

FAITH, CARE, AND CONTRADICTION: MARY COOPER'S POSTHUMAN MOTHERHOOD IN *YOUNG SHELDON*

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Abstract

This study explores the representation of Mary Cooper, the mother figure in the television series *Young Sheldon* (2017–2024), through Rosi Braidotti's Mother–Monster–Machine framework. As a prequel to *The Big Bang Theory*, the series revisits the conflict between science and religion in small-town Texas, centering on Mary, a devout Baptist mother raising a child prodigy whose rational worldview often challenges her faith. Using a qualitative descriptive approach with textual and narrative analysis, this research examines episodes that highlight Mary's negotiations of faith, motherhood, and moral authority. The findings reveal that Mary embodies three interconnected subjectivities: as Mother, she performs care rooted in faith and emotional endurance; as Monster, she embodies the patriarchal fear of religious intensity; and as Machine, she mediates the ideological tension between belief and reason, serving as an ethical interface within her family. These overlapping identities present Mary Cooper as a posthuman hybrid, illustrating how religious motherhood adapts to the contradictions of modernity. The study concludes that *Young Sheldon* transforms motherhood from a static moral category into an ethical negotiation, redefining faith as both emotional intelligence and a strategy for resilience in a rational, posthuman world.

Keywords/Kata Kunci: *Mary Cooper; Mother–Monster–Machine; Posthumanism; religious motherhood; Young Sheldon*

INTRODUCTION

The CBS television series *Young Sheldon* (2017–2024) functions as a prequel to the globally popular sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–2019), yet it introduces a significant ideological reorientation. While *The Big Bang Theory* situates Sheldon Cooper as an adult prodigy embedded in a secular, science-driven academic environment, *Young Sheldon* relocates the narrative to late-1980s East Texas, a region closely associated with evangelical Christianity and conservative social values. This shift transforms the series from a science-centered comedy into a reflective portrayal of family life, faith, and moral negotiation within the cultural context of America's Bible Belt. As a result, the series foregrounds a persistent tension between religious belief and scientific rationality as it unfolds within everyday domestic life.

This tension is most visibly embodied through the figure of Mary Cooper, Sheldon's mother, portrayed by Zoe Perry. As a devout Baptist, Mary occupies the spiritual and moral center of the Cooper family, expressing her faith through prayer, discipline, and a firm belief in divine protection. At the same time, her maternal devotion is marked by deep anxiety toward her son's rejection of religious belief and his intellectual arrogance. Through Mary's character, *Young Sheldon* dramatizes broader cultural negotiations between humility and pride, belief and doubt, and devotion and rationalism, reflecting ongoing struggles over moral authority in late-twentieth-century American society.

Mary Cooper's maternal identity further reveals the contradictions inherent in conservative religious culture. Her piety grants her moral legitimacy within her church community, yet it also renders her emotionally vulnerable and socially scrutinized as the mother of a child who openly challenges religious norms. Admired as a model Christian mother but judged for her perceived failure to transmit faith, Mary is positioned simultaneously as a moral ideal and a

moral anomaly. This paradox highlights motherhood not as a stable or unified role but as a contested site where gendered expectations, religious devotion, and cultural anxiety intersect.

Previous studies on American television sitcoms have largely focused on representations of secularism, science, masculinity, and intellectual authority, particularly in relation to *The Big Bang Theory* (Lewis & Molloy, 2015; Dahle & Kro, 2021). These analyses emphasize how scientific rationality is often constructed as cultural superiority, while religious belief is framed as irrational or obsolete. However, such scholarship tends to privilege male intellectual subjects and overlooks the domestic and maternal spaces where ideological conflicts are negotiated on an everyday basis.

Feminist media studies have addressed motherhood as a moral and ideological construct, demonstrating how maternal figures in American television are frequently depicted as sentimental nurturers or moral guardians responsible for maintaining social order (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Warner, 2018). While these studies illuminate the gendered burden placed upon mothers, religious motherhood is often treated as static, conservative, or ideologically fixed, rather than as a dynamic and ambivalent form of subjectivity. At the same time, posthuman feminist theorists have challenged such essentialist frameworks by emphasizing hybridity, becoming, and the instability of subject positions. Braidotti (2013) and Ferrando (2019) argue that posthuman subjectivity emerges through the entanglement of affect, embodiment, technology, and moral agency, destabilizing traditional humanist binaries such as those between reason and belief. Despite these theoretical developments, Traesar and Saktiningrum (2024) argue that little attention has been given to how posthuman frameworks might illuminate representations of religious motherhood in mainstream television.

This absence reveals a critical gap in existing scholarship. While religion, gender, and science have been examined as separate analytical concerns, few studies explore how maternal figures function as mediators between competing epistemological systems within popular media. In the context of *Young Sheldon*, Mary Cooper occupies precisely this intermediary position, navigating evangelical belief, maternal care, and scientific modernity. Existing approaches have yet to fully account for how her maternal subjectivity exceeds humanist and feminist interpretations, thus necessitating a posthuman analytical lens.

Addressing this gap, the present study applies Rosi Braidotti's Mother-Monster-Machine framework to analyze the representation of Mary Cooper as a posthuman maternal subject in *Young Sheldon*. Drawing on *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (2002) and *Nomadic Subjects* (2011), Braidotti conceptualizes the figures of the Mother, Monster, and Machine as overlapping modes through which femininity is regulated, idealized, and instrumentalized within patriarchal and posthuman cultures. The Mother signifies nurture and moral continuity, the Monster embodies excess and deviance, and the Machine represents mediation and functional adaptation within ideological systems (Braidotti, 2002, p. 79).

This study asks how Mary Cooper is represented as a posthuman maternal figure negotiating faith, care, and rationality within the socio-religious landscape of small-town Texas. The research aims to examine how her religious devotion operates as moral labor, how her faith renders her simultaneously authoritative and abject, and how she functions as a mediating figure between scientific rationalism and evangelical belief. The novelty of this study lies in its integration of posthuman feminist theory with television motherhood studies, offering a new perspective on religious maternal subjectivity in mainstream American media.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design to examine the representation of religious motherhood in the television series *Young Sheldon* (CBS, 2017–2024). A qualitative approach is appropriate for addressing the research question, as the study seeks to interpret cultural meanings, narrative structures, and ideological negotiations rather than to measure variables quantitatively (Creswell, 2014). The subject of the research is the character of Mary Cooper, selected due to her central role in mediating faith, maternal care, and scientific rationality within the narrative. Using purposive sampling, the study focuses on selected episodes and narratives that explicitly depict moments of religious practice, moral conflict, and interaction between belief and reason. Data were collected through repeated

close viewing and transcription of significant dialogues, with attention to narrative context, tone, gesture, and affective expression. The data recorded consist of textual excerpts and descriptive observations that highlight ideological and emotional tensions surrounding Mary's maternal identity.

Data analysis is guided by Rosi Braidotti's Mother–Monster–Machine framework, developed in *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (2002) and further elaborated in *The Posthuman* (2013). This framework conceptualizes the Mother as care and moral continuity, the Monster as excess and deviation, and the Machine as mediation between ideological systems (Braidotti, 2002, p. 79). These figurations function as overlapping analytical categories rather than fixed archetypes. The analysis proceeded by identifying and categorizing selected scenes according to this triadic framework, followed by interpretive analysis that situates the findings within posthuman feminist thought (Haraway, 1991; Braidotti, 2013). Through this procedure, the study examines how Mary Cooper is constructed as a posthuman maternal subject negotiating faith, emotion, and rational modernity in contemporary American television.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of Mary Cooper in *Young Sheldon* reveals that her character embodies Rosi Braidotti's triadic conceptualization of the Mother–Monster–Machine, functioning as a dynamic site of negotiation between religion, gender, and rationality. Her portrayal challenges simplistic readings of religious motherhood, presenting instead a hybrid subject who moves between caregiving, discipline, and mediation. Drawing on feminist and posthuman perspectives, this section discusses how Mary's identity emerges through key scenes across seasons, with close attention to cultural, narrative, and theoretical contexts.

The Mother: Faith as Care and Moral Continuity

Mary Cooper represents the archetype of the religious mother, the moral compass of her family, whose care is grounded in spirituality rather than psychology. In Braidotti's (2002) model, the Mother signifies the continuity of life and ethical order—she “embodies moral memory in a time of fragmentation” (p. 81). Mary's character continues the lineage of her older self in *The Big Bang Theory*, where the adult Mary (played by Laurie Metcalf) appears as a strict yet loving Baptist woman. *Young Sheldon*, however, deepens this figure by exploring her vulnerability as a younger mother navigating belief, modernity, and motherhood in late-1980s Texas.

In Season 1, Episode 2 (“Rockets, Communists, and the Dewey Decimal System”), Mary kneels beside Sheldon's bed to pray before his first day of school. When Sheldon questions the logic of prayer,

MARY: “Some things you do not measure—you believe.”

SHELDON: “I'd rather not.”

MARY: “Suit yourself.”

(Mary prays beside the bed while Sheldon looks unimpressed.)

(*Young Sheldon*, S1E2, 00:04:15).

Mary replies, “Some things you don't measure—you believe.” This interaction encapsulates what Warner (2018) calls the “ethics of maternal care,” where affection and morality function as pedagogical forces (p. 57). Mary teaches not just manners but metaphysics: that love and faith are inseparable. Her faith-based care aligns with broader televisual representations of religious motherhood in American culture. Recent scholarship notes that TV mothers increasingly embody “moral multitasking”—balancing care, belief, and emotional labor amid social change (Lewis, 2019; Goff, 2022). Mary's care, while gentle, is also doctrinal: her parenting performs theology in everyday life.

In Season 2, Episode 13 (“A Nuclear Reactor and a Boy Called Lovey”), after Sheldon's science experiment fails, Mary comforts him, saying, “You're not failing, sweetheart. You're learning.” (*Young Sheldon*, S2E13, 00:15:40 – 00:16:30). The moment intertwines faith with resilience, echoing Braidotti's (2013) posthuman ethics of “becoming through

compassion" (p. 191). Mary's ability to transform scientific failure into moral wisdom shows how religion in *Young Sheldon* is not dogmatic but dynamic.

Nevertheless, her motherhood is constrained by patriarchal expectations. As Hays (1996) and Douglas and Michaels (2021) argue, "intensive mothering" often glorifies sacrifice as virtue, hiding systemic inequity. Mary's devotion makes her indispensable yet invisible. Even George Sr. often trivializes her religiosity, treating it as sentimental excess. Tuchman's (1978) "symbolic annihilation" aptly describes this erasure of women's moral labor.

Thus, Mary's maternal identity carries a paradox: faith empowers her emotionally yet confines her socially. Her devotion sustains the household but also marks her as outdated in a rational world—a tension that evolves into the monstrous.

The Monster: Religious Excess and Social Stigma

If the Mother ensures moral continuity, the Monster emerges when that morality becomes too visible, too intense, or too disobedient to patriarchal norms. Braidotti (2002) defines the Monster as "a materialization of fear and fascination toward female difference" (p. 89). Mary's monstrosity stems from the same virtues that once defined her goodness—devotion, protectiveness, and emotional intensity.

In Season 3, Episode 11 ("A Live Chicken, a Fried Chicken, and Holy Matrimony"), Mary forbids Georgie, Sheldon's older brother, from having romantic feelings, declaring it sinful. Her tears and anger transform her into the "monstrous mother" archetype, not through cruelty but through the excess of virtue. As Kristeva (1982) observes, the abject mother "haunts the boundaries of love and law" (p. 3). Mary's fury reveals the instability of faith under pressure—love becomes surveillance, care becomes control.

GEORGIE: I think I might marry Veronica someday.

MARY: Excuse me?

GEORGIE: Yeah. She's pretty, she's sweet, she loves Jesus... what's not to like?

MARY: (raising her voice slightly) Georgie, you're sixteen years old! You don't need to be talking about marriage.

GEORGIE: But if it's God's plan—

MARY: (interrupts) God's plan? Don't you use the Lord to justify hormones!

GEORGIE: We just held hands and prayed!

MARY: And that's how it starts. One minute you're praying, the next you're sinning!

(She crosses her arms, visibly shaken; the tone mixes comedy with genuine alarm.)

GEORGIE: You think everything's a sin.

MARY: Because I'm your mother, and it's my job to keep you from going to hell!

(She exhales sharply, on the verge of tears. Georgie storms off.)

(*Young Sheldon*, S3E11, 00:13:20–00:14:55)

The emotional staging of this scene—Mary's trembling voice, lowered lighting, and camera focus on her clasped hands—portrays Kristeva's (1982) concept of abjection. Mary's moral panic becomes a physical manifestation of the instability between sacred law and human affection. Her body, oscillating between prayer and anger, materializes the tension between spiritual virtue and maternal fear.

This moral intensity links Mary to broader depictions of religious women in Western media, from *Carrie's* Margaret White to *The Handmaid's Tale's* Aunt Lydia. Yet, *Young Sheldon* complicates this lineage. Rather than rendering her as villainous, the series portrays her anxiety as profoundly human. As O'Brien (2018) suggests, modern sitcoms recast controlling mothers as "emblems of cultural fear about moral collapse" (p. 121). Mary's strictness thus functions as both comedy and critique—a reminder that behind religious certainty lies maternal fragility.

In Season 4, Episode 3 ("Training Wheels and an Unleashed Chicken"), Mary faces gossip within her church community, where congregants subtly accuse her of failing as a Christian mother because of Sheldon's irreverence.

The scene portrays Braidotti's (2011) notion of monstrosity as a social mechanism—society expels the woman who fails to conform (p. 118).

PEG: Well, I heard from my cousin that Sheldon called the Bible “a book of fairy tales.”

BRENDA: (chuckling) Oh, bless your heart, Mary. Must be hard raising a little heathen.

MARY: He's not a heathen. He's just... curious.

PEG: Curiosity's fine, but questioning the Good Book? That's how it starts.

(The women exchange glances. Mary forces a polite smile, holding back irritation.)

MARY: (quietly) Well, I'll keep praying for him.

BRENDA: You might wanna pray a little harder.

(They laugh; Mary's expression falls. She exits the room stiffly, clearly hurt.)

(*Young Sheldon*, S4E3, 00:09:00–00:10:40)

The subtle cruelty of this exchange—masked as humor and “concern”—embodies what Braidotti (2011) identifies as the disciplinary aspect of monstrosity. Mary's polite restraint amidst derision illustrates the quiet violence of moral surveillance within conservative communities. Audience reception studies also suggest that viewers sympathize with Mary's tension rather than condemn it. As demonstrated by empirical analyses of online fan communities (Nguyen, 2023), Mary's character resonates with religious and secular audiences alike because she embodies “imperfect faith.” Fans often describe her as “flawed but faithful”—a mother struggling to remain good in a world that mocks belief.

In Season 2, Episode 2 (“A Rival Prodigy and Sir Isaac Neutron”), Mary oscillates between pride and guilt over Sheldon's extraordinary achievements. When another child prodigy is introduced at church, Mary beams with pride as the pastor praises her son's intellect—but her smile falters when a congregant jokes that “cleverness isn't always godliness.” This moment of hesitation portrays the moral double bind she endures, pride feels sinful, yet humility feels like denial of her child's gifts. Her conflicting emotions reflect Ahmed's (2017) theory of affective economies, where emotions circulate to define social value (p. 10). In Mary's case, guilt and love become the moral currency of motherhood—feelings that both affirm and punish her sense of devotion.

PASTOR JEFF: We are blessed to have not one, but two gifted young minds among us—Sheldon Cooper and our newest visitor, Paige Swanson.

MARY: (smiling) That's wonderful. (look proudly at Sheldon)

PEG: (to Brenda) He's not the only smart kid in town anymore.

BRENDA: (laughing softly) Guess being special just got less special.

(Mary overhears; her smile fades slightly.)

PASTOR JEFF: Let's remember that wisdom without humility can lead us astray.

(Mary glances down, embarrassed, then folds her hands.)

MARY: (quietly, to herself) Thank you, Pastor.

(She forces a polite smile as the congregation laughs lightly. Sheldon looks around, oblivious.)

(*Young Sheldon*, S2E2, 00:09:10–00:10:40)

Mary's discomfort in this scene marks a crucial transformation: her faith collides with pride, producing what Braidotti (2002) terms the monstrous threshold—a moment when contradictions destabilize fixed identities (p. 91). The congregation's laughter and her forced humility expose the emotional cost of sustaining moral perfection. Within this tension, *Young Sheldon* redefines monstrosity not as evil but as revelation. Mary's guilt becomes the very mechanism of ethical becoming; through emotional struggle, she negotiates new forms of understanding and care. Her monstrosity, far from demonic, thus becomes a catalyst for moral growth—a transitional space between fear and acceptance, where faith and maternal love coexist as processes of transformation rather than certainty (Adhitya et al., 2024).

The Machine: Mediating Faith and Reason

In Braidotti's (2013) posthuman framework, the Machine represents the human as mediator—a connective system linking organic, technological, and ideological domains (p. 97). Mary Cooper performs this role through emotional

translation. Her purpose within *Young Sheldon*'s narrative is to mediate the incompatibility between her son's scientific rationalism and her community's faith-based worldview.

In Season 1, Episode 7 ("A Brisket, Voodoo, and Cannonball Run"), Sheldon confronts Pastor Jeff about divine control, questioning the logic of God's role in physics. Mary intervenes with the diplomatic line, "God gave you that smart brain, honey. Maybe He wants you to use it." Her statement fuses theology and pragmatism, enacting what Lewis and Molloy (2015) describe as "secularized spirituality in comedic frameworks" (p. 143). In this moment, Mary becomes a moral interface—translating dogma into compassion and ensuring that faith and reason coexist without hierarchy.

Her emotional diplomacy aligns closely with Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labor, later expanded by Jarrett (2022) to digital-age contexts. Mary processes familial tension as affective energy—absorbing conflict, converting it into humor, and releasing comfort. She becomes, in effect, a living algorithm of empathy, maintaining harmony between contrasting worldviews.

The series further extends this machinic mediation metaphor into the digital and ideological age. Scholars such as Fuller (2019) and Gane (2020) note that posthuman ethics increasingly relies on hybrid empathy—humans acting as emotional processors between systems of knowledge and technology. Mary embodies this hybrid condition: she serves as a moral interface, connecting belief to data and faith to logic. Her negotiation between prayer and intellect anticipates twenty-first-century discourses on the convergence of artificial intelligence and spirituality, where emotion, code, and faith overlap (Campbell & Shepherd, 2020).

Yet, the cost of this mediation is profound emotional fatigue. In Season 5, Episode 6 ("Money Laundering and a Cascade of Hormones"), Mary laments, "If I stop holding it all together, everything falls apart." This articulation of invisible labor echoes Braidotti's (2013) concept of posthuman fatigue—the depletion of a self that sustains systems it cannot escape (p. 101). A similar exhaustion recurs in Season 6, Episode 8 ("Legalese and a Whole Hoo-Ha"), when Mary prays alone in her bedroom:

MARY: (sighs) Lord, I'm tired of fixing everyone. Fix me instead.
(*Young Sheldon*, S6E8, 00:15:25 – 00:15:55)

The quiet, dimly lit scene captures both her weariness and renewal. As she closes her eyes and exhales, the moment portrays self-reprogramming through faith. Religion functions here as her internal software for emotional restoration, performing what Braidotti (2013) terms an affirmative ethics of transformation (p. 191).

In this convergence of exhaustion and transcendence, Mary embodies both human vulnerability and mechanical persistence, the exhausted yet adaptive circuitry of care. Her faith, rather than rigid dogma, becomes a flexible operating system that continually updates in response to moral and emotional strain. Through this machinic subjectivity, *Young Sheldon* reframes spirituality as an act of translation and endurance. Mary's religiosity thus emerges as a form of emotional intelligence within a posthuman framework, redefining belief as adaptive technology—resilient, iterative, and profoundly humane.

Gender, Class, and Regional Context

Mary's subjectivity is inseparable from her class and regional identity. As a working-class woman in conservative Texas, her faith doubles as both moral compass and social capital. Scholars such as Whitehead (2021) and Brasher (2019) show that Southern Protestant women often sustain communities through "relational religiosity," a combination of service, humility, and strength. Mary epitomizes this form of embodied belief. Her employment at the church (Season 5, Episode 10, "An Ugly Car, an Affair, and Some Kickass Football") symbolizes both economic necessity and moral identity. Within patriarchal structures, her labor is respected only insofar as it supports communal faith. Denton (2022) terms this phenomenon "moralized labor," where virtue substitutes for autonomy (p. 211).

Mary's class status also accentuates her conflict with Sheldon's intellectual elitism. His skepticism often frames her faith as ignorance, mirroring broader cultural hierarchies between science and religion. Yet, as Rose (2021) argues, working-class religiosity contains its own epistemology—what she calls "vernacular theology," or the everyday

reasoning of belief (p. 52). Mary's compassion, patience, and humor constitute moral intelligence that complements, not contradicts, reason. This depiction subverts the stereotype of Southern religiosity as backward. *Young Sheldon* reclaims it as an ethic of care—emotionally rich, relational, and sustainable in a world fragmented by technological rationality.

Mary Cooper as Posthuman Hybrid

Synthesizing these readings, Mary Cooper emerges as a posthuman hybrid, embodying all three figures simultaneously. She is a Mother whose faith nurtures continuity, a Monster whose morality challenges conformity, and a Machine whose empathy mediates contradiction. Her identity shifts fluidly across situations, affirming Braidotti's (2013) assertion that the posthuman subject "exists through relation, not essence" (p. 123).

Tabel 1. Mary Cooper as Mother, Monster, Machine.

Braidotti's Figure	Manifestation in Mary Cooper	Representative Episodes	Interpretation
Mother	Nurturing, spiritually anchored, morally consistent	S1E2, S2E13	Faith as affective technology sustaining moral order
Monster	Rigid, stigmatized, emotionally excessive	S3E11, S4E3	Religious motherhood as deviant resistance and critique
Machine	Mediator, translator, emotional processor	S1E7, S2E2, S6E8	Posthuman motherhood: woman as connective, adaptive interface

By Season 7, Mary achieves synthesis. In Episode 6 ("Community Service and the Key to a Happy Marriage"), she tells Sheldon, "Maybe God made you the way you are so you could ask the questions the rest of us are afraid to." The line represents her transformation: faith and reason no longer oppose each other. She has learned coexistence—a posthuman virtue that transcends binary categories.

Her journey mirrors cultural shifts in contemporary media. As Lotz (2018) and Lewis (2019) observe, post-2010 television increasingly portrays mothers as philosophical subjects rather than sentimental ones. Mary's blend of faith, humor, and frustration embodies this evolution. She becomes a figure of affirmative hybridity, proving that moral conviction and adaptability can coexist.

In conclusion, Mary Cooper's evolution redefines religious motherhood for the posthuman era. She symbolizes ethical coexistence between faith and science, emotion and logic, devotion and autonomy. Her triadic identity not only enriches feminist media studies but also illuminates how belief continues to evolve within technologically mediated culture.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Mary Cooper in *Young Sheldon* (2017–2024) represents religious motherhood through Rosi Braidotti's Mother–Monster–Machine framework. The analysis shows that Mary embodies a posthuman hybrid who continually negotiates faith, morality, and rationality. As Mother, she performs care as moral resilience; as Monster, she reveals how patriarchal culture disciplines devout women through moral contradiction; and as Machine, she mediates between belief and reason, turning faith into an adaptive ethical technology.

These findings meet the study's objective by reframing religious motherhood as an active, hybrid subjectivity rather than a static ideal. The work advances feminist media scholarship by extending Braidotti's posthuman lens to mainstream television and by demonstrating how spirituality can function as emotional and ethical intelligence within contemporary life.

Theoretically, the study bridges feminist, religious, and posthuman perspectives; culturally, it highlights how media narratives shape public ideas of goodness, care, and intelligence in a rationalized world. Future research can compare parallel figures across different series or cultural contexts and investigate audience reception to trace how viewers interpret the coexistence of faith and reason in female characters.

In sum, Mary Cooper models an ethics of resilience: she nurtures, resists, and translates—embodying a dynamic synthesis of belief and intellect that enriches debates on gender, faith, and posthuman identity in twenty-first-century media.

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