Above all she stands out in the crowd. Her popularity is worldwide. She is known not for her beauty, but for her envy. She is the talk of the town and an outsider to all. Her hateful schemes and crooked ways go before her. She has been characterized by her acts and overlooked in her emotions. Placed in a box with no way of escape is the wicked stepmother who all have come to hate.

It was the summer of 2013 and I was just days away from marrying my boyfriend of less than two years. My heart was filled with excitement as I anticipated the celebration of our nuptials. I had finally found “the one”. He was kind, compassionate, loving and sincere. Daniel had great qualities I knew were hard to come by in our day and age. He had just about everything I had ever hoped for in a man. But then, there is always a catch, right? The man of my dreams had two little girls…with his ex-wife. All the years I spent as a dreaming of my perfect fairytale never included children. I never once daydreamed about becoming the second wife- the stepmother!

Don’t get me wrong- I love kids. I just never planned on raising someone else’s. The man of my dreams was a full-time single parent to two little girls, Ellie and Alexis. I pinched myself. I felt like I was on an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. With it being just days away from our wedding, reality began to set in. I wasn’t just becoming a wife- a newlywed bride- I was becoming a stepmother. My stomach cringed at the thought of the title- stepmother. I dared myself to say it aloud. And when I did, I didn’t like what I heard. A wave of images flooded my brain. Classic Disney movies started replaying in my mind. The word “stepmother” tasted like
poison in my mouth. I vowed never to say the word again. After all, I was a nice Christian girl from a loving family. I could never be anyone’s wicked stepmother!

We’ve all become familiar with the term “wicked stepmother”. We may have even used it ourselves. We’ve spent hours watching movies and reading books all about wicked stepmothers and their plots to destroy their stepchildren. From the time we could sit through an entire Disney movie we have been repetitively introduced to the notorious matriarch of the blended family. She may have been old and wrinkly in one story or young and cute in another, but don’t be mistaken- it was always the same woman in every story. Her physical description was merely a façade. And by time you neared the end of the story you would see her true colors. Jealousy ate away at her heart, causing her to try and destroy her stepchildren. Yet every attempt proved in vain and she never came out the victor.

Throughout history the stepmother has been portrayed as evil and deceiving. She has received the most criticism out of all family members. She has been attacked by just about every form of media. From stories such as *Snow White* to *Cinderella* to *Parent Trap*, the stepmother has been labeled as the antagonist. To my knowledge, she has never been the protagonist or hero—except maybe in a Hallmark movie. The writers have rarely given the stepmother a voice in the matter. And have hardly even relayed her thoughts to the audience. All we see is one side; her maleficence. In the story of *Cinderella*, her evil stepmother made her do chores all day and emotionally abused her. She favored her biological children and made sure they had the best of the best. In *Parent Trap*, Meredith- the evil stepmother- had plans to send her twin stepdaughters to boarding school until they graduated. The stereotype that has plagued the ever-growing stepmother population has become more of a “thorn in the flesh” than just an idea in a fairy tale.
Have you ever asked yourself why stepmothers are too often categorized as evil? Have you thought about the psychology behind a stepmother—her feelings, struggles and emotions? Perhaps there is more than meets the eye when it comes to the infamous stepmother.

In order to understand the stepmother and how she got a bad reputation, you must dig beneath the surface of what is being presented in the mass media. Only then may you begin to put the pieces together to create a clear picture. The myth of the wicked stepmother has its roots in the actions of this woman, but it does not examine the psychological and emotional struggles that she encounters in this role. It merely groups together all stepmothers into one category without any explanation. Does this grouping—this myth—affect stepmothers and how do they cope with it? By reintroducing the stepmother firstly as a woman and establishing common struggles that she faces, you will learn of the effects that the myth has on her as a woman and motherly figure and ultimately debunking the myth that all stepmothers are evil. The truth is many stepmothers are simply misunderstood; this paper is to give them a voice.

The myth began hundreds of years ago when the term ‘stepparent’ originated from the Old English word ‘steop’, meaning bereavement (Christian 28-29). A person became a stepparent when they would marry a widow or widower. They literally were “stepping” in as a replacement parent for the children of their spouse. There was no blood relation between a stepparent and their stepchildren. There were both stepmothers and stepfathers, yet somehow stepfathers were put on the back burner and throughout the years have remained a silent member of the blended family. It is in fact, the stepmother who became the center of attention. She became infamous and her fame was soon capitalized on by the retelling of century old fairy tales in the media at large. The idea of the wicked stepmother has been used throughout history, especially in fairytales such as Snow White and Cinderella. According to Ceglian and Gardner,
the idea of the wicked stepmother “has been traced back to ninth-century China” (qtd in Christian 29), and though hundreds of years have passed and new worlds have been discovered since, the myth of has survived and expanded. In today’s society the myth is kept alive through films and books and other forms of entertainment. Modern day movies such as *The Parent Trap* and *StepMonster* perpetuate the negative stereotype for every new generation. Children who watch Disney movies, are being introduced to the stepmother as an evil woman- not motherly at all. The majority of Disney’s early films depict an evil stepmother as one of the main characters- often the villain (Christian 29). This is the image and character that these films are ascribing to the stepmother and in turn giving children a false representation of her.

“Yet, fairy tales and plays are not the only sites of the perpetuation of this myth. Popular news media are equally responsible…a search of newspaper stories reveals many titles and excerpts that illustrate the myth of the 'wicked stepmother’” (Christian 29). That is a prime example of the cyclical nature of this never-ending myth. We all, at some point in our childhood, become introduced to this myth that dates back hundreds of years only to regurgitate it when we are older. This is more than just a “child’s myth”. And that is evident in the different forms of media. It is the adults who are producing the material that perpetuates this myth. Over and over again we see it replayed. It’s the same old sad song and we can predict the ending every time.

After I got married, I quickly assumed role as the matriarch in our household. It didn’t take much time for me to start taking on motherly tasks- as it came both naturally and by learning from my own mother at a young age. My stepchildren had already taken a liking to me when my husband and I began dating. Although I had dreaded being called a stepmom and was nervous about raising two young girls, everything seemed to work out just fine. Things went pretty smoothly…at first. And then came the onslaught of emotions. Feelings I had never felt
before began to swell up on the inside of me. I wondered if I was doing a good job at raising the girls. I wondered if I was doing more than I should as a stepmother. Where were my boundaries? How much should I love these little girls? Would it ever feel like they were really my own?

When I would get upset with them or have to discipline them I would beat myself up- saying that I was just a wicked stepmother.

I began to act a bit weird because I didn’t know the answers to these questions, so all I knew to do was to remove myself from involvement just a little bit. I would have my husband pick up my slack. I wanted to see if that would make things better; if I would feel less like a stepmother and could be more of the fun older sister type. But then came along their biological mom. Although she had been gone for quite some time she stormed into our lives as if all were right. And then I became even more confused. I couldn’t seem the get ahold of my role in this family. It was a very stressful time and many tears were shed. Not knowing your place in your own family is very disheartening.

One of the biggest issues for a stepmother is finding her place in her new family. There are so many variations of a stepfamily- father/stepmother, mother/stepfather, absent biological parents and so on- that a stepmother may take many years to find how she fits into the family. “From the standpoint of children’s lives, an increasing number are living with their fathers and many will experience having ‘two mothers’: a resident stepmother and a non-resident biological mother” (King 1178).

Becoming a stepmother in name only is easy to do, but actually living out the role is an entirely different subject. Her new family may unknowingly put strain on her role simply by their expectations. The children may expect her to do one thing and the husband another- causing
“role strain” and “role conflict” (Whiting 101). Stepmothers struggle with knowing whether to be a “big sister” or a mom (Whiting 101). The line between a stepmom and a biological mom can be quite blurry at times. And knowing what to do and when to do it can be difficult if the stepmother doesn’t know where her place in her family is. While every stepfamily is unique, the struggles (both emotional and psychological) are mostly the same. When a woman becomes a stepmother she must develop a relationship with her stepchild that is both motherly and parental, but at the same time keep from overstepping her boundaries with the biological mom (Hart 129). This struggle to find her place can be so overwhelming that some women choose to give up and they completely remove themselves from the equation. Unlike the mythical plot of the stepmother to destroy her children, some real life stepmothers actually choose to “opt” out instead. There is no death wish or curse, there is simply heartache. In most cases, the biological mom is alive and well and actively assuming her role as mother to her children. And many times the children are not willing to accept this new wife of their father’s. Herein lies the great struggle. There is no defined role for the stepmother. It is all dependent upon the new family she is becoming a part of and their acceptance of her as another motherly figure (Christian 29).

Unlike so many stepmothers I know, I am one of the few who doesn’t have the biological mom involved in the parenting. My stepdaughters immediately gravitated to me and had no problem looking to me as a mother figure. In fact, they began telling their friends I was their mom. I felt so proud and loved that these little people cared so much about me. I thought that nothing could crush that feeling. But then it did. The hurt I felt as they ran to greet their “real” mom was quite unbearable. I remember their faces lighting up as they yelled. “Mommy, Mommy!” They hadn’t seen their biological mom in months, but in an instant I saw their great love for her and it tore me in two. Not because they loved her, but because she got to relish in
something I believed she had no right to. My mind rehearsed all of the things I did and all of the ways I had become a mother to these little girls in every way possible—cooking, laundry, doctor appointments, waking up in the middle of the night to calm them from their bad dreams; the list goes on. The only difference between me and their biological mom was just that— they were flesh of her flesh. They looked like her; they talked her. It didn’t matter that I had taken care of them for longer than she had. None of that mattered. I went back inside my home feeling so empty. Here this woman had just come to take my little girls for the weekend and instead—to me—she took away my dignity. I felt stripped of my role as mother and I had no clue how I was supposed to react. It was from then on (her coming back into their lives on a not so consistent basis) that I began to truly struggle with how I fit in as these little girls’ mother. Maybe there was a reason they still reserved the title “Mommy” for her.

Although my stepchildren told their friends I was their mom on many occasions, they rarely ever called me mom. Matter of fact, in the early years, Alexis would always remind me that I was their stepmother, not their real mom. She was telling the truth. I wasn’t their real mom. But it still hurt to hear her say that. I hated being called the stepmom. It was the worst description I had ever been given. And not only because of the negative connotation, but because I did the stuff that “real” moms do. I didn’t want to be a step! My friend told me that her stepdad said that the only steps were the ones on the back porch. I liked that phrase. I made it my motto. But in the long run trying to run away from being called the stepmom didn’t work and only dug me deeper into my hole of despair. Why couldn’t I find my own place in my new family!

For many stepmothers, the struggle to define their role in their pre-made family is a daily challenge. Because resources for these women are often limited, they try to gain an understanding of their roles from others who have been in the same position. Gleaning from
others’ years of experience, stepmothers use the advice they receive to try and become better stepparents—maintaining their relationships with their stepchildren and not losing themselves while doing so. But according to Patricia Hart, advice isn’t going to be the one thing to help these women figure it out:

I propose that “‘good enough stepmothering’” requires that the stepmother undergo major psychological change in order to successfully address the multiple psychological tasks posed by the new marriage and the children from the prior marriage. This change is an expansion of the self that is a significant step in adult development. It requires the stepmother to develop a maternal/parental attachment to the child while she behaves in a way that respects the limitations imposed by the primacy of the biological parents. It includes the capacity to sustain her experience and understanding of the child as a child in the face of the primitive feelings that can be unleashed in the complex environment of the stepparent family. I call the internal change that facilitates these capacities an “‘internal parental stance.’” Recognizing that the stepmother has a significant impact through both her direct and indirect influence on the life of the child, I will argue that unless the stepmother is able to develop this parental mindset, her relationship with the child, with the best of conscious intentions, is in jeopardy. (Hart 129)

What makes the psychological change—and thus parental mindset—so hard is the fact that a stepmother doesn’t physically carry her stepchildren for nine months. The bond that is formed between a biological mother and her baby during those nine months is special and in most cases something that is not easily broken. So a stepmother must try and assume a bond similar to that
of the birth mother and child- this is a very difficult thing to do for those stepmothers who have never actually had their own children. And for those stepmothers who already had children before their new marriage, the task may be harder because they must try and love their stepchildren as their own. This is no easy thing to do. “She [the stepmother] faces the difficulty of loving someone else’s child and accepting second tier maternal status as well as the sense of inadequacy and vulnerability that comes from stepping into an ambiguously defined role” (Hart 129).

The ambiguity of a stepmother’s role in her family is tough, but studies do show that for many stepmothers the outcome of their efforts can prove to be satisfying. In a study done by Pennsylvania State University, a group of 294 adolescents were surveyed on how close they were to each of the parents. These particular groups of students were all living with their biological fathers and stepmothers yet still had communication with their biological mothers. The results of the survey were rather surprising. Adolescents who said they were closest to their stepmothers were 29%, while those who said they were closest to their mothers were 21%. The majority of the young people – 38% - said they were close to both their biological and stepmothers (King 1186). This did not include factors such as how long the adolescent was living with their stepmother as opposed to the mother. Overall, the study does suggest that not all children loathe their stepmothers and have no relationship with them. In fact, it is just the opposite. This study gives some evidence that the relationship between a stepmother and her stepchildren can flourish. And that she isn’t always “second” to the biological mother.

The struggle in finding the role of a stepmother and establishing a healthy relationship with her stepchildren is one of the first obstacles that a new stepmother will face, but it may only be second to the obstacle of the biological mom. For women considering marrying a man from a
previous marriage many times there are objections from friends and family. They warn the bride-to-be of the stepchildren and their biological mom (Knox and Zusman 68). While the warning may be overlooked at first, it can become a very regrettable burden.

I will never forget the first time that my stepchildren’s biological mom and I spoke. It wasn’t face to face nor was it pretty, but it did happen. I never felt I had a reason to speak to this woman; therefore I never reached out. After all, I was the one raising her kids- not her. I knew more about them than she did. What did I need to talk to her about? From her point-of-view we needed to be friends, but the way she approached that friendship was nothing short of a high school cat fight. Seeing that I had received a Facebook message, I opened my app and was surprised to see a message from my stepchildren’s mom. It was just a few weeks before my husband and I were to be married and I was very curious to see what she had to say. “You have never tried to contact me at all. [You’re] such a Christian. Just sayin.” Anger swelled inside of me as I quickly closed out the message and called my then fiancé. I was livid! And quite frankly so appalled that she would be so rude! I wanted my husband to straighten her out. But instead he calmed me down, telling me to ignore the childish ways that she so easily participated in. I wasn’t sure if he was just being a pushover or if he really was telling me the best thing to do. A tad bit reluctant, I held my tongue and didn’t respond to the message. Later that week, she wrote me again to apologize. It felt great to get an apology, but I soon learned that she would be a repeat offender.

Dealing with the biological mother of the stepchildren, not to mention the ex-wife of her new husband is enough to make anyone go mad. Alongside accepting children that are not her own, the stepmother also has to deal with the ex-wife of her husband in more ways than she may have imagined. For many women, the biological mother is in her children’s lives and therefore
communicates with their father on a very regular basis. This put the stepmother in a very awkward position. “Living with the ghosts of the husband’s first marriage to his previous wife is another issue with which some second wives contend” (Knox and Zusman 69). In other words it becomes a competition- to what I’m not quite sure. The stepmother may feel threatened and jealous of her husband’s ex-wife simply because at one point in time they were together. They have a history. They have children together and that in itself is a daily reminder to the stepmother that there was another woman who came before her. For those women who enter a marriage for the first time expecting their childhood fantasies to come true, this comes as a complete shock. They must come to terms with the fact that their “prince charming” already had a Cinderella.

With all of the psychological and emotional stress that comes with being a stepmother, there are certain inevitable outcomes. The first of which being venting- getting it all out- is one of the most common ways that stepmothers deal with their situations. And who better to vent to than a support group? A group of people in similar situations that won’t judge is what these women seek out. Support groups that meet on a weekly basis in a physical location are almost impossible to find. Instead, there are hundreds of online support groups in their place. These groups (often found on Facebook or just by googling) allow women an outlet to vent all of their frustrations and worries. They provide a way of anonymity and judgment free discourse. Support groups are nothing new- they have been around for years and are known for their effectiveness in helping people cope with their situations, but online groups offer support on an entirely different level (Christian 31).

Aside from anonymity, these groups allow for what can be referred to as the stranger-on-a-plane phenomenon. Anyone can say anything. And in the event that a stepmother feels the need to share some of her deepest secrets, she can type away without restraint. There is no fear of
saying the wrong thing to the wrong person because nobody knows each other! These groups
seem to have a strong membership, especially because they offer 24/7 access that a non-online
group wouldn’t be able to do (Wright 1999). One important aspect of an online group is that it is
more conducive to more “extreme, and in some cases, even rude behavior” (Sassenberg 362).
This is caused by the anonymity of the members in the group and their lack of interpersonal
connections (Sassenberg 362). So it is not unusual to see many hateful comments and posts.
Many stepmothers take advantage of these groups-using them to put their feelings out there
without feeling guilty. “This [online groups] helps them make sense of their situations as well as
build community among the other members” (Christian 33).

I personally am a member of one of these online support groups for stepmothers. I turned
to the group after I began to struggle with finding my role and dealing with the biological mom
of my stepchildren. And once I joined the group, I found a community of women just like me. I
would stay up for hours just reading stories from women all over the states. I remember feeling a
sigh of relief as I had found people who understood me! The thoughts and feelings I had been
harboring suddenly didn’t make me feel so bad. I realized that it was normal- I wasn’t the only
one experiencing the wave of emotions that came from my situation. It was a breath of fresh air.
But what was supposed to be a support group and means of encouragement soon became a
medium for me to vent. And when I say vent, I mean to tell-all and hold nothing back- even if it
was mean or hateful. I soon found that the group was full of women who loathed their husband’s
ex-wives. And many of them would spew hateful things and wish for their husband’s ex-wives to
disappear or even worse- die! There were plenty of good posts, but enough of the bad ones to
make me second guess what really was going on in the “support” group.
Be it known to them [stepmothers] or not, many have a bad habit of throwing stones. In what Christian refers to as binary opposition, stepmothers often demonize the biological mother in an effort to remove the wicked stepmother myth from themselves (38). She goes on to say that there are two stages in creating binary opposition: the first being to set up the biological mother as evil or incapable of doing the right thing. Then the stepmother sets herself up as the savior or one who makes all right, thus creating good versus bad (39). The idea of the biological mom being the evil one is seen all throughout online support groups. In many of them, it is the focal point of discussion within the group. Does this role reversal help the stepmother or hurt her? For an average non-stepparent viewing one of these groups, they may see an entirely different story.

My husband heard my phone go off and picked it up for me. It was a notification that someone had posted in my online support group. Out of curiosity, he went to the group and began reading the posts. While I’m sure he isn’t the first “outsider” to ever read our conversations within the group, he was the first person I knew to do it. And what he said after reading really set in with me. He was shocked to find me participating in this sort of group. I quickly defended myself telling him he doesn’t understand what it is like to be a stepparent and that I need to talk with women who understand me. But that wasn’t of his concern. He said that all it seemed like to him was a bash fest and a bunch of women who hated their lives. I rolled my eyes and grabbed my phone from him vowing to never let him see that again. But days later I found myself pondering on his words. I decided to scroll through the group again, this time paying close attention to the topics of conversation. And sure enough, most of it revolved around resentment and hate. These women were not happy and questioned their marriages on a daily basis. The support and encouragement came in the form of rioting and ganging up on all other
members of the stepfamily. Of course, I didn’t look down on these women, but instead saw a need that needed to be filled. Positivity and hope.

There is a growing need for information and support for stepmoms. “Although a certain amount of stress and adjustment may be common among stepmothers, intervention approaches aimed at preparing stepmothers for and helping them to understand and manage the complexity and stress of stepmothering might reduce the risk for depressive symptoms in the group” (Shapiro and Stewart 541). I believe that many stepmothers and stepmothers-to-be can have a better understanding of the psychological and emotional changes they will experience if they are given the right resources. This includes books, support groups and mentoring. There is a great benefit in having support from your peers. To know that you aren’t the only one feeling the way you do makes you feel less insane.

If you would have asked me a few years ago if I would be interested in a man with kids, I would have laughed in your face. Really, I would have tossed my head back and let out a hysterical giggle. Who grows up wanting to get married to a man who has already had a family? No one that I know of and certainly not me. My thinking was the obvious- “baby mama” drama and bebe kids. I had no idea that those were just surface situations. I had no clue the range of emotions that I would feel or how my personal life would change drastically. Over the past couple of years I have spent countless hours researching stepmothers, stepfamilies and stepchildren. In a desperate attempt to find answers I ended up finding more questions. I found an entire sect of women who have gone unnoticed for centuries. A group of women who have been mislabeled and sold as is. No one ever really taking the time to look past the label and see what was on the inside. The struggles of finding her place in a pre-made family, the emotions of becoming an instant mom and the constant balancing act between her and the biological mom are
a few of the factors to be dealt with when becoming a stepmother. That is what this “wicked stepmother” is dealing with. Her entire image remains in jeopardy because people continue to view her actions instead of her motives. The truth of the matter is that these are strong women who choose to take on a more sacrificial role than any other member in the family. They may be capitalized upon in the media, but their worth is far more than a high grossing film. They have fallen prey to writers and become villains to society. Their efforts to stray away from the idea that they are evil or wicked have only dug them further in that hole of despair. The myth that all of them have a secret plot to destroy their stepchildren— that they are evil to the core— can only be debunked when they free themselves from the opinions of others and find their rightful place within their blended families. Only then will they have the power to emerge as victor from an age old folk tale.

Works Cited


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