

**MONSTROUS MOTHERS AND DEAD GIRLS IN  
GILLIAN FLYNN'S *SHARP OBJECTS*  
AND *GONE GIRL***

**MADRES MONSTRUOSAS Y CHICAS MUERTAS  
EN *SHARP OBJECTS* Y *GONE GIRL*,  
DE GILLIAN FLYNN**

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171

**Abstract**

This article explores two predominant images of Gillian Flynn's female characters: the monstrous mother and the missing/dead girl. These two representations of Flynn's female characters showcase the link between female criminality and transgression on the one hand, and the female characters' traumatic history and family dysfunctionality on the other. This article argues that Flynn's use of these two tropes reveals the conflicting facets of female crime, victimhood, and agency in her thrillers, and by so doing her work subverts the murky domain of the portrayal of criminal women in relation to motherhood, mental illness and trauma.

**Keywords:** Gillian Flynn, motherhood, monstrosity, female criminality, trauma.

**Resumen**

Este artículo explora dos imágenes predominantes de los personajes femeninos de Gillian Flynn: la madre monstruosa y la niña desaparecida/muerta. Estas dos representaciones de los personajes femeninos de Flynn muestran el vínculo entre la criminalidad y la transgresión femeninas, por un lado, y la historia traumática y la disfuncionalidad familiar de los personajes femeninos, por otro. Este artículo sostiene que el uso que hace Flynn de estos dos tropos revela las facetas conflictivas

de la delincuencia femenina, el victimismo y la agencia en sus thrillers, y al hacerlo su obra subvierte el turbio ámbito de la representación de las mujeres delincuentes en relación con la maternidad, la enfermedad mental y el trauma.

**Palabras clave:** Gillian Flynn, maternidad, monstruosidad, criminalidad femenina, trauma.

### **Gillian Flynn’s Mothers, Missing Girls, and Criminal Women**

Gillian Flynn’s *Sharp Objects* and *Gone Girl* present the case for the link between female criminality, a history of childhood trauma and broken families. As far as this link is concerned, Flynn’s work displays two prominent images of female characters: the monstrous mother and the missing/dead girl. The monstrous mother is a figure who harms rather than nurtures her children. She stands for a transgressive woman who subverts the image of a loving devoted mother and challenges the constructions of normative femininity. *Sharp Objects* and *Gone Girl* also feature dead and/or missing females who disappear or are murdered within complicated family situations. Like the monstrous mother, the missing/dead female is often depicted with a sordid family history and trauma. The missing/dead girl narrative stands both as a parallel and in contrast to that of the monstrous mother. Both narratives are used to navigate complex issues of femininity, motherhood, criminality, and agency; however, there are nuances in the ways Flynn’s narratives negotiate these issues. Flynn’s thrillers are structured around female characters who constantly walk the line between victimhood (due to these characters’ long and distorted history of personal and family trauma) and agency (as perpetrators of vicious crimes). The oscillation between the female identities of the victim and the criminal creates the tension, reinforces the mystery and is central to the plot of Flynn’s thrillers.

172

In both *Gone Girl* and *Sharp Objects*, Flynn focuses on negative and often controversial portrayals of female protagonists by portraying subversive roles of the mother, the wife, and the daughter. Both works depict female characters as bad mothers and/or in constant struggle with their mothers —Camille and Amma are in a battle of survival with their mentally unstable mother in *Sharp Objects*, while Amy in *Gone Girl* is exploited by her parents for material gain as she stars as the main character in a successful children’s book, and then she herself uses motherhood as a cover to carry out an elaborate revenge plan to frame her husband for murder. In both works, the “bad mother” and the “dead girl” are significant for the characterization of the female criminal and the conflicting questions of victimization and agency.

The “Pathological Mommy”, to use Andrew Scull’s term (2016: 341), is an integral component in Flynn’s thriller scheme.<sup>1</sup> The focus on motherhood sheds

light not only on family dynamics and the economic and class background within the family but also on issues of femininity, womanhood and the perception of the sociocultural standards of good *versus* bad mothers. Many scholars have studied and addressed the role of mothers from myriad perspectives; the debates that examine the position and roles of women in relation to employment, reproductive rights and gender biases all have motherhood at the heart.<sup>2</sup> The social expectations for women are also part of the debate on motherhood, as the gender identity of women has often been defined by mothering. For example, Rosi Braidotti's article "Mothers, Monsters, and Machines" argues that "[w]oman as a sign of difference is monstrous" (1997: 65). Braidotti contends that the female body, especially the pregnant maternal body, is a representation of the "Other" as it "provides the fuel for the production of normative discourse" (1997: 64). Barbara Creed also argues that when a woman is defined as monstrous, it is often related to her role as a mother. Creed speaks of various faces of the "monstrous-feminine": the archaic mother, the monstrous womb, the witch, the vampire, and the possessed woman (1993: 7). In terms of the monstrous mother, Creed describes her as the "parthenogenetic mother, the mother as primordial abyss, the point of origin and of end" (1993: 17).<sup>3</sup>

173

In public discourse, mothers are often portrayed within a continuum of "age old Madonna-whore poles of perfect and failed motherhood" (Douglas and Michaels 2004: 27). In this regard, Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels explore the good mother/bad mother discourse, identifying the "good mother" in terms of what they call "the new momism", which is defined as "intensive mothering" where "everyone watches us, we watch ourselves, and other mothers and we watch ourselves watching ourselves" (2004: 5). Indeed, mothers always struggle with meeting social standards of being good mothers. However, when a mother is "deemed substandard" she is judged harshly and the state often intervenes (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 1998: 2). There are images and stereotypes attached to "bad" mothers in American culture —"the welfare mother, the teen mother, the career woman who has no time for her kids, the drug addict who poisons her fetus, the pushy stage mother, the overprotective Jewish mother" (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 1998: 2). One that is not listed here is the criminal mother, who is easily considered a "bad" mother; when a mother commits a criminal action, she is readily deemed monstrous. The criminal mother is subversive as she challenges social norms of femininity and motherhood as well as she breaks legal codes.

Gillian Flynn situates the monstrous mother at the heart of her narratives as a figure who pushes the boundaries of the representations of women, particularly criminal women in the thriller genre. The aim of this article is to look at the depiction of mothers when they commit criminal acts in Flynn's thrillers. It is

argued that the thriller offers a unique platform to establish a connection between the criminal woman and the “pathological mommy”, first by debunking the mythology around mothers as only loving and docile, and second by subverting the depiction of women within a genre that relies on women as helpless victims.<sup>4</sup> Flynn’s work also casts doubt on female victimhood by portraying female characters who perform the role of the victim from a position of dominance (Amy in *Gone Girl*) or assume a victim identity but one that is tied to or born out of criminality (Amma in *Sharp Objects*). This confusion between victimhood and criminality in the portrayal of female characters allows for complex female representations and demonstrates how they struggle with a difficult and traumatic family history. This uncertainty, as far as the roles of women are concerned, is also evident in the missing/dead girl trope found in Flynn’s work.

174

Flynn presents a missing/dead female narrative, which reveals the cultural obsession with missing or dead, often murdered, females suffering a violent death. It exposes the morbid fascination with stories of missing, abused, tortured, and murdered women as well as the interest in their bodies, especially the sight of discarded, wounded female bodies. It points to what Mark Seltzer calls “wound culture”, which is a “public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and open persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound” (1998: 1). Trauma, as far as “wound culture” is concerned, becomes the “switchpoint” between bodily and psychic functions and between the private and the public, where the body is the signifier of the “national malady of trauma and violence” (Seltzer 1998: 6). The female body in crime narratives is often a site of investigation as well as trauma for those involved in her death. According to Alice Bolin, the “dead girl” presents “existential knowledge” and a kind of purity that stands in sharp contrast to the violence committed against her (2018: 14-15). Girls are shown as “wild, vulnerable creatures who need to be protected from their own sexualities” (14-15). What Bolin calls the “dead girl” narrative exposes societal anxiety by revealing and expanding the “effect and the meaning of an individual murder” (16). It also shows the “impulse to prey on young [women]”, as though it is “both inevitable and beyond the control of men” to enact violence (15). The main component of this narrative is “the investigator’s haunted, semi-sexual obsession with the Dead Girl, or rather, the absence she has left” (47). In crime fiction texts, the dead female often becomes the object of the male’s effort to resolve the puzzle that revolves around her body, and thus the dead girl narrative invites a reconsideration of the position of the dead and missing female body in the discourse on femininity and violence.

In *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, Elisabeth Bronfen explores the conjunction of femininity, death and the aesthetic in literature and

culture, shedding light on images of women as connected to the omnipresence of death in western culture. Bronfen speaks of the cultural stereotype of the dead female victim where she is “killed again” in representation; the threat of both death and femininity is “recuperated by representation [...] because this means appeasing the threat of real mortality, of sexual insufficiency, of lack of plenitude and wholeness” (Bronfen 2017: xii). Claiming that because “death is at work in the cultural construction of femininity” (208), the death of a woman becomes a “social sacrifice” (181), and the

equation between femininity and death is such, that while in cultural narratives the feminine corpse is treated like an artwork, or the beautiful woman is killed to produce an artwork, conversely, artworks emerge only at the expense of a beautiful woman’s death and are treated like feminine corpses. (72-73)

Flynn uses the missing/dead female in both *Gone Girl* and *Sharp Objects* to highlight the centrality of the female body and the link between criminality, trauma, and femininity. This way, *Gone Girl* and *Sharp Objects* reveal the gender ideologies that surround women in relation to media and violence. The conjunction between the trope of the missing/dead girl and the malevolent mother in these two narratives is performed through female protagonists who represent complex dynamics of agency and victimization and, at the same time, in relation to the trauma that lies behind these dynamics.

175

### **The Pathological Mommy and her Daughters in *Sharp Objects***

*Sharp Objects* follows the return of journalist Camille Preaker to her hometown of Wind-Gap to investigate and cover the murder of two young girls who attend the same school as her younger half-sister, Amma. Whilst the story revolves around the horrific murders of young girls and the investigation uncovering the identity of the killer, it is also about the female characters’ traumatic past and disturbing family relationships. Flynn succeeds in presenting a thriller narrative that is more than just a mystery solved at the end by a detective. Instead, *Sharp Objects* uses the mystery around the story of the dead girls to dive deeply into the psychology of motherhood, and the entrapment of female characters in cycles of violence and their own traumatic family history —a history that repeats itself again and again in persistent yet futile attempts to resolve the childhood trauma perpetuated by the malevolent mother. In *Sharp Objects* Flynn situates violence by and against women against the trauma and dysfunctionality of a matriarchal family. The novel tells the story of a controlling and mentally unstable matriarch, Adora, and the trauma endured by her daughters,

Camille, Amma and their dead sister Marian, at the hands of their mother. There are two parallel stories of dead girls in this novel. Firstly, we hear about the killing of two young girls, Amma's friends Natalie and Ann, who were brutally tortured and killed. It turns out that Amma, the youngest daughter of the Crellin family, is the one who has committed these murders. The fact that Amma, a victim of her own mother, turns out to be a murderer, reveals a cycle of trauma and violence. Secondly, there is the mysterious death of Marian, Adora's daughter, which is revealed not to be due to an illness, as is believed by people in the town; rather the young girl was poisoned and slowly killed by her own mother. This meeting point between violence, trauma and the female body points to a larger discourse that delineates the missing/dead female narrative and underlines a common culture "of the atrocity exhibition, in which people wear their damage like badges of identity, or fashion accessories" (Seltzer 1998: 2).

176

Flynn's story exposes the monstrous mother that stands behind the violence the female characters face and cause, and explores the effects of this mother on those around her, especially young girls. Flynn also twists the dead girl victim narrative often found in crime fiction by shedding light on her complex female characters who often cross the line from victimhood to transgression and criminality. *Sharp Objects* thus paints dark and disagreeable images of the mother as well as her daughters, who are both victims and perpetrators of violence. The depiction of the monstrous malevolent mother in Flynn's story shows the link between femininity and violence on the one hand, and trauma on the other. The monstrous mother is Adora Crellin, a wealthy aristocratic southern lady who also suffers from Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy. This is a disorder where the "caregiver", as the nurse at the pediatric ward at the hospital where Adora's daughter Marian died explains, is "*almost always* the mother" and she deliberately "makes her child ill to get attention. You got Munchausen, you make yourself sick to get attention. You got MBP, you make your child sick to show what a kind, doting mommy you are" (Flynn 2006: 228, emphasis in original). It is something, she continues, "a wicked fairy queen would do" (228), and considering Adora's money and social class, it seems that she embodies that role of the wicked fairy queen. Adora's first target was Marian, whom the mother showered with attention, care and love only when the child was sick: "Marian is such a doll when she's ill, she dotes on me and wants me with her all the time. I love wiping away her tears" (242). Adora was obsessed with her daughter's illness and kept a diary in which she documented Marian's illness and how the doctors were impressed with her as a mother saying that she "was an angel and that every child should have a mother like me" (242). Adora's diary entry after Marian died shows this intense obsession with her daughter and death itself: "Marian is dead. I couldn't stop. I've lost 12 pounds and am skin and bones. Everyone's been incredibly kind" (242).

Through Camille's narration, readers see the effects of Adora's destructive motherhood. Camille narrates the episodes of Marian's illness and her mother's obsession with her sister. In contrast, Camille recalls her mother's neglect and coldness towards her, which seemingly shaped her upbringing and her mental state. Camille has always resented her mother, and they have a tense relationship. Adora admits that "I've decided today to stop caring for Camille and focus on Marian" (Flynn 2006: 242). Camille was not a "good patient —being sick only makes her angry and spiteful" according to the mother, who then adds that Camille "doesn't like me to touch her [...] I hate her" (242). Adora's open admission of hate towards her own child can be viewed in light of the mother's mental state and the broken mother-daughter relationship. In this regard, Camille recalls a story of her roommate's mother bringing her daughter safety pins in case she needed them. Camille's reaction was that of surprise before a kind gesture offered by a mother to her daughter: "Mine phoned once a month and always asked the same practical questions (grades, classes, upcoming expenses)" (96).

In keeping with this, Camille is shown to suffer from a severe trauma after repressing a lot of painful memories from her childhood, especially the trauma of losing her sister Marian at the hand of their mother. The narrative illustrates the failure of the processing of her trauma; Camille is haunted by her past and her pain is literally painted on her body. She cuts herself and admits: "I am a cutter [...] Also a snipper, a slicer, a carver, a jabber [...] I have a purpose. My skin, you see, screams" (60). She uses her mother's steak knife to inflict pain. Describing her first cutting experience when she was just thirteen years old, she carved the word "wicked" into her skin and felt that cutting is "like a child along red imaginary lines. Cleaning myself. Digging in deeper. Cleaning myself [...] Wicked. Relief" (60). Camille embodies words literally and the words on her body become her main narrative, a vehicle for whatever attempts to escape language and expression —her trauma. For female characterization in Flynn's text, trauma is the trigger behind the mystery of the girls' murders. Moreover, Camille's troubling relationship with her mother is the cause behind her trauma and self-harm. When Adora sees her daughter's scarred body on a shopping trip to get a dress for a party, instead of sympathy and compassion for her daughter's pain, the mother shows resentment and anger: "Oh, dear God [...] Look what you've done to yourself [...] I hope you just loved it. I hope you can stand yourself" (121).

Adora needs to be at the center of her daughters' lives and assume control over them to the point of suffocation and death. She seeks attention and love from her daughters but she takes loving and caring for her children to the extreme. What Camille describes as her mother's "voraciousness about children" is not separate from the violence and control that she exhibits (Flynn 2006: 96). Camille tells a

story from her childhood of watching her mother interact with a baby of a family friend at their house. Adora was “staring at the child almost lasciviously” and then she pressed her lips “hard against the baby’s apple slice of a cheek” and “took a tiny bit of flesh between her teeth, and gave it a little bite” (97). Camille describes her reaction saying that even as a child she felt “a jealousy, a resentment” towards her mother (96). It is a negative and obsessive image of motherhood, one defined by Adora’s admission that “[she] couldn’t stop” (242).

It is thus clear that the Crellin household is matriarchal and governed by the tyranny of Adora. Adora has all the power in the household while her husband, Camille’s stepfather (Alan Crellin), has no voice. The most complicated aspect in this family, however, is Adora’s conflicting relationship with her daughters. While she is cold and even cruel to Camille, she showers Amma with love and affection. Gradually, the narrative illustrates the reasons behind this behavior. While Camille rebels, Amma plays along with her mother, she lets her mother give her the medication that makes her sick yet she also revels in the attention she is given. Throughout the story Camille is presented as a puzzle; she is full of conflicting feelings towards her mother, her family and even the whole town. She refuses to end up like her sister Marian, another “dead girl”, and turns her pain, anger, and frustration towards her mother inwards. Her body is a full canvas of her traumatic past, while it also speaks to the present as readers come to view her relationship with her sister Amma and her reunion with her mother when she returns to her hometown.

178

In the case of Amma’s traumatized self, following Miller’s theories, Adora is “a girl-woman who occupies an ambiguous space between appearances of innocence and expressions” (2019: 10), while Amma oscillates between the roles of a child victim and a ruthless killer—an angel at home and a devil in the streets. Amma plays the role of the “little doll” for her mother: “I wear this for Adora. When I’m home, I’m her little doll” (Flynn 2006: 43), letting the doting mother pamper her but also make her sick. Amma soaks up the attention that her mother gives and feels contentment. Yet “such childish things” are “left at home” (77), and Amma transforms in not only the way she dresses and behaves but she also turns into a killer outside the house. Amma, in the public sphere, metamorphoses from a doll in a sundress to “a miniskirt, platform sandals, and a tube top” (77), and she exchanges the dollhouse that she plays with at home for alcohol, sex and a gang.

The sexualization of the child exposes the dysfunctional family and the harm that Amma suffers under her mother’s hand, but it also reveals the doubling in her personality. The two faces of Amma—a child and an over sexualized girl—disclose the fissure in her psyche and the trauma that lies behind her dissociative behavior. It is the trauma of being a victim of her mother’s constant manipulation, which is



soon translated into violence. The relationship between Amma and her mother is at the heart of the argument that Flynn's thriller relies on the morbid relationship between a mother and her daughters to emphasize the two competing narratives of the malevolent mother and the missing/dead girl, which in turn highlights the tie between femininity and violence exposed in this novel.

Moreover, the temporal fluidity in Flynn's story shows how the female characters navigate their reality. The story moves smoothly between the past and present, which creates more tension around the murder mystery of the two dead girls, and at the same time underlines the trauma and the complex family history of the female characters. Readers see the details of the crimes unfold through Camille's eyes in the story. She demystifies and resolves the mystery of the murders and brings attention to the conflicting facets of femininity, victimhood and power. In the end, the answer to the puzzle of the dead girls and the trauma within the Crellin family is the monstrous mother. As Camille states,

Sometimes I think illness sits inside every woman, waiting for the right moment to bloom. I have known so many sick women all my life. Women with chronic pain, with ever-gestating diseases. Women with conditions [...] Women get consumed. (Flynn 2006: 204)

179

Therefore, in presenting “a lineage of disturbed women”, *Sharp Objects* focuses on femininity in a display that reveals a tension between public “performance” and “private deviance” (Miller 2019: 9). Femininity in the novel is closely related to criminality and monstrosity. The text highlights female monstrosity as the source of all the disturbing events in town. Although Adora's daughters are victims of their mother's Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy and had to undergo an unstable upbringing and the death of a sibling, the novel also suggests that there is a mirroring between the mother and her daughters. Flynn establishes Amma as a “monstrous double of the mother” (Thornham 2015: 55), as both Amma and Adora killed girls, while Amma herself is the product of her mother's abusive upbringing. This replication complicates the demarcation lines between victimhood and criminality on the one hand, and victimhood and agency on the other. Is the thirteen-year-old child, Amma, responsible for her criminal actions? The answer to the question, though not clear, may be seen through the dynamics of transgression and dominance in relation to femininity at play in the text.

Through a family full of dysfunction and destruction, Flynn brings to the fore the origin of female monstrosity and dissects the inner workings of femininity and motherhood in this narrative. The story reveals generational hatred and damage in the family structure. Adora says to Camille “I think I finally realized why I don't love you [...] You remind me of my mother Joya. Cold and distant and so, so smug” (Flynn 2006: 148). Then Adora goes into her own history to confirm that

her mother “never loved me, either. And if you girls won’t love me, I won’t love you” (148). There is a genealogical aspect in the representation of Adora as a mother, as she is the source of the disturbing events that happen within that family. In her article “‘Emissaries of Death and Destruction’: Reading the Child-as-Killer in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and *Sharp Objects*”, Alyson Miller proposes that Adora is “a wicked source, the product [...] of a conflicted maternal heritage” (2019: 10). Through this child killer, Flynn’s novel also presents the case of an “internalization of the regulatory practices of patriarchy” where Amma’s monstrosity is an “extreme version” of a “patriarchal logic that seeks to annihilate [...] the presence of the ‘other’” (9). Amma, as part of an “ancestry of monstrous women” and a “biological destiny of evil” represents an “iteration of the dominant culture” (9). That is, the murders that Amma commits can be viewed through the lens of misogynistic violence, as they involve not only torturing and killing girls but also silencing them (taking out their teeth and keeping them as trophies) and discarding their bodies. Amma’s motive for committing these horrific murders is jealousy; she was jealous of the attention that her mother was giving to these girls, but it is also clear that the abuse that Amma endured under her mother’s hand has turned into rage and violence.

180

Amma thus turns into a ruthless killer and becomes obsessed with killing. When she pulls the girls’ teeth, Amma uses them to decorate her dollhouse, for its marble floor. The dollhouse itself becomes more than a child’s game to Amma. It is the site of violence, a site of the trophies of her murders. The dollhouse, an exact replica of the Crellin household with the exact same design and color scheme, holds the secrets of family suffering and trauma. Talking to her sister, Amma describes the dollhouse as her “fancy”, and Camille cannot help but notice that the “words floated out of her mouth sweet and round like butterscotch, [...] but the phrase was definitely my mother’s. Her little doll, learning to speak just like Adora” (Flynn 2006: 43). The dollhouse shows the child in Amma, yet it also reveals a dark and malevolent side of the thirteen-year-old girl that mirrors her mother’s monstrosity.

The symbolism of dolls that runs throughout the narrative confirms the pathology that dictates female characterization in the book. It is not merely associated with Amma, but the image of Adora as a “doll” is constantly invoked in the story. The motif of dolls is indicative of the construction of femininity in this narrative on the one hand, and the friction between motherhood and childhood on the other. Adora, the mother, is presented as girlish, even childish, in the way she dresses and acts. She is “like a girl’s very best doll, the kind you don’t play with” (Flynn 2006: 24). The reference to Adora in terms of a doll infantilizes her and highlights her obsession with children; she loves her image as a perfect lady and hostess, but more

than anything she is obsessed with her role as a mother. It is worth mentioning that this image of Adora as a doll also stands parallel to Amma's obsession with the dollhouse, which is ultimately tied to criminality.

In conclusion, we can agree that both Adora and Amma are responsible for killing young girls. By the end of the book, it is confirmed that the presence of Adora as a pathological mother is ubiquitous. When the mystery of the two murdered girls is resolved, fingers are pointed not just at Amma but also at her mother as the reason behind the thirteen-year-old's criminal behavior. The ending brings the two narratives of the dead girl and the monstrous mother together by situating the frightening matriarch against her murderous daughter. By so doing, Flynn challenges the stereotypes of women by creating female characters, a mother and a daughter, who "slip in and between the regulations of a binary in which women are identified as virgins or whores" and "subvert the conventions of feminine social codes" (Miller 2019: 10).

### Amy Dunne Writes her *Gone Girl* Narrative

*Gone Girl* features Amy Dunne who, when the book begins, is missing. The story follows her disappearance and the investigation that centers on her husband, Nick, as the prime suspect for her presumed murder. The second part of the book, however, reveals that Amy masterminded her own disappearance and fabricated a story about her death in order to frame her husband as a punishment for his infidelity. The novel tackles failure in love, relationships, marriage and family, as it exposes the cycles of betrayal and revenge, especially between a husband and a wife. By presenting a vengeful female protagonist, the novel highlights again the connection between female criminality and dysfunctional family dynamics established via the missing/dead girl narrative.

Like *Sharp Objects*, this novel focuses on a complex female protagonist who does harm to her loved ones. *Gone Girl*, however, does not rely on a mother-daughter relationship as the primary plotline; rather, Amy herself represents the malevolent mother and the missing/dead girl. She pretends to be pregnant using her supposed pregnancy as a means to frame Nick for murder and, in the end, to guarantee his silence and make sure that he stays married to her despite his hesitation. Amy herself represents both narratives of the malevolent mother and the dead girl in a manner that, like *Sharp Objects*, brings trauma and dysfunctional families to the fore. Hence, the text displays the close connection between female transgression and criminality on the one hand, and the portrayal of dysfunctional motherhood on the other. Amy, through her compelling characterization and her ambiguous portrayal as an unreliable narrator, plays multiple roles in the narrative. This

character deliberately confuses the reader regarding her victimhood and her implication in serious crimes; she takes on the active roles of the narrator, mother, wife, victim, criminal, and missing/dead woman.

Amy is full of contradictions. While she rejects the role of the wife, she clings to being Nick's spouse at the end, and the narrative ends where it started: Nick and Amy are married within a turbulent relationship. Moreover, she is at odds with her persona of "Amazing Amy", the character in a successful children's book series written by her psychologist parents and inspired by Amy herself as a child. Amy detested the attention she received as a child due to the success of the Amazing Amy books, yet when she stages her disappearance as an adult she carefully crafts the image of a victimized wife, demonstrating that she really wants to be front page news. Amy lies and deceives others by playing certain roles and adopting personas to suit her purposes. For example, at the end of the story, she assumes the role of the victim again: she fabricates the story of being abducted, abused and raped at the hands of her ex-boyfriend Desi Collings, whom she actually killed, and she uses the victim card again as a comeback story to return to her town. Then, she has one more persona, "an absolute hero" who saved herself and Nick. She is "officially in control of [their] story", which Amy says is "wonderfully symbolic" of her marriage (Flynn 2012: 380, 406). These multiple facets of Amy and the "awful fairy-tale reverse transformation" (49), reveal her ability to create different personas to suit her purposes. She is relentless when it comes to fulfilling her goals and ultimately does not hesitate to resort to crime to express her voice and write her own "Gone Girl" story. In addition to this, Amy uses motherhood as a means of manipulation to achieve her goal of revenge. Like Adora, Amy twists and subverts those social perceptions around motherhood that usually revolve around love, selflessness and sacrifice. Although readers do not see her as a mother in the text, Amy's ploy of using pregnancy is important to the ending of the book in terms of displaying Amy's capability of transgressing social norms and disrupting commonly accepted constructions of femininity and motherhood.

182

In this novel, the link between criminality and motherhood is woven through Amy's narrative of being missing and/or dead. Amy pretends to be pregnant as she disappears so as to increase people's sympathy for her and thus complete her revenge plan. She writes a diary before she disappears with the intention of framing Nick, and she deliberately fakes an identity that sketches her as a victimized pregnant wife. In this diary, she points out that "now might be the right time. To start a family. Try to get pregnant. I know it's crazy [...] I have become the crazy woman who wants to get pregnant because it will save her marriage" (Flynn 2012: 187). Amy, while portraying herself as a wife longing for motherhood, simultaneously writes of Nick's rejection of the idea of having children as follows:

“Now? Now is about the worst time to start a family, which makes him unlikeable and even spiteful” (187). Amy formulated a specific image that would grant her dominance and give her the upper hand while demonizing Nick. However, from Nick’s perspective, he narrates that “I whispered the words, Let’s do this Amy, let’s have a baby—and she said no... just not something she was interested in anymore” (295). The novel is narrated by Amy and Nick, who both turn out to be unreliable narrators. Flynn’s book starts with Nick narrating the story of Amy’s disappearance just before their fifth wedding anniversary, and we hear Amy’s narration through her diary entries. It is not until the second part that we discover that Amy is alive and that they are both lying. Flynn uses the contrasts between the two points of view to flesh out her protagonists’ flaws. The two contradictory narratives about Amy’s pregnancy and the consequent ambiguity are part of this narrative’s mystery. The narration in the hands of Flynn, as it oscillates between Amy and Nick’s voices, plays a significant part in portraying gender roles as well as muddying the truth about the missing/dead girl plotline.

The discovery that Amy’s diary was fabricated by Amy herself, however, casts more doubts on Amy as a victim in the framework of the missing/dead girl story, while at the same time it challenges the social expectations for readers about female victimization. The diary itself is used throughout the novel as a narrative device that undermines and simultaneously confirms female authorship and voice. Amy is aware of the effect that the diary can produce when the police and her community read it, “like it’s some sort of Gothic tragedy” (Flynn 2012: 238). The second part of the book starts with the shocking discovery that Amy is alive and she is the one behind an elaborate revenge plan. The second part starts with these words: “I’m so much happier now that I’m dead. Technically, missing. Soon to be presumed dead. But as shorthand, we’ll say dead” (219). Now the dead girl narrative is completely rewritten by Amy herself, it changes her image from a victim to a victimizer, and she maximizes the dead girl narrative transforming “Diary Amy”—a “wonderful, good-hearted woman”—into a work of fiction to achieve the image of an abused mother-to-be who “chooses the wrong mate and *pays the ultimate price*” (238, emphasis in original).

After she returns from being missing, Amy uses Nick’s semen, which they had saved in a fertility clinic, to impregnate herself when she is threatened by Nick’s decision to write a memoir that he wanted to use to expose Amy’s lies. Amy forces Nick to destroy his memoir by threatening him with his unborn child. Once again, Amy uses motherhood as a weapon in her fraught relationship with Nick. She exploits Nick’s weakness in their “family-values town” against his plan to divorce her. She thus confirms that he “would never [get a divorce] now, not Good Guy Nick [...] believe he’s the kind of guy who’d abandon his wife and child”, and the

novel closes with an image of a future family life where Nick would “stay and suffer with [Amy]” (Flynn 2012: 204). Amy plays on the fantasy of the pregnant woman, and what it represents in society: “Americans like what is easy, and it’s easy to like pregnant women —they’re like ducklings or bunnies or dogs” (258). She eventually succeeds in turning the fantasy into reality when she gets pregnant, and the novel ends with her close to her due date. What sounds like a perfect family on the outside is a rather grim reality on the inside, one that points to a dysfunctional marriage and family. At the end of the novel, Amy explains that she is writing her memoir while expecting a baby with Nick:

You can read more about my thoughts on love in *Amazing*. Out soon! But first: motherhood. The due date is tomorrow. Tomorrow happens to be our anniversary [...] It’s so strange to think: A year ago today, I was undoing my husband. Now I am almost done reassembling him. (414)

184

While the novel is centered on Amy, her revenge and her position within the social institutions of marriage and family are crucial to the psychological construction of Flynn’s female protagonist. Amy and Nick’s relationship is governed by power dynamics that feed on lies and deception, and it is within this framework that the associations between female criminality and victimhood, on the one hand, and family and motherhood, on the other, are negotiated. There is a class and wealth gap between Amy and Nick which creates a constant tension in their relationship. They seem to be chasing each other just like in the “elaborate treasure hunt” they set up and play on their anniversary every year with one “clue leading to the hiding place of the next clue until [he] reached the end, and [his] present” (Flynn 2012: 18). Nick borrows money from Amy to open a bar after he loses his job but he insists on paying her back “with interest because ‘he would not be a man who borrowed from his wife’” (7). Nick’s masculine anxieties are not confined to the financial aspect in his relationship with Amy. There is also the sexist baggage he carries from a misogynistic father who was “wounded, vengeful” and who “just didn’t like women” (60). Through Amy and Nick, *Gone Girl* offers a critique of the state of marriage and family in American society. It debunks the mythology of the perfect family and couple. Amy, through the narrative of her fake disappearance and presumed death and the consequent suspense that results in Nick’s involvement in the investigation, also rewrites the story of family and marriage, which here relies on revenge and greed instead of love, companionship, and devotion. This cynicism around the institutions of family and marriage is summed up by Amy’s confirming that love should be conditional —“if love has no boundaries, no limits, no conditions, why should anyone try to do the right thing ever?” (414).

Flynn in *Gone Girl* also creates a narrative about a woman’s struggles to accept her

role as a wife and her identity as a married woman without a career in a small town, and the road to transgression and violence. It is not merely pure evil that motivates Amy to go the lengths she went to with such careful planning and cunning to frame Nick. It is also a story of the misfit Amy who tries and often fails to please those around her. Amy repeatedly states that she is unhappy not only in her marriage but also in her life. Since she was a child Amy has been under the pressure of “Amazing Amy”. She writes, “My parents have always worried that I’d take Amy too personally” and explains that “I can’t fail to notice that whenever I screw something up, Amy does it right: When I finally quit violin at age twelve, Amy was revealed as a prodigy in the next book” (Flynn 2012: 26). Thus, she writes her own missing/dead girl narrative and then she writes her rebirth story. Crime, a primary element in Amy’s narrative, is not confined to a mere mystery or whodunit to be solved; it is more tied to female characterization. That is, in Flynn’s psychological thriller the focus is on the female character’s psychology and her complicated motivations for faking her death and fabricating an elaborate story to frame her husband.

The divide between the persona of the perfect “Amazing Amy” and the murderous Amy creates the tension behind the mystery of Amy’s story and allows for the missing/dead girl narrative to operate in the book. The literary *doppelgänger* of “Amazing Amy” from her childhood is an embodiment of the perfect childish image that the real Amy dislikes. As an adult, Amy maintains the role of the popular “cool girl” in her marriage. This is a façade that Amy in fact dislikes but uses to hide her revenge plans against Nick. In a revealing monologue, Amy talks about the “cool girl”, a construction that appeals to men and one that relies on emphasized femininity:<sup>5</sup> “I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer” (Flynn 2012: 222). Cool girls, while maintaining “size 2”, are “[h]ot and understanding”, they also never get angry, and “only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want” (222). Although Amy plays the role of the “cool girl” in her marriage to fit in with her husband and people in the small town, she resents this model of femininity, and her words clearly criticize the limited construction that confines women to this formula. As Eva Burke maintains:

Amy has moved from Cool Girl to Gone Girl, from one archetypal embodiment, the acquiescent female, a co-conspirator in her own marginalisation, to another: the victimised or missing woman, a paradigmatic void of sorts into which anything can be, and frequently is, projected [...] she is unable to escape the often stifling symbolic confines of femininity in spite of her machinations. (2018: 73-74)

By choosing to write her own disappearance story, Amy is also rewriting her cool girl persona to make room for a new face, albeit not a truthful one, to be displayed through absence —a victimized pregnant wife who is in reality neither pregnant

nor a victim. Although Amy does not escape what Burke calls the “stifling symbolic confines of femininity”, through the missing/dead girl persona she enjoys the freedom to reject and rebel against these confines (2018: 74). Amy states that, once she let Nick see the “Real Amy” who was “so much better, more interesting and complicated and challenging, than Cool Amy” (Flynn 2012: 225), Nick rejected this real Amy. She points out that the “hating began” when she showed her “soulmate” her “true self” and he nonetheless rejected her (225). Of the multiple personas that Amy embodies, the role of the criminal stands as the extreme opposite to that of the good wife and the cool girl. Criminal Amy also subverts the confines of sexist notions and constructions of women’s identities.

The book reveals how Amy reinvents and situates herself as the heroine of the missing/dead girl story who is in this case the other face of the criminal Amy. When Amy writes her own missing/dead girl narrative, which turns out to be unreliable and untruthful, it becomes the locus of her agency. She is the one in control of her story through which she manipulates not only the police investigation but also the media coverage, using the diary and the crumbs of evidence she left behind to help convict Nick. This “Gone Girl” narrative which centers on Amy’s disappearance is an effective part of the thriller plot. Amy weaves a convincing, though deceptive, narrative of her murder at the hand of a jealous husband, and by so doing she recreates her own story of female transgression, and at the same time, she regains her agency. Amy’s “exploitation of certain well-worn feminine tropes” offers space to fill in her identity gaps and “interpret her silences accordingly” (Burke 2018: 73). Amy makes an impact through absence, her “non-presence in the narrative of her own undoing is an irrefutable statement” confirming “an inability or unwillingness to verbalise an implicit indictment of Nick” (Burke 2018: 73). In a missing/dead wife narrative, the husband is usually the antagonist. It is “*always the husband [...] Everyone knows it’s always the husband*” when a woman is missing or killed (Flynn 2012: 43, emphasis in original). Amy writes about Nick as a potential murderer and the media plays the “*Missing Wife game!*” (42, emphasis in original). In her fabricated diary, Amy describes how she caught him looking at her with “those watchful eyes, the eyes of an insect, pure calculation, and I think: *This man might kill me*” (205, emphasis in original). The narrative of the female victim, which feeds on male violence, is twisted and the trajectory of the husband as the only one wholly responsible for the violence is re-evaluated. Using a formulaic narrative of a terrified missing pregnant wife with fingers pointing towards the husband, Flynn subverts crime narrative conventions by making Amy the perpetrator and the agent. She is the one in control of her and Nick’s story. Although Nick is guilty of infidelity, he is trapped in the missing/dead wife narrative where the wife herself is the perpetrator. He is situated within a crime story that often relies on images of victimized broken female bodies, but



in this case, the book problematizes the notion of female victimization.

The various conflicting facets at play in the text cement the competing narratives that center on Amy. There is Amy the meek and victimized wife and mother-to-be, as we see her in her diary, and there is the manipulative avenger Amy of the second part of the book. These two Amys —the adoring wife/mother *versus* the missing/dead avenger— illustrate the blurred lines between these contrasting images, and Flynn destabilizes these narratives by confounding the conventions that frame their representations.

### Conclusion

Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects* and *Gone Girl* succeed in destabilizing the links between femininity and victimhood by presenting women like Adora and Amy who undermine the image of the good wife/mother. By so doing, Flynn's thrillers challenge the societal prescribed roles of "serving an image, authoritative and central, of man: a woman is first and foremost a daughter/a mother/a wife" (Felman 1993: 21). By confusing and sometimes conflating the roles of the victim/criminal, Flynn's two novels undermine and destabilize the certainty and urgency around the constructions of the female criminal, for example, stereotypes such as the evil seductress, the sexual predator, the prostitute, and the murderess. This opens an avenue to reevaluate the thriller genre conventions, especially in relation to feminism and the feminist project within crime fiction.<sup>6</sup> The two competing narratives of the dead girl and the malevolent mother, told through the medium of a thriller, establish parallel narratives of the conjunction between female crime and trauma and between femininity and violence. Trauma is central to the female characterization and these narratives; it is tied to the female body and "the atrocity exhibition" of broken bodies and violence at the heart of Flynn's novels. In *Sharp Objects*, the trauma the sisters encounter at the hand of their mother dictates not only the plot and the mystery of the dead girls, but it is the key to the resolution of the murders when the perpetrator (Amma) is revealed. In *Gone Girl*, however, trauma occupies a less central position and is more tied to the dysfunctionality of the marriage institution, the violence and Amy's unreliable narrative. Ultimately, Flynn's thrillers paint an intriguing dark picture of femininities with contrasting manifestations of victimhood against agency where traumatized females are set against vengeful ones and missing/dead females are positioned against murderous ones.

## Notes

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188

1. Andrew Scull points out that “Pathological Mommies” make frequent appearances in film and fiction, especially after World War II. He also contends that much of psychoanalytic theory is related to the family, particularly the mother, and analysts accuse American mothers of being the source of an “expanding array of illnesses and debility, and even a threat to the health of the nation” (2016: 342).

2. Many studies suggest that motherhood is connected to notions of femininity, and women’s gender identity is defined by mothering. For example, see Glenn (1994) and McMahan (1995).

3. The parthenogenetic archaic mother, according to Creed, is useful for gaining understanding of the patriarchal ideology that denies difference. It is worth mentioning that the notion of the archaic mother originated in psychoanalysis, especially in Julia Kristeva’s work. According to Kristeva, the fear of the archaic mother is considered through the lens of the “fear of her generative power” (in Creed 1993: 43).

4. The primary concern of crime narratives, especially feminist crime fiction, is violence against women. For example, Adrienne E. Gavin argues that women in crime narratives are victims, “captured, raped, murdered, butchered and in the hands of forensic detectives dissected into evidence,” which eventually voices a protest against gendered violence (2010: 268).

5. Emphasized femininity, as R.W. Connell argues, is a pattern of femininity that is defined according to women’s “compliance and subordination”; it is “oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men” (1987: 183). Emphasized femininity highlights how women contribute to their own victimization and marginalization in a patriarchal hierarchy. The notion of emphasized femininity thus brings about gender roles that rely on loving nurturing mothers and domestic women. For more on emphasized femininity, see also Schippers (2007).

6. For more information on the link between feminism and crime fiction, see Irons (1995) and Munt (1994).

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