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Fight Like a YA Girl: Fourth Wave Feminism, Defense,
and Weaponization Through the Lens of Object Relations

By

Amanda Blakeman

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
Honors in the Department of English

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ABSTRACT

BLAKEMAN, AMANDA Fight Like a YA Girl: Fourth Wave Feminism, Defense, and Weaponization Through the Lens of Object Relations. Department of English, June 2022.

ADVISOR: Dr. Claire Bracken and Dr. Jillmarie Murphy

This thesis will discuss how the genre of Young Adult (YA) fiction, more specifically Fantasy YA fiction, reflects the major goals and objectives of fourth wave feminism, ultimately arguing for the need for more intersectional representation in heroine characters. YA Fantasy fiction consistently features a strong heroine in both spirit and body, one who uses weapons to take on systems of injustice in their respective worlds, from systematic child murder to modern slavery. What and how, then, are these books teaching the next generation about feminism? I attempt to answer this question with this thesis, looking at three YA female protagonists and their individual methods of literally and figuratively fighting against the patriarchy. I explore their relationships with weapons and fighting in general, paying attention to the use of designated instruments as weapons and the implications of this relationship on these characters. To do this, I will employ the theoretical framework of Object Relations and its notable theorists, including Melanie Klein, D.W Winnicott, Jessica Benjamin, and Nancy Chodorow, examining the connections between the heroine's sense of self, their childhood, and the object world around them. Further, I examine the use of the female body as a weapon itself, therefore requiring me to think about the significance of weaponizing the female body given the historical reality of sexual violence as a powerful bodily weapon. When put into conversation with the goals of fourth wave feminism, I will ultimately conclude that YA Fantasy fiction aligns with fourth wave feminism in its goal of female empowerment through equality but is lacking in the field of intersectional representation.

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Bursts of artillery fire, mass strikes, massacred protesters, bomb explosions--these are our images of revolution. But some revolutions are harder to recognize: no cataclysms mark their beginnings or ends, no casualties are left lying in pools of blood. Though people may suffer greatly, their pain is hidden from public view.

- Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open*

I grew up an avid reader, choosing to lose myself in the trials and tribulations of fictional characters over my own reality. My childhood consisted of hardcovers, with the occasional paperback, keeping me company at all hours of the day: under my covers at night, during my downtime, even under my desk in class. Books have always engrossed me, including me in the fold of their secret worlds and lessons learned. I discovered the key to Misselthwaite's abandoned garden with Mary Lennox. I stayed a night at the Edmont Hotel with the eccentric Holden Caulfield. I was with Harry Potter at the battle of Hogwarts, defeating the evil Lord Voldemort who sought to enforce magical race-based slavery. While their stories were great and memorable in their own rights, they lacked an element of becoming for me. I never wanted to become any of these characters in any of the books that we now consider the classics.

In discovering Young Adult (YA) novels, I was finally able to find myself in the characters I was reading. Particularly in *Lady Midnight*, one of the focuses of this thesis, I remember the wonderful feeling of seeing some of my own experience reflected on the page in a fantastical and engaging tale of redemption. Emma of *Lady Midnight* is the Harry Potter of her world, the girl who lived to fight on, and I greatly admire those characteristics. YA novels sparked my interest to continue reading into adulthood; I would even credit them with inspiring me to study English, leading me here.

With my avid reading, I began to notice a common theme amongst popular YA novels that I found rather peculiar: every one of these main female characters, Emma among them, seemed to have a natural affinity for fighting and using weapons. While it's lovely to imagine picking up a sword and suddenly knowing how to use it, that's certainly not realistic, so I began to wonder what purpose this serves in the larger messaging of the genre, particularly when placed into conversation with the empowerment that I personally felt during my reading experience. Why do these characters fight, and perhaps more importantly, what are they fighting? What impact could these works have had on girls like me, who read them at the impressionable age of adolescence? What messages will they pass on to future readers? These are the initial questions I asked as I set out to write this thesis. I've found several ways to answer these questions, both through the lens of object relations theory and through the perfectly timed rise of the fourth wave of feminism.

However, part of the nature of YA fiction, as an exciting and emerging genre, is that its definition can be somewhat murky depending on the focus. The literary world knows more about what YA is not than what it is; YA is not typically required reading in high school English class. The genre is too contemporary to be considered a "classic" piece of literature, part of the often-taught canon of works including Shakespeare, Dickens, and Hemingway. They are books crafted not for adults or children, but specifically young adults, an age group necessarily at the forefront of personal and social change (Crowe 120). But then the murkiness emerges again: the term young adult has no clear start or end age, and so the task of defining the genre's audience is difficult. Critic Richard Crowe offers one take, stating "I consider a young adult to be a person old enough to be in junior or high school, usually grades seven through twelve... everyone who works with teenagers knows that many young adults read books marketed above... and below..."

books marketed exclusively to teenagers, but YAL restricts itself to literature *intended* for teenagers” (121). YA, then, is written for teenagers who are still trying to learn about the world in school and who they want to be in that given world. If my example is anything to go by, the books you read can have a lasting impact on your personal values and your life trajectory. Adding to this the popularity of the genre, it becomes clear that my example is anything but an anomaly. YA is by definition for young adults, who in their youth are both impressionable—emphasizing the importance of proper role modeling – and potentially influential.

While Crowe does a fine job of defining young adulthood, in terms of the genre’s audience, he misses the key factor of gender. YA is a genre written by and for women, largely, if the dominant amount of both female authors and readers are anything to go by (Lewit). This fact is even more interesting considering the lack of scholarly criticism on YA fiction by female authors. Even a genre filled with and inspired by feminist messaging is plagued by misogyny, where women’s interests are downplayed as less valid or intelligent by nature of their association with the feminine. The silence in the scholarly realm speaks for itself here; no critical commentary on works like *Lady Midnight*, *A Court of Silver Flames*, and *An Ember in the Ashes*, which I will focus on in this thesis, indicates an ingrained belief that they are somehow not worthy of the study and analysis. My own analysis proves that these works have a wealth of information to look at and value.

For my purposes, I’ve narrowed the genre in my selections even further to fantasy YA fiction, as this subgenre is even more unified in its hallmark components. Every one of these novels details a unique fantasy world with its own rules and hierarchies, natural laws and magical ones, as a product of the author’s imagination. The possibilities are very nearly endless as to the kind of fantasy world that informs the story, but the stories share a strong heroine

archetype to lead. Tough as nails and surviving against impossible odds, the YA heroine is strong in many senses of the word. One of the most well-known examples of a YA heroine is Katniss Everdeen of Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* Series; supporting her family in the hardship and poverty of District 12, Katniss represents the standard for that admirable strength perfectly. In one piece for the *New York Times*, YA fiction author John Green comments on Katniss and her role, effectively summarizing what makes up a YA fantasy heroine through her:

The archetype of the girl survivalist is familiar — she's tough and resourceful, but kind and sentimental... But the considerable strength of the novel comes in Collins's convincingly detailed world-building and her memorably complex and fascinating heroine. In fact, by not calling attention to itself, the text disappears in the way a good font does: nothing stands between Katniss and the reader, between Panem and America. This makes for an exhilarating narrative and a future we can fear and believe in, but it also allows us to see the similarities between Katniss's world and ours. (Green)

While Katniss and *The Hunger Games* are not the subjects of my analysis in this thesis, Green's inadvertent definition of the YA heroine through the work is the clearest and most accessible definition that I've found. He highlights Katniss's hardiness as a person, her womanhood, and her strong tie to her fantasy world, all of which are traits that carry into other novels. She is in part the "girl survivalist", demonstrating remarkable resilience and yet tenderness. Katniss is interesting to Green, and to the reader, because she balances both traditional masculinity and femininity within her character, embracing what appears to be a paradox. To be explained in more detail in the analysis of the following chapters, fighting, weapons, and physical strength are associated with the male and masculine, as men typically fulfill the roles of soldier or warrior, both in literature and in reality. Sentimentality and a tenderness towards family, however, are traditionally feminine in their association with inherent weakness and therefore motherhood. The combination of these two extremes within Katniss, and by extension other YA fantasy heroines, make her stand out as a female character, written with a great deal of depth and nuance not

typical of a female literary character. The YA heroine, then, is primed front and center to almost communicate directly with the reader off the page, as Green points out.

Green also notes that Katniss, by nature of her well-designed character type within the subgenre and the captivating writing style, makes her fantasy world of Panem appear more realistic. Katniss, a varied and refined heroine, is a lifelike character in a fantasy world. She essentially highlights what is life-like about Panem in her realism, by Green's definition of the heroine, bringing out important social criticism built up within works of YA fiction. The heroine is therefore also instrumental in demonstrating or modeling the messaging within YA fantasy fiction, making her crucial to both the subgenre and its overall purpose. In my thesis, I intend to make the connection between the YA fantasy fiction heroine, as defined here, and the social movement of feminism that potentially informed the character, the silent fight made violent and stark on YA pages. In doing so, I hope to emphasize the importance of the YA fantasy genre, displaying its merits as a type of literature worth studying in an academic setting because of its young, female target audience. And most of all, I hope to push the genre forward a bit in its feminist messaging, pointing out where there are gaps in representation for other young girls who read.

To go about this, I selected three YA fantasy fiction novels based on the criteria of popularity and year published in order to make my analysis the most relevant it could possibly be. The first work is the aforementioned *Lady Midnight*, published in 2016 by author Cassandra Clare. Clare is the well-known author of several other works of YA fantasy fiction, all centered around the fictional world of the Shadowhunters that she crafted. She starts a new series with *Lady Midnight*, focusing on Emma Carstairs, a minor character from a previous novel who is now all grown up and taking center stage. The second work is *A Court of Silver Flames*, the

much-anticipated 2021 installment of Sarah J. Maas's *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series, perhaps the most talked about series in online forums. Maas writes of Nesta Archeron, a girl damaged by her world in many ways and therefore forced to fight her way out of the world that wounds her. Finally, there is the 2015 *An Ember in the Ashes* by Sabaa Tahir, zoning in on heroine Laia of Serra, who fights for her autonomy through enslavement. While each heroine is unique, they all share a strong fighting spirit, breaking down their worlds in order to build new ones that are kinder to them and to others.

By pure observation, I also noticed that the tragic past of all of these heroines can be traced back to their childhood and the deaths of their parents. Believing it to be anything but coincidental, I will examine each heroine's unique childhood trauma through the lens of object relations theory, more specifically through its most noteworthy feminist theorists. In this sense, feminist implies a focus on women and/or in theoretical application to women, although many object relations theory thinkers did consider themselves to be proponents of the social movement as well. Among those, I will focus on Melanie Klein, D.W. Winnicott, Jessica Benjamin, and Nancy Chodorow, applying their theoretical framework to one heroine each. In application, Melanie Klein's concept of projective identification and D.W. Winnicott's concept of the transitional object will be foundational in thinking about *Lady Midnight*, making up the core theory that will be built upon in subsequent chapters. Jessica Benjamin's theory of intersubjectivity and gender difference is useful for *A Court of Silver Flames* in how it emphasizes the uniquely feminine and womanly experience of the heroine. Nancy Chodorow's work on the reproduction of mothering and gender difference is applicable to *An Ember in the Ashes* in how Laia's relationship with her mother is a great focus of the character, taking up a great deal of her mental energy in struggle. As a lens, object relations theory is a tool that ties the

physical weapons so central to YA fantasy and its heroines with their behavior and modeling, bridging the gap between the two realms that my thesis attempts to cover.

Over the course of my studies, I have always relied on these books as an escape, to lose myself in, and so I am grateful for the opportunity to bring them into the academic realm, where not much criticism, if any, exists yet. This thesis is partly to define my interests and passions as a student of English. Most of all, this thesis is for all the girls who found themselves in books, and for all the girls who are still searching.

Chapter One: Feminism, How We Got Here, and Where We're Going

Most everyone has some concept of what feminism entails, regardless of how incomplete or misleading that conception might be. In its most basic form, feminism is the fight for equality of the sexes, although it has become much more widespread and developed than that in recent years. While it is clear that feminism is widespread, its effects and ideological advances are much less so. Grown out of the women's rights movement, feminism is crucial for understanding female empowerment and representation in literature, which will be demonstrated by my later analysis. But how did feminism become such a divisive topic, used to label women as man-hating or misandrists? Why and how is it so entwined in politics? And: what about feminism is so important that it must be passed down to the youth of America? Tracing the development of feminism as a movement and outlining its paradigms is paramount to answering these questions.

The trouble with defining feminism is due to the movement's tendency towards disorganization and infighting, demonstrated in part by the common wave metaphor. In all its controversy, feminism has often been described in terms of mother nature, a traditionally feminine entity that, in fits of rage, is known to destroy using storm and sea as noted in Sara Evans' *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End* (2004). Borrowing from that same symbolism, the "driving storm [of feminism], with shifting winds and crosscurrents, never focused on a single issue and sometimes seemed to be at war as much within itself as with patriarchy. Yet that storm, with all its internal conflicts, produced a tidal wave of feminism that washed over the United States and changed it forever" (Evans 1). Labeling the destructive power of the natural world as feminine or womanly is also a traditionally sexist practice, as it instills the idea that women are inherently destructive. In a society where male leadership is dominant and the masculine is associated with power, sexist practices such as linking the feminine with

destruction come as no surprise to feminists. The wave metaphor of the feminist movement reclaims and reshapes this sexist terminology not to depict how women destroy, but how they build and recreate within a relative paradox. Much like a giant wave, feminism has built up, crested, and dissipated many times since its inception. Its powerful waters have swept away some of the structures of patriarchy, putting new, more equal structures in their place. However, the wave metaphor is somewhat misleading in how it characterizes feminism as a cohesive, centralized movement, entirely focused on one goal; again like a wave, the movement often seems overly cyclical with no visible improvements. Delineations of the separate waves, four in total, are certainly general, and more of an art than a science. They cannot possibly encompass the totality of feminist thought in every period, as there was often disagreement amongst feminist ranks. Different feminists--men, women, and gender non-conforming individuals alike--emphasized different issues depending on their lived experience. In this way, feminism is a deeply personal movement, and while difficult to nail down in its entirety, that is perhaps a much larger issue outside of the scope of this work. Instead, the general descriptions of each wave or iteration of feminism will be useful here in that they paint a clear chronology of the development of feminism, and thus highlight where the movement might still have room to grow.

Origins: The First Wave

What is now known as the first wave of feminism began before the turn of the 20th century, marking a historic awakening in the lives of subordinated women. Prior to this period, women in the United States were not afforded the same rights as men, such as owning their own property, earning money, having custody of their children, or voting in elections. Written into law, this extreme inequality also had various supposed biological and religious justifications that wove the same ideas into the very fabric of society. It is difficult to discern when the first wave

first began to build, but most scholars specifically in America point to the Seneca Falls convention of 1848. Regardless of the starting date, the first wave built very slowly, “finally cresting in 1920 with the passage of the nineteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution guaranteeing women the most fundamental right of citizenship, the vote. It swelled slowly and steadily, riding this single, symbolic issue” (Evans 1). Unlike the later waves, the first wave was largely united by a single focus on women's rights under the law. They fought for *de jure* gender equality, meaning that they wanted to be treated as equal citizens under the code of law, as it was written on the page. However, they were not united under the term of feminism for much of the building of this wave, as “[the] term ‘feminism’ came into being in late nineteenth century France and was adopted by a segment of the U.S. movement for woman suffrage (the vote) in the 1910s” (Evans 2). Feminism, as a relatively new term, carried none of the same weight that it now does. Instead, the term plainly meant advocating for women's rights, like the right to vote or own property, which was very much in line with the struggles of the first wave. It not only marked the emergence of the feminist movement, but also the creation of the language that is used to describe female subordination and oppression. Many of the terms that are now central to feminism, such as the patriarchy, did not yet exist, and with it the idea that sexism is incredibly pervasive, *de facto* as well as *de jure* (Evans 3).

The first wave also limited to whom its definition of feminism applied, although it is doubtful that this can be attributed to a simple lack of terminology. As the origin of feminist thought, the first wave provided the jumping off point for which any and all subsequent ideas were based on. So, in the years of the first wave and following, “women’s rights gave birth to feminism’s rebellious cultural criticism, although it never responded to the demands of African-American women for full inclusion” (Evans 5). Even from one of the earliest characterizations of

the movement, feminism was painted with a rebellious spirit, indicating that the idea of rebellion, which requires an armed resistance, is at the very heart of the movement. However, the first wave not only excluded Black women from the woman's movement--therefore designating them as something other than women to be valued--but it did not even deem them worthy of a response. The noteworthy leaders of the first wave, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, came from rich, white backgrounds; so, they largely focused on rich, white women, gaining support from their own social circles. By default, this excluded women of any other background or racial group from feminism, Black women in particular. While the first wave accomplished its symbolic goal with the 19th Amendment in 1920, it quickly became clear that the first wave had fallen short of equality in both its limited view of women and sexist institutions.

Improving with the Second Wave

Following the perceived failures of what is now called the first wave in the United States of America, a new generation of women--the daughters and granddaughters of those who fought for the vote--again took up arms to fight for progress towards equality. Taking place in the 1960s and 70s, the second wave of feminism, as it is now universally called, "not only shattered a set of legal structures that upheld inequalities between women and men but also challenged prevailing 'common-sense' everyday practices built on the assumption that women were naturally docile, domestic, and subordinate" (Evans 1-2). It is clear that the second wavers took the ideas of their foremothers and greatly expanded them. While they did continue the fight for equality under the law with focuses such as the Equal Rights Amendment and *Roe v. Wade*, these newer feminists recognized that true equality exists in practice as well as law. The second wave brought with it the theory and terminology of feminism, such as patriarchy and gender roles, to understand the

pervasive nature of sexism in society. The movement blurred the lines “between the ‘personal’ and the ‘political’ captured in an early slogan, ‘The Personal is Political.’ Under this banner, the movement politicized issues that had long been deemed outside the purview of ‘politics,’ including sexuality, domestic, violence and the exercise of authority within the family” (Evans 3). The second wave, then, marked a far more radical challenge than the first, given how it attacked the definitions of personal and political. This challenge left little room for deflection or argument, perhaps explaining why feminists are so often thought of as overly militant, angry, and man-hating. However, the true spirit of feminism, beginning with this second wave, is a critical evaluation of the larger system of sexism; exemplified here, feminists examine the inherent sexist associations with womanhood and the feminine that contribute to subordination within a larger system, such as the “weak” work of wives and mothers in the private sphere of the home. By nature of the gender binary, men are then strong and in power, able to take charge, lead, and leave the home for the public sphere. In this way, the second wave attacked preconceived notions about a woman’s life and place in society, developing how the original wave challenged in the name of equality.

About 40 years passed between the first and second wave, prompting questions as to how a second wave even began to build with the absence of linear momentum. The answer came in the form of the Boomer generation, who worked to expand feminism in academic theory. In the 40-year period where feminism lay relatively dormant and inactive, the country’s focus was on financial recovery following the Great Depression of the 1930s and rebuilding following WWII. It would be incorrect to state that feminist ideals had totally ceased to exist, but women largely had to shift to focus on survival as opposed to equality, and so feminists could not make headlines in the same manner. However, these conditions could not last forever; all the

movement needed was a single spark to fire the first shot of the renewed battle, and that spark came in the form of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). She articulated a woman's position of subordination in terms of her relationship with the men in her life, best expressed through Friedan's own words:

Over and over again, stories in women's magazines insist that women can know fulfillment only at the moment of giving birth to a child. They deny the years when she can no longer look forward to giving birth, even if she repeats the act over and over again. In the feminine mystique, there is no other way for a woman to dream of creation or of the future. There is no other way she can even dream about herself, except as her children's mother, her husband's wife. (Friedan 59)

A woman's value, then, was only in how she can fulfill her traditionally feminine roles of wife and mother, two inherently subordinated positions. Her entire being was only what service she can provide for others. Friedan's idea of the 'feminine mystique' gave voice to the many women of her time that were left unfulfilled by simply being a wife and mother, so they turned to the fight for feminism to find more purpose in their lives. Friedan's spark highlights how the second wave created the terminology and thought behind feminism, pointing out the many faces of sexism, but also how integral academic, interdisciplinary thought was to the overall development of feminism.

Friedan's idea, while revolutionary in its own right, was not a one-size-fits-all answer to the frustrations of women, but rather the frustrations of white women like Friedan and other dominant feminists of the mainstream movement. While I am emphasizing the redemptive nature of feminism's cycles, it has continuously failed to serve any woman of color completely, an important critique which carries through to the second wave and beyond. The second wave, specifically, pushed feminists of color, Black women particularly, to the margins, just as in life. Feminist critic Mikki Kendall in *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women That a Movement Forgot* (2020), reflects on this fact, articulating why it is problematic to perpetuate white

feminism with “Whether it is the centering of white women even when women of color are most likely to be at risk, or the complete erasure of issues most likely to impact those that are not white, white feminism tends to forget that a movement that claims to be for all women has to engage with the obstacles women who are not white face” (Kendall 21). She goes even further to state that “When white feminism ignores history, ignores that the tears of white women have the power to get Black people killed while insisting that all women are on the same side, it doesn’t solve anything” (Kendall 24). By history, Kendall refers to various acts of violence instigated by white women against Black people, such as the lynching of Emmett Till after a false accusation of rape by a white woman, occurring only a few years prior to the publication of Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique*. By leaving out entire groups of women from their definition, feminists – more specifically white feminists – indirectly caused Black people to suffer and die. Particularly for marginalized groups, feminism is life or death, then. While it is infuriating that the second wave not only neglected Black women in their feminism, but purposefully so, as in the first wave, it is a very crucial point to make when tracing feminism’s development. This trait, woefully, largely carries across feminism for much of its early development; in leaving out the early Black voices of this movement, I hope to emphasize just how critical the need for their inclusion is, which will apply to my larger analysis.

The Rise of the Third Wave

As with the previous wave, the second wave of feminism lost momentum before it could reach the metaphorical shore and accomplish its goals, crushed in part by the stifling policies of the Reagan administration that reinforced sexist, racist, and homophobic policies within the United States. The second wave did make progress for women’s rights but excluded many marginalized groups both from the particular set of women that feminism sought to defend and

from the benefits of its accomplishments. However, the third wave soon began to rise in the early 1990s following the sexual assault accusations of Anita Hill against future Justice Clarence Thomas, sparking a highly publicized trial and re-inciting feminist passion. While clearly tied together by the ideological basis of feminism, the third wave included several major departures from the second wave, making strides towards a more well-rounded and inclusive set of beliefs. In other words, “third-wave feminism [made] three important tactical moves that respond[ed] to a series of theoretical problems within the second wave. First, in response to the collapse of the category of “women,” the third wave foregrounds personal narratives that illustrate an intersectional and multiperspectival version of feminism” (Snyder 175). Before the third wave, the definition of a woman - at least in terms of who the mainstream movement would fight for - was rather narrow, limited by factors of race, socioeconomic status, and gender identity. Trans women, for instance, were largely excluded from discussion in the second wave, as they were not categorically assigned female at birth. With the third wave, the term “woman” expanded to include trans women, poor women, women of minority racial groups, and women not otherwise traditionally respected, such as sex workers. This reflected an increased understanding of both the shortcomings of the second wave, in tune with the spirit of reflection and improvement, and the academic concepts emerging to describe subordination and oppression, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw’s articulation of intersectionality.

While incredibly important to the development of feminism, and the overall argument of this thesis, table Crenshaw’s intersectionality for a moment to finish a summary of the cornerstones of the third wave. Further building upon the shortcomings of the second wave, the third wave of feminism favored an orientation towards goals. The theoretical development of feminism, while necessary in its expansion, split and fractured the movement into ideological

schools sometimes more at war with one another than with a common enemy, therefore damaging the overall name and progress of feminism. So, “as a consequence... third-wavers embrace[d] multivocality over synthesis and action over theoretical justification” (Snyder 175). Third wave feminists were not interested in being an entirely cohesive movement, agreeing on every issue amongst their ranks. Instead, they sought to work towards action on important issues such as harmful gender roles and the standard of feminine beauty, trying to avoid the mistakes of their mothers. They went to great lengths to avoid division, as “third-wave feminism emphasize[d] an inclusive and nonjudgmental approach that refuse[d] to police the boundaries of the feminist political” (Snyder 175). In other words, third-wavers went beyond the binary labeling of the personal and the political, refusing to label issues as a whole movement and therefore validating the experience of the individual. Everything could be a feminist issue, and everyone could be a feminist, and it became not the responsibility of the whole social movement to apply those labels. In terms of sex work, for instance, the movement as a whole sought to embrace the people involved in the trade without shaming them for their involvement in a clearly patriarchal system. Third wave feminism, then, marked a significant departure from earlier waves, as it improved upon previously held beliefs of the movement while also greatly expanding its scope.

The Origins of Intersectionality

One of the major frustrations with feminism up until this point had been that it catered to rich, white, cisgender women and the sexism that they experienced rather than the sexism that all women, marginalized groups included, experienced. Traditionally dominant feminist views, consistent with both the first and second waves, labeled discrimination on the basis of one identity characteristic: womanhood. While this understanding is not incorrect, it also does not

fully describe the true extent of subordination and sexism. In response, Kimberlé Crenshaw articulated the concept of intersectionality with her 1989 work “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics” to more accurately describe the experiences of those who exist at the intersection of multiple identities, chiefly Black women. Crenshaw’s original articulation is simple:

I argue that Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender. These problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure. Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated. Thus, for feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse to embrace the experiences and concerns of Black women, the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating “women’s experience” or “the Black experience” into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast. (Crenshaw 140)

Speaking specifically to feminism, Crenshaw supports a marked departure from previous thought and methods of action, an attitude that largely characterized the third wave during which she wrote. According to Crenshaw, race and gender do not exist independently from one another; people can be subordinated on both axes, i.e., Black women experience both racism and sexism, and so a unique intersection between race and gender exists. Not only that, but people who exist at the intersection of subordinated identities experience unique forms of oppression that no other groups experience in the same way. Antidiscrimination framework of the time did not adequately address intersectional identities, instead focusing on singular identities, as Crenshaw points out. She emphasizes both the previous mistakes of feminist thought, excluding women existing at these intersections, and the need for dramatic change in how these issues are thought about and addressed. Crenshaw’s articulation is highly consistent with the attitudes of the third wave,

eventually sparking larger conversations about identity and representation that are only beginning to be answered in literature.

Crenshaw further builds upon her analysis of intersectionality to define the unspoken social standard as white and male, ultimately expanding the feminist movement to include more people in its fight for equality. She continues to attack the dominant approaches to combating sexism in feminist theory as tools in only furthering oppression. She states:

Despite the narrow scope of this dominant conception of discrimination and its tendency to marginalize those whose experiences cannot be described within its tightly-drawn parameters, this approach has been regarded as the appropriate framework for addressing a range of problems. In much of feminist theory and, to some extent, in antiracist politics, this framework is reflected in the belief that sexism or racism can be meaningfully discussed without paying attention to the lives of those other than the race-, gender- or class-privileged. As a result, both feminist theory and antiracist politics have been organized, in part, around the equation of racism with what happens to the Black middle-class or to Black men, and the equation of sexism with what happens to white women. (Crenshaw 152).

Black women, chiefly, were not included in the definition of womanhood prior to the third wave and Crenshaw's work. While quite obviously women in a biological sense, Black women - and all non-white women, to some extent - were not all afforded that same treatment under the concept of womanhood, given Crenshaw's articulation of a multiple axis framework. It is then clear that whiteness was the unspoken standard of womanhood, an unwritten qualifier to be valued and accepted within feminism just as maleness is for wider respect. This is especially true when considering the earlier silenced voices of women of color, particularly Black women. Crenshaw, therefore, made important strides in defining intersectionality. She does far more than just summarize the experience of Black women. Rather, she expressed the need for focusing on the most marginalized or oppressed group(s) in order to help the wider population. She expanded the very basis of the feminist movement to be more inclusive and placed it in conversation with

the larger fight for equality and equity, giving voice to those who were previously silenced in the margins.

This substantial call for change, beginning with the third wave of feminism, has only grown in size and scope since 1989. While Crenshaw's original expression was specific to Black women, her term has since taken on a life of its own, becoming a sort of battle cry for those that fight against oppression, feminist or otherwise. It is used to describe intersections of identity for women of color, women with disabilities, queer women, and those that do not identify as women. Not only that, but intersectionality gave the third wave a way to improve upon the shortcomings of the second wave by shifting its focus to marginalized groups; minimizing crashes in a metaphorical intersection improves the safety of the road for everyone. In this way, Crenshaw created a strong link between feminism, antiracism, and other antidiscrimination theories, somewhat merging them together in everyday practice. Intersectionality, as feminism's newfound slogan, became a household word to be incorporated into ordinary understanding just as the intersections that Crenshaw described are ordinary and pervasive. This updated understanding of the term intersectionality is crucial in comprehending how and why feminism in current literature is necessary.

The Fourth Wave and Beyond

Intersectionality continues to be used and expanded upon in the current fourth wave of feminism. There's no complete consensus as to when the third wave ended and the fourth wave began; some point to the rise of social media circa 2009, others to #metoo or Time's Up, and still others to the first Women's March in 2017. Most all of these estimates, while differing in their precise dating, agree that the fourth wave rose circa the 2010s, bringing with it a more all-encompassing and everyday form of feminism than ever before. Here, perhaps, the often-used

wave metaphor to describes shifts in the feminist movement is more reductive than helpful; given the very small break, if any, between the third and fourth waves, and the similarities in principle, the fourth wave could be characterized as a redefinition or restructuring of the third, more of a change in the direction of the wave than anything else. More accurately, then, each rise of feminism marks an ideological progression with a drive to improve upon what was done previously, which had been demonstrated in the analysis of each wave thus far. The fourth rise of feminism is an ideological improvement upon the first, second, and third iterations to create the most all-encompassing form to date.

To more precisely characterize the so named fourth wave, it is important to consider that same drive for change and progress across the entire development of the feminist movement. The latest push in the form of the fourth wave does far more than simply expand previous thought. In the spirit of Crenshaw's intersectionality, which the movement seems to have taken to heart, fourth-wavers have redefined and reconstructed what it means to be a feminist as such:

The emerging fourth wavers are not just reincarnations of their second wave grandmothers; they bring to the discussion important perspectives taught by third wave feminism. They speak in terms of intersectionality whereby women's suppression can only fully be understood in a context of the marginalization of other groups and genders—feminism is part of a larger consciousness of oppression along with racism, ageism, classism, ableism, and sexual orientation (no “ism” to go with that). Among the third wave's bequests is the importance of inclusion, an acceptance of the sexualized human body as non-threatening, and the role the internet can play in gender-bending and leveling hierarchies. Part of the reason a fourth wave can emerge is because these millennials' articulation of themselves as “feminists” is their own: not a hand-me-down from grandma. The beauty of the fourth wave is that there is a place in it for all –together. The academic and theoretical apparatus is extensive and well-honed in the academy, ready to support a new broad-based activism in the home, in the workplace, in the sphere of social media, and in the streets. (Rampton)

What distinguishes the fourth wave so dramatically from the third, despite their seemingly similar era, is the redefinition of the word feminism from its previous meaning. Feminism as a term is the unifying force between the various iterations thus far: the first wave created the term,

the second wave defined it, the third wave expanded it, but the fourth wave is redefining it, essentially creating a new movement. Feminism is not only a call for the equality of all, but also now a call for equity using the strong backing of expanded intersectional theory. Fourth wave feminism includes women, men, and those that exist outside of the gender binary of many different backgrounds and types. The movement's far greater application then describes the new movement's overarching goal of bringing feminism to the everyday. Fourth wave feminism tackles issues such as gender-based violence in the home, the wage gap in the workplace, body positivity on social media, and sexual harassment in the streets. It is designed to be a movement inclusive of all, including those most commonly left out of discussions of feminism: men, trans people, sex workers, and people of color, chiefly.

Further distinguishing fourth wave feminism are the tools employed to bring feminism to the everyday. The movement is uniquely contemporary in that it has harnessed the power of the internet to build momentum, and consequently, an attitude of ferocity amongst supporters. One commentator of feminism has further summarized the movement as such:

[The] internet itself has enabled a shift from 'third-wave' to 'fourth-wave' feminism. What is certain is that the internet has created a 'call-out' culture, in which sexism or misogyny can be 'called out' and challenged. This culture is indicative of the continuing influence of the third wave, with its focus on micropolitics and challenging sexism and misogyny insofar as they appear in everyday rhetoric, advertising, film, television and literature, the media, and so on. (Munro 23)

Fourth wave feminism is a born digital movement, led by a younger generation that again saw the failures of the previous waves. However, it is less academic and theoretical in many ways, demonstrated by this "call-out" culture. With the internet, practically anyone has access to educational materials on the wide array of issues that feminism now addresses. It is incredibly easy, purposefully so, to discover feminism in hashtags, online abbreviations, and dedicated social media accounts. The newfound wide reach is beneficial given the goals of the movement;

increased access to feminist ideas increases supporters and helps to eliminate academic hierarchy or superiority. Fourth wave feminism focuses on issues that every person experiences in daily life, making everyone an expert on some level, and the movement truly embraces that level playing ground in every sense. Furthermore, fourth-wavers make the failures of the past more central to their new feminism, demonstrated by the more militant practice of the call-out. In response to consistent sexism and violence against them, feminists are now somewhat responding in kind, demanding with force rather than asking. While the mainstream of the movement does not support violence as a tactic to achieve their goals by any means, they are simply no longer tolerant of everyday sexism in any of its various forms.

The fourth wave has also centralized ideas of intersectionality, taking the idea further towards a goal of representation in media, amongst other things. One of the benefits of intersectional theory is that it offers a path or solution to issues of complex, multi-axis oppression by focusing on marginalized groups. In implementing these solutions, “contemporary feminists advocate several tactics, including the much-maligned practice of ‘privilege-checking’. As a tactic, privilege-checking is about reminding someone that they cannot and should not speak for others” (Munro 24). Fourth wave feminism therefore takes intersectionality even more of a step further than the third wave with concepts of self-representation and forward activism. Traditionally white, female-centered and led forms of feminism failed in their goals due to their lack of inclusivity. The third wave, while well-meaning, still allowed white women to lead the charge of change, and so again failed. With the contributions of the internet and a critical awareness of past failures through the lens of intersectionality, the fourth wave is set to be more successful than its predecessors, again taking into account the everyday presence and struggle with systems of oppression, sexism included.

Feminism, then, with all its waves and nuances, is one of the most important ideological forces of the past 200 years. It has changed the lives of women everywhere in its pushback against misogyny, sexism, and systems of oppression. In tracing the development of feminism thus far, I have thoroughly defined what the term “feminism” means within the context of this thesis, providing adequate historical background that will be useful for the subsequent analysis in Chapters Two, Three, and Four. Perhaps more important than what feminism promotes in its principles, however, are the issues that it is relatively silent about. I have consistently noted how feminism, over the course of its history, has fallen short of its goals in defending the rights of all women, neglecting any women of color in favor of white women. The concept of intersectionality chiefly helps to highlight feminism’s shortcomings in this way while also providing a framework for change. By fighting against the oppression of the most marginalized groups, feminism can fight oppression for all in the new fourth wave. As my later analysis will prove, the fantasy YA heroine is inherently feminist in many ways, both reflecting the current state of feminism and pushing the movement further in intersectional representation.

Bridging the Ideological Gap: Describing Object Relations Theory

Even though feminism is the main focus of this thesis, I am evaluating its messaging in fantasy YA through the use of objects and weapons, and so require a method to assess the impacts of these weapons. My chosen method is that of object relations theory, particularly feminist object relations theory, as it focuses on the relationship between the inner self and the outside world through conceptual and physical objects. I define the theory here again in order to provide context for later analysis, describing my methods in full detail so that I will be able to employ them in full detail. As a theoretical framework, object relations theory describes human

behavior and development in relationship to the surrounding world. Derived from Sigmund Freud's school of psychoanalysis, where he preached that the unconscious mind controls somewhat innate behavior based on gender, modern object relations theory is far more widely applicable to people of many different gender identities; Freud focused mainly on men and fathering, including women as afterthoughts, making his original theories problematic. The seemingly feminist spirit of improvement caused theorists like Nancy Chodorow and Jessica Benjamin to make women a more central focus of their analysis, creating a separate school of object relations that is a useful tool for describing the impacts of the patriarchy on the self. The theory operates on a relatively simple premise:

Object relations theory begins by assuming that people are born seeking and needing relationships, so the behaviors demonstrated by the members of the group presented here are attempts to connect with one another. The degree to which those behaviors fail to accomplish that goal has to do with members' needs to feel safe and protect themselves amid the vulnerability that comes with risking failure, mistreatment, or rejection. (Buchele & Rutan 36)

It otherwise explains behavior as a manifestation of past important relationships, particularly those of childhood. People act in ways that provide them safety from the hurt of loneliness, although sometimes these actions become dysfunctional. The terminology of object relations Theory paints relationships and life in general as a struggle. All behavior is a psychological "defense" against the traumatic "attack" of life in the forms of failure, mistreatment, and rejection; every action either defies or is defined by previous childhood experiences. In terms of feminism, the two belief systems are compatible in that they emphasize the social or interpersonal impact on the individual, describing how the outside world can somewhat work against individual cases.

Object relations theory further describes interpersonal relationships on the basis of unconscious decision-making and the self, relating especially to how the self is defined in

relationships. According to the theory, humans always seek connection but do not always succeed in that goal; it is the image of the self that is wounded here, and from then on takes drastic action to avoid getting hurt again through behavior. This then impacts any relationships going forward, where the cycle might continue without conscious awareness. Many women, for instance, are beaten down by the lived experience of sexism throughout their lives, and so they behave in ways that reflect a deeply held belief of lesser value, describing their worth only in relation to the men in their lives (Gilligan; Friedan). They unconsciously reduce themselves to ornaments in a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy known in object relations as projective identification. This example therefore stresses the power of the self as a tenet of object relations theory, given how one's perception has such a strong influence.

Object relations theory further provides the language to describe relationships that display the effects of one's wounded state, as all interpersonal relationships inevitably do on some level. Since the wounds of the past are not necessarily apparent to one in the present, it can be difficult to recognize the truth of behavior in the self and in others. As relationships develop, "some become what are known as part-object relationships. In these cases, the "other" is not fully seen, but is rather seen partially. Often this will follow the borderline defense of "splitting," with the "other" being inaccurately seen as all "good" or "bad."'" (Buchele & Rutan 39) This recognition of damaged relationships is central to developing healthy connections in object relations theory. The "object" of object relations is complex in that it is not inanimate, but rather a perception of a person or part of a person - the definition is closer to the object in "objectify" that is prevalent throughout feminist literature. Something labeled as an object is inherently less than a person in the mind of whoever is the subject of analysis. In opposition to an object is the subject, someone viewed as a complex person with thoughts, feelings, traumas, and experiences

backing up their behaviors; they are subjective in that they express their opinions, and their opinions are generally recognized and accepted by others, a reflection of their unconscious personhood. Objects and subjects are both terms applied to people in object relations theory, however they more describe the perception of another's value, which can very easily go awry in different kinds of relationships, such as that of parent/child. It seems strikingly childlike to view the world with a black-and-white moral lens, but that is exactly the core of object relations. Adults are really children at heart, wounded and traumatized by their life experience in different ways, making any and all future behavior a product of childhood. In this way, it is no stretch to look at adult behavior - in life and in fiction - as that of an inner child, in essence.

While the "object" of object relations is not a physical object, that is not to say that physical objects do not play a role in how the theory describes human behavior through relationships. The reality is quite the contrary, as physical, inanimate objects hold personal meaning in childhood that carries into adulthood, as I will later argue. Famed researcher and major developer of object relations theory, D. W. Winnicott, studied this interaction, eventually coming to a conclusion that he termed transitional objects. To quote his research:

All these things I am calling transitional phenomena. Also, out of this, if we study any one infant, there may emerge some one thing or some phenomenon-perhaps a bundle of wool or the corner of a blanket or eiderdown, or a word or tune, or a mannerism-that becomes vitally important to the infant for use at the time of going to sleep, as is a defence against anxiety, especially anxiety of depressive type. Perhaps some soft object or other type of object has been found and used by the infant, and thus then becomes what I am calling a transitional object. This object goes on being important. (Winnicott 90)

Transitional objects, according to Winnicott, are useful tools for childhood development, as the constant care and attention of parents, specifically the mother, begins to fade with age. He specifies that transitional objects are a physical defense of psychological problems, a way for a child to cope with struggles in the absence of human emotional support. But even further, this

reliance on and connection to something inanimate gives the object somewhat of a life of its own through the attachment to the child. The connection between a child and their baby blanket, for instance, is so strong that the blanket is named, loved, and taken care of by the child in a sense of complete ownership. It takes on qualities of life in that all-important interpersonal relationship, real or imagined through the strength of the connection. Continuing with the same example, the baby blanket becomes an extension of the child's self due to their extreme closeness, both "them" and "not-them" at the same time (Winnicott 89). By reading adults as a different form of child, it is then logical to conclude that transitional objects, like many of the other tenets of object relations theory, continue into adulthood, which I later argue is again a useful tool for analysis in literature.

Object relations, as a theory of human behavior, provides a general guide for how to analyze and break down how people react in different situations. However, it is particularly useful in that it has been widely critiqued, studied, analyzed, and expanded upon since its inception at the turn of the 20th century, creating a diverse array of theoretical offshoots. One such perspective that is of particular interest to my topic is that of feminist object relations theory, centering on women and their experiences as the focus of analysis. Frustrated by the neglect of women socially, culturally, and in theoretical study, theorists like Nancy Chodorow and Jessica Benjamin, two major feminist object relations theorists whose works I will later employ, both developed the school to explain womanhood and motherhood specifically. Nancy Chodorow, specifically, pioneered this movement, taking the terminology of object relations theory and applying it to the mother figure:

Object-relations theory does not need to idealize a hyper-individualism; it assumes a fundamental internal as well as external relatedness to the other. The question is then what kind of relation this can or should be. The relational individual is not reconstructed in terms of his or her drives and defenses but in terms of the greater or lesser

fragmentation of his or her inner world and the extent to which the core self feels spontaneous and whole within, rather than driven by, this world. Even the sense of agency and autonomy remain relational in the object-relations model, because agency develops in the context of the early relationship with the mother bears the meaning of her collaboration in and response to it. (*Feminism* 159)

Chodorow is sure to specify “his or her” at several points, beginning her work of including women in theoretical conversations. Her point hinges on the idea of the mother as the first connection that the child makes, a model, in essence, for their future behavior. The mother, while clearly a person in her own right, is not always afforded agency and autonomy in her mothering, becoming a type of object in her relationship with her daughter. While I will elaborate on this more in my analysis of *Lady Midnight*, *A Court of Silver Flames*, and *An Ember in the Ashes*, feminist object relations theory proves women to be complex subjects, in both reality and literature.

Conclusions

Given the centralization of marginalized groups as a dramatic departure in the fourth wave of feminism, it might after all be rather reductive to describe feminism’s development as tidal waves. Consider, then, a more appropriate metaphor in a war. It correctly summarizes both the general spirit of feminism and the lack of centrality to the movement, with different units, battles, and fronts all occurring within one conflict. War can be successive, with fighting renewed after periods of relative peace. Unlike the destructive chaos of a natural disaster, war is fought for a purpose, often strategically destroying what is necessary to win rather than carelessly demolishing everything in its path. Within one war, there could be multiple battles or fronts, but it would still be possible to lose the battle and win the war. The newest battle, then, in the fourth war of feminism is that for intersectional representation in media, chiefly movies and television. In an age where all types of media are highly accessible, it is more important than

ever to be conscious of the messages media sends, lest impressionable people receive the wrong ones, conscious or not. People exist at a variety of intersections of identity, and so in order for these stories to be accurate, they must depict a diverse array of people. One art form that is consistently left out of this discussion of representation is literature, more specifically the genres that young adults (read: burgeoning feminists) enjoy. In order for these young adults to join the everyday, all-encompassing fight of the fourth wave, they must see themselves in the role of a fighter, which I will prove that the heroines of YA fantasy embody.

Chapter Two: *Lady Midnight* (2016) by Cassandra Clare

The heroine of Cassandra Clare's *Lady Midnight*, Emma Carstairs, is a prime example of a feminist heroine, encompassing many of the traits of the movement outlined in Chapter One. Emma somewhat forces herself into the male-dominated discipline of warriorhood, creating the inclusion so central to feminism in her world by her own will. She is admirable in how she embraces her fight and subsequent rebellion, while still managing to remain outwardly feminine, breaking down ideas that fighting is necessarily masculine or manly. In this chapter, I hope to demonstrate how the different topics discussed in Chapter One - the development of feminism, intersectionality, and object relations theory - interact to form a dynamic conception of how to demonstrate feminism through a human body such as Emma's in *Lady Midnight*. Further, using the works of theorists Melanie Klein and D.W. Winnicott of the object relations school, it is clear that Emma displays a unique bond with her family sword in line with the concept of a transitional object, typically used as a defense against the anxieties of life. However, even though Emma replicates the structures of childhood development in her journey, she utilizes her sword to fight back against the patriarchy of her world, emphasizing that her femininity does not make her weak. She ultimately serves as a model for young readers of how to take back control of life through fighting, which Emma does using her transitional object, the symbolic sword Cortana.

2016's *Lady Midnight* puts a magical spin on the modern world, creating a secret nest of society layered within reality that mimics many qualities of our own. Los Angeles, California, late summer of 2012: while many 17-year-olds are spending their days at the beach and preparing for school, Emma Carstairs is fighting demons, fairies, werewolves, vampires, and warlocks to avenge the death of her parents five years previous. The average human resident of Los Angeles is blissfully unaware of Emma's existence, remaining blind to the magical

community that hides in the shadows of the big city. Clare crafts her literary Los Angeles in two parts: the known ordinary, and the hidden extraordinary. She does so with purpose, placing a special sort of claim on the city with, “[many] of the places Emma goes are real or based on real places in Los Angeles, but some are imaginary... I grew up in Los Angeles, so in many ways this is the L.A. I always imagined as a child, full of magic” (Clare “Notes on the Text”). By setting the work in her home city, *Lady Midnight* gives Clare the opportunity to reimagine her own childhood and experiences as she would like to see them. She chooses to make her magical world strikingly similar to the real thing, strengthening the connection between the events of her work and reality. The aspects of human society that remain in *Lady Midnight* were therefore choices, ones that will be necessary to examine to fully understand the impact of the novel. Further, while Clare does feature magical beings and the presence of magic in her work quite prominently, the magic of reimagination extends beyond this. It is a recrafting of Los Angeles as Clare would like to see it, one where women like her can make a difference in turning the tide of war. Clare accomplishes this through Emma Carstairs, her own fighting heroine of YA fantasy fiction fame.

Lady Midnight follows Emma Carstairs through the hidden Shadowhunter world, focused on her investigation into the traumatizing deaths of her parents. The Shadowhunter society, in part due to its hidden nature, places great emphasis on rules, order, and closing rank. The Shadowhunters themselves are magical beings, descended from angels and now charged with protecting humanity from demonic activity with their superhuman warrior abilities. Emma is a shining example of Shadowhunter might; having survived an international civil war amongst her people and the tragic deaths of her parents five years earlier, Emma is now stronger than ever, despite some tough choices that she had to make. An orphan of the war, and the last living

member of the Carstairs family, Emma had no one else to turn to besides her best friend, Julian Blackthorn, and so she was forced to take on a *Parabatai* bond with him in order to move in with his family and remain in Los Angeles. A *Parabatai* bond is not to be taken lightly, as it is a life-long warrior partnership more respected than a marriage. It ties two people together mentally so that they may better fight together. While a strong and respected Shadowhunter, even at 17, Emma certainly does not adhere to the rules of her society through her continued investigation of her parents' murders, which *Lady Midnight* chronicles. She goes against a very rigid standard:

The Clave had a motto: *The Law is hard, but it is the Law*. Every Shadowhunter knew what it meant. The rules of the Law of the Clave had to be obeyed, no matter how hard or painful. The Law overrode everything else--personal need, grief, loss, unfairness, treachery. When the Clave had told Emma that she was to accept the fact that her parents had been murdered as part of the Dark War, she had been required to do so. She hadn't. (Clare 21)

The Clave of the Shadowhunters refers to their international governing body, making decisions for the entirety of the Shadowhunter people. It enforces the rules to such an intense degree that they have become a proper noun: "Law". It trumps family ties, love, and even morality with its almost complete control over Shadowhunters. More so than in human society, obedience to the Law is truly valued over anything else, making Emma's knowing disobedience much more significant. Her disobedience marks the beginning of her literal and figurative rebellion in the spirit of feminism, fighting against an unfair system that breeds complacency in simulation of a patriarchy, the very ideal which modern feminism seeks to topple.

Emma Carstairs as a Character: Feminizing her Fight

In order to fully explain Emma's role in embodying fourth-wave ideals, more must be said about Emma as a character. Emma fits the strong female heroine type so signature of *Lady Midnight's* genre, and in true heroic fashion, she is best exemplified through her acts of service

and strength. Most notably in the events of the novel, Emma demonstrates physical strength, mental toughness, and selflessness as she volunteers to take a whipping in the place of her *Parabatai*, Julian Blackthorn. Intended as a punishment for the Blackthorn family's lies, the whipping sentence was long and publicly executed. Emma volunteers with, "Instead of whipping two Blackthorns,' she said, 'you can whip a Carstairs. Wouldn't that be better?... She reached down and yanked up her shirt... She was standing in front of them all in just a bra and jeans. She didn't care. She didn't feel naked--she felt clothed in rage and fury, like a warrior" (Clare 523). By taking Julian's punishment, Emma subjects herself to public humiliation, pain, and lifelong scars, but she does not seem to care, not even for the sake of following social protocol and typical gender norms surrounding nakedness. She, instead, is fueled by her rage and her nakedness, clarifying the lack of any feelings of exposure. In the face of a whip, a rather impersonal weapon often signifying slavery or servitude, Emma weaponizes her being in a uniquely female way. The female body, especially a naked and vulnerable one, is often sexualized, but Emma specifically rejects those feelings in favor of warriorhood. Her clearly bold and shocking move is made even more bold and shocking, considering how she faces both the pressure to comply with the rules and to fall into traditional gender associations. As a woman with a female body, Emma Carstairs is grounded in the physicality of her being, using it as one tool to disobey the rigid order of the Shadowhunters.

Central to both Emma's characterization and her overall purpose of embodying feminism is her status as a heroine rather than a hero, continuing her weaponization. Following her move to volunteer in Julian's place, Emma was harshly whipped, passing out quickly from the pain and waking an undisclosed amount of time later, in bed and magically healed. Emma's friends and surrogate family kept watch over her closely while she was unconscious; Cristina, a friend and

fellow Shadowhunter, was there to greet Emma when she woke. Upon her awakening, Cristina makes an emotional plea at Emma's bedside, stating "Emma, why did you do it? Why? You really think your body is so much stronger than... Julian's?" "No," said Emma. "I think everyone is strong and weak in different ways" (Clare 533). Emma's physical body and strength is again highlighted but this time as a way to differentiate her from other characters, making her somewhat exceptional. Emma's body replaced a male one in a place of servitude and punishment, but she twists it into an act of rebellion and strength, reclaiming her body and how she would like to use it in becoming a warrior. Warriors are traditionally male, but Emma proves that she is equally, if not more, capable than her male peers. It is doubtful that Emma is literally physically stronger than all of her male peers, such as the two that Cristina mentions. However, on a more symbolic level, her bodily strength in direct comparison to others is somewhat besides the final point that Emma makes. Emma subtly and simply corrects Cristina's gendered language, expanding beyond her physical body to more potential meanings of "strong" or "weak"; she references that it is possible to be a fighter on different levels, physical and mental or emotional. As characteristic of a physically fighting warrior, much of Emma is tangible and material, grounded in the body that she uses in combat. Coupled with the depth of her fighting, Emma can be widely understood and applicable to any potential reader familiar with the focuses of the fourth wave of feminism, particularly inclusivity and redefinition of the movement.

This perspective is largely due to Emma's traumatic past, the effects of which are widely studied and publicized by the object relations school, as a method of studying human behavior. The works of theorist D.W. Winnicott, in particular, examine how a traumatic childhood can carry through to adulthood. As a former pediatrician, Winnicott took a sympathetic interest in the lives of children, causing him to look into the psychology of childhood development. He writes

in an approachable and rather colloquial manner, so his theories to be more widely applicable as a result:

The third part of the life of a human being, a third part that we cannot ignore, is an intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute... I am therefore studying the substance of *illusion*, that which is allowed to the infant, and which in adult life is inherent in art and religion... We can share a respect for *illusory experience*, and if we wish we may collect together and form a group on the basis of the similarity of our illusory experiences, This is a natural root of grouping among human beings. (90)

Winnicott points to experience as the source of creativity in adult life, placing emphasis on forming relationships from childhood to adulthood. Separately, he also points to the value of illusion and imagination as unifying experiences for these relationships. In Winnicott's argument, social relations are crucial to human development, to the point where they cannot be ignored in psychological study. Where problems arise in experience, however, is when this process fails to happen normally, when grouping and connection go awry in childhood, which his later concepts of transitional objects and the transitional space, still yet to be discussed, attempt to explain. In application to Emma, then, it is clear from Winnicott's concept of experience that Emma's childhood would have a dramatic impact on her adult self and behaviors. She failed in connecting to her parents at a young age by no fault of her own, and so Emma turns to physical fighting.

That is not to say that Emma is not an emotional fighter by any means; she frequently grapples with the emotional turmoil of traumatically losing her parents at such a young age and in such a brutal manner. She fights with her trauma every day, demonstrated by her sense of self. With the context of Winnicott, as previously discussed, one's sense of self and behavior are tied to past perceived failures in seeking relationships. In Emma's mind, she feels that she must fight, as she states "Look, they expect me to fight, to get hurt. They think: There's Emma, scratched up

again, cut up and bandaged” (Clare 536). Not only is Emma characterized as an extreme fighter, but fighting is intrinsic to her being, so much so that she cannot separate herself from it; it is integral to her sense of self. She feels the pressure from her surrogate family to keep fighting in this manner, to keep scratching and cutting up her body with battle scars. The traumatizing experience of Emma’s childhood taught Emma this through the idea of projective identification. On some level, she failed to obtain a relationship with her parents because she was unable to protect them at the time. To make up for this failure, she fights and trains and seeks out situations where she can protect others, unconsciously placing herself in the role of a fighter and a heroine over and over again. Saving Julian is simply one example of Emma’s fight to make up for her failures on an emotional level, displaying just how deep her rebellion penetrates her being.

Even further, Emma’s past experience with her parents reveals how childhood continues to impact and influence her, ultimately explaining many aspects of her character. Again and again, Emma battles her way through life to prove her strength, just as her childhood self desired but was unable to do. While not necessarily aware of it herself, the people that surround Emma certainly make note of her motivations, chiefly her tutor and mentor, Diana. Diana directly calls out Emma, stating, “I know you’re strong, you are, but this is something that cut you so deeply when you were just a child. It’s twelve-year-old Emma that reacts with anything to do with her parents, not almost-adult Emma” (Clare 32). Although not literally still a 12-year-old, the age at which her parents were murdered, Emma often behaves as if she were that age, reacting impulsively without regard to authority. Replacing Julian for the whipping is, again, a prime example of this. It would therefore be useful, in reading *Lady Midnight*, to regard many aspects of Emma as somewhat childlike, given how much of a hold her younger self has in her fighting and rebellion, from what she does, says, and even in what she looks like.

Emma's physical description perfectly highlights the connection between her childlike motivations and her status as a fighter or warrior. When described, there are certain elements of Emma that continually appear, such as a tie to her physical body, how strong it is or how it takes on injuries. The clearest depiction of this is through the eyes of her closest friend and *Parabatai*, Julian, a painter in his free time. He quite literally paints a clear picture of Emma as he sees her, "striding out of the ocean, Cortana strapped to her hip. Her hair was down... and he had made it look like the spray of the ocean at sunset, when the last rays of daylight turned the water to a brutal gold. She looked beautiful, fierce, as terrible as a goddess" (Clare 539). Emma is both brutal and beautiful, terrible and a goddess. This strange and awesome juxtaposition between beauty and brutality demonstrates both her complete commitment to the role of a fighter, but also the somewhat uniquely feminine characteristics she maintains despite this. The very image of Emma Carstairs must contain an air of fierceness and her weapon, as those are necessary components of her essence. However, she retains her individuality in her warrior role, making it her own rather than succumbing to patriarchal pressures given the masculine connotation of fighting. Further, Emma reflects object relations theory's belief that trauma from childhood when seeking relationships—to a mother and father, in Emma's case—later explains behavior in several ways. She is committed to her search for their killer, largely making up the plot in *Lady Midnight*. She does so despite and at times in spite of the rigid rules of her society, displaying a commitment to rebellion. She also wields her sword, Cortana, as a tool to accomplish both of these goals, forming a significant connection between the two in the process.

Characterizing Cortana: Emma in Transition

Perhaps more importantly, Julian also paints Emma's sword Cortana in his image of her, only scratching the surface of the extreme link between Emma and Cortana in terms of object relations and Emma's overall feminist purpose. It's been proven time and again that Emma has a strong fighting spirit, but it is very closely intertwined with her family's inherited sword. Cortana, the historic sword of the Carstairs family, is one of several ancient blades with legendary magical properties, said to be able to cut through anything and never break. While a sword is not assigned a gender in the English language, it is commonly associated with the masculine; it is certainly not out of the ordinary for a warrior to use a sword in battle, given the physical might required to wield one. From a more psychological perspective, a sword is largely considered to be a common phallic symbol, especially in the school of psychoanalysis from which object relations is an offshoot. Psychoanalyst Ernest Jones, a British contemporary of the German Freud, specifically examines symbols for the phallus, which he believed, in their true form, stood for a father's patriarchal power and rights (187). He further details the conditions of a psychological symbol as opposed to a purely literary one:

By it is meant, not so much that the concepts symbolised are not known to the individual, for most often they are, is that the affect investing the concept is in a state of repression, and so is unconscious. Further, the process of symbolisation is carried out unconsciously, and the individual is quite unaware of the meaning of the symbol he has employed, and often of the fact that he has employed one at all, for he takes the symbol for reality. (Jones 188)

As popularized in psychoanalytic theory, Jones emphasizes the role of the unconscious in receiving and interpreting symbolism. Much of a phallic symbol's power, then, lies in what it is unconsciously associated with, or in other words, what the use of it implies to the mind. This information makes Emma's connection to Cortana quite curious; keeping with Jones's analysis, Cortana as a sword is inherently connected to a masculine patriarchy. However, down to its feminine name, Cortana appears to fully belong to and embody Emma. It is therefore quite

significant that Emma chooses and has such a connection with a sword above any other weapon, and especially a special sword such as Cortana.

Emma's relationship of sorts with Cortana began with the deaths of her parents, marking Cortana as a transitional object in the terms of object relations theory. As the sword of the Carstairs family, Emma was given Cortana once the bodies of her parents were discovered, since she was next in line to receive it. Ever since that day, Emma trained relentlessly with the sword, forcing herself to adapt to it in a way that even the Shadowhunters would consider brutal.

Nonetheless, is strengthened her connection with Cortana, described as such:

Half the scars Emma had on her body she put there herself, teaching herself to fall from the highest rafters, training herself to fight through pain by practicing barefoot--on broken glass. The most brutal scar she had was on her forearm, and she'd given herself that, too, in a sense. It had come from Cortana, the day her parents had died. Julian had placed the blade in her arms, and she'd cradled it through the blood and the pain, weeping as it cut her skin. It had left a long white line on her arm, one that sometimes made her feel shy about wearing sleeveless dresses or tank tops. She wondered if even other Shadowhunters would stare at the scar, wonder where it came from (Clare 45).

This image of a 12-year-old Emma is heartbreaking, cradling a sword like other children her age would a teddy bear to help cope with the grief of losing her parents. She hugged it so tight to her body that it cut into her, which is in many ways symbolic of her attachment to Cortana. The lasting, silvery, and highly visible scar is the physical indication of her emotional trauma from this time in her life, again tying Emma to her physical being. She will always carry it with her into every new situation, explaining why the deaths of her parents are such a motivating factor for Emma in *Lady Midnight*. However, it is highly significant that Cortana is the sword that cuts Emma this deep, drawing blood to blade. While Emma receives a scar from this exchange, Cortana receives Emma's blood from the cut, much like a blood oath. This symbolic exchange, again grounded in physical markers, ensures that Emma and Cortana always carry pieces of each other, displaying how their relationship is not one-sided by any means. It is then clear that the

link between Emma and Cortana is extraordinary in its nature, despite Cortana being an inanimate object; the sword is both a part of her and not, a separate entity and yet an emotional crutch. This unique bond between child and object can only be described by the concept of a transitional object from object relations theory. While Emma is not literally still a child during the events of *Lady Midnight*, she is a product of her childhood trauma, so in many ways that version of her still exists in her head and on her body. Therefore, Cortana can be read as a transitional object, something that she clings to in the absence of a relationship with her parents to fuel Emma in her fight against the system symbolic of feminism.

This concept of a transitional object as applicable to Emma's case again comes from Winnicott's work on childhood development within the school of object relations. Evolving out of Winnicott's observations of children in both of his careers, the transitional object is a tool to move a child from dependence to independence, a process which can bring about many fears and anxieties. He again puts his ideas in very simple terms:

[If] we study any one infant, there may emerge some one thing or some phenomenon—perhaps a bundle of wool or the corner of a blanket... that becomes vitally important to the infant for use at the time of going to sleep, as is a defence against anxiety, especially anxiety of depressive type. Perhaps some soft object or other type of object has been found and used by the infant, and thus then becomes what I am calling a transitional object. This object goes on being important. The parents get to know its value and carry it around when travelling. The mother lets it get dirty and even smelly, knowing that by washing it she introduces a break in continuity in the infant's experience, a break that may destroy the meaning and value of the object to the infant. (Winnicott 90)

The most common examples of transitional objects are teddy bears or baby blankets, something given to the child in infancy that they can safely cling to in the growing absence of their mother. The transitional object is always a comfort to the child, to the point where it takes on a place of importance in the child's life. A transitional object is more than just a simple inanimate object in how the parents and child treat it, and so it becomes more than just an object in practice. The

relationship between a child and their transitional object is therefore unique and very special, but Winnicott's analysis does not end here; he further expands upon the importance of the transitional object into adulthood, reinforcing the relevance of its theoretical application for Emma of *Lady Midnight*. While the original conception of a transitional object applies to infancy, its use does not cease within that period of development, as “[patterns] set in infancy may persist... A need for a specific object or behavior pattern that started at a very early date may reappear at a later date when deprivation threatens” (Winnicott 90). Emma, who was traumatized by the deaths of her parents in her childhood, is practically always threatened by deprivation as a result. She lives in a dangerous world where she both lacks connection and risks death every day that she fights. It is only logical that she would rely on her transitional object, Cortana, into adulthood to help her cope with these difficulties.

The tie between Emma and Cortana is additionally developed with the continued description of Emma's training with her sword, strengthening Cortana's position as a transitional object. Rather than learn with different weapons, Emma chooses Cortana over any other option, a challenging selection for a young girl. She refused to leave the sword behind, keeping it with her at all times, resulting in more scars and injuries on her body. Her training recounts:

Emma hit the training mat hard, rolling quickly so that Cortana, still strapped to her back, wouldn't be damaged--or damage her. In the early years of her training she'd inflicted more injuries on herself by accident with Cortana's sharp edges than any exercises had, thanks to her stubborn refusal to take it off. Cortana was hers, and her father's, and her father's father's. She and Cortana were what was left of the Carstairs family. She never left the blade behind when she went to fight, even if they planned to use daggers or holy water or fire. Therefore she needed to know how to fight with it strapped to her in every conceivable circumstance. (Clare 81)

Rather than select an easier weapon at times, Emma stubbornly commits to using Cortana and only Cortana. She never leaves the sword behind when going into battle, almost as if she cannot emotionally cope without it. To Winnicott, this trait makes perfect sense, as a necessary quality

of a transitional object is that the “infant assumes rights over the object, and we agree to this assumption. Nevertheless, some abrogation of omnipotence is a feature from the start” (Winnicott 90). The “we” is the collective outside of the child/object relationship, those who observe their extraordinary connection. The infant, or in this case Emma and her inner child, essentially owns the object completely, making Cortana Emma’s and only Emma’s. While other children might have baby blankets or stuffed animals, Emma has Cortana as a surrogate connection to her parents and, by extension, the entire Carstairs line. One key feature of a transitional object, however, is that it exists to make up for some type of perceived failure in connection, which Cortana again fits. While she is physically injured by Cortana many times, she is also emotionally cut with the knowledge of her failure to her father, specifically. As the last Carstairs descendant, Emma had to receive the sword with no other surviving male heirs to carry on the patriarchal tradition. She is her father’s daughter, but not her father’s son, which is a failure in her eyes that cuts to a deep emotional level. This understanding then makes Emma’s fighting even more significant. Rather than choose to be cut over and over again, Emma learns to do the cutting against the very system that hurts her, using Cortana to do so. Her determination to succeed as a Shadowhunter and in her parents’ murder investigations is cutting against the rigid order of the Clave, which expects obedience above all else. Cortana is therefore a tool to help Emma succeed despite her emotional burdens.

Emma’s connection to Cortana is even further developed by Emma’s own emotional reaction to the sword, treating it like her most prized possession. Given Cortana’s importance in Emma’s development as a transitional object, this comes as no surprise. It holds a piece of her and her last connection to her family with it. Just as Emma refuses to leave Cortana behind, she also does not take kindly to others using her sword, or in one case, trying to take it as their own

weapon. Out on a mission with her friend Cristina, Emma sought to capture and question a werewolf by the name of Sterling about his involvement in her parents' murders. While ultimately successful in her plan, Emma drops Cortana briefly during the action, giving Sterling a chance to fight his way out with Cortana. Cristina alerts Emma to his plan with:

“Sterling’s on the move--he has your sword--” Emma whirled as Sterling shot past her... He held something up as he ran, something that glowed gold in the darkness. Cortana. Rage exploded inside Emma’s chest. It shot through her veins like lit gunpowder and then she was running, slamming across the grass and dirt after Sterling... She seized the wrist that held Cortana. Her sword. Her father’s sword. Her only connection to a family that seemed to have dissolved away into the past like powder in rain. (Clare 461-462)

In losing her parents at the young age of 12, Emma was forced to find other ways to cope emotionally, with Winnicott’s object relations theory demonstrating Cortana to be a very important coping mechanism once again. Winnicott specifies that transitional objects are inherently personal, a trait being that the “object is affectionately cuddled as well as excitedly loved and mutilated...It must never change, unless changed by the infant...It must survive instinctual loving, and also hating and, if it be a feature, pure aggression” (Winnicott 90). Emma clearly has a strong reaction to someone else taking her sword as a result of this continued sense of ownership and love. Emma fights with Cortana consistently; as the Carstairs family sword, it is part her father’s, but Emma has transformed it into part hers as well. This sense of ownership explains Emma’s rage-fueled reaction to almost losing her sword.

Emma’s fight, Cortana in hand, began with the death of her parents, and 5 years later, she has embodied the fighting role so completely that she is too comfortable within it. She projectively identifies with needing to fight to survive, and so her fighting instinct is so ingrained in her that it is unconscious, highlighted by the speed and extremity of her reaction to Sterling. To theoretically expand upon the idea of projective identification, consider the work of theorist Melanie Klein, a contemporary of Winnicott’s within the same object relations school. She

viewed projective identification as an extreme form of projection in order to be rid of anxieties within the self, known formally as an “unconscious phantasy” in Kleinian language (Gomez 39). By unconsciously acting in ways that force others to respond and reinforce previously held childhood beliefs, people like Emma, with lots of trauma to bear, can cope on the daily, another outlet to be used in tandem with Cortana. Her ownership of Cortana and her projective identification with fighting together translate to no one being able to use Cortana in a fighting capacity like Emma does, as the heroine and her sword are connected on multiple levels. Emma must take the fight and Cortana into her own hands, a very symbolic representation of feminism.

In Emma’s hands, Cortana is an especially powerful weapon, given the deeply personal layers of their attachment. As Emma wields no other weapon but Cortana, she carries the sword with her into the final, climactic battle of *Lady Midnight*, where she discovers the truth of her parents’ murders. In the moments before the battle, Emma “could feel Cortana between her shoulder blades, heavy and golden, whispering to her in her mother’s voice. *Steel and temper, daughter*” (Clare 574). The instance feels very fulfilling, almost full circle in that Emma hears the Carstairs family motto: steel and temper. Those words encompass all that she fights for, what has driven her from the outset of *Lady Midnight*. “Steel” refers to the compound out of which weapons like Cortana are made, strengthening the tie between Cortana and Emma’s family line. “Temper” could be another characteristic of Cortana’s metal, how likely it is to bend or break. Both terms could also be applied to Emma herself; she is steely in her pursuit to discover what happened to her parents and is often fueled by her temper in battle. The phrase, all meanings considered, is a wonderful moment in which past experience drives Emma’s present behavior. What is curious, however, is how Emma hears the phrase through Cortana, spoken in the voice of her mother rather than her father. This gives the impression that Cortana, bearing a feminine

name and speaking in a female voice, is now completely owned by Emma, the first female wielder of the sword. It was her father's sword, but Emma redefined Cortana through their long and emotionally significant relationship, creating something all her own.

In this way, Emma and Cortana are models for feminism, which also seeks to redefine what once was into new ideas. Cortana and feminism both bear the same names as before but are structurally reconceived to move past the limiting ideas of sexism. Feminism, in moving through its waves, has shifted to become more encompassing and inclusive, as outlined in Chapter One. It has expanded beyond its original goal of gaining legal rights for women to fight against many different systems of oppression by including intersectionality. In a similar manner, Cortana – and therefore Emma, given Cortana's status as a transitional object – has shifted and expanded beyond their previous limits and norms, becoming something entirely new.

Given the extent of Emma's ownership over Cortana, it is remarkable that the sword also literally speaks to her and only her, providing more character to their attachment. The voice of Emma's mother is channeled through the sword, as though Cortana were living and breathing right alongside its owner. This marks Cortana as both human and object, Emma and not-Emma, almost as if Cortana were more her *Parabatai*—a warrior partner—than Emma's real one, Julian. While Cortana shows signs of animation here with speech, the sword seems to move on its own at other points, strengthening the position that Cortana and Emma are more than simply a heroine and her weapon. Perhaps the most key quality of a transitional object, so much so that Winnicott leaves its discussion for last in his works, is the idea that it takes on qualities of human life relative to the child. He describes it as “it must seem to the infant to give warmth, or to move; or to have texture, or to do something that seems to show it has vitality or reality of its own” (Winnicott 90). Winnicott leaves a wide space for the kind of humanoid qualities that transitional

objects can take on, meaning that Cortana could take on one, some, or all of these attributes in Emma's experience. At one point, in the thick of battle, Emma "whipped Cortana free so quickly it was as if it had leaped into her hand... This was the sharp point of the blade, the moments when all the training, all the hours and the passion and the rage narrowed down to a single point of focus" (Clare 214). Warriors generally use their swords as extensions of their limbs, and therefore themselves, as if they had been born with one very long and sharp arm. The technique allows for fighting to be more graceful and fluid. Emma, however, uses Cortana differently, almost as if the sword had a mind of its own. Rather than attached to her arm, the sword moves in tune with her thoughts, almost like a third leg or arm. Cortana, in its personhood, has a mind seemingly of its own. The sword is more than just alive: it is alive through its relationship to Emma and, when used by her, an integral part of her being. The terms used to describe Cortana in this way— "third leg" — are also common euphemisms for a penis, bolstered by a sword's common use as a phallic symbol in the realms of psychology and literature. While seemingly inappropriate, this is a crucial comparison for understanding Emma's fighting as feminist role modeling. Cortana is a traditionally masculine phallic symbol owned, possessed, and made alive by the feminine, so much so the very material of the sword shifts. It is a total reclamation of not only Cortana in Emma's immediate storyline, but also of the traditionally masculine, rising beyond divisive gender norms. The attitude of redefinition is central to a feminism that cyclically reinvents itself, each wave with a different focus, a common thread between Emma and Cortana and the ideology they represent.

The events of *Lady Midnight* all build up to that point at which Emma can exact her revenge on her parents' killer, something she has been working relentlessly towards for years. Their deaths fundamentally changed her, teaching her from a young age to rely on Cortana, fight

for herself, and to trust no one to do either of those things for her. Her drive to investigate and get her revenge results in her discovery of their killer, a warlock named Malcolm Fade. Malcolm was thought to be a close friend and confidant for Emma and her *Parabatai* Julian, even an occasional babysitter for Julian's younger brother Tavvy when they were out on missions. Emma feels incredibly betrayed, among other strong emotions:

Rage at knowing Malcolm had killed her parents, rage for the wasted years she'd searched for their killer when he'd been right in front of her. Rage at every time he'd smiled at Julian or picked up Tavvy when his heart was full of hate. Rage at one more thing that had been taken from the Blackthorns. She seized Cortana and wrenched herself to her knees, her hair flying as she drove the sword into Malcolm's gut... She felt the blade go in, felt it tear through skin and rip past bone. Saw the tip of it burst out through his back, his white jacket soaked through with red blood... 'This is for my parents,' she said. (Clare 599)

Emma's parents were killed by Malcolm as practice for a necromancy ritual that required Shadowhunter blood. He sought to bring the love of his life back from the dead, choosing to render a young girl an orphan in his carelessness. That ritual represents the patriarchy, constituting part of the "magic" in Clare's fictional world; beyond the fact that a man attempts to perform the ritual, he also attempts to gain control of a woman's very life force and body by bringing her back from the dead without her consent. That is a complete possession of his love's being, stripping her of any bodily autonomy, and therefore personhood. It is much like how patriarchal systems attempt to control women's bodies through anti-abortion and birth control laws, laws which feminism as a movement attempts to fight. By striking Malcolm, Emma strikes against the patriarchy, directly foiling it. She kills him in a rage-fueled haze, violently penetrating him through the chest with Cortana. Given her obsessive drive to kill this man for years, and her unconscious interpersonal failure, her violence is unsurprising; her brutal warrior side, built up over so many years to physically and emotionally protect Emma, takes over, seizing the chance to make up for a perceived failure to protect her parents. This very powerful

end to *Lady Midnight* brings Emma's story full circle, as she has the opportunity to use her malfunctions, deduced through the lens of object relations theory, to gift readers with a sense of magic at her takedown of a patriarchal system.

Conclusions

Lady Midnight, author Cassandra Clare's fantastical reimagination of reality, is overall a fun and engaging read, also serving the larger purpose of simulating an alternate reality where movements like feminism are modeled. Selected for its YA fantasy fiction traits, the novel accomplishes this through heroine Emma Carstairs. Emma is a fighter through and through, using her sword Cortana to rebel against a system that resulted in her personal trauma at a young age. Her fight is incredibly far-reaching in its scope on her life and in her character, as well as that of her sword. Emma reflects a great deal of the messages of fourth wave feminism – such as taking the fight to the everyday and specifically taking as opposed to asking for permission – in her fight, therefore passing on the ideals of the movement to young readers of the popular genre. Some of the ways in which Emma could be considered a feminist model are quite apparent; Emma fully embraces the traditionally male role of a warrior, fully embracing it to the point where it becomes part of her. She manages to retain many of her feminine qualities, combining brutality with beauty, adapting warriorhood to fit her needs rather than the other way around. While many young readers will not literally become soldiers like Emma, she does demonstrate how the feminine is not weak or something to be ashamed of. Feminism as a movement, in fighting for the equality of the sexes, preaches that femininity and womanhood need not be subordinate on the false basis of inherent weakness.

Emma also models some of the more nuanced and complex ideals of feminism in her fight, relying heavily on weapons symbolism to do so. When she uses Cortana, a phallic symbol,

Emma symbolically fucks the patriarchy in her disruption of tradition. Usually passed down to males only, Emma bonds to Cortana on a deep level, eventually forming an emotional connection with the sword described as a transitional object in the language of object relations theory. She changes the sword by bonding it to her physically and emotionally, going beyond gendered ideals. As her only tool in battle, Cortana is the object that does the damage in order to accomplish Emma's goals, causing her ultimate victory over the people in service to patriarchy that underestimated her, such as Malcolm Fade. Emma truly takes back control, demonstrating female empowerment. Her fire, commitment, and drive are certainly traits to admire and emulate in a fight for feminist equality, ones that hopefully will translate to young feminists. One can only hope to create this bit of Clare's magic in Emma in the real world, despite Emma's status as a fictional character.

Chapter Three: *A Court of Silver Flames* by Sarah J Maas

A Court of Silver Flames paints a different picture of fighting, not of warriorhood, but of survivorhood using heroine Nesta Archeron. Chapter Two argued that YA fantasy heroines, exemplified by Emma Carstairs of *Lady Midnight*, have the individual capabilities to fight against the patriarchy so ingrained in society and win, while at the same time not compromising femininity. In this chapter, I will expand upon Emma's example with an analysis of Nesta Archeron of *A Court of Silver Flames*, highlighting Nesta's resistance as deeper and more profound through her use of transitional objects. Nesta manages feats of great power and strength despite a wealth of trauma and hardship in her life. These feats of great power are channeled through transitional objects that allow Nesta to subjectify herself in defiance of a patriarchy that objectifies women. Through the particular lens of object relations theorist Jessica Benjamin, placed in conversation with the foundational works of D.W. Winnicott, I hope to examine Nesta's upending of the structures and symbols of her world, specifically in the weaponization of her multiple transitional objects as opposed to her own body.

Sarah J Maas, in *A Court of Silver Flames*, focuses on heroine Nesta Archeron as she adjusts to a newfound magical life, suddenly thrown into a fantasy world of High Fae and Illyrian beings, two types of fairies that exist in tandem with one another. The Illyrians, particularly, are a winged race of Fae known for both their warrior skill and brutality. Allowed to live remotely and practice their traditional way of life in exchange for serving as their ruling High Lord's army, the Illyrians are particularly notorious for their rampant sexism. Illyrian women are expected to be wives and mothers only, banned from even picking up weapons, let alone becoming warriors, as is expected of Illyrian men. It is this world that Nesta is forced into, by no choice of her own; Nesta hails from the human realm, but was magically transformed into

a High Fae being, forcing her to uproot her life. She comes to the High Fae lands to live with her brother-in-law, High Lord Rhysand, but faces great difficulty adjusting to the change, to be expanded upon and analyzed more in-depth later. Accustomed to a life of luxury in the human realm and as a relative of the High Lord in the Fae realm, Nesta wastes mountains of time and money on alcohol, drugs, and sex; to save her from herself, Nesta is brought to the Illyrian camp to be trained as a warrior amongst them, the first woman to ever do so. In this way, Maas positions Nesta to be a prime example of the feminist heroine that this thesis attempts to evaluate.

As to be expected, Nesta faces great opposition to her study of weapons and fighting from the Illyrian men, demonstrating the deep-rooted sexism present in their society that mirrors much of our own. While not daring to go against the orders of their High Lord, the Illyrians find creative ways to hinder Nesta's training and isolate her in the process. Before her first lesson, one Illyrian leader proclaims "Any weapons she touches must be buried afterward. Leave them in a pile... Are you bleeding, witch? If you are, you will not be allowed to touch the weapons at all" (Maas 71). Nesta and her teacher Cassian protest – "Those are outdated superstitions. She can touch the weapons whether she has her cycle or not" – but to no avail, as the leader responds with "She can... but they will still be buried" (Maas 71). The multiple layers of sexism clearly present in Illyrian society ultimately serve to set up Nesta's training as a fight to be able to fight, a deeply radical act in context. According to Illyrian tradition, even a woman's mere touch on a weapon is taboo, causing the weapon – regardless of how it is used – to be forever tainted. It must be buried, much like a dead body, to rid the world of its unnaturalness. Even further, it is clear that this stems from an ingrained hatred of women and their bodies, keeping them subordinate in Illyrian society. This is an impossible situation for Nesta, but also for women in

general; Illyrian women are expected to serve as mothers and wives, echoing Betty Friedan's concept of the feminine mystique outlined in Chapter One. Women must have a menstrual period in order to have children, but they are shunned while experiencing it, as if "bleeding" compounds the effect of the taboo, making a woman's touch even more poisonous. A woman's cycle is a reminder of inherent womanhood that, in the minds of the Illyrians, is fundamentally antithetical to weaponry and fighting. By disrupting this supposedly natural order of Illyrian society, Nesta engages in a radical rebellion against Illyrian ideals, which are more extreme than those present in reality, and perhaps purposefully so.

The Illyrians embody the misogynies of the patriarchy, which theorist Jessica Benjamin addresses with her theory of gender difference, based on her overarching idea of intersubjectivity. Benjamin is a noteworthy feminist object relations theorist, approaching the topic with a sociological background as opposed to a psychiatric one. As a result, Benjamin greatly emphasizes the relational aspect of object relations in her work, proposing that experience is intersubjective, or shared between different subjects. She explains further:

The intersubjective view maintains that the individual grows in and through the relationship to other subjects. Most important, this perspective observes that the other whom the self meets is also a self, a subject in his or her own right. It assumes that we are able and need to recognize that other subject as different and yet alike, as an other who is capable of sharing similar mental experience... intersubjective theory describes capacities that emerge in the interaction between self and others. Thus intersubjective theory, even when describing the self alone, sees its aloneness as a particular point in the spectrum of relationships rather than as the original, 'natural state' of the individual. The crucial area we uncover with intrapsychic theory is the unconscious; the crucial element we explore with intersubjective theory is the representation of self and other as distinct but interrelated beings. (*The Bonds of Love* 20)

Benjamin's theory, inspired by the subject/object concept of object relations theory and its subsequent emphasis on the unconscious, is unique in that it conceives of multiple subjects as opposed to just one. Through the idea of recognition, meaning the conscious realization of the

autonomy of selfhood of the other, subjects interact and influence each other, each equally as worthy of consideration in behavior. More specifically, to Benjamin, recognition is the idea that another person needs to affirm and validate experience to connect, starting with the all-important mother or mother-figure. Benjamin essentially argues that no one person can ever be viewed as completely separate from others, as relationships with others have such a great influence on the self.

Benjamin uses the basis of intersubjectivity to argue for her feminist perspective on gender difference, where she contends that the loss of alienation leads to gender splitting, or polarity. With this, Benjamin ties the idea of gender very closely to that of experience and the self; socially, gender tends to organize experience and identity in ways that are culturally problematic, but prevalent nonetheless. True to her object relations roots, Benjamin highlights the importance of childhood again, asserting that the difference between “male” and “female” comes from an object relations failure in effectively recognizing a separate other that is taught in youth. She maintains this perspective, stating that “[this] polarized structure of gender difference leaves only the alternatives of irrational oneness and rational autonomy. In the wake of this splitting, the image of feminine connection appears the more dangerous, the goal of masculine separation the more rational” (*The Bonds of Love* 184). In more simple terms, the male and the female, the feminine and the masculine, must be internally defined as polar opposites in a perpetuated relationship that leads to male dominance and female submission. The mother, due to her closeness in raising children, is therefore the source of irrationality and undifferentiation in selfhood, or “rational oneness”, while the father is separate from this, and therefore “rational”. In their separate presentations of gender, the mother and the father therefore pass this system down, making the male powerful and desirable, while the female is necessarily opposite.

Benjamin's concept is demonstrated by Nesta's case with Illyrian fighting perfectly; the Illyrian fighters, all men raised by women, have a rigid construction of gender polarity in place, given their extreme aversion to women, women's bodies, and other inherent reminders of their ties to their mothers. Nesta's world with the High Fae, then, shares many similarities with reality in their systems of oppression of women. On this same thread, her old human world, existing in tandem with that of the Fae in the novel, also exhibits characteristics of a patriarchy, serving as a point of juxtaposition. Nesta was raised in the human world as the daughter of a very wealthy merchant. In her transformation into High Fae, Nesta shifted between these worlds, having to leave the human world but never leaving her memories behind. Used to the pressures of growing up as the eldest daughter of a wealthy man, Nesta is well-versed in the social rules of her human world, which her Illyrian fighting teacher, Cassian, is unfamiliar with. He often asks about her human life, at one point discussing the details of her father's work, and he asks, "Did you travel with him?" (Maas 280). She answers, "No, my two sisters and I remained home. It wasn't appropriate for us to travel the world", and he replies, "I always forget how similar human ideas of propriety are to the Illyrians" (Maas 280-281). Not coincidentally, Cassian directly states the similarities that he sees between the two worlds, specifically in their rampant sexism. While the concept of the Illyrians might be fantastical, it is not so fantastical as to forget the subordination and oppression of women. Maas had every opportunity, as the author of a fantasy novel, to erase whatever she wanted from her creation. However, she chose to not only include sexism in her work, but highlight it to the extreme, creating a visible – more precisely, visibly feminist – conflict for Nesta. In this way, Nesta serves as a model for feminist rebellion and fighting, made more interesting by her particular trauma, growth, and use of weapons.

Nesta Archeron as a Character: Making Ballrooms into Battlefields

In order to understand Nesta, it is crucial to understand her background through the tenets of Object Relations Theory, showcasing her trauma and perceived failures that make her eventual growth all the more significant. Given Nesta's position growing up in the human world, she was born and bred to fight battles, though she had no control over the choice of which battles to fight. Perhaps more importantly, Nesta consistently won those battles, adept at using her body and charms to manipulate men in her wealthy social circle. From a young age, Nesta's mother trained her daughter as a weapon for the family on the marriage market, a tool to grow their wealth and social standing. While Nesta certainly lived up to her training, it haunts her in her adult life, impacting her ability to connect with others. At multiple points in the novel, Nesta hears her mother's voice in her mind, saying, "*My Nesta. Elain shall wed for love and beauty, but you, my cunning little queen ... You shall wed for conquest*" or "*She does not dream beyond her garden and pretty clothes. She will be an asset on the marriage market for us one day, if that beauty holds, but it will be our own maneuverings, Nesta, not hers, that win us an advantageous match*" (Maas 59, 203). The ghost of her mother in Nesta's mind repeatedly phrases life, love and family like a game to be won, an attitude which Nesta unwillingly inherits. In this game, Nesta competes against her own sister, Elain, as her mother's favorite weapon, shown by the possession of "my" in ownership. Elain is good, beautiful, acceptably feminine in her pursuits and therefore suitable for a good husband one day in Nesta's mother's mind. She will be a good soldier in her womanly duties. Nesta, however, has been taught battle strategy from a young age and understands its nuanced maneuverings. Nesta is therefore far more useful as a sharpened weapon on the marriage market than as a mere soldier, although this came at the cost of her personhood and autonomy. As her mother's weapon, Nesta was no longer a daughter to love, cherish, and nourish, but rather an object to own and use at will. As demonstrated by the form of

Nesta's memories, this lack of personhood both in childhood and in her relationship with her mother emotionally wounded Nesta, making her vulnerable to further hurt.

Benjamin's view of the mother as a separate subject as opposed to an intrapsychic, or mental, object becomes important when examining Nesta's relationship with her mother, as their dynamic clearly impacts Nesta into her adulthood. Aligning with her theory of intersubjectivity, Benjamin diverts from other object relations theorists in her view of the mother, believing her to have childhood traumas, experiences, and thoughts of her own, making her equally worthy of analysis within the mother/child relationship. To Benjamin, parenting is intersubjective in the sense that the child impacts the mother just as the mother impacts the child. This understanding makes interpreting behavior far more nuanced, as Benjamin explains:

Alternatively, the parent who cannot tolerate the child's attempt to do things independently will make the child feel that the price of freedom is aloneness, or even, that freedom is not possible. Thus if the child does not want to do without approval, she must give up her will... Not only is she constantly in need of a parent's protection and confirmation in lieu of her own agency, but the parent remains omnipotent in her mind (*The Bonds of Love* 35-36)

The mother interacts with the child based on her own subjective experience, bringing into the relationship her own ideas of motherhood, as well as any damage from her own childhood. In some situations, the parent has difficulty viewing the child as a subject, as a being with thoughts and feelings separate from the mother. According to Benjamin, this causes the parent to manipulate the conditions of the parent and child relationship, severing that all-important connection for the child's development unless the child submits to conditions of objectification in the sense of losing autonomy. In the case of Nesta and her mother, it is clear that Nesta unconsciously submits to this loss of autonomy in order to maintain connection with her mother. Nesta's mother, although her background is unknown to any reader, has been influenced to seek out a controlling connection with her daughter as a subject. Nesta therefore agrees to be the

weapon that her mother desires in their social circle in exchange for the possessiveness of belonging to her mother, defining the terms of their relationship. As a distinct subject herself, but also a developing child, Nesta later feels the impact of this relationship in how she still feels her mother's influence through these distinct memories as a sort of ghost. Nesta, as someone who is used to being controlled in this manner, is primed to be vulnerable to further hurt, constantly in need of the protection that her mother provided. The origins of Nesta's complicated relationship with her mother, then, are object relations based, demonstrating how this early experience can impact later behavior.

While certainly not battles in the traditional sense of warfare, the battles of Nesta's youth reflect a taxing mental fight on many levels, ultimately causing Nesta even more trauma. Not to be discounted or underestimated, battles within the womanly sphere of the marriage market are battles of wit using a knowledge of physical beauty and attractiveness, particularly in the traditionally feminine sense. For Nesta, this translated to a weaponization of her being, physicality included. However, Nesta's weaponization of her body is distinct from a male soldier in that there is a sexual undercurrent to her actions, a service to the patriarchy in which she was raised. While the same mindset is certainly consistent in both, Nesta was not raised to be a physical fighter in defense of herself; she was never given ownership over her body by both her mother and the men she catered to, making her accustomed to offense. In a feminist sense, this is the kind of weaponization that has been used against women in both history and literature by nature of their ability to bear children. By this, I mean rape and sexual assault as spoils of war. Nesta's experience is a reflection of this; while mentally cunning, she was physically defenseless in her youth, leaving her vulnerable to attack. Before the events of *A Court of Silver Flames*, Nesta did secure herself a fiancé, named Tomas, although he was not the man her mother hoped

him to be. Just as others before him, he felt entitled to Nesta, but Tomas went even further to attempt to take her sexually for himself, regardless of her consent. The event is recounted in crystal clear detail:

[Tomas had] launched himself at her, pinning her against the enormous woodpile stacked along the barn wall. *Spiteful whore*, he'd growled. *You think you're better than me? Acting like a queen when you haven't got shit*. She'd never forget the sound of her dress tearing, the greed in his eyes as his hands pawed at her skirts, trying to raise them as he fumbled with the buckle on his belt. Only pure, undiluted terror and survival instinct had saved her. She'd let him get close, let him think her strength had failed, and then clamped her teeth down on his ear. And ripped. He'd screamed, but he'd loosened his grip on her—just enough that she'd broken free and scrambled through the snow, spitting his blood out of her mouth, and did not stop running. (Maas 278)

The fighting spirit so characteristic of a YA heroine is evident in Nesta's response, allowing her to survive to become a feminist role model. As a character, Nesta was particularly vulnerable to this type of assault because she was accustomed to other people owning and possessing her, probably more so than the average person. This is clear through her lingering connection to her mother, a failure "to balance assertion and recognition" resulting in "omnipotence" attributed to the mother that hinders "the development of mutual recognition" (*Like Subjects* 38). Through the lens of Object Relations Theory, her trauma here can be traced back to the failed connection to her mother, causing Nesta to unconsciously seek out situations in which she is similarly disconnected, or owned. That is not to say that her assault is her fault in any way, nor is it to say that men do not experience sexual assault and the accompanying trauma when classifying Nesta as someone with womanly experience. Rather, it is to say that men do not experience sexual assault as a result of a larger system of subordination and oppression, which *A Court of Silver Flames* includes, that considers a woman's body to be public property and appropriate to be seized at will. As unfortunate as this fact is, Nesta's experience is therefore indicative of a woman's experience, as is her story of recovery and redemption through fighting and weaponry.

Her layers of trauma, which can ultimately be traced back to her mother, then characterize Nesta as someone who both can be related to on the basis of her experiences, but also can all too intimately comprehend the need to fight for the feminist cause.

Characterizing Nesta Continued: A Fighting Spirit

As previously mentioned, Nesta does show other signs of a fighting spirit, but perhaps a more relevant example is her continued fight for survival despite a wealth of unfortunate circumstances stacked against her. Nesta's mother died following an illness when Nesta was a teenager, leaving her father to irresponsibly invest their money, throwing the family into poverty. To recover, her father started trading again, leaving Nesta and her sister unprotected and alone at home. They were captured by a villainous foreign king, and their father was unable to rescue them, leaving Nesta to fight. She reflects on the occurrence, and particularly on her father's role in it:

Her father. The man who had never fought for his children, not until the end. When he had come to save them—to save the humans and the Fae, yes, but most of all, his daughters. Her. A grand, stupid waste. Unholy dark power flowed through her, and it had not been enough to stop the King of Hybern from snapping his neck. She had hated her father, hated him deeply, and yet he had loved her, for some inexplicable reason. Not enough to try to spare them from poverty or keep them from starving. (Maas 14).

Nesta deeply resents her father for failing to provide for her both physically and emotionally. She feels disconnected from him, unable to return his love due to their emotional distance, which is in many ways another failed emotional connection for Nesta in the language of object relations. Particularly using Benjamin's understanding of domination and gender polarity, it becomes clear that Nesta's resentment stems from an error distinguishing between subject and object, autonomous and not, within the all-important first bond or connection with a parent. Benjamin argues that domination results from boys and girls being socialized differently by the father and

the mother, respectively, perpetuating the gender difference. Domination, at its core, “is a twisting of the bonds of love. Domination does not repress the desire for recognition; rather, it enlists and transforms it” (*The Bonds of Love* 219). She continues:

This reversible complementarity is the basic pattern of domination, and it is set in motion by the denial of recognition to the original other, the mother who is reduced to object. The resulting structure of subject and object (gender polarity) thoroughly permeates our social relations, our ways of knowing, our efforts to transform and control the world; and it is this gendered logic which ultimately forecloses on the intersubjective realm—that space in which the mutual recognition of subjects can compete with the reversible relationship of domination. (*The Bonds of Love* 220)

Gender polarity, or the belief that maleness and femaleness are natural opposites, occurs when the mother is viewed as an object to be controlled, even though in reality she is her own subject, with her own thoughts and feelings. The father, however, is recognized as subject due to his distance from childrearing, and in his subjectness he is dominant over the mother object. By the example of the mother and father, this idea of gender and domination is applied to the wider world, creating a system. However, with domination in fatherhood also comes a sense of authority, governance, responsibility, or stewardship over what is being dominated, in this case mothers and daughters.

Nesta therefore views her relationship with her father as a failed connection because he failed to fulfill Nesta’s internal concept of a father associated with his maleness. He does not take care of her basic emotional or physical needs. She did not receive emotional guidance from her mother, as previously discussed, and the effect is compounded by a complimentary emotional distance from her father. Physically, the family did not have safe shelter, food, or clothing for a period of time due to his risky investing. Nesta was therefore unable to rely on her father as a daughter and within the framework of ownership that her mother instilled in her. However, she does survive this difficult period, seemingly by sheer power of will. This history

makes up Nesta's complicated relationship with her father, causing her inner turmoil throughout *A Court of Silver Flames*. His horrifyingly violent death, with the snapping of his neck in front of her, serves as a sign of Nesta's perceived failure to connect with her father in relation. As consistent with Benjamin's theoretical framework and object relations theory in general, this part of Nesta, wounded in her youth, stays with her into adulthood and acts in her adult relationships.

As a result of her various traumas from her mother, father, and a world altogether stacked against her, Nesta seizes significant magical powers to cope with the wealth of perceived failures, reaching out for them in what is potentially the most traumatic event of her life. Nesta's father leaves his merchant position to come save her, specifically, from the King of Hybern, or more precisely from the world-shattering power of the Cauldron that the King harnesses in his evil deeds. The Cauldron is legendary in Nesta's world; sometimes worshipped like a god, the Cauldron is the source of life in Nesta's world, curiously enough in the form of an object. As the King of Hybern's prisoner, a role from which she could not escape or be rescued, Nesta was subjected to torture by the King of Hybern, through the Cauldron. One act – submerging her into the Cauldron's icy waters – accidentally turned her into a powerful High Fae being, resulting in her transformation. However, Nesta was not just submerged; she was drowning, causing her to fight back against the source of creation itself. As a result, she returned from the Cauldron with an “unholy dark power”, using it to kill the foreign king with her gaze that now burns with an inner silver fire. While Nesta managed to survive this event, the nature of her gift and how exactly she acquired it remains a point of concern throughout *A Court of Silver Flames*. Her fighting teacher Cassian, who witnessed this particular trauma of Nesta's, stated that he “didn't know whether it was a gift at all—or something she had taken. The silver fire, that sense of death looming, the raw power he'd witnessed as it blasted into the King of Hybern. Whatever it was, it

existed beyond the usual array of High Fae gifts” (Maas 29). Nesta’s power of silver fire is certainly a unique one to grasp onto. Every sign – the circumstances of her power, its dark nature, her as the sole person to possess such magic – points to Nesta seizing the power from the Cauldron as opposed to being blessed with it, as Cassian observes. In her fight to save both her own life and her father’s, still just a teenager, Nesta fought the source of creation itself for her power, ripping it out with her teeth just as she’d ripped out Tomas’s ear. This clearly displays Nesta’s fighting spirit, as she dares to attack the Cauldron and emerge victorious, a credit to her inner strength.

Nesta’s sheer force of will, then, is a force not to be underestimated, as it has allowed Nesta to accomplish huge feats of strength, both mental and physical. From numerous bouts of learned experience – from being weaponized at a young age, to emotional distance from both parents, to being sexually assaulted – Nesta is strong to an extreme, abrasive even, as her state at the outset of *A Court of Silver Flames* reveals. In protecting herself from renewed trauma through a strong wall, Nesta is unable to be vulnerable - intersubjective even using Benjamin’s language - and let other people in, not even her surviving family, turning to drugs, alcohol, and casual sex instead. Her Illyrian training with Cassian was forced upon her to kickstart her healing. Nesta is acutely aware of how she alienates herself in this way, prompting intervention, but is not able to overcome the behaviors. Instead, she believes she “had been born wrong. Had been born with claws and fangs and had never been able to keep from using them, never been able to quell the part of her that roared at betrayal, that could hate and love more violently than anyone ever understood... She couldn’t quell that relentless, churning anger. Couldn’t stop herself from lashing out before she could be wounded” (Maas 500). Although an adult throughout the events of *A Court of Silver Flames*, the parts of Nesta that were wounded in her

childhood control her “lashing out” and her bite as a person, truly doing anything to ensure no repetition of the same trauma. This inhibits Nesta’s relationships, although she works to grow and change them over the course of her journey with fighting and weapons.

Benjamin’s work is again useful here to explain the source of Nesta’s frustration as related to her experience of gender, her heroiness. Benjamin contends that failing to integrate and understand the realities of intersubjectivity results in conflict, more specifically inner conflict, such as the one with aggression that Nesta deals with here. Benjamin points to inner perception as the key:

All experience is elaborated intrapsychically, we might venture to say, but when the other does not survive and aggression is not dissipated, it becomes almost exclusively intrapsychic. It therefore seems to me fallacious to see internalization processes only as breakdown products or defenses; rather I see them as a kind of underlying substratum of our mental activity—a constant symbolic digestion process that constitutes an important part of the cycle of exchange between the individual and the outside. (*Like Subjects* 40)

Benjamin expands upon her concept of the intrapsychic in light of intersubjectivity, explaining the role that the mind plays in relationships. The intrapsychic refers to the human mind and its inner workings stemming from the psyche. As subjects, the mind is constantly interpreting experience through the lens of past experiences, applying lessons learned from them as an attempt at protection from new trauma. So, the mind plays a constant, albeit silent, part in an intersubjective world. Aggression, specifically, like that of what Nesta experiences, is the result of her constant intrapsychic attempts at defense; the aggression is essentially all in her head, but that does not make it any less real. She unconsciously repeats scenarios where she must mimic the roles and battles of her youth, to the point where it feels like second nature to Nesta. She must be a sharpened weapon, ready to wound at any time. Overall, this fighting spirit of Nesta’s stands out as the essence of her being, characterizing her as a woman with a will of iron, just as

determined as any feminist should be to enact systemic change, if the silver of her fire is to be judged as such.

Nesta's Journey to Physical Fighting

While clearly possessing a fighting spirit, and the mental capacity to turn ballrooms into battlefields, Nesta was never given the skills to engage in physical combat, making her ultimate successes in this realm all the more significant. Given Nesta's history, which has already been examined thoroughly, she is originally resistant to forced training that keeps her away from her preferred methods of coping. She refuses to participate, and while that might appear to be a halt in her journey, it is actually the true beginning. Nesta justifies her refusal with "'I am not a thing to be controlled by you,' ... Everything in her life, from the moment she was born, had been controlled by other people. Things happened to her; anytime she tried to exert control, she'd been thwarted at every turn—and she hated that even more than the King of Hybern" (Maas 34). So, instead of beginning her first training lesson with Cassian, she sits and refuses to even move from that spot, let alone train. Besides being another clear demonstration of Nesta's will of iron, this event also marks a break in Nesta's taught and reinforced pattern of always being someone else's. Someone else's weapon. Someone else's body. Instead of remaining comfortable being controlled, she recognizes that she's been controlled her entire life, bringing that awareness into her conscious mind rather than her unconscious mind. For the first time, Nesta objects to control – to projective identification through the unconscious, or ascribing to the beliefs that her mother instills in her early on in life – and acts on it, although it comes across as stubborn anger. In many ways, this is her first autonomous thought. While not beginning the physical fighting just yet, she takes an important first step to being able to fight for herself here, beginning her fighting journey.

Nesta's resistance to training does eventually end after this initial objection, demonstrating that growth under and into feminism is possible for a reader by example. As *A Court of Silver Flames* progresses, Nesta agrees to begin mastering her body, starting with the fighting basics to gain back her sense of control. Although that's not exactly what Nesta expects; she's eager to begin training with weapons, immediately expecting to be able to strike effectively. Cassian quickly corrects her view, stating, "You won't be getting to swords yet. You need to learn to control your movements, your balance. You'll develop basic strength and awareness of your body before you'll pick up even a wooden practice sword... [First is] feet and breathing" (Maas 138). When Nesta questions his methods – "Feet?" – Cassian shows her the difference that a solid foundation can make in fighting. He has her throw a simple punch:

"Now do it again, and as you do, inhale." She did, the motion markedly weaker. "And now do it again, but exhale with the thrust." It took her a second or two to orient her breathing, but she obeyed... Power rippled down her arms, her body... "I could feel the difference." "It's all linked. Breath and balance and movement. Bulky muscle like this... means shit when you don't know how to utilize it. (Maas 141)

With Cassian's instructions, Nesta begins the process of turning offense into defense, of turning the attack and strategy that she's comfortable with in social situations into a form of real protection against more trauma. When inhaling, Nesta's movement is markedly weaker than with an exhale of her breath, a physical representation of the beginnings of her transformation that ripple through her like goosebumps. It is as if she takes in the essence of feminism from the air, a fighter role that she acquires as opposed to inherits, as Emma of *Lady Midnight* does. In terms of feminist readership, this moment makes Nesta a strong potential role model, as she learns about and sees the merits of feminist beliefs through her radical fighting training in her own time and on her own terms. In catering to a wide variety of readers, some not coming from backgrounds where feminism is talked about or promoted, Nesta is a character where growth is a possibility,

and an encouraged one. Additionally, while necessary to learn fighting basics from a purely practical perspective, as Nesta has to be strong enough to hold a heavy sword in order to properly wield it, starting with the basics of “breath and balance and movement” is also crucial in the symbolism of Nesta’s journey. Much of Nesta’s trauma has to do with the outside use and abuse of her body as a weapon, not of her own choice, but of someone else’s, like her mother’s. By beginning her physical training, Nesta begins acting towards reclaiming ownership of her body. This truly reveals just how little control she previously had over her own body; she must relearn skills as simple as breathing and standing in order to make her body hers again, really starting from scratch. By shifting tactics in this way, Nesta makes headway on her journey towards mastering both her body and weaponry, slowly evolving into a feminist fighter.

As her journey with fighting develops, Nesta is able to claim ownership over herself, marking a crucial moment of transformation into a warrior, more specifically a traditionally male one. She trains steadily for several weeks, gaining strength under Cassian’s careful guidance, but not yet moving on to weaponry as she’d hoped to do so early on. Nesta fully commits herself to her training, nonetheless, enthusiastically participating in all her lessons, practicing in her free time, and even researching battle strategy in the library. This dedication surprises Cassian, given the forced conditions of her training and her earlier rejection, but Nesta makes all of these choices with purpose, explaining it as such: “What’s the point in learning fighting techniques if I don’t know their true purpose and uses? You’d train me into a weapon, and I’d be just that: someone else’s weapon. I want to know how to wield it—myself, I mean. And others.” (Maas 431). Nesta combines her old mental fighting skills with her newfound physical fighting skills, allowing her to verbally claim ownership of herself for the first time. Previously, she had articulated her dislike of being “someone else’s weapon” and had taken active steps towards not

letting someone else control her. Here, Nesta ceases asking for permission, fully stepping into being her own master rather than simply striving to become her own master. In essence, she can now weaponize herself as she pleases, with all her magical power and mental cunning, just as a male soldier does – her body, her choice indeed. Further, it is clear by her study of real battle strategy that she is no ordinary soldier. Nesta intends to command other soldiers as a general, and a female general amongst entirely male soldiers at that. This is her very own glass ceiling, a position where no woman has ever gone before in this world because they have been blocked and brutalized at every turn, just as Nesta has. In terms of feminism, Nesta clearly displays the drive for equality and improvement that the movement as a whole promotes, finally making the choice to wield herself in direction of these goals.

Nesta's journey is dually mental and physical, training both her mind and her body into warriorhood, additionally emphasizing the importance of detailing her evolution as opposed to just her final destination. Her numerous traumas, as defined under object relations theory, have major implications on the use of her physical body, but also on her mental health. She has frequent flashbacks of her assault and the death of her father, sometimes sparking bouts of depression. While her extreme focus on training does appear to help alleviate some of these symptoms, they do not disappear; at one critical point towards the end of her journey, Nesta falls into the deepest depression of her life, ultimately contemplating suicide. This concerns Cassian, helpless to do anything but watch:

“Cassian knew that Nesta often hated herself. But he'd never known she hated herself enough to want to ... not exist anymore. He'd seen her expression when he mentioned the threat of falling. And he knew going back to [their home in the city of] Velaris wouldn't save her from that look. He couldn't save her from that look, either. Only Nesta could save herself from that feeling.” (Maas 493).

In healing from her childhood wounds, Nesta's fight is partly against herself and all of the behavior rooted in her past wounds that hinders her growth. She has to fight against it to stay alive, even, stressing the weight of her struggle. Due to her former lack of ownership over her being, Nesta previously never had to solely bear that weight, always able to give it to someone else, along with her autonomy and choice. In taking ownership of herself, she also takes ownership of her struggle, a necessary but not-so-glamorous step in learning to be her own weapon. She is uncomfortable having to hold onto that responsibility in her own hands, so she struggles mentally, but overcomes it. In terms of messaging, the model of overcoming a struggle—acknowledging that the process of fighting for equality is one with many fronts, many of them difficult—makes the eventual accomplishment of dismantling patriarchal systems much more significant. With Nesta, then, mental fights constitute an important detail of her training into a radical feminist fighter.

Perhaps one of the most important moments in Nesta's journey is how she wins her mental fight through weapons training for the first time, specifically by use of a sword. While certainly committed to her training, Cassian does not permit her to use a real sword for both of their safety, instead using a wooden practice sword for form and drills. When the most extreme wave of Nesta's depression hits her, causing her to contemplate suicide, Cassian does not know another way to get through to her except through their common language of weapons and fighting. In a leap of faith, Cassian offers her the sword off his back:

Cassian drew the Illyrian blade from down his back. It gleamed with moonlight as he extended it to her hilt-first. "Take it." Blinking, eyes still puffy with tears, she did. The blade dipped as she wrapped her hands around it, as if she didn't expect its weight after so long with the wooden practice swords. Cassian stepped back. Then said, "Show me the eight-pointed star."... Nesta lifted the sword and executed a perfect arcing slash. Her weight shifted to her legs just as she flipped the blade, leading with the hilt, and brought up her arm against an invisible blow. Another shift and the sword swept down, a brutal slash that would have sliced an opponent in half. Each slice was perfect. Like that eight-

pointed star was stamped on her very heart. The sword was an extension of her arm, a part of her as much as her hair or breath. Every movement bloomed with purpose and precision. In the moonlight, before the silvered lake, she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. (Maas 508-509)

Cassian risked Nesta hurting him by offering the sword, or worse, hurting herself at her lowest point. However, she instead executes a perfect Illyrian sword form known as the eight-pointed star, one of the hardest to complete, without ever holding a metal sword before. The sword certainly appears to lift Nesta's spirits, but more than that, it appears to complete her being, as if she were somehow destined to hold and use a sword. She wields it effortlessly as an extension of herself, demonstrating a clear sign of a transitional object bond with a sword. Benjamin, in her theoretical framework, expands upon much of Winnicott's original work on the transitional space, interpreting it through the lens of intersubjectivity. Specifically in the case of the mother/child relationship, she describes how a transitional object contributes to the healthy development of mutual understanding between both subjects:

The creation of a symbolic space within the infant-mother relationship fosters the dimension of intersubjectivity, a concomitant of mutual understanding. This space, as Winnicott emphasized, is a function not only of the child's play alone in the presence of the mother but also of play between mother and child... the transitional space also evolves within the interaction between mother and child. With this play, the mother is "related to" in fantasy but at the same time "used" to establish mutual understanding, a pattern that parallels transference play in the analytic situation. In the elaboration of this play the mother can appear as the child's fantasy object and another subject without threatening the child's subjectivity. (*Like Subjects 44*)

The transitional object, with intersubjectivity in mind, serves as not only a substitute for connection with the mother, but also as a go-between for the mother's opposing subjectivity and objectivity. Benjamin notes that, for the child, understanding the mother as a separate subject, with her own distinct thoughts, feelings, and experiences, is a major marker of development. The same goes for the mother understanding the child to be separate from her will, in a process known as mutual understanding. Through the creative and imaginative world of the transitional

object, however, the child can begin to experiment with mutual understanding, seeing the mother dually as subject and object in their intrapsychic experience. Benjamin positions the transitional object to be an important step in reaching what she views to be ultimate development, mutual understanding.

In the case of Nesta and her mother, however, the transitional object marks a step that Nesta takes towards healing the object relations damage from her childhood in her weaponization. Nesta begins a new weaponization with the help of a transitional object, leading her down the path of a feminist fighter. It is no coincidence, additionally, that Nesta uses a sword for this maneuver, specifically Cassian's Illyrian blade; as the only woman training in a male fighting style, it is highly symbolic that one of their weapons, never to be contaminated by the hands of a woman, is her first real sword. It serves as proof that Nesta can succeed as her own woman within their system. However, the sword is not only Illyrian, but it is Cassian's, who at this point in *A Court of Silver Flames* is dually Nesta's teacher and lover. On one hand, as her teacher, he gives her the sword as he gave her the fighting training as a final piece of her warrior puzzle, completing his service there. On the other hand, as her lover, he hands a piece of himself over to Nesta to use as a weapon, just as she has unwittingly done with her own. This is not the only time Cassian is Nesta's sword: one magical creature "had called her Lady Death, and [Cassian] was her sword." (Maas 390). As discussed more thoroughly on the topic of *Lady Midnight*, swords are common phallic symbols both in psychoanalysis and in euphemistic language, clearly representing the male genitalia in shape. By using specifically Cassian's, whom she is engaged in a sexual relationship with, Nesta literally weaponizes the male body in her fight to be equal under a patriarchy, establishing the possibility for intersubjectivity.

While lengthy and treacherous, Nesta's journey comes to an end with the Illyrian tradition of the Blood Rite, where she proves to herself and the world that doubts her that she is a great warrior, capable of leading others. By training with the Illyrians, who traditionally only allow men to be warriors, Nesta angers older, more misogynistic factions of that society, who quietly plot her demise amidst her training. Though she had no intentions of participating in the brutal ritual, happy to learn their techniques one-on-one with Cassian, Nesta is thrown into the Illyrian Blood Rite without her consent. The Blood Rite is a sacred week-long ritual for warriors, where they can earn their manhood simply by surviving to its completion. They earn their rank in the Illyrian army by how close they climb to the top of a mountain there. They earn the respect of their fellow warriors, however, by their body count, killing as many of their peers as possible without the use of weapons or magic. It is held once a year on the outskirts of the Illyrian land in honor of an ancient Illyrian warrior who, legend has it, single-handedly fought off an army in a mountain pass. In forcing Nesta to participate, the Illyrian leaders set her up to fail, especially considering how they broke the sacred rules of their ritual for her, giving male participants deadly weapons to use against her. However, Nesta exceeds all expectations, not only surviving the Blood Rite, but winning it against these impossible odds. She fights many enemies during her week in the Blood Rite, stealing weapons and supplies, and eventually making it to the mountain pass just shy of the mountain's peak. Too injured to attempt the summit, she makes a final stand before the Rite's week ends, blocking the Illyrian men that tried to murder her from claiming victory over her. With all her months of training and mental healing behind her, Nesta:

...tucked the dagger into her belt. Picked up the sword. And drew a line in the dirt in front of the archway. Her final stand. Her last line of defense. Nesta gathered the shield...A small, quiet smile passed over Nesta's face. Then she hefted her shield. Angled her sword. And stepped beyond the line she'd drawn to meet her enemy. (Maas 707)

The Illyrians unwittingly give Nesta the opportunity to shatter her world's glass ceiling, paving the way for any women that follow her by being the first female warrior to survive the Blood Rite, let alone earn a high rank. She does so with Illyrian rules in the Illyrian system; by drawing the line of defense in that mountain pass and facing a mass of warriors charging toward her, Nesta emulates the ancient Illyrian warrior that inspired the Blood Rite. While the Illyrians might call her participation in the Blood Rite, her repetition of tradition, and the earn of her rank a corruption of tradition, it is more accurately a rebirth and an expansion of Illyrian tradition to include women. Rather than proof of manhood, it can be proof of adulthood, warriorhood, and mental toughness, all of which Nesta shows beyond doubt in both her journey and her final stand. Her stand marks the official completion of her training, especially considering how the many aspects of her journey come together here. She is unafraid to face an army, practically, charging at her, confident in both her rigorous training and in the work she's done to heal her childhood wounds in tandem. She uses the very weapons that were placed in the Rite to kill her, flipping them on the patriarchy just as she flips tradition, in rather plain feminist symbolism.

Nesta in Transition: The Dread Trove

Alongside her journey of growth, Nesta is thrown into the world of weapons by no choice of her own, latching on to several different objects in line with object relations theory. As with the Illyrian leaders secretly plotting against Nesta while she trains, other magical beings and evil rulers plot against her for her unheard-of powers in *A Court of Silver Flames*, making her a target for attack in other ways. One villainous queen, moving against Nesta, her family, and friends, seeks to do so by collecting the most powerful objects in the world: The Dread Trove. Named for their terrible power, each object of the three can bend will, death, and even time in their favor, making them impossible to fight against once used. Nesta, with her unique power from the

Cauldron, is the only person alive who can stop the queen, and so she briefly pauses her training to search for the Dread Trove. Drawn to a dangerous no-man's-land in her search, Nesta finds one item of the Trove after a great struggle– the Mask – and uses its awesome and terrible power. It affects Nesta greatly: “the power of the Mask an icy song through her, Nesta summoned the dead. To do what her own body could not. Though she had fought back against Tomas, against the Cauldron, against the King of Hybern, they had all happened to her. She had survived, but she had been helpless and afraid. Not today. Today, she would happen to him.” (Maas 369). Nesta makes a poignant connection back to her multiple traumas, calling out by name the people and beings that have caused them. In doing so, Nesta takes another step towards what Benjamin has termed halting the cycle of domination in gender polarity. Benjamin emphasizes that women must be the ones to enact change in this system, claiming that:

[Women] must claim subjectivity and so be able to survive destruction. They may thus offer men a new possibility of colliding with the outside and becoming alive in the presence of the equal other. The conception of equal subjects has begun to seem intellectually plausible only because women's demand for equality has achieved a real social force. This material change makes the intersubjective vision appear as more than a utopian abstraction; it makes it seem a legitimate opponent of the traditional logic of subject and object. (*The Bonds of Love* 221)

Intersubjectivity sets up a somewhat ideal world to be a place where all people – men and women, mothers and children – each understand that others are sentient beings with their own backgrounds, by which they interpret events and behave accordingly. However, in the current structure, which feminism seeks to better by nature of the movement, women are dominated by men, and this structure is passed down through parenting. To better this system, according to Benjamin, women must act and make themselves become subjects as opposed to objects, no longer able to be dominated by a separate male subject. By taking up the Mask with a clear statement of purpose, Nesta subjectifies herself, taking control of the situation. She again

expresses anger and frustration at her previous lack of control over her own life and actions, but with the use of the Mask as a weapon, she gains the ultimate form of bodily control: the ability to summon the dead at will. With the Mask, even for a brief moment, Nesta gets to be in control of the male body rather than having her female body controlled, a sort of role reversal for her. One might even say that Nesta weaponizes their bodies, lifting the decaying bones and half-rotted flesh of fallen soldiers from the earth to defend her. Through her will, Mask on, Nesta happens to “him”, specifically, using an object of The Dread Trove to do so in a way that somewhat mimics her own weaponized trauma.

Nesta and the Mask together accomplish unworldly things, meshing together in a way this is indicative of transitional objects and childhood wounds. Nesta and Cassian originally sought the Mask in no-man’s-land together, when they become separated, leaving Nesta, a less accomplished warrior than Cassian at this point, vulnerable. She is captured by a Kelpie, a creature of legend that is known to steal women, rape them, drown them, and eat them. In the struggle to avoid this fate, Nesta finds the Mask under the water, prompting the rise of her symbolically significant power and control and her attachment to the Mask. Cassian can only bear witness as Nesta uses the bodies of the dead to fend off the Kelpie, and what he sees is heartbreaking:

To stand against it would be to stand against Death itself. Death herself. . . Cassian lifted his eyes as he held the position, and watched the gold of the Mask’s reflection dance upon the water. Then that gold shifted. He raised his head in time to see Nesta peel away the Mask. The dead collapsed. Fell under the black surface in splashes and ripples and vanished entirely. Not one spear remained. Nesta sank as if dropped, too. . . When they reached the shore and the grass and the tree, Cassian surveyed her pale face, ripped and scratched around her mouth and jaw— Nesta blinked, and her eyes were again blue-gray, and then she was clutching the Mask to her chest like a child with a doll and shaking, shaking, shaking. (Maas 372)

The scratches around her face and jaw are evidence of the Kelpie attacking her underwater, attempting to use her body just as Tomas, her ex-fiancé who sexually assaulted her, and the King of Hybern, who killed her father and drowned her in the Cauldron, attempted to do. Although a new situation, Nesta acted out in such an extreme way as a result of those memories, which this situation would clearly trigger. Not only that, but she acts out with the capability to defend herself using the power of the Mask, prompting Cassian's observation of Nesta as "Death herself" in another reversal of roles. It is no coincidence that Nesta finds an object of such great power at exactly the moment she needs it, facing new trauma and imminent death. She uses the Mask as a transitional object, a way to cope with her inner child wounds in her adult life, ultimately saving her from death. The relationship between Nesta and the Mask is highlighted by how Nesta continues to cling to the Mask even after the moment has passed, as a child would her favorite doll. She seems to rock back and forth with the Mask in comfort, not wearing it, but cuddling it, certainly an odd thing to do with one of the most powerful objects in the universe. While this experience is incredibly triggering for Nesta, the use of the Mask allows her to avoid more of the same hurt, prompting an unusually childlike response that is a physical manifestation of how Nesta relies on the Mask emotionally.

What makes Nesta's use of the Mask even more significant is how she is still able to maintain control amidst the sheer force of its power, refining the transitional relationship between Nesta and the Mask. Upon Nesta's return to her home court, her friends and family are shocked that she not only retrieved the Mask, but was able to wear it, use it, and then remove it, living through the use of its power to tell the tale. Her brother-in-law Rhys, somewhat of an expert on dark and special magic, theorizes that "Like calls to like... Others could not free themselves because the Mask did not recognize their power. The Mask rode them, not the other

way around. Only one Made from the same dark source can wear the Mask and not be ruled by it” (Maas 377). By using the Mask, Nesta runs the risk of again giving up her control, if it were not for her own dark and seemingly unnatural powers. The key difference is that she, like the Mask and the other Dread Trove objects, is capital-m Made, originating from the very source of life itself: the Cauldron. Recall that the precise circumstances of Nesta’s Making are traumatic for her, surrounding a near-death experience and the real death of her father by a broken neck. So, in her struggle, she latches on to a piece of the Cauldron itself, tearing it out and absorbing it into herself. This power is what sets her apart, what allows her to channel the Mask. So, while the Mask is used as a transitional object for Nesta, the true transitional object – what allows her to cope emotionally with her wounds – is her power, a magical piece of an object itself. With her power, Nesta is then able to channel and Make several other weapons as transitional objects, all coming from the same root source.

Nesta in Transition: The Made Weapons

Mirroring her own powerfully feminist journey, Nesta has the opportunity not only to forge her own path in the Illyrian world, but also to forge her own weapons, ultimately channeling her power into more transitional objects. As part of her early training with swords, Cassian takes Nesta to a blacksmith to see how the weapons are made, hoping that in the process she would gain an appreciation and a reverence for her weapons. She watches the smith for a time, and then has the chance to try her hand at the trade, working on two swords and a dagger that the smith has in progress. Her approach demonstrates Nesta’s tenacity, persistence, and commitment to healing, as “Nesta struck the sword again. A better hit this time, but still a sorry blow. Coals popped in the forge behind them, and Nesta flinched. Before Cassian could ask why, she’d gritted her teeth again and struck the sword a third time. Fourth. Fifth” (Maas 414). Nesta

flinches at the coals in the fire due to the sharp cracking sound they make, reminding her intensely of the moment of her father's death. It takes bravery and determination for Nesta to even be in that room with the forge, let alone to take up a hammer at the items. However, it takes additional commitment to try and fail, as Nesta does both at the forge and in her own journey. It is a physically grueling task, but that does not stop her from her attempts, hitting at it again and again. In creating her own weapons, Nesta is able to put her being and spirit into them, emphasizing her impact on the weapons as well as their impact on her.

The weapons that Nesta forges with the use of her spirit carry more of her than just craftsmanship, especially considering the circumstances under which they were Made, ultimately becoming transitional objects due to the pieces of Nesta that they carry. Originally going to the blacksmith only to watch the weapons-making process, Nesta and Cassian leave the blades behind, not knowing what kind of powers they had, let alone that the blades had magical properties at all. The blacksmith is the first to discover the uniqueness of the two swords and dagger, causing him to dump the blades on Nesta's doorstep with the claim that they are tainted. Confused, and thinking that perhaps the misogynistic Illyrians were right about her, Nesta searches for possible answers as to how this could have happened and what kind of powers the weapons have. Again consulting Rhys, she discovers that “[long ago] the High Fae were more elemental, more given to reading the stars and crafting masterpieces of art and jewelry and weaponry. Their gifts were rawer, more connected to nature, and they could imbue objects with that power” (Maas 443). He elaborates on this:

When you hammered those blades, you imbued them—the two swords and the dagger—with your power. The Cauldron's power. They're now magic blades. And I'm not talking nice, pretty magic. I'm talking big, ancient magic that hasn't been seen in a long, long time. There are no magic weapons left. None. They were either lost or destroyed or dumped in the sea. But you just Made three of them. You created a new Dread Trove. You could create even more objects, if you wished. (Maas 475)

While forging the weapons, Nesta is triggered by the cracking of the fire mimicking the cracking of her father's neck, bringing her back to a time in her childhood where she was severely wounded by loss of connection to him. Albeit unintentionally, she relies on her taken power, channeling it into the weapons she works on. While unusual to have several different transitional objects, Nesta's power that she emotionally clings to is not tangible, not something she can hold in her hand for comfort. So, she requires a physical manifestation of her power to have the same calming effect on her unconscious mind, resulting in a variety of objects for Nesta.

Again employing the theory of Jessica Benjamin, it becomes crucially significant that Nesta crafts those blades by hand to become transitional objects, as this goes beyond their usual limitations. Since Benjamin views transitional objects as helpful tools to achieve mutual recognition, they are a curious combination of the intrapsychic and intersubjective. In her words:

The object existed objectively, waiting to be found, and yet the infant has created it subjectively, as if it emerged from herself. This paradox is crucial to the evolving sense of reality. The transitional object is literally a means of passage toward the awareness of otherness, toward establishing a boundary between inside and outside. (*The Bonds of Love* 41)

Before they are transitional objects, objects in the sense of the inanimate object exist without any special meaning or significance. What makes them transitional is how the infant imposes their own intrapsychic experience on the object, making it somewhat of a subject, as transitional objects often take on human traits inherited from the infant. The paradox of a transitional object exists in how it is always a mix: subject and object, inside and outside. This paradox, however, is the creation of the infant, according to Benjamin. Nesta, in her crafting of the blades, physically creates her objects as well as giving them intrapsychic significance, almost mitigating the traditional paradox. The weapons and The Dread Trove are similar in that they are both Made, much like Nesta herself. When an object or a person is Made, it is created from the raw,

universal power of the Cauldron, which is essentially creation itself. Although, to be Made is to be more than just crafted; it is to be born, transformed into something more and beyond, noted by the capitalization of the term. Nesta does the Making for these objects, essentially giving them a type of life. The Making of these weapons, then, is highly significant in that they mirror Nesta, carrying pieces of her power as signature to transitional objects in object relations theory.

Nesta's Made weapons are special not only in their connection to Nesta, but also in their unique, otherworldly powers when wielded by her, demonstrating the depth of Nesta's feminist resistance. Much like her own powers, the true abilities of Nesta's Made weapons are unknown and untested, judged only by their similarities to other powerful objects; the Made weapons of past centuries no longer exist in Nesta's world, destroyed or forgotten due to their great and terrible power. So, Nesta carries one of her Made swords, which she names Ataraxia, without knowledge of its true powers, thinking it necessary to carry a weapon on her dangerous continued search for the other items of the Dread Trove. On one leg of her search, Nesta enters a magical prison, hoping that the items might be housed there amongst the most powerful monsters in her world. She accidentally releases a creature named Lanthys, at which point it is to her great fortune that she carries Ataraxia into this battle. Nesta uses Ataraxia as such:

Drawing her sword in the same movement with which she shot to her feet, Nesta slashed a perfect combination. Lanthys screamed, and it was nothing like what she'd heard before—this was an earsplitting sound of pure shock and fury. Nesta hefted Ataraxia, settling her weight between her feet, making sure her stance was even. Unshakable. The blade began to glow. The mist contorted, shrinking and writhing as if it fought an invisible enemy, and then it became solid, blooming with color. (Maas 546)

Lanthys, one of the most dangerous creatures to exist, is supposed to be immortal, making him impossible to defeat. With Ataraxia, however, Nesta does the impossible, not only defying a patriarchal structure with her weaponry, but defying the system of nature. Ataraxia defies logic even in a world of fantasy and magic, killing the unkillable with one well-placed swipe. Ataraxia

also reacts to Nesta and her will, glowing in her hand without movement, almost as if the two are intrinsically linked. This relationship between weapon and wielder is typical of a transitional object relationship, used for comfort and healing amongst destruction. However, Nesta weaponizes her transitional objects – beyond their normal confines, at least – against the patriarchy. She takes all of her wounds, her healing, her difficult journey, even, and throws them right back at the very systems that hurt her in her youth, almost remedying the damage. With Ataraxia, Nesta chooses to use her childhood wounds for a purpose, paving the way for others to follow and not face the same danger.

The action of naming a sword, and choosing the particular name Ataraxia, reveals a great deal more about Nesta's relationship with the sword and her greater connection to feminism. For her last stand in the Blood Rite, Nesta does not have her signature sword, as is the nature of the competition. That is not without regret on Nesta's part; she thinks about the sword during her battle:

For a heartbeat, she wondered what she might have done with Ataraxia in her hand. What she might do with this body, these skills trained into her bones. If she was worthy of the sword at last. She'd opted for a name in the Old Language, a tongue no one had spoken in fifteen thousand years. A name Lanthys had laughed to hear... Ataraxia, she had named that magic sword. Inner Peace. (Maas 708-709)

Giving a sword a name immediately personifies it, bringing it closer to a person than an inanimate object. Nesta certainly treats the sword like a person, missing it in battle and wanting its approval. Coupled with Ataraxia's unique gifts, it is plain that the sword feeds off of Nesta both in its animation and the extension of her power. She both crafted and Made the sword, putting a piece of what makes Nesta "Nesta" in there, as previously defined. Further, Nesta names the sword Ataraxia, meaning "Inner Peace", giving the sword entirely new meaning. On her fighting journey, Nesta struggles deeply to find her inner peace amongst her numerous

childhood wounds, but with this sword, she gives Inner Peace to herself. Not only that, but she fights with Inner Peace, not violence or revenge or something equally disquieting. Ataraxia is instead righteous redemption, in use against a system that is already unjust in nature. Nesta fully embraces both the use of transitional objects and the Benjamin-defined journey towards mutual recognition to fight against her own mental struggles and traumas; this damage in mind, she then flips her own hurt back onto the patriarchy, subjectifying herself to stand up for feminism.

Conclusions

Nesta is thrown into the incredibly misogynistic Illyrian society as the first woman to ever learn their exclusive fighting techniques. However, it was not originally her choice to do so; after a hard childhood, and an even harder teenage period, Nesta struggles to cope, turning to vices and developing a biting personality to keep the memories at bay. As is unfortunately typical of the female experience, Nesta has her body weaponized against her will at multiple points, making her eventual fight all the more significant. The works of feminist object relations theorist Jessica Benjamin, help to define Nesta's female experience in relation to others; as a result of her particular relationship with her mother, and by extension her father, Nesta finds reclaiming her own domination and autonomy to be difficult. Nesta's fight is often mental, where she struggles to continue living with the trauma. Her magical power, however, channeled through transitional weapons, allows her to keep going and strike back against the very systems that hurt her. She transitions to fighting to cope with her trauma, eventually finding inner peace as many survivors of sexual assault and gender-based violence hope to do in our reality. Nesta in many ways stands for those women, showing them that there is hope and that "[our] stories are worth telling." (Maas 573).

Chapter Four: *An Ember in the Ashes* by Sabaa Tahir

Sabaa Tahir's *An Ember in the Ashes*, through heroine Laia and her fictional, fantastical rebellion, contributes inherently feminist ideas of domination and agency to the conversation of weaponization, particularly in exploring the mother/daughter relationship so central to object relations theory. Chapter Three argues that the YA fantasy heroine, such as Nesta Archeron of *A Court of Silver Flames*, does not simply fight for autonomy and control in a patriarchy that objectifies her; the heroine gives autonomy and control to herself with her transitional objects. Elaborating further on the idea of control, Chapter Four will be an analysis of *An Ember in the Ashes*, more specifically the relationships surrounding the heroine, with her mother and with the world. The novel, although told through the dual perspectives of Laia of Serra and Elias Venturias, focuses on Laia's story as the ember for which the novel is named, making her the true focus of its events. Despite the fact that we never meet Laia's mother, known only as the Lioness, she acts as a character within Laia's mind, actively influencing her behavior in the events of the novel. To examine their specific relationship, I will use Nancy Chodorow's pioneering work on mothering and the mother/daughter relationship in the context of gender difference. With this chapter, I hope to expand upon my previous analysis, particularly that of Chapter Three, to elaborate upon the role of the mother as relational to the daughter, including her in the larger discussion of the need for accurate representation in feminist literature.

An Ember in the Ashes takes place in Laia's world, the world of the Martial Empire, specifically in the capital city of Serra. Laia, raised by her grandparents from a young age, spends her days helping her grandparents with their work; her grandmother, Nan, is a jam-maker, while her grandfather, Pop, is a talented healer. Laia is joined in her work by her older brother Darin, who she looks up to immensely. While the little family struggles to make money, they are

happy—that is until everything is stolen from them as a result of their Scholar heritage. In Laia’s world, the Scholars are oppressed due to events from long ago: “Half a millennium ago, the Scholars crumbled beneath the Martial invasion because our blades broke against their superior steel. Since then, we have learned nothing of steelcraft. The Martials hoard their secrets the way a miser hoards gold. Anyone caught near our city’s forges without good reason... risks execution.” (Tahir 7). The Scholars were conquered and continue to be oppressed as a result of their inferior weaponry. Not able to withstand the might of the militant Martials, the Scholars were absorbed into the empire and subordinated on account of their different racial and ethnic identity. In Laia’s time, Scholars are strictly forbidden from possessing or having any knowledge of weapons, lest they use it to launch a rebellion against the Martial empire. Frequent raids in Laia’s neighborhood, where Scholars often mysteriously disappear, never to be seen again, help to enforce the law. This rule of terror and violence, while cruel, has been successful for hundreds of years in oppressing the Scholars; that is, until Darin and Laia unknowingly spark a rebellion that tears their world apart. While apprenticed to Nan and Pop just as Laia is, Darin does not possess the same passion for that work, instead preferring to secretly study weapons-making in the Martial sector of the city, making him a clear target for a raid and racial violence. By being near the forges in the city, Darin risks death, but only due to his status as a Scholar as opposed to the true danger of the weapons.

Laia begins her rebellion, then, with the Martial raid on her home, meant to target her brother Darin for his illegal – but only for Scholars – activities. In the middle of the night, Laia and her family are woken violently by Martial soldiers, destroying their property for proof to arrest Darin. The Martials find schematics of various swords, spears, and knives in Darin’s hidden sketchbook, but not before they brutally murder Nan and Pop to get Laia to reveal the

sketchbook's location. The Martials harm Laia, attempting to capture her as well, which she describes:

I wonder if he has a sister, a wife, a woman. But it wouldn't matter if he did. To him, I'm not someone's family. I'm just a thing to be subdued, used, and discarded. The Mask drags me down the hallway to the front room as casually as a hunter drags his kill. Fight, I tell myself. Fight. But as if he senses my pathetic attempts at bravery, his hand squeezes, and pain lances through my skull. I sag and let him pull me along. (Tahir 14)

Quite literally, these events are permissible under Martial law, or rule by the military, which the name of the empire purposefully invokes. Like the Shadowhunters of *Lady Midnight* in Chapter Two, the Martials value military might and strength above all else, and these values seep into their treatment and subordination of the Scholar people. One way the Martials breed this loyalty and obedience is training their children in the Blackcliff military schools to become the highest rank of soldier: a Mask. Named for the silver face coverings that make up their uniform, Masks then carry out the most brutal of Martial tasks, abuse against Scholars like Laia included. Masks are most often men, as any women admitted to Blackcliff are usually brutalized and killed before they can graduate to Maskhood, with two noteworthy exceptions that Laia encounters later on in her journey. From this, it is clear that the Martial system – and the Masks themselves – is inherently misogynistic, especially when coupled with Laia's traumatic experience here. In order to have value to the Mask, Laia feels as if she must take on a role in relation to him, such as a sister or a mother; women have no inherent power or value in Laia's world. Laia's own value as a person is further decreased due to her Scholar heritage, indicating her overall low social position from which to begin her rebellion.

While Laia does escape from the Mask, she does not do so easily, having to outrun them in a chase that makes the social position of the Scholars even more clear and priming Laia for her fighting journey, consistent with the tenets of feminist object relations theory. She runs through

her neighborhood, the segregated part of Serra known as the Scholar's Quarter, trying to lose the Mask through streets and alleyways that she knows like the back of her hand. Laia runs, and once she loses them, she stops to process:

I feel like a hunted, craven animal, which is exactly how the Empire sees me—how it sees all Scholars. The Emperor says that we are a free people who live under his benevolence. But that's a joke. We can't own property or attend schools, and even the mildest transgression results in enslavement. No one else suffers such harshness. Tribesmen are protected under a treaty; during the invasion, they accepted Martial rule in exchange for free movement for their people. Mariners are protected by geography and the vast amounts of spices, meat, and iron they trade. In the Empire, only Scholars are treated like trash. *Then defy the Empire, Laia*, I hear Darin's voice. *Save me. Find the Resistance.* (Tahir 34)

Not only are the Scholars oppressed, but they are enslaved within the Martial empire, a treatment far harsher than any of the other racial and ethnic groups that Laia names. This oppression is very much systemic. Without permission to handle weapons, learn a trade, or even to learn to read, the Scholars have no methods from which to improve their social condition, let alone begin a successful rebellion. While the position of the Scholars is fictional, it contains echoes of race-based slavery and genocide throughout history, mirroring reality in order to make Laia's fight and rebellion that much more impressive. Truly, the odds are stacked against her, but that does not stop Laia from gaining the inspiration to find a movement known as the Resistance. While struggling and not very powerful due to lack of weapons and supplies, the Resistance is a group of Scholars who continue to fight against the empire in secret, risking their lives. She believes that the movement can help her save her brother from execution, a radical rebellion in and of itself that sparks the chain of events within *An Ember in the Ashes*. Saving her brother – her only surviving family member – motivates Laia, explaining in part why she receives her inspiration through Darin's voice. Additionally, however, it is significant that it is the male voice of her brother as opposed to a female one; resistance, rebellion, and fighting are traditionally associated

with the masculine, both socially and in object relations. Laia, in line with other heroines thus far, is then able to take the traditionally male and masculine and transform it, especially through the family structure that object relations theory takes such an interest in.

Theorist Nancy Chodorow, with her work on gender and mothering within object relations theory, emphasizes the importance of social relations to explain behavior, which I apply to *An Ember in the Ashes* in how it creates a strong theoretical link between Laia, her family, and her oppressive world. Chodorow's work grew out of Freud's traditional psychoanalytic theories centering on the relationship with the father; assuming a feminist view, Chodorow developed her own theory to complement and expand upon Freud's to center more on the mother and the daughter, who Freud often neglected or included as afterthoughts. As a result, much of her work borrows Freudian language when discussing gender difference and early childhood. In particular, Chodorow uses this language to describe the impact of the family:

The oedipus complex leaves in a child unconscious inner representations of feelings about its position in relation to both parents, and potentially other primary figures as well... This final oedipal stance, because it is now unconscious and was conceived at a period when the child felt particularly helpless and vulnerable, continues to exert powerful influence in later life... the issues and relationships invested with conflict and ambivalence gain their significance from the internalized and repressed oedipal situation. (*Reproduction* 164)

Freud's traditional oedipus complex theorizes that that the male child sees his mother as a specifically sexual object, putting him in competition with his father, while the female child is simply jealous of the male. This concept is so central to Freud's work that he also includes it in his theory of childhood development, calling it the oedipal stage that is consistent in the unconscious mind of all children. Chodorow's analysis extends into adulthood, emphasizing the impact that childhood has on behavior and personality in life, although similarly unconscious. Adult behavior, relationships, even, gains their significance only because of the experience of

childhood, an inherently vulnerable period of life due to dependence on parental figures within the family. Chodorow's concept is made clear through Laia.

Chodorow further emphasizes the role of the family in her work, making the connection between Laia, her family, and her world more concrete. Chodorow, a student of Freud's works and the field of sociology, centers her writing within and following the second wave of feminism, arguing that "Object-relations grow out of contemporary family structure and are mutually created by parents and children" (*Reproduction* 114). By object-relations, Chodorow refers to the process of developing a self that lies at the core of the school of thought.

Chodorow's argument, however, is specific to the modern family structure in which the mother has no other job or purpose but to do the mothering of her children; parenting is a patriarchal structure in how it reduces the mother, a woman in her own right, to only her mothering, an object of her child's development and affection.

Keeping the context to Chodorow's work in mind, her concept of the lens of object relations theory then appropriately emphasizes the importance of Laia's upbringing and surroundings when evaluating her as a character. The particular family structure on which Chodorow bases her analysis emerged following WWII; *An Ember in the Ashes*, as a current work of YA fantasy fiction, and therefore post-WWII, was written at a time when Chodorow's family structure was relevant. Chodorow's time-specific analysis, then, is applicable in Laia's fantasy world by nature of its writing. It also underscores the importance of thoroughly describing the conditions of Laia's world, particularly the enslavement and oppression of the Scholar people and Laia's family situation with her mother, in order to understand her more completely as a feminist heroine. While Darin and the Lioness are not the focus of this work, Chodorow contends that they are important factors in describing the adult Laia, as they each

have their impacts within the family structure. Laia's later actions and behaviors – which will make up the bulk of the analysis in this chapter – are worth looking at due to how they apply to early childhood in origin. With Chodorow in mind, the key to this analysis is centering on Laia's own connections to and perceptions of her family, particularly her mother, as opposed to outside forces. Beyond simply motivating her, Darin takes on an important role in Laia's life as her older brother, explaining why his voice and influence seems to take up space in her mind. Darin is almost never physically present in *An Ember in the Ashes*, as is the Lioness, but both still contribute to Laia's adult actions as expressions of unconscious inner representations.

Laia as a Character

The particular details and traumas of Laia's upbringing make her who she is under Chodorow's theory and object relations in general, so in order to understand her, it is pivotal to begin with what Laia remembers about her childhood. Laia's parents left her and her brother on their grandparents' doorstep when they were very young, leaving the children to continue their own fight against the Martials. Laia's parents led the Scholar Resistance – the very same movement that Laia seeks out to help rescue Darin – and their leadership caused them and Laia's older sister, Lis, to be imprisoned, tortured, and murdered by the Martial empire. But for the first several years of Laia's life, she lived in the midst of the Resistance with her parents and siblings. Returning to the same movement that killed her family, Laia's next task is to convince the new Resistance leaders to help her find Darin. Laia finds it difficult to express her lineage when struggling to convince the Resistance, recalling:

Lis took me and Darin into the forest and sang so we wouldn't hear them. That's my first memory—Lis singing me a song while the Lioness raged a few yards away. After my parents left us with Nan and Pop, it took weeks for me to stop feeling jumpy, to get used to living with two people who actually seemed to love each other. I say none of this, instead knotting my fingers together as the fighters tell their stories. I know they want me

to be brave and charming, like Mother. They want me to listen, really listen, like Father. (Tahir 70-71)

Raised amongst this everyday violence and tragedy as a young child, she clearly displays the physical signs of trauma, both in her youth and in the present, jumping and fidgeting. Not only that, but Laia calls Lis's distracting song her "first memory", a title that usually carries some significance in the conscious mind. What's more curious, however, is Laia's repeated reference to her mother, the Lioness. Laia never uses her mother's real, given name, instead using titles and nicknames given to her by others. Nicknamed the Lioness for her "rage" and fierceness in battle, Laia's mother's reputation precedes her, even after her death; so, while Laia struggles with the impact of her trauma, it seems to go hand-in-hand with her concept of her mother and her mother's legacy.

Chodorow's work on the mother/daughter relationship in the context of object relations theory can help explain the particulars of Laia's trauma, emphasizing her role as the inspirational heroine necessary to further the feminist cause. Chodorow focuses on the development of the self through relationships, as is typical of object relations, but does so with her own unique spin, adding the mother to Freud's traditional equation that only focused on the child's relationship to the father through the Oedipal complex. She argues that a child's sense of self essentially comes from the mother:

Separateness is defined relationally; differentiation occurs in relationship: "I" am "*not-you*". Moreover, "*you*", or the other, is also distinguished. The child learns to see the particularity of the mother or primary caretaker in contrast to the rest of the world. Thus, as the self is differentiated from the object world, the object world is itself differentiated into its component parts. (*Feminism* 102-103)

Objects play a role in helping one to understand inner thoughts and feelings as well as that of others. Objects, however, are not always tangible things; the object can refer to something inanimate as well as to a person who has been objectified, or not viewed as a person by others.

With this idea in mind, it becomes clear why Laia feels such pressure to live up to her mother's legacy, interpreting this connection as outside pressure from her mother's former friends. In development, Laia saw a great deal of her mother as her primary caretaker, fulfilling the traditional role of a mother. In opposition, her father was more distant – “Father was different—always in the background... unsmiling” – due to the typical role of a father, and therefore less of a focus (Tahir 58). At that crucial stage of life, the first person that Laia formed a relationship with – in the sense of two separate entities, a give and take – was her mother. The core of Laia's identity and self, then, is who she is in relation to her mother, since her mother was the starting point. This in part clarifies why Laia still compares her adult self to the mother she knew – “*Be like Mother. Don't show fear*” (Tahir 359) – a habit of her childhood self that carries into adulthood.

Laia, however, seems to take on this burden of comparison much more so than her brother Darin; Chodorow additionally unravels this question with her expansion on the mother/daughter relationship, offering a view of gender difference that highlights Laia's status as a heroine as opposed to a hero, and rightly so. While Chodorow does place a great deal of emphasis on socialization as the cause of the uniqueness of the mother/daughter relationship, and therefore in developing a sense of self, she combines this view with a strong acknowledgement of what she believes is innate biology. Mothers and daughters are even more connected to each other due to their shared womanhood; while an unconscious connection, it changes the nature of their relationship from that of a mother and son. Chodorow elaborates on this point:

Because of their mothering by women, girls come to experience themselves as less separate than boys, as having more permeable ego boundaries. Girls come to define themselves more in relation to others. Their internalized object-relational structure becomes more complex, with more ongoing issues. These personality features are reflected in superego development. (*Reproduction* 93)

So, not only does Laia define herself in relation to her mother, she does so to a more extreme degree than her brother by nature of her gender. Laia is given a direct model of what womanhood should look like by the Lioness – a “Backbone of steel” – and tries to emulate that within her sense of self, as it can directly translate to her own womanhood (Tahir 21). Even her mother’s nickname is gendered, indicating how central this idea is to her sense of self. Darin, however, has no such direct model as a man, and so has a different experience from his sister. Laia’s struggles with the legacy of her parents, while distinct to her, are therefore somewhat characteristic of the female experience. It situates Laia as a model for something, according to Chodorow, that is inherently female; she consequently is firmly a YA heroine, not just by nature of her obvious gender expression, but by her expression of the female experience.

Laia’s struggle with the burden of her mother’s legacy, while a reflection of her heroine status, continues throughout the course of *An Ember in the Ashes* as a way to measure Laia’s progress and growth. Laia begins the novel as an ordinary Scholar living an ordinary life, differing from the previously discussed heroines in that she has no special magical or fighting powers; she has no ties to royalty and the magic of life itself, as Nesta of *A Court of Silver Flames* does, nor is she recognized as the most promising fighter of her generation, as Emma of *Lady Midnight* is. Laia lives a simple life with her grandparents, trying to forget the trauma of her childhood and to make ends meet, and so she is not always a fighter throughout the course of the novel. Rather, *An Ember in the Ashes* tracks her growth into a fighter from basically nothing, modeling how a potential reader could develop this mindset for themselves. In fact, in attempting to live up to her fighter of a mother, Laia struggles with feelings of guilt, stating “I shake my head and shrink back, hating myself for being such a coward. I reach for my mother’s tarnished armband, wrapped around my bicep, and touch the familiar pattern for strength. I find none.

Mother would have fought. She'd have died rather than face this humiliation. But I can't make myself move. My fear has ensnared me" (Tahir 15). She speaks of how she runs from the Mask here. These feelings of guilt also apply to the abandonment of her brother: "I left Darin. I abandoned him. The fact that he told me to go doesn't matter. How could I have been so cowardly? I grasp my mother's armlet, but touching it makes me feel worse. Mother would have outfoxed the Mask. Somehow, she'd have saved Darin and Nan and Pop." (Tahir 21). Laia feels a great personal pressure and responsibility for these happenings. In these moments, however, Laia grasps her mother's armlet for comfort, a seemingly peculiar gesture. According to Chodorow, Laia, like many women and girls, feels a close tie and connection to her mother, more specifically her mother's identity; Laia's struggle lies in how her own actions differ from what she believes her mother should or would have done. So, she seeks the physical comfort of her armlet somewhat automatically or unconsciously as a surrogate connection to her mother. However, differing from the typical use of a transitional object, reaching for the armlet makes Laia feel both better and worse, demonstrating the depth of Laia's struggle. The armlet therefore serves as a powerful reminder of Laia's failures by her perception. Laia seeks the comfort of her armlet at multiple points within the novel, making her armlet a useful tool to trace her development into a feminist heroine through the lens of object relations theory, beginning with her supposed cowardice here.

Laia in Transition

While not precisely a weapon, Laia's armlet serves as a weapon-adjacent, both in how it allows Laia to grow into fighting on her own – as typical of the transitional object of object relations – and in how it connects to the fantastical plot of *An Ember in the Ashes*. Laia's primary goal is to rescue Darin from the same fate that her parents and older sister met, taking drastic

action to ensure his physical safety and her own mental safety from the repeated trauma. She finds and pleads with the Resistance, who recognizes her as the Lioness's daughter, as opposed to her own person: Laia. They agree to launch a mission to free Darin on the condition that Laia joins the Resistance as a spy within the Martial military academy, Blackcliff, one of the most dangerous places for Scholars in all of Serra. While the mission terrifies Laia, as it involves her willing enslavement to a Martial commander, she agrees to it after a brief flashback to her last memory of her mother. Laia recounts how she received the armllet:

My hand goes to my armllet, as it always does when I need strength. It's nearly black with tarnish, but I prefer it that way; it draws less attention. I trace the pattern in the silver, a series of connecting lines that I know so well I see it in my dreams. Mother gave me the armllet the last time I saw her, when I was five. It's one of the few clear memories I have of her—the cinnamon scent of her hair, the sparkle in her storm-sea eyes. "Keep it safe for me, little cricket. Just for a week. Just until I come back." What would she say now, if she knew I'd kept the armllet safe but lost her only son? That I'd saved my own neck and sacrificed my brother's? (Tahir 35)

The gift of the armllet seems to come with an element of responsibility for Laia, even though she receives it at such a young age, to the point where it is present in the unconscious world of her dreams. In Laia's world of magic, her armllet is not merely an armllet; while tarnished and dirty, it also serves as the missing piece to a magical weapon meant to free non-human beings – djinn, efrits, and others – from their prison, unleashing them on humans. So, while the armllet is not a physical weapon in and of itself, it has the potential to be weaponized. Before Laia, the Lioness always wore the armllet, making it somewhat synonymous with her image, the lasting picture that Laia has of her deceased mother in her head, indicated in great sensory detail. The Lioness entrusts her daughter with this part of her, meaning for it to be only temporary, but she never returns, leaving Laia with the symbolic weight of the armllet. In a sense, Laia takes on the duties of her mother, bearing a strong sense of duty towards her brother as a result of the armllet. At this young and impressionable age, crucial for the development of self, Laia takes on the armllet as a

representation of her connection to her mother through identity, explaining the weight of her struggles and guilt.

Into her dangerous mission of enslavement at Blackcliff, Laia carries her mother's armlet, attempting to be as brave and as strong as her concept of the Lioness. She succeeds a long line of Resistance spies who have tried and failed to infiltrate Blackcliff by becoming the personal Scholar slave to its vicious headmaster, the Commandant Keris Venturia. One of the only women to ever become a Mask, Keris did so by adopting extreme cruelty in all aspects of her life, an attitude that certainly carries over to her treatment of her slaves. Having been a free woman all her life, Laia has difficulty adjusting to following orders, resulting in her becoming a target for the Commandant's anger and suspicion. She is saved multiple times by her fellow slaves and two Masks-to-be that she tentatively befriends, Helene Aquilla and Elias Venturius, but that is not enough to spare Laia entirely from the Commandant's wrath. In an extreme bid to teach Laia obedience, the Commandant brands her with the letter K – her first name – and denies her medical treatment, not caring if Laia lives or dies. For a few tense days, Laia exists on the brink of death, feverish, willing to give up her life for her brother's. She dreams during her illness, particularly of her family:

My mother's face appears, then my father's. They walk with me at the edge of a great sea, swinging me between them. Above us, the night sky gleams like polished glass, its wealth of stars reflected in the oddly still surface of the water. My toes skim the fine sand below my feet, and I feel as though I'm flying. I understand now... it's a sweet death. If I'd known it was this kind, I'd never have been so afraid... I return to the beach, and this time Lis races ahead of me, her hair a blue-black banner glowing in the night. I stare at her willow-fine limbs and dark blue eyes, and I've never seen anything so gorgeously alive. You don't know how I've missed you, Lis. She looks back at me, and her mouth moves—one word, sung over and over. I can't make it out. Realization comes slowly. I'm seeing Lis. But it's Aquilla who's singing... Live live live live live live live. My parents fade—no! Mother! Father! Lis! I want to go back to them, see them, touch them. I want to walk the night shores, hear their voices, marvel at their closeness. I reach for them, but they're gone, and there's only me and Aquilla and the stifling walls of my

quarters. And that's when I understand that Aquilla isn't singing me to a sweet death. She's bringing me back to life. (Tahir 317-318)

In her enslavement, Laia experiences the most extreme lack of power and agency that anyone can experience. The Commandant denies Laia her personhood, instead choosing to take her life for herself through the branding and subsequent abandonment. Laia would have died if not for Helene Aquilla's tender care, pulling Laia both from the brink of death and from her dream. Dreams are representations of the unconscious mind, given how they occur when consciousness is shut off in sleep. Laia's unconscious mind has been fixated on her mother so far in *An Ember in the Ashes*, always concerned with what her mother would do, how her mother would act, really any representation of the maternal. It is then highly significant that Laia dreams of her deceased family during her moment of death, particularly her mother; she is again joined with her mother, but then is brought back into reality by Aquilla, into her new life. Laia experienced a metaphorical death – and subsequent rebirth – in that she survived her illness and the Commandant's punishment, fighting for her life and winning. With this win, she begins to create her own womanhood, her own sense of self, which is evident in her later actions and uses of her transitional object.

Laia's return from death into her new life marks a shift from “coward” to fighter, a woman coming into her own power and agency having rejected others', particularly the Commandant's and the Lioness's. The shift enables her to form a healthy intersubjective bond that enables her to move forward as a subject as opposed to an object, now having control where she previously went without. She doubles down on her efforts to rescue Darin, providing the Scholar Resistance with valuable information about Martial weapons and fighting tactics from the Commandant's personal office. However, she is quickly disappointed; the Resistance never intended to help her or Darin, only using Laia as a distraction to carry out their real attack on the

Emperor and his family. The Resistance betrays her, sparking Laia's fire of rebellion even more. She expresses her anger, stating "I want to defy all of them—the Empire, the Commandant, the Resistance. I wonder where such defiance comes from, and my armlet feels hot suddenly. Perhaps there's more of my mother in me than I thought" (Tahir 370). Laia's armlet seems to take on a life of its own here, growing hot to the touch with the mere thought of her defiance to the system. Following Laia's dream and subsequent rebirth, there is a switch between unhealthy attachment to healthy attachment using the transitional object, demonstrated through the change in Laia's inner reaction to her armlet. She no longer feels the same guilt and shame as before, a result of the healing power of her dream in reframing the subconscious. While it does still serve as a connection to the Lioness, it is a much more robust one in the form of a transitional object, indicating Laia's growth in moving towards a healthy separation from her mother.

Keeping in line with object relations theory, Chodorow adapts and interprets Winnicott's original idea of the transitional object as a translation of connection. This makes it applicable to Laia and the Lioness's mother/daughter relationship. The idea of a transitional object centers around the transition of the self from dependent on the mother to independent, a sort of surrogate mother in her absence. Since Chodorow sees the mother/daughter relationship as important and unique in development, she expands Winnicott's idea, more fully discussed in Chapter Two, beyond just childhood, stating:

Culture and creativity emerge through the imaginative ability to both enter into the world of the other, or the observed, in the transitional space, and also to assess and evaluate one's experience in the full confidence of the "I", or self. Winnicott's view thus also shows how childhood experience and the childhood subjective world come integrated into the adult's creative life and culture as a whole without seeing creativity as simply a return to childhood wishes, fantasies, and fears. (*Feminism* 153)

Chodorow sees the transitional object as an important step in forming a separate sense of self from the mother. This makes up a part of Laia's journey in *An Ember in the Ashes*. The armlet,

then – once the Lioness’s and now Laia’s – carries significance beyond just a reminder of the family members that Laia has loved and lost. It is, in many ways, a part of Laia in how she relies on the armlet for comfort and strength. However, the object seems to come alive by itself, reacting to and being in tune with Laia’s thoughts and feelings, demonstrating Laia’s growing power and autonomy, as it reacts to her and not her mother or her enslaver. The armlet becoming a true transitional object, then, is a step further in Laia’s journey, as she goes to new depths of culture and creativity thus unexplored in her life up to this point. In beginning to forge her own path to rebellion, and therefore identity, Laia makes major strides in development, which the armlet gauges.

Laia’s Weaponized Journey

Laia’s armlet, while a weapon in its own right, is not the only measure of Laia’s progress towards regaining her own power, authority, and subjectivity, subsequently breaking down the barriers of oppression in *An Ember in the Ashes*. Laia faces many trials, conflicts, and moments of peril during her period of enslavement beyond her inner conflicts with her identity, although the two are linked. One trial is fantastical in nature; to go to and from her periodic meetings with the Resistance, Laia utilizes far more dangerous routes of travel, going through desert and precarious, narrow, and rocky passageways. While successful in going unnoticed, Laia quickly discovers why those passages are not guarded, as they are infested with dark magical beings known as ghuls. Ghuls feed off of a human’s sadness and fear by appearing as those one has loved and lost, making Laia a rich target for them with her trauma. They find Laia’s weaknesses, attacking her:

The shadows titter and circle. One, braver than the rest, nips at my leg, teeth flashing. A chill pierces my skin, and I cry out. “Stop!” The ghuls cackle and parrot my plea. “Stop! Stop!” If only I had a scim, a knife—something to scare them off, the way Spiro Teluman

did. But I have nothing, so I try instead to stagger away, only to run straight into a wall.
(Tahir 186)

The ghuls serve as a tool to demonstrate that Laia still has quite a bit of distance to go on her journey, as the metaphorical shadows of dependence on her mother still surround Laia, following and injuring her. So, while the transitional object of the armlet is a step in the right direction, it is only one step of several. In this moment, however, Laia wishes that she could fight back with weapons, specifically in the manner of a man named Spiro Teluman. Spiro Teluman, a famed maker of Martial weapons, embodies traditional masculinity in both his profession and appearance; physically imposing, covered in tattoos and piercings, and working a physically laborious job, Spiro Teluman is a wise friend of the Scholar Resistance who taught Laia how to combat the ghuls that plague her. The desire for weapons in a masculine image marks a change for Laia, who has always preferred to run and deal with feelings of guilt later. In becoming her own person, Laia follows other heroines of her genre by displaying a desire to physically fight back as opposed to verbally or in spirit. Given her status as a Scholar, a slave, and a young woman at this point in the novel, it is also a move towards a radical act of rebellion.

Laia's journey towards physical fighting, however, is necessarily intertwined with her growing ability to separate herself from the Lioness and become her own person. Laia discovers the Resistance's betrayal through public spectacle, being accused of spying for the Resistance and sentenced to death in front of a crowd of Martials at Blackcliff. She is able to escape with the help of another type of magical being that exists in her world, a future-telling Augur. While rescuing her, the Augur verbally summarizes the current state of Laia's journey to encourage her to continue down her destined path. He reveals her inner emotions and conflicts with:

“You fear you will never have your mother's courage. You fear your cowardice will spell the doom of your brother. You yearn to understand why your parents chose the Resistance over their children”... It's unbearable, this knowledge of me from someone

who isn't me. "You are full, Laia. Full of life and dark and strength and spirit. You are in our dreams. You will burn, for you are an ember in the ashes. That is your destiny. Being a Resistance spy—that is the smallest part of you. That is nothing." (Tahir 400-401)

The Augur expands Laia's rebellion beyond simply the Scholar Resistance, hinging upon the idea of destiny and bringing in the title of the novel: *An Ember in the Ashes*. The Augur names several of Laia's fears and anxieties, all related to her family and her relationships within that structure. Laia has always struggled with her connection to her mother, as a young woman who was mothered, at least for the first few years of her life, by another woman; in trying to live up to the Lioness's memory and example, Laia also struggles in the realm of object relations, or in forming a distinct sense of self. Laia takes major strides to move past this struggle, and yet, the Augur brings this conflict back to the surface, making it seem as if these conflicts are necessary for Laia's journey, the destination yet unknown. In a linear plot and journey, this moment seems strange given the totality of Laia's experience thus far.

Nancy Chodorow's theories on mothering within the school of object relations reveal how Laia's struggles are typical of her female experience, emphasizing her feminist heroine status and her subsequent fight. At the core of object relations theory, and its theorists, Chodorow included, is the idea that childhood experience has a large impact on adulthood, that the traumas endured in youth will forever affect a person, the only question being how they choose to deal with this fact. To Chodorow, a proponent of both object relations and feminism, the answer for a young woman like Laia again lies in the mother:

Since women, as mothers, are the primary caretakers of infants, if the child (or psychoanalytic account) only takes the viewpoint of the infant as (developing) self, then the mother will be perceived (or depicted) only as an object. But, from a feminist perspective, perceiving the particularity of the mother must involve according the mother her own selfhood... Throughout life, perceptions of the mother fluctuate between perceiving her particularity and selfhood and perceiving her as a narcissistic extension, a not-separate other whose sole reason for existence is to gratify one's own wants and needs. (*Feminism* 104)

More precisely, Laia's struggle for identity is in both how she is linked to her mother and in her perception of her mother. It is clear that Laia's concept of the Lioness is an idealized version of what her five-year-old self saw: courageous and brave, never scared, a real embodiment of her nickname. That image is what Laia attempts to live up to, as opposed to a living, breathing woman who can also make mistakes; in this way, Laia holds herself to an impossible standard, and so her struggle to essentially become the Lioness will always be in vain. Laia's journey, then, will never be complete, as she struggles with deep internal conflicts that oscillate between an adult and a childlike understanding, as Chodorow points out. Laia's unresolved relationship with her mother renders her feminist subjectivity in an ongoing and in-process state of being and becoming. Her fight, then, is significant in that it is continuous on many fronts. She fights internally against her womanly traumas and upbringing as well as externally against the system that keeps her enslaved. In terms of a feminist weaponization, however, Laia's exemplary character is a means of defense for feminist ideology, a tool to pass on its concepts. She keeps feminism alive in her story through her the modelling her real and raw journey, fantastical and yet carrying important threads of truth. Her journey in and of itself is therefore weaponized, although that is not the only meaning that the phrasing carries in this context.

Laia also becomes accustomed to action on her journey, taking up weapons for herself to fight against the systems that have harmed her, taking back her own power in multiple ways. Angered by the Resistance's betrayal, Laia does take matters into her own hands, deciding to betray the Resistance right back after her escape from death with the Augur. Still motivated to rescue her brother, who has been imprisoned her entire mission at Blackcliff, Laia attacks the new leader of the Resistance, named Mazen, so she can break Darin out of prison herself. She uses a weapon to do so:

In an instant, I have the blade at the Resistance leader's throat. "Back!" I say to the fighters. They lower their weapons reluctantly. My pulse pounds in my ears, and I have no fear in this moment, only rage for everything Mazen has put me through. "You tell me where my brother is, you lying son of a whore." When Mazen says nothing, I dig the blade in deeper, drawing out a thin line of blood. "Tell me," I say. "Or I'll slit your throat here and now." (Tahir 406)

Mazen is the very same leader who also betrayed Laia's parents and sister, ultimately causing their deaths and coming back for Laia and Darin in a very cyclical manner. By using the blade to threaten Mazen, Laia breaks the cycle of betrayal and does what her mother never could: survive long enough to see the cracks in the order of the Resistance. Even a supposedly righteous movement for the good of the Scholar people is infested with patriarchy and power struggles, given how Mazen overthrows the Lioness, a strong and intimidating woman, for his own political gain. He goes further with Laia, taking away her autonomy under the guise of a spying mission, placing the chains of slavery on her wrists himself. Further, this moment marks the first time that Laia takes up a weapon in her fight, bringing it to the physical plane from what was once just her mind. With this marked movement, Laia uses fighting to break boundaries of patriarchy and connection, differentiating herself from her mother and more fully coming into the title of heroine.

Continuing the rebellion she starts, Laia escapes Blackcliff to follow through with her plan of rescuing Darin without the fragmented Resistance. Along the way, she asks Spiro Teluman for help to fully leave Blackcliff behind, stopping at his workshop in order to break off Mazen's – and the Commandant's – cuffs from Laia's wrists. It is a long process:

It takes him nearly three hours to break the cuffs off... When I'm free of the cuffs, he offers me a salve for my chafed wrists and then disappears into the back room. A moment later he emerges with a beautifully decorated scim—the same blade he used to scare the ghuls away the day I met him. "This is the first true Teluman blade I made with Darin," he says. "Take it to him. When you free him, you tell him Spiro Teluman will be waiting in the Free Lands. You tell him we have work to do." "I'm afraid," I whisper. "Afraid I'll fail. Afraid he'll die." The fear flares through me then, as if by speaking of it I've

breathed life into it. Shadows gather and pool near the door. Ghuls. Laia, they say. Laia. “Fear is only your enemy if you allow it to be.” Teluman hands me Darin’s blade and nods to the ghuls. I turn and, as Teluman speaks, advance upon them. “Too much fear and you’re paralyzed,” he says. The ghuls aren’t cowed yet. I raise the scim. “Too little fear and you’re arrogant.” I strike out at the closest ghul. It hisses and skitters under the door. Some of its fellows back away, but others lunge at me. I force myself to stand fast, to meet them with the edge of the blade. Moments later, the few that were brave enough to remain flee with wrathful hisses. I turn back to Teluman. He finds my eyes. “Fear can be good, Laia. It can keep you alive. But don’t let it control you. Don’t let it sow doubts within you. When the fear takes over, use the only thing more powerful, more indestructible, to fight it: your spirit. Your heart. (Tahir 421-422)

The ghuls again serve as a symbol for the shadows in Laia’s mind, the darkness of childhood abandonment, oppression, and enslavement that she continually struggles with, the very same that the Augur calls out. It is a constant in her life, but Spiro Teluman essentially connects the pieces together for her here. By removing her cuffs – the physical reminder of her lack of freedom and autonomy as a slave – he makes Laia a free woman, able act, speak, and think for herself as never before. While Laia could wear both at the same time, it is curious how the cuffs of slavery and her armlet, a weaponized transitional object in its own right, resemble each other, taking their distinct places on Laia’s arm. In many ways, Laia’s armlet is a cuff of slavery to her mother’s memory, but one that cannot be removed as easily by Spiro. Only Laia, by taking up a scim against her shadows, can keep them at bay, learning how to deal with her lifelong struggles and traumas that will forever remain according to Chodorow. Laia’s journey, then, serves as a powerful model of the realities of fighting feminist battles; it is often a constant and inconclusive fight, not always wrapped up in a neat bow, but still valuable to fight.

Conclusions

Laia’s world within *An Ember in the Ashes* oppresses her both as a Scholar and as a woman, actually making it illegal for her to handle weapons and fight back. Laia does so anyway by overcoming her own object relations struggles in forming her own sense of self separate from

her mother, the legendary Lioness of the Resistance. At many points, Laia goes back and forth with this connection with her mother, at times feeling guilt and at others triumph. Relying on the analysis of theorist Nancy Chodorow, who focused on the mother/daughter relationship breeding gender difference, it is then clear how Laia's experience with her mother is rather typical of a young woman mothered by another woman; by nature of their shared gender, girls see themselves in their mother in ways that sons, like Laia's brother Darin, do not. In Laia's case, this relationship is symbolized by the gift of her mother's armlet, tying her to her mother's legacy, which is where Laia begins her fight to form her own sense of self. Laia simultaneously fights back against the enslavement she is placed into by using the very weapons illegal to the Scholar people, breaking boundaries just as she breaks off her cuffs of enslavement. As a feminist heroine, Laia is perhaps the most realistic fighter thus far examined, given how her struggle is nearly constant throughout *An Ember in the Ashes*, and yet she still emerges, always victorious.

Conclusions on Intersectional Representation

As defined in Chapter One, the fourth wave of feminism is the most inclusive and far-reaching iteration of feminism in the movement's nearly 200-year history. Prior to the fourth wave, feminism had consistently neglected and excluded women of color from its fight for equality, instead practicing a white-centered form of mainstream feminism. Feminism has not always lived up to its goals of equality for all women; the fourth wave looks to redefine feminism with more of a focus on equity as opposed to equality, improving upon past mistakes. This is accomplished through the solution-oriented approach of intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw. At its core, intersectionality is the understanding that people have many different identities, and may be oppressed by all, some, or none of those identities at once, creating multiple potential axes of oppression. These multiple identities, such as womanhood and blackness, come together to create a form of oppression that is greater than the sum of its parts, more severe than the misogyny faced by the default of white women, for instance (Crenshaw 140). Intersectionality offers the solution of focusing on the most oppressed groups on many axes – class, race, gender, sexuality, gender identity, disability, etc. – in order to make the greatest strides towards improvement for all (Crenshaw 150). Aligning with its goals, the fourth wave incorporates intersectionality into its ideology, focusing its activism on the most marginalized and oppressed groups. However, it appears that intersectionality has not totally been integrated into feminist literature, as demonstrated by YA fantasy fiction.

This thesis overall evaluates YA fantasy fiction through the genre's signature central heroine as to understand the psychodynamics of feminist subjectivity contained within the texts, an important underlying message for the young readers of the genre. Exemplified by heroines Emma Carstairs, Nesta Archeron, and Laia of Serra in the individual worlds of their texts, YA

fantasy fiction tells stories of redemption and redefinition, of destroying the patriarchy and discovering an autonomous, womanly sense of self in the process through the use of transitional objects. By applying a psychoanalytic lens, used in reality to study human behavior, it is clear that these heroines are just as complex as nuanced as the young people reading about them. Largely, these heroines reflect the goals of feminism in terms empowerment and equality but are lacking in reflecting specifically the fourth wave of feminism by depicting characters that are largely not intersectional. This conclusion, then, considers ideas of inclusivity as an understanding of the subjective feminisms of YA fantasy fiction, facilitating a closer look at their overarching politics of inclusivity through *Lady Midnight*, *A Court of Silver Flames*, and *An Ember in the Ashes*.

Sabaa Tahir's *An Ember in the Ashes* certainly makes broad strokes towards the goal of more intersectional representation in YA fantasy fiction, distinguishing itself in the genre and in my analysis as a work that makes multiple levels of oppression – enslavement, even – a focus of the work through heroine Laia of Serra. Using the lens of object relations theory, employed practically by many therapeutic practitioners to understand human behavior, it is clear that Laia, despite her status as a fantasy fiction heroine, is written in a complex and realistic manner. Her world and the hateful people in it truly seek to tear Laia down, disregarding her pain and cries, exposing her to violence at a young age, even stripping her of her personhood with slave cuffs and a brand on her chest. Laia, like the other heroines, has a story of redemption, overcoming her various obstacles and succeeding in growing personally while also exacting her revenge on the Resistance. What makes Laia's story most of all stand out, however, is that she works against multiple axes of oppression in order to seek this redemption, taking her power back in the process. Spiro Teluman, the Martial blacksmith who helps her along the way, describes Laia's

situation best: “Keep the knife too. A Scholar girl should always carry a weapon, no matter what the rules say.” (Tahir 370). As is the focus of my thesis, weapons like knives are crucial tools for heroines like Laia in this subgenre to do the fighting back against oppressive systems in line with the most current definition of feminism. But Spiro specifies Laia’s status within her society as the reason to hand her a knife to fight back with, calling her a “Scholar girl”. The label “girl” indicates oppression on the basis of gender, as Laia’s womanhood makes her a target for attack based on her perceived inherent weakness. The label “Scholar”, however, carries with it oppression on the basis of race or ethnicity and class, as the term indicates all three to those in Laia’s world. Scholars, as a fictional ethnic and racial group, have been oppressed by the Martial empire for hundreds of years in a deep-rooted system that keeps the entire group either enslaved or working menial jobs that afford them no wealth or security. The Scholars are even banned from protecting themselves against attack with weapons, specifically targeted to remain oppressed and subordinated by a larger social system. Laia, as opposed to other heroines in their womanhood, fights back against an array of axes of oppression.

Her rebellion, then, is the most radical one examined in this thesis, in line with Crenshaw’s articulation of intersectionality. As is the reality of many people, YA fantasy readers certainly included amongst that group, Laia has many struggles with oppression as opposed to just one. Her situation could mirror that of Black women in America, for instance, also oppressed on the basis of race, gender, and class. Laia is therefore an important example of diversity in YA fantasy characters, a subgenre thus far proven to be critical in shaping future changemakers to be feminists, but more specifically intersectional feminists. While Laia is a wonderful example of intersectionality in the YA fantasy fiction genre, she is one of the only intersectional heroines that I discovered in my research, indicating a gap in representation.

Nesta of Sarah J Maas's *A Court of Silver Flames* could be considered inclusive, although not precisely intersectional, for her simultaneous fight for her mental health along with the physical one against the Illyrian world. Nesta, a victim of childhood emotional abuse and sexual assault, feels the toll of these multiple traumas through bouts of depression and PTSD-like symptoms throughout the novel, even contemplating suicide. Her mental health struggles, while no fault of her own, disrupt the very fabric of her life to the point where they could be considered disabilities. In terms of modeling a feminist fight, Nesta also marks an important step for young readers, as mental health struggles are all too common but often disregarded as serious concerns. Nesta is an inclusive – and therefore appropriately complex – heroine in that she is a woman with a disability.

While a fascinating read with many highlighted merits, and very important to me personally, *Lady Midnight* is not totally reflective of the inclusive feminism of today, demonstrating how YA fantasy fiction as a genre has some gaps to fill in messaging and in representation. Author Cassandra Clare, in dedicating a great deal of time to describing Emma physically, makes clear that Emma fits the traditional standard of beauty as defined by Crenshaw (read: white, physically fit). Emma is repeatedly “golden” in reference to her sun-bleached hair, light eyes, and lightly tanned skin. She is in excellent physical shape from her years of training, consistently able to rely on her body to fight for and with her. She never has to worry about money, being funded entirely by her inheritance of priceless family heirlooms, Cortana among them. And, given that she is of European Shadowhunter descent, Emma is white. The only clear way that Emma is subordinated on an axis of identity, then, is in her femininity and womanhood. While a valid perspective to speak from, Emma's experience and modeling is therefore not widely applicable to all readers as it should be. She fights against none of the misogynoir, for

instance, that a black female Shadowhunter might experience, a reality that many of the readers of *Lady Midnight* face. There are many heroines that exist on the same axis of oppression that Emma does: Hermione Granger of *Harry Potter*, Tris Prior of *Divergent*, Katniss Everdeen of *The Hunger Games*, to name a few. In this way, Emma's modeled feminism is not totally intersectional as it could be, given that she is of an already well-represented identity group. In the spirit of improvement and drive so important to both the fourth wave and Emma as a character, I would push for a better representation of intersectional groups with stories like Emma's in order to influence more feminists of all groups to join the fight.

By nature of being heroines, out to both change and save the world, women like Laia, Nesta, and Emma are characters that young readers look up to. They accomplish fantastic feats of strength and wit, overcoming their personal mental struggles at the end of every work. At their core, they are heroic, a representation of a traditionally male trait made uniquely feminine. Critic Maria Tatar, with her work *The Heroine with 1,001 Faces*, meditates on the impacts of the female heroine, stating:

The heroines... reveal new sides to old stories. The faces of these women are malleable and mutable, resisting all efforts to freeze their features and to capture one representative expression. No single heroine dominates or endures. Instead heroines keep evolving, challenging authority and legitimacy, rebelling, resisting, and demanding makeovers. Traditional hierarchies of heroism are forever being reshuffled and rearranged as cultural values shift and are rebalanced. (Tatar 281)

What withstands from individual heroines, then, is not their distinct stories or representations, but rather the overarching messages they convey and how they align with the social conditions of their age. It is clear that feminism is always evolving, the modern interpretation of the fourth wave placing great emphasis on diverse, intersectional representations by diverse, intersectional authors, if possible. I fear that the stories I love so much are in danger of telling a single story of white feminism, with white heroines and white authors, and I can only hope that my thesis

evaluating the complexity of the YA fantasy heroine as tied to her object(s) can push the literature to catch up to the social movement. There is still plenty of work to be done on the issue of intersectional representation and I aim for my thesis to propel and generate this crucial work, yielding works that other young girls can find themselves in, even if they do not look like me or share my background.

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