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“We Are the Beaker Mums”

The Influence of New Momism in the Tracy Beaker Series

Abstract: This article sustains that children’s literature has the potential to legitimise and subvert dominant motherhood ideologies. Drawing on feminist motherhood theory in the fields of gender studies and children’s literature, this article critically analyses the influence of New Momism in Jacqueline Wilson’s Tracy Beaker series (1991–2019), contributing to a body of research on these acclaimed books for children. New Momism is an ideological movement which romanticises motherhood and sets highly demanding, impossible-to-meet standards of motherhood (Douglas and Adams 4). New Momist ideology resulted in a series of mother stereotypes advanced by the media, such as the “celebrity mum”, the “welfare mother” and the “supermum”. Mother characters in the Tracy Beaker novels are analysed against these stereotypes to ascertain to what extent their existence is supported or disavowed. This article is divided into two sections that coincide with the two sequences of the series. The first focuses on the two main mother characters: Carly, Tracy’s biological mother, and Cam, Tracy’s foster mother. The second part focuses on the character of Tracy as a mother and how her socio-economic background affects her experience of mothering. The presence of mother stereotypes such as the celebrity mum and the welfare mother demonstrate how New Momist ideas are embedded in the text. However, these patriarchal ideas of motherhood are also undermined in the novels, most notably through the challenge of mother stereotypes, the dismissal of the mother ideal and the portrayal of diverse motherhood experiences. Finally, an evolution in the treatment of motherhood throughout the years can be observed in the series, with the most recent novels presenting a more progressive perspective on working-class motherhood and female sexuality.

Keywords: social realism, feminist theory, motherhood theory, new momism, motherhood ideology, Jacqueline Wilson, welfare mother, celebrity mum, supermum

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“I was determined not to be that sort of mother to my daughter”, declared children’s author Jacqueline Wilson in an interview in 2019, opening up about her difficult family circumstances. In the same interview, she shared her motivation for writing the Tracy Beaker series; to show readers that “You don’t have to be stuck in whatever groove all your family were in. You can always think, well, I’m going to do things differently” (Ferguson). Wilson conveyed this and many other ideas about family and motherhood in her books. She was clearly aware of children’s books’ potential to communicate ideas to their audience. As it has long been discussed in children’s literature studies, books can both legitimate and subvert dominant ideologies (Zipes 21). On the one hand, literature for children is conditioned by cultural values, norms and ideas of the historical period in which they are written (Zipes 21). Consequently, children’s books reflect cultural expectations of motherhood and the mother ideal (Coats and Fraustino 107–109) and can transmit to readers socially created ideas of what motherhood is, who should be a mother, and what makes a “good” mother. On the other hand, children’s literature can also be used to promote social change (Jenika-Agbaw 452; Bothelo and Rudman 117) by challenging and subverting dominant motherhood ideology. This article uses feminist perspectives on motherhood studies to analyse how traditional ideas of motherhood are embedded and undermined in Jacqueline Wilson’s Tracy Beaker series (1991–2019). An analysis of the main mother characters in relation to the stereotypes of the celebrity mum, the welfare mother and the supermum explore how the series reflects and subverts dominant cultural constructs of motherhood.

The Significance of Jacqueline Wilson in Children’s Literature

Jacqueline Wilson (1945–) is widely considered one of the most relevant and influential children’s authors worldwide and a pioneer of social realism for children in the United Kingdom (Harde 53). She rose to fame with *The Story of Tracy Beaker* (1991), which was the most borrowed title in British libraries of the 1990s (Neilan). Wilson’s depiction of working-class characters in realistic situations gave children from this socio-economic background the opportunity to see themselves reflected (Pearson 8). Many of Wilson’s novels revolve around the relationship between the child protagonist and their primary carers and motherhood is a central theme across her work

(Limon 102). This article examines depictions of motherhood across Wilson's Tracy Beaker series, focusing on the central mother characters as well as mother-daughter relationships featured in the novels.

The Tracy Beaker series is a prime example of Wilson's writing showcasing her characteristic social realism, child protagonist narrator and hero's journey narrative. The first three books of the series narrate the story of Tracy, a feisty ten-year-old girl, prone to mischief, with great imagination and a sense of humour. Narrated by Tracy herself, the novels follow her adventures growing up in care until, despite many obstacles, she finally succeeds in finding a loving home. Tracy's traumatic childhood, her difficult relationship with her biological mother and her struggle to be fostered are central topics. The Tracy Beaker series marked the beginning of a very successful partnership between Wilson and the illustrator Nick Sharratt (Waddilove), who created the instantly recognisable colourful and child-like aesthetic that continues to characterise their joint work.

In the early 2000s, the success of the books and subsequent television adaptations made Tracy one of the best-known characters in British culture as evidenced by the common references to Tracy in media reporting on the care system in the United Kingdom (Andalo). The TV show later aired in Australia, Canada, Germany, India, Russia and Sweden, making Tracy an international star. Despite the cultural relevance of the books and TV series, scholarship on Tracy Beaker is very limited with available research focusing on the narrative style of the lying narrator (Day 119) and constructions of home (Fibianti 1). This article attempts to extend the research on the Tracy Beaker book series, including an analysis of the two more recently published books for which research is not yet available.

The Tracy Beaker book series contains five books: *The Story of Tracy Beaker*, *The Dare Game* (2000), *Starring Tracy Beaker* (2006), *My Mum Tracy Beaker* (2018) and *We are the Beaker Girls* (2019). The series can be divided into two sequences. The first sequence narrates Tracy's childhood in and out of care until she is finally fostered. The second sequence takes place fifteen years in the future when Tracy has grown up and become a young single mother herself. Motherhood is a central theme throughout; the first three books deal with Tracy's longing for a family and her relationships with her biological and foster mothers. Revolving around the relationship between Tracy and her daughter, Jess, the second sequence explores Tracy's experience of motherhood through her daughter's eyes. This shift in narrator allows Wilson to privilege the viewpoint of the daughter over that of the mother throughout the series.

Despite Wilson's important place in British children's literature and media, scholarly research fully dedicated to her work is limited to an edited book and a few scholarly articles. While some of these celebrate Wilson's achievements and contribution to children's literature (e.g. Wadilove; Harde), other scholars delve more deeply into her work. This is the case of Vanessa Joosen, who has examined depictions of adulthood in Wilson's work. In her article on child-like parents Joosen included an analysis of Marigold, the mother character of Wilson's *The Illustrated Mum*, as an example of "failed adulthood" ("Childlike"). More recently, she devoted a chapter of her book *Adulthood in Children's Literature* (2018) to adult characters of the Tracy Beaker series. *Jacqueline Wilson* (2016) is the only comprehensive book dedicated to the author's work touching on many of her novels and relevant themes, such as social realism, the problem novel, gender roles and child-carer relations. In her contribution to this book, Helen Limon explores motherhood and child-carer relationships in *The Illustrated Mum* (1999) and *Dustbin Baby* (2001). She concludes that these novels show that child-carer relationships are imperfect and that biological parenthood is not a guarantee of good care, setting the basis for further examination of motherhood in other Wilson novels.

This study of the Tracy Beaker series corroborates the trends identified by Limon. However, this article differs from hers in the theoretical perspective and themes explored. Limon primarily applies Donald Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory, using the terms "failed mothering" and "good-enough mothering" to understand the impact of mothering behaviours on children's maturation and development. Using this theoretical frame, Limon analyses child-carer relations in the novels and explores the transformative power that ideas of motherhood can have in children (117). This article, on the contrary, uses feminist sociological theories to analyse the external social pressures that mothers endure in the form of ideals and stereotypes, focusing on themes of social class and sexuality. This feminist perspective contributes to the understanding of the series' depictions of motherhood that highlights the material, social and patriarchal structures at play, moving away from readings that focus on psychological factors and individual responsibility. In addition, this article expands the study of motherhood across Wilson's body of work, providing the first comprehensive analysis of motherhood across the Tracy Beaker series.

This article is divided into two sections that coincide with the two sequences of the series. The first focuses on the two main mother

characters: Carly, Tracy's biological mother, and Cam, Tracy's foster mother. The second part focuses on the character of Tracy as a mother and how her socio-economic background affects her experience of mothering. Before turning to the analysis of the novels, and to better understand the treatment of motherhood in them, we need to explore the social construct of motherhood in the context in which these novels were written.

New Momism and Mother Stereotypes: The Supermum Ideal, the Celebrity Mum Fantasy and the Cautionary Tale of the Welfare Mother

Motherhood ideology is understood in feminist scholarship as a social construction that maintains the patriarchal order that dominates and oppresses women (Rich 56–57). This motherhood ideology has created an unattainable ideal of the “good mother” which has reappeared throughout history in different guises, based on the experience of white, middle-class, heterosexual, married women. This ideal set by society and the media is far from the experience of most women and marginalises the experiences of those women who deviate from it (Heffernan and Wilgus 5).

Motherhood was a hot topic in the late twentieth century both in research and public opinion, as mothers received unprecedented media coverage in the United States and the United Kingdom. The dichotomous representation of mothers as either good or evil which originated in the eighteenth century (Gilbert and Gubar 44), far from disappearing, was reframed to appeal to contemporary society, repackaged and sold through mass media. In 1980s America, the ideological movement known as “New Momism” emerged (Douglas and Michaels 7) asserting that:

To be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children. The New Momism is a highly romanticised and yet demanding view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet. (Douglas and Michaels 4)

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the New Momism doctrine gave rise to the media phenomena known as the “mummy wars”, an alleged conflict between working and stay-at-home mothers. This dichotomy suggested that women are only able to cope with either work or home-keeping and conflicts with the feminist argument that women

can balance work and family commitments and still lead happy lives. The idea that women can balance work and motherhood is based on the premise that family members will provide support, and social institutions will facilitate this (Douglas and Michaels 201). It is necessary to consider that keeping a balanced life is easier for mothers of privileged backgrounds who have a support network and can afford a better standard of care and flexible working. The idea that women can indeed “have it all” has been often misconstrued, giving place to the “Supermom”, an unattainable ideal which implies that mothers are women “with superpowers to be everywhere, doing everything, for everyone” (Lazo Gilmore 96).

In the 1980s, Western media witnessed the rise of a new ideal of motherhood, the so-called celebrity mum. The celebrity mum had it all; a happy family, a fulfilling career, and she always looked her best. The celebrity mum offered a “fantasy of abundance” (Douglas and Michaels 16); abundant energy to take care of her children and pursue a successful career, an abundance of financial resources that allowed the purchase of a multitude of toys and gifts, and the employment of personal assistants. The celebrity mum is always portrayed in the media as being gorgeous and sexy, living an exciting, glamorous and fulfilling life (Douglas and Michaels 116). This idea arose in an era in which “becoming rich and famous was the ultimate personal achievement” (Douglas and Michaels 117). The rise of the celebrity mum profile was made popular by celebrities in women’s magazines throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and its negative effects on real women has been well-researched (Allen; Chae; Williams et al.).

For New Momism to influence society, women were presented with an example of what would happen if they did not embrace this intensive form of mothering. In the late 1980s and 1990s, when the first Tracy Beaker novel was published, a cautionary tale for mothers was provided by the media: the stereotype of the welfare mother. The welfare mother was depicted as dependent, poor, irresponsible and promiscuous (Thurer 199). Welfare mothers were considered selfish and neglectful, putting their needs before those of their children. Politicians and the media ensured that the situation of women living on benefits in the United Kingdom was depicted as solely their responsibility and a matter of choice. Thus, completely ignoring the faults of a social system that had failed these vulnerable women and their children. The conservative political climate in the United States and the United Kingdom in the late 1970s and 1980s reinforced the case against the welfare mother. Political leaders used this stereotype to advance their political agenda; calling for a return to “family values” and the patriarchal family (Thane and Evans 194).

Impossible ideals and negative stereotypes of motherhood have been fuelled by media and greatly influenced the way we currently think about motherhood in Western society, including children's literature. The influence of the dominant motherhood ideology that has shaped the cautionary tale of the welfare mother, the celebrity mum fantasy and the supermum ideal is present in the Tracy Beaker novels. However, these are disavowed in favour of more complex and realistic depictions of motherhood.

Mother Stereotypes in *The Dare Game*

The first era of Tracy Beaker, which comprises the first three novels, narrates her life at the children's home that she calls The Dumping Ground until she is fostered. The main narrative thread is Tracy's struggle with her biological mother's abandonment and her desire to be fostered. In the first book, we are introduced to the two main mother characters: Carly, Tracy's biological mother, and Cam, who becomes Tracy's foster mother. The two first novels set the scene for the central conflict; Tracy must decide whether to live with Cam or Carly. This conflict is resolved in *The Dare Game* when Tracy is finally fostered by Cam. Through the character of Carly, the novel utilises the stereotypes of the celebrity mum and the welfare mother and challenges hegemonic views of biological motherhood as ideal.

Carly Beaker: The Celebrity Mum and the Welfare Mother Stereotypes

Before the character of Carly is introduced in *The Dare Game*, the reader only knows her from Tracy's narration. In Carly's absence, Tracy often clings to the few memories she has of her and invents fantasies about Carly being a famous Hollywood star. This shows the influence of the celebrity mum ideal in Western culture. According to Douglas and Michaels, "Celebrity mum profiles are carefully packaged fantasies [...] that deliberately blur the lines between reality and daydreams" (Douglas and Michaels 123). Tracy has assimilated the celebrity mum myth and adapted it to suit her personal story, projecting it onto the persona she has created for her absent mother, which she describes as follows:

I've got the loveliest, prettiest, best-ever mum in the whole world. She's this dead famous Hollywood movie star and she is in film after film, in so much demand that there isn't a minute of the day when she can see me so that's why I'm in care. (Wilson, *Dare Game* 13)

Tracy has created this celebrity mum persona to make sense of her experience of abandonment and to justify Carly's absence in her life. However, Tracy is aware that this is only a fabrication she has created to protect herself from this painful reality. Early in the novel, Tracy admits: "None of it is true. I made it all up. It's dead babyish and pathetic. She's not an actress at all. She just can't be bothered to get in touch" (Wilson, *Dare Game* 44).

When in *The Dare Game*, Carly returns with the intention of regaining Tracy's custody, Tracy is in awe of her mother's appearance whom she describes as "a small woman with very bright blonde hair and a lot of lipstick, wearing a very short skirt and very high heels. A beautiful woman with long fair hair and a lovely face and the most stylish sexy clothes" (Wilson, *Dare Game* 56). At this moment the celebrity mum fantasy is briefly reignited. According to research, adoptees' fantasies of the birth mother are a common feature of adoption narratives (Novy 11). In addition, depictions of the absent parent are often stereotypical, particularly when they are women (Novy 2) which is true in the case of these novels. The celebrity mum is only present in the novels through Tracy's imagination to be later dismissed when the real Carly appears in Tracy's life. The text reflects Douglas and Michael's argument that the celebrity mum myth is ultimately damaging due to the unrealistic expectations it places on mothers.

As *The Dare Game* advances, the reader is presented with a mother figure more reminiscent of the welfare mother stereotype. This stereotype has long been utilised to demonise working-class single mothers depicting them as irresponsible, promiscuous, selfish and neglectful (Thurer 199). The character of Carly displays many of these stereotypical traits. She lives in a council estate that Tracy describes as "all car tyres and rubbish and scraggy kids outside [...] and pee smell in the lift" (Wilson, *Dare Game* 452). Despite initially showering Tracy with gifts to win her over, Carly displays a protective attitude toward money. She does not have a known job in the novel and believes that she should receive payment for caring for Tracy, which sustains the false narrative that single mothers are "scroungers" that prefer to take advantage of the welfare system rather than work (Thane and Evans 166–194).

Carly is the main representative of working-class motherhood in the novels and her characterisation resonates with empirical research about the lives of working-class women. Beverley Skeggs' ethnographic study of working-class mothers is particularly relevant here, as it was carried out in England during the early 1990s,

contemporary to the publication of the early Tracy Beaker novels. Skeggs' study highlights respectability as a key signifier of class which is used to other and pathologize working-class women (9). She argues that working-class women are often positioned by discourse as non-respectable and thus of "little social value" and morally pathological (10). According to this research, considerations of working-class women as non-respectable are intimately linked to ideas of female sexuality. Sexual desire is coded as a practice of non-respectability, particularly for those women who have been historically labelled as impure and dangerous sexual beings, such as working-class women (97).

It can be observed in the text how Carly is characterised as "non-respectable" based on her sexual behaviours. It is implied that she has been featured in pornographic films and magazines. Children in the care home tease Tracy about a glossy picture of Carly in underwear which appears to belong to a pornographic publication. In addition, Carly is depicted as being sexually active, seeking and engaging in relationships with men. Sexual behaviours are socially regarded as shameful (Skeggs 98), and the shame experienced by some women serves as a form of self-policing, particularly for those women, like working-class mothers, who are considered non-respectable in the first place (Skeggs 99). Carly, however, does not feel ashamed of her sexuality and consequently does not hide her own desires or self-regulate her behaviours. Carly's sexualisation plays a role in her characterisation as a non-respectable woman. The treatment of Carly's sexuality is problematic in two ways: it equates women's sexuality with moral deficiency and associates working-class women with sex work. In addition, being sexual goes against the ideal of the selfless and chaste mother, thus rendering Carly a "bad" mother. It is noteworthy that this stereotyped and moralistic treatment of Carly is uncharacteristic of Wilson's work and contrasts with empathetic working-class mother characters in novels such as *The Illustrated Mum* (1999) and *Lola Rose* (2007).

In addition to being working class and sexually active, Carly is irresponsible and neglectful. When Tracy moves in with Carly, her mother shows signs of having a chaotic and unhealthy lifestyle; Carly is hungover and forgets to feed Tracy, and she only has alcohol and diet food. Carly displays neglectful behaviour when she leaves Tracy alone at night to go to the pub, and emotionally abusive behaviour when she threatens Tracy with taking her back to the Children's home. Carly speaks to Tracy as follows: "You can tell you've been spoilt. You're going to have to learn to do as you're told

if we're going to get along [...]. Do you want me to send you back to the Children's home?" (Wilson, *Dare Game* 189–190). When Carly leaves Tracy alone the girl is terrified because she is reminded of the other occasions in which Carly left her alone, re-living the traumatic experience of abandonment. It is at this moment that Tracy realises that Carly is not the mother she expected her to be.

Carly only differs from the welfare mother stereotype in one trait: her well-groomed appearance. The demonisation of working-class mothers in the media has often relied on depictions of ungroomed women as synonymous with morally deficient working-class femininity, thus making beauty culture a tool for working-class women to reach for "middle-class aspiration, sexual attractiveness and hence social acceptability" (McRobbie 125). Consequently, femininity is performed out of necessity by working-class women to display respectability (Skeggs 128). From this perspective, Carly's display of femininity can be understood as an attempt at social acceptability through her appearance, as she cannot achieve this in other ways due to financial and social constraints.

Another way of interpreting Carly's image could be as a display of working-class standards of beauty and consequently of her class identity. Although well-groomed, Carly's appearance could be considered tacky or distasteful by middle-class standards. With her hoop earrings, short skirts and heavy make-up, Carly is reminiscent of the figure of the "celebrity chav"¹. This term is used to refer to working-class women who gain fame and wealth but lack social capital, which manifests primarily in an aesthetics of "expensive vulgarity" (Hayward and Yar 14). The "celebrity chav" trope is specific to the British context where it is often used to demonise working-class women, depicting them as "improper, talentless, undeserving and tacky" (Cocker et al. 504). Some of the most notable women portrayed in this way in British media are Katie Price and Kerry Katona. This portrayal of celebrities as wealthy but tasteless maintains class-based stigma and discrimination (Cocker et al. 504). It seems that, in the public eye, whether they decide to dress up or not, working-class women can never win.

Whether Carly's appearance is an attempt at becoming respectable or a manifestation of her working-class identity, a more comprehensive exploration of her socio-economic background would have made Carly a more complex and empathetic character. In addition, reflecting the impact of socio-economic factors in Carly's mothering ability may have avoided stereotypical portrayals of working-class mothers and the further stigmatisation of these

women. These limitations are a consequence of the narrative form of the book, which focuses on Tracy's perspective who barely knows her mother and thus does not have an insight into her background and circumstances.

Cam Lawson: Debunking the Supermum Ideal

However, not all mother characters respond to mother stereotypes in *The Dare Game*. Cam is the prime example of this. She is a complex character that conforms to some aspects of the mother ideal while challenging others. Cam's successful career, comparative financial stability and independence bring her closer to the mother ideal but what is most important in this regard is her selflessness and dedication to raising Tracy. Cam deviates from the mother ideal in her gender expression, sexual orientation and appearance. She does not conform to social standards of beauty and traditional femininity; she has short hair, wears casual clothes and no makeup. The way Cam is depicted in both text and illustration, wearing plaid shirts and jeans paired with nice earrings, fits the aesthetics of the "soft butch" lesbian stereotype, characterised by presenting a masculine aesthetic with some feminine qualities (Walker et al. 91). Cam's appearance is used to signal stereotypically her sexual orientation. In addition to her appearance, Cam's mother's disapproval of her lifestyle is part of the wider subtext that hints at Cam's homosexuality. However, there is no explicit mention of Cam maintaining sexual or romantic relationships with either men or women in the first three novels. Only the most recent novels, discussed in the following section, directly address Cam's homosexuality.

The mother characters of Carly and Cam are set in opposition through the plot; Tracy needs to decide whom to live with, which unavoidably results in comparisons between them and their mothering abilities. The main difference that tips the balance in favour of Cam is that, while Carly is selfish and neglectful, Cam is selfless and caring. It is clear throughout the novels that Tracy's care is Cam's priority, as she often cancels plans to care for her. In addition, Cam's lack of interest in relationships in the first novels, in contrast with Carly's promiscuity, allows Cam to make Tracy's care her priority. When Tracy finally recognises that the ideal mother is only a fantasy, she is able to appreciate Cam's commitment and recognises it as more important than wealth or appearance. However, Cam's whole-hearted dedication to Tracy avoids conveying the New Momist message that mothers must always put their children's needs before their own. As

Cam sets boundaries with Tracy regarding the limits of her finances and her need to continue nurturing her bonds with other people important to her, she comes to terms with her inability to always please Tracy. Both Tracy and Cam eventually do away with the ideal of the self-sacrificing mother to make the most of their relationship.

By the end of *The Dare Game*, Tracy has learned to value Cam as a loving and caring mother but also as a person with her own wants and needs. The novel has a happy, but realistic ending with Tracy accepting that mother-daughter relationships are both challenging and fulfilling: "Cam and I still have mega-arguments sometimes [...] But then we make up. We have great times together" (Wilson, *Dare Game* 241). Biological essentialist discourses that equate biological motherhood with good mothering are contested when Cam, Tracy's foster mother, is portrayed as a better mother than Carly, her biological mother. *The Dare Game* conveys that biological motherhood is not necessarily a synonym for good quality of care and that non-biological mothers who raise children by choice can provide appropriate care and a loving home for children.

Dominant motherhood ideology is reinforced in this first trilogy which re-enacts its own version of the "mummy wars" and results in the stereotypical representations of working-class motherhood. The text presents two seemingly opposed types of single mothers; the middle-class good-enough mother and the neglectful working-class mother, without a detailed exploration of the personal circumstances and social structures that influence their motherhood behaviours. Once again, it is important to highlight that Tracy's perspective contributes to polarizing the images of these two mothers. The lack of consideration of the systemic issues that impact women's ability to mother reduces motherhood to a matter of individual ability and responsibility, reinforcing the demonisation of working-class mothers. On the other hand, *The Dare Game* also challenges traditional motherhood ideology in its rejection of the supermum ideal. Despite the many differences between Cam and Carly in matters of social class, appearance and motherhood ability, they have one thing in common: neither of them fully complies with the mother ideal, although for different reasons. Cam does not comply because she is a foster mother, homosexual and not traditionally feminine, whilst, for Carly, it is because she is working-class, promiscuous and neglectful. These characters represent the existence of a variety of motherhoods, none of which conforms to unachievable ideals of motherhood.

Progressive Views of Working-Class Motherhood in *My Mum Tracy Beaker*

The subversion of the supermum ideal continues in *My Mum Tracy Beaker*, published more than a decade later in 2018. In opposition to the earlier novels, *My Mum Tracy Beaker* presents a more progressive view of working-class motherhood and female sexuality, through the exploration of Tracy's struggle to make ends meet as a young single mother. The supermum ideal manifests in Tracy's personal and professional aspirations and dreams of rising out of poverty. Tracy's motivation to seek personal and professional success is not selfish but to provide the best standard of life for her daughter. Tracy believes she has failed as a mother because her circumstances prevented her from building a successful career and a traditional nuclear family. She expresses feelings of shame provoked by her inability to comply with the supermum ideal: "I am a loser. I've made a mess of everything. I've never had a proper job or relationship. I always thought the one thing I could be proud of was being a good mum [...]" (Wilson, *My Mum* 365). Tracy's feelings of shame and guilt result from considering her inability to conform to the supermum ideal a personal failure rather than the product of unrealistic goals and social disadvantage.

In contrast with the previous depiction of working-class motherhood in *Carly*, Tracy is a more complex and empathetic character. Despite both having similar material circumstances there are some salient differences between their mothering behaviours; while Carly is depicted as an unsuitable mother due to her neglectful behaviour, Tracy is a capable mother who is hard-working, responsible and willing to sacrifice herself for her daughter's wellbeing. Carly and Tracy are evidently very different characters, and their differences are highlighted through the change in child narrator. In contrast with Tracy's experience, Jess is very close with her mother, whom she has grown up with and knows very well. The second sequence of novels narrates a very close and caring mother-daughter relationship. Readers are encouraged to empathise with Tracy through acknowledgement of her socio-economic and personal circumstances. While contextual elements such as poverty and intergenerational trauma were omitted from Carly's depiction, in the case of Tracy their effect on mothering is foregrounded.

Tracy's socio-economic situation is explored in contrast with secondary mother characters, highlighting the connection between material circumstances and motherhood. In *My Mum Tracy Beaker*,

Tracy takes up a job as a childminder for Marina, a woman of higher socio-economic status who has a successful career and marriage. Marina is aspirational for Tracy, as she provides for her daughters everything that Tracy wishes she could offer Jess. Marina's family lives in a "very posh old house in a terrace of cream painted houses" (Wilson, *My Mum* 42–43) as opposed to Tracy's small, cold and damp flat in a council estate. Tracy expresses her desire for upward social mobility when she tells Jess: "We are going to have a house like this one day, Jess, you just wait and see" (Wilson, *My Mum* 43). Once inside Marina's house, Tracy is in awe at her larder: "It was like a little supermarket in there [...] They had all kinds of fancy things we hadn't heard of" (Wilson, *My Mum* 47). Once again the socio-economic differences between the two families are emphasised. This example illustrates how social privilege allows upper-middle-class women like Marina to build successful careers while maintaining a high standard of life for their families. This is made possible by outsourcing the care of their children to working-class women like Tracy, who despite bearing the care-load of multiple households continue to struggle financially. This situation demonstrates how class differences influence motherhood behaviours and sustain socio-economic disparities.

When later Tracy falls in love with the wealthy ex-footballer Sean Godfrey, she sees this relationship as an opportunity to build the life she has always wished for. She acquires socio-economic status through this romantic relationship and the class dynamics of care are reversed; Tracy stops babysitting for Marina and starts receiving help from Rosalie, Sean's housekeeper. Tracy's dreams initially come true when she and Jess go to live with Sean, but it all falls apart quickly when Sean betrays Tracy. This failed relationship functions as a cautionary tale for single mothers about the risks of relying on a romantic partner. Sean's chauvinistic attitudes prevent Tracy from working and being financially independent. He wants Tracy to devote herself to him only: "You are not a flipping childminder. You are a Sean-minder now!" (Wilson, *My Mum* 172). After the couple's separation, Tracy reflects on the experience and comes to this realisation: "We don't need anyone else to keep us going, Jess. [...] We are going to stand proud and be independent" (Wilson, *My Mum* 346). But when Tracy and Jess return to their old lives devoid of luxuries, they acknowledge the positive impact financial and material resources had in their lives: "It was so heavenly, everyone envying us and not having to worry about the money. To be honest I miss that the most" (Wilson, *My Mum* 386). There is an explicit acknowledgement that having access to financial resources makes life easier and

that mothering with limited resources is difficult. This recognition of the effect that financial and material circumstances have on mothering challenges the New Momist idea that mothering is solely a matter of individual dedication and sacrifice. New Momism, particularly the supermum ideal, clearly favours those whose lives are greatly eased due to their financial means. It is possible to “have it all” if you have the means to “purchase it all”; good quality food and housing and someone else’s time to help around the house and with child-care. The text posits that despite the challenges that mothering while poor presents it is possible to be a good working-class mother, and that self-reliance is preferable to dependence. *My Mum Tracy Beaker* displays a more progressive outlook on working-class motherhood than earlier novels. However, it puts forward a neoliberal agenda in which the personal and financial self-reliance of the single mother is paramount and a necessity for success.

The more progressive outlook of the later novels is also present in the treatment of mothers’ sexuality, as the depiction of sexually active mothers as morally deficient is abandoned. As previously mentioned, Carly’s sexuality played a role in her being portrayed as a non-respectable person and a neglectful mother. Carly is represented as promiscuous, and thus selfishly putting her personal needs over Tracy’s care needs. Feminist scholarship helps us recognise how the characterisation of sexually active mothers as selfish and immoral is damaging and contributes to the social judgement of women for their sexual behaviours (Skeggs; Robbie). The later novels display a more progressive view of female sexuality in the character of Tracy who is open to and engages in relationships with men. However, the text emphasises the fact that she is not promiscuous: “Mum’s had lots of boyfriends. One at a time, of course” (Wilson, *My Mum* 22). This assertion responds to the need to justify Tracy’s desire as adequate rather than excessive to avoid judgement. Overall, the novels seem to imply that women cannot have fulfilling romantic and sexual relationships while mothering as they must devote all their time and attention to their children. This is also true in the case of Cam who only lives happily with a partner later in life when her role as a mother becomes secondary and her full dedication is no longer needed. It is not until Tracy is an adult and no longer under her care that Cam finds a same-sex partner and her sexual orientation is explicitly addressed. Despite this more accepting treatment of mothers’ sexuality in the later novels the New Momist ideal of whole-hearted dedication to mothering prevails, preventing mothers from seeking fulfilment from romantic or sexual relationships outside marriage.

Conclusion

Wilson's novels have paved the way for realistic, nuanced and diverse representations of motherhood that challenge heteropatriarchal ideology in children's literature. The Tracy Beaker series is commendable for its realistic and socially engaged treatment of motherhood. The series is a celebration of single motherhood in all its diversity, and of family models that differ from the heteropatriarchal nuclear family. A testament to the time in which they were written, Wilson's novels are imbued with the then-current motherhood ideology and discourses, showing the influence of New Momism and the stereotypes and ideals that emerged from it. The harmful consequences that the mother ideal and the tropes of the welfare mother and the celebrity mum have on mothers' self-perception and children's expectations are explored and ultimately dismissed as unattainable fantasies.

Unlike previous research based on the psychological analysis of characters and their behaviours, this article has focused on material and systemic issues from a feminist perspective, highlighting how patriarchal and social class structures affect the characters' mothering experiences. Depictions of working-class motherhood are particularly prominent in the series, bringing to the fore the tension between material circumstances and personal responsibility. Uncharacteristically for Wilson's writing, the damaging welfare mother stereotype is present in the first novels, reinforcing the identification of working-class motherhood with neglectful behaviours. However, working-class motherhood is characterised more positively in the later series through Tracy's own experiences as a mother. Written over the course of almost thirty years, the novels convey changes in the way motherhood is socially constructed and portrayed, acknowledging systemic issues that affect the mothering ability of women and displaying more progressive views of women's sexuality. In the final novel of the series, Wilson finally delivers the message that she intended all along; that it is possible to "do things differently" and challenge established ideas of what motherhood is meant to be.

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Notes

¹ “Chav” is a highly offensive term used to refer to working-class people in the United Kingdom. Unfortunately, the term remains widely used in a derogatory way. However, it is also being reclaimed by some working-class communities. See the book *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* (2011) by Owen Jones.

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