

TESSA PYLES

## Centring Complex Maternal Emotion in *The Babadook*

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“If it’s in a word or it’s in a look,  
You can’t get rid of the Babadook...  
I’ll wager with you.  
I’ll make you a bet.  
The more you deny,  
The stronger I get.  
You start to change when I get in.  
The Babadook growing right under your skin.”  
—The Babadook

*Jennifer Kent’s horror film The Babadook shines a spotlight on maternal ambivalence, which is easily read as horrifying in a culture that demands mothers feel or express nothing but love for their children. However, Kent asks her audience to look beyond maternal ambivalence as a representation of bad, mad, or monstrous mothering and instead as an act of resistance to one of the most intimate forms of female oppression—motherhood. Read this way, The Babadook challenges what Adrienne Rich named the “institution of motherhood.” I argue that The Babadook moves beyond the institution of motherhood and into the realm of the emotional and psychological ramifications the institution engenders. I engage Barbara Almond’s The Monster Within: The Hidden Side of Motherhood to help convey the experiences of what she refers to as “the dark side of motherhood.” It is in this dark space that Amelia, the film’s protagonist, finds herself. Like so many mothers, Amelia has no outlet to honestly express what and how she feels about motherhood and about her child. As a result, she denies and represses her feelings. But monsters are not often born from the expression of feelings but from their repression, and the more her feelings are denied the stronger the monster—the Babadook—grows. Ultimately,*

*The Babadook challenges the many cultural and emotional restrictions placed upon mothers. More so, it asks those of us who are mothers to consider loving and maybe even nurturing the monster within.*

### **The “Horror” of Liberating Representation**

The excerpt cited above is from an ominous poem in a pop-up children’s book, which makes unexplained appearances throughout Jennifer Kent’s horror film *The Babadook* (2014). However, throughout the film, the monster—the Babadook—is not only growing stronger within the book’s story; it is also growing stronger in Amelia (Essie Davis), the film’s central character, who is a single mother to seven-year-old Samuel (Noah Wiseman). Recognizing her own story in the words and images held within the pages of the book, Amelia tries to destroy it. Alarmingly, even after the book is destroyed it continues to reappear, and with each reappearance, the written and illustrated content of a mother emotionally and then violently escalating is added, making manifest the warning: “The more you deny, the stronger I get.” As horror films are meant to do, *The Babadook* terrifies. However, the primary source of this terror is not derived from graphic violence or shock; rather it is the raw portrayal of a woman who is trying to mother within the suffocating social constricts of acceptable maternal emotion.

Though amplified by the supernatural, Amelia’s experience of motherhood is a common story many mothers live, and the monsters of their stories are as real as the Babadook. Not only is the Babadook a manifestation of Amelia’s denial and repression of her feelings, it is also a manifestation of cultural collective angst embedded within notions of acceptable maternal feelings and actions. For those who struggle within and against the emotional constraints of motherhood, the recognition of oneself in Amelia—a woman who becomes monstrous as she represses the darker elements of her maternal feelings—can be experienced as representation and validation of something mothers are all too often terrified to say aloud. Ultimately, this film posits that such complex maternal emotion is not monstrous. What is monstrous is the expectation that mothers deny the reality and expression of that complexity. In a society that wants its mothers to be only beacons of selfless love and comfort, centring the representation of a mother as an emotionally complex being, especially in relation to her child, can seem terrifying. Yet the representation is also liberating.

In an interview with *The Guardian*, *The Babadook*’s writer and director Jennifer Kent states the following: “We’re all, as women, educated and conditioned to think that motherhood is an easy thing that just happens. But it’s not always the case. I wanted to show a real woman who was drowning in that environment” (qtd. in MacInnes). Kent recognized the need to offer a

candid representation of an experience of motherhood not often told, a perspective that coincides with Andrea O'Reilly's call for a "matricentric feminism." As O'Reilly explains, the need for a mother-centred feminism "is to emphasize that the category of mother is distinct from the category of woman and that many of the problems mothers face—social, economic, political, cultural, psychological, and so forth—are specific to women's role and identity as mothers" (2). Tangled within the "problems," as O'Reilly outlines, is the construct of maternal love—a love expected to be selfless and free of any complex feelings (e.g., resentment, regret, dissatisfaction, and hate). By centring Amelia and her emotionally tumultuous experience of motherhood, and specifically the denial of her emotions, *The Babadook* demonstrates the need for and the possibility of acknowledging the many dimensions of motherhood in stories about mothers.

In *Maternal Horror Film* (2013), a study primarily concerned with the function of the cinematic representation of motherhood within the horror genre, Sarah Arnold explains that it is common that "these gothic-inspired films repress the maternal in order to deny her [the mother's] authorial power. They do this by limiting the subjectivity of the mother and framing the film from the point of view of the child or by constructing the mother as an absent presence" (Arnold 70). Kent actively inverts these practices. *The Babadook* does not limit Amelia's subjectivity; instead, the story is told from her perspective. In a joint interview with Kent, Essie Davis, the actress who portrays Amelia, explains, "Jen really wanted a film where everyone, everything, was seen through Amelia's eyes. Amelia had to be in this incredible truthful place ... there's this heightened element of how she feels she's being seen by these other extraordinary characters, and that's what I also think is quite beautiful about this film" (FilmQuote Compile). By telling Amelia's story of motherhood from her perspective, the film does not reproduce "patriarchally informed constructions of maternity" (Arnold 17); instead, it unveils and disrupts these constructions. The "incredible truthful place" Amelia inhabits throughout the film can also be read as a frightening but liberating place because she does not function as a villain mother or as a cautionary tale, at least not as a means to reinscribe social and cultural—patriarchal—mores. Instead, she serves as a caution against their limitations and the harm they do to mothers and motherhood.

### **Maternal Ambivalence and Monstrous Expectations**

Though nearly seven years have passed, Amelia is still heartbroken and reeling from the traumatic and untimely death of her husband. This trauma is at the core of much of her inner turmoil and denial of her feelings. As becomes evident throughout the film, this is because those closest to Amelia have set

limits on how or what she can feel—not only about the death of her husband but also about her difficult relationship with motherhood and, therefore, with Samuel. Their relationship is made more complex by the fact that Samuel, who was born the day his father died, is a precocious but challenging child for whom others have no patience or compassion. In short, the people best positioned to provide understanding and support to Amelia and Samuel—family, teachers, and doctors—instead treat both like social pariahs. As a result, Amelia has quelled her feelings and does her best to present as a woman and mother unbothered by her circumstances, especially her son.

For example, in the opening scenes, Amelia is awakened from a nightmare that is forcing her to relive the death of her husband when she hears Samuel cry out, “Mum, I had the dream again!” Amelia instantly opens her eyes, and then, with Samuel clinging to her side, she dutifully looks under his bed and in his closet to assure him that there are no monsters in hiding. After he is satisfied of his safety, she sits next to Samuel on his bed and tenderly reads to him. Although there are no monsters in his room that night, before he falls asleep, Samuel looks to Amelia and both prophetically and protectively tells her, “I’ll kill the monster when it comes. I’ll smash its head in.” Samuel knows what, at first, Amelia does not know or cannot face—the monster is coming.

Within these first scenes of the film, Amelia does her best to temper the complexity of the feelings she has for and about Samuel. Her attentiveness to Samuel’s needs is reflective of a culturally expected response of a mother to her distressed child. However, the extent of this bond, or more precisely, the complicated feelings that exist within it, are quickly evident. After Samuel falls asleep next to Amelia, he is grinding his teeth and has draped one of his legs over her body. Unexpectedly, Amelia has a look on her face not of irritation but disgust. She removes his leg from her body and rolls, back towards him, as far away to the opposite side of the bed as she can manage. The following morning, the struggle to deal with her complicated feelings for Samuel become even more evident.

Exhausted from the lack of sleep, Amelia is struggling to get herself and Samuel to work and school on time. Despite this rush, Samuel is trying to show Amelia the weapon he created to kill the monster—a contraption he wears on his back, with a handle that allows him to catapult objects at the monster. Frustrated by his obsession with monsters, Amelia kneels in front of Samuel and pleadingly says, “The monster thing has got to stop, alright?” She addresses this issue not only because of her frustration but also, as is later revealed, because of the frustration and reaction of those who provide care for Samuel, namely her sister and his school. In response to his mother’s plea, Samuel gently touches Amelia’s face and then leans forwards to hug her. She receives and returns this hug, but when a comforted Samuel moans “Mmm” in her ear, Amelia pushes him away and yells, “Don’t do that!” However, very

quickly, and with a look of resigned guilt on her face, she forces a gentle smile and cheerfully asks, “Ready?” These first few scenes between mother and son are telling; they speak to a common experience mothers are far too often terrified to acknowledge.

Amelia tries to be a loving and caring mother, and she is; however, her looks and actions also convey feelings of disgust and disdain for Samuel. The latter of these are culturally marked as abnormal or unnatural for mothers, so to experience these feelings can be terrifying. In *The Monster within: The Hidden Side of Motherhood*, Barbara Almond draws from her experiences as a psychologist who has treated many mothers who struggle with complex maternal feelings as well as from her own experiences and feelings as a mother. She explains that “conflict is the bedrock of human psychology and is always manifested in some form of ambivalence.... It is a completely normal phenomenon” (xiii). Yet ambivalence is not deemed normal or acceptable for mothers. As Brid Featherstone writes in *Motherhood and Ambivalence*, “the idea of mothering in particular arouses anxieties which may be managed through defences which, reproduced at a cultural level, are manifested in the idealization and denigration of mothers—neither set of images faithful to reality” (1). The cultural manifestation of these anxieties is often expressed in the binary of good or bad mother. In other words, mothers who are deemed good are idealized, whereas mothers who are deemed bad are denigrated. Although this binary holds tremendous cultural power over mothers as they strive to be perceived as good, it is in no way an accurate reflection of reality.

In “*Bad Mothers*,” Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky write about the inconsistencies of what or who defines bad mothers in the twentieth century, as well as the elasticity of the term. As they state, most believe “‘bad’ mothering is like obscenity: you know it when you see it” (2). Yet as the authors further explain, “the ‘bad’ mother label does not necessarily denote practices that actually harm children. In fact, it serves to shift our attention away from a specific act to a whole person—and even to entire categories of people” (3). The similar inconsistency surrounds the notion of the good mother. In *The Good Mother Myth*, Christy Turlington Burns describes the good mother myth as “an insidious burden working against our [women and mothers’] empowerment and freedom” (x), and Avital Norman Nathman adds that “the myth of the ‘good mother’ is one continuously embedded in our lives, passed down from generation to generation, shape-shifting to fit the nuances of culture and society but always imbued with a fabled ideal of what constitutes the perfect mother” (xiii-xiv). In other words, what constitutes bad and good mothering is neither clear nor stable. Yet the fear of being labelled bad, which drives the desire to be labelled good, hinders the understanding of the normalcy of complex maternal emotions as well as the healthy expression of those feelings.

In “The Production and Purposes of Maternal Ambivalence,” Rozsika Parker reinforces the universal experience of maternal ambivalence as well as the effects of a culture that refuses to acknowledge its regularity, which causes many mothers to experience compounded feelings of guilt and shame. She writes the following:

None of us find it easy to truly accept that we both love and hate our children. For maternal ambivalence constitutes not an anodyne condition of mixed feelings, but a complex and contradictory state of mind, shared variously by all mothers, in which loving and hating feelings for children exist side by side. However, much of the ubiquitous guilt mothers endure stems from difficulties in weathering the painful feelings evoked by experienced maternal ambivalence in a culture that shies away from the very existence of something it has helped to produce. (17)

Amelia is hyper-aware that she exists in a culture that does not condone, or even acknowledge, the validity of her feelings. As a result, the guilt over how and what she often feels towards Samuel as well as her frustration for the pretenses she has to keep up is palatable. For example, in an awkward scene set in a grocery store, Amelia’s ambivalence and the turmoil it causes is on display. She assumes that Samuel is being a nuisance to another customer and says, “Sam, don’t bother the lady.” The woman responds, “No, no, no. That’s alright,” but quickly says to her own daughter: “We have to go home and see Daddy, though, haven’t we?” To this Samuel matter-of-factly states, “My dad’s in the cemetery. He got killed driving Mum to the hospital to have me.” As neither woman knows what to say, the stranger cheerfully adds, “Well, your mum is very lucky to have you, then, isn’t she?” Beyond the painful memory this exchange evokes, as the woman walks away, Amelia stands still while her eyes convey and betray her inner thoughts: she does not know or necessarily believe that she is lucky to have him. He is certainly not a fair exchange or a consolation prize for her dead husband.

Each of these scenes, as well as many others throughout the film, contradict the expected reactions from a mother. For some, Amelia’s angry and ambivalent reactions to Samuel might be what is horrifying about this film, but it is important to ask why that is the case. As Briony Kidd discusses in her analysis of *The Babadook*, “Mothers are socially conditioned to restrain hostile feelings towards their children, and, in turn, film audiences are not used to seeing expressions of these feelings” (9). By showing the range of Amelia’s feelings, the film provides a representation of motherhood that though perhaps disconcerting or even horrifying is very real. As Kidd plainly states, “Like life itself ... *The Babadook* reminds us several times [that] motherhood can be treacherous” (8). The film conveys and confronts some of what makes mother-

hood treacherous and then suggests that the easier journey will not come by denying the monsters but by embracing them.

### **“The More You Deny, the Stronger I Get”**

Kidd describes the Babadook as “a shadowy, spindly figure with a long black coat and a black hat ... truly a frightening presence, funny name or not—and more so because it’s not clear what he wants. Perhaps he’s just an evil thing that’s moved into their lives because they’ve left a gap. Because he can” (8). I argue that he is much more. The Babadook plays a dual role. He is a manifestation of the external pressures placed on Amelia, specifically as they relate to her motherhood as well as the complex feelings that engulf her personal experiences as a mother, including maternal ambivalence. Both of the Babadook’s roles bleeds into and feeds the other. Ultimately, what the Babadook wants is what Amelia wants, and even needs—to quit having to deny the existence of feelings those around her think she should not have. Until Amelia acknowledges and confronts the monster, he only grows stronger.

Above, I discuss Amelia’s maternal ambivalence and the ways she denies herself full expression of her feelings. Part of the reason that she cannot be more honest is because of her fears of others’ perceptions and judgments of her and of Samuel. Yet her fears are for the most part rooted in reality. For example, during a heated exchange between Amelia and her sister Claire, in which Amelia points out that Claire never asks about her life or visits her home, Claire readily admits “because I can’t stand being around your son!” Arnold points out that “one of the motifs apparent in a great number of maternal horror films is that of the monstrous child as a product of the Bad Mother” (71). Kent plays with this motif and uses it as a means through which to challenge the bad mother trope rather than to reinforce it. Although Samuel can be difficult at times, particularly concerning his obsession with and fear of monsters, he is not a bad or monstrous child. Yet nearly everyone around him treats him as if he is a lost cause.

In one scene in which Amelia has been called to the school and is shown a monster-killing weapon Samuel had snuck into school, a weapon that could have gravely harmed another child, Samuel’s teacher and principal do not refer to him by name but instead as “the boy.” They do this repeatedly, and each time they say it, Amelia’s anger grows. Finally, she demands, “Please stop calling him ‘the boy.’ His name is Samuel.” This scene is juxtaposed with a later scene when the monster has begun making appearances in their home. At one point, Amelia goes to the basement and sees the Babadook who has taken the form of her dead husband. She moves to him and quickly melts into his embrace. As he comforts her, he says, “We’re gonna be together. You just need to bring me the boy.” She asks, “You mean Samuel?” The monster, in the

shape of her husband repeats in an ever-increasing monstrous voice: “You can bring me the boy. You can bring me the boy. You can bring me the boy.” Finally, Amelia shouts, “Stop calling him ‘the boy,’” before running out of the basement. The Babadook is reenacting the very thing that causes Amelia distress and feeds her fear and anger. Amelia’s reaction to Samuel’s dismissal by those who should help care for him is to be fiercely protective. However, her protection of Samuel is complicated because even while she defends him, her disdain for him grows; she fears, or knows, that the others’ hatred of Samuel is a manifestation of their assessment of her as a mother. Eventually, this fear causes Amelia to misinterpret and reject genuine care and concern.

The only character in *The Babadook* who constantly expresses genuine concern and even love for Amelia and Samuel is their elderly neighbour, Mrs. Roach. Early in the film, Amelia and Samuel come home one day, and Mrs. Roach sees that Samuel looks forlorn. She soothingly asks, “Who do we have here?” Samuel sadly responds, “Hi, Mrs. Roach,” to which she responds, “You look tired little one. You’ve been in the wars today?” He quietly answers, “A few wars.” Amelia, wanting to show that she has a handle on the situation adds, “He’s had a big day, that’s all. He’s just exhausted.” Mrs. Roach says, “Poor little sweetheart. You look tired too love. You ok?” Amelia responds somewhat jovially, “Nothing five years of sleep won’t fix.” Although Amelia is clearly putting on a brave face, as her responses to Mrs. Roach do not match the emotions she has conveyed throughout the day, she does not seem to resent Mrs. Roach or to question the motives of her concern. However, as the film progresses and as Amelia loses her battle to suppress the monster, her feelings of inadequacy and resentment grow.

After the pop-up children’s book, *The Babadook*, reappears for a third time, and after receiving a frightening phone call from the monster, Amelia leaves Samuel with Mrs. Roach before going to the police station to report being stalked. After the police officer dismisses her and treats her as if she were crazy, Amelia is overwhelmed, frustrated, exhausted, and angry. Upon her return, Mrs. Roach asks, “Did you get your things done?” Before Amelia can respond, Samuel blurts out, “Mrs. Roach has Parkinson’s. That’s why she shakes like this,” and then he demonstrates the movement. Amelia scolds, “Samuel, you don’t have to say everything that goes through your head!” To her admonishment, Mrs. Roach gently replies, “Oh, it’s alright, love. He wanted to know, so we talked about it. He sees things as they are, that one. Oscar [Amelia’s deceased husband] was the same. He always spoke his mind.” Amelia then snaps, “Do you have to keep on bringing him up?” She storms off and grabs Samuel by the arm practically dragging him back to their house as he whimpers, and Mrs. Roach looks on with concern. Without meaning to, Mrs. Roach—a woman who is the epitome of gentle, patient, and maternal love, a culturally defined good mother—has gotten under Amelia’s skin.



In the following scenes, the extent of how Mrs. Roach makes Amelia feel about herself as a mother manifests through an infestation of roaches.

Upon entering her home, Amelia notices how messy it is. In the kitchen, there are dirty dishes piled up in the sink as well as on the countertops and table. She starts to wash the dishes but then sees large roaches crawling all over them. Then she notices one crawling on her and hastily knocks it to the floor. As she watches it fall, she notices more roaches crawling across the floor from underneath the refrigerator. She pulls the fridge from the wall and then peels a small area of loose wallpaper from the wall to reveal a large hole from which an intrusion of roaches pours. She falls back from them horrified. In the following scene, Amelia has unexpected guests. She apologizes for the mess and explains about the infestation, despite regular fumigation. She begins to explain where she found the infestation, but stops mid-sentence when she realizes that the hole she had seen before was in fact not there. This scene reveals the depth of Amelia's shame and guilt for not being a good mother to Samuel. The roaches are not an indictment of Mrs. Roach; rather they were a physical manifestation of how, intentionally or not, Mrs. Roach and others make Amelia feel. The extent of how Amelia knows she is being seen by those around her becomes even more apparent when she has to take Samuel to the doctor.

After an incident at Claire's home, Amelia is driving home and Samuel is in the backseat of the car looking at something Amelia cannot see and is screaming for the Babadook to get out. Meanwhile, Amelia is screaming at Samuel to "stop" and to "be normal." Samuel is so overwhelmed and scared he has a seizure, something that has not happened to him before. At the doctors, Amelia is crying. When the doctor tells Amelia she can make an appointment for Samuel to see a specialist, she pleads for immediate relief. She asks, "But can you just give me something for now, just to make him sleep? Um, just until ... just until we get an appointment. Please? I haven't slept in weeks and neither has Samuel, and when we go home tonight, this whole nightmare will start up again and I am really ... I'm not coping." At this point, it is clear that while Amelia is concerned for Samuel, she is also crying (literally) for help.

Although the doctor does comply with her request, he does so begrudgingly, and he passive-aggressively shames her. He responds to her request by saying, "I can give you a short course of sedatives. Just until the tests come back. Most mothers aren't too keen on them unless it's really bad." To this, Amelia quickly and desperately replies, "It's really bad." Even with the doctor, someone who should have Samuel and Amelia's best interest at heart, Amelia is not allowed to talk about how and what she is feeling and experiencing. She is not given room to be sad, to be frustrated, or to be at a loss about how to cope.

According to Almond this is not at all an uncommon response, even among therapists. She explains this issue as well as its impact on mothers in the following way:

Therapists who work with children see maternal ambivalence as a serious problem for the child, sometimes as *the* problem. The problem it creates for the mother takes second place. Even in the mother's psychotherapy, the therapist's concern about the child may compromise empathy for the mother's conflicted situation. Women's reluctance to talk about hatred—the negative side of their ambivalence—has a real basis in society's idealization and protections of children. At the same time, the strains of raising a difficult child tend to be left mostly at the mother's door. (141)

Although the doctor Amelia asks for help from is not a therapist and may not even be their regular doctor, he is a reflection of what Almond explains above. He is another element of a society that is deeply invested in ideals of motherhood rather than its realities. In evoking “most mothers,” he is telling Amelia that there is something wrong with her and that she is not living up to what is expected of her. She is not a good mother. Amelia is trapped in an institution that demands her silence. Up until that moment in the doctor's office, she could not and did not speak her feelings aloud. Yet when she does admit that she is “not coping” and when she asks for help, the person who could ensure professional help for both she and Samuel belittles her. Thus, Amelia reaches her breaking point. She has denied all that she can for as long as she can, and the monster has grown strong enough to take over.

After a night of no sleep because of the ever-encroaching monster, Amelia calls out to work and crawls back into her bed to sleep. She has only just closed her eyes when Samuel enters the room and says, “Mum, I took the pills, but I feel sick again.” Amelia just lies there breathing deeply as if she is trying to keep herself under control. Samuel continues, “I need to eat something. I couldn't find any food in the fridge. You said to have them with food. I'm really hungry, mum.” Between each of his sentences Amelia's breathing becomes louder and more intense, until she finally says with extreme irritation in her voice, “Why do you always have to keep talk, talk, talking? Don't you ever stop?” Samuel begins to reply, “I was just,” when Amelia cuts him off and demands, “I need to sleep.” Samuel ignores her clear frustration and continues, “I'm sorry, mummy. I was just really hungry.” At this Amelia begins to move. She rolls over to face him, and as she sits up, the rage in her voice builds as she slowly growls, “If you're that hungry why don't you go and EAT SHIT!” Samuel runs fearfully out of the room.

Although at first she lies back down to sleep, Amelia immediately feels guilty about what she yelled at Samuel. She gets up and finds him crying in his room. She gets close to him and says, “I'm so sorry. I don't know why I said that. It was terrible. I've had absolutely no sleep. I didn't know what I was saying. I'll cook you something, ok? What would you like?” Samuel responds, “I'm not hungry anymore.” At this point in the film, Amelia is, as Kidd writes,

“not just menaced by the malevolence of the Babadook: she’s possessed by it” (10). Indeed, from the time the book first appears and she begins to lose her ability to control all of her feelings, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine the distinction between when Amelia is in danger and when she is possessed. Both happen simultaneously. This lack of clarity is an important aspect of what is horrifying about this film. Amelia is not an otherwise good mom caught up in a bad situation and eventually possessed by an evil monster. She is always both at different parts of the film. Even when she is clearly possessed by the Babadook, she never ceases to be Amelia. The complexity of her feelings for Samuel are not suddenly gone.

This is apparent when later Amelia, as possessed by the Babadook, is trying to get hold of Samuel and coolly says, “You don’t know how many times I wished it was you, not him that died.” Samuel pleadingly responds, “I just want you to be happy.” Amelia retorts in a mocking tone, “‘I just want you to be happy.’ Sometimes I just wanna smash your head against a brick wall until your fucking brains pop out.” Of her own experience working with mothers dealing with feelings of ambivalence towards their children, Almond writes that women often “express anger at their offspring with murderous words: ‘I could have killed her!’ ‘I felt like hitting him over the head with a baseball bat!’ And they mean it. But they don’t do that” (190). Acknowledging that mothers can and often do have these thoughts about their children can be disturbing and difficult to understand. However, like many thoughts that run through anyone’s mind throughout any given day, the greater majority of mothers never act on them. When Samuel hears these words, he tells Amelia, “You’re not my mother,” but she immediately and vehemently roars, “I AM YOUR MOTHER!” In other words, Amelia is telling Samuel, “I am all of this. All of the love and the hate. All of me is your mother.” Ultimately, acknowledging this together is what saves them both.

When Samuel traps Amelia in the basement, and she is trying to break free, he tells her, “I know you don’t love me. The Babadook won’t let you. But I love you, Mum. And I always will. You let it in. You have to get it out!” Amelia struggles but finally makes her way to her knees and vomits a mass of black bile onto the basement floor. In this moment, both believe they are free, but then Samuel remembers the rhyme: “You can’t get rid of the Babadook.” Amelia has to continue battling the Babadook, but as she does, she begins to see the monster for what it is. Finally she screams, “You are nothing. You’re nothing! This is my house! You are trespassing in my house!” In that moment, the Babadook flees to their basement and Amelia and Samuel follow it down to lock it inside, but, the Babadook cannot be gotten rid of.

## **Conclusion: Nurturing the Monster and Claiming Motherhood on Our Own Terms**

Within her book, Almond poses and then works to help answer the question, “so what is a mother to do?” That is, what is a mother to do about what she may think, feel, and experience within the institution of motherhood, especially if her experiences are not deemed as normal. To this question, Almond offers the following: “The final assumption that I am making is that this painful issue can be ameliorated in a variety of ways, if women can come to accept that their feelings do not make them unnatural pariahs, unfit to be mothers, unfit to be part of the human race” (238). In her own analysis of *The Babadook*, Kidd echoes Almond’s stance: “As many a psychoanalyst would have had it, repression is the real toxin, not negative feelings in themselves.... There’s no way to eliminate these aspects of life, but, in facing them head-on, in paying tribute ... we can at least keep them under control” (10). It would be easier for women to accept the complexity of their maternal emotions if society and culture would loosen the expectations placed on mothers and motherhood. Until then, we might need to follow Amelia’s lead. After all, by acknowledging the Babadook for what it is, by embracing it, and even by nurturing it, the monster loses its power over her.

Thus, what *The Babadook* reveals about the monsters of motherhood is terrifying, illuminating, and potentially liberating. Towards the end of the film, Samuel and Amelia are outside and are working together to collect worms. Amelia takes their collection to the basement, places it on the floor, and steps back expectantly. The Babadook comes out of the darkness, grabs the bucket, and retreats. Although the monster still scares her and is still present, she knows that it no longer has control over her or her relationship with Samuel. In fact, when she visits the Babadook, she feeds it, and offers it comfort, which is in effect the comfort and acceptance she is offering to herself. At the very end, Amelia and Samuel are outside in their yard and celebrating Samuel’s birthday. Both are smiling, happy, and enjoying each other’s company. Both are also recovering from the wounds each inflicted upon the other during their battle against, but also for, each other. In this powerful moment, they acknowledge their wounds and acknowledge their healing. Amelia and Samuel now know what the monster is, but it never goes away. They keep it in their basement and care for it, even nurture it. In this way, the monster is in their lives but on their own terms, because “you can’t get rid of the Babadook.”

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