever since then, the Anthony case has been on my mind. I was surprised, flabbergasted even, about what had happened here. I wondered what outraged my friends and millions of people in America about this

trial. Were they really just concerned with Caylee (and the justice she arguably had not gotten)? Why did they hate Anthony so much, and what freedom to voice their opinions did the Internet give them? Was Anthony such a target because she was a beautiful young woman who seemed to hide her real face from the world? Or was her single motherhood the real problem at hand - did Americans loathe Anthony so much because she was not what people thought a mother *should* be? And if that would be the case, what *do* Americans expect from mothers? These questions form the foundation for this study. In order to answer them, next to the case of Casey Anthony, the media's reception of the cases of Susan Smith and Andrea Yates will be covered. Newspaper and magazine articles will be taken as mirrors and catalysts of public opinion, with the Internet also taking up some room in this study's discussion of the Anthony case.

A quick recap of the two other cases is useful at this point. In 1994, Susan Smith drove to a lake in her hometown, Union, South Carolina, and let her car roll into the water. Inside the vehicle, her two sons, Michael and Alex, were sleeping. For nine days, she told everyone that a black man had stolen her car, with the two children still inside the vehicle. When she confessed to having killed her children herself, outrage about her lies, her alleged motifs and her trial kept the entire nation on its feet with fascination and anger.

Seven years later, in 2001, Texas housewife Andrea Yates, after having struggled with postpartum depression and psychosis for two years, filled the bathtub in her house. One after one, she drowned her five children, the youngest child six months old. She called the police and immediately confessed, and was found not guilty on Reason of Insanity.

All three cases occupied Americans and went down in history as some of the most tragic, shocking and complex cases of maternal filicide in the United States. They were all "special" in their own right, and each had distinct key features. To elaborate: Andrea Yates confessed immediately and her actions had disturbing religious connotations, Susan Smith lied and even employed racism in her case, and Casey Anthony's case stand out as it is the only one of the three in which no final answers about the child's death were found. Beyond this, the backgrounds of the three women are distinct: single motherhood and alleged promiscuity in Anthony's case, postpartum depression in Yates' case, extra-marital sexual relations in Smith's case. Since the three cases all have such distinct key features they thus represent several important issues in America. Therefore, the reactions to them can give a broad insight into American family values, gender roles and expectations in mothers and women. Simultaneously, all three cases have extensive media coverage in common, and are therefore some of the most prominent cases of maternal filicide in the United States. Hence, the tones and ideas of the articles written about them can be compared.

The media's reception of all three of these cases will therefore be analyzed and examined to find out how American society reacts when mothers challenge "normalcy" most drastically. These findings then allow to answer the big question that arches over all of the case studies: What do these media reactions to the three cases tell us about expectations in motherhood and gender roles in the United States in the 1990s and 2000s?

These questions essentially revolve around women's deviations from expected behavior in its most tragic form, asking what conclusions can be drawn about the

importance, presence, presentation and possible iconization of motherhood from the way these cases were dealt with.

### **Academic Discussion**

As far as the academic discussion of family life and values goes, this topic has been one of the most heatedly discussed ones in America for a long time. Consequently, academics have always asked the question what was and is happening to the American family, but especially so in the 1970s and 1980s, times of an alleged destruction of the nuclear family as well as neo-conservative politics' focus on traditional "American values" (cf. Keniston's *All Our Children – The American Family under Pressure* [1977], Levitar and Belous *What's Happening to the American Family?* [1981]; Hayden's *Redesigning the American Dream* [1984]).

These discussions also always entail thoughts about motherhood in America, and how women should and should not behave as females and as mothers. In these demarcations and discussions of motherhood, it seems that the female in America is placed in a highly moralized position. Consequently, a rather basic but nonetheless crucial ideological underpinning of American society influences this work's analysis. Motherhood has been iconized ever since the frontier "made" America. The woman – who was also always automatically a mother – appears to still be thought of as the civilizer, full of pure good and saint-like morality (cf. Kaplan, Amy 24), many decades after the closing of the frontier. In short: motherhood, in America, is sacred, and it is a woman's greatest task and gift in life, which implies that this role for women has undergone only few changes. Traditional notions of motherhood, even though contested by feminism in the



1960s and 1970s as well as through political change still seem to be iconized and highly idealized in American society (Levitar and Belous 15-20). That is to say that in academic works about mothering and childcare, the implications that mothers (and not fathers) are the gatekeepers of morality can be found, the 1950s notion of Republican Motherhood arguably still haunts the minds of many Americans (cf. Tyler May, 228).

Since the mid-1980s though relatively little has been written about motherhood in America and its future. Academics instead looked back, like Elaine Tyler May's *Homeward Bound* and Arlene Skolnick's *Embattled Paradise* did in their discussions of motherhood and family life in America. There are few to none books or publications with social, ideological, feminist or political agendas focusing explicitly on mothering in the 1990s or 2000s respectively. Why motherhood became such a relatively ignored topic in contemporary research cannot be satisfyingly answered at this point, but one possible explanation might be the relative decrease in feminist activity in post-Cold War America. There seemed to be comparatively less urgency to figure out what was happening to the American family when there were so many other issues (such as the Gulf Wars or the terrorist threat in the 2000s) to be concerned about. It might further be argued that women considered part of Third Wave Feminism were less concerned with family and motherhood ideals than with work equality and issues of sexuality, such as gay and transgender rights.<sup>1</sup>

However, all of the books and publications dealing with motherhood in America evidence a key factor of this work: the 1950s are the ideal all other family

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<sup>1</sup> See Baumgardner and Richards' "Manifesta – Young Women, Feminism and the Future" for a more detailed discussion of Third Wave Feminism.

arrangements are measured against. The nuclear, suburban, middle-class 1950s American family, as will become apparent in the first and third chapters of this study, still is – in 2012- the goal to strive for, and it takes up such centrality in American thinking about family and society that its influence is nearly inescapable.

Therefore, the three cases of filicide and the reactions they caused between 1994 and 2011 might be able to shed some light on what motherhood meant and was supposed to be in this time, and how 1950s idea(l) might have influenced these meanings and expectations. But this study can only be a first start, and perhaps the case studies here can serve as a future incentive for more research about motherhood in America after the end of the Cold War.

Next to the (general) question of motherhood, and in order to successfully explain filicide in relation to what it means for mainstream America, it will be necessary to deal with maternal filicide as a psychological and legal issue (cf. especially Wilczynski's *Child Homicide*; or Rubin's *The Supreme Court and the American Family* and Worrall's *Offending Women* for further research), to set the right framework for my own analysis. Obviously, filicide in all its shapes has been researched extensively, but in the field of American Studies there has, as of now, not been a comprehensive study about intersections of idealized/iconized motherhood and maternal filicide in the United States.

Hence, an uncomfortable question for this study arises: why study it at all in American Studies? Why not leave it up to psychologists and lawyers to deal with maternal filicide? While this topic is, admittedly, not an easy one to stomach, I believe it is important to talk about it in the field of American Studies. Especially because there are, as of now, no works about how maternal filicide is reacted to in

the American media, and certainly none from the point of view that, from these reactions, we can draw more genuine conclusions about what society expects from their mothers than we can from looking at "good" mothers. I believe this might help us to not only understand how Americans deal with these horrific crimes, but also gives more accurate insight into what society expects of mothers, and how these expectations are reinforced, rather than re-considered, by the media.

## **Methods**

The contemporary ideal(ized) motherhood is evaluated through the dissection of the reactions to three cases of maternal filicide in the 1990s and 2000s. This study therefore works with the assumption that from these reactions to confrontations with the most deviant side of motherhood, rather than looking at actual idealized female lives in politics and culture, expectations in American mothers can be carved out.

The questions at hand will be answered through several sub- questions. First of all, what are concepts of ideal motherhood and where do they come from? To do this, a historical perspective is necessary. The first chapter will give an insight into motherhood and its cultural, social and political implications in American history. Without a historical framework about the "history" of motherhood in culture and politics, it will be impossible to truly understand why the three cases were reacted to the way they were.

Due to the scope of this paper, however, motherhood in America since 1945 to 1990 is focused on. In essence, the first chapter of this work will be a theoretical and historical overview over the major developments in America, working to

explain and detect changes in perception of motherhood and gender roles over time, while incorporating politics and culture into my analysis. Hence, I will deal with, for example, the post-war return to domesticity and the baby boom in the 1940s and '50s, the rise of second wave feminism as well as issues such as abortion and contraception in the 1960s and '70s, and the 1980s and '90s' impact of neo-conservative politics.

As I will, instead of looking at representations of ideal motherhood in America rather deal with its exact opposite, the second chapter has to focus on maternal filicide, its motifs and consequences. In practice, how and why filicide is argued to happen is explained, and connecting all chapters of this work into a greater whole, conclusions are drawn about society's reactions when ideal and real expressions of motherhood clash.

Concerning the three case studies, the third and major part of this paper, I work largely with the print media and television's presentations of the mothers. Trying to be as comprehensive as possible, not only articles from outlets like the *New York Times* and *Time Magazine* will be consulted, but also works published in tabloids or gossip-magazines/websites, such as *People Magazine*, *New York Post* and *TMZ.com*.

The focus further lies only on national, and not regional/ local newspapers, because this study is ultimately concerned with American rather than regionally differing ideas about and expectations in motherhood. While analyzing and dissecting the articles, the political background of the newspapers will also occasionally play a role, as this can influence the flavoring of the coverage.

The articles in the third part were selected after the initial sighting of over a

hundred articles written and published about the three cases all in all. For each case, red threads found in several articles were chosen as the indicator of which pieces to include. Articles were then incorporated either because they were most representative of the themes identified in the coverage or, on the other hand, because they were most strikingly different or critical.

Most of the pieces examined here were published immediately after the trials and the verdicts, which serves a purpose. These immediate responses are the most telling reactions to these cases one can find, as they are often instinctive, emotionally charged and designed to appeal to an audience as large as possible. They, more so than articles published and written later in time, can thus be taken as more accurate reflections of American values and society's ideas of motherhood, because they are less mediated through the benefit of hindsight. In the Smith and Yates cases though there will be articles dealt with that were published later in time. These pieces are important mostly for the question of whether or not ideas and appropriations of these women's crimes have changed over time.

Next to newspapers and magazines television will take up some room in this analysis. The popular TV Show *Law&Order* incorporated plot lines mirroring the Smith and Yates cases, while Anthony's case received tremendous attention from national TV shows, such as *48 Hours* and Nancy Grace's show. These productions then also play a role in the case studies. Further, in the Anthony case, the Internet's role in the coverage of the cases will have to be taken into account.

Beforehand, a brief note on the cases as such: in the chapters dealing with the trials and their coverage, the aim is to demarcate the media's reactions, with

questions of who is influencing whom (the media or American society) finding only very little room in this. Further, details of the murders will not be elaborated at great length but only when they became important for the trials themselves. Other than that, it was important to keep the often painfully detailed descriptions of the murders out of this study as much as possible. Objectivity was key in this study (even though that was not always easy) and a replication of the often sensationalist tone of some articles was avoided as much as possible.

After this being said, the first chapter, as mentioned above, is an overview of the history of motherhood in America since 1945 and its major changes and developments. This following chapter functions as the historical backdrop against which all three filicide case studies have to be read. It is then followed by a brief introduction into filicide and the influence gender and mental illness has on it, which all leads up to the studies and discussions of the cases of Susan Smith, Andrea Yates and Casey Anthony.

## **2. The Personal is Political : Motherhood in America, 1945- 1989**

It appears that for the most part of American history, a woman is thought of as always automatically a wife and a mother but hardly as an individual. The representation of women in society, politics and popular culture gradually underwent the shift from mother and wife to woman, just like women only gradually claimed their right to be more than somebody's wife or mother (cf. Levitar and Belous 56; Skolnick 101-124)

All the more important is it to evaluate how society at large thinks and feels about motherhood. Mothering in America cannot be examined without looking at family in the United States, be it its idealized 1950s version or its realities (single-parent households, low income families, childless marriages).

But why should such an analysis be undertaken when there are questions of the media reactions to criminal mothers at hand? Because Susan Smith, Andrea Yates and Casey Anthony were mothers, their motherhood as such definitely influenced the way their cases were reported about. Hence, it is harder to understand how the three cases of maternal filicide in Chapter 4 were dealt with if constructions, idealizations and challenges of motherhood in America are not taken into account. The three cases need to be considered in light of what motherhood means in America, and how the ideals and realities of mothering, gender roles, and family life have (or have not) changed. This chapter aims to give an overview of how motherhood was defined, what was expected from American mothers over the course of history, and how all of these notions stand in relation to social policies.

In order to do this, the chapter is divided into three sub-chapters. In the first

chapter, covering 1945 to 1963, the post-World War II American family and especially the 1950s suburban, nuclear family are discussed. The second sub-chapter deals with the decade between the publication of Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and *Roe v. Wade*, the law that made abortions legal nationwide. Therefore, milestones of the women's rights movement and the most important of social policies (concerning, for example, abortion, divorce laws, etc.) provide the framework for the analysis of changes in attitudes and realities. This will then also be evidenced in the third and last sub-chapter, which covers the time span from 1973 (*Roe v. Wade*) to the end of Ronald Reagan's second presidency in 1989. In all of this, 20<sup>th</sup> century politics are as important as popular culture; facts and numbers are as important as history of thought.

In essence, this chapter looks at the evolution and development of the concept of motherhood, but it cannot look at motherhood of different ethnicities or same-sex parents. This is due to the fact that the three cases to be dealt with in Chapter 4 all revolve around white women.

As mentioned above, the main analysis starts in 1945, at the end of World War II. But *how* and *why* women should mother is a part of America's self-understanding basically from the moment the first white settlers set foot on American soil (cf. Keniston 9- 11; Hayden 68 - 71). A short insight into Puritan family ideals is therefore beneficial. And "in its early years, the United States had a higher total fertility rate than many European nations" (Levitar and Belous 40), showing how important the family was in the Colonies. Puritan discourse about family tells us what place motherhood should take in society. The colonies' ideal of motherhood "already valued tenderness" (Kaplan, Ann. 22). A woman was



supposed to possess qualities such as “piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness” (Kaplan, Ann. 24). These, arguably, became values of eternal importance in American motherhood.

While these character traits remained mainly untouched, society changed. Consequently, a woman's workload did as well. The Industrial Revolution was one of the most significant external and social developments that impacted American family life. Out of the changes in industry and work life came the era's “high modernist family” (Kaplan, Ann. 20). The post-Industrial Revolution family had become smaller than its precedent, “nuclear, isolated with the husbands often distanced from the work place.” (Kaplan, Ann. 27) This meant a change of maternal practice: “Previously, women had mothered children in addition to producing goods and services for themselves, their family, and their society.” (Risman 72) Now, their focus was on the education and nurturing of their children. “The very notion of motherhood” then “is a radical modern invention.” (Risman 72)

Hence, the common notion of “mother” - a stay-at-home mom, full-time homemaker, wife in a heterosexual relationship – is one that has not as such existed before the rise of American Industry and the urbanization of the United States. Even though born from rapid change, this concept quickly became the only ideological concept of motherhood (cf. Keniston 11, Kaplan, Ann 22). It prevailed World War I mainly unchallenged. This is evidenced by the fact that up until 1945, divorce rates were relatively low (cf. Levitar and Belous 28). These low divorce rates allow for the interpretation that both marriage and family were bonds only death could break. Despite all hardships and troubles men, women and their children might have faced, divorce was most often completely out of the question.

Further, this also means that the rapid change in American economy, politics and global relations after World War I did not bring with them fundamental reconsideration of marriage and family ideals.

However, especially women were consciously thinking about their roles and duties in society. The 1920s saw a new wave of post- suffrage feminism, as Maureen Honey (1990) found in her study of 1920s periodical fiction. There was “wide-spread enthusiasm among middle-class women for substantial rethinking of gender roles” (“Gotham's Daughter's” 25). Mass-circulated stories featured female characters who broke away from their families (especially tyrannizing fathers) to seek creative fulfillment in the big cities. These characters followed their dreams, hungered for “knowledge, variety, transformation” (Honey, “Gotham's Daughter's” 29) and they resisted marriage.

But despite these models of female accomplishment and autonomy, society at large did not change. Marriage and motherhood in the 1920s still was the glue that held it all together. Middle-class women's day-dreams of escaping into a different life were only rarely accomplished, few women in the “Roaring Twenties” lived up to the liberal ideals. What is more is that all these aspirations of female creativity and liberation never really seem to have sparked substantial challenges to patriarchy or well-organized feminist activism. Effectively, women's hopes and dreams in the 1920s remained exactly that: hopes and dreams one escaped to while doing the chores around the home.

A first, rather big 20th-century change in American families took place during the Great Depression, when American fertility suffered a tremendous blow (cf. Levitar and Belous 41). American families hence were becoming smaller in

number of children. This in any case should not be considered an outcome of the feminism of the 1920s, but much rather a logic consequence of extreme economic hardship. Parents or yet childless couples were simply more cautious not to have (more) children they could not feed.

Once things got better for Americans, reproduction increased again and with this, the “ideology of family life, especially gender roles, grew more traditional during the 1930s” (Skolnick 85-86). But the 1930s were not completely static in its ideology. The practice of dating, for example, “became an entrenched custom among young people” (Skolnick 85-86). The number of premarital relationships among teenagers increased and led to the rise of something called “technical virginity.” (Skolnick 86) This was, in short, an expression of sexuality that allowed girls to experiment with the other sex without losing their virginity. Through “technical virginity” young women could still live up to society's expectations that one should enter marriage as a virgin. At the same time, this arguably allowed them to enter marriage with a more clear idea of their sexual needs and desires than their mothers did.

While some details of American family life and motherhood had changed since the Puritans the big picture, in which a woman happily was wife and mother first, remained the same. The Depression had actually “sowed the seeds of a traditionalism that would last more than three decades.” (Skolnick 76) This traditionalism should also survive World War II and beyond, effectively helping to shape the 1950s ideal nuclear family myth down the road (cf. Skolnick 52). But before then, there was the curious case of Rosie the Riveter and her sisters, who seemed to challenge all these notions of femininity, motherhood and domestic life.

Below, the issue of war workers and the subsequent female retreat into the domestic will be analyzed, as well as the “Freudian” 1950s nuclear family myth and its political implications for Cold War America.

## **2.1 1945- 1963: Suburban Victorianism and Republican Motherhood**

Thinking of 1940s America's women, one image comes to mind almost immediately: Rosie the Riveter. Rosie the Riveter became the stand-in for all those women gladly doing their share for America's great fight against fascism everywhere and entered the wartime workforce. Now as much as then a national treasure, Rosie riveted her way through war, working jobs that men had done before they went overseas to defeat the Nazis. Once the Germans and the Japanese were defeated, hard-working women - whose “patriotic fervor”, not beauty, made men fall in love with them, thus arguably briefly defining a new beauty ideal (cf. Honey, “New Roles” 42)— happily retreated back into the domestic sphere. They settled down with the real heroes of war, and gave birth to equally patriotic American babies, the future scientists, lawyers and soldiers. Or so the story goes.

That women “entered the labor force out of a patriotic desire” (Honey, “New Roles” 37) and left it at the end of the Second World War with equal enthusiasm for the nation's needs is “almost completely false.” (Honey, “New Roles” 37) Many American women certainly did take jobs at factories to show their loyalty to the nation. But 50% of all women working in the war industry did so because the pay was simply better than in the service industry (cf. Honey, “New Roles” 48). And “war work was a step up the occupational ladder for women, most of the new

entrants to the labor force had prewar work experience.” (Honey, “New Roles” 48) A striking 75% of women who had worked during World War II wanted to keep their jobs (Honey, “New Roles” 48). The millions of Rosies were certainly doing their share to make sure the United States would win the war – but they were also hoping to gain more out of their efforts than a husband and a baby (cf. Honey, “New Roles” 41).

The distortion of female war workers' real motifs and desires in popular culture and the American mind serves as one of the first striking examples of how woman- and motherhood was thought of in 1940s America. The traditionalism that had become so essential in the 1930s could not be interrupted by the millions of American women who had gone out in the labor force. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century feminist discussions, especially those of the 1920s, took the backseat and “traditional conceptions of gender roles dominated public and private life.” (Skolnick 52) Hence, this time – roughly from the 1930s to the 1960s - was often called “the 'long amnesia.’” (Skolnick 52)

This “amnesia” is obvious in the 1940s and in the case of the female war workers. The women who had helped to make victory possible were robbed of their hard-earned independence and autonomy in favor of male workers. And what is more: no discussion about it took place (cf. Honey, “New Roles” 47). The needs of the soldiers returning home were more important than those of the women. Reassuring the masculinity of the “psychologically and physically maimed soldiers” (Mirkin 40) by making them useful contributors to civilian life again had first priority.

<sup>2</sup> Male needs overpowered female accomplishments.

Already during the war, American women were bombarded constantly with

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<sup>2</sup> A beautiful dissection of this issue can be found in the 1946 movie *The Best Years of Our Lives*.

extensive propaganda funded by the United States Office of War Information (OWI). Articles and books promoted the steady belief that a woman's real place was the home. The explicit goal of these publications was to make women believe that their work outside the house or the service industry was really only temporary, and would no longer be required once the men would return home (cf. Honey, "New Roles" 41).<sup>3</sup> This was propaganda that nipped any possible rebellion of the female war workers in the bud. In these mass-circulated stories, home-loving, capable women worked hard and proved that they were just as good as any man. But in the end and almost without exception, the characters fell in love and went back "home" to continue their real patriotic duty as nurturers, care-takers, cooks, maids, wives and, most importantly, mothers.

This retreat happened swiftly in reality. In the 1950s, the U.S. boasted a "birthrate that approached that of India" (Skolnick 52), or what Elaine Tyler May called the "domestic explosion" (Tyler May 5) or the baby-boom. With millions of new mothers in America, the nation logically became occupied with what motherhood should be once more .

The very bottom line of late 1940s and 1950s discussion about motherhood was anything but new. The century-old belief that a woman's life was characterized by "wholehearted commitment to family and their happy submersions into domestic life" (Kutulas 15) reigned. All the while, reality looked different than what was propagated in the media and by the government: "In 1952, there were two million more wives at work than at the peak of wartime production." (Davies and

<sup>3</sup> Arlene Skolnick, on the other hand, in *Embattled Paradise*, (1991) argues that there was "no elaborate propaganda campaign to get women back home." (Skolnick 66) Maureen Honey, however, in "New Roles for Women and the Feminine Mystique" (1983) through her analysis of popular fiction of the 1940s proved that the OWI actively recruited women for work and then subsequently made sure that the writers working for the magazines under OWI influence would propagate the retreat back into the domestic.

Smith 42) This increase in female labor has manifold reasons, but it arguably might have had origins in the fact that many men who returned home were severely injured, or, on the other hand, because not all Rosies backed down.

Nonetheless, the idea(s) of maternal bliss had re-surged with new fervor, so much so that motherhood was even argued to be what made a woman finally human (cf. Marshall 68). But with the baby-boom came fears and anxieties, the majority of which were the direct outcome of Cold War politics and concerns. For one, the many mothers who worked were under tremendous pressure from society and politics to be perfect mothers. They had to avoid raising “weak” children who might fall victim to Communist propaganda (cf. Tyler May 96- 104). But also those women who were full-time homemakers saw their share of unrealistically high expectations in their parenting skills and prospects of horrible outcomes if they did not fulfill these expectations.

These maternal anxieties had their roots in what is called the “Freudian fifties” mindset. Psychoanalysis and Freud's theories became extremely popular and defined the era's thought about mental well-being and psyche (cf. Kutulas 16; Marshall 71). Hardly surprising then that motherhood in the 1950s came with clear rules and instructions derived from Freud's theories about childhood trauma, psychoanalysis and unexpressed desires.

On the downside of all this, 1950s theories about childhood and motherhood often instilled severe feelings of guilt (cf. Kutulas 24, 30; Kaplan, Ann 45). Dr. Spock, in his advice book, which is perhaps the most prolific of its kind, for example, claimed that a mother had the “ominous power to destroy their children's' innocence and make them discontent forever.” (Skolnick 70) In many other

parental advice books, mothering was advised to happen with an “emphasis on good feelings” (Skolnick 70), or what was called “fun morality”, which was also partly influenced by Freudian theories. In practice, a mother had to walk the fine line between control and permissiveness. She was urged to be tender, understanding and loving, to become the nerve center of her family. At the same time, she had to teach strict morals and values to her children as to prevent a rise of fascism and communism (cf. Tyler May Chapter 4). Motherhood in the 1950s in America was, in essence, Republican Motherhood *par excellence*, a system in which mothers are the “reproducers of ethnic collectivities, reproducers of the boundaries between ethnic/national groups ... women participate in the ideological reproduction of the state collectivity and are transmitters of its culture.” (Phoenix and Woollett 17) All of this was logically especially important for Cold War ideology of the 1950s, in which waves of Red Scares swept through the nation. All those who did not comply with the mainstream were deemed communists and a threat to America. This found its way into the mind of the American mother: with her and her abilities at child-rearing, America would either stand or fall.

Change in the importance of motherhood – and the horrific outcomes of mothering gone awry- was also spurred by the new economic well-being of America. By the mid-1950s, 60% of Americans had “attained a middle-class standard of living” (Skolnick 54) and these middle-class families moved to the suburbs. The rise of American suburbia<sup>4</sup> amplified fears that American families had been turned into “matriarchies with overbearing wives, emasculated husbands, over-involved mothers, absent fathers.” (Skolnick 60) While the husbands were

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<sup>4</sup> “By the end of the decade [the 1950s], the new suburbia contained more than a quarter of the American population.” (Skolnick 59)



away from home making the money, the women stayed home with their children. A suburban mother could thus exert 24/7 influence on her children. This could then, in turn, lead to them being overbearing and controlling, while the fathers only spent little time with their offspring. This was, again, a deeply Freudian anxiety about powerful women and emasculated men.

Therefore, the (suburban) American mother in the 1940s and 1950s was supposed to be a child-bearer and - rearer who loves intensively, but leaves directing her family's fate to her husband. Ironically, she carried a tremendous responsibility to raise the "right" kind of children basically all by herself on her apron-clad shoulders, but had to carefully avoid being anything close to powerful, controlling or overbearing (cf. Skolnick 60; Wellton 45)

Despite its contradictions, blatant sexism (at home as well as in the workplace) and manifold ambiguities, the "[m]iddle-class family of the 1950s" was and still is regarded "as the most evolved version of a timeless, nuclear family, its division into gender and generational roles 'functional' to the psychological needs of the family members and to those of the larger society." (Skolnick 64) The myth of the suburban family created a wondrous decade of perfect marital harmony, a paradise in which women stayed at home and raised their children with tenderness, love and in line with the thousands of parental guidelines of the 1950s. Men could then remain in charge, even though they were mostly away from home and hearth. The idealized, suburban American family is the image all families in the decades were measured against, and it is the ideal that still prevails until this day.

But what family life in practice looked like for most Americans in the 1950s

and beyond has little to do with this myth. The “neo-Victorian version of separate spheres allowed women no other role than that of the wife and mother, despite the fact that women were entering the workforce in increasing numbers.” (Skolnick 65) The 1950s and their contradictions birthed the issues that would dominate the 1960s and 1970s. Conflicts began to boil under the picture-perfect suburban, wealthy and healthy surface of America (cf. Skolnick 76). Racial inequality came to the foreground, African-Americans went to the streets to fight for their rights, Rock'n'Roll had created a seemingly insuperable generation gap between parents and their children. Concerning women, one book – Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* - in particular changed the fate of American women's history irreversibly.

## **2.2 1963- 1973 The Problem with no Name**

The 1960s gave new urgency to a series of issues, questions and aspirations for women that already had been verbalized in the 1920s, but that had been silenced by the Depression and the traditionalism it gave birth to. In the 30 years to follow the Depression, a woman was always a mother and a wife, and if she was not, there was something wrong with her. That motherhood and the tasks as wives were not nearly as fulfilling as America wanted its women to believe became painfully clear in 1963, when Betty Friedan published her groundbreaking, decade-defining *The Feminine Mystique* (cf. Phoenix and Woollett 13). The book and the movement it inspired as such were not spontaneous reactions to a new decade. Much rather were they the outcome of developments that had begun in the 1950s, women's chafing against the hyper-domesticity of the 1950s.

Postwar- feminism is most often associated with single women going out on

the streets, fighting against inequality and discrimination in the workplace and politics. Second Wave Feminism is automatically linked with a certain militancy (the image of the unattractive, loud-mouthed feminist burning her bra that still prevails has its origins in exactly this time). Of course, social and political issues were important to the movement<sup>5</sup>, but for this chapter, the feminist dissection of family is most interesting. American family life now became challenged and discussed by American feminists<sup>6</sup> who were also often wives and mothers. Thus, they were precisely not the negatively stereotyped lesbian, bitter, men-hating deviants. Wives and mothers felt the need to speak out on behalf of their millions of fellow American women feeling depressed, suffocated and unfulfilled.

Consequently, Friedan's book hit a nerve in 1963, because she was concerned with the lives of American housewives and mothers, the realm the majority of women lived in in the 1960s. As she conducted interviews with women her own age, she found that all was not well in American homes. The American Dream that women "had found true feminine fulfillment" (Friedan 13) as mothers and wives, were cherished by their husbands and "respected as a full and equal partner to man in this world ... , had everything that women ever dreamed of" (Friedan 13) had not come true. Instead, wives and mothers felt burnt-out (as we would call this phenomenon today), pushed to the edge of society, with no real contribution to make to society. They felt stuck in a vacuum of doing monotonous housework, mothering and marital duties, feeling a hole in their lives not even the newest of kitchen appliances could fill. The malaise was felt more pronounced by

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Adrienne Rich's *Sexual Politics* demonstrates to the feminist occupation with inequality and discrimination.

<sup>6</sup> Whereas First Wave Feminism was much less concerned with family and motherhood (cf. Skolnick 103).

women than by men<sup>7</sup>, and it made it difficult for American mothers/wives to remain silent. And remain silent they did not.

What did Second Wave feminists have to say about motherhood and marriage? In feminist theory – especially patriarchy theory - family and motherhood control women. In Kate Millet's words, women are “ruled through the family (since they have little or no formal relationship to the State) and are socialized by it.” (Millet quoted in Mirkin 44) Further, motherhood as it “arose after the Industrial Revolution” (Mirkin 45) was regarded anything but natural. Rather, it served male interests in that it confined women to the domestic sphere, leaving them voiceless and powerless in the political and economical sphere. Feminist theory of the family also focused on the huge gap between ideal and the reality of families: in 1960, almost half of all women working outside the home (cf. Skolnick 109). In essence then, 1960s feminists, while fighting for equality and the end of sex-based discrimination, also strove for a re-thinking and re-shaping of domesticity and gender roles in families. They called for an end of the idealization of motherhood and a more equal distribution of work in the home, as well as for more support for and acceptance of (single) working mothers (cf. Mirkin 53, Skolnick, chapter 4).

Another issue that helped to spark discussion about mothering and sexuality in the 60s was the approval of the birth control pill in 1960. If a girl chose to have premarital intercourse, the pill allowed her to prevent pregnancy, and the impact of the pill as such on society stands undisputed. One consequence of the pill worth mentioning at this point is the growth of a “single's culture.” (Skolnick 88)

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<sup>7</sup> “[T]he rate of depression among married women is about 45 percent higher than the rate for married men.” (Levitar and Belous 26)

In turn, premarital intercourse had become more widely accepted by the mid-1970s. Increased from one-fifth of parents in the 1960s, more than one-half of parents in the 1970s (cf. Levitar and Belous 23) claimed to have no problems with their children premarital sexual experiences. This is because through the pill, pregnancy became avoidable. Women embraced their right to postpone motherhood through contraception. Had sex been considered “dirty and dangerous before marriage” (Skolnick 86) for women as it posed the danger of having a child out of wedlock, sexuality became detached from reproduction with the advent of the pill. The new methods of contraception gave American women a chance to claim more autonomy over their own sexual needs and desires: “By privately and routinely taking a pill ... women were suddenly liberated to experience their sexuality unaccompanied by the fear of pregnancy.” (Skolnick 89) A new sexuality that could and did take place outside of marriage was on its way, most poignantly in the free-love movement of the Hippies. This was – as widely known- also greatly influenced by the era's most serious and most contested military conflict, the Vietnam War. As Americans challenged and protested the government's actions, many young people questioned their society's moral standards, and most crucially so its “notions of sexual propriety.” (Skolnick 89)

The advent of the pill and the arguably less restrictive sexual morals it allowed, lead to a loosening of morals in many critics' eyes. These changes were interpreted as a sign of society growing more and more corrupted. But neither the pill nor the Hippie movement rang in the total destruction and rejection of family and parenthood. It is true that traditional gender roles were certainly contested by feminists, that medical progress changed sexuality and that political awareness

entailed social experiments. But the family was most definitely not on its way out in the 1960s and 1970s. To think so would underestimate the power of human longing for stability and companionship only a family offers. Most American women and young girls, despite being aware of the women's rights movement and its dissection of the family, did not profoundly change their attitudes (cf. Risman 91). In a survey conducted in 1965 and 1966 with teenage girls about their wishes for the future, the majority displayed a “baseline orientation towards domesticity, based on values she internalized while growing up.” (Risman 82) This proves that the bottom line for American girls and young women – marriage and motherhood, a happy family as the great goals in life - remained the same.

Hence, the “if” of motherhood in the 1960s was of much lesser concern to most women in America than was the question of “how”. Had the 1950s “psychologized” motherhood, the 1960s were a time of “medicalization of childbirth and childcare.” (Marshall 67) Especially the issue of post-natal depression (which will also be important later on in the discussion of maternal filicide and the cases) gained a lime-light position in the motherhood-discussions of the 1960s and early 1970s. With childbirth and mothering becoming subject for medical scrutiny and predominantly male expertise, the “blues” were a hot topic. In the widely-read parental advice manuals of the time, the “blues” (the name alone belittles the dimension post-natal depressions can have) and the advice given on them might as well have been written in the 1940s and 1950s. In her study of parent manuals, Harriette Marshall found this: “The 'blues' experienced by a majority of women are either inexplicable, irrational, 'women's troubles' or they are explained in terms of women being at the mercy of their hormones.” (Marshall 71) Women suffering from

post-natal depression were presented as irrational and impulsive. They needed male guidance in the shape of doctors to overcome the “blues”. Instead of encouraging women to form networks to help each other and to consult women of older age or with more experience as mothers, new moms struggling were urged to believe in medicine. In the 1960s, medical advice effectively devalued female experience and “insider's” knowledge, leading to a “total dismissal of advice given by women speaking as mothers.” (Marshall 73)

In the 1960s and 1970s, to conclude this, society was less concerned with Republican motherhood, but more with issues of birth control, medical progress in the birthing practices of women, female liberation and young people's willingness to experiment with alternative forms of families (cf. Skolnick, 75-100).

All of this, however, did not significantly change the way motherhood was thought of. At the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, motherhood kept its emotional and social importance for most American women, no matter how contested it was by certain groups. Change did happen, but not to a degree to which one could speak of a fundamental destruction of motherhood or a change in its perception. Family was still the foundation society rested on. Women still eagerly chose to become mothers even though they had the means to prevent pregnancies and to work outside the home, and despite feminist efforts to shake the family as an institution to the core.

Regardless of this, for many critical observers the 1950s nuclear family that had become the ideal to strive for was on the brink of disappearing in midst of the social eruptions of the 1960s, even though this was hardly the case (cf. Redman 53). In the decades to follow, fears about the downfall of the family was still a most

pressing matter – and new divorce laws as well as the legalization of abortion in 1973 and seemed to be another brick in that wall.

To many, the family question in the 1970s in America was urgent: “Following the post- World War II baby boom, fertility rates have plummeted to historic lows.” (Levitar 39) That this was simply a natural consequence of the baby-boom and the invention of the pill, which reduced unplanned and unwanted pregnancies, seemed to strike only a few. The baby-boomers had come of age and especially the women had greater employment possibilities, which they often seized. They enjoyed sexuality detached from reproduction relying on birth control and postponed marriage. But once they were married, many of them wanted to have children, and this went for men as much as for women, no matter what paths feminism had blazed. However, people chose to have fewer children. Dual-income marriages came with half the time available to spend on a great number of babies. In a way, couples chose quality over quantity.

What also was not taken into consideration was that “it appears that in the 1970s the United States continued to experience a higher birth rate than many other industrialized countries.” (Levitar and Belous 43) Compared to earlier decades (especially, of course, the baby-boom) numbers *did* go down, but they were still higher in America than in other Western nations, effectively debunking the fear that America as a nation was close to dying out. Or differently put: if the lower fertility rates were a sign of American society dangerously close to dying out, other nations must have had already died out.



### 2.3. 1973- 1990: Divorce, Abortion and Ronald Reagan

Another factor that played into the pessimistic outlooks many had on the American family was the issue of divorce, an important development of which had taken place in 1969 in California. By 1983, all but two states had adopted variations of California's 1969 no-fault divorce law<sup>8</sup> (cf. Levitar and Belous 33), essentially changing marriage and divorce. No-fault divorce laws made it much easier to leave an unfulfilled, unhappy marriage. And consequences soon became visible: By “1973 the divorce rate [was] reaching 5.2 per 1000 in 1979.” (Levitar and Belous 29) By the middle of the 1970s, “the annual number of divorce exceeded one million for the first time” (Skolnick 129) in American history. The frameworks of families were changing in the 1970s. More than 75 percent of all Americans lived in arrangements that had nothing to do with the so-called normal family (cf. Levitar and Belous), which was therefore actually no longer the norm. By the end of the decade “divorced, separated, widowed and never-married women headed more than 8 million families” (Levitar and Belous 8). Women were at the nerve center of social change in postwar America.

What did this then mean for motherhood in America especially in the 1970s? Single motherhood became more and more wide-spread, and with it came new challenges. Discussion of the impact a working mother had on her child(ren)'s behavior, happiness and development flared up. Most of the discussion revolved around the damage latch-key children would carry into their adult life. Arguing that latch-key children would have lacked parental guidance during childhood and

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<sup>8</sup> Which states that a spouse asking for divorce does not have to prove that the other spouse did something wrong – such as cheating- in the marriage. Simply claiming “irreconcilable differences” became enough to legally dissolve a marriage.

youth, there were more inclined towards youth delinquency<sup>9</sup>, drug abuse, teenage pregnancies (Tyler May 201).

So, despite the changed conditions of family life, the most basic understanding of motherhood did not. Even after Second Wave Feminism, childcare was still an ultimately female responsibility and, in the same breath, female fulfillment. Special attention was ergo paid to single mothers, and not single fathers (cf. Risman 51). The 1950s ideal of the stay-home mom who perfectly raises her children, nurtures them and finds true bliss in mothering still prevailed. Consequently then, the 1970s saw the argumentation that a single mother could not provide the same kind of support and happiness for her children as a woman who was married to the children's father could.

Evidence for the fact that the 1950s ideal was still haunting the minds of many Americans in the late 1970s can be found in the politics of the time and. Even though there were more and more single mothers (cf. Keniston 5), the government did not implement social policies that would improve single working mother's economic situations. This then speaks for the unwillingness of the majority to re-think the 1950s suburban family ideal that had ceased to exist, if it had ever been a reality. The failure of Nixon's Family Assistance Plan (hereafter: FAP) in 1970 serves as evidence for the conditions single mothers lived in throughout all of the 1960s and 1970s. While FAP would have expanded access to day-care facilities for working mothers (cf. Quadagno 15) and federal government would have covered the costs of day-care, it also actively "promoted child-bearing and encouraged women to leave the labor market and remain in the household to

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<sup>9</sup> "Show me a delinquent child and I'll show you a working mother." An anonymous letter, quoted in Friedan, quoted in Friedan.

care for their children.” (Quadagno 26) As FAP did not pass the Senate anyway, any analysis of FAP's possible outcomes is pure speculation. But its construction does strikingly show how “the replacement of a social program that paid benefits to single women by one that supported intact families with an employed male demonstrates how policy can be influenced by male dominance.” (Quadagno 19) Women of all lower-class households were in a lose-lose situation, and those who did not comply with the nuclear family ideal would have been especially punished. The 1970s were conservative in social policies and did nothing to improve single working mothers and their childrens' lives – a sign that despite the women's rights movement, the economic situation of women was by far worse than those of, for example, single fathers who had more income at their disposal (cf. Risman 51; Quadagno 14). Here, we find no change in attitudes towards allegedly deviant mothers, but possibly a radicalization of self-sufficiency ideals brought forwards against them.

Abortion, next to divorce, became the hot topic. The nationwide legalization of abortion in the ground-breaking 1973 *Roe v. Wade* made reproduction a deeply private choice. Abortion agitated especially Conservatives, and the issue's importance is prevalent until this day. The legalization of terminations of pregnancies, for many, spoke of the moral decay of the United States, “linking [the] most vexing problems to defects in individual moral character.” (Skolnick 138) In the case of abortion, it becomes apparent once more how much blame *women* shared (after all, only women can have an abortion). The 1950s had seen a wave of Freudian- inspired parenting manuals implying that a child's misbehavior or later failures in life were directly to blame on the mother's lack of character. The 1980s

then interpreted abortions and divorce rates as equal signs of corrupted characters, most often on the side of the women.

How essential of a topic abortion really was for the self-understanding and identity of the United States is evidenced by the election of Ronald Reagan. He arguably won the presidency carried on a wave of antifeminist, pro-life backlash, and his strong refusal of abortions (even though he did sign, in 1967, the Therapeutic Abortion Bill) ( cf. Skolnick 123). Reagan and the Moral Majority that backed him up appealed to conservatives of all colors, as well as to voters. This is also confirmed by a poll commissioned in 1979 by Reagan's campaign, in which "seventy-one percent of the American people thought that 'many things our parents stood for are going to ruin right before our eyes'." (Dunn and Woodard 121) Reagan "promised a new era of national renewal emphasizing traditional values- the dignity of work, love for family and neighborhood, faith in God, belief in peace through strength and commitment to protect freedom as a legacy unique to America" (Dunn and Woodard 121). All these "values" were anything but new, but Reagan implied and promoted them at the right time: the United States, as a whole, felt that they had lost their self-confidence, and the charismatic actor from California was just the right man to restore that unshakable faith in the American nation.

What Reagan could use in direct relation to this re-emphasis on traditional values was the Cold War and its problems. The Cold War surged to new prominence under his presidencies compared to his predecessor, Carter, and led to a revival of conservative Christian values.<sup>10</sup> Not surprising then that, when

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<sup>10</sup> "The real crisis we face today is a spiritual one; at root, it is a test of moral will and faith." (Reagan 64).

confronted with an issue such as abortion, conservatives all over America were anxious about the destruction and downfall of the nuclear family. Because the 1980s saw increased focus on the family as the wall resisting Communist penetration, abortion was almost a crime, but most definitely a sin. For Reagan and the Moral Majority every life deserved to be lived, and this life began with conception. These very same notions of 1980s christian right-wing politics and its strong stances in issues such as abortion still abound today, and the current discussions and legislatures about abortion have their origin exactly in Reagan' neo-conservative, Christian presidencies.

What is perhaps most striking about the topic of abortion in the 1980s is that women's choices were yanked out of their hands. While *Roe v. Wade* made choices more personal, the discussion it sparked made choices political. An American mother, to exaggerate this, had no right to *not* have a baby – her motherhood was her service to the nation. If she chose to not bring the child into this world, she chose against America. To say it in the famous words of feminism: the personal is political. In the 1980s as much as 30 years earlier, women's lives and the most intimate of their choices were subject to “political statements.” (Phoenix and Woollet 15) “Not only [were] the circumstances in which women should give birth prescribed, but the age which they should give birth and how they should live after birth” (Phoenix and Woollett 15) were subject of political discussion and came under scrutiny in comparison to allegedly “normal” families' behaviors.

Beyond this and just like in the decades that preceded it, Reagan's 1980s America played the blame-game for all things seemingly going downhill in

America. At the receiving end of this were women, especially those who chose to, for example, have an abortion, get a divorce and even those who wanted to have a career, post-pone child-rearing or worked parallel to their domestic duties. If we draw connections from the 1950s to the 1980s, we can see that the 1950s' perception of woman- and motherhood has experienced many very real changes in day to day life, but was politically reaffirmed rather than reconsidered by the Reagan Revolution.

At the end of the 1980s and the Cold War, much had changed since Friedan's book jump started the Second Wave of Feminism, from the medicalization of motherhood, growing single-mother households and experiments with alternative family arrangements in, for example, communes (even though they often did not last for very long). And at the same time, very little had changed. A woman's work still should focus on the home, domesticity therefore remaining the ideological female status quo. The most sobering revelation that started to hit Americans however was that the myth of the nuclear family was no longer valid, no matter how conservative and traditional White House policies were: "So numerous are these family alternatives ... that feminists argue they should be studied as new forms of family arrangements, not as examples of deviant behavior." (Andersen 238) At the end of 1980s, nobody was really sure anymore what the typical – hence "normal"- American family actually was, or should be.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

Over the course of time, motherhood in the United States underwent many challenges, but also many reaffirmations. While some argued that motherhood

could not and should not be the only fulfillment for a woman, many others proclaimed it to be in a woman's "blood".

Furthermore, when motherhood was discussed from the 1940s to the 1980s, it was still often only being talked about as blissful fulfillment for women. That mothers had always struggled with the raising of children was hardly ever verbalized. Becoming a mother is a woman's eternal duty and the greatest gift she could ever receive. The real issues and challenges mothers faced found no place in public discussion, except for when it became obvious that the system and society had its flaws.

When these problems had to be dealt with, they were not - male - government's faults. If a mother's parenting skills were dubious, or if she did not conform to standards set by people who had no insight into the individual's life, she was automatically deemed a bad mother. Personal flaws, shortcomings and a corrupted character made her mothering worse than that of other women – that many mothers struggled not with their children as such, but with the lack of support in society was happily ignored. Personal responsibility was key (which was also resonated in Reagan's rejection of "welfare queens" alleged lack of personal responsibility and determination to be upwardly mobile). And those who failed to show this kind of responsibility were deemed pathological mothers.

When scholars argue, such as Levitar and Belous did in 1981, that history "indicates some basic shifts in stereotyped sex roles" (Levitar and Belous 14), one cannot help but want to contest this. There are many aspects to look at, but for the conclusion of this chapter, two are most interesting. First, the ever so heatedly discussed topic of abortion. Most women welcomed the legalization of abortion,

not because they *wanted* to have abortions – nobody wants to have to make this decision - but because they embraced *Roe v. Wade* as a legal decision that solidified women's rights to make their own choices. However, abortion was – and still is, as we speak, in 2012 – a hot potato, and politicians all had an opinion about it. Predominantly male politicians. What the discussion of abortion demonstrates is loss of female agency and autonomy – which will become apparent on the Case Studies in Chapter 4 as well. It further shows that in American society a woman's body sometimes is subject to male (political) discussion. In essence, men claim the right to decide what is best for women. True that there are dozens of female politicians – not all of them in favor of abortion, which is just as much of a choice as being pro-choice- but most of the voices raised fervently against abortion are male. Men, in the 1950s as much as in the very present, still feel obligated and privileged to interfere with a woman's most personal, most intimate and most challenging decisions.

A mother's identity is another issue that seems to evidence that little has changed in the way Americans think and feel about motherhood and the gender relations it entails. In the United States, a mother's identity is always inextricably linked to her child's identity, an idea that can be argued to have survived from the 1950s. This era – as such, the one decade in American history that all families that came after it have to live up to- were, as mentioned above, deeply Freudian times. Psychoanalysis imported into parenting manuals created the cult of psychological mothering, in which a mother's every action had tremendous impact on her child's psyche and behavior for all times to come. In consequence,

“[m]others are often thought of as being responsible for their children's every shortcoming in American culture ... [they] are perceived in some way



as responsible for their childrens' misbehavior, they may account for their behavior or apologize for it in order to save face." (Gordon 77, cf. also Marshall 81 pp.)

When a child misbehaves, it is ultimately the mother's fault, who becomes entrapped in a vacuum of no personal identity. Her identity is defined and characterized by her offspring's behavior, character, abilities and shortcomings (cf. Wellton 42-62; Gordon 71-101). She is not her own person, but only exists in relations with others – and especially so her male counterparts, and the well-doing of her male offspring, the leaders of the new generation. In the end, when it comes to motherhood from 1945- 1989, little has changed ideologically and politically.

The next chapter will deal with how psychology and sociology deal with the issue of filicide (which is, to a certain degree, also a [luckily rare] part of motherhood). In this analysis of why mothers especially kill their children, some of the issues raised above will re-occur.

### 3. Explaining the Inexplicable: The causes of maternal filicide

Maternal filicide, or filicide for that matter, knows no age, class, race and nationality. It occurs in every society, in all age groups and in every political system. And it is as old as time. This is testified by what can be called the first “famous” mother who killed her own children: Medea, the name-giving mythical character of Euripides' play *Medea*, written in 431 B.C. The persona of Medea, regardless of the fact that she is an ancient Greek figure, still holds significance in the way we think about maternal filicide and those who commit it (cf. Wilczynski 45). She is the angry, wrathful woman and mother who will not refrain from the most drastic of measures to get even. In the Greek classic mythical Medea, wife of Jason, kills their two sons to hurt Jason after he leaves her for another woman. Euripides' play is a testament to the fear of the raging woman, the bad mother, the vengeful female. Today, a mother who kills her own child out of retaliation is labeled as suffering from the “Medea Complex” ( cf. Liem and Koenraadt, 167).

It appears that “functions” of filicide have changed over time, as Marieke Liem, a Professor of Criminology, and Koenraadt, a Professor of Forensic Psychiatry and Psychology, point out: “In previous centuries filicide was used to control family size and weed out weak, abnormal, deformed and illegitimate children.” (167) Today, these reasons seem to play much less of a role in the assessment of offender's reasoning for filicides. Nonetheless though, maternal filicide is a reality, and one that can be found all over the world, at any time.

A theoretical discussion of the causes of filicide and the differences in filicide according to the gender of the offender should find room here, even though this study is mainly concerned with the cultural reception of and response to cases

of maternal filicide. Since the goal is to understand, examine and evaluate how the cases of Susan Smith, Andrea Yates and Casey Anthony were dealt with in the media and society, it is important to give at least some insight into how other disciplines – mainly psychology and sociology - handle maternal filicide. This is to better evaluate if and how media ignored some motifs of filicide established through psychological demarcation and accused the offenders of, for example, selfishness, emotional coldness, deviant sexuality (and sexual practices) or simply sheer brutality instead .

### **3.1 Crucial distinctions: Neonaticide, Infanticide and Filicide**

The term filicide basically describes the killing a child. It therefore denotes the murders of children committed by either a parent or a family member. A kidnapper, for example, who goes on to kill his victim in the spur of the moment is equally filicidal. The most common form of filicide, however, is the one committed by (one of the) parents of the child.

In this sub-chapter, the different categories of filicide are to be explained. When aiming for a definition of filicide, the distinction between filicide and infanticide has to be incorporated. The latter refers to the murder of an infant (children up to the age of one year, cf. Krusche et al., 192). Infanticide can be further split up into the subcategory of neonaticide, which describes the killing of a newborn child within 24 hours after birth ( cf. Krusche et al., 192).

Neonaticide, even though not part of the later case studies, deserves mention at this point because it is possibly the most frequent form of child homicide, and the form that is most often committed by mothers. Beyond this, is

the one that most often goes unreported. An explanation for this is simple: “women are ... more likely to be alone at home with a child when s/he dies, due to their primary childcare responsibilities ... , female filicides are less likely to be witnessed than male filicides.” (Wilczynski 31). Further, in a lot of the neonaticidal cases, the women's partner's, friends and families were not even aware of the offender's pregnancy. The women in question often either were not aware of their pregnancies (or claimed not to be) or went to great lengths to hide their pregnancy from the outside world (cf. Krischer et. al.,192). What is also interesting is that the phenomenon of newborns dying is most often treated as a tragic accident out of lack of evidence and filed as Cot Deaths (also known as Sudden Infant Syndrome [SIDS] or Sudden Unexplainable Deaths in Infancy [SUDIS]. Cf. Wilczynski 27; Liem and Koenraadt 173).<sup>11</sup> Researchers have suggested that 1.3- 4.7 %<sup>12</sup> (Wilczynski 27) of all child deaths filed under Cot Deaths, SIDS or SUDIS actually were homicides.

Why is neonaticide important for the discussion of the three cases, in which no neonaticides occurred?<sup>13</sup> The issue of killing a newborn right after birth strikingly shows how certain crimes are enabled by biology and gender, thus how sex can greatly influence the crimes committed. Neonaticide is an almost exclusively female category of filicide (cf. Liem and Koenraadt 168). Most women are, even today, the sole care-takers of children. This gives them the opportunity to dispose of their newborn babies fast, easy and often in secrecy. This goes to show how, when we deal with definitions and categories of maternal filicide, we have to

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<sup>11</sup> “One relevant factor is that SIDS is a diagnosis of exclusion only. This means that it is not defined by a list of positive symptoms, but only by a lack thereof.” (Wilczynski 28)

<sup>12</sup> In some studies even up to 10-20% (Wilczynski 27)

<sup>13</sup> Infanticide, however, did occur in the case of Andrea Yates. Her only daughter, Mary, was six months old at the time of her death.

look at gender roles and family structures. It thus becomes apparent that society's division in the domestic and the differences in female and male duties and tasks in their families has impact on their homicidal crimes (cf. Wilczynski 104). This links back to the first chapter, in which it became apparent that divisions of duties and tasks in the American family are still very traditionally distributed, with women being at the core of domestic work, housekeeping and child care, while men are more often away from the home most of the time. These traditional nuclear family constellations thus have effects on maternal filicide.

Further, neonaticide and infanticide need to be talked about in this chapter as they are different from filicide in the ways they are committed. Concerning the murder of a newborn or an infant, women "use rather nonviolent methods, such as suffocation" or "drowning" (Krischer et al., 198). Differently put, these children die through direct action such as asphyxiation or indirect action such as neglect.<sup>14</sup> In cases of filicide (read: the killing of older children) on the other hand "women ... tended to use more violent methods, such as ... shaking, throwing to the ground, hitting, strangling, stabbing, and shooting." (Krischer et al., 192)

With that being said, why women kill their children – or at least, what they claimed to have been their reasons will be examined now. As with every crime, the actual facts and the offender's confessions and justifications do not always go hand in hand. As Wilczynski notes, there always is the problem "that filicidal parents' retrospective statements may be of limited reliability, particularly when the

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<sup>14</sup> Consulting an English sample about neonaticide, Anna Wilczynski identifies the following: "Six of the neonates died purely through an 'omission' by the mother, such as precipitate birth into a toilet or lack of medical attention. Five died through 'passive' acts such as putting in a wardrobe. Nine were killed by a positive act of violence committed on the spur of the moment by the mother with an instrument immediately available, such as a head scarf or pair of sewing scissors." (Wilczynski 50)

suspects are faced with very serious legal consequences.“ (40)

Because maternal filicide is so extremely difficult and complex to grasp, psychologists, criminologists and lawyers are making tremendous efforts to understand maternal filicide – not just for reasons of criminal justice, but also to prevent at least some children's deaths by hands of their own parents.

### **3.2 The most common causes of filicide**

A very basic – and very important - conclusion to draw at this point is that, unlike Medea, most mothers who kill their children do not do so because they seek revenge (cf. Liem and Koenraadt 168). Rather, filicidal actions by women are much more often caused by manifold reasons – too many really to be explained here. As this work revolves around three prolific cases of (alleged) maternal filicide, it is best to focus on the most common motifs for murdering one's own children.

It goes without saying that committing a murder is always an unimaginable deed. But it becomes even more incomprehensible when we look at mothers who kill their own babies and children. After all, the connection between a mother and the child she carried in her womb for nine months is the most intimate and closest two humans can have with each other. All the harder it becomes to understand why mothers end the lives of their own children.

There are several motifs argued to have brought mothers to kill their children. Aside from aforementioned “retaliatory killings“ (Wilczynski 45) (the Medea-Complex) ergo crimes committed out of jealousy (which, as indicated before, is an almost exclusively male category of child homicide, cf. Wilczynski

126), several other motifs appear especially in female offenders. These are the birth of an unwanted child and subsequent neonaticide, accidental filicides (“battered child”), altruistic motifs ( for example, “mercy killings”) and psychotic disorders.

First, one of the biggest trigger for filicide is argued to be the birth of an unwanted child (cf. Krische et al 191). These killings are, in essence, filicides committed because a woman (often a rather young woman, in her late teens and early twenties) was pregnant with a child she, her partner (a lot of neonaticides occur with children born out of wedlock), her social environment or her family either did not want or could not adequately care for (cf. Krische et al 192, Wilczynski 49). More often than not, neonaticides go unreported to the authorities (as also explained above). The neonaticide resulting out of the birth of an unwanted child is interesting because it has to do with gender roles and simple biology. It is, naturally, the woman who gives birth, and hence, if the child was not “welcome” for complex reasons, she is, in most cases, also the one who is “stuck” with the baby. In turn, it is her who has to take care of the child, a responsibility often too much to handle. Hence, women commit neonaticide much more often than men not just because they are biologically the one carrying and giving birth to a child, but they are the ones socially *expected* to nurture and raise the child (and wholeheartedly embrace and cherish this responsibility) much more than men are. This reasoning for filicide should be kept in mind during the discussion of the Casey Anthony case. Even though the dead child in question, Caylee, was not an infant, but a toddler, the prosecution claimed that Caylee had been unwanted. Thus, the Anthony case was interwoven with accusations that Casey had never

wanted her daughter in the first place, and had simply taken longer than other infanticidal mothers to carry out her murderous plan.

Secondly, there is the “battered child” syndrome, which describes killings that are mostly accidental and take place after a long series of physical punishment of the child (Krische et al 191). These killings are also sometimes called discipline-driven filicidal killings, as they often begin with corporal punishment by the parent(s) to discipline their (allegedly) misbehaving child. Physical disciplining (the lines between physical punishment and full-out abuse are blurry) spirals out of control, leading to the unintended death of the child: “In these cases the parent typically said that they had manually assaulted the child in a fit of temper and had not meant to inflict serious harm.” (Wilczynski 53) Even though the motif of physical punishment gone fatal is rather rare for female offenders, it is important to note here. It can often be male influence on the mothers that leads to physical measures in child rearing. That is to say that the mother's partner exerts pressure on the mother to raise the child properly (cf. Wilczynski 53-55). When a father/ partner uses or encourages violence in child care, it could also be because he wishes to take the mother's attention away from the misbehaving child and to regain her attention and affection once the child is behaving properly again, hoping that corporal punishment of the child will educate it faster than non-physical methods.

But perhaps the best-known cause of child filicide is what Wilczynski calls “Altruistic” and “Psychotic Parent“. This category is especially important as it played a major role in the case of Andrea Yates, who had struggled with depression and mental illness since her early 20's. In any case, alleged altruistic



motives are almost always connected to mental illness in the offender. As the word implies, when a parent commits an altruistic filicide they claim that the child was “better off dead” (cf. Wilczynski 55), which can be explained not through objective reasoning, but by keeping in mind that the child's death was “good” from the homicidal parent's perception. Here, the issue of mental illness, psychoses and delusions comes into play (Wilczynski 57).

In the case of altruistic killings, Wilczynski distinguishes between “primary” and “secondary” killings (Wilczynski 55-56), the latter of which being much more common. Primary altruistic child homicide, or “mercy killing” (Wilczynski 55), often involves sick children, such as both mentally and physically handicapped children. Their death is, by the filicidal parent, perceived as a relief for both the child and the parent.

“Secondary altruistic killings”, on the other hand, are almost without exception all committed by mothers suffering from depression and in situations where there is “no real degree of suffering in the child.” (Wilczynski 56) The women who commit secondary altruistic filicide often feel a failure on their part, caused and/or increased by bouts of postnatal depression. They feel inadequate as mothers, believing that they are not living up to society's expectations of motherhood (cf. Wilczynski 56). Consequently, these mothers fear for their offspring's “health and well-being” (Wilczynski 56), and, instead of putting their babies and children through the strains of “bad mothering”, they opt to end the lives of their children to spare them future sickness and sadness.

Why these mothers do not consider giving their children into foster-care or up for adoption could be explained through, first of all, the distorted view of the world that

can come with mental illness. Also, these women are convinced to have failed as mothers. In order, perhaps, to avoid being labeled an inadequate mother by society because she gave up her child(ren) for adoption or foster care, the woman who is already struggling from severe feelings of short-comings as mother, decides to end the lives of her children. The death of her children, in her severely disturbed mental state, seems to be the only way out of being a social pariah in society's eyes – which, of course, does just the opposite. In these cases, society's idealized images and ideas of motherhood can increase a woman's feelings of her own shortcomings, and can then, rarely but all the more tragic, lead to her drastic actions (cf. Wilczynski 56).

The issue of mental illness deserves more room here, as there are sex-based differences. While male psychotic offenders with and without altruistic motifs suffered from delusions "related more to the 'external' world" (Wilczynski 57), psychotic women found themselves dealing much more with 'internal' delusions. Next to the feeling of being inadequate mothers, they in Wilczynski's study for example, became obsessed with a certain aspect of their domestic duties. They had often also suffered sexual abuse at one point in their life, struggled with feelings of being unattractive, ugly even (cf. Wilczynski 57) or were convinced that their children "could understand the women's every thought" (Wilczynski 57), obvious signs of severe paranoia.

### **3.3 Small, big differences: Paternal Filicide and maternal filicide**

At this point, it is beneficial to explain in some more detail where paternal filicide differs from maternal filicide in causes and actions, because this work does

revolve around gender, gender norms and expected behavior for women, but also, to a certain degree, men. When we talk about motherhood, we also have to keep in mind that motherhood cannot exist without fatherhood. All the more important – and interesting - it is to see what brings men to kill their own children.

A very basic observation made by all the literature consulted is that paternal filicide often happens under very different circumstances than maternal child homicide. One of the most common reason for fathers to kill their own children seems to be revenge, for example, to hurt the mother of their children after a divorce or separation, hence “retaliation.” (cf. Liem and Koenraadt, 168) Here, quite strikingly, men act more like prototypical Medea than women do (cf. Wilczynski 45). These retaliating child homicides not rarely lead to familicides (cf. Liem and Koenraadt 168), for which there is also an explanation based in society's and culture's perception of manhood and masculinity. Male family homicides “may relate to the concepts of women and children being considered as a man's property, and the lethal violence an attempt to re-establish his patriarchal rights under threat.” (Liem and Koenraadt 172) Accordingly, fathers often become violent towards their children once they feel that they are losing control, be it over the child, the mother, or both.

Linked to this is the fact that male filicides often happen out of jealousy towards the child. That is to say that paternal killings frequently take place when men realize that their female partners give most of their attention to the child (cf. Wilczynski 47), or out of irritation and annoyance with the child which give rise to a wish to “discipline” the child (cf. Wilczynski 53- 55). Or differently put, “[f]or men, filicide is more likely to be an expression of instrumental concerns and their desire

to exert power and control within their family.” (Wilczynski 65)

What is also tremendously interesting about male versus female filicidal offenses is that men are much more likely “to use a weapon“ which “may be interpreted as displaced aggressive impulses.“ (Liem and Koenraadt 172) The issue of mental illness, one of the biggest “motivators“ of female filicide, also plays a significantly smaller role in paternal filicide. While some offenders certainly do suffer from one sort of mental disorder, “these disorders are found to be much more pronounced among female perpetrators.” (Liem and Koenraadt 168)

### **3.4 An attempt at explanation**

This final sub-chapter can really only attempt an explanation of filicide – both maternal and paternal. Maternal filicide – or child homicide in general for that matter- is complex, difficult and disturbing because it can never be completely explained. Filicide never simply happens, and it never happens within clear-cut reasoning. All the more interesting it will be to see how some newspapers and magazines, even TV Shows, have, in their coverages of the cases (almost desperately) attempted to find *the one* answer that would explain the crime and the women's actions. This wish to make sense of that which we can not understand is perhaps a part of human nature. But it might also be taken as a very strong sign of how American society – and its media - works in terms of expectations in female roles and motherhood. By making the reasons for maternal filicide much simpler than they might be, motherhood in its idealized version becomes much less complex and demanding, expectations in motherhood becomes less unrealistic. The cases of the three women – who are and were so

individual and so different from each other - might have been simplified. Their actions might have been filed under simple terms in order to explain, understand and, in the same breath, reinforce what is right by making the reasons for the women's actions so much simpler in the coverage of the cases.

What can be said at the end, however, is there are themes identified in cases of filicide that are more common than others, and some are much more characteristic for women than for men.

First of all, most female offenders suffered from mental disorders (cf. Wilczynski 122) while men tend to spontaneously “snap” and kill their children, not out of deluded altruistic concerns, but out of jealousy, rage and annoyance. In this, we see a certain stereotypical gender gap: the woman is mad, the man is bad (cf. Wilczynski, Chapter 5). This will also become apparent in the case of Andrea Yates, who had been found not guilty on reason of insanity, whereas her husband Rusty was argued to share part of the blame because he was allegedly controlling and exploitative of his wife.

Also, there is a certain passivity and activity in female and male filicides respectively in the way the children are killed. Paternal child homicide often happens more brutally, with higher levels of physical violence involved. For example, men are more likely to beat children to death, shake them violently, burn them, stab them or shoot them (cf. Wilczynski 92), whereas women commit their crimes in much more quiet ways. The most common methods used by women include asphyxiation or suffocating (which we will see in both Susan Smith's and Andrea Yates' cases) as well as “strangling, neglect” (Wilczynski 92). Neglect was also one of the accusations Casey Anthony stood trial for. In general, women are

less likely to use tools to kill their children, and rather opt to end the lives of their children through less physical actions, and through “passive” actions. This does lead to the assumption that, in filicide, women mostly do not break with certain aspects of gender roles, in that they do not take on “male” methods of killing, but rather stay within female, “softer” methods.

All of this should be considered and kept in mind in the third chapter, which deals with the cases of Susan Smith, Andrea Yates and Casey Anthony. Some of the reasons/ motifs of maternal filicide play a role in the media's coverage of the cases, whereas, Susan Smith's trial, for example, was negotiated in the media leaving out the psychological aspects of maternal filicide.

## 4. Case Studies: The Media's Reception of Susan Smith, Andrea Yates and Casey Anthony

### 4.1 Susan Smith: "Southern Gothic on Trial"<sup>15</sup>

#### 4.1.1 The Case

On October 24<sup>th</sup> 1994 Susan Smith, aged 23, killed her two sons, 4-year old Michael and Alex, 14 months at the time of his death. Smith drove to John. D. Long Lake in Union, South Carolina, with her two children strapped into their seats in the back. Smith released the emergency brake of her car, stepped out the vehicle and let the car roll into the lake.

She then ran to a nearby house, whose inhabitants she told that a black man had carjacked her car with her sons still in it (cf. Pergament, "Susan Smith: Child Murderer or Victim?", page 6). This story she maintained for nine days, repeatedly appearing on National Television:

"Mrs. Smith stood hand in hand with her estranged husband, David Smith ... and begged to 'whoever has my children, that they please, please, bring them home where they belong.' She added, "They are missed and loved more than any children in the world." Choking back a sob, she continued: 'I feel in my heart you're O.K. And your momma and daddy will be waiting for you when you get home. I put my faith in the Lord that He will bring them home to us.'" (Bragg, "Focus on Susan Smith's Lies and a Smile")<sup>16</sup>

The case of the missing children - and their seemingly desperate mother- became subject of nation-wide news and "national sympathy" for the parents "grew." (Bragg, "Arguments Begin in Susan Smith Trial") For nine days in October and

<sup>15</sup> The title of an article by Peyser and Carroll that was published in *Newsweek* on July 17<sup>th</sup> 1995.

<sup>16</sup> It is to note here that she is not the only filicidal mother to have employed a strategy of lies, there are several "[p]roven filicide cases in which parents initially claimed that their child had been kidnapped or attacked by a stranger. These had been accompanied by repeated and tearful media appeals by the parents, pleading for a return of their child." (Wilczynski 32)

November 1994, most Americans believed Smith, prayed for the children's safe return and sincerely felt for her. "[B]ut if many were convinced by her performance, the police were not" (Levitt, "Portrait of a Killer"): the police of Union, South Carolina, had been growing suspicious on Susan Smith's heels. During lie-detector tests, she repeatedly failed to answer the question "Do you know where your children are?" without the machine detecting stress (cf. Pergament, "Susan Smith: Child Murderer or Victim?", page 7; Levitt, "Portrait of a Killer"). Eventually, on November 3<sup>rd</sup> 1994, Susan confessed that there had been no African-American kidnapper, but that she herself had murdered her two small sons (Bragg, "Arguments Begin in Susan Smith Trial").

As the trial against Susan Smith began, there was thus no doubt that she was a murderer. Instead, the court faced the decision about how to punish the young woman. In January 1995 the prosecution, represented by Mr. Thomas E. Pope, stated that they would do all in their power to have Smith punished with the death penalty (cf. Ellis, "The Ultimate Price"). Despite the prosecution's efforts for the death penalty, Susan Smith was convicted to life in prison on July 22<sup>th</sup> 1995. She will be eligible for parole on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2024 (cf. Krasky, "A decade after Susan Smith case, South Carolina city still trying to heal").

During her trial, some facts about this young woman's life and past pointed in the direction of Mrs. Smith having been a deeply disturbed woman, who might be found legally insane, and could, in turn, not be found guilty. To substantiate their claim of insanity, the defense had brought forward that Susan's father had committed suicide when she was six years old (cf. Pergament, "Susan Smith: Child Murderer or Victim?", page 3) and that Susan had never gotten over this



loss. Smith's mother explained that Susan had, in fact, tried to kill herself twice during her teenage years (cf. Bragg, "Arguments Begin in Susan Smith Trial"). Further, Smith claimed that, her stepfather Beverly Russel had molested her when she was a teenager, but she had also started a relationship with him later in life (Hewitt, "Tears of Hate and Pity"). Despite all of this

"it was successfully argued, in the Smith case, that she was 'legally sane' (Meyer and Oberman 2001), although it was generally agreed that she had, throughout various periods, met the DSM-IV's category of clinical depression (DSM IV 1994). It was also determined by her doctors that Smith suffered from 'dependent personality disorder' (Rekers 1996)." (Kjeldal, "Susan Smith and Her Children: A Reasoning Dialectic", 268)

Her troubled relationships with men – possibly a sign of her "dependent personality disorder"- had continued after her teenage years and her marriage with David Smith was hardly happy. David was rumored to have had affairs during their relationship and marriage (cf. No Author, "The trouble with Susan Smith"). So did Susan did, most prominently known with Tom Findlay, the son of a wealthy businessman of Union. The relationship between Findlay and Smith then became one of the most important features of this sensational case and trial. They had had a brief affair while Smith was still married to David. It was Findlay who eventually ended the relationship. He explained in a letter to Susan that they could no longer see each other, not because she was married, but because he did not want to raise Alex and Michael with Susan (Pergament, "Susan Smith: Child Murderer or Victim?", page 1). The letter read: "You have some endearing qualities about you, and I think that you are a terrific person. But like I have told you before, there are some things about you that aren't suited for me, and yes, I am speaking about your children." (quoted in Pergament, "Susan Smith: Child Murderer or Victim?",

page 1) Findlay's letter subsequently became a crucial piece of evidence in Smith's case, as the prosecution made its case by claiming that Susan had killed her children so she could be with Findlay.

This affair, and that the end of it had allegedly brought Susan to kill her children and fabricate a detailed lie about their disappearance, made the Smith case one with hardly no precedents. Hence, newspapers and magazines flocked to the case. An article in *The Economist* summed up quite adequately what seemed to intrigue many people about the Susan Smith case: "The story has something for everyone: double infanticide, suicide, molestation, incest and a web of marital infidelity that makes Peyton Place look like Sesame Street." (No Author, "The Trouble with Susan Smith")

#### 4.1.2 The Coverage

*People Magazine*<sup>17</sup> and *Newsweek*<sup>18</sup>, as well as the *New York Times*<sup>19</sup>, *The Economist*<sup>20</sup> and *National Review*<sup>21</sup> alike reported on the Smith case abundantly. This case was guaranteed to be a hit at the newsstands all over America, certainly also because Susan had hoodwinked and deceived so many Americans, who had initially sincerely felt for her. Once she confessed, hardly surprising, "sentiment ... swung dramatically between" (Clark, "The Freedom of Susan Smith" 10) two juxtaposed positions. People considered Susan either as a cold, selfish monster, or she was a victim in all of this:

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<sup>17</sup> Levitt, "Portrait of a Killer"; Hewitt, "Tears of Hate and Pity"; Wescott, "The Reckoning"; No Author, "Susan Smith"

<sup>18</sup> Peyser and Carroll, "Southern Gothic on Trial"; Morgenthau, Carroll and O'Shea, "Will They Kill Susan Smith?"

<sup>19</sup> Bragg, "Arguments Begin in Susan Smith Trial"

<sup>20</sup> No Author. "The trouble with Susan Smith"

<sup>21</sup> Buckley, "The Susan Smith Case"

“Is she the selfish, manipulative, sexually exploitative woman the prosecutors see? Or is she, as the defense claims, the deeply troubled survivor of a blighted marriage and a thwarted love affair--a woman who was sexually abused as a teenager and who had attempted suicide twice before?” (Morganthau, Carroll and O’Shea, “Will They Kill Susan Smith?”)

For the majority of Americans, Susan Smith was a monster who deserved to die for her crime, as a “a poll conducted for PEOPLE by the ICR survey group of a national sample of adults” proves: “nearly 50 percent of those polled believe that Smith should be executed if found guilty; only 33 percent were opposed.” (Hewitt, “Tears of Hate and Pity”) Public anger even went as far as Smith receiving “numerous death threats made against Smith, and outrage is so strong among the people of Union that Bruck [Mrs. Smith’s lawyer] says he might ask that the trial be moved out of town.”( Levitt, “Portrait of a Killer“)

Her punishment to life in prison, even though not what the majority of Americans had hoped for in this trial, was still considered just and deserved. As the following analysis will show, Mrs. Smith had been painted as a devilish woman, a selfish mother and a sexually insatiable criminal, whose crime was one of “incomprehensible savagery.” (Morganthau, Carroll and O’Shea, “Will They Kill Susan Smith?”) Her difficult past could effectively not soften this demonized image of her. For example, not even the alleged relationship with her step-father who had molested her (or even just the molestation as such) as a teenager made the majority of people reconsider the kind of woman Smith might be:

“After Susan’s confession and during the trial, several commentators underlined the fact that Susan’s father committed suicide when she was 7. They also emphasized the fact that in her youth she had been seriously molested by her very Christian stepfather, who confessed in a rather pathetic way. So Susan was an unhappy child. We won’t excuse her on that account; her deed was too atrocious.”(Calligaris, “Susan Smith: a Modern

mother, reflections on the destiny of children at the end of childhood”, 32)

In the case coverage five aspects dominated and shaped the perception of her as a monster. First, there is a connection built in the articles read between Smith and her hometown Union. Secondly, there are discussions about Smith's social status and her alleged wish to be upwardly mobile. This is linked to the third major aspect to be covered here: Susan's sexuality, especially the affair with Tom Findlay. An analysis of her sexuality must be followed by and linked to the issue of male responsibility (or the neglect of the same), which then, lastly, leads to an observation about Smith's female agency.

To begin, in many articles, Susan Smith's crime was painted as more than a private tragedy concerning her family. Her actions and the deaths of Michael and Alex were rather presented as pertaining the very institutions of American family life, motherhood and suburban, small-town American society.

### **Susan and the end of Union**

The people of Union, South Carolina, were described to “carry so much pain in their hearts” (Hewitt, “Tears of Hate and Pity”) over the brutal deaths of Michael and Alex. This effectively turned them into Smith's victims, just like her children and her estranged husband. As an article in the Canadian magazine *Macleans'* put it:

“Just how much Susan Smith should pay was the focus of a trial that ripped the veneer of normalcy off the southern town. In deeply religious Union, Smith's tale of adultery and murder has tested the community's sense of Christian charity.” (Chidley and Decker, “ 'I have put my Faith in God' ”)

Effectively, the murders were presented as the brutal disruption of the happy – and Christian!- communities of small-town America, with Susan as the woman who had shook an entire town's understanding of itself to its very core.

That Union, S.C., was used as stand-in for perfect, idyllic small town America with all its ideological implications becomes especially apparent in an article in *The Economist*: “Nowhere have these revelations been more unsettling than in Union, a town of about 10,000 whose Main Street looks ... like the set of a 1950s film.” (No Author, “The trouble with Susan Smith”) The reference to the 1950s evoked all those idea(l)s Smith had “killed”: suburbia, picket fences, family-owned businesses, nuclear families, love, marriage, community. The invocation of the myth of the 1950s in this article further serves as a striking example of how present the idyllic myth of the 1950s still was and is, with Americans feeling nostalgic for the 1950s in the 1990s (cf. Skolnick 50; Phoenix 15). Susan had not only committed a horrendous crime, but even before the fateful day in 1994, Smith had arguably cared little for what was “right”. She had affairs, left her husband, was thus presented as anything but compliant of 1950's ideas of female sexuality, and did not – this will come up again later- stay with her cheating husband for the sake of her family.

Smith's crime was also described as having created fear among the children of Union. She became Union's boogiemán that haunted the nightmares of the town's youngest:

“Even more profoundly, people in Union are still grappling with the sense of fear left behind by the murders, especially among young children. A number of parents say that their kids have gone so far as to voice anxiety about their own safety. Scotty recalls being shocked not long ago when his son Nick, 9, while riding in the car, brought up the question. 'Just out of the blue

he looked at me and asked would I kill him,' says Scotty, who with wife Wendy, 32, also has a younger son, Matt, 6. 'We've had to reassure them that Susan loved Alex and Michael and something just went wrong, that she wasn't well and that the same thing would never happen to them.'" (Hewitt, "Tears of Hate and Pity")

The media's obsession with Union (one is tempted to read the town's name as a signifier of American ideals) did not end with the verdict in the case. *People Magazine*, for example, later ran an article about a mysterious accident that had happened at the lake where Alex and Michael died, in which it was implied that there might have been some supernatural power – a curse?<sup>22</sup> - at play (cf. Fields-Meyer, "Dark Waters"). While this should certainly not be taken all too serious, it does further show how Susan Smith and her actions had taken on horror-film quality.

Ten years after Smith was sentenced to life in prison, *USA Today* also ran an article on Union. Reporter Lou Krasky, revisited the town to show how elusive, almost impossible, a return to normalcy was in this town. He spoke to prosecutor Tommy Pope, who recalled a conversation with an older lady at a store: " 'She was very sweet and polite until the subject of Smith came up, then the woman began to 'sound like a sailor,' he said." (Krasky, "A decade after Susan Smith case") Susan had not only ended the lives of her two babies, she had brought the end of innocence to "Union". In this town in Virginia, the 1950s were now over, forever: "no one in Union is expecting to shake off a deep sense of grief anytime soon." (Hewitt, "Tears of Hate and Pity")

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<sup>22</sup> "Many people say they will never fish again in the catfish-rich waters of John D. Long Lake. It is, as one man put it, 'hallowed ground.' One recent misty morning, a visitor, himself paying silent tribute, noticed a forlorn figure walking toward him. 'It's unthinkable, isn't it?' the visitor said." ( Levitt, "Portrait of a Killer")

All of this grief had been brought, the media argued, to Union because of Smith's wish to escape the reality of her own life as a low-income, single mother in America. Her act, thus, was presented as one of ruthless selfishness. All that which had been great about this town, Susan Smith had destroyed out of egocentricity and dreams of a better life.

### **A scheming, social Climber**

To paint a most clear picture that would undermine the claim that Smith was a reckless social climber, Shelly Levitt, in her “Portrait of a Killer”, listed Smith's exact monthly net income as well as the alimony David paid her weekly, pointing out that she was barely able to make ends meet for her and her two small children:

“[...]money was tight. As a secretary at Conso Products Co., a decorative trimmings factory, she took home \$1,096 a month after taxes, and David was paying \$115 a week in child support. After mortgage, car payments and child-care costs, she barely broke even” (Levitt, “Portrait of a Killer”; cf. also Peyser and Carroll, “Southern Gothic on Trial”).

Another complete insight into Smith's financial situation – the public disclosure of which speaks for a loss of privacy for Susan- was offered by another *People Magazine* article: “With a monthly take-home salary of \$1,100, plus \$115 a week in child support, she was barely breaking even after mortgage and car payments and child-care costs.” (Hewitt, “Tears of Hate and Pity”)

According to *People Magazine* Susan dreamed a “deluded dream of wealth, love, and status.” (Levitt, “Portrait of a Killer”) Her crime then was “a case of selfishness, of 'I,I,I' and 'me,me,me' ”, a statement by Mr. Giese, “a special prosecutor and assistant to the state's prosecutor.” (Bragg, “Arguments Begin in

Susan Smith Trial”) Smith was further described as a ruthless schemer, “a cold, calculating social climber” (Levitt, “Portrait of a Killer”) who was driven by “the self-aggrandizing desire to promote an affair with her wealthy employer’s son.” (Clark, “The Freedom of Susan Smith”,11) She hoped to one day cash in on Findlay’s inheritance: “[l]iving in a tiny brick house with two kids and a \$17,000 secretary’s salary, she saw Findlay as her ticket out of the working class.” (Peyser and Carroll, “Southern Gothic on Trial”) The prosecution of the trial presented her as a clever and manipulative woman “who would do anything to get what she wants.” (Peyser and Carroll, “Southern Gothic on Trial”) This monstrous side of Susan was reinforced by articles repeating the horrifying details of the boys’ last minutes, as, for example, in an article published in *Newsweek*:

“He [Thomas Pope] has a videotaped re-enactment of the Mazda’s slow and deadly glide across the lake; it took six excruciating minutes and, as Smith told police when she was arrested, little Michael was awake as the murky water swallowed him and his baby brother.” (Morganthau, Carroll and O’Shea, “Will They Kill Susan Smith?”)

Consequently, she is not a woman who might have developed true feelings for Findlay, but one who wanted to move up in the world and killed her toddlers in a most horrible way to achieve her dream of a better life. It is important to note here that none of the articles read bring up the possibility that Smith’s feelings for Findlay might have been genuine and sincere.

There might have been a much bigger social question at hand, but this was also not acknowledged in the media. So-called “family values” had been a political hot potato during the 1992 presidential election but once Clinton was in office he did nothing to improve single mother’s economic situations. Rather, his family



politics were in line with Reagan's and Bush's policies, which both “reinforce[d] women's domestic role” and effectively kept them out of the workplace (Marchevsky and Theoharis. “Welfare Reform, Globalization, and the Racialization of Entitlement”, 238). 1990s welfare law “was a litany of rules and sanctions on family and sexual life designed to regulate morality on a population deemed naturally immoral and deviant.” (Marchevsky and Theoharis. “Welfare Reform, Globalization, and the Racialization of Entitlement”, 251)

This is where a link to the second important aspect of the Smith trial needs to be examined: her sexuality. Not only had she decided to leave her marriage, but she had also had affairs before, during and after her marriage, ergo displaying exactly the kind of sexually and socially unacceptable behavior the American policy makers warned of (cf. Marchevsky and Theoharis 251).

### **Susan's burning need**

Susan's “burning need for male attention” (Pergament, “Susan Smith: Child Murderer or Victim?”, page 3) was argued too strong for her to become the self-sacrificing Madonna-figure of the American imagination of motherhood. Hence, the coverage of her case paralleled its time's family policies ideological underpinnings and expectations in women. These were, of course, the long-standing values and ideas about female sexuality and marriage of the 1950s. Smith's female promiscuity thus made her, even in the mid-1990s, an unfit mother in hindsight: “Susan Smith was not programmed to be 'good.' Everything in her own sorry history taught her to put the pull of sexual, romantic love above the needs of little

children.” (Ehrenreich, “Susan Smith: Corrupted By Love?”) This all played right into the containment of female sexuality within marriage, and the coverage here echoed old fears about the risks female sexuality outside of marriage. This danger “uncontrolled” female sexual expression posed to society hence was still prevalent, and continued to shape perception of mothers in the 1990s. In consequence, Susan Smith became the poster-girl for this.

Susan Smith was denied her right to sexuality, not only because she was a woman but most importantly because she was a mother. For example, even Tom ”wrote that he was upset by some of Susan's behavior, especially at a hot tub party that he had recently thrown. At that party, Susan and the husband of a friend of Susan's kissed and fondled each other.” (Pergament, “Susan Smith: Child Murderer or Victim?”, page 1) The man who had an affair with her was thus also shocked about this woman's sexuality, all while he had participated in her sexual life. That “she frolicked nude in a hot tub” was so “wrong”, it seems, first and foremost because she had two small sons at home, and had arguably neglected her maternal duties (the question if David was sitting the kids is not even raised) (Wescott, “The Reckoning”). Another striking example of judgment about her sexuality is an incident of oral sex: “During the trial, Susan's psychiatrist said she also told him that around the same time she had *even* [emphasis mine] performed oral sex on her stepfather Bev.” (Wescott, “The Reckoning”) Journalists judged Susan's allegedly predatory sexuality but - this is somewhat ironic - newspapers and magazines made sure to repeat very intimate details of Smith's private life. The mention of the oral sex performed on Beverly Russel serves no legal function whatsoever but is rather a sign of the public demarcation of Smith's sex life and

her “twisted” sexual practices. Not only, as implied here, was it wrong to give oral sex to Beverly, but apparently the very act of oral sex performed by Susan *itself* was dubious, as the word “even” illustrates. Hence, not only were her sexual partners wrong choices, even her sexual acts themselves were perverted.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, while she is denied the right to – privately - live out her sexual needs and wishes, the media reiterate details of the same, giving Americans front-row seats to Smith's intimate life. A certain degree of voyeurism plays into this, and an apparent fascination with forbidden pleasures. As Smith had been denied her right to have a sexuality, millions of Americans could talk about her affairs and her “deviant” sexual behavior (a similar issue will come up in the Casey Anthony case), without crossing boundaries themselves. They remained morally superior while simultaneously “watching” Susan's sexuality.

The fascination with Smith's sexual escapades did not end with her verdict. In an article in *Time Magazine* her case “continues to make headlines, even from behind bars. In 2000 two prison guards were fired for having sex with her.” (Egan, “It Haunts Me Every Day”) A piece by Tom Turnipseed also deals Smith's sexual relations with not one, but two, of her prison guards. He writes that Susan “is still scheming in prison” (Turnipseed, “Continuing Saga of Sex, Murder & Racism: Susan Smith Is Still Scheming In Prison ”), seducing men around her who cannot help but fall into her traps. In consequence then, this evil woman has not learned her lesson, but rather continues to live out all of her fantasies and must remain evil, bad and dangerous.

Another, more abstract example of the role of Susan's deviant sexuality can

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<sup>23</sup> The fact the Russel obviously participated is not even at issue here – it focuses solely on the fact that Smith did it.

be found in an episode of *Discovery Channel's* program *Most Evil*, an episode titled "Murderous Women" (July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2006). In this episode, Smith's case is discussed right after that of Marybeth Tinning. Tinning gets an in-depth (or what qualifies as in-depth for *Discovery Channel*) dissection of her past and her psychological issues. Tinning was argued to have had a father-complex, craving the attention her own father never gave her. When Tinning's first child passed, she basked in the attention and sympathy she received from her community, and decided to kill her remaining children one after one to keep getting attention.

The episode then turns to Susan Smith. While Smith arguably does have an equally disturbing and troubled past, she received none of this attempt to understand the "why" of her crimes. The episode devoted to female crime presents her as nothing but a selfish, single, and most importantly promiscuous mother whose actions cannot at least partly be understood from her past. Consequently, as she is compared to other criminal *women*, she becomes the more evil one. She is the one who apparently spontaneously and unjustifiably broke out of her marriage. Through the denial of Susan's past in this episode, the murders of her children are simply the outcome of pure female evil in shape of sexuality and deviance, one that was *always* there, and did not have some origin in a difficult past.

This leads to the third big issue of the coverage: the roles men played in Smith's life and crime. This also deals with male responsibility, or the ignoring of the same. Everything Smith had done was her own doing, and the men in her life seemed to receive only very little criticism for their actions.

## Gentle Men

It seems that because Americans already knew that Susan had been promiscuous writers like Turnipseed did not have to point fingers at anyone but Susan, not even at the prison guards who had sex with her. Smith had schemed and seduced men before, so this episode of sexual misconduct could simply be read as a continuation of this woman's dangerous appeal. Looking at the gender roles that are at play concerning her sexuality in the coverage of her case and its aftermath, one could argue that the entire news coverage drips with a moral double standard. Here, Tom Findlay is a crucial figure to look at.

Findlay had started to sleep with Susan while she was still married – whether estranged or not - to David, and she was only one of the several women he was known to have intercourse with.<sup>24</sup> Yet Findlay was not asked questions about his actions. His many affairs and sexual relationships with several women in Union are never presented as dubious or morally objectionable, his actions and words are never questioned. Rather, it seems to be the women he sleeps with or dates who have it all wrong: “ 'Most of the young women in town are interested in Tom,' says one well-placed social observer, 'and when women get attached to him, they can't let go.'” (Levitt, “Portrait of a Killer”)

Concerning the way Findlay was “untouchable” for the media, Rachel Pergament's detailed recollection of Findlay's letter is tremendously interesting. She writes that

“[t]he tone of the letter was *gentle* [emphasis mine] and sections of the letter were flattering toward Susan. Tom wrote that he thought Susan was a great

<sup>24</sup> While the mere fact that he felt the need to write Susan a letter to end the relationship speaks for the fact that their relation was not a one-time event, but happened several times, as a line in the letter implies as well: “Susan, I could really fall for you” (quoted in Pergament, “Susan Smith: Child Murderer or Victim?”, page 1).

person and that he was impressed that she had enrolled in night school at the local college. Tom encouraged Susan to continue her studies. Tom also wrote that he was proud that Susan was trying to improve her life. ... Findlay wrote, 'If you want to catch a *nice guy like me* [emphasis mine] one day, you have to act like a nice girl.'" ( Pergament, "Susan Smith: Child Murderer or Victim, page 1")

The questionable and difficult nature of their relationship is overpowered by his gentleness and well-meaning towards Susan. His own description as “a nice guy”, a gentle man who was supportive of Susan, is not questioned. It is presented without comment and taken at face value. At the same time, Findlay is simply an attractive bachelor who plays the field and is “famous for his hot-tub parties” (Levitt, “Portrait of a Killer”) who seemingly had every right to explore his sexuality. Tom Findlay, even though the letter was argued the impetus for Smith's crime, received no repercussions whatsoever.<sup>25</sup> He did appear as a witness in the trial and the letter served as one of the most important pieces of evidence against Smith – but other than that, Findlay remained completely untouched. Even though his words were argued to have ultimately – unwillingly – been the trigger for Susan, he went unscathed.

David Smith, Susan's (ex-)husband is also an interesting male person to look at, because “[i]n June 1993, David began a relationship with a cashier at Winn-Dixie, Tiffany Moss“ out of loneliness (Pergament, “Susan Smith: Child Murderer or Victim?“, page 5). David eventually also admitted that he been “sexually involved with other people during their separations and reconciliations. David dated other supermarket employees. While continuing to sleep with David,

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<sup>25</sup> It is to note that “Thomas Findlay's life has also been threatened, and he has left Union” ( Levitt, “Portrait of a Killer”). However, this article in *People Magazine* is the only one ever to mention this, and it appears that the threats against his life are more of a sad sign of how much trouble Susan has put him through.

Susan started seeing Tom Findlay.“ (Wescott, “The Reckoning“) The wording here – again- deserves some discussion. While David started “seeing“ other people (hence it was not implied that these relationships were necessarily sexual, even though he later admitted that they were) Susan was “sleeping” with both David and Tom at the same time. Consequently, David, just like Tom, is free to have a sexuality, while Susan is not because she is a mother and wife first. While this does play into the issue of Susan's allegedly deviant sexuality, it also strikingly shows how David was not asked any uncomfortable questions about his extra-marital affairs as much as Susan was. No articles read ever even tackled the question of how Susan must have felt about David's affair(s).

Shortly after the trial, David Smith wrote a tell-all book, *Beyond All Reason*, for which he was criticized. However, when he explained “that his only motive is to ensure that public sympathy remain with the boys rather than Susan“, this was taken as fair enough a reason to write this book.

There of course also is Beverly Russell, Susan's stepfather who had molested her. One *New York Times* article about the trial is especially noteworthy here, as it places blame on Beverly Russel, but then, in the same breath, starts to raise question about Mrs. Linda Russel's (Susan's mother) failures as mother:

“If the case goes as expected, Mrs. Smith's stepfather ... will be portrayed as a molester who fondled Mrs. Smith when she was 15 and had sex with her in the months leading up to the double murder. The lawyers are expected to look deep into the life of the stepfather, Beverly Russell, who was once one of the most respected men in this town. ... Mrs. Smith's lawyers have been slow to criticize Mrs. Russell outright but have hinted that she was not a warm, supportive mother.“ (Bragg, “Focus on Susan Smith's Lies and a Smile“)

Mrs. Russell's failures are almost as unforgivable as Mr. Russell's sexual abuse

and molestation of his step-daughter. But at the same time, he also – like Findlay and Smith – does not receive any really out-spoken criticism or real blame. This is possibly due to the idea that Smith's experiences with men were not that horrible, as Hewitt retells two statements by two women from Union:

" 'She has been betrayed by most of the men in her life—a father who committed suicide, a stepfather who molested her and a husband who cheated on her.' But there are others who scoff at the notion that something like molestation, horrible though it is, provides a mitigating circumstance. 'I don't see where it has to do with anything,' says Lizzie Goudelock, a clerk at Teacher's Corner, a school supply store. 'People survive it. They don't kill their children.' " (Hewitt, "Tears of Hate and Pity")

At the end, neither the molestation nor the betrayal and adultery Susan experienced with the men in her life were justification for her actions (which is, to a certain degree, understandable). None of these male figures in the Smith case came under a lot of fire or were asked more pressing questions about their actions. Then, the deaths of Michael and Alex were argued to have been nothing more than the terrible deed of a sick, evil, sexually deviant and selfish woman, whose history could not take away any of her guilt.

But concerning the role of men in the Smith case, something ironic happens. While men are not scrutinized for their actions and are merely victims of Susan, she, at the very same time, is robbed of all of her power to make decisions and speak for herself. She is a monster without a voice.

### **A criminal without a voice**

To illustrate this voicelessness – Susan never speaks to the reader, she is also not allowed to give interviews from prison (Krasky, "A Decade after Susan



Smith case”)- and almost complete lack of agency and power for Susan, a look at American television's demarcation and usage of the Smith case is valuable.

Especially a November 1995 *Law and Order* episode, “Angel”, is interesting. In the episode a mother claims that her infant daughter had been kidnapped by a Puerto- Rican man, with the character also making a plea for her daughter's safe return on television. The episode's character, Lea, eventually confesses to having smothered and subsequently cremated her daughter Rachel, the rest of the episode focuses on Lea's trial. The episode directly references Susan Smith and the murder of her two sons in several instances, in one scene even naming her. Father Corner explains how upset Lea was after hearing about the Susan Smith case and explains that he told Lea that Michael and Alex, Smith's sons, were in heaven with God now, and that this was for the best.<sup>26</sup> As Lea, close to the end of the episode, comes clean about why she smothered her baby, she directly quotes her pastor. In this world of cruelty, crime and hate, she says, death was for the best for her infant daughter, and repeats Father Corner's exact words: “She is now in Heaven with God.”

Of course this might be nothing other than a stylistic device, but when connected to the case of Susan Smith, it can be read differently. The letter in which Tom Findlay broke off the relationship with Smith because he did not want to take care of children, was, during the trial, brought forward as what triggered Smith's actions. Both women act only after exchange with men. Susan Smith could then be considered to have ultimately been influenced and dominated by the power of male words, which instilled in her the wish to be sexually, emotionally and

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<sup>26</sup> “Smith wrote she is confident her children are with 'our Heavenly Father' and safe from further harm.” (Chidley and Decker, “I Have Put My Faith in God”)

socially desirable to the man she desires. Smith then remains agency only in the final evilness of her deeds, just like Lea in “Angel”, but the initial “idea/ justification” does not come from herself. She becomes evil after contact with men and her difficult past with the male sex makes her a threat. Upset by men, rejected by men, hurt by men, lied to by men, used by men, a woman can only turn one way: bad. She cannot, however, have been born bad, as this would mean a reversal of traditionally gendered discourse about male and female “characters” in which a woman must be pure, innocent and kind.

A similar approach –one of denying Smith the power to make choices and to speak for herself- to Smith was employed by her own defense team: “The defense begged [the jurors] to look into their hearts and, through that softer focus, find a disturbed, child-like figure who, after a lifetime of sadness, just snapped like a dry twig.” (Bragg, “Arguments Begin in Susan Smith Trial”) The defense was patronizing in its strategy, presenting Smith as a child-woman who simply could no longer deal with the hardships she was going through. When Susan was not described as a sexually immoral monster, she was “this girl”, whose “attorney Bruck carefully screens her mail to spare her the anguish of hostile notes” (Hewitt, “Tears of Hate and Pity”) which would make her even sadder. Her written confession, on a side note, was described as “astonishingly childish confession where small hieroglyphic hearts regularly replace the word ‘heart’.”(Calligaris, “Susan Smith, a modern mother“, 32)

In line with this patronizing, Susan, as who the reader is made to believe she is, was shaped by her experiences with men who made her “sad” (but who, as elaborated above, did not have to explain themselves). Susan, as the child-like

woman she was claimed to be, was at the mercy of her feelings. Journalist Barbara Ehrenreich argued the very same: Susan was a powerless puppet of her female emotions, incapable of controlling them. Love had corrupted her to kill her babies:

“But there is a theme implicit in the Smith story that ought to be familiar to every woman with a functioning heart, and that theme is love. Not the good kind of love, obviously, the kind that results in homemade cookies and all-night vigils with feverish children, but the ungovernable, romantic kind of love that the songs tell us about, as in "addicted to love" and "I would do anything to hold on to you." (Ehrenreich, "Susan Smith: Corrupted By Love?")

Susan Smith – and with her all women- was unable to take charge over her actions because her heart had overpowered her mind. Men, at the same time, did not fall into the love-trap – Findlay, for example, did not allow himself to fall in love with Susan, because his mind told him that it would be a “bad” idea to raise her children. What was implied here is that a woman is irrational, unstable and has frivolous hopes for a love greater than herself, and therefore needs good men in her life to control her.

But then again, others were convinced that Smith had consciously made the choice to kill her babies, was neither mentally ill nor “childlike”, but an agent of Satan:

“That night at the lake with her toddlers strapped in, with her fears about the future running through her head, Susan Smith was witness to two "presentations," Long tells me. "God made her a presentation and Satan made her a beautiful presentation." She evaluated them, the pastor believes, and proceeded to choose Satan's." (Rosenbaum, "Staring into the Heart of Darkness")

This was ambivalence in its most drastic form: Susan was either a child-like,

fragile, damaged, incapable, voiceless woman, or she was a whore, a monster, a schemer and a liar without any moral restraints whatsoever. At the end, the latter outweighed the former. That Susan was nothing like the loving, maternal 1950s homemaker was then also emphasized by articles dealing with her behavior during her trial. *People Magazine* had flocked to the case and trial, and presented Smith as cold, heartless and as feeling no remorse: “ 'There have been', says a spokeswoman for the South Carolina Department of Corrections, 'no tears in Susan's solitary cell' .” (Levitt, “Portrait of a Killer”)<sup>27</sup>

#### 4.1.3 Conclusion: Monstrous Mother

At the end, Susan Smith was a monster, a baby killer, corrupted by selfish hopes for a better life and desire for a man she could never get. But the way her badness as a mother was defined in in the media's dissection of her horrific crime focused on much more than on the murders, Smith's deceit and her allegedly disassociated reaction to the deaths of her children. There was much, much more wrong with Susan, and this had been manifested in her failure to sacrifice it all for the sake of good mothering:

“ 'Good' women put the children first. They forgo disruptive romantic entanglements; if necessary, they endure loveless marriages until the kids grow up. This is what Susan Smith would have done if she had any capacity for *conventional feminine virtue* [emphasis mine]: stuck by her philandering husband, and of course refrained from fooling around herself.” (Ehrenreich, “Susan Smith: Corrupted by Love?”)

The murders did not make her a bad mother, they were just the tip of the iceberg.

<sup>27</sup> Later, however, *People Magazine* claimed that she had written letters to her dead sons (Hewitt, “Tears of Hate and Pity”), that she saw the error of her ways.

It was suggested that she has been an evil mother/ woman all along: “The definition of an evil mother is someone who is ‘ruthless, selfish, cold, callous, neglectful of her children or domestic responsibilities, violent or promiscuous’.” (Huckerby, 2003: 158 quoted in Rudrappa, “Madness, Diasporic Difference, and State Violence : Explaining Filicide in American Courts”, 269) All of this, in the media, was applicable to Smith. Consequently, Susan's “bad” mothering had manifested itself much sooner in two ways.

First of all, the financial hardships Susan faced were a reality millions of single mothers faced every day in America, and the rendition of Smith's financial troubles could also be read as a device to point out *how* bad she really was. While other single mothers cut back on their own needs to feed their children, Smith's media persona became a selfish one who refused to make these sacrifices. The frequent repetition of this motif for Susan's crime then served to take away her child-like innocence. Since this selfishness was promoted in all articles and from legal experts, it effectively made the monstrosity- angle much more likely and eventually the one that dominated the discourse about Smith.

Secondly, she had had sexual desires a mother should not have. She did not stay with a man who she did not love anymore for the sake of her children, like a mother should. She did not sacrifice everything for Michael and Alex's well-being, like she should have. These two aspects of the coverage also include the other distinctive features of the case's coverage, such as the lack of female agency, Smith's refusal to sacrifice something and the uncritical discussion about the role and responsibility of the men in Smith's life.

After her confession, Susan's image in the media was turned into a

corrupted, evil, greedy, sexually uncontrollable woman who had hurt so many people, and consequently was a bad mother even though there was no evidence prior to her sons deaths that she had ever mistreated or neglected them (this should also be kept in mind, as it will also come up in the Casey Anthony case study): “Susan Smith had no prior history of violence or abuse toward her children.” (Pergament, “Susan Smith: Child Murderer or Victim“, page 10)

But that did not seem to matter. Because Smith was argued to not have been “morally pure”, her devotion to Michael and Alex did not count:

“In assessing the behavior of Smith, Meyer and Oberman (2001) have stated that given her predominant devotion toward her children, she may fall into the category of a ‘mad’ mother. Women portrayed as “mad” have been characterized as morally “pure” women who by all accounts have conformed to traditional gender roles and notions of femininity” (Meyer and Oberman 2001).(268 Kjeldal, “Susan Smith and her Children: A Reasoning Dialectic”, 268)

Her crime then ultimately consisted not only of the murder of her children. The media made an example of her: Susan Smith had fooled an entire nation, and she did not conform to society's expectations in mother – hence proving that little had changed since the 1950s. Because Smith had had affairs and allegedly wished to move up in the world she was deviant, a trickster, a cheater and a social climber who had disregarded all those female virtues (restraint, purity, sacrifice, finding bliss in motherhood) that were still being asked from mothers in the 1990s. Or, differently put: ““It is, in a way, rather shocking how very little motherhood has changed.” (Rothman, “Mothering Alone: Rethinking Single Motherhood in America“, 326)

Perhaps Susan Smith's case also was such great material because it

helped to ignore other issues at hand. Susan's case was unique, simply because millions in situations similar to that of Susan did *not* kill their children. Susan was the exception to the rule that ironically reaffirmed the government's welfare policies. Not because they actively supported women but because other women's lives showed that the system did not bring them to kill their babies.

The same goes for the gender roles in the case: Susan was the also an exception to the sexual rule. She was a woman who had affairs and a disturbing sexual history, her actions were therefore a logic consequence of her characteristic badness and uncontrollable hormones. American women who simply conformed to their assigned roles were deemed natural and good, and because most women were compliant, there was no need to re-think the nuclear family, heterosexual relationships and their power structures. All was well when compared to Susan Smith's past and life.

At the same time, male responsibility and influence in Susan's crime are never questioned: boys will be boys. Simultaneously and paradoxically, only men receive agency and power over women. There was ambivalence in these gender roles, but at the end, ultimate guilt remained purely with Susan. Looking at the next case, the one of Andrea Yates, one question will come up: did Susan Smith's case have an impact on how Andrea Yates was demarcated in the media, were these two women two sides of the same coin – or did Andrea Yates have the advantage of her life having been a suburban dream come true?

## 4.2 Andrea Yates - “He destroys, and then he leaves.”<sup>28</sup>

### 4.2.1 The Case

The case of Andrea Yates, next to that of Susan Smith, is one of the most memorable maternal filicides in recent memory, or as Ed Bradley said on CBS' *60 Minutes* program: “Before September 11, it was the most horrifying story of the year.” (*60 Minutes*, 0:00 to 0:05 min.). Andrea Yates, on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2001, had killed all five of her children- Noah, John, Paul, Luke and Mary - by drowning them one by one in the bathtub in her house in Houston, Texas.

That alone would have sufficed to make her case an extreme one, but there appeared to be much more to her story. Journalists, commentators and readers found themselves confronted with a crime that was anything but black-and-white in terms of guilt and responsibility; and a mother who might have been a victim as much as a victimizer.

The most crucial fact that would seemingly complicate her trial and its coverage was that Yates, as it almost immediately became publicly known, had a long history of mental illness. She had suffered from severe depression paired with psychosis since the birth of her fourth son, Luke, in 1999 (cf. Roche, “Andrea Yates: More to the Story”). In the same year, Andrea Yates attempted to take her own life twice (cf. *ibid*) and was treated for her depression and psychosis. As her husband Rusty explained, after her a stay in a mental hospital and medication with Haldol, their family life returned to normal and he did not see Andrea as a danger

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<sup>28</sup> Andrea Yates when asked about Satan, whom she thought was inside of her. (cf. Roche, “Andrea Yates: More to the Story.”)



to herself or their children (cf. Milloy, "Father of Drowned Children Says He Never Feared for Their Safety").

*60 Minutes*, Rusty elaborated the faith he had in Haldol: "Within a day, Andrea went from being completely catatonic to sitting on the couch with me, in the visiting area, and we carried on just... what I refer to as the best conversation we ever had." (*60 Minutes*, 3:00- 3:10 min.) Andrea was soon thereafter released from the mental institution, and Yates family had another child, Mary. Her psychiatrist had warned of the high risk another pregnancy, as it would surely push her back into deep depression. These warnings were disregarded, and six months after the birth of their only daughter, Andrea Yates drowned all five of her children.

Mrs. Yates herself immediately called the police and confessed. Consequently, there was no doubt that she had killed the children, just like in the Smith case. Therefore, the Texan court faced the decision as to whether or not Yates was psychotic and hence not capable of deciding right from wrong at the time of the murders, and would then, in turn be found not guilty (cf. Roche, "Andrea Yates"; Ramsland, "Andrea Yates: Ill or Evil?").

As her case went to court, testimonies from her former psychiatrists as well as from new psychologists were brought forward by the defense proving that Andrea Yates was not able to decide right from wrong due to her mental state when she killed her children (cf. Ramsland, "Andrea Yates: Ill or Evil?"; No Author, "Andrea Yates Found Not Guilty"). The jury, however, rejected the Insanity Defense and found Yates guilty and sentenced her to life in prison.

But the Yates case was far from being over. In 2006, her trial was picked up

again after Dr. Dietz, the prosecution's witness who had disproved her plea for not guilty by reason of insanity, admitted that he had given a false testimony:

“At issue was the testimony of prosecution witness Dr. Park Dietz, a noted forensic psychiatrist, who at the trial said that shortly before the crime an episode of the TV show *Law & Order* had aired in which a woman had drowned her children but was found not guilty by reason of insanity. Prosecutors suggested Yates could have seen the show, bolstering their claim that she was sane and the killing was premeditated. It turned out, however, that no such episode existed, which prompted the appeals court to make its ruling.” (No Author, “Andrea Yates: Could She Go Free?”)

After this, Yates could once more enter a plea for not guilty on reason of insanity, and on July 26<sup>th</sup> 2006, she was found not guilty. The 2002 verdict was overturned, and Yates was transferred, in January 2007, to a low-security mental hospital in Texas. In 2041, Yates will be eligible for parole.

The coverage of the Yates case in itself was highly complex and full of competing voices, but on the whole it appears that Andrea was seen as much of a victim as her children. If we think back to reactions to Susan Smith's case, Andrea Yates received comparatively more sympathy, empathy and her case, as will be shown below, even created profound critiques of American society and gender roles.

#### **4.2.2 The Coverage**

Just like in the Susan Smith trial, one crucial and at the same time basic observation can be drawn immediately, even from just briefly scanning articles about Andrea Yates. Newspapers chose a sympathetic tone for their coverage. Even *People Magazine* ran articles that aimed to shed light on what had really happened in the Texan suburb, and made sure to elaborate on how much pain and

hardship Andrea was going through (cf. No Author, "Her Private Hell").

Further, in a *CBS* summary of the Yates' case, her final verdict – that of not guilty by reason of insanity- was put into perspective to those who felt she should have remained guilty in prison:

"No one should believe that she is getting off easy. She's going to be committed to mental health facility, probably for the rest of her life. And every time her medicine allows her to regain a little bit of sanity, she realizes what she did to her beloved children and then descends again into some sort of madness . . . So this started as a tragedy and continues even with this verdict." (No Author, "Andrea Yates Not Found Guilty")

Whereas Susan Smith had fallen into the category of the evil woman (cf. Wilczynski 115) due to her affairs, sexual deviance, alleged selfishness, lies and coldness, Andrea Yates was presented as a normal, well-adapted, suburban, upper middle-class, selfless, loving mother of five, who had lived up to society's standards until that fateful day in 2001. This can further be considered a symptomatic characteristic of how cases of maternal filicide, or its offenders, are treated within courts: "Some women are treated more harshly than others. This more severe punishment can be due to such factors as the woman's perceived conformity to gender stereotypes, race and social class." (Wilczynski 116) Was Andrea more symptomatic of maternal filicide than Susan, was she presented as morally and socially better because Andrea was married and not apparently sexually deviant?

To evaluate this, there are seven aspects that re-occur frequently in the articles read. First, there are presentations of Andrea's motherhood, which leads to the second characteristic of the coverage, the issue of sympathy and empathy with Andrea. This, in turn, entails another observation about the coverage of her case:

Andrea's innocence on grounds of mental illness. This is, in this analysis, followed by the presence of male voice and Andrea's "silence", which indicates a loss of agency on her side. A consequential observation of this is that the men in her life did most of the talking for her. An aspect that was missing from the Susan Smith, but became a prominent feature of the Yates case was that exactly these men were often presented as "evil". A further examination is the role religion played in the case as well as in its coverage. At the end, the critical voices that were raised in the media during the trial need to be evaluated, because they evidence that this case – unlike that of Susan Smith – created critical (sometimes even profound) skepticism of American society and values.

How Andrea's motherhood prior to the filicide was presented lays the framework for the other aspects to cover, as it basically sets the tone for all observations to follow. The image of Andrea as nurturer and loving mother was resonated frequently and seemed to serve a very specific function.

### **The All-American Girl and Mom**

As if to undermine how "good" Andrea really was all her life and that her crime was not a sign that she was inherently evil, Andrea was portrayed as the All-American girl. Articles paid great attention to how popular she had been in school and her community, how determined and disciplined she had been: "At Milby High School, Andrea graduated at the top of her class and was captain of the swim team. Those who knew her recall her as a perfectionist." (Hewitt, "Life or Death", cf. also Thomas, "Motherhood and Murder") The image of Yates before she killed

her children was the one of a

”devoted mom who wanted her children to be curious and bright, the helpful daughter who cared for her ailing father until his death, the remarkable young woman who loved being a nurse and swimming before she got married and had as many children as God would give her.” (Roche, “Andrea Yates: More to the Story“)

Her good nature was evidenced by her commitment to social tasks, and it was implied that she had a certain inclination towards traditionally female work in the care-sector, as if to point out how sensitive Andrea was to other people's needs. Frequently mentioned is the fact that Andrea was “a dedicated nurse” (Rudrappa, “Madness, Diasporic Difference, and State Violence: Explaining Filicide in American Courts” 260) and on top of this went “every day, for seven or eight years,” (Thomas, “Motherhood and Murder”) over to her parents' house to care for her father with Alzheimer's:

“What we know of Andrea Yates suggests that she was a loving and caring person—and not only in relation to her own children. She had worked as a nurse at the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center from 1986 to 1994, one of the country's leading cancer treatment centers. Moreover, she was the one of her parents' five children who apparently spent the most time with her dying father as he struggled with Alzheimer's disease.” (Walsh, “Texas mother drowns children”, cf. also Thomas, “Motherhood and Murder”; Ramsland, “Ill or Evil”)

Of course, this is what Andrea *did*, but the fact that so much attention is paid to Andrea not as the murderer, but as the female nurturer and care-taker could be taken as indication of wide-spread conviction that Andrea was neither bad nor evil. Unlike Susan Smith, whose crime was just the tip of the iceberg, Andrea Yates, before she killed her children, was a great mother, and thus a “good” woman.

So Yates was presented as dedicated to her maternal duties and as a woman who fully enjoyed being a mother. She was "[t]he mother who only last year baked chocolate chip cookies and took her sons to ball games in the park" (Roche, "Andrea Yates: More to the Story"), a perfect suburban mother of five. The images of Andrea as mother, and not as the mentally ill person she was or should become, arguably are tools to present her in a light that make her crime even more incomprehensible and yet, ironically, made her a woman people could somehow relate to. An article by Suzanne O' Malley (who went on to write an entire book on Andrea Yates) as published in *O Magazine* serves as a great example of this: "The many Father's Day cards she'd art-directed, the costumes she'd sewn, the Valentine certificates for hugs and kisses she'd given her children, didn't add up to filicide." (O'Malley, "A Cry in the Dark")

These presentations of Andrea as perfect mother are also used to place her in direct juxtaposition to other mothers and women, such as those she would encounter in prison. Andrea Yates, the woman the media has presented to us as loving, caring, concerned mother and wife "will eventually mingle with the general population at the prison known for housing some of the toughest, meanest women in Texas." (Roche, "Andrea Yates: More to the Story") She is placed in a system of direct opposites. Her All- American, idealized motherhood (the cookies she baked may very well be the symbolic stand-in for domesticity per se) is the direct opposite of the "tough" (read: evil) women she will encounter in the prisons of Texas.

But she does not ever become one of these tough, masculine because not maternal, criminal women. She has once been a mother after all, and a good one

at that. Because her motherhood fit perfectly into society's expectations of motherhood, she ultimately remains pure, innocent, a victim of her own mind, or as Evan Thomas put it, a victim of "snakes that", as Andrea believed, "were writhing in her head" (Thomas, "Motherhood and Murder") – she was a victim, and someone many seemingly could relate to.

### **A Killer To Feel For**

Compared to other criminal women, Andrea Yates remains good, at the mercy of her illness and therefore not in control of her actions and emotions. This made her a woman who could happen anywhere, anytime. Her crime became one that could be committed by anyone, and Andrea ultimately remains "one of us" : "Suddenly the nation has a mass killer it can empathize with, identify with, care for, even love." (Herbert, "In America; Empathy for a Killer") This empathy seemed to be derived largely, in the media, from Yates' "normalcy": "The essential point is that many middle-class Americans have been able to identify, and thus empathize, with Ms. Yates. She was a suburban middle-class woman struggling with mental illness and the enormous stress of raising five kids under the age of 8." (Herbert, "Deciding Who Will Live") Andrea was convinced that she had failed as a mother, and had to kill them to save them from herself. Her conviction - that she alone was responsible for her children's futures - seemed to have resonated with many Americans, as it was a direct reflection of how responsible mothers in America are for their children's behavior and character. As covered in Chapter 1, a child's behavior is always the direct consequence of a woman's ability to mother and raise perfect children (cf. Gordon 77, cf. also Marshall 81 pp.). In Andrea's case,

her anxiety and belief that she had failed had its origins in her family's faith (more on this below), but it was nonetheless an aspect of her crime that many other women could relate to, thus increasing female sympathy for Andrea. The fear of being the "ultimate maternal failure turned murderer, the demon mother writ large" (Fleming, "Crime and Motherhood; Maternal Madness") was one not unfamiliar to many mothers.

Yates' struggles further made it "important to find out why, to probe for explanations." (Herbert, "Deciding Who Will Live") The search for the "why" Yates is granted reminds of Susan Smith, whose "why" effectively was answered not through Smith's mental struggles and suicide attempts.

### **Mental Illness and Innocence**

As a consequence, Yates' postpartum depression and psychosis dominated the media's discourse about her. The *New York Times* published several articles titled "Compassion for Andrea Yates" in which writers expressed their feelings of empathy and their views on her final verdict in light of Yates' mental illness.<sup>29</sup> This lead, for most, to the conclusion that her insanity makes Andrea innocent, while a Not Guilty on Reason of Insanity plea was deemed completely unjustified for Susan Smith:

"Even in the Houston area, where support for capital punishment runs strong, there seems to be little sentiment in favor of executing Yates. A poll by the *Houston Chronicle* last November showed that only 19 percent of those surveyed wanted her to die, while 57 percent believed a life sentence was fair punishment. Many in Yates' camp, a loose coalition of individuals and advocacy groups, reject even that solution. 'It's a flagrant case of

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<sup>29</sup> [http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/people/y/andrea\\_yates/index.html?offset=20&s=newest](http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/people/y/andrea_yates/index.html?offset=20&s=newest), page 3



prosecuting a very sick person for being sick,' says Frances 'Sissy' Farenthold, a Houston attorney and former state legislator. 'The first indictment I would have is against the kind of mental health care she got. She's a victim too.' Unlike Susan Smith, the notorious South Carolina mother who killed her two young sons in 1994, Yates made no attempt to hide her crime." (Hewitt, "Life or Death")

All of this does ultimately display a pattern that is in line with how society thinks about female filicide. This "compassionate" approach to maternal filicide is quite common: mothers are mad, they are sick and need help. Fathers, on the other side of the coin, are bad, angry and deserve to be punished for their crimes. Mothers who become "masculine" in their motifs are then considered bad as well. Therefore, traditional gender roles and perceptions of how men and women are and how they differ from each other emotionally and intellectually played into this compassionate approach towards Yates.

Consequently, her initial verdict shocked many of the trial's followers: "A national gasp went up last week when Andrea Pia Yates was found guilty in a Texas courtroom of capital murder." (Fleming, "Crime and Motherhood; Maternal Madness") Her sentence to life in prison seemed unjust, and it was made possible, the media argued, by the restrictive Texas Law on Insanity Defenses in homicide cases:

"So narrow are the nuances of the state's centuries-old law that it was not enough for Yates' defense lawyers to simply prove that she twice attempted suicide, had been hospitalized four times for psychiatric care and nursed a psychosis before the drownings clearly documented in thousands of pages of medical records." (Roche, "Andrea Yates: More to the Story")

As in this *Time Magazine* article, there seemed to be no doubt that Yates was insane and hence not guilty. But even the conservative *The Weekly Standard* found her verdict objectionable:

“Andrea Yates ... was crazy as a loon. Her craziness had everything to do with the murders she committed. While the Harris County prosecutors pretended not to believe this, it is hard to see how 12 jurors could have thought otherwise. Their decision to convict Yates of murder, rather than rule her not guilty by reason of insanity, has given rise to accusations from columnist Richard Cohen that witch trials are back, and to European declarations that Texas is collapsing into barbarism.” (Caldwell, “Insanity on Trial; Andrea Yates was insane, and everybody knew it”)

Andrea's long bout with depression and psychosis also placed her killings in a very clear-cut category of maternal filicide. Her filicide was a representative example of what the term “altruistic filicide” denotes. Andrea believed that she was actually saving her children from herself, as she believed that Satan was possessing her (cf. No Author, “Andrea Yates Found Not Guilty”; Roche, “Andrea Yates: More to the Story”; Ramsland, “Andrea Yates: Ill or Evil?”). She was apparently truly convinced that she was protecting them, doing what she thought was best for her children in the midst of her psychosis. This altruism of Andrea (even though obviously completely misguided) played a huge role in the media's response to her case.

Andrea, unlike Susan Smith, had killed her children because she believed it was the right thing to do before God (albeit she was aware that it was legally wrong), and hence fell into this common category of maternal filicide. The category of “altruistic filicide” is recognized by experts and one that had had precedents. Susan, on the other hand, had killed her children out of perceived selfishness, and was, if one wants to exaggerate this, not just socially deviant, but also a criminological exception to the rule.

Because Andrea was mentally ill – and because only few doubted her illness- she seems to have lost her voice in the coverage of her trial and crime.

Men took over and did Andrea's talking. This leads to another observation to draw from the articles read: Andrea never speaks to us, and she never explains her actions to the public. All we find about her we learn from others.

### **No Voice**

During her trial, Yates often appeared in court sedated, and is described as silent, quiet and apathetic: "Yates stared blankly at the jury while listening to the verdicts" (No Author, "Andrea Yates Case: Yates found not guilty by reason of insanity") and "Yates appears disheveled, confused by the questioning and emotionless." (No author, "Psychosis or Vengeance?")

The only words we ever "hear" from her are her initial testimony or from a recorded interview conducted with Dr. Dietz (the prosecution's psychological expert and witness), she never speaks again after this to the reader and the public directly. Her husband, the defense's psychologists and experts, who are without exception male, speak for her. Rusty's words count the most in all of this, and what he says is being taken at face value. After all, he had been this woman's legal husband, had lived with her for years, and thus, he would know who she really was. So, when Rusty described his wife a loving, caring mother, and said : "It wasn't Andrea. It was the illness.[...] We [Rusty himself, their family and Andrea's therapists] didn't see her as a danger" (quoted in Roche, "Andrea Yates: More to the Story"), there was no reason not to believe him.

But looking at Dr. Dietz and the testimony he gave, in which he had confused fact and fiction, made clear the downside of this. Nobody ever bothered to ask Andrea, once she was feeling better and medication started to work, if she

had actually seen this (as later turned out, non-existent) episode of *Law & Order*, instead, the therapists' words were taken as ultimate truth – with big consequences.

Ultimately, Andrea has no voice and she is not granted to the right – or the capability- to speak for herself. The men in her life define her character and her crime in terms of her illness.

For example, Rusty is the only one who has the right to speak about the birth of Mary, their last child. Andrea's therapist had warned about having another child, but, as mentioned before, the Yates had another child disregarding the medical concerns. We do not hear from Andrea – not once, not even now, years later- about her last child, Mary. It was only Rusty who talked to the public about the last pregnancy. Ed Bradley confronted Rusty Yates directly about this, when he asked, on *60 Minutes*, how they could have made the decision to have another child. Rusty responded: “Well, we looked at that and said...well, this was a very difficult time. Then we said, well, would we rather not have had Luke? I mean, of course, we'd rather have Luke” (*60 Minutes*, 4:30- 4:38 mins.). And that was that.

Here, it can be argued that the media became sexist in their own way: they denied Andrea her choice. Nobody acknowledged or even theorized that maybe Andrea did wholeheartedly want to have another child. Her sexuality and thus her reproduction lies solely in Rusty's hands in the articles about the case. He, in turn, is then presented as sexually exploitative of his wife. This accusation is made possible not only because Andrea has no voice, but also because it could be taken as a sign that this “more traditional family” (*60 Minutes*) in which “man is the breadwinner and the woman is the homemaker” (Rusty Yates, quoted in No

Author, "Psychosis or Vengeance") was an oppressive one. This did then lead to another, important aspect of the coverage, one that makes the Yates' case strikingly different from the Susan Smith case: the men in Andrea's Yates were asked pressing questions about their own actions.

### **Evil Men**

Since Andrea never spoke to the public directly and we consequently, as explained above, only learned about her as a person, mother and wife from Rusty or her therapists, these people eventually became the targets of critique. Timothy Roche painted an image of Rusty Yates that was anything but flattering: "Rusty appeared to have no regrets about any of the choices he and Andrea had made in their life together." ("Andrea Yates: More to the Story") He was presented as a man who felt he shared no blame in this tragedy, but the media ascribed to him a certain guilt, especially in consideration of the fact that Rusty got Andrea pregnant once more. This seemed to mean that she had no say in their reproduction. It implied that, even if she did have some authority over her body and even if she did agree to having another child, her word should not have been taken into account by Rusty, simply because she, as a person struggling with severe mental illness, was in no state of mind to make this kind of decision. Further, during the trial, "[s]ome in the Kennedy family [ Andrea's side of the family] still criticized Rusty for doing too little to get treatment for her — and at least for failing to hire a nanny or housekeeper." (Roche, "Andrea Yates: More to the Story")

The ambivalent feelings towards Rusty Yates (people seemed unsure about what to really make of him) were resonated in an *Law & Order* episode called

“Magnificat” (Season 3, November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004). In the episode, a mother kills her children, and Detectives Eames and Goren want to bring the father, Paul Whitlock, to court. The detectives feel that his controlling and abusive treatment of Doreen was the trigger that brought her to commit “a murder so heinous as to be incomprehensible.” (“Magnificat”, 21:30- 21:34)

The character of Doreen suffered from postpartum depression, stopped going to therapy and went off her medication. Further, her and Paul had another child even though her therapist advised them not to – all of this is Andrea Yates in her televised form.

In the episode, it is ultimately Paul who is guilty, because he does not feel responsible for his wife's actions and did not help her to overcome her depression. He must be punished because he pulled her out of therapy and – as is implied in the episode- got her pregnant once more against better judgment (resonating the idea that Rusty got Andrea pregnant again without considering her needs and wishes). The producers of *Law& Order*, with this episode, could be argued to have catered to the public's concerns about Rusty Yates. Had he supported his wife and gotten her help, none of this would have happened – Andrea, at the same time, was hence also a victim of her own husband, who either failed or chose not to see how critical her condition was.

Going back to “Magnificat”, this study also needs to cover the issue of religion on the Yates case, not just because it was addressed in the *Law& Order* episode, but also because Andrea's faith led to disturbing religious delusions; which, in turn, further stand in direct correlation to gender roles. Religion in the Yates case stood at the intersection of gender and control, male power and

influence.

### **Andrea and Eve**

The dismantling of her religious beliefs became a key feature of Andrea's trial and the coverage of it, as her faith had a direct impact on her crime. Both Andrea and Rusty were devout Christians, and had become more fundamental in their beliefs after having come into close contact with Michael Woroniecki, "a renegade minister whose writings fault women for the woes of their children." (Roche, "Andrea Yates: More to the Story")

But even before the couple turned more hardline in their beliefs, Andrea had had dangerous, religious hallucinations:

"Yet soon after Noah was born, Andrea began to have violent visions: she saw someone being stabbed. She thought she heard Satan speak to her. However, she and her husband had idealistic, Bible-inspired notions about family and motherhood, so she kept her tormenting secrets to herself." (Ramsland, "Andrea Yates: Ill or Evil?")

When the family started to follow Woroniecki's teachings, Andrea's fears of having failed as a mother increased. Woroniecki's teachings often revolved around

"the idea that women have Eves' witch nature and need to be subservient to men. The preacher judged harshly those mothers who were permissive and who allowed their children to go in the wrong direction. In other words, if the mother was going to Hell for some reason, so would the children." (Rudrappa, "Madness, Diasporic Difference, and State Violence: Explaining Filicide in American Courts." 269)

This certainly did not help Andrea, and when she eventually killed her five children, she claimed that she had ended their lives because her

"children were [not] righteous. They stumbled because [she] was evil . . . The way [she] was raising them they could never be saved . . . Better for someone else to tie a millstone around their neck and cast them into a river than stumble. They were going to perish." (quoted in Rudrappa "Madness, Diasporic Difference, and State Violence: Explaining Filicide in American

Courts." 269)

This was obviously a thought that Woroniecki's preaching had instilled in her, who placed his theology in a system of female obedience and inherent female sinfulness.

The religious aspect of the Yates case and the way it was covered in the media is interesting. Just like we never hear Andrea speak on her own behalf, her actions are influenced by male words and teachings.<sup>30</sup> Her husband had subjected her to his religious aspirations (he turned to Woroniecki because he could not find a church that suited him, cf. Roche, "Andrea Yates: More to the Story") and urged his wife to live a life according to these patriarchal teachings. Woroniecki had taught these lessons, and thus shared some of the blame, but was less in the spotlight than Rusty was in the media. Hence, the religious teachings about female obedience destroyed Andrea, and once more – just like in Susan Smith's case—men had the power to influence unstable women, this time in religious terms. In the end, though, both Rusty Yates and Michael Woroniecki went unpunished, their guilt being an abstract, indirect one. That they were blamed at all, however, spoke volumes: this was not a tragedy caused by the evilness of a woman, much rather, the deaths of the children were the outcome of male domination and female submission, a value system that, as the media argued, was not just out-dated, but even potentially dangerous: "She continued to correspond with the Woronieckis and to receive their warnings. They thought it was better to kill oneself than to mislead a child in the way of Jesus—a sentiment she would repeat later in prison interviews." (Ramsland, "Andrea Yates: Ill or Evil?")

Concerning religion, it is safe to say that what Susan Smith's case did not

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<sup>30</sup> This is a striking parallel to Susan Smith's actions after she received Tom Findlay's letter.



experience – ambivalence and disagreement, be it concerning gender roles or medical findings- Andrea Yates' did get. Her case was being looked at from different angles, which then also meant that her actions themselves needed to be re-evaluated.

### **Bathtubs and Gauze**

A letter to the *New York Times* by a reader, Dimitra Arlys, asked the question if Andrea's murders could not have been a Medea-Complex. Mrs. Arlys suggested that Andrea killed her children to get back at Rusty for having allegedly controlled her for so long (cf. Arlys, "Standing by His Woman"). Even though this notion is a rather rare one, it leads to another observation: there was ambivalence in the media. On the whole, most newspapers and journalists were empathetic to Andrea, which did not exclude some more critical demarcations of her case.

In all of this, Andrea Yates' case echoed theories about maternal filicides:

“For women ... filicide reflects their simultaneous position of power and powerlessness, and expressive concerns are more likely to predominate. Therefore whilst filicide is a dramatic, severe and relatively rare act, it reflects in extreme form the playing out of traditional gender roles.“ (Wilczynski 65)

There were, simply put, two ways in which criticism came. First there were claims that Andrea was, in fact, a calculating, cold-blooded murderer who was not mentally ill; and then, on the other hand, her case seemed to raise basic questions and critiques of gender relations and society for many.

Concerning the former, what is striking is that many articles and publications repeated the gruesome details of this heinous crime, often describing how the children died in length. As if to prove how evil her deed and thus how dark

her soul really was, especially the bathtub in which the children were drowned in was mentioned over and over again. This image – the one of the bath tub filled with the evidence of the children's struggles - was repeated over and over again. This possibly is an indicator of how the media actively responded to a public hunger for horror, making the story of the dead children one that was gruesome and terrifying, but so incredibly difficult to look away from.

“[Kaylinn] Williford [the prosecution] aroused the emotions of the jurors and reminded them that the victims were helpless as Andrea forced them into the water. Noah, she recalled graphically, had died in water containing vomit and feces from the others who died before him. 'Is this the act of a loving mother?' She asked. Then, she asked them to take three minutes of silence while they were back in the jury room. That's how long it takes for a child to lose consciousness, she told them.” (Roche, “Andrea Yates: More to the Story”)

The horribleness of Yates' case then also sparked suspicion in relation to her depression:

“Typically, a woman has a believably tragic story to go along with her deed, although some like Mary Beth Tinning, Susan Smith, and Marie Noe turned out to have killed for reasons other than their initial excuses. Thus, excuses become suspicious. And sometimes an act is so overwhelming that no mental condition seems to count as a reasonable explanation.” (Ramsland, “Andrea Yates: Ill or Evil?”)

Her crime exceeded the limits of imagination, and by claiming that she was not really sick at all, one might argue that Andrea could be turned into a monster who was simply evil. After all, turning into a simply bad and manipulative Susan Smith-kind of killer might have been a strategy to explain her crime.

But critiques of her trial also took another form, as mentioned above, that of criticism against society in general. For some journalists and scholars Andrea Yates' case brought “into sharp focus questions about the United States as a

nation.” (Meier "Andrea Yates: Where did we Go Wrong?", 296) Here was a woman whose depression and psychosis had not been adequately treated, and Andrea, in the majority of the articles covered, had been failed by her doctors and the health insurance system in America. Literally everyone had failed her, making her action the unavoidable outcome of a society that did not pay enough attention to mother's struggles and mental health. But, as Bob Herbert rightly pointed out, “[t]he gut reactions throughout Texas and across the country would have been far different if Andrea Yates had been a crackhead, or a welfare mother, or some crazy guy with a gun who opened fire on a classroom full of children” (Herbert, “Deciding Who Will Live”).

Perhaps precisely because Yates was white, married and middle-class, journalists did start to question how well families were really functioning, and especially if the expectations in American mothers might not need some reconsidering:

“[T]he American sentimentalization of motherhood. It is seen as a sacred and sacrosanct sphere. The circle of mother and child is a Hallmark card place, where the selfless mother nurtures her young, no matter her dreams or ambitions, conflicts or terrors. Motherhood is seen through gauze, in soft, religiously inflected focus. Madonna and child. Through all that gauze, it's hard to see a mother like Mrs. Yates as she really is -- one of the desperate, destructive mothers nobody takes seriously until too late.” (Fleming, “Crime and Motherhood; Maternal Madness”)

Here were critical voices asking if and how the striving for ideal motherhood created a problem for American mothers, and how modern mothers should no longer expected to do it all without so much as a whimper.

### 4.2.3 Conclusion: Suburban Soccer Mom

Andrea Yates was a role-model citizen, who complied to moral expectations in the female sex, perhaps she even was a woman who was too good to some. Had she been single, or black, sympathy, one might argue, would not have been on her side as much as it was.

On the other hand, though, she was “an instance of individual deviance” (Rudrappa "Madness, Diasporic Difference, and State Violence: Explaining Filicide in American Courts" 268), a mother who was literally crazy and thus as unrepresentative of the way things really were in America as Susan Smith – simply put, not all mothers struggling with depression kill their children.

But at the very same time, Andrea Yates, it seems, was a person millions of American mothers could feel for, even if the murders of her children were brutal and disturbing beyond comprehension. There was a simple truth to Andrea: the mother of five children that she planned to home-school, three of which were still in diapers, with a husband working full-time. She was not the Susan Smith of motherhood, who had been having affairs and killed her babies to continue them – Andrea Yates could happen anywhere, anytime.

In the end, the media was almost delicate in the coverage of the Andrea Yates case, even though it took a very clear stand from the beginning: Yates is innocent. Her innocence, then, entailed that there were bigger issues at hand that the media sought to discuss, such as the issues of inadequate medical treatment and access to the same for mothers, the flaws of the insurance system, misogynistic religious hardliners and last but not least, marriage and its power

structures.

That these questions were raised in the Yates case, but not during the trial of Susan Smith (even though there were some similarities these two women shared), could and should be interpreted as a sign of the still prevalent 1950's ideal of motherhood. Smith had had affairs (this has been discussed in detail in the foregoing chapter), but Andrea was all that a woman should be. This then, ultimately, meant two things for the media.

First of all, Andrea Yates was a “normal” (before the murders) mother and wife, and hence not initially deviant. Consequently, her normalcy and suburban conformity meant that Americans had to think about the larger questions at hand, because Yates was a woman like millions of others – as mentioned before, Andrea could have lived anywhere and anytime.

Secondly, Andrea had not lost her right to receive benevolent coverage through her life prior to the murders. She was married to the father of her children, baked the symbolic cookies with a smile on her face, and wanted nothing but what she believed was best for her kids. She did not drown her children because she- as was implied in the Smith case- wanted to start a new, sexually fulfilling, financially promising life. Thus, she still was inherently good, and could consequently also be presented as such. She had not broken with tradition and allegedly American values. In turn, she got mostly sympathy even though – objectively- she killed more children than Susan Smith.

No matter how many critical voices had been allowed to be heard in newspapers and magazines, the media did nothing to re-evaluate motherhood and gender roles in America. Andrea Yates was a role-model soccer mom in the media.

American newspapers and magazines could be so emphatic to her because she did not breach with American values and morals and thus had not lost the right to still be considered a good mother. Whereas Susan Smith had broken with all norms, Andrea had not, and could thus still ultimately remain good and be empathized for, she was a good “bad” mother. Attempts to make sense of Yates lead to ambivalence, but not to real change - that would have been too much for the American media to undertake. After all, had Andrea not killed the five children, she would have remained under the radar, and she would have remained a good mother forever.

In essence, then, her case raised individual questions about her and her life, but what remained in the end was that the Yates-tragedy was *not* the logical outcome of a system ( concerning gender, sexuality and mental health care) that was not working anymore, but one that should simply be slightly improved-personally, individually.

The same idea – that maternal filicide in general – was a sign of personal, individual failures should dominate the media's reception and coverage of the third case of this study: the one of Casey Anthony.

### 4.3. Casey Anthony - “This is Better than 'Jersey Shore'”

#### 4.3.1 The Case

The most recent of the three cases covered here is the one of Casey Anthony, which is also different from the two prior cases in many ways. Anthony's trial and its aftermath are still present in American media, with, for example, *People Magazine* having reported about the case as late as May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2012.<sup>31</sup>

The case as such is highly complicated. The only thing one can say with absolute certainty is that the body of Casey Anthony's daughter, then two-year old Caylee Anthony, was found in a wood nearby her mother's house on December 11<sup>th</sup> 2008.

The story of Caylee Anthony had naturally begun much sooner. Caylee had last been seen on June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008 (cf. Alvarez, “Casey Anthony Not Guilty In Slaying of Daughter”). A month later, on July 15<sup>th</sup>, Caylee's grandmother, Cindy, called 911. Casey had told her that Caylee had been kidnapped by her nanny “Zanny”, a woman that later turned out not to exist. In this first call to the dispatcher, Cindy mentioned that Casey's car was smelling like a body had been decomposing in the trunk: “There is something wrong. I found my daughter's car today [and] it smells like there's been a dead body in the damn car.” (quoted in Waxman, “Timeline: The Casey Anthony Saga”) Suspicions had thus been rising from the beginning, and a day later, on July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008, Casey Anthony was arrested for “child neglect, providing false information to investigators, and

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<sup>31</sup> See: Fleeman, Mike. “Casey Anthony: Meet the Teen Actress Playing Her in TV Movie.” *People Magazine*, May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2012.  
<http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20598372,00.html>

obstructing a criminal investigation.” (Waxman, “Timeline: The Casey Anthony Saga”)

She was released on August 21<sup>st</sup> 2008, but was re-arrested a week later for charges that had nothing to do with the disappearance of Caylee (cf. Waxman, “Timeline: The Casey Anthony Saga”). She was still in prison when Caylee's body was found in December 2008, and was charged with first degree murder, aggravated child abuse, aggravated manslaughter of a child, and four counts of providing false information to police.

In April 2009, prosecution stated that it would seek the death penalty for Ms. Anthony. Before the case could go to court, however, the other charges against her had to be settled. In May 2011, the murder trial went to court, and went on for six-weeks (cf. Waxman, “Timeline: The Casey Anthony Saga”).

Anthony's defense attorney, Jose Baez, made his case by claiming that Caylee had accidentally drowned in the family's pool, and that Casey covered up the death with the help of her father, George. Baez argued that Casey did not dare to come forward with the truth because she was scared and intimidated by her father, who, as Baez claimed, had sexually abused and molested Casey for years (cf. Waxman, “Timeline: The Casey Anthony Saga”; Alvarez, “Casey Anthony not Guilty”).

The prosecution on the other hand argued that Anthony was “a callous liar who sought to kill Caylee so she could lead a carefree life of boyfriends and bars” (Alvarez, “Casey Anthony not Guilty”), and presented evidence tying Anthony to the death of her daughter. For example, the defense brought up Internet- searches



to show that the crime was premeditated (cf. *48 Hours*, “Casey Anthony: Judgment Day”).<sup>32</sup> Further, hair found in the trunk of Casey Anthony was argued to have been Caylee's (cf. Rawlings, “Casey Anthony Trial, CSI:A Triumph of High-Tech Forensics?”). Arpad Vass, a forensic anthropologist, was brought to the stand to testify that his newly-developed odor analysis technique applied to the air in the trunk showed “definitive signs of decomposition.” (Rawlings, “Casey Anthony Trial, CSI”) However, these findings were controversial, as these technologies were not entirely established yet (cf. Rawlings, “Casey Anthony Trial, CSI”). The evidence and testimonies, in essence, did not undoubtedly link Casey Anthony to the death of Caylee.

On July 5<sup>th</sup> 2011, the jury found Casey Anthony not guilty on first-degree murder, aggravated child abuse and manslaughter, but Anthony was “convicted of four counts of misleading investigators, although the crimes were misdemeanors.” (DiBlasio, “Web keeps Anthony Case Alive”) Since Anthony had already spent nearly 1 ½ years in prison, this was counted towards her verdict, and she was released shortly after.

Unlike Susan Smith and Andrea Yates, Casey Anthony had not been found guilty. But in most people's opinion, she had not gotten the punishment she deserved. The verdict in her case had, for most Americans following the case (and only few were not), simply not brought closure and justice. This lack of closure as well as the complexity of the Anthony case made Casey Anthony was a perfect target and character for the media.

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<sup>32</sup> On the computer 'neck breaking', “household weapons” and “how to make chloroform” had been searched for. (cf. Waxman, “Timeline: The Casey Anthony Saga”).

### 4.3.2 The Coverage

*The View* producer Bill Geddie told the New York Post: "We think that there is a genuine interest in this story in daytime television because, at its core, Casey Anthony's motherhood is on trial." (cf. Shen, Maxine, "TV's Hottest Ticket, Holy OJ! Viewers Can't Get Enough Casey") This "genuine interest" almost made Anthony a celebrity and many believed that Anthony would soon appear on television or publish a book:

"Her quickest road to cash is likely to be through books or television, which she can pursue because of her acquittal. Agents said her story was highly marketable, despite the furor over the verdict and the disgust over her behavior after her child's disappearance. 'There would be a lot of buyers for the book in the publishing market and a significant amount of money,' said Robert Gottlieb, the chairman of Trident Media Group, who added that Ms. Anthony could get a seven-figure deal as long as she does not share her story in advance. 'This is a controversial story. Controversy sells books.' (Alvarez, "On Her release, a Chorus of 'Happy Trails' to Anthony, Minus the 'Happy'")

However, Anthony did neither, even disappeared after her verdict, but she still remains present in the media. Concerning the coverage of her case, four major perspectives dominated. A lot of attention was paid to her many lies, which effectively painted her as evil and morally flawed. As it seems, then, a striking subcategory of her evilness (that was originally derived from her lies) was a more abstract observation: Anthony's sexuality and her lifestyle choices which were – just like her lies – taken as evidence for her guilt; and made her target of sexualization and unrestricted gaze and dissection of Casey's body.

Then there is also the issue of Anthony's single motherhood and the absence of Caylee's father, which tied in with discussions about the role of Caylee's grandmother, Cindy Anthony. A fourth major aspect of the coverage are the

reactions to her verdict. The outrage seemed to outweigh any other opinions, so *why* Americans found the verdict unjust and did not stop talking about her as a murderer must then be covered. This fourth aspect actually lead to a reflection of the media on itself. Legal and journalistic commentators were critical of how the case and its outcome were dealt with. Even though this is extremely interesting, and a unique feature of the Casey Anthony trial, it cannot be dealt with in this study. An analysis of this self-reflective evaluation of American media simply leads too far away from what this study is ultimately concerned with: gender and motherhood in America.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, this can only be a suggestion for further research. This case study should then begin with a closer look at Anthony's lies and the media's reception and evaluations of these lies.

### **Lies mean Guilty**

Right from the beginning of the Anthony-story, the public was informed about Casey's odd behavior (which was basically what had led to her initial arrest), and she was presented as a pathological liar. Anthony had lied about many things, such as her work, her nanny and, most importantly, the whereabouts of Caylee:

“A month after Caylee disappeared, Ms. Anthony told a detective during questioning that she worked at Universal Studios in Orlando, and took the police to the park, admitting at the last minute that she did not work there. She provided the detective the fictitious name of a nanny, claiming the woman had kidnapped Caylee. She also gave him the names of two people who worked at Universal, saying she had told them that Caylee had disappeared. Lastly, she told the detective that she had spoken by phone with Caylee the day before.” ( Alvarez, “Anthony Is Sentenced To 4-Year

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<sup>33</sup> Articles dealing with this criticism of the media certainly make for interesting further reading, and should be only recommended at this point: Garvin's “Casey Anthony verdict outrage: critics blame Nancy Grace, Geraldo Rivera and other media figures” in the *Vancouver Sun*; Alvarez' “On her Release” in the *New York Times*; Poniewozik's “The Avenger” in *Time Magazine*.

Term for Lying”)

Her fabrications were the key to Anthony as a suspect, and the doubt it created got her arrested. In many people's opinions, her lies were a clear sign that she was guilty as sin. Dr. Phil reaffirmed this conviction, when he stated – in an interview with her parents conducted after Casey was found not guilty – that her behavior was the one of a “unconscionable psychopath.” (Dr. Phil, “Cindy and George Anthony: The Interview“ Part1, 37:00- 37:04 min.)

As the case progressed and the “national obsession” with the case grew (cf. *48 Hours*, “Casey Anthony: Judgment Day”), newspapers and magazines started to dig up other details of Anthony's life that spoke for her being a pathological liar, and hence responsible for Caylee's death.

For example, the question of who Caylee's father was never resolved. As *People Magazine* reported, Anthony had repeatedly lied about it (cf. Helling, “Who Is Caylee Anthony's Father?”). When friends and family had inquired about the paternity “over the ensuing years, Casey Anthony named several people as possible fathers for Caylee, including her boyfriend at the time, a man she made up and a man she said had died.” (Ng and McDonald, “Casey Anthony Reveals New Theory for Caylee's Death”) At the end of her trial – and until this day - the public does not know who Caylee's father is. Ms. Anthony eventually claimed that she had been drugged at a party and raped subsequently so that Caylee might have the product of this sexual assault (cf. Ng and McDonald, “Casey Anthony Reveals New Theory”; Hartmann, “Casey Anthony: Caylee Was the Product of Rape”; Soltis, “Casey: I got preg from rape”).

Further, Ms. Anthony's defense team then brought forward accusations of sexual abuse Anthony had suffered at the hands of her own father and her brother. Even the possibility that her own father, George, might be Caylee's father was raised (DNA-tests proved that he was not).

The alleged rape at a party and the year-long sexual abuse in her family, however, did in no way help to paint a different image of Anthony. She remained the victimizer, and the chance that she might have been a victim herself was not found relevant.

What was more: the idea that Caylee might have been the product of rape made her mother's involvement in her death all the more likely. If (and this is an "if" that will probably never be resolved) Caylee was really conceived during a rape, she might have been a constant reminder to Casey of what had happened to her. The only way to move on from such a traumatic experience would then have been to cut the child out of one's life, as Jeanne Sager pointed out:

"[...]women who have become pregnant from rape are much more likely to abort or put the child up for adoption because their feelings toward said child can very understandably be tinged by the circumstances of conception." (Sager, "Casey Anthony's Rape Revelation Makes Her Harder to Hate")

Sager's article is the only one read for this study that raised the point that, if this rape and the sexual abuse had really happened, Casey "was a sympathetic, even tragic figure." (Sager, "Casey Anthony's Rape Revelation") Sager thus argues that, if it is true, the majority of people might have been too quick to condemn her, but should rather start to feel some sympathy for Casey as victim. Sager's piece on *The Spin* hence illustrates that there were different readings of Casey's behavior

and actions. Sager's piece also is one that is very concerned with female emotions and struggles, thus one many could have been able to relate to. However, there were so very few of articles that suggested alternative readings of Anthony and the trial that they never really became a force in influencing public opinion about Anthony.

It is to observe that few believed the story of rape and incest anyway. This distrust in Casey's allegations becomes apparent most strikingly in an article posted on *Jezebel*, which re-iterated Dr. Danziger's – a psychologist who had spoken to Casey in prison – words that rebutted her allegations. In this article, Anthony was effectively described as a liar:

“Defendants commonly lie to mental health experts to try to legitimize their story or allow their claims to be presented in court without having to testify, and Danziger was very concerned about being used in this way. He said he was 'deeply troubled' about repeating Anthony's sex abuse allegations since they hadn't been proven by law enforcement.” (Hartmann, “Casey Anthony: Caylee was Product of Rape”)

The bottom line here was clear: Casey lied about being raped and sexually abused, and she should not be believed one bit. Of course, Dr. Danziger's interview with Anthony was also reprinted and mentioned in other articles (such as Ng and McDonald, “Casey Anthony Reveals New Theory”), but the article in *Jezebel* is tremendously important in this instance. The online women's magazine is usually a bastion of victim advocacy, especially concerning rape and sexual abuse. However, in the Casey Anthony case, even the writer at *Jezebel* questioned her claims, whereas the site usually takes the stand that all allegations of rape should initially be taken serious (coming from the point of view that people do not just make up such claims).

In essence, even in *Jezebel*, Anthony was presented as a dangerous liar, whose words should not be taken too seriously (and in turn, the words of her own father, who denied ever having molested Casey and those of Dr. Danziger are true). Even slightly feminist news outlets such as *Jezebel* could not help but consider Anthony as a victimizer, and never as a victim.

At the end, her lies were the most clear sign of her inherently evil and automatically criminal persona, an opinion that resonated in comments posted to a *TMZ* poll (more on this below). A comment of “pinkwhitehead” boils it down to the point: “... Casey Anthony is a bad mom and a monster. ... Casey Anthony is a liar, manipulative, murderer. (Lopez, Johnny, “Who'd You Rather?”, comment 32, page 3) The wording of this comment is important. Anthony is a bad mom, then a monster, and *then* a murderer. Her alleged shortcomings as mother come first, and it is them that make her a monster and a murderer. Arguably then, Casey’s “crime” had begun the moment she became a “bad” mother. Thinking back to the two other cases analyzed, the Casey Anthony here is similar to that of Susan Smith. Just like Smith in 1994, Casey Anthony had lied, and these lies were also then taken as the clear sign that she was a bad mother turned killer, as was also implied in the coverage of Susan Smith. Whereas Andrea Yates had been described as a good mother even after she was initially found guilty, Susan Smith and Casey Anthony were never good, selfless, maternal.

That Anthony was cold, manipulative, calculating and a murderer was then again resonated in many articles. An article by Andrea Peyser in the *New York Post* claimed that

“[i]t was clear that if she cares for anyone on earth unconditionally, it's not her daughter, her parents, her dog or even her lover-of-the-moment. There

is not a hint of grief, sadness, or compassion for another living soul. For Casey is the very definition of a walking sociopath. Casey Anthony cares only for herself." (Peyser, "Casey The Party Monster- Heartless Tart Gets All Dolled Up For Her Court 'Appearance'")

But there was something else about Anthony that seemed to make her an evil woman, bad mother, a sociopath even, and hence guilty: her body. Her body seemed to stand in direct relation to her allegedly uncontrolled sexuality, which will be discussed now. This discussion also entails observations of how Anthony's very body was, seemingly as a consequence of her deviant sexuality and attractiveness, made a commodity for gaze.

### **Casey's Body**

Newspapers and magazines, from the *New York Times* to *Time Magazine* to tabloids like *People Magazine* and *Newsweek*, covered one aspect relentlessly: her lifestyle choices, which allowed discussions of her sexuality. This apparently gave permission to dissect Anthony's physical appearance.

There seemed to be little disagreement over the fact that Anthony had been living a life filled with parties and little concern or care for her maternal duties: "She was also a single mother who rarely, if ever, mentioned her daughter, according to the testimony of several former friends on Wednesday." (Tauber, "Casey Anthony's Transformation From Party Girl to Murder Defendant") This made her case even more interesting: "The case has riveted much of the country, which became entranced by tales of a duplicitous young mother apparently more interested in boyfriends and barhopping than in caring for her child." (Alvarez, "Anthony Is Sentenced To 4-Year Term for Lying")



Even though not always that explicit, Casey was described as a selfish, deviant party-girl who cared for little else besides her fun, but, once charged with murder, lied about it: She had been a “smiley, flirty, bright-eyed” “sexy 'shot girl” (Tauber, “Casey Anthony's Transformation”) but “the young woman so often photographed in various states of inebriation” (Ng and McDonald, “Casey Anthony Reveals New Theory”) told psychiatrists that she spoke to in prison that she rarely went out or drank alcohol.

Especially noteworthy in relation to Anthony's alleged lifestyle is the instance of the “Hot Body” Contest Anthony took part in four days after her daughter had disappeared (but had not yet been reported missing). A picture of Anthony at this contest was circulated widely and can be found in many reports about her.<sup>34</sup> It prompted Dr. Phil to observe that “her lifestyle is out of control.” (*Dr. Phil*, “Cindy and George Anthony: The Interview“, Part 1, 13:55 – 14:05 minutes) Her taking part in such a contest meant, apparently, that she was guilty.

Her alleged party-lifestyle and the way it was covered then was inextricably linked to the aspect of Casey's persona that would be so very prominent in the coverage: her physicality. The “Hot Body” contest Casey took part in was – obviously - an event in which attention focused on Anthony's body, and this gaze should then be duplicated by the media.

First of all, a rather basic observation to make is Anthony is highly visible. Most articles read included photographs of Anthony, either in court or before the

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<sup>34</sup> It is one of the images showed over and over again in the Dr. Phil interview with Cindy and George Anthony (cf. Dr. Phil „Cindy and George Anthony: The Interview“, Part 1, 35: 53 min.), it is in the special edition of CBS' *48 Hours* “Casey Anthony: Judgment Day” ( 2:34 – 2:42 minutes) and is one of the first results one gets when Image-Googleing “Casey Anthony”, next to other photographs of her showing her drinking from a shot glass and making a peace sign as she is crouched over a toilet.

trial, and often also boasted descriptions of Anthony. She was described, by Andrea Peyser in the *New York Post*, as having

“sashayed into the courtroom[...] tarted up like a Florida sorority girl looking for a quick-and-dirty hookup. On what she clearly believed was Freedom Day - hide the barstools! - Casey entered the fluorescent-lit runway looking nightclub-sexy in a lavender sweater dress designed to show off her generous curves.” (Peyser, “Casey the Party Monster”).

Reacting to the video of her that surfaced on YouTube in January 2012, she was, with an accusing tone, described as wearing, “dangerously low-cut tank top that shrieked 'sensual schoolteacher'” by Peyser. (Peyser, “Smelling a Rat in Casey's Video”)

But even less opinionated pieces and articles about Anthony paid a lot of attention to her physical attributes and attractiveness. The beautiful young woman had gone “dour. Tense. Pale. Prim. Her jaw set hard” (Tauber, “Casey Anthony's Transformation”), what she wore and what she did to her hair were reported, as if they were a sign of guilt or innocence (cf. Peyser, “Casey the Party Monster”).

A part of Casey's body that gathered special attention was a tattoo she got after Caylee had disappeared. On her shoulder, she wears a tattoo that reads “Bella Vita”. This was a sign of guilt and ultimate coldness, an indication that now that she had disposed of her child, she could live “the beautiful life.” (cf. Mann, “Casey Anthony Trial Update: Casey got 'Bella Vita' Tattoo While Caylee Was Missing”; Richey, “Casey Anthony Murder Trial: What Did Her 'Bella Vita' Tattoo Mean?”, Alvarez, “Casey Anthony Not Guilty of Murder) But one journalist presented a different way to read the by-now infamous tattoo: “And about that tattoo: what if *Bella Vita* is a description not of the good life Casey believed she

would have after her troublesome daughter was dead but of the 'beautiful life' that had just been taken from her?" (Cloud, "How the Casey Anthony Murder Case Became the Social-Media Trial of the Century") But just like Jeanne Sager's different assessment of the aspect of rape and sexual abuse, John Cloud's alternative reading of the tattoo was a rare occurrence. Most media outlets presented the tattoo as definite sign of Anthony's guilt.

The tattoo she got – for whatever reason- is, in any case, a sign of the hyper-visibility of Casey Anthony's very body. She was, in turn, sexualized, even denigrated. *TMZ*, on August 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011, posted a video on their website under the headline "Who Wants to Investigate My Body?" Making this question sound like Casey Anthony was asking it, the article claims that "[Casey Anthony](#) looks different -- but is it her hair color, her new clothes, or ... ??Okay, fine...we're talking about her huge BOOBS [sic]." (TMZ Staff, "Casey Anthony: Who Wants to Investigate My Body?") This implies two things. First of all, by making it sound as if Anthony herself is asking this question, "she" is literally asking for physical contact from anyone who is willing. Thus, Anthony is presented as sexually insatiable, a woman who will let anyone "investigate" her body.

Secondly, this focuses on Anthony solely as a sexual being, an object for the (male) gaze. Also, taking this thought one step further, she has lost all right to decency and privacy of her own body, because she is a criminal (even though she had already been found not guilty at the time this was posted).

Then, two months later, *TMZ* posted a poll: who would their readers rather sleep with – Amanda Knox, the American who had been accused of killing a young woman in Italy, or Casey Anthony? The comments to this poll are, to say the least,

repulsively telling. Only two comments shall be repeated at this point. Commentator “Who Dat“ writes: “Definitely a three way, both are hot. But right after I busted both their faces, I would leave“ (Lopez,” Who'd You Rather?”, comment 7, page 1). “Jay“ wrote: “I wish I could of [sic] been the guy to be the first to hit it after they were released. I bet they were so horny and so sensual, it would be awesome“( Lopez,” Who'd You Rather?”, comment 14, page 1).

Casey Anthony (Amanda Knox alike) is not a person, but a body free to be, drastically put, hunted down and taken advantage of. The tone of the two comments reiterated above also speaks for violence and brutal sexual relations with these women, again, because they seem to have lost their right to consent. And then, secondly, they were here presented to be oversexualized, insatiable femme fatales.

At this point, the role and prominence of the Internet in the Anthony case must be mentioned. Both the cases of Susan Smith and Andrea Yates did not receive this amount of coverage on the Internet by people who were not journalists or jurists. In 2011, Facebook, Twitter and blogs gave people a chance to speak their minds freely, without any kind of restriction<sup>35</sup>, and in the safety of anonymity: “The verdict incited outrage from people who had watched the televised trial and then used Twitter and set up Facebook pages to venomously denounce the verdict“ (Alvarez,”Anthony Is Sentenced To 4-Year Term for Lying“), without anyone really knowing who they were (which allowed them to often say rather cruel things, like those above). Because the Internet was so omnipresent and such

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<sup>35</sup> See, for example, some tweets posted about the verdict:  
<http://newsfeed.time.com/2011/07/05/the-verdict-is-in-top-9-tweets-about-casey-anthonys-acquittal/#caseytweetjoy>

a big part of everyday American life accessible at any place and at any time by 2011, people could vent their anger about cases like this one like never before. The media could then also arguably adjust coverage more quickly to overall opinion online.

To only briefly elaborate on this (the Internet in the Anthony case is definitely an issue to keep in mind for further research), the prolific pieces by Andrea Peyser come in handy. While ultimately opinion pieces in the guise of trial coverage, Peyser employs the very same strategies and ideas found online. For example, she writes that Anthony looked “hot, in a hooker-behind-bars kind of way” (Peyser, “Casey the Party Monster”) and would, after she was found not guilty, go back to “rubbing her parts against random boys and girls in bars.” (Peyser, “Casey the Party Monster”) Then, Peyser calls Anthony “the skank” (Peyser, “Smelling a Rat”). While this does not really need any further elaboration, it does link back to the comments on *TMZ* and elsewhere. By calling Anthony “*the skank*” [emphasis mine], she re-affirms people's opinions about and hatred for allegedly sexually insatiable Casey, while simultaneously *legitimizing* the denouncement of Casey that had been happening online, because Peyser, after all, is a writer published in a national magazine.

This evil sexuality apparent through Anthony's physical appearance and lifestyle lead to the conclusion that Casey Anthony had been a bad mother, suggesting that an attractive and allegedly promiscuous woman cannot be a good mother. Also, articles also dealt with Cindy Anthony's failures as grandmother, making the death of Caylee a family affair, in which the Caylee's grandmother was guilty as well.

## Failed Mothers Everywhere

What is striking about the Casey Anthony case is that there are hardly any real descriptions of Anthony as a mother. In all the articles read, there is not once a description of Casey Anthony's interactions with Caylee. We do not learn about her as a care-taker and mother, but only as someone who *might* have been a good mother, but most likely was not. Andrea Yates and even Susan Smith, on the other hand, had been described in motherly images. Yates, as mentioned in the last chapter, was the all-American perfect mom who baked cookies and dropped her kids off at baseball practice. People even spoke about Smith as a rather normal mother before she killed Michael and Alex. Casey is never described as a mother, but always as party-girl, liar and promiscuous, young woman. It appears that Casey, from the very beginning, was deemed an unfit mother who had proven herself to be incapable of maternal duties through her lies, sexuality and body.

On the other hand, the role of Cindy, Caylee's grandmother, was discussed frequently. The media asked questions about Cindy Anthony and her roles as mother and grandmother, and where she had failed.

What can be said right now that guilt in the Casey Anthony trial and its coverage was negotiated solely on female terms, in motherhood and grandmotherhood. George Anthony, Casey's father, hardly ever came under fire, despite evidence that spoke for him being a factor in this tragedy. It was revealed that he had had a gambling addiction, had left the family's house for several months, was rumored to have had an affair and even accused of sexually abusing his daughter. Even when the defense argued that George had witnessed Caylee drowning and helped to dispose of the body, he remains a bystander. The most poignant

questions of guilt are only asked about Casey and Cindy. This is a direct similarity to the cases of Susan Smith and Andrea Yates. In the former, discussions of possible male guilt are not found, even though the letter of Tom Findlay seemed to have had an influence on Smith, and even though it was proven that she had had been abused by her step-father. Andrea Yates' husband, Rusty, and the family's religious "leader", Michael Woroniecki, came into question in the Yates filicide, but they also did not experience any legal consequences. And as pointed out above, neither did George Anthony, whose apparent moral flaws were not taken into account, but were rather just left standing without comment.

Concerning Casey as a mother, most articles deal with her as a mother only on a side note. But, as Lizette Alvarez pointed out, the "[p]rosecutors failed to offer evidence or testimony that showed Ms. Anthony was actually a bad or negligent mother" (Alvarez, "Casey Anthony Found Not Guilty"). There were no signs prior to Caylee's disappearance that Casey had not taken care of her child or abused her. Further, none of the 91 witnesses who testified (cf. *48 Hours*, "Casey Anthony: Judgement Day") ever mentioned that Anthony had been treating Caylee badly: "no eyewitnesses ever saw Casey hurt Caylee." (Cloud, "How the CA Murder Became the Social- Media Trial of the Century")

Dr. Wertz, who also evaluated Casey as she was in prison, pointed out that she had said that the "pregnancy became very meaningful to Anthony, especially when she realized she was having a daughter." (Ng and McDonald, "Casey Anthony Reveals New Theory") Casey's at times difficult relationship with her own mother led to bliss on Casey's side when she found out she was having a girl. Further, she apparently never considered abortion or adoption even though she

argued that Caylee was the product of rape. It is implicitly implied here that for Casey, Caylee might have been a chance to do it “better”, to do it “right”, and that for her, motherhood was the greatest gift ever given to her.

But neither the psychological evaluation of Casey nor the lack of evidence proving that Casey was, in fact, a negligent mother, changed the tone of coverage about her. Casey had partied too much for the taste of most and was allegedly promiscuous and self-absorbed, so she could not have been a good mother.

Nancy Grace, who was perhaps the most outspoken person covering the Casey Anthony case, said in an interview with the New York Post: “Other mothers are faced with much worse circumstances every day, and they don't resort to violence.” (Nancy Grace quoted in Starr, “The Jury Was Wrong' ; What Nancy Would Ask Casey“) This statement is interesting because, just like Susan Smith, Casey Anthony was compared to other mothers and standards of normalcy. Susan Smith was worse than other single mothers because she wanted to marry a rich man and escape her harsh financial reality, Casey was a bad mom because she couldn't say who fathered Caylee, was rumored to be promiscuous, a party girl and lied about so many things.

Casey arguably was better off than other single moms, she, for the most time, lived with her parents who supported her financially. Because other single moms do not kill their babies, Casey must have been twice as bad, gladly overlooking the fact that this accusation of violence stands without any evidence. What is so important about this is that even 15 years after the Susan Smith case, American news outlets still made their points by comparing individual mothers to the whole of (single) mothers in America. In 2011 as much as in 1994, deviant



mothers were criminals because they were not conforming to a normalcy that had allegedly been lived up to by their fellow American mothers. Consequently, individual instances of maternal “failure” were not taken as a sign that maybe the other mothers were struggling just as much as Anthony and Smith and that they were part of a bigger picture of changing motherhood in America, but were regarded as evidence that these women were simply evil.

That Casey was bad mother and thus a despicable, possibly even murderous, woman, was a commonly held opinion among Americans. In a poll about whom Americans dislike the most, Anthony made first place, and “became more reviled than 'Octomom' Nadya Suleman, socialite Paris Hilton and fallen football star O.J. Simpson.” (Kaplan, “America's Most Hated- Casey Anthony Tops Loathe-Life List”) Don Kaplan explained this hate for Anthony through the “vitriol for notorious mothers, like Octomom and Anthony” (Kaplan, “America's Most Hated”). This – both the Most-Hated List and Kaplan's explanation- is significant. An allegedly bad mother ranks higher on the loathe-list of Americans than anybody else, strikingly showing how important good mothering still is in the United States. A failed mother – even when there is no evidence to back up this valuation – is “worse” than, for example, a woman who has starred in Porn, or a man who was accused of killing two people. Consequently here, Casey Anthony is the most hated person in America not because she stood a trial for murder, but because she was accused of being a bad mother. Just like with Susan Smith, Anthony's crime was more than an alleged murder. It went deeper than that: she was a bad mother. The worst kind of criminal of them all.

And then there was Cindy Anthony and her role in all of this. Nancy Grace

asked: "Cindy [Anthony] would have taken Caylee in a heartbeat. Why couldn't that be?" (Nancy Grace quoted in Starr, "The Jury Was Wrong") Responsibilities of mothering and childcare were transplanted from Casey to Cindy, from mother to grandmother (why George never stepped in was not asked, as it was also never brought up that none of the possible fathers ever bothered to do paternity tests). Questions of Cindy's role revolved around the idea that she could have prevented all of this, but did not - perhaps because she was not a good mother for her own children either? Exactly that was suggested by John Cloud, when he wrote that "[t]he Anthony family tale has so many crosscurrents that operate along such electrified moral axes that it's hard to turn away." (Cloud, "How the Casey Anthony Murder Case Became the Social-Media Trial of the Century") Cindy had failed as a mother – how else could Casey's lying, unplanned pregnancy and party lifestyle be explained? *48 Hours* argued the very same: Casey was such a monster "because of the environment she was brought up in." (*48 Hours*, "Casey Anthony: Judgment Day", 24:47 – 24:50 mins.)

Concerning the role of Cindy Anthony, the *Dr. Phil* interview with her and her husband George is most interesting. One of the first questions Dr. Phil asked the Anthonys was one bringing up notions of normalcy and "Americanness": "Would you consider the upbringing in home a typical American upbringing?" (*Dr. Phil*, "Cindy and George Anthony: The Interview", Part 1, 5:10- 5:15 min.), to which the parents responded that their children were raised in a totally normal way. While Dr. Phil also asks pressing questions about George's gambling and his alleged affairs, he confronts Cindy with the idea that she might have pushed Casey too hard, while she is mostly being accused of desperately trying to rationalize Casey's

behavior. She claims that her daughter had had seizures in the past, and might have had one the day Caylee disappeared. Then she said that she thinks that Casey had suffered from undiagnosed postpartum depression. Dr. Phil has only one thing to say about this: “You cannot explain away horrific behavior by saying somebody was hormonal” (Dr. Phil, “Cindy and George Anthony: The Interview”, Part 2, 4:30 – 4:42 min.), and shakes his head at Cindy’s “naivety”. This needs some closer dissemination.

Thinking back to Andrea Yates, her “horrific behavior” explicitly *was* explained by her hormones, her postpartum depression with psychosis . But Casey Anthony is not granted a more in-depth employment of this possibility, perhaps because she was sexually deviant, morally objectionable and a single mother; whereas Andrea Yates had been living the suburban American Dream.

At the same time, though, Cindy Anthony comes under fire for trying to make sense of the tragedy that had happened to her family ( at whoever's hands), and there is some belittling of Cindy going on here. She is called naïve, blind to the facts and so desperate for an explanation she lets her emotions overpower her logical thinking. This all reminds of notions about female capability, in which women, like discussed in the Susan Smith case, are at the mercy of their feelings.

While Casey is purely evil and manipulative, and hence masculine in a certain way (even though simultaneously overly sexualized), her mother is irrational, emotional and thus strikingly feminized. Both women, then, share the blame for the death of Caylee. Both, as is suggested, were failed mothers; and while Casey was simply evil, Cindy was too soft. Both mother and grandmother are deemed incapable of child care and the raising of children, for different

reasons; but in essence, the females in this story are not good mothers.

Hence, the question of male ability (but never of guilt) is raised. In a note published on "Marry Your Baby Daddy", Maryann Reid argued that, if only there had been a father for Caylee, the little girl would still be alive. Had there been a male figure other than her grandfather involved in Caylee's life, things would not have happened the way they did: "A father can see what grandparents can't." And, what is more is that this man "doesn't have to be father of the year, but it doesn't take a rocket scientist to know when the milk has gone bad." (Reid, "Quick Note About Casey Anthony: The Single Mom Angle")

The bottom line in this note then is that any averagely reasonable man would have been able to prevent this tragedy, whereas the two women both lacked the significant abilities and character traits to raise little Caylee. Neither mother nor grandmother were able to see what a man could see, due to their evilness or softness respectively. Man, then, is needed in every mother's life to have a rational eye on her actions which also goes to show, once again, how important nuclear family ideals still are. Casey's status as a single mother is implicitly argued as dangerous, and the idea that all of this could have been prevented had she been living with the father of her child plays right into the 1950s myth of the stable, happy and well-functioning family in which both parents are present. This, then, was also applicable to the state of American society in general or, as Reid wrote:

"There are also many single mothers doing it right. But I do know, there is something odd about a young woman who doesn't know who the father is, or all the possible fathers are dead or in jail. What's even more disturbing is that this is more common than we think." (Reid, "Quick Note about Casey Anthony")

Women who could not say with certainty who the father of their child was were a “disturbing” reality, one much more frequent than one might think – and thus a sign of the moral decay of America as a nation. The U.S., this note seems to argue, was moving further and further away from the 1950s' ideal.

After the verdict had come in, these fears and anxieties became more explicitly voiced. That Anthony had been found not guilty was seen as America's legal system moral failure, it was “the greatest miscarriage of justice ever to hit the East Coast.” (Peyser, “Casey the Party Monster”).

### **Baby Killer Unpunished**

Americans all over the country sat and watched the verdict being read. For example, *The Talk*'s Julie Chen had made the decision to inform viewers of the outcome the moment it came in on the show. Choking back tears live on national Television, Julie Chen read the verdict. At the same time, Americans gathered in bars and pubs (!) to watch the live-coverage of the verdict. A video posted by *CBS News* shows people sitting in a bar. When the verdict is being read, the crowd literally starts to scream, people begin crying.

Her being found not guilty was seen as an aberration of the American justice system, and little Caylee did not get justice: “Outside the courthouse, a throng of loud protesters, including some people who had searched for Caylee, held placards reading 'Justice for Caylee' and 'Plenty of Evidence. No Guts.' The verdict has generated a great deal of anger.” (Alvarez, “Anthony Is Sentenced To 4-Year Term for Lying“)

One unidentified person at a bar in which the verdict was broadcast said: “She deserves to rot in Hell!” (*CBS News*, “Public takes collective gasp to Anthony verdict“, 1- 28- 1:30 mins) Another woman said : “She can run but she can't hide. God will get her.” (*CBS News*, “Public takes collective gasp to Anthony verdict“, 1:58- 2:02 mins.) Another instance of this thinking about the verdict in strict black-and-white terms is Nancy Grace.

Nancy Grace was perhaps the most vocal of all commentators in the week-long trial. Grace had covered the court case from its very beginning, but her live broadcast of the verdict and Grace's views on it is most interesting. Once Casey Anthony was found not guilty, she says: “Caylee's death has gone unavenged” (Nancy Grace, “Casey Anthony Verdict UNCUT- Nancy Grace vs 'Tot Mom“ 12:40- 12:45 mins.) and uses vocabulary – and even a low, soft tone of voice – to evoke strong emotions. She then described Caylee's dead body, which had been gnawed on by animals, and ended by saying that the little girl was “thrown away like she was trash.” (Nancy Grace “Casey Anthony Verdict UNCUT- Nancy Grace vs 'Tot Mom“ 13:49- 13:52 mins.) But her most famous statement about the Anthony verdict was this: “The Devil is dancing tonight.” (cf. Stanley, “Nancy Grace says 'the devil is dancing' at Casey Anthony verdict”) Just like in the unidentified viewer's comment above, the verdict is reacted to in religious vocabulary. The same was voiced by Andrea Peyser: “For this monster mother who possibly got away with murder, hell will have to wait.” (Peyser, “Casey the Party Monster”)

The Devil was smiling at the outcome of this trial, as the crime was his deed (with Casey Anthony as his minion), while God would avenge Caylee's death. Ms. Anthony thus was placed in a religious good versus evil structure, and Americans

everywhere put faith in God in their hopes that Anthony would eventually get what she had coming. Where the American justice system – and the jury – had allegedly failed, God would not. This way of thinking was Puritan to a certain degree. The fact that this was a case of alleged maternal filicide – hence female disobedience, deviance and crime- made it all the more clear. This woman needed to be punished, she was evil, a demon walking among us. God would take care of this evil witch one day.

What is another important observation about Nancy Grace is the fact that, in an interview with *ABC News*, Nancy Grace positioned herself as mother of young twins: “Amazingly, I thought about my own twin sons so much. And last night, when I finally got home, I just went and crawled in bed with them, just laid there.” (Nancy Grace on *ABC News*, “Casey Anthony: Nancy Grace Calls Jury 'Cooky', Reacts to Not Guilty Verdict“, 2:21- 2:30) Of course, it should not be underestimated that covering a case of alleged maternal filicide as extensively as Nancy Grace would have a toll on anyone's emotional state, and probably especially on parents'.

But Mrs. Grace is a media specialist, so one cannot completely overlook the idea that this statement might have been calculated. This is because, firstly, Nancy Grace, in this interview, positions herself as an emotional human being. Anthony was then Grace's direct opposite: in the poll conducted along with aforementioned “Most Hated”-List, Anthony was considered “creepy” by 57% of respondents, and as “cold” by 60% (cf. Kaplan, “America's Most Hated”). Grace, on the other hand, through her own words, becomes a passionate, emotional woman – feminine, then- while Anthony was a coldblooded murderer, who might have been attractive,

but ultimately evil and “masculine” in her actions.

Secondly, Mrs. Grace presented herself to the public as a loving mother who works hard and still finds time to spend quality time with her toddler sons, she becomes “better” than Casey Anthony. Nancy Grace further seems to gain authority and influence in the Anthony case especially because she *is* a mother, and, from how she presents herself, a great one, too. Hence, she has more ability to speak about Anthony than a man or a woman who is not a mother; because Nancy Grace fits so perfectly into the modern mother's ideal. A working mom who still does everything she has to at home and raises her sons the way they “should” be raised. Effectively then, Nancy Grace, through her own statements about her motherhood, once more creates a dichotomy of good versus bad mothers. Obviously, she occupies the good end of the spectrum and Casey becomes all the more evil and bad. And because Mrs. Grace is a mother, other mothers listen to her, understand her, can identify with Nancy Grace's emotions.

In connection to these notions of motherhood, and possibly because Anthony was quite young when she had Caylee, a few people started to think that the way motherhood was thought of had an impact on how Anthony's case was being dealt with :

“Perhaps society bears some of the responsibility for so poorly preparing people for parenthood. Having a baby is hard — even when the baby is very much wanted. 'Our culture portrays parenthood in a romantic way, but it's messy and exhausting and demanding,' says Simon. “It's really important the message get out that this is difficult.' ” (Rochman, “ Why Are Americans Obsessed With the Casey Anthony Trial?”)

But just like in earlier instances (concerning the question of rape, for example), these more sober voices calling for a more rational demarcation of how



society might have an influence on these crimes and the reactions to these crimes were so few as to be completely drowned out by the emotions running high. They ran so high, in fact that “Jose Baez, Ms. Anthony’s lawyer, has expressed concern for her safety” (Alvarez, “On her Release”): “The verdict shocked trial observers and unleashed a kind of collective tirade, which has sometimes spilled into outright threats and violence. On Friday alone, Ms. Anthony received seven threats, her civil lawyer said. “ (Alvarez, “On her Release“)

So, even in articles written after the verdict, Casey Anthony is still presented as guilty in one way or another, most interestingly so in the Dr. Phil interview. While carefully avoiding the word “guilty” all throughout the interview, he says things like she “did whatever it is she did”, has a slip of tongue at one point and calls her a “criminal”.

The bottom line of all of this was simple: Caylee had not gotten justice, the court had failed, and this society had been letting a criminal getting away with murder. Hardly ever are there more sober evaluations of this case, but one was written by John Cloud in *Time Magazine*, who simply relied on the facts of the trial:

“Ashton and his colleagues were never able to show how Caylee died. Much of the prosecution’s evidence came from examining remnants of Caylee’s little corpse. Her bones had been gnawed by animals, and the remaining bits of unwanted flesh and clothing were scattered by storms and vermin.” (Cloud, “The Casey Anthony Verdict: The Jury Did the Right Thing”)

It was so incomprehensible for most that Casey had been found not guilty, even when, as John Cloud argued, there simply was no clear evidence. Ultimately then, the question is: why did the voices calling for Anthony to go to prison not die down?

### **4.3.3 Conclusion: The Ultimate Failure**

The big issue with Casey Anthony is that she was not found guilty of killing her child, but ultimately remained a monster in people's opinions about her. Her crime, at times, did not even seem to be linked to the death of Caylee. Just like Susan Smith, she had been bad and even evil long before her daughter disappeared and died. Casey had been a bad mother, and from this guilt, it seemed, she could never run away.

Her bad motherhood and the guilt it entailed was defined on several grounds. First, there were her many lies, which meant that she must have had something to hide and had no difficulties deceiving even those closest to her.

Beyond that, her entire lifestyle had so little to do with the way mothers “should” behave. She was a young mother who had failed to make the sacrifices a woman must make once she has a baby. A young woman, Casey Anthony partied and drank, danced nights away and was a popular party girl, rarely talking about Caylee when she went out. This was not correct behavior of a mother, but rather that of a woman who allegedly wished that she had never even had had her daughter. In the media, then, Casey was rarely spoken about as a mother, but as a party-girl “skank”. It was implied time and time again that she did not care for her daughter, committing the biggest crime a mother can commit. That there was no evidence and no testimony ever brought forward that Casey was not a good, caring, loving mother did not change the overall opinion that she was cold and selfish, thus possessing all those character traits a mother should never have. She did not sacrifice the life she had lived before Caylee's birth. She literally and

figuratively did not go “home”.

Casey's sexuality and her body hence were another big issue. Since she was rumored to be sexually deviant, promiscuous even after she had become a mother, she could not have been a good mother, it was implied. A woman's sexual needs, wishes and desires, in the 2000s as much as ever, had to be contained within marriage, or at least one stable relationship in order to not be a potential danger to her family and society *en large*. The fact that Casey was neither married nor disclosed who had fathered Caylee was arguably the clear sign that this woman was an unfit mother, a sexual predator and a criminal. That she fell into conventional standards of beauty did not help to soften her public image. In fact, it made her case even more complicated. Anthony is undoubtedly a conventionally attractive young woman, so the rumors and allegations of out-of-control sexuality seemed all the more likely. After all, this was a woman who could have had every man she wanted, and, as it was presented in articles, she did make use of her beauty to get what she wanted from men.

The hyper visibility of her body the media had created (such as the invitations to ponder what sex would be like with Anthony, or the frequent display of images of her wearing the infamous low-cut blue dress at the “Hot Body” Contest) only helped to make her more evil. In fact, it was, as in the *TMZ* video, presented that she was literally asking for sexual exploitation and objectification – because she had allegedly done so all her life. But this hyper- sexualized image and her body being almost a commodity also robbed her of her sexual agency and the right to the privacy of her own body, and it made her powerless. Because Casey was allegedly promiscuous, she had lost all right to decide who could and could not

look at her, and she had to simply take what people had to say about her body and appearance. The instance of Casey's body, further, is unique for the Anthony case. During the Susan Smith trial, there are descriptions of Smith's attractiveness; but they are so few as to be marginal. This is a crucial observation: in 1994, then arguably, an equally sexually deviant woman ( whose affairs had been *proven!*) still remained a human being who should not, or could not, be turned into a piece of meat for everyone to enjoy. Smith's evilness is also a sexualized one, but even more so, a social one. In 2011, however, Anthony's alleged sexual noncompliance to norms makes her a whorish monster more than anything else, and what is most important is the fact that news outlets and websites reacted in almost voyeuristic ways. Casey's body was presented on a silver plate for everyone to gaze at, dissect and even fantasize about.

What had happened here? A possible – albeit bold – explanation for this could be found in the rise of reality TV in the United States, which does always play with the joy of “watching” people's every moves and often most intimate moments. This does make sense, especially when thinking of the title of this chapter: “This is better than *Jersey Shore*”, a statement made by a woman who had followed the trial and compared it – even preferred it- to the *MTV* Hit-show in which a group of people let cameras film their every move. American newspapers and magazines, arguably, did the exact same with Casey, but hers was not a voluntary participation. Still, the hyper visibility of her body and the dissection of certain body parts speak for a certain voyeurism in American media, and one that seems to have drastically increased since the mid -1990s' Susan Smith' coverage.

What was also unique in the Anthony case's coverage was that Cindy

Anthony, Caylee's grandmother, came under scrutiny as well. Unlike in the other two cases, the responsibility of the grandmother was questioned, and guilt seemed to be transferred from Casey to her mother. Cindy shared blame for this tragedy, because she was either too soft, too naïve or too uninvolved in her granddaughter's life. Both mothers then, effectively, had failed because they both did not seem to comply with the standards of motherhood. While Casey did not make enough sacrifices, and did not dedicate her entire being to her daughter, Cindy seemed to have been too kindhearted and too gullible. This reminds of the Freudian Fifties: Psychoanalysis imported into parenting manuals created the cult of psychological mothering, in which a mother's every action had tremendous impact on her child's psyche and behavior for all times to come. Cindy, in this case, was argued to have made irrevocable mistakes in her own motherhood that came back to haunt her family in the shape of her daughter Casey's behavior (not, interestingly though, in the case of her son, Lee, who was entirely ignored by media). Perhaps Cindy had failed to walk the fine line between being too soft and too strict, had failed as a mother so that her daughter would be bound to fail as well. This goes to show how, in 2011, the idea that a mother's mistakes would unavoidably lead to deep moral flaws in her children was still alive and well, placing responsibility for her children's success or failure in life solely on the mother.

At the very end of all of this, Casey Anthony must remain evil in public opinion, because she simply put did not live the kind of life an American mother should live. The 1950s, with their calls for contained female sexuality, modesty, maternal sacrifice and ultimate fulfillment for women as mothers and wives were

still present in the 2000s. And because Casey – completely detached from what she was really accused of – did not comply with these expectations and standards was deemed guilty from the very beginning. That the outrage over the verdict and the estimation that her verdict was unjust still remains months after the end of her trial shows this strikingly. There was no evidence that she had killed her daughter but, as it was presented in the articles covered here, there was more than enough evidence proving that Casey had never cared for her daughter the way millions of other women in America did. That was, apparently, enough to make her a criminal and a cold-blooded murderer.

## 5. Motherhood on Trial

At the end of this study, a pattern in the way the three cases were reported on becomes visible: the women in question in this work were either bad or good, and they were positioned in these clearly defined moral positions solely on ground of their conformity to gender roles, gender stereotypes as well as to traditional values about sexuality and marriage.

It has to be pointed out at this point that all final findings to be elaborated below have to be read disconnected from the crimes the three women committed. The focus here can only be on the interpretation and analysis of the media's coverage of the cases, questions of whether or not the verdicts were justified cannot, and should not, find any room here. Questions of gender roles and the American media's portrayal of the same are the main subject, while disregarding the often complicated and complex legal issues that played a role in the trials. Therefore, it can be said that, whether Susan Smith, Andrea Yates and Casey Anthony were good or not was decided, in the media's coverages of the cases, through their failures or successes as mothers. The "right" kind of motherhood they should live up to, in turn, was the 1950's ideal of domesticity, personal responsibility, conformity, even submissiveness.

The bottom line of all three cases is that the motherhood of these three women was on trial. The questions about the actual murders (or alleged murder, in the Anthony case) at times seemed much less important than the question of whether the women had been good mothers. Here, it has to be said that, of course, these women's pasts were dissected to detect signs that would speak for or against the crimes, and their pasts were crucial to make sense of their crimes. But the

coverage of the three cases went above and beyond the evidence presented, and more often than not drew its own conclusions about the three women. As the case studies showed, these conclusions were frequently based on and influenced by conservative estimations of gender roles and sexuality. Accordingly, the cases of Susan Smith and Casey Anthony have more in common with each other than they do with the case of Andrea Yates. Before the three cases can finally be contrasted and compared, it is advisable to point out the one thing all three trials and coverage had in common: the lack of agency. None of the three women ever speaks directly to the readers, Susan, Andrea and Casey all had lost their right or their ability to speak for themselves. This lack of agency, a striking similarity of all cases, could be taken as a very important first indication of the gender roles and gendered power relations at play in the trials and their reception in the media. That is to say that neither one of these women is granted a chance to speak for herself, present things and issues from her side of the story, and it is mostly men who do the talking for them. Effectively then, the women are silenced, and through their silence, they could be spoken about and literally be spoken for, by men, who therefore remain ( or regain the position of being) in charge.

Turning to the differences in coverage of the three cases now, a first, admittedly basic but nonetheless telling indicator of these differing attitudes towards the women is the issue of sympathy. Smith and Anthony did not receive much sympathy in the media. Angry voices wished that Anthony would “rot in hell”, protesters' anger turned into verbal violence, and Smith received so many death threats that her lawyer considering asking for a move of the trial's location. While these were reactions from people not affiliated with the media, these sentiments



were resonated by journalists and media commentators. In the Anthony case, for example, degrading vocabulary on the Internet was legitimized through its usage in mainstream media outlets (the instance of “the skank” in Peyser’s *New York Post* piece, for example).

The issue of mental illness then stands in relation to this. Postpartum depression, mental illness in general has to be (and luckily mostly is) taken seriously, and the Yates’ case tragically evidenced what might happen if it is not treated adequately. However, comparing the three cases with each other, there is definitely a disregard of claims of mental illness, suicidal tendencies and destructive behavior in both the Smith and Anthony cases to be observed. Andrea Yates, per contra, was a killer to feel for, as Bob Herbert put it in the *New York Times*, a woman struggling with mental illness and psychosis. Because of her mental disease, Andrea Yates was not only not guilty. Through the media’s portrayal of her as a victim herself, a powerless, emotional, unstable woman at the mercy of her hormones, she became an All-American woman who deserved to be treated kindly by the media. Smith and Anthony then both were not granted the “right” to receive a different kind of discourse about their mental states, because they were bad mothers.

To exaggerate this, Yates was the ultimate female who could not be blamed for actions that were the outcome of what her gender brings with it (such as emotionality, irrationality, hormonal chaos). She was not a mother with a murderous agenda. She could not help it, while Anthony and Smith were portrayed as calculating, manipulative – and therefore, in power – women. Yates was consequently not a threat to American notions of masculinity, gender and power

structures, while Smith and Anthony's actions tragically evidenced that they were the kind of women who were not conforming to gender roles, disturbing the "natural" order – and they were seemingly punished for this, which explains the way they were reported on in contrast to Yates.

As elaborated in the foregoing case studies, both Smith and Anthony had arguably struggled with mental disorders (more pronounced in the Smith's case, whose *two* suicide attempts had been proven, whereas in the Anthony case, mental illness remained subject of speculation), but their possible bouts of depression and/ or psychosis were not taken into account. Both Smith and Anthony were deemed bad mothers from the very beginning of their trials (in Anthony's case also before her case went to court). Their crimes had been presented as, in both cases, the final outcome of their inherently evil, morally flawed, sexually deviant and dangerous characters. Their alleged shortcomings as mothers made it seemingly impossible to take into account that they, too, might have been mentally ill.

How was this "bad" motherhood defined in the Smith and Anthony cases? And then, how could Yates remain a good mother, even though she had killed her children as well?

Neither in the Smith nor the Anthony trial was there evidence that proved that the women had neglected or abused their children, not even so much as forgetting to pick up their children from school or kindergarten. Of course, Anthony's case is a lot more complicated than Smith's, because the fictitious nanny "Zanny" does speak for the fact that Casey Anthony was detached and potentially negligent of Caylee, but beyond that, no witnesses testified that

Anthony had treated her daughter badly. What made them bad mothers- and in turn guilty without doubt- were their selfishness and their sexuality, and these two aspects were evidence enough.

First, their sexuality in contrast to Yates' sexual life. Smith and Anthony both had had affairs. Both were rumored to be promiscuous and sexually insatiable, which spoke for them being bad mothers. This way of thinking about female sexuality seems very much influenced by conservative American politics, as well as by the Cold War ideologies of containing woman's sexuality within marriage.

A major difference between the two, however, was that Smith had been married, and was not, like Casey Anthony a single mother. To some degree then, Susan had some moral high ground over Casey, who never disclosed who the father of her daughter was. But marriage in the Smith case can also be read differently: her affair might have actually made her all the more "evil". She had cheated on and left her husband, and had thus effectively torn apart her entire, seemingly perfect little family.

In any case, one of the consequently most striking differences between Anthony and Smith, on the one hand, and Yates, on the other hand, is to note. Andrea Yates was presented as neither promiscuous nor adulterous nor single. She was married to the father of all her children, and the Yates' marriage also functioned within conservative and religious boundaries in its clear separation into domestic and public spheres along gender. Further, Yates' sexuality was inextricably linked to procreation, the Yates would welcome as many children as God would sent their way. Yates' sexual life then served the "right" purpose. Not, like it was suggested for Smith and Anthony, did Andrea have intercourse "just for

fun” or to achieve some selfish goals. Smith allegedly slept with Findlay to escape her harsh financial reality and Anthony was portrayed as a conceited young woman who took advantage of her good looks to lure in men. Therefore, they were claimed to have had sex for reasons other than making babies, which is where the second big issue becomes apparent: their selfishness.

This “selfishness” was then described in terms of their mothering, perhaps their alleged maternal selfishness was even carried over from their sexual selfishness. Susan brought herself into the position of a single mother through her adultery, while she did not see that these children were her duty to care for and love the rest of her life, and that the financial hardships were, drastically put, what she had coming and had to deal with it – she had brought this on herself. Anthony was a selfish mother who was simply careless, cold, and heartless. A mother who could not care less about her toddler when there were parties to go to, shots to down and men to seduce, who would not give up her pre-motherhood lifestyle for the sake of her precious baby girl.

Comparing this to Andrea Yates, Yates was described as having “sacrificed” herself, had quit working when she got pregnant with her first child, even planned to home school all five of her children (certainly a tremendous task). She had thus committed the sacrifice American mothers “should” be willing to make. The argument that the female retreat into the domestic is still the ideal version of motherhood becomes therefore apparent in the Yates case in the way that Yates was spoken about: a loving mother, who stayed in the kitchen, baking cookies; a woman whose actions thus never indicated what she would eventually do. Susan and Anthony, on the other hand, were not housewives. They worked, or had to

work. Concerning the sacrifice of Andrea Yates, the reasoning for the murders should also be dissected at this point. Her claim of having killed her five children because she was saving them from herself seems to have been counted in her favor. She “did what was best”, even though what she believed was best was a terrible crime. But in this tragically misguided conviction, was she not making the ultimate sacrifice? In the media, killing the children she loved so much because she “knew” that she had “stumbled” implicitly – this was never verbalized, of course - spoke for her untouchable goodness. This woman was sick, yes, but she was also a good mother who was making a sacrifice, perhaps the greatest sacrifice a woman could ever make.

This conclusion would be incomplete, though, if some of the more critical approaches to all three cases would not be brought up again at this point. Susan's emotional stability brought into focus questions about Americans' quest for the one great love, with people arguing whether this might not exactly be what corrupts young *female* minds. While this idea obviously did not question heterosexual relationship's power structures but rather actively reaffirmed the old stereotypes of women being incapable of controlling their hearts, it did nonetheless show that some writers and journalists were skeptical. This skepticism was even more pronounced in the Yates case, in two ways. On the one hand, some articles questioned Yates' very story of mental illness, effectively disregarding the female emotional instability stereotype and rather turning mental illness into a clever deceit. On the other hand, no matter how implicit, the Yates case did revolve around issues millions of mothers could relate to, and thus through expressing their empathy for Yates, writers and reporters also showed that this was a real

problem – that, yes, motherhood is hard. Casey Anthony received very few sober discussions, but they also raised the point that (especially single) motherhood is tough, and that, just maybe, American politics should find a way to support these mothers more, and that single motherhood should be treated as a different kind of “normal” family rather than an exception to the rule. However, neither of these critical, sober, distanced, at times even slightly irritated voices brought with them a profound sense of change or urgency to take action. They did raise legit points and valid questions, but the overall coverage ignoring these considerations prevailed, thus hindering some social reevaluation of especially Smith and Anthony.

At this point, one of the biggest question of this work can be answered: Is it possible to draw conclusions about the perception of motherhood in America in the 1990s and 2000s from the coverage of these three prolific cases?

The media implied that Susan Smith and Casey Anthony were utterly bad mothers, long before their children died. Andrea Yates, however, was portrayed as a suburban role-model, and thus, the murders of her five children, while tragic and incomprehensible, were not taken as indication that Yates had been evil all along, and was in turn also not perceived as such. Here, it becomes visible just how much 1950s ideals of motherhood still influence contemporary American society. The 1950s nuclear family is the one model that seems to haunt American's minds until this day. This ultimately means that childcare is a female duty, parenting per se is an almost exclusively female role and a calling in life that has to be performed along very clear rules and restrictions. Therefore, a single, promiscuous mother, like Anthony, was an aberration. Smith's sexuality and wishes were an

abomination. Yates' suburban (this cannot be stressed enough), married, middle-class life was the only right way, regardless of the fact that, in the picture-perfect Yates family, there were tremendous problems. And everyone played into this. Instead of asking “do we, as a society, need to reconsider what we ask of motherhood and how we think motherhood should be?”, Americans – readers and journalists alike – rather decided to take 1950s ideas about mothering and family life as reality and ideal. Therefore, Smith and Anthony could only lose.

The mother who sacrifices her career and possibly even hands over her sexuality (as was implied in the discussion of Andrea Yates' last pregnancy) to her husband can remain morally pure, uncorrupted, even saint-like – a good mother, in short, despite her crime. The mother who dreams of a better life, has a social life and does not - allegedly – place her child above all can consequently not be a good mother. She simply cannot be a maternal Madonna if she does not exhibit the character traits Americans consider the foundation for good mothering .

The cult of female domestication and all it entails is key in the United States, which can further be proven by a look at the fathers and men in the three cases. As an issue missing almost entirely from all three case's coverages, the roles of men, and what impact they might have had on these women was never greatly discussed. They were hardly ever asked where *they* were in all of this. David Smith, even though he had affairs as well, came under no scrutiny for his extra-marital sexual relations, and he is never asked why he did not ask for custody of his sons, even though he was aware of his wife's financial struggles and seemed displeased about her behavior in general. In the Anthony case, Caylee's grandfather/ Casey's father, George Anthony, was also never asked many

uncomfortable questions, whereas his wife, Cindy Anthony, received blame for not having taken in Caylee. Therefore, in both the Smith and Anthony case, the responsibility to raise children was exclusively female; men did not, apparently, even have to be bothered about their (grand-)fatherhood and their possible mistakes. It can be argued that the clear division into domestic versus public roles for women and men that had become the basic way of family life in the 1950s was as alive and well as ever. The fathers were expected to go out and make money, while the women were urged to stay at home and take care of the kids; and if something happened, it could then also exclusively be their fault, which also goes to show once more how children's futures lie solely in female hands and is a female responsibility.

Paradoxically, however, Andrea Yates – the only “good” mother in this study – was hardly representative of motherhood in America in the 1990s/early 2000s. Susan Smith was arguably much more of an accurate reflection of family life and motherhood than Yates (Anthony seemed a whole other story, though). Because the media did not take into account that Smith's crime and failures should perhaps be dealt with taking into consideration that the struggles she faced were ones familiar to millions of mothers, and by making Yates on the other hand the mother who could “happen” anywhere, traditional values and gender roles were reinforced, despite the fact that they were no longer valid. Social change, divorce rates, feminist movements all had done their share to change motherhood in reality, while society in general still clung to the way things (never) were.

There are several issues this study did not touch upon but that I would like to, at this point, suggest as topics for further research. Race and ethnicity, for



example, were left out of this work entirely. It would be interesting – and important- to undertake an examination of cases of filicide committed by people of different ethnic backgrounds. Such a study could either stand on its own or could be done in a comparative approach to the cases of white maternal filicide undertaken here. The cases of Ka Yang or Lashanda Armstrong (both in 2011) could be subject of such research. For example, Armstrong, like Susan Smith, had drowned her children by letting her car roll into a lake. Therefore, how these cases – especially when there are striking similarities to white maternal filicide- might have been dealt with considering racialized notions about motherhood could serve as promising further research.

Beyond this, questions of class could also only very briefly be touched upon here, so that this, as well, is a subject that is worth looking into further in the future – how, for example, does class influence the coverage, what class distinctions are at play in these cases, and where do they intersect with race and gender? Further, I believe it would be beneficial to incorporate the role of the new / changing media a bit more in some future research about these – or other- cases. As the Anthony case showed, the Internet has by now become a real force to reckon with, and how the Internet impacts “traditional” media's discussion of such crimes could then also be an issue for further research.

Despite the fact that there are more topics that could be researched further in a work about maternal filicide and the American media's reception of it, this study has attempted to give a most comprehensive and complete insight and demarcation of this. At the end, it therefore can be concluded that very little has changed in American gender roles as well as concerning the perception of and

expectations in motherhood in the United States in the 1990s and 2000s. 1950's values and ideals dominate the discourse about mothering and childcare, which thus remains an almost exclusively female responsibility. All of this in the end means that, despite social change ( such as the drastic changes in family realities) and political revolutions did not have much impact on how mainstream America – and its mouthpiece, the national media – thinks and feels about motherhood in the 1990s and 2000s.

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