2025-2026

Master Littératures, Langues, Patrimoines et Civilisations Option Anglais

Mémoire de fin d'études

Women in Psychological Thrillers

Redefining the Representation of Feminine Identity, Trauma, and Hysteria

Sasha Feunteun-Walsh

Sous la direction de Karima Thomas

Jury

Karima Thomas : directrice

Michelle Ryan : présidente du jury

Soutenu publiquement le 15/ 06/ 2026

Document confidentiel

université angers

Avertissement

L'université n'entend donner aucune approbation ni improbation aux opinions émises dans les travaux des étudiants : ces opinions doivent être considérées comme propres à leurs auteurs.

Engagement de non plagiat

Engagement à signer et à joindre à tous les rapports, dossiers, mémoires ou thèse

Je, soussignée Sasha Feunteun-Walsh

déclare être pleinement conscient·e que le plagiat de documents ou d'une partie d'un document publiée sur toutes formes de support, numérique ou papier, constitue une violation des droits d'auteur ainsi qu'une fraude caractérisée. En conséquence, je m'engage à citer toutes les sources que j'ai utilisées pour écrire ce mémoire.

Sasha Feunteun-Walsh le 07/ 06/ 2026

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my thesis advisor, Karima Thomas, for her guidance and support. Her careful feedback and insight on each draft were crucial to shaping this research's angle and realization. Without her persistent help and encouragement, this work would not have been possible.

I would also like to extend my sincere gratitude to Anne-Florence Quaireau and Michelle Ryan. Their courses were instrumental in grounding and inspiring this thesis' perspective, as they consistently placed women at the very center of their research.

My appreciations also extend to my classmates and cohorts, Lou, Elena and Lily for their discussions and steady moral support, which were essential to sustaining my motivation and navigating the challenges of academic life. Their willingness to share and exchange ideas, as well as proofread my work, created a safe and collaborative environment that enriched my research and critical rigor. A special thanks to Harper Alderson, for her promptness in providing key research that greatly contributed to my work on sexual violence against women.

Most importantly, I could not have undertaken this journey without the unwavering support of two people who shaped this work in different yet equally important manners. I'm truly grateful to my close friend and classmate Salomé, whose invaluable insight helped refine my research's prose. Her own enthusiastic encouragement and academic rigor was a constant source of strength and inspiration. To my partner, Tristan, whose steady and uplifting presence was the bedrock of my resilience during the most challenging times; thank you both for believing in me.

Sommaire

Avertissement **1**

Engagement de non plagiat **2**

Acknowledgements **3**

Sommaire **4**

Introduction **6**

Chapter 1: Women in Psychological Thrillers **14**

I- Historical and Literary Origins of Psychological Thrillers 14

II- Psychoanalysis and its Impact on Literary Thrillers 17

III- The Popularization of Psychological Thrillers 22

IV- Hysteria and Women in Literature 27

Chapter 2: Facades of the Self: Fracture and Performance **34**

A. The Nature of Their Trauma 34

I- Camille: Trauma as an Unhealed Wound 35

a. The Self as an Other 38

b. Narrative and Temporal Fragmentation 39

II- Amy: Trauma as a Performance 44

a. Diary Amy 46

b. Cool Girl and Margo 52

B. Sources of Identity Fragmentation 61

I- Parental Neglect and Lack of Love 61

II- Pressure to Be "Amazing Amy" 72

Chapter 3: The Spectacle of Female Pain **83**

A. The Body as a Site of Pain and Power 83

I- Camille: Destructive Behaviors 83

a. Alcoholism and Numbness 83

b. Self-harm 86

II- Amy: A Weaponized Body 95

B. Victimhood and the “Ideal Victim” 101

I- Camille: Rape culture 102

II- Amy: The Power of the Perfect Victim 116

Conclusion 126

Works Cited 130

Abstract 139

Résumé 139

Introduction

As protagonist Camille Preaker states in *Sharp Objects,* "A child weaned on poison considers harm a comfort" (Flynn 320). This striking quote from Gillian Flynn's debut novel encapsulates the essence that this thesis seeks to explore; the weight and implication of trauma and patriarchy-related distress in the construction of female identity and mental landscape. Camille's statement frames harm as a distorted form of familiarity and normalization, rather than a mere symptom of abuse. The comfort in trauma's predictability confines individuals to an endless cycle, a phenomenon that disproportionately affects women. While psychological thrillers have long provided prolific ground to investigate this specific connection made between women's trauma and identity, they also help reshape our understanding of how pain is felt. As such, this thesis asks the following question; How do psychological thrillers redefine the representation of feminine identity, trauma, and hysteria? Through the examination of Gillian Flynn's work, this study postulates that the "hysterical woman" trope can be transformed from a passive victim to a complex character who's fractured and performed self dispute traditional depictions of female suffering and identity.

Thrillers are a literary and cinematic form of expression that critics and writers have found hard to define. The thriller's parameters overlap with other genres; movies or novels that appear to be entirely different from one another still fall under the category of "thriller". This is partly due to the fact that novels and films referred to as *thrillers* often explore a wide diversity of narrative, aesthetic, and thematic characteristics. This array has caused theorists, such as Pablo Castrillo, to consider the term "thriller" as more of a narrative style (111) rather than a specific genre, as it can be attached to other clean-cut genres. Charles Derry defines thrillers as an "umbrella genre comprised of an evolving complex of (sub-)genres" (75), thus

opening it up to a myriad of possible facets; psychological, supernatural, legal, political, among many others.

In *The Poetics of Prose* (1971), Tsvetan Todorov argued that "to classify several works in a genre is to devalue them … a work was judged poor if it did not sufficiently obey the rules of its genre" (42). Indeed, though many seek to condense thrillers to fit into a definite category, their characteristics transcend traditional boundaries due to their flexibility. By constantly adapting to current political or cultural contexts, thrillers can be used to closely examine the social fears that plague a specific period. Philip Simpson supports this idea, contending that thrillers' conflict "addresses at some subliminal level a contemporary anxiety (or more than one) facing the thriller's audience" (188). Among the several subcategories that thrillers encompass, this paper will concentrate on one branch in particular: the psychological thriller.

The psychological thriller has been widely read and enjoyed since Gothic novels began incorporating elements of psychology and psychoanalysis. Daphne du Maurier's 1938 novel, *Rebecca*, illustrates this penchant for obscuring the boundaries between reality and delusion, thus setting the scene for modern psychological thrillers' exploration of memory and unreliable narrations. Since then, it has risen in popularity among contemporary fiction, tackling themes of trauma, mental illness, memory distortion, and manipulation. These particular issues are acutely interwoven with the pathologization of women's pain, as seen through the pervasive "myth" of hysteria.

In psychological thrillers, ambiguity is brought on by blending reality and distorted perception, organized around "a world tipped off its balance, unstable" (Castrillo 112), which causes the reader to question the veracity of the narrative. Established in everyday settings, paired with skewed truths, doubt is a constant throughout the narrative. This allows for the

viewer or reader to relate to the reality of the character who experiences extraordinary challenges in an ordinary world. Thrillers aim to inspire an atmosphere of suspense and anxiety, while psychological thrillers delve deeper, intentionally digging into the emotional struggles and inner turmoil of characters. Regardless of the complex challenge that has become defining whether or not thrillers are a genre, a narrative style, or simply an aesthetic, a thriller does come with a variety of traits and tropes. These specifications make the "thrilleresque quality" (Rubin 4) of a storyline and its protagonists easy to recognize. Likewise, psychological thrillers have come to develop characteristics that maintain a strong link with their Gothic and psychoanalysis origins, while also forging their own distinctions and influences.

Psychological thrillers have drawn inspiration not only from their literary predecessors but from cultural phenomena such as the wave of feminist movements that gained momentum during the late 1960s. Novels such as *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *The Bloody Chamber* by Angela Carter began to supply feminist literature that delved into themes of oppression and the psychology of the female experience, condemning, and subverting the strict patriarchal structures of society. The women's liberation movement, also known as second wave feminism, began in the 1960s and was carried out through the 1970s. This movement challenged traditional gender roles, demanded reproductive rights, and critiqued how women unequal treatment, issues reflected in literature through Betty Friedan's groundbreaking publication in 1963, *The Feminine Mystique* (Freeman 789). Freidan's work dismantled feminine domesticity and unquestioned submission, vividly sparking debate and activism.

Psychological thrillers grant feminine identity a platform to interact with societal pressures, victimhood, power dynamics, and personal perception while straying from belittling clichés. Feminist theorists have also had their input in the development of psychological

thrillers. Judith Butler's revolutionary essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" (1988) gave way to a fresh perspective on societal roles, arguing that gender is unstable and that individuals perform their gender identity through "stylized and repeated acts" (519), thus introducing the notion of a subject being estranged from its social self, an uncanny position depicted in characters of psychological thrillers. In the same way, Elaine Showalter's *Hystories* (1997) explores the undervalued yet evolving representation of female mental health, as seen through domestic thrillers like *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, highlighting the systemic dismissal of a woman's psychological struggle. As such, these works enable a new approach to the misrepresented female characters and the impacts of abuse and trauma on selfhood.

This narrative style of psychological thrillers has evolved alongside scientific and societal advances, namely the increasing awareness of mental health. The Mental Hygiene Movement, created in 1910, recognized the importance of mental well-being beyond the physical, "concerned with the improvement of the care of people with mental disorders" (Bertolote 113). Since then, its exponential development has shaped the way psychological thrillers handle mental illness and behavioral health. These narratives matter in view of the representation they can supply, be it the impact trauma can have on a person or how mental health affects identities. When written with careful research and intent, psychological thrillers can capture a glimpse of the human experience and reflect contemporary interests, fears, and behaviors. Moving beyond the harmful and sexist stereotypes produced by the diagnosis of hysteria, these depictions offer a more nuanced and realistic perspective on themes of feminine identity. Indeed, hysteria impacted societal expectations for women, effectively silencing their legitimate struggles through the weaponization of this catch-all pathology.

Additionally, by giving space to a woman's point of view, the psychological thriller allows readers to develop a more profound sense of empathy for their condition. As such, the

more one engages with this type of literature, the greater level of openness and receptiveness readers can acquire (Keen 128). This variety of narratives denounces the reductive and binary categorization of women's identities.

Therefore, psychological thrillers have progressively been challenging traditional narratives by introducing unreliable and self-deluded narrators. For that reason, an experimental quality can be attributed to them, as these protagonists do not pull the strings, rather, they discover themselves *through* the act of storytelling. The experimentation in psychological thrillers occurs on several levels, such as the plot, which can blend realism and supernatural elements. By adopting this method of writing, these stories imbibe themselves with motifs borrowed from canonical literature, such as Gothic tradition, but are also consciously straying to develop new ones, resulting in innovative texts. Much like fairy tales, psychological thrillers are often disregarded for belonging to popular culture. However, the experimentation that transpires within their narrative strategies demonstrates their literary potential. Modern psychological thrillers also have the newfound ability to draw from cinema aesthetics, offering a much broader visual culture that heightens immersion. As Kristopher Mecholsky contends, contemporary authors such as Dennis Lehane have become "the consummate descendent of almost all of his predecessors in the genre" (19).

My research will adopt an interdisciplinary approach, combining both feminist and psychoanalytic frameworks. To support this analysis, I will utilize different theoretical frameworks. First, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theories on trauma, the uncanny, and the unconscious will yield competent tools to analyze behaviors and personalities. In order to link literature and trauma, Cathy Caruth, a leading theorist in trauma studies, will help establish psychoanalysis in the context of narrative voices. Second, feminist philosopher and gender studies scholar Judith Butler as well as literary critic Elaine Showalter will guide the feminist

dimension of this research in regard to the depictions of feminine identity and hysteria in novels. Additionally, Kristopher Mecholsky and David Glover's research on thrillers and its early influences will establish the literary context needed to examine psychological thrillers.

For this paper, I have selected two main novels: *Sharp Objects* and *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn. Both narratives share an interest in the representation of female protagonists cast in complex and uncanny situations. The novels offer an opportunity to study the characteristics of psychological thrillers, namely the relation between body and trauma, the representation of emotional turmoil, and female suffering.

Similarly, the novels offer productive case studies to examine female narrative voices in psychological thrillers. Between delusional and manipulative narrators, representation is distorted, twisted, and fragmented. I chose to work on two novels from the same author, so as to ensure and establish thematic and stylistic continuity, enabling the analysis to explore existing patterns in female experience.

Sharp Objects (2006) by Gillian Flynn features a first-person narration by Camille Preaker, a young journalist who is forced to return to her hometown due to an assignment. The murders she investigates trigger haunting memories of childhood trauma and maternal neglect, revealing her toxic habits of self-harm and poor coping mechanisms. Her fragmented identity accentuates the unreliability of her narration, yet it does not take away from the emotional rawness her perspective conveys. Flynn challenges the conventional female protagonist trope in psychological thrillers by portraying her as both a victim of trauma and a deeply flawed individual, prone to making questionable choices. Camille is a subversion to female leads, through her psychologically complex and nuanced characterization.

Also written by Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (2012) offers a different structural narrative, providing dual viewpoints through husband-and-wife, Amy and Nick Dunne, both unreliable

in their own way. Amy's plan to exact revenge on her cheating husband enables an exploration of the complex dynamic within toxic marriages and personal identity. Her narrative plays with the societal expectation of women, the likability of characters, and feminine victimhood. Their dual narration allows for a richer analysis of women's perception, offering insights from both a man's point of view along with a woman's. The novel's huge commercial success, of over 20 million copies sold worldwide, led to a film adaptation by David Fincher in 2014, sparking numerous debates about feminism, representation of female villains and the instrumentalization of the media. Together, these novels form a solid foundation for the analysis of how psychological thrillers represent and portray feminine characters, and more particularly how feminine identity is shaped by trauma and power dynamics. The contrasts and structural dissimilarities allow for a comparative analysis and a deeper exploration of narrative voice, trauma, and feminine pain.

This paper will be structured into three parts. The first section, Women in Psychological thrillers, will introduce psychological thrillers, providing a thorough analysis of the historical and theoretical background as well as its origins in Gothic fiction, Freudian psychology, and crime fiction. The section will also aim to dissect the origins of hysteria, its impact and evolution, through the representation of female suffering in literature. Psychological thrillers both challenge the image of the "hysterical" woman, while also perpetuating harmful stereotypes. This will provide the cultural and literary context as well as key works of psychological thrillers that have left a distinct mark on the narrative style. Consequently, looking into the evolution and influences of this narrative style will offer precious insight into its intricacies and complexities, which are essential to the comprehension of contemporary psychological thrillers and women's portrayal in literature.

The second part, entitled Facade of the Self: Fracture and Performance, will examine the core elements that make up the protagonists' identities, exploring how trauma can manifest in performance or internal self-destruction. As such, this section will endeavour to establish the sources of the characters either conscious or unconscious fragmentation, as well as how their environments and relationships came to shape their respective traumas.

In the third and final part, The Spectacle of Female Pain, the focus shifts from the character's internal turmoil and logic to their external manifestation of said issues. This section will articulate the duality in the expression of female suffering, which can either be endured, commodified or for some, weaponized as a form of resistance.

This work endeavors to analyze the link between women, trauma and self-harm through the comparative study of *Sharp Objects* and *Gone Girl*. In these psychological thrillers, narrative fragmentation is used to symbolically represent and reflect psychological distress. Indeed, whether it be through narrative structure, identity or corporality, the female mind and body become sites of emotional conflict, a concept portrayed through self-harm, illness, or transformations. Through the intentional juxtaposition of *Gone Girl* and *Sharp Objects*, female pain will be explored through the lens of characters whose fragmented selves, reflected in their fragmented narratives, turn to distinct strategies for survival, empowerment, and manipulation.

Chapter 1: Women in Psychological Thrillers

I- Historical and Literary Origins of Psychological Thrillers

Thrillers stem from a long and varied list of genres, all rooted in tension, fear, and mystery. Psychological thrillers, in particular, anchor themselves to mind-made atrocities rather than the physicality of a possible danger or threat. Indeed, to comprehend how psychological thrillers function, I must begin by mapping the origins of thrillers. Their foundations lay in Gothic fiction, a genre focused on fear, irrationality, and all things that are unfamiliar to the human experience. Its aesthetic relies on external threats such as supernatural elements, spectral entities and haunted mansions. This genre was inaugurated by Horace Walpole in 1764 with the release of his novel *The Castle of Otranto,* where Gothic tradition entrenched itself in England before traveling across the Atlantic to the terrifying world of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). This American author haunts the genre's ancestry and remains to this day an unquestioned pioneer of literary suspense. Poe's writing introduced a sundry of elements that have become unavoidable in modern-day thrillers, and his chilling narratives laid the groundwork that inspired many to carry on the Gothic legacy. Notably, Poe offered an intimate glimpse into the minds of unstable and unhinged protagonists as seen through their vivid, often fanatical monologues, thus shifting the horrors of exterior forces to the human mind. In the *Tell-Tale Heart* (1843), rather than a monster or ghost, the tension relies on the haunting brilliance of the narrator's frenzied spiraling which distorts the lines between rationalization and obsession. The protagonist is convinced of his genius through maniacal logic, stating, "And now have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over acuteness of the senses?" (5).

By creating characters for whom the frontier between reality and hallucination is blurred due to immense feelings of guilt or paranoia, Poe popularized the use of unreliable narrators. His penchant for the deeply macabre ensued unique tales of isolation, madness, incest, and the uncanny, which inspired many contemporary thrillers. In addition to his thematic contribution to the Gothic form, Poe also provided one of the first detective stories in literature; *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841). This short story further proves his fondness for tension-filled narratives, following C. Auguste Dupin as he uses his keen analytical skills to investigate the murders of two Parisian women. Poe nonetheless expressed his opinion on the simplicity of detective stories in a letter to his friend Philip Cooke (1866) where he wrote "Where is the ingenuity of unravelling a web which you yourself have woven for the express purpose of unravelling?" (qtd. in Rosenheim and Rachman 154). Poe's valuable insights on the topic allowed for more psychologically complex writing methods, often employed in modern-day thrillers.

As it matured and expanded, Gothic fiction's characteristics have become patently recognizable, including haunted settings (castles, mansions), twisted mysteries (murders, kidnappings) and troubled psyches (insanity, psychopaths). As Mark Edmundson contends in the preface to *Nightmare on Main Street*, "Gothic … is the art of haunting, the art of possession" (xi). Gothic fiction aims to wholly capture its reader's attention, creeping itself into every thought until the book becomes physically impossible to put down. In *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction,* Jerrold E. Hogle contends that Gothic literature persists in time and age owing to the fact that it reflects society's deepest anxieties, cloaked with supernatural and exaggerated features. On a smaller scale, the overall fear of the unknown and of losing one's mind are essential themes that sustained the superstitious wave that overtook the 18th century. The range of themes this engendered is extensive, encompassing motifs related to mysteries of identity and inheritance, to false appearances and to secrets that are hidden in everyday life.

The rise in serial fiction during the late 19th century contributed to the mass marketing and publication of thrillers, owing to several mediums. Penny dreadfuls and pulp magazines like *The Argosy* in America and *Saturday Evening Post* in the UK, all provided a platform for the genre of crime and thriller to take shape and develop (Glover 146, 152). Their accessibility was due to their low prices, as they were printed on cheap "pulp" paper. In *Disseminating Impure Literature: The 'Penny Dreadful' Publishing Business Since 1860,* John Springhall argues that these stories relied on their distinctive titles and striking cover pages to ensure a consistent clientele, which was the case for stories such as 'The Crimes of London … The Dance of Death' 'The Hangman's Plot (1865-6) and The Skeleton Horseman' or 'The Shadow of Death (1866)'" (572). By 1940, the "paperback boom" revolutionized the realm of literature and publishing. Pocket books firmly cemented psychological thrillers within popular fiction. As Kristopher Mecholsky notes "I mark the beginning of the early psychological thriller, then, with the intersection of mass-marketing, psychological realism, and Gothic-inspired fiction" (8).

By obscuring the boundaries between reality, imagination, and paranoia, psychological thrillers rely on the same horror that Gothic literature later came to suggest – fearing ourselves rather than the monsters we conjure up. As such, Gothic conventions have persevered and are held alive thanks to 'thrilling' narratives.

II- Psychoanalysis and its Impact on Literary Thrillers

Since the late ninetieth century, horror has witnessed a shift from the supernatural to a psychoanalytical perspective. This orientation of the Gothic tradition is partly fueled by Freudian psychoanalysis which furthered the exploration of the human mind and its irrational fears. Rather than depicting monstrous creatures, narratives focused on settings or figures that usually inspire trust and comfort, such as family, the home, and ourselves, and made them become the source of discomfort and anxiety. Sigmund Freud's seminal essay "The Uncanny" (1919), underlines that the doubt and uncertainty about the status of things, familiar or unfamiliar, dead or alive, animate or inanimate is at the origin of the eerie feelings we get. The uncanny, or "unhomeliness" (translated from its original *unheimlich* in German) is described by Freud through the work of Ernst Jentsch as "doubt as to whether an apparently animate object really is alive and, conversely, whether a lifeless object might not perhaps be animate" (136). Recurrent examples that create such an effect are human-like dolls, wax figures, and animatronics.

This concept goes beyond material objects, as the uncanny can pertain to psychological conditions or "manifestations of insanity" (Freud 136) and the reaction that these can evoke. The difficulty in defining its framework and effects lies, as Freud contends, in the vast spectrum of people's individual sensitivity when it comes to this feeling. By its very nature, the uncanny remains a deeply personal sensation. It occurs from something that the individual feels previously familiar with, but which is disturbingly distorted. The uncanny has repeatedly found itself in the realms of literature. As Jentsch is quoted by Freud, "One of the surest devices for producing slightly uncanny effects through storytelling … is to leave the reader wondering whether a particular figure is a real person or an automaton" (136). As such, Freud theories reveal that ghouls and paranoia aren't necessarily required to elicit fear in readers; instead, we can use elements that feel recognizable but somewhat feel "off" to the reader. As Mark

Edmundson notes in *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism and the Culture of Gothic*, "Freud's remarkable achievement is to have taken the props and passions of terror Gothic … and to have relocated them inside the self" (32). This Austrian neurologist played a crucial role in the internalization and relocalization of horror, instituting it at a more intimate and personal and domestic sphere. Though Freud theorized the *uncanny*, author Gillian Flynn implements it as a core element of her novels and further distorts it; the self as uncanny. Indeed, Flynn's protagonists are strangers to themselves, either through performance or trauma manifestations. The individual is repeatedly surprised by their own capacity to hurt others and themselves. As such, the monstrosity comes from within, through the unrecognizable sense of one's own body, psyche, and actions.

Indeed, authors blended Gothic literature with avant-garde psychoanalytic ideas, combining the extravagant flair of the genre with psychological realism. A particular genre that helped develop this literary transition was the sensation novel. As Kristopher Mecholsky notes, sensation fiction of the early nineteenth century was "an important conduit to the psychological thriller for the Gothic obsession with mysterious and perverted families" (6).

For instance, Wilkie Collins (1824-1889), English writer and playwright, utilized Gothic themes with realistic psychological drama. His sensation novel, *The Woman in White* (1860), established a standard for psychological thrillers with the tropes of psychological deceit and family secrets. Originally published in serial form, its popularity led to its release as a novel, exemplifying the early commercialization of literature. The storyline twists and turns around Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie– two women whose lives have been manipulated because of inheritance issues. Count Fosco, the nefarious antagonist, creates a constant feeling of psychological dread that affects both the characters that surround him and the readers engaging with the novel. Though the narrative does not include any supernatural elements, a haunting atmosphere persists throughout the story.

Additionally, Henry James', *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), contributed to this shift by relocating the Gothic "haunted house" from physical location to the family unit, thus enabling a cross-examination of reality through the prism of psychological realism. The novella's storyline follows a governess hired to care for two orphaned children, Miles and Flora. She starts to speculate that the manor they inhabit is haunted by two figures, which she later learns resemble her predecessor, Miss Kessel and a former employee, Peter Quint– both deceased. The ambiguity surrounding their ghostly appearances plagues the governess, as no one around her seems to believe her. Recently adapted into a Netflix series, entitled *The Haunting of Bly Manor*, Henry James' 19th century horror novella explores themes of innocence as well as unstable perception. The settings and characters blend psychological depth with supernatural undertones, creating a storyline that perfectly portrays the tropes employed in modern psychological thrillers.

Mecholsky additionally contends that a quintessential example of the starting point for psychological thrillers was *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier. This 1938 novel deftly fuses Gothic tradition, crime, and romance, transitioning the well-established Gothic form to a more contemporary version of literature that could easily be categorized as a psychological thriller. The plot revolves around a young, unnamed narrator who marries Maxim de Winter, a wealthy widower. They move into his mansion in Manderley, where the narrator struggles to feel at home owing to Mrs. Danvers, the overbearing housekeeper who seems obsessed with Rebecca, Maxim's deceased spouse. However, the narrator learns that Rebecca, far from being the perfect wife and socialite many believed her to be, was a cruel and adulterating manipulator. She taunts Maxim with her pregnancy to another man, and he kills her in a fit of rage. As such, though Rebecca is indeed deceased, her memory haunts the mansion through its living occupants' obsessive fixation.

Though regarded as a forerunner to psychological thrillers, Du Maurier's work does not possess the direct danger that often threatens the protagonist throughout the plot. Mecholsky argues that this staple of psychological thrillers is lacking in Rebecca (9). Nonetheless, the significance of Du Maurier's work is indisputable, as she provided texts that Alfred Hitchcock, also known as "The Master of Suspense", adapted into films. Two years after its literary release, *Rebecca* was brought to the screen, starring Joan Fontaine, Laurence Olivier, and Judith Anderson. Hitchcock continued to draw from her work, directing *Jamaica Inn* in 1939, and later, *The Birds* (1963), which is one of his most unsettling adaptations.

By the 1930s, the genres of hard-boiled fiction and Noir emerged, which would later have a huge influence on the psychological thriller. Philip Simpson contends that Noir fiction heavily impacted thrillers by providing moral ambiguity as well as paranoia, noting that "noir is stamped by its prevailing mood of pessimism, personal and societal failure, urban paranoia, the individual's disconnection from society, and cynicism" (189).

As thrillers started to expand and take on a life of their own, with specific tropes and particularities, David Glover cataloged them into "racing thrillers (Dick Francis), legal thrillers (John Grisham), psychological thrillers (Dennis Lehane), political thrillers (Jack Higgins), futuristic thrillers (Philip Kerr), and on and on" (146). Each adds a new dimension and perspective to the fluidity of thrillers. Additionally, various other genres started to have an influence on the development of psychological thrillers – hard-boiled fiction being one of them. Detective narratives provided a procedural aspect that thrillers have been known to rely on. Philip Simpson argues that this genre of detective fiction brought forth key characters to psychological thrillers such as the avenger-detective and the morally ambiguous anti-hero, blurring the lines between justice and revenge. He cites Gary Hoppenstand from *The Dime*

Novel in American Life who notes that these new detectives "captivate the nation's fancy by effectively solving criminal problems with vigilante violence. This new detective … catered to the societal desire for simplified solutions to complex problems" (91).

Crucial figures of this period include Dashiel Hammett with *The Maltese Falcon* (1929) and Cornell Woolrich, whose novel, *It Had to be Murder* (1942), was later adapted by Hitchcock, into *Rear Window* (1954). As the 1930s advanced, the most widely acknowledged variant of psychological thrillers started to come into view. This era proved to be highly prolific for psychological thrillers, thanks to authors like William Faulkner, Patricia Highsmith and Jim Thompson.

Patricia Highsmith, through novels like *Strangers on a Train* (1950) and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955), brought a newfound psychological depth to thriller characters. She created individuals with complex inner workings and flawed motivations. Mecholsky contends that her writings added a "greater level of sophistication" (14) to psychological thrillers and is regarded as one of the most impactful writers of this narrative style. Jim Thompson, another quintessential writer, put in place a fresh degree of realism and unsettling intricacy to psychological thrillers through first person accounts. In *The Killer Inside Me* (1952), Thompson crafted psychopathic characters that disturbed and intrigued with their startling realism. He would even go as far as giving us empathy for these deeply flawed figures. Consequently, these characters were even more chilling by their relatability. David Glover regards Thompson's characters as depictions of thoroughly demented individuals where "the storyline soon slides over into the obsessive and the downright crazy" (154) despite the inclusion of autobiographical elements.

As such, psychological thrillers progressively gained increasing momentum and recognition as a legitimate 'genre' through the fusion of Gothic tradition and Freudian theory,

effectively transforming suspenseful narratives into a more complex and in-depth exploration of the human psyche. Owing to paperback publishing and cinematic adaptations of the mid-20th century, psychological thrillers were able to transcend their literary constraints, thus captivating an even wider range of audiences.

III- The Popularization of Psychological Thrillers

Psychological thrillers' proliferation was aided by their cinematographic adaptations. Maintaining suspense and tension was easily achieved through visual and audio cues, granting this narrative style consequent recognition. As such, psychological thrillers have come to borrow an array of elements from their cinematic counterpart, making it a prolific medium to transmediate to the big screen, thus granting it a wider audience.

For instance, Robert Bloch, an American writer mentored by H.P. Lovecraft, skillfully fused crime and horror, which led him to pen the groundbreaking novel *Psycho* (1959). The book's unsettling and complex protagonist Norman Bates constructed a new model for psychological thrillers. Bloch strays from conventions and ingeniously kills off his main character, Mary Crane, quite early in the story. This audacious choice pays off, as the reader or viewer is kept guessing throughout the plot. In 1960, his novel was adapted by Alfred Hitchcock, and remains to this day, his most beloved film. The adaptation popularized the serial killer trope, which would later be recognized as a significant subgenre of thrillers.

The 1970s and 1980s represented a time of growth and mainstream acceptance for psychological thrillers. As numerous writers took creative liberties and advanced the genre into uncharted realism, Thomas Harris honed and polished the serial killer motif and is now regarded as one of the most important authors of psychological thrillers. Starting with *Red Dragon*

(1981), followed by *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988), his Lecter series was a huge hit among the public, which starred psychopathic serial killer and cannibal; Hannibal Lecter. By fusing police procedural aspects and deep psychological terror, Harris not only created the chilling character of Hannibal "the Cannibal" Lecter, but he also refined the hunter/hunted relationship, which would later be a common feature in thrillers to come. He enriched crime fiction by redirecting the focus from the criminal act to the psychological motivations that offenders may have.

Throughout this same period, Stephen King also provided notable literary contributions that have since been included as staples. His blend of supernatural Gothic writings and psychological thrillers in works like *The Shining* (1977), *Misery* (1987), and *Doctor Sleep* (2013) showcase traditional tales of crime fused with horror. King's work showcased the possibility of a denser psychological thriller (Mecholsky 17). As a result, a much longer format starts to be accepted by the public, due the authors' ability to maintain suspense and tension throughout narratives.

King's thriller novels compel readers to confront harsh psychological truths, often through violent allegories. He once stated "I'll try to terrify you first, and if that doesn't work, I'll try to horrify you, and if I can't make it there, I'll try to gross you out. I'm not proud" (41). His raw approach to literary methods showcases his desire to delve into uncomfortable, taboo and frequently neglected topics. E. Justin Ruben highlights this very point by noting that "Documenting disturbed individuals helps us to understand the complex nature of people around us in society" (51). In fact, Ruben further contends that King's fictional characters can be linked to a larger cultural phenomenon, particularly the understanding of darker parts of the human mind. The human psyche's hidden and overlooked facets have fascinated scholars for centuries, however, its investigation took a significant turn when VICAP (Violent Criminal Apprehension Program) was created in 1985 by the FBI. Ruben connects this research division

to King's work, along with other authors, that attempts to decipher the egregious and baffling behaviors of human beings.

Indeed, among the various subgenres that have developed over the years, psychological thrillers stand out by relocating the emphasis from physical and external action to the intricacies of the human psyche. As Mecholsky states, psychological thrillers are a "self-conflicted genre" (1). This is caused by the contradicting idea that "we can understand the mind—we can't understand the mind" (1). As such, the themes and actions that constitute psychological thrillers are primarily based on the psychology of human behavior, as opposed to the broader genre of "thriller". Inspired by its numerous ancestors, numerous motifs have established themselves as staples of psychological thrillers, including serial killers, psychotic protagonists, past trauma resurfacing and obsessive investigations, among many others. Certain novels incorporate several of these tropes in a single storyline, as seen in *Alex Cross, Run* (2013) by James Patterson. Though Patterson is considered to be one of the most prolific authors of the thriller "genre", his plot contains an astonishing number of conventions that "reaches, and passes absurdity", to use the words of Mecholsky (2).

Though psychological thrillers find their influences and tropes in ancestral genres, they remain a narrative style that has seen a sudden surge in popularity. As such, research surrounding it remains limited, especially when it comes to its many subgenres. In general, thrillers have often been regarded as an inferior genre, overlooking the reflective qualities they bear. David Glover criticizes the superficial arguments that grant thriller such a low status, noting:

> This anecdotal, tongue-in-cheek confession neatly captures the ambivalence associated with a hugely successful mode of crime writing, a guilty sense that its lack of literary merit has always somehow been inseparable from the compulsiveness with which its

> narrative pleasures are greedily gobbled up, relegating the thriller to the most undeserving of genres. (142)

Glover calls attention to the fact that thrillers, as well as popular fiction, have often been dismissed as fast-paced and pleasurable. However, in the recent psychological research paper, "Changed by Literature? A Critical Review of Psychological Research on the Effects of Reading Fiction", Caracciolo and Van Duuren argue that fiction "does not establish but does improve our capacity to interpret events. It … aids our rapid understanding of real-life social situations, activating and maintaining this capacity" (520).

Furthermore, new generation writers are moving beyond the commercial excitement that once dominated, innovating with structures that are slower-paced or categorized as "slow burn". The slow burn refers to narratives that are drawn out and don't include intense action scenes until the very end, a feature that is characteristic of many psychological thrillers. Just as James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz contend in David Herman's *Theory and Interpretation of Narrative* "instabilities and their complications generate readerly responses (and vice versa) as we make interpretive, ethical, and aesthetic judgments of them, so too do tensions" (59). Suspense is prolonged until the very end, culminating in the infamous "plot twists" that thrillers are often known for. This allows for deeper storytelling, conveyed through rich, non-linear narratives.

As psychological thrillers entered the realm of mainstream literature, readers have been reeled into the exploration of humanity's darkest corners. As previously mentioned, modern psychological thrillers don't limit themselves to recounting gruesome or ghastly events, they aim to see how characters perceive themselves when dealing with said events. These villain/hero roles are muddled and often overlap, allowing for greater nuance to exist within

narratives. Motivations are no longer reduced or confined to simplistic traits such as good or evil, as characters can simultaneously embody both. Contemporary authors such as Karin Slaughter, Lisa Jewell, Gillian Flynn and Paula Hawkins have shifted the codes of psychological thrillers, aiming to include a more reflective tone in their storytelling. As a matter of fact, numerous authors have contributed time and effort to exploring the effects of trauma. Female authors in particular have been opening up about repression, fear, and empowerment through the prism of horror and psychology. Inner turmoil is confronted in violent yet cathartic ways, providing a safe outlet to question and critique societal expectations and trauma.

It is within this rich lineage that author Gillian Flynn operates. Her take on psychological thrillers embraces its literary predecessors while successfully shifting the Gothic monster to the domestic by suggesting that the monster *is* the domestic sphere. As such, Flynn dives into *what* haunts the protagonists, as well as *how* they have become their own ghosts. Crucially, she engages with the legacy of 'hysteria' and the 'madwoman' trope, which has left an indelible mark on the representation of female suffering and subsequently, their characterization. By introducing female protagonists that challenge these biased and 'traditional' portrayals of femininity, she sets the stage for a deeper analysis on the redefinition of depictions of the 'hysterical woman' in psychological thrillers.

IV- Hysteria and Women in Literature

While psychological thrillers tackled the complexities of the human psyche, the traditional portrayal of women remained entrenched in outdated historical and cultural narratives, namely due to the evasive 'diagnosis' of hysteria. Female characters in literature endured centuries of simplistic depictions shaped by harmful and misogynistic concepts and myths. As such, the concept of hysteria is key to understanding the more complex portrayals of female characters who resist straightforward categorization.

Etymologically, the term 'hysteria' is derived from the Greek adjective "hysterikos", meaning "from the womb" (Gilman 12), situating hysteria in the female body. Feminine madness was first ascribed to a woman's refusal to "honor the phallus" (Tasca et al. 110) or a lack of orgasms called "uterine melancholy" (Chandini et al. 312). In *Unwell Women: Misdiagnosis and Myth in a Man-Made World* (2021), Elinor Cleghorn reminds readers of 'biology as destiny' bias that stipulated that "a woman was her biology; that she was ruled by it, governed by it, at the mercy of it" (8). The remedy to these physical "afflictions" were dictated through a patriarchal necessity; engaging in intercourse to "satisfy" the womb, or conversely, required abstinence to repress "stimuli that could excite a young woman" (Tasca et al. 111).

This medical bias was, and remains to this day, rooted in the broader system of patriarchy, which has historically been defined as "a system of government in which men ruled societies through their positions as head of households" (Walby 214). From the Greek *patriarkhēs,* meaning "rule of the father", this social structure grants men predominant roles in society, affecting both the public, "education and politics" and private "rights in the marriage,

divorce, mobility, and inheritance" sphere of women's lives (Benstead 2). This misogynistic system has historically erased the female experience while prioritizing male narratives, a dynamic evident as early as Antiquity "In ancient Greek and Roman literature, works such as Homer's "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey" depicted male heroes as central figures while often relegating women to secondary roles … portrayed primarily as objects of desire or as symbols of virtue and chastity" (Hiwarkhedka and Anshu 1128). It is within this strict framework that male control over hysteria's narrative emerged, thus becoming yet another tool to police women who deviate from conventional roles.

Hysteria became a catch-all diagnosis that medical professionals fell back on when unsure what to say, especially when it came to female patients. In *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture,* Elaine Showalter quotes Thomas Willis in *Essay on the Pathology of the Brain,* who emphasizes this very notion, stating that hysteria was "the subterfuge of ignorance" (16). Some speculate that hysteria might be a "symbolic voice for the silenced sex" (Scull 7), as women were prohibited to express themselves freely, thus explaining the need for a physical reaction and outlet. This theory is shared in *Hysteria Beyond Freud* by Sander Gilman, in which it is stated that "hysteria has been claimed as the first step on the road to feminism, a specifically feminine pathology that speaks to and against patriarchy" (286), highlighting that, even when pathologized, hysteria was a subversive act of resistance.

Consequently, hysteria constitutes an intersectional space, as it has "grown at the busy crossroad where psychoanalytic theory, narratology, feminist criticism, and the history of medicine intersect … the recognition that all medical practice depends on narrative" (Showalter 81). Undeniably, narrative plays a crucial part in trapping women within limited medical categorizations to ensure power over their autonomy. For instance, Ida Bauer, most famously known as *Dora,* was one of Sigmund Freud's female patients whose hysteria diagnosis was

heavily influenced by her father's desire to "bring her to reason" (Showalter 43). Rather than address her problems and concerns, Freud was preemptively convinced of her hysterical nature and reportedly "interpreted all Dora's behavior and statements in accordance with his theories" (43). Patients were often made to believe the fabricated narratives that therapists conceived, as these professionals would "fill in" the blank of missing memories or claim to "recover" repressed sexual trauma from their childhood. Though Dora was able to end her father-imposed therapy, Freud nonetheless tried to persuade her that she was "in love with her father, and with Freud himself" (Showalter 43). To this day, her story remains one of the most renowned cases of hysteria documented by Freud, who published "Fragments of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria" in 1905. Indeed, Ida Bauer's side of the story was entirely overpowered by Freud's authority and his overly convinced judgment on her mental state. This case underscores the complex efforts to define hysteria, as its forms shifted according to different professionals and their specific beliefs regarding the disorder.

Distorted portrayal of early literary female characters preceded Freud's works on hysteria; Emma Bovary in *Madame Bovary* (1855) by Gustave Flaubert and Bertha Mason Rochester in *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë are good examples. As Elaine Showalter voices, "Hysterical narrative, however, has a literary history that predates Freud." (81). For instance, the character of Bertha Mason is often dismissed as another "madwoman in the attic". Yet, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*: *The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, Gilbert and Gubar state that figures such as herself, much like Victor Frankenstein's monster and Septimus Warren Smith, are "created only to be destroyed" (105). Nonetheless, their characterization reveals a continuous desire to be seen and acknowledged by the other characters within the story, as well as the readers. According to Gilbert and Gubar, much like Bertha herself, these characters are "dark doubles" (105) that women use to cathartically express their experiences of oppression. This theory can be applied to Jane Eyre

and Bertha, as their thoughts and behaviors seem inherently linked and uncoincidental. When Jane is forced to stay silent, Ge Yifan states that Bertha rebels "through direct violence and hysterical language" (7).

Indeed, the 19th century established hysteria as "proof" of the mentally unwell woman trope. This generalized medicalization of women's issues gave cause for the Gothic template of the infamous "madwoman" to be manipulated and distorted into a harmful stereotype which remains embedded in the public's unconscious conception of women. Though hysteria was removed from the DSM-III (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual) in 1980, "hysterical" remains a term employed to degrade women, as it still holds a significant amount of cultural power (Tasca et al. 115).

The systemic and historical dismissal of women's pain anchored itself in cultural imagination, establishing female archetypes as the virgin, the mother and the witch (Lucas and Ordeniza 8-9). This rigid dichotomy between purity and rebellion in women gained prominence during the Middle Ages. As Maureen Fries notes in "Feminae Populi: Popular Images of Women in Medieval Literature", the archetype of the Blessed Virgin Mary exemplified the idealized and "highly desirable condition of motherhood without the questionable act of sexual intercourse" which became the unattainable standard of the time (80). Indeed, the figure of Mother Mary established a coveted yet paradoxical status for women; virgin and mother. Furthermore, as hysteria shifted from being viewed as a medical disorder to a theological condition, women were cast as the source of all evil, which set about the persecution of 'witches'. This phenomenon was mainly observable through the creation of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) by Heinrish Kramer, which explicitly linked female mental health to demonic possession, suggesting that "evil is female" (Tasca et al. 112). Not only did the treatise institutionalized women's oppression and torture, condemning them to die for forced admissions of guilt, it bound defiant women to the 'witch' archetype. As Lucas and Ordeniza

argue, “Societal fear regarding women with power and intelligence is the backbone of the idea of witch” (8). This trope is often associated with the contemporary image of the ‘madwoman’, whose rage and intellect are deemed wild and dangerous.

The 20th century gave way to further analysis and codification of female archetypes by literary theorists and film theorists, such as Laura Mulvey. In her groundbreaking essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), Mulvey argues that women are portrayed as one-dimensional characters, often serving as a passive object tailored solely to satisfy male desire. Mulvey quotes Budd Boetticher, who notes that “What counts is what the heroine provokes … In herself the woman has not the slightest importance” (809).

The psychological thrillers offer a space to modernize and redefine these traditional female archetypes. As David Glover notes, the thriller operates as a “guilty sense” (142) narrative style which is often perceived as inferior, when in reality, it aptly and uniquely allows for the ‘madwoman’ trope to evolve and find a new voice. Similarly, Kristopher Mecholsky contends that thrillers are at the “intersection of mass-marketing, psychological realism, and Gothic-inspired fiction” (8). This notion highlights how thrillers effectively shift Gothic horror from dungeons and haunted woods to haunted minds and fractured psyches.

Indeed, rather than exclusively portray women as unstable characters, psychological thrillers concede feminine identity a sense of plurality and ambiguity. This allows for narratives to include realities that women face every day; not being taken seriously when having a genuine breakdown or being a victim of gaslighting. In *Introduction to Domestic Noir,* Laura Joyce elucidates the origins of the term “gaslighting”, which stems from the British film *Gaslight* (1944), directed by George Cukor. The main character, Paula, experiences intense psychological manipulation from her husband, notably through the repeated action of dimming a gas lamp, which he denies ever doing, thus pushing Paula to doubt her own reality and

perception. ‘Gaslighting’ has widely been used since the 2010s, conceptualizing the practice of imposing narrative insanity onto female characters. Much like ‘gaslighting’, the term ‘hysterical’ has become a rhetorical defense used against women that are deemed too erratic or overemotional.

Psychological thrillers utilize this very tension between the accused ‘hysterical’ woman and the male figure who doubts her stability. In many cases, the woman’s theories are revealed to be either a rational response to a traumatic event or a deliberate performance on their part. As such, these thrillers allow for male authority to be questioned, while also encouraging the audience to reevaluate the reductive stereotypes that are assigned to women. This is the case for novels such as *The Woman in the Window* (2018) by A.J. Finn, *The Girl on the Train* (2015) by Paula Hawkins and *Behind Closed Doors* (2016) by B.A. Paris. Though this format is widely popular among contemporary literature, earlier versions of this template exist, namely, *Rosemary’s Baby* by Ira Levin, published in 1967. These narratives make use of the hostility women are often greeted with, particularly emphasizing the deep sense of isolation which forces them to navigate a world in which they are constantly silenced or disregarded. Indeed, psychological thrillers have come to repurpose women’s mental health and identity, creating a space that grants their characterization neutrality or, at the very best, sympathy. Though it is now possible to find an array of accurate portrayals of women's mental health issues in novels, others utilize this stigmatized ‘madness’ as a way to reclaim agency.

As such, the in-depth analysis of how psychological thriller’s origins interweave with psychoanalysis provides the necessary framework to study female protagonists. Additionally, in Gillian Flynn’s *Sharp Objects* and *Gone Girl*, the deliberate redefinition of the ‘madwoman’ trope is essential. Flynn unearths said trope's roots through the character’s traumatic experiences. The narrative is shifted from a woman’s often stigmatized ‘instability’ to the analysis of *how* her trauma constructs and shapes her identity. Through an examination of

Flynn's protagonists, Camille Preaker and Amy Dunne, distinct yet parallel methods emerge from their strategies to surviving trauma. Shifting from psychological thriller's historical context to a closer textual analysis enables us to discern how Flynn redefines the feminine identity, trauma and hysteria within a contemporary setting.

Chapter 2: Facades of the Self: Fracture and Performance

A. The Nature of Their Trauma

As explored through its origins, a key notion in the narrative perspective of "psychological thrillers" resides in its very name– psychology. Indeed, psychological thrillers offer an intimate perception into the psyches of characters, emphasizing the importance of a personal narrative voice to reinforce empathy, while further immersing the reader in the story's complex world. This particular notion is given weight through the use of multiple narrative voices within a single storyline and an implementation of predominantly first-person narration. However, Gillian Flynn's literary work goes beyond the dissection of broken minds. Indeed, she exposes the intricate layers and social construct of femininity within the domestic sphere. Women have historically been affiliated to domesticity due to their gendered roles of mothers and wives, rather than being perceived as an independent self. As Rotman states "the home was defined as a private, female sphere in opposition to the public economic sphere of men" (666). Flynn subverts the safety of the home and frames it as the source of trauma and fragmentation, shifting the *uncanny* of the Gothic monster to the average suburban residence. The very elements that commonly inspire reassurance and stability are dismantled and cast as horrific. The "haunted house" trope becomes a reality; Camille's bedroom, or Amy's "confidential" diary. As such, the domestic sphere in Flynn's novels is more than a practical setting, as it is the site of foundation for female identity. However, unlike traditional crime fiction, where portrayals of women within the home are reduced to an "inert body to be looked at, dissected, and penetrated" (qtd. in Joyce 5), Amy and Camille have active, though often destructive, roles

in their narratives. Their respective narrative voices allow for evidence on how their trauma protrudes into their lives. As such, this section will explore how Flynn redefines trauma as a catalyst in shaping identity, through Camille's fragmentation and Amy's performance.

I- Camille: Trauma as an Unhealed Wound

I had the pleasure of asking author Lisa Jewell about her approach to narratology and the portrayal of women's mental health in psychological thrillers, to which she replied:

> The way I write about trauma in my female characters is very instinctive. I tend to discover the character before I discover the trauma, and then find that the trauma explains the character. My books are never planned in advance so I only know things about my characters as the book evolves. I'm learning all the time. I also enjoy spending time inside the heads of broken people, damaged people, twisted people, seeing the world through their eyes with empathy. (Lisa Jewell 2025)

Jewell's reflections highlight a defining characteristic of the psychological thriller: trauma is a shaping force in a character's life, actions and storytelling. By emphasizing a focus on "broken" and "damaged" women, it mirrors the expression of fragmented narratives and identities that asserts itself in psychological thrillers. Gillian Flynn's debut novel, *Sharp Objects* (2006), embodies this notion, following numerous female characters who grapple with trauma that manifests itself psychologically and physically, thus shaping their sense of self.

Camille Preaker, a journalist who reports for a Chicago newspaper, is sent to Wind Gap, Missouri, her hometown, to investigate the murder of a young girl and the disappearance of another. She reluctantly returns, due to the complicated and fraught relationship she has with

her mother, Adora, as well as the trauma surrounding the death of her younger sister, Marian. Camille's real father is never mentioned, but her mother remarried and had a new daughter, Amma, a half-sister Camille barely knows. Camille's childhood was particularly complex, as she not only had to face Marian's death, but she was also sexually assaulted around the same time. As a result of this multilayered and traumatic upbringing, Camille's scarring experiences have led her to develop a skewed sense of reality and self. Her character is "fragmented", which refers to a character whose sense of self has been split and is built of discordant elements. This division of identity originates from unresolved trauma, which Cathy Caruth discusses in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, stating:

> [P]sychiatry is beginning to rediscover the reality of trauma in people's lives and the fact that actual experiences can be so overwhelming that they cannot be integrated into existing mental frameworks and, instead, are dissociated, later to return intrusively as fragmented sensory or motoric experiences (176).

Indeed, Camille's accumulated childhood trauma shaped her adult self's coping mechanisms to deal with daily life, ultimately shattering her identity. This has caused her to dissociate and become unable to reconcile the fragments of her selfhood.

The concept of "fragmentation" has long existed in literature, yet its recognition only occurred rather recently. One of the earliest examples of fragmented characters is featured in *Mrs. Dalloway*, written by Virginia Woolf in 1925. Her main protagonist, Clarissa, as well as other characters, such as Septimus Warren Smith, repeatedly find themselves reminiscing or being haunted by their past. This offers disjointed narratives that mirror their tormented or nostalgic minds. However, the first instance in which the concept of fragmentation was theorized appears in Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1899, where he

contends that "The unconscious is the larger sphere, which includes within it the smaller sphere of the conscious" (660). This split between the conscious and unconscious mind suggests a possibility for duality in personality that isn't fully recognized by the individual themselves. When analyzing trauma, Freud argues in *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, that:

> the expression "traumatic" has no other than an economic meaning, and the disturbance permanently attacks the management of available energy. The traumatic experience is one which, in a very short space of time, is able to increase the strength of a given stimulus so enormously that its assimilation, or rather its elaboration, can no longer be effected by normal means. (215)

Freud emphasizes the disruption of psychological processing, a notion which aligns itself with research regarding childhood trauma, that Goodyear et al. underscore as highly damaging. They have reported that childhood trauma in particular has proven to increase "adult health problems related to strategies, coping mechanisms and behaviors developed by the child to protect themselves from adversity" (2). Indeed, a fragmented mind is often the result of intense trauma, leaving victims in a state of emotional purgatory. Numerous cases studied demonstrate the lasting and persisting effect painful events can have on individuals, including invading their dreams and impacting their actions and behaviors. Nightmares, panic attacks or repeated, compulsive practices can take over the lives of the affected, owing to experiences that were too overwhelming for their minds to bear or process at the time.

Cathy Caruth establishes in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History,* the etymology of the word trauma, which stems from "the Greek *trauma*, or "wound," originally referring to an injury inflicted on a body" (3). Indeed, the first usage of the word was solely employed for physical wounds. However, as Caruth explains, Freud began utilizing the term in psychology. Additionally, Caruth states that, as opposed to corporeal harm, trauma of the mind

is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness” (4). As such, unlike corporeal harm which can be healed or treated, a psychological wound can form without its host being fully aware of its existence.

This theoretical framework is especially relevant with the case of Camille Preaker in *Sharp Objects.* Her childhood traumas were mental shocks that led to a fragmentation of her sense of self. This fragmentation will be seen in her detached relationship to herself and her coping strategies. Her fractured self will also manifest through her complex relation to time, as her past continuously haunts her present, effectively warping her perception of reality.

a. The Self as an Other

The manner in which Camille speaks of herself in *Sharp Objects* is striking and unsettling to the reader. Freud’s *uncanny* takes on a new dimension through Gillian Flynn’s characters, as Camille separates herself from her own identity to survive her past trauma. The self is cast as a monstrous “other” entity, whose mechanisms are complex and deeply entrenched, thus creating a seemingly endless and impenetrable cycle of suffering. Indeed, though Camille never strays from using the pronoun “I”, her tone alienates her from her own narrative, observing herself with distance and harsh criticism. Her temporal leaps from past to present create narrative disorientation, mimicking her own ruptured sense of reality. She constructs her identity on her younger self, while simultaneously degrading it. This is conveyed through the repeated use of self-deprecating phrases, such as “I was rotten” (44) or “I was the class freak, a tight, nervous eight-grader” (77). Her past-self is described with such distance that it borders on dissociation, almost suggesting she is referring to a stranger. This underscores her internal fragmentation and the ways in which her sense of self is shattered.

Camille's self-loathing is rendered evident through the critique and belittlement of her experiences, as though looking at herself from the outside, stating, "I had a dirty streak my senior year, which I later rectified" (78). The mention of a "dirty streak", which she "later rectified", reveals her inability to claim or accept her past actions. Her need to 'repair' herself does not limit itself to her corporality, as she rejects every aspect of her teenage self "I regretted what a serious teenager I'd been: There were no posters of pop stars or favorite movies, no girlish collections of photos or corsages" (50-51).

Camille's lack of empathy for herself is striking, as she frames her past as something that should be corrected rather than understood, thus treating self-acceptance as a luxury she can't afford, especially when referring to her self-harm "Someday I may visit a surgeon, see what can be done to smooth me, but now I couldn't bear the reaction. Instead I drink so I don't think too much about what I've done to my body" (79). Camille seems reluctant to grant her present self and younger self even the smallest amount of grace. While her grammar doesn't clearly shift from common narratives, the blatant disgust she directs towards her own body and emotions creates an internal division. Indeed, the narrative unfolds in a stream-of-consciousness style, oscillating between vivid, gory memories and daunting flashbacks that feel like ghost-like hallucinations. As such, the reader assembles the pieces of Camille's life little by little, while constantly questioning her objectivity regarding her past experiences. Her character is profoundly impacted by her unresolved childhood trauma which had led to a blurring of her past and present in which her self-perception is distorted by suffering.

b. Narrative and Temporal Fragmentation

Camille's shattered psyche is also evident from her narrative, which is relentlessly haunted by the past. In *A Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory,* Imre Szeman, Sarah

Blacker and Justin Sully argue that a fragmented narrative voice, even one that offers a single perspective, like Camille Preaker's, can come to mirror the fragmentation of one's identity. As they contend:

> By allowing a plurality of narratives, this choice of grammatical form suggests an equally plural, fragmented, and always renegotiated sense of self. If, taking a clue from Judith Butler, we regard storytelling as a performance of identity, the self becomes something that we constantly create and recreate, not only through the stories we tell ourselves in the privacy of our minds, but also through the ones that we verbalize, since we present ourselves differently to every audience we face. (684)

In *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* by E. Ann Kaplan notes that fragmentation "appears in the fragmented thinking, the moving backwards and forwards, the repetitions, the doubts about what he is doing, and so on" (59). Similarly, Camille's hallucinations and recollections of the past are often done without transition, reflecting her fragile, fragmented state of mind, particularly when it pertains to the memories of her deceased sister.

Indeed, Camille's memories, though rich in detail, are not presented in chronological order. Instead, they are introduced as disjointed fragments, disconnected slices of her childhood which protrude in her present. While these memories aren't always depicted as overtly traumatic, the surrounding context often is. For instance, when attending a funeral, her mind is immediately plunged back into her younger sister's funeral:

> My mother was wearing blue to the funeral. Black was hopeless and any other color was indecent. She also wore blue to Marian's funeral, and so did Marian. She was

> astonished I didn't remember this. I remembered Marian being buried in a pale pink dress. (37)

Adora's blue attire triggers Camille to relive a past funeral while attending a present one, thus exposing the fracture she experiences between time periods. Evidently, her turmoil is mental as well as physical as she is trapped in a cycle of grief. The intrusions of painful memories is not a simple narrative technique but a psychological reality for Camille as she is unable to move forward.

Camille never fully processed the death of her sister, Marian. Freud's theory of the *return of the repressed* is applicable in Camille's case, as he argues that painful memories that are pushed into the unconscious mind never truly disappear and are bound to resurface in unexpected ways. Camille experiences this through frequent flashbacks and hallucinations about her sister. The death of her sister was too overwhelming for her then thirteen-year-old self to fathom, leading her to obsessively reference Marian, as if speaking her name would manifest her back into existence. This fixation on the past is accentuated by the comparisons Camille draws between Marian and her half-sister, Amma, as she states, "I retreated to my room, away from that horrible little girl, who was not like Marian at all" (75). In *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis,* Freud notes that "Mourning is a type of emotional fixation on a theory of the past, which also brings with it the most complete alienation from the present and the future" (174). By shutting out Amma and comparing her to her deceased sister, Camille may believe she is staying loyal to her blood sister. Guilt creates a barrier between her and Amma, as if bonding with her would betray Marian's memory. This causes her to preemptively assume she could never connect with Amma as deeply as she did with Marian. The loss of her first sister being too much to bear caused her mind to impede her from forming any kind of attachment to Amma, as a way to protect herself from further grief.

Trauma can often cause victims to feel as though no time has passed since the distressing event took place or give this impression due to frequent flashbacks. Elements of everyday life can trigger a person into reliving their ordeal. Sensory, visual, or auditory details that seem mundane to someone else, can prompt a traumatic episode for others. As Caruth contends in *Trauma: Explorations of the Mind*, victims feel an intense shock to stimuli that recalls the event, leading them to avoid any and all situations that could set off their internal alarm. Camille is particularly prone to this due to her return to Wind Gap. Staying in an environment that hosted several of her most difficult and traumatizing childhood experiences leaves her vulnerable, reopening wounds of her past that hadn't healed at all. Additionally, in view of the journalistic investigation she is pursuing, she is professionally required to interact with people from the town. The contact she is compelled to have through interviews with her past community directly thrusts her back into her past mindset, making her traumas feel as raw and fresh as the first time she experienced them.

During her early teenage years, Camille endured both a sexual assault and the death of her sister, thus permanently skewing her perception of time. The past has a fierce grip on her psyche, compelling her to eternally linger in a trauma and grief-ridden limbo. This is made abundantly clear through the repeated intrusion of the past into the present in the form of systematic comparisons Camille makes between the present and life when Marian was alive, “She also wore blue to Marian’s funeral” (37), “It was so much like the old days with Marian” (73), “I was sinking back into old routines, about to run to the kitchen to heat some tea, just like I always did for Marian when she was sick” (74), “She loves me like Marian did” (231-232). In *Trauma: Exploration in Memory*, Caruth states that, “To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (4-5). This sentence perfectly underlines the most challenging symptom that trauma generates, the *possession* it has on the victim in question. It holds them

hostage in the one place they suffered the most, installing fear anew, and making it impossible for them to fully escape.

Soldiers return from war possessed by images of death and violence they were forced to witness. What was originally referred to as "shell-shock" is now categorized as PTSD or *post-traumatic stress disorder* and has been recognized to affect more than war veterans. As Caruth contends in *Unclaimed Experiences,* "other experiences, such as rape, child abuse, auto and industrial accidents" (11), can lead to equally life alternating symptoms and are at long last being acknowledged as experiences that cause post-traumatic stress disorder.

Indeed, Camille is frozen in a state of emotional paralysis, hindering her from moving on or grieving. This stagnation or inability to 'grow up' is notably substantiated by her regressive behavior with her sister, Amma. Though Camille is an adult and should prioritize Amma's protection, Camille's actions are reckless, as seen in this passage, "*I am doing drugs with my thirteen-year-old sister*, I whispered to myself. But a good ten minutes had passed, and the idea brought only a flutter of happiness. She was a fun girl, my little sister, the most popular girl in Wind Gap, and she wanted to hang out with me" (231). Her lack of maturity makes her incapable of acting as a responsible guardian, revealing her unconscious desire to retreat to a pre-trauma era, where she could be carefree and unburdened by adult responsibilities. The phrase "the most popular girl in Wind Gap, and she wanted to hang out with me", reveals how childlike she remains, as her little sister's high social status grants her a sense of belonging and validation, a dynamic which highlights her emotionally stunted state. Camille's trauma has left her grasping for fleeting moments of joy that enable her to escape her reality.

Camille illustrates how victims of trauma "show clear indications that they are grounded in a fixation upon the moment of the traumatic disaster" (Freud 173). In this sense, the haunting presence of her sister mimics the Gothic presence of ghosts but twists it from a spectral

apparition to a psychological haunting. The allegory of ghosts reflecting real trauma is a recurring theme in literature, as seen in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), where the ghostly apparitions are in fact embodiments of the protagonists' psychological suffering, thus entangling trauma and spectral forces. Nonetheless, Camille does state her awareness regarding this incapability to mourn, when she asks herself, "Would we have been this ugly if Marian hadn't died? Other families got over such things. Grieve and move on. She still hovered over us" (212). Her choice of the word "hover" when describing her departed sister, reveals a hint of ghostly presence, once more evoking the haunting trope of Gothic literature.

However, this acknowledgement is not sufficient as it does not allow her to untangle herself from the suffering her mind subjects her to. As such, Camille is acutely aware of the impact her sister's death had on her, suggesting that her regular mention of Marian is intentional and can be interpreted as a sort of self-inflicted penance. Camille's emotional entrapment serves as a foil to Amy's radical use of her past as a resource to gain control. Indeed, while Camille is a more passive character in her response to trauma, Amy uses victimhood as a flexible status she can embody, weaponize and perform with startling accuracy.

II- Amy: Trauma as a Performance

In stark contrast to Camille's identity, which is incessantly haunted by her past traumas, Amy's character is an illustration of trauma as a catalyst performance to resist oppression. Not only is Amy a subversive female lead with agency within a psychological thriller, she is also acutely conscious of harmful feminine tropes, such as the victimized heroine, which she exploits and leverages to her advantage. Despite her self-awareness, she isn't always able to fully escape feminine clichés. For instance, though her initial plan aimed to get Nick charged

for murder to receive the death penalty, her objective swiftly changes once she realizes she can rehabilitate their relationship. As such, while Amy portrays herself as utterly independent, she remains very much male-orientated and goes as far as murder to be able to find a viable excuse to return home to Nick. Amy's dissection of identity aligns with Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity, which is outlined as a series of ritualized acts:

> In what senses, then, is gender an act? As anthropologist Victor Turner suggests in his studies of ritual social drama, social action requires a performance which is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; it is the mundane and ritualized form of their Legitimation. (526)

Though Butler highlights how gender identity is a result of a desire to socially "fit in", Amy calculates her performed gender to effectively stand out. Indeed, while Camille's fragmentation is a symptom of traumatic events, Amy literally writes and weaponizes the narrative of her fragmented self to confound the public and Nick. Unlike Camille Preaker, Amy's identity is intentionally fragmented adopts different personas to suit her needs. This is evident in *Gone Girl*'s structure; the novel follows both Amy Dunne and her husband Nick through alternating point-of-view chapters. Flynn's novel begins with Nick returning home to discover Amy has been abducted on the date of their wedding's fifth anniversary. Amy's voice is first delivered through her diary entries that retrace the early stages of her relationship with Nick. Recently having to relocate to Missouri due to Nick's mother falling ill, Amy's diary reveals that Nick's behavior towards her had become increasingly psychologically and financially abusive. As such, Nick's involvement in Amy's disappearance is heavily suspected.

However, part two reveals that Amy had meticulously orchestrated her abduction, and that Nick was cheating on her with one of his students, Andie. Betrayed and furious at Nick for

wasting her life, Amy seeks revenge against her partner and stages evidence to frame him for her death while she goes into hiding.

Furthermore, the novel overtly toys with genre conventions, literary references and the reader's expectations. As H. Sutton states "The text becomes not just self-referential—knowing and then expanding on its place within a literary noir tradition—but increasingly intertextual and metafictional" (58). Indeed, *Gone Girl* knowingly shifts and transforms conventions of genre and literary tropes, such as the scorned lover and the pursuit of revenge. Flynn reminds readers of the narrative norms of thrillers, as categorized by David Glover into "racing thrillers … legal thrillers … psychological thrillers … political thrillers … futuristic thrillers" (146), while also deconstructing them, inviting reflection upon conventional structure and characterization. Amy states "I am penniless and on the run. How fucking noir" (356), once more reminding the reader she is a character aware of the trope she is consciously manufacturing. Moreover, *Gone Girl* contorts all expectations of the whodunit by revealing the culprit in the middle of the storyline. Flynn constructs a semi-conventional beginning to the storyline, thus creating a specific level of expectation or "horizon d'attente" for the readers, only to completely subvert its traditional structure. Amy's character is endlessly surprising as a female lead, offering an array of multifaceted identities. Amy herself is aware of her ever-shifting self, stating: "The way some women change fashion regularly, I change personalities. What persona feels good, what's coveted, what's *au courant?*" (250).

a. Diary Amy

Throughout the novel, Amy delivers her point of view through two main ways; the first being diary entries. As such, readers' initial encounter with Amy's narration is through an

idealized and performative identity constructed around her desire for revenge. Indeed, once aware of Nick's infidelity, she starts crafting seven-year worth of handwritten diary entries from their first meeting up to right before her abduction. Additionally, diaries commonly represent a deeply intimate space in which one can freely process or record inner thoughts, exempt from judgment. As such, Amy paradoxically, but intentionally, chose a conventionally private sphere to construct a performance while including factual episodes of her life with Nick. The diary becomes a script which allows her to continue controlling the narrative while still in hiding:

> One hundred and fifty-two entries total, and I don't think I ever lost her voice. I wrote her very carefully, Diary Amy. She is designed to appeal to the cops, to appeal to the public should the portions be released. They have to read this diary like it's some sort of Gothic tragedy. A wonderful, good-hearted woman – whole life ahead of her, everything going for her, whatever else they say about women who die - chooses the wrong mate and pays the ultimate price. They have to like her. Me. (267)

It is significant that Amy labels her narrative as a "Gothic tragedy". This classification firmly reinscribes her story within the Gothic tradition, while also, on a metatextual level, modernizes her narrative to the psychological thriller, by including police and detective elements. The early Gothic narratives in which women were primarily portrayed as victims becomes inspiration for new compelling female narratives and voices. Thus, Amy is careful to ensure an authentic performance through the diary, as each entry is handwritten and possesses a seemingly unfiltered tone, thus making it believable and evoking empathy. Literary research has unveiled how empathy can influence a character's reliability. If the reader is able to recognize themselves in the character's decisions, it is easier for them to ascribe logic and reliability, thus creating a stronger reader/character connection. As Suzanne Keen states in *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions* (2015):

> When a narrator generalizes in a reliable fashion about a character's thoughts and feelings, using psycho-narration, readers have little reason to doubt it. Similarly, in fiction employing either quoted (interior) monologue or narrated monologue (free indirect discourse), in which the words of the characters' thoughts appear, narrative empathic accuracy will be high. (128)

Additionally, 'Diary' Amy narrates in present tense while Nick's point of view is delivered in past tense, thus emphasizing a sense of urgency to Amy's actions. This grants Amy a more natural feel to her narrative, as if she were simply describing her daily life before even having processed it. Contrastingly, Nick's past tense feels intentional which leaves room for readers to suspect his narrative was thought out and adjusted to further his innocence.

Inspired by female characters in "Gothic tragedy", Amy paints herself as a modernization of the damsel in distress trope, through her deliberate lamentation. This ambivalent duality of victim and villain further anchors her as a deftly effective unreliable narrator. Conversely to Camille Preaker, who is unreliable due to her imposed fragmented sense of reality, Amy is unreliable as she *chooses* to deceive. She is aware of the profound media bias that grants white women high levels of coverage when they go missing, which she can manipulate to shape her image as "A wonderful, good-hearted woman". The phrase, "They have to like her. Me" suggests a linguistic rupture. The Freudian slip of "her" to "me" reinforces the notion that this persona is an illusion she created. She dissociates from 'Diary Amy' and employs "her", suggesting she establishes distance between herself and this identity. However, the surge of "Me" betrays the inextricable conflation of "her" and "me", the victim and the agent, the puppeteer and puppet.

This passage also aptly illustrates the metatextual aspects of Gillian Flynn's novel, as Amy's inner dialogue in the diary entries are experienced as confessions to the reader. Her stream of consciousness style within the diary positions the readers as an unwitting witness, who, much like Nick, the police, and the public, are manipulated by Amy's orchestrated deception. Flynn exploits the reader's trust through the character's seemingly authentic self being laid bare, while we are in fact being trapped within her fabricated narrative. Indeed, however ingenious Amy's diary, the true horror lies in her successful deception of the reader. Her narrative positions us as active and complicit participants in her manipulation. Why do we want to believe her? Is our desire to consume a coherent narrative with the binary villain/victim so powerful that it skews our perception of reality? Amy skillfully exploits this conditioning, thus offering us a narrative that fits our preconceived expectations of female suffering.

As the authorities' initial reaction wasn't to doubt the diary's reliability, but to scour it for information, all they found was incriminating information regarding her husband's behavior prior to the abduction. When conducting a murder investigation in which the victim is married, the first individuals to be subjected to suspicion are the spouses, especially when said victim is a woman. In a study entitled *Global Study on Homicide 2023* by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, statistics clearly show that" women and girls are disproportionately affected by homicide perpetrated by intimate partners or family members, which accounts for 56 per cent of all female homicide victims" (UNODC 33). Women are indeed at high risk of being killed by their loved ones, particularly their romantic partners, a statistical inevitability Amy not only understands but exploits for her benefit. Accordingly, the diary portrays her as the perfect wife and victim who has devoted time, love and money to an emotionally and physically abusive husband, thereby steering the narrative in her favor. This falsified personality draws on the image of the pleasant and ready-to-sacrifice-everything spouse, a character she sums up perfectly in her self-injunction "So you swallow your disappointment and say okay" (178). By

addressing herself and women in general as “you”, Amy stands here for the voice of social pressure and patriarchal system that defines the accepted female behavioral standards.

A parallel can be drawn between Amy’s ‘Diary’ identity and Camille's mother, Adora Crellin in *Sharp Objects*, as in both cases, performed femininity is a mask as well as a foundation of the character’s architecture. One crafts an idealized version of female victimhood, while the other seeks to be the benevolent Southern mother. While both possess distinctive traits, their end goal is to manipulate others through the weaponization of their femininity.

Indeed, Amy embodies gendered expectations to perfection. For instance, she gives Nick the remainder of her trust fund to help him buy a bar with his sister, blindly trusting him with their already unstable financial situation. As such, she must navigate the narrow line between convincing the reader that she adores and trusts Nick, while simultaneously painting him as the villain in their story. Correspondingly, she must also plausibly depict herself as innocent, which she achieves through the use of childlike vocabulary and imagery “Summer. Birdies. Sunshine” (93) or “Tra and la! I am smiling a big adopted-orphan child smile as I write this … like some Technicolor comic of a teenage girl talking on the phone with my hair in a ponytail” (11). Her goal is to portray herself as naive to simulate innocence, accomplished through the inclusion of red flags that she seems oblivious to, which the reader easily picks up on. All the while, she minimizes Nick’s toxic traits by putting herself down with words such as “idiot”, “frivolous”, “ridiculous” (175). As such, Amy exploits the experiences of psychologically abused wives, who often downplay their mistreatment in an attempt to resolve the issues of the relationship. This phenomenon is not a mere tolerance; Mary Anne Dutton defines it as a “function of the "cognitive dissonance" created by living in an abusive relationship” (Dutton 30), in which individuals feel as though they have to produce understandable reasons to stay with their abusers.

Additionally, Amy's diary is intentionally littered with references drawing on the image of the socially desirable meek woman while projecting blame on that very same trope. For instance, whenever she expresses feelings or acts in a 'feminine' coded way, she states "I am being a girl" (73) or "then I started crying when I started talking – I was doing the awful child talk-cry" (73). She repeatedly blames her gender for her reactions to Nick, when in reality, these are strategic lamentations that aim to reinforce the reader's hate for Nick's behavior.

A telling instance in her diary entries revealed a sliver of Amy's real, calculating logic. Reporting the instance when she accidentally ran into Nick eight months after their first meeting, she explains that despite her anger, she preferred to look light and laid-back, but not without thinking about her options. Though framed as lighthearted questions that resemble the personality quizzes she created when working for a women's magazine, she meticulously preempts every response:

> "It was *him*. The boy in 'I met a boy!'
> I didn't break my stride, just turned to him and said:
> a) 'Do I know you?' (manipulative, challenging)
> b) 'Oh, wow, I'm so happy to see you!' (eager, doormatlike)
> c) 'Go fuck yourself.' (aggressive, bitter)
> d) 'Well, you certainly take your time about it, don't you, Nick?'
> (light, playful, laid-back)
> Answer: D" (28-29)

Amy reveals how deeply jarring her need for control is, as she sifts through every possible outcome, to micromanage through different scripts how she could be perceived. Though her goal is to be as likeable as possible in her diary to garner sympathy, her need for every

interaction to be calculated and disciplined bleeds through. Indeed, the diary intertwines performance and reality, occasionally offering a window into her psyche. Additionally, her concise responses of "(manipulative, challenging)", "(eager, doormatlike)", showcases the reductive labels that are assigned to women by men, thus shedding light on the often punitive environments women must navigate in social interactions. These words are more than simply descriptive, as they reflect a broader phenomenon, where women's actions are viewed in binary terms or archetypes, as in the usual opposition between pure angel and villainous witch. She is either "doormatlike", suggesting she is passive and weak, or "manipulative", thus categorizing her as aggressive. This "quiz" format is a recurrent feature throughout the novel, demonstrating that this inflexible system is deeply entrenched in Amy's mentality. This mechanism reminds readers of the gendered biases that permeate society, where men's qualities are to be confident and assertive, while a woman with the same traits will be categorized as narcissistic or aggressive. As such, Amy obsessively anticipates her responses to fit the rigid script of her audience, certifying that her identity and inner thoughts are policed by the male gaze. Her dependency on this binary form of characterization further proves the fractured nature of her identity in a system that fails to recognize female complexity.

b. Cool Girl and Margo

Among Amy's array of manufactured identities (which are available to the reader), is the 'Cool Girl' persona. As Laura Joyce notes, this " 'Cool Girl' façade … is designed to appeal to Nick and the reader's preconceptions with regard to femininity and certain gendered signifiers" (75). Indeed, 'Cool Girl' reveals the performative and artificial construction of gender roles, emphasizing how female identity is often an amalgamation of cultural expectations and patriarchal fantasies. In perhaps one of the most renowned portions of the

novel, popularized through David Fincher's cinematic adaptation in 2014, Amy's 'Cool Girl' monologue serves as a scathing feminist critique against the performative nature of feminine identity. This persona is in no way described as a natural state of femininity, rather, Amy regards it as a discordance and a male-designed trap. Indeed, Amy details how she altered and molded her entire personality to become the girl of Nick's dreams, thus exposing the profoundly oppressive and prejudiced nature of these expectations. While embodying "Cool Girl" as a social construct, Amy also condemns its misogyny and shows aversion to its use.

Indeed, Amy's critique of the 'Cool Girl' allows for a reexamination of the social and cultural traits that have been associated with feminine identity. Her monologue deftly underlines how these actions are not innate, but rather imposed practices that women have internalized as standard requirements to obtain or maintain a relationship with men. Indeed, these repeated, often strict performances are built upon men's misogynistic imagination. Patriarchy endorses these narratives as conventional, thus conditioning men to believe the women who don't adhere to them are difficult or undesirable. As Amy states:

> Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she's hosting the world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. *Go ahead, shit on me, I don't mind, I'm the Cool Girl …*
>
> Men actually think this girl exists. Maybe they're fooled because so many women are willing to pretend to be this girl. For a long time Cool Girl offended me. I /used to see men – friends, coworkers, strangers – giddy over these awful pretender

> women, and I'd want to sit these men down and calmly say: *You are not dating a woman, you are dating a woman who has watched too many movies written by socially awkward men who'd like to believe that this kind of woman exists and might kiss them* … And the Cool Girls are even more pathetic: They're not even pretending to be the woman they want to be, they're pretending to be the woman a man wants them to be. Oh, and if you're *not* a Cool Girl, I beg you not to believe that your man doesn't want the Cool Girl. It may be a slightly different version – maybe he's a vegetarian, so Cool Girl loves seitan and is great with dogs; or maybe he's a hipster artist, so Cool Girl is a tattooed, bespectacled nerd who loves comics. There are variations to the window dressing, but believe me, he wants Cool Girl, who is basically the girl who likes every fucking thing he likes and doesn't ever complain.
>
> (How do you know you're *not* Cool Girl? Because he says things like: 'I like strong women.' If he says that to you, he will at some point fuck someone else. Because 'I like strong women' is code for 'I hate strong women.') (250-251)

As Amy presents it, 'Cool Girl' is nothing but a performative identity that women adopt to satisfy male fantasies. Moreover, the monologue highlights how women are granted a strategic *illusion* of agency within this identity. While some women can choose to embody these traits, this compliance is constrained by a culturally constructed need for men's approval. As Butler contends, "The body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, as if it were a lifeless recipient of wholly pre-given cultural relations. But neither do embodied selves pre-exist the cultural conventions which essentially signify bodies" (526). As this passage indicates, identity does not precede the cultural conventions that shape it, and this is true for both men and women. Whether intentionally or not, Amy's monologue underlines the way both men and women are trapped in performing roles that have been culturally ascribed.

Consequently, the 'Cool Girl' must integrate men's hobbies and fantasies as her own to be as appealing as possible, a warped double standard men rarely recognize. Amy enumerates a satirical hyperbole of men's interests "football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth … while somehow maintaining a size 2" (250-251). This list reveals the absurd and unrealistic nature of the expectations men project onto women who are deemed 'cool'. As such, Amy mocks the over-romanticization of this portrayal of feminine identity in popular culture, which promotes a skewed version of womanhood. The tone of this monologue drips with irony and bitterness, thus communicating the abhorrence Amy holds towards these standards. Her imagery is crude and visceral, "like she's hosting the world's biggest culinary gang bang" (250) or "*Go ahead, shit on me*" (250) an effort to provoke the readers into facing the ugly realities of women's condition and treatment. Amy's candid and confrontational attitude does not solely depend on shock value, it frames 'Cool Girl' as a passive object that men can abuse and discard without repercussions. The phrase, "Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want", betrays the one-sided transaction that this 'Cool Girls' trap entails. Amy demonstrates that these women are somewhat conscious of their disaccord with their situation through the adjective "chagrined", yet they maintain a facade of compliance, ripe for male disposal. Therefore, Amy repeatedly/ breaks the fourth wall and directly addresses men, "*You are not dating a woman…*", as well as women, "I beg you not to believe that your man doesn't want the Cool Girl", to once more foster a space for readers to reflect upon their own compliance to these harmful myths.

Amy's monologue gained momentum in popular culture as it serves as a cathartic release for women all around the world. Her unfiltered anger acts as an intense defiance against the systemic mistreatment of women. As patriarchal society has raised women to be polite and accommodating, Amy intentionally subverts these traits through the use of confrontation and

vulgarity. Though her portrayal of men's behavior is satirical for impact, her rage serves as a collective outcry for justice, thus echoing the experiences of women who consistently compete with the unrealistic standard of the 'Cool Girl'.

Additionally, Amy's version of 'Cool Girl' underlines the high level of cognitive dissonance that women must possess in order to live through life without the crushing weight of patriarchal demands. 'Cool Girl' is elucidated as a state of mind whose main requirement is to be ignorant of the blatant misogyny that permeates female/male relationships. In *Our Blood: Prophecies and Discourses on Sexual Politics*, Andrea Dworkin contends that "Many women, I think, resist feminism because it is an agony to be fully conscious of the brutal misogyny which permeates culture, society, and all personal relationships" (78). Indeed, Amy's monologue highlights the intellectual lobotomy that feels obligatory to women, thus reducing authentic personalities to a vessel of male fantasy and desire. Drawing on this notion, Amy exemplifies through enumeration how women can feel a deluded sense of serenity when they choose to embody the 'Cool Girl' lifestyle for their partner:

> I ate a MoonPie, I walked barefoot, I stopped worrying. I watched dumb movies and ate chemically laced foods. I didn't think past the first step of anything, that was the key. I drank a Coke and didn't worry about how to recycle the can or about the acid puddling in my belly, acid so powerful it could strip clean a penny. We went to a dumb movie and I didn't worry about the offensive sexism or the lack of minorities in meaningful roles. I didn't even worry whether the movie made sense. I didn't worry about anything that came next. Nothing had consequence, I was living in the moment, and I could feel myself getting shallower and dumber. But also happy. (252)

We must ask ourselves what it does to women to have to repress and essentially "kill off" their true selves in order to be loved. This passage aptly illustrates this question, where, in an effort to be 'Cool' and the perfect girlfriend, she had to dumb herself down. 'Perfect', in this specific instance, means performing zero degree of intellectual engagement, refraining from using her intellectual agency and expressing her social awareness.

Through the words "MoonPie", "Coke" and "chemically laced foods" Amy evokes consumerism and a numbing indifference to their artificial and harmful impact. She subtly reminds the reader of the strict diets imposed onto women, while suggesting that such an indulgent and carefree lifestyle is solely accepted for men. This notion is highlighted through the image of "acid buddling in my belly … so powerful it could strip clean a penny" (252), deftly illustrating the underlying toxicity of willful ignorance. She understands that the price of being loved by Nick was playing 'dumb', reinforcing the notion that a woman's worth is linked to how useful she can be to her partner, compelling her to give up her agency and authenticity.

Amy remains conscious of the blatant sexism that surrounds her, yet she intentionally decides to abstain from thinking about it too much, as this would run the risk of becoming too 'difficult' or complex. By stating she was "getting shallower and dumber. But also happy", she links her own happiness to a form of intellectual and moral diminishment. Though she admits to the temporary relief this state of mind grants her, the psychological toll of her perceived complicity in perpetuating a non-authentic version of herself quickly catches up to her. As such, this over polished persona is a survival mechanism that women take on to navigate oppressive gender norms and secure a place in a male dominated world. Her 'Cool Girl' monologue juxtaposed with the "MoonPie" passage demonstrates the ambivalence women feel when deciding whether to be authentic and true to themselves or be socially accepted.

However, Amy's denunciation remains purely psychological, as she does not actively seek out to dismantle these biased and absurd expectations. As such, though her discourse is in

strict opposition to the 'Cool Girl' traits, she embodies it, thus perpetuating the trope she despises.

Amy positions herself as a conscious performer of 'Cool Girl', while weaponizing it as a mask to help achieve her desires or to gain power. However, she argues many women have come to internalize and normalize misogynistic ideals as the standard that all women should follow. Indeed, though Amy embodies 'Cool Girl' as a romantic archetype, Margo (also called Go), Nick's sister, demonstrates how this trope can permeate relationships beyond romantic ones. Her character serves as a crucial foil to Amy's fabricated performance. While Amy recognizes 'Cool Girl' as a manufactured identity based on men's fantasies, Margo believes it to be her authentic self; she believes herself to be a *natural* 'Cool Girl'. It becomes clear that Margo exemplifies a strong case of internalized misogyny, highlighting how the 'Cool Girl' trope is a survival strategy for women who center their lives around men. Margo's devoutness to Nick is evident, going as far as mortgaging her house to help him acquire funds for his legal defense. Moreover, she openly insults other women and actively belittles the entire feminine gender, as she notes: "'Women are crazy.' Go didn't consider herself as part of the general category of *women*, a word she used derisively" (20). Notably, Margo rejects her given name, in favor of the more gender-neutral nickname 'Go", once more distancing herself from a more traditionally feminine identity. Her character illustrates the normalization of denigrating women as a way to ensure acceptance and love from men. To fully comprehend the extent of 'internalized misogyny', it is essential to define the term, which stems from systemic sexism. Kate Manne's *Down Girl* provides a more intricate delineation of these two contiguous notions, describing sexism as "the branch of patriarchal ideology that justifies and rationalizes a patriarchal social order", whereas misogyny is the "system that polices and enforces its governing norms and expectations. So sexism is scientific; misogyny is moralistic. And a patriarchal order has a hegemonic quality (20).

When internalized, misogyny permeates everyday interaction, manifesting in a myriad of ways. Bearman, et al. describe one example of women "putting one another down or maneuvering each other into lower status positions in an attempt to make themselves look or feel better" ("The Fabric of Internalised Sexism" 16). Go's character occupies a particularly complex space as she can be considered to fit the "tomboy" blueprint, but also embody the 'pick me' archetype. As Bearman et al. contend, a 'pick me girl' can be defined as women, often teenagers, "who have been influenced by gender norms and have ended up putting down other females in order to attract the attention of others" (9). This phenomenon can be linked to the popular phrase "I'm not like other girls", which some women use as a way to distinguish themselves through behaviors such as not applying cosmetics nor wearing skirts, listening to rock, and despising girls who embrace femininity (Bearman et al. 9). This behavior is not a simple matter of choice, it is a conscious embodiment of an archetype which purposefully strays from feminine conventions, thus allowing 'Cool girls' and 'pick-mes' to benefit from preferential treatment from men.

Amy's earlier 'Diary' identity aligns with these traits, as she repeatedly expresses condescending opinions on women who 'nag' their husbands, stating "Nick and I, we sometimes laugh … at the horrible things women make their husbands do to prove their love. … We call these men the *dancing monkeys*" (61). This passage perfectly demonstrates the 'pick me' habit of positioning oneself as superior to other women for following conventional roles. Nick's laughter shows his complicity in sustaining the 'Cool Girl' myth, enabling this toxic mindset.

Margo's behavior reveals similar traits to this recently coined term, as she both seeks Nick's approval and love and rejects femininity and any kind of allegiance to other women. Consequently, Go acts as an enabler for Nick's appalling behavior towards his presumed missing wife. When she finds out about his infidelity, Go accepts the possibility that Nick was unfaithful, abusive and ultimately murdered his pregnant wife. Go's allegiance evidently stems

from the fact that they are siblings, yet this unconditional familial love progressively shifts to a sort of willful blindness. Indeed, she is inclined to overlook and deny her brother's every reprehensible action for the sake of both their personal relationship and a privileged place among the female figures who make up the relational landscape of her brother's life. As such, the contrasting yet similarly structured figures of Amy and Margo emphasize Butler's theory of the instability of gender roles, which in this case, are survival strategies rather than authentic expressions of identity. Nonetheless, in both cases, the result remains the same; the erasure of a person's "real" self.

Though Amy and Camille's responses to pressure and trauma are distinct, they both see identity as a construction that can be built or broken. Camille's temporal and narrative fracture forces her to remain trapped in the past, thus creating distance between reality and her perception of her own life. Amy, on the other hand, exploits her trauma to craft a performance or personas to regain agency over her predetermined narrative. These survival methods, though different, are a logical consequence of their respective sources of identity fragmentation. Indeed, it is essential to explore and dissect their past so as to better understand their present identities.

B. Sources of Identity Fragmentation

While the domestic sphere offers a stage in which trauma is articulated and plays out, it is specifically within the family unit that identity fragmentation finds its roots. Psychological thrillers dismantle the belief that danger resides in the "unknown stranger". As the United Nations of Drug and Crime report on homicide notes, "women are disproportionately affected by homicidal violence in the family is a pattern observed in all word regions … This highlights the home as the most dangerous place for women and girls" (*Global Study on Homicide 2023* 33). Indeed, this underscores how intimate relationships can be the site of extreme violence. Amy and Camille's identities exemplify how fragmentation is often the aftermath of parental figures' failure to provide a supportive and nurturing environment during childhood. Consequently, their primary source of love becomes their foundation for trauma. Through the exploration of these origins, we uncover that the most vicious monsters in Camille and Amy's lives are those meant to raise or love them.

I- Parental Neglect and Lack of Love

During her investigation into the murders of the young girls of Wind Gap, Camille discovers that her mother suffers from Munchausen syndrome by proxy, which was the cause of her little sister's death. Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy (MSBP) is a mental illness that describes "children whose mothers produce histories of illness to their children and who support such histories by fabricated physical signs and symptoms" (Ramos et al. 516). At the end of the novel, Camille is poisoned by her mother, but she is saved and Adora is found guilty of the murders of the two young girls.

Indeed, Camille's fractured sense of self cannot be fully explored without examining the source of her trauma and deep-seated insecurities: her mother. Adora Crellin, though not a ghoul or criminal, embodies the trope of the monstrous maternal figure in psychological thrillers who weaponizes her love, thus further developing Camille's characterization as the unreliable narrator who struggles with repressed memories. Adora's manipulation reveals how trauma can be manufactured within family dynamics, a theme that is central to the novel *Sharp Objects.* As such, this section aims to explore the external forces that have come to shape Camille's suffering, thus elucidating her need for self-inflicted pain.

Camille's mother enables the reader to confront the harrowing distortion of a figure of love into a source of manipulation and shame. Adora Crellin's Munchausen by Proxy becomes more than a plot device as it magnifies a hallmark present in domestic psychological thrillers, the grotesque patriarchal expectations of femininity; selflessness and sacrifice. The key distinction between Munchausen syndrome and Munchausen by *proxy*, is that the latter involves an individual gaining attention not by making themselves look sick, but by manufacturing illness in someone else to acquire the role of an altruistic caretaker thus performing normalcy in order to mask the horror. The most recent and public case was that of Gypsy-Rose Blanchard (2015, Missouri), a victim whose mother had been keeping her ill for years, forcing her to endure surgeries and procedures under the guise of fabricated diagnoses. In need of freedom from the medically induced hell her mother had her living in, Gypsy-Rose had her boyfriend help kill her mother and was sentenced to 10 years of jail (A.G. Sutton, "Blanchard, Gypsy Rose").

Similarly, Adora kept Marian sick for years, but her need to worsen her daughter's health went too far. As Adora says in her diary, "Marian is dead. I couldn't stop" (310). Her impulse was too strong to refrain from murdering her own child, while completely overlooking Camille throughout her childhood. Although Adora did attempt to poison Camille at first, she

states that "Camille has never become a good patient—being sick only makes her angry and spiteful … I hate her" (309). This excerpt taken from Adora's diary starkly reveals her blatant disregard and animosity, highlighting how she ignored Camille for selfish reasons, forcing her daughter to find care through self-harm. Adora craves the martyr-like status of the 'ultimate caretaker', seeking not just adoration but power over life and death. Adora's neglect taught Camille a fundamentally skewed notion; love is conditional. Adora would only love Camille if she was of use to her, but she failed to live up to her mother's toxic standards.

Because of the premature nature of Marian's death, Adora venerates her image, and while Camille adored her sister, she will never live up to her perfection, as she notes, "It's impossible to compete with the dead. I wished I could stop trying" (81). Camille believes that the pedestal Marian is put on effectively grants her a lower status, as she is treated more like an inconvenience than a member of the family, a negligence that deeply affected her as a teenager, and still does as an adult. "How long do we get to have you for, sweetness?" she'd say. Which meant: "When do you leave?" It's the politeness that I find most upsetting" (7).

Indeed, Camille was brought up to believe her very existence was a nuisance and that her place among the family had to be earned. She seems conscious of the toxic dynamic perpetuated by her mother, yet she struggles to separate from it. Despite her strong desire to break the generational curse of her family, she fails for the simple reason that she continues to actively seek approval from her mother. She recognizes the pattern of emotional abuse and tries to improve it for Amma's sake, yet she avoids betraying her mother for as long as possible. As Van der Kolk states in *The Body Keeps the Score,* "Children are also programmed to be fundamentally loyal to their caretakers, even if they are abused by them. Terror increases the need for attachment, even if the source of comfort is also the source of terror" (112). As such, even though Adora treats Camille poorly, her need for validation hinders her from truly being

able to untangle herself from her maternal toxicity, thus adding to the heavy psychological tension that drives the thriller's atmosphere.

Though Adora is described as a traumatized character, she has come to impose her toxic coping mechanisms and habits onto her daughters. Research on intergenerational trauma has revealed how unresolved trauma in parents be 'inherited' by their children. Goodyear et al. quote Hesse and Main who contend that this transmission is done through "specific interactional patterns, resulting in the effects of trauma being experienced without the original traumatic experience or event" (2). Indeed, through the same mechanisms that allow for culture to be passed down, traumatic effects can "become embedded in collective, cultural memory" (Goodyear et al. 2). Adora's trauma manifests through physical tics, mimicking Camille's use of self-harm as a way to relieve and manage stress. Adora is reported to compulsively remove her eyelashes, a practice called 'trichotillomania'. This habit has been studied to stem from different causes, as Jon E. Grant asserts, "Triggers to pull may be sensory, … emotional (e.g., feeling anxious, bored, tense, or angry), and cognitive" (869). Adora's habit, driven by an unhealthy obsession with control, becomes a symptom she passed down to Camille like a genetic code. As such, in times of stress, Adora regains the control she needs to remain calm by pulling her eyelashes off. Though Camille doesn't resort to her mother's choice of coping mechanism, she articulates the same need for a sense of power over her own body. Their dynamic demonstrates how feminine identity can construct itself as a reaction to a parent's behavior.

> During those last years, my mother pulled out all her eyelashes. She couldn't keep her fingers off them. She left little piles of them on tabletops. I told myself they were fairy nests. I remember finding two long blonde lashes stuck to the side of my foot, and I kept

> them for weeks next to my pillow. At night I tickled my cheeks and lips with them. (97)

Camille reports her mother's actions without worry, having unconsciously integrated these 'minor' acts of violence into her habitual reality. The passage above further bears witness to Camille's ability to adapt and self-soothe, even as a child. As her mother made no attempt to hide her trichotillomania, notably by leaving her plucked eyelashes in shared spaces like tabletops, Camille created a narrative to save herself from tragic realities. By pretending these eyelashes were "fairy nests" or by tickling her "cheeks and lips with them", she reclaims a sense of whimsy innocence in her otherwise complex childhood, a coping mechanism that highlights Camille's distorted version reality.

Mirroring her mother's behavior, Amma not only follows Adora's strict demands regarding clothes, she also replicates her destructive compulsions, as Camille states, "Amma had problems, too, I guessed. She'd left a tiny pile of eyelashes on the pillow next to me" (243). While Adora's stress management is carried out in private, the fact that she purposefully leaves 'proof' of her distress behind shows an intense need for attention and recognition of her pain. This creates a norm regarding the expression of pain; one can feel it and exorcise it, yet it must remain demure. Amma understands this system and easily repeats the damaging pattern without question, reinforcing the cyclical nature of horror often represented in psychological thrillers.

Additionally, Adora's hyper fixation on Marian forced Camille into becoming an emotional caregiver in order to survive her mother's mental instability. Counselor, writer and psychotherapist John Bradshaw explores this inversion of the parent-child relationship in *Healing the Shame that Binds You* (1988), as he explains:

> The child is always at the mother's disposal. A child cannot run away as her own mother did, a child can be used as an echo, is completely centered on her, will never desert her, can be totally controlled and offers full admiration and absorbed attention … By taking on the role of supplying the shame-based parents' narcissistic gratification the child secures love and a sense of being needed and not abandoned. *This process is a reversal of the order of nature. Now the child is taking care of the parents' needs* … This caregiver role is strangely paradoxical. In an attempt to secure parental love and avoid abandonment, the child is in fact being abandoned. (73)

Camille navigates her conflicted feelings towards her mother with humor and sarcasm while her mother persistently judges her and treats her like a child. Their relationship remains trapped in the dynamic of a strict mother and a rebellious daughter, even though Camille was forced into self-parenting. This passage aptly showcases Adora's

> "You're so hateful."
>
> "I learned at your feet."
>
> My mother lunged then, grabbed me by both arms. Then she reached behind me and, with one fingernail, circled the spot on my back that had no scars.
>
> "The only place you have left," she whispered at me. Her breath was cloying and musky, like air coming from a spring well.
>
> "Yes."
>
> "Someday I'll carve my name there." She shook me once, released me, then left me on the stairs with the warm remains of our liquor.
>
> I drank the rest of the sours and had dark sticky dreams. My mother had cut me open and was unpacking my organs, stacking them in a row on my bed as my flesh flapped to either side. She was sewing her initials into each of them, then tossing them back into me, along with a passel of forgotten objects" (191-192).

At the end of this excerpt, Camille's gruesome and gory dream symbolically reveals the terrible hold her mother maintains on her psyche and her body. Her nightmare graphically demonstrates her fear of Adora's real and imaginary physical control over her body, as rendered evident in the line, "She was sewing her initials into each of them", which refers to Camille's organs. The dream reveals that Camille equates her body to a vessel that can attest to her mother's abuse and control. However, reality demonstrates that her body is in fact a site of resistance, a space on which she has total control as she is the only one entitled to write her story on it. With no witnesses to corroborate her emotional mistreatment, her scars are a visceral manifestation of her internal turmoil.

During a trip with her mother and sister to try on dresses, she feels deeply ashamed of her uncovered body, stating "I rifled through the other dresses. All just as revealing. I caught sight of myself again in the mirror. I was horrifying" (153). Even when offered a compliment, she is unable to accept or believe it, so much so that her self-loathing and self-deprecating dominated her, "Every time people said I was pretty, I thought of everything ugly swarming beneath my clothes" (201). Her shame is expressed through constant self-surveillance and is then accentuated by her mother's damaging remarks:

> "Momma, you saw the dresses, you know why they won't work," I urged.
>
> "Just let me see."
>
> "I'll try one on, Momma," Amma wheedled.
>
> "Camille…"
>
> "Fine." I banged open the door. My mother, her face level with my neckline, winced.

> "Oh, dear God." I could feel her breath on me. She held up a bandaged hand, as if about to touch my chest, then let it drop. Behind her Amma whined like a puppy. "Look what you've done to yourself," Adora said. "Look at it."
>
> "I do."
>
> "I hope you just loved it. I hope you can stand yourself." (154)

The short passage above adequately illustrates the peculiar daughter-mother dynamics between Adora and Amma, versus Adora and Camille. While the youngest daughter continues to covet their mother's attention and approbation, Camille attempts to resist Adora's constant control. Adora's reaction to Camille's scars is of revulsion rather than empathy or concern. Her refusal to touch Camille's body borders on a visceral fear of contamination. This reveals Adora's intense discomfort when faced with imperfection, as Camille disrupts her mother's patriarchal ideals of beauty or 'normality'. Additionally, Adora's choice of language betrays her warped priorities. She commands, "Look at it", thus reducing her daughter to an "it", as if her scars overshadowed her entire being. Adora's condemnation demonstrates her belief that Camille's scars are a moral failure rather than a result of childhood trauma. She is unable to look past her daughter's scars to see the pain that lies beneath, therefore perpetuating the harmful notion that ranks physical perfection above mental well-being, leading Camille to believe she was either too much, too little or simply not enough. Camille's profound self-hatred continues to thrive due to Adora's neglect, as seen in this passage:

> "I thought the letter was nice. It was heartfelt," I said. "Didn't you read anything at Marian's funeral?"
>
> "No, no. I could barely stand, much less give speeches. I can't believe you can't remember these things, Camille. I'd think you'd be embarrassed to have forgotten so much."

"I was only thirteen when she died, Momma. Remember, I was young." Nearly twenty years ago, can that be right?

"Yes, well. Enough. Is there anything you'd like to do today? The roses are in bloom at Daly Park, if you'd like a walk."

"I should go over to the police station."

"Don't say that while you're staying here," she snapped. "Say you have errands to run, or friends to see."

"I have errands to run."

"Fine. Enjoy." (52-53)

The passage, though mundane, demonstrates the contempt in which Camille was brought up. Adora laces every word with dismission and judgment, thus successfully shattering Camille's identity, career and autonomy all at once. Adora's phrasing reveals she is persistently irritated with Camille's choices, which leads her to policing her every thought and memory. Adora's cruel remark suggests that Camille's own memory is defective for not recalling every detail of Marian's funeral, even though she was a child at the time. As such, Camille's grief is dismissed as performative and insincere by Adora, shaming her into believing her mourning wasn't done the 'right' way, a classic example of gaslighting which is often employed in psychological thrillers to unsettle and destabilize protagonists.

Moreover, Adora takes on the role of a patriarchal enforcer to ensure what is acceptable in society, or in this case, in their Missouri based hometown. Not only does Adora hold authority in their household, her prominent position as owner of the town's most prosperous pig farm grants her influence throughout the entirety of Wind Gap. Indeed, the second part of their exchange highlights Adora's demand for feminine performance as the norm. When Camille arrives home, her mother says: "Well, goodness, I'm sorry, sweetheart, come in, come

in. The house is not up to par for a visitor, I'm afraid." The house was perfect, down to the dozens of cut tulips in vases at the entry hall" (29). The juxtaposition of Adora's feigned modesty of an 'unclean' house, which is in reality perfect, underscores the hypocrisy of the expectations she perpetuates. Adora accepts the notion that women must present a flawless home and image at all times, even if those entails being artificial or performative. The tulips she mentions serve as perfect a metaphor for the illusion she seeks to create. They are cut and arranged, just like Adora's personality, which is controlled and orchestrated in order to disguise flaws or discomfort. Camille's contrasting behavior leads Adora to view her as 'too much' and excessive compared to her skewed perspective of a woman's acceptable conduct.

Camille's choice in pursuing journalism may be interpreted as a direct response to her personal mistreatment; she strives to give a voice to those who don't have one. However, her career becomes a double-edged sword. Journalism allows her to be in constant contact with traumatic events, thus forcing her to constantly adapt, yet her own trauma lingers at the surface, creating an endless cycle of exposure without personal closure. Her job is a clear cause for tension in her mother's home, as Adora states: "I just can't have that kind of talk around me ... Just don't tell me what you're doing, don't talk about anything you know. I'll pretend you're here for summer break" (32). This demand for silence coupled with a need for a more 'agreeable pretext' for a visit successfully erases Camille's career and reduces her to a child "you're here for summer break". Adora imposes this script upon her to perform; Camille must adhere to pleasant topics, as women are only permitted to speak of 'appropriate' things. This suppression of expression and truth echoes the psychological thriller's tendency to isolate its protagonists to fuel a suspensive ambiance, which is central to the narrative style.

Consequently, Camille has become the family's scapegoat, enabling Adora to establish the expected level of perfection she desires from her children, without having to scold Amma.

Adora's dialogue is clipped and devoid of any kind of warmth, excepting a few commonly used nicknames to soften her harsh words ("sweetheart"). This is reflected through her use of short, striking words to dominate the conversation and hold power of its rhythm and conclusion, as seen through "Yes, well. Enough" or with "Fine. Enjoy". John Bradshaw, who analyzes "shame-based families", argues that shame can be the result of failing to abide by certain rules. He states:

> Each family system has several categories of rules. There are rules about celebrating and socializing, rules about touching and sexuality, rules about sickness and proper health care, rules about vacations and vocations, rules about household maintenance and the spending of money. (67)

Adora's behavior encapsulates this very notion, her home needs to be flawlessly clean, as appearances and status mean everything to her. Accordingly, her daughters must act as a reflection of who she is and her ability to parent. In order to gain their mother's love, Amma and Camille must embody these strict standards, while also willing to accept being poisoned to be Adora's perfect patient. Indeed, Adora's demands stem from her own narcissistic needs, a common trait in shame-based parents, who use their children in order to fulfill emotional voids created by their own parents, thus creating "parents [that] are adult children who are still in search of a parent … For such parents, the most appropriate objects of narcissistic gratification are their *own children*" (Bradshaw 73). Adora's expectations mirror those the patriarchy imposes onto all women; to be agreeable, submissive, and physically attractive. Inevitably, as Camille rejects her mother's commands or 'rules', she is ostracized and abandoned as she does not provide unquestioned compliance to Adora's demands. This toxic bond is clear-cut through Camille's interactions with her mother, where deviation from said role is met with irritation or disgust.

Adora's rejection of Camille's scarred body reinforces her patriarchal standards, which considers a woman's body a site of scrutiny and control that needs to be altered or hidden. If her own mother disapproves of her physical appearance, how can she be expected to believe society would treat her any differently? Indeed, Adora projects her patriarchal standards that Adora internalized these misogynistic conventions where blame becomes a default reaction and is used to police and condemn women among themselves. Adora's hyper femininity and perfectionism teaches Amy to "learn to experience mistakes and their consequences as anxiety-provoking" (Cook and Kearney 4). Adora's intentional ostracization of Camille further fuels her isolation, adding to the dramatic tension that drives this psychological thriller to its tragic climax. Unlike Amy Dunne, who was raised to believe that perfection was an essential requirement to gain parental affection, Camille rejects her mother's high standards and transforms her body into a site of resistance.

II- Pressure to Be "Amazing Amy"

Much like Camille's perfectionist mother, Amy's inherent drive of being categorized as the 'perfect girl' finds its roots in her childhood and her parents' career. The perfect Amy was quite literally written by her parents in the series, 'Amazing Amy', which depicts the life of a girl prodigy called Amy. This fictitious duplicate fabricated by her parents is described by Amy as "my literary alter ego, my paper-bound better half, the me I was supposed to be" (29). This 'Amazing Amy' was reportedly always a step ahead of her, as her parents' used her life as inspiration for their fictional protagonist. For instance, when the real Amy was twelve, she quit violin, while 'Amazing Amy' was "revealed as a prodigy in the next book" (30). Though Amy recognizes the absurdity in 'Amazing Amy' succeeding at everything she (the real Amy) failed

to do, the constant reminder of her shortcomings compared to her idealized double serves as a relentless psychological torment. The "double" is a major motif in Gothic fiction and more recently in psychological thrillers, thus being a compelling form of expression of self-fragmentation.

Amy was brought up competing with many competing doubles in addition to the literary ameliorated double of herself in the form of "Amazing Amy". Indeed, Amy is aware that she is only one out of many desired babies of whom she is the only survivor. All her parents' unborn children were named "Hope", which her mother "commemorates" on their birth-deaths, anchoring them as untouchable, perfect entities. These doubles were sites on which parental desires was projected leading young Amy to interpret this reverence for the absent children as lack of desire for the living child. While these dead doubles did not physically haunt Amy, they psychologically inform her perception of herself through recurrent comparisons. A similar leitmotiv is also present in *Sharp Objects,* as Camille continuously feels inadequate compared to her double/deceased little sister, Marian, a sentiment that Amy tries to counter but ultimately shares:

> I've always been better than the Hopes, I was the one who made it. But I've always been jealous too, always - seven dead dancing princesses. They get to be perfect without even trying, without even facing one moment of existence, while I am stuck here on earth, and every day I must try, and every day is a chance to be less than perfect. (250)

The reference to the "seven dead dancing princesses" is reminiscent of the Brothers Grimm's fairy tale, *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*, other doubles from the Western cultural imaginary whose perfection haunts Amy as well as women in general. Amy compares the "Hopes" to the fairy tale princesses, thus criticizing her mother's idealized perception of her lost children whom she deems perfect in death. This allusion contrasts with Amy's "earthly" condition, as

she notes, “I am stuck on earth, and every day I must try, and every day is a chance to be less than perfect”, highlighting the importance she grants to being ‘perfect’. Her parents’ book series has internalized the notion that being perfect is more than a characteristic, it is a lifestyle. Much like patriarchal demands, she feels a relentless pressure to perform for her parents, and later for the public who followed and consumed the “Amazing Amy” book series, who constantly contrasted her to her fictional version. As such, Amy resents her existence when it fails to match her flawless storybook version, which is nothing but a metonymy of the numerous narratives of perfection in which women were cast since the narrative of the Virgin Mary to the narrative of the Angel in the House.

Amy’s desire for control can thus be interpreted as the legacy of “Amazing Amy”, a role that compelled her to believe that perfection surpassed authenticity. Growing up alongside her parents’ book series effectively taught her that fiction was better, and even preferable to reality. Consequently, from a young age, Amy learnt how to manufacture her narrative to fit external standards through convincing lies. However, this performance did not end when her childhood did, as the role’s audience merely shifted from her parents to her husband. Consequently, once Nick failed to sustain the “perfect” facade of love and partnership, the role she had meticulously curated for him lost its meaning, shattering her perception of reality. Nick was Amy’s chance to prove her worth as a real life “Amazing Amy”, which remained possible as long as she followed the script of the “ideal” woman.

Though Nick cannot be categorized as an outright “villain” in Amy’s life, his behavior towards Amy, and other women, make him the embodiment of the “audience” Amy’s parents trained her to satisfy. As such, Nick’s treatment of Amy is indicative of this inherited dynamic. His character exemplifies men who, much like Amy’s own parents, value the *idea* of femininity, rather than its reality. For instance, the narrative surrounding Nick and his mistress Andie,

reveals how easily Nick moved on from Amy once she failed to please him, stating, “When I thought about Andie, my stomach didn’t turn the way it did with my wife – the constant dread of returning to my own home, where I wasn’t welcome” (166).

As a result, the narrative guides us to sympathize with Amy, for while she shares her fear that Nick is no longer attracted to her in her diary, we learn about his affair with a 23-year-old student. Furthermore, Nick firmly recognizes how young his mistress, Andie, is. He notes, “I have a pretty, young, very young, mistress” (161), which pairs with Amy’s diary stating, “I’ve heard his ruthless comments about women nearing forty: how pathetic he finds them, overdressed, out at night out drinking” (211). These two comments are juxtaposed to highlight the ageist and misogynistic undertones to Nick’s character, reducing women to disposable objects that need replacing once past their prime. His infidelity goes beyond a marital betrayal, as it delineates the boundaries of his perception of “acceptable” femininity; a standard he believes Amy no longer maintains.

However, the true psychological impact of his behavior is rendered evident through his linguistic inclination to insult and erase Amy’s agency from her own narrative. Indeed, degrading, and objectifying words are regularly employed by Nick when referring to Amy and women in general. Margo, Nick’s sister, seems as comfortable as him in using jarringly sexist terms for women, underscoring the obvious impact their father’s toxic behavior had on their upbringing (particularly through their father’s linguistic tic of repeating “bitch, bitch, bitch”). As a result, Nick’s childhood, which was evidently dominated by patriarchal mentality and language, continues to shape his perception of women, thus impacting Amy’s sense of self.

The gendered slur *bitch* appears a total amount of 83 times throughout *Gone Girl,* as a way to simultaneously dehumanize and belittle women who stray from their prescribed “roles”.

This repetition also contributes to the overall tone of the story, weaving a realistic portrayal of linguistic habits when paired with misogynistic viewpoints. In *Bitch: The Journey of a Word,* Karen Stollznow, writer and linguist, quotes Dr. Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*, whose definition of the word *bitch* is firstly established as "The female of the canine kind; as the wolf, the dog, the fox, the otter" but also specified as "A name of reproach for a woman" (19). Indeed, the word's original meaning is inherently linked to a negative connotation of women. Nowadays considered a mainstream insult, it casts women as untamed animals, characterizing them as irrational or hysterical when they fail to play the part of their expected gender. In *Gone Girl*, *bitch* operates as a shock collar designed to keep women in their place, embedding itself into everyday language as a mechanism of control.

Often utilized by men when a woman is being 'overly' confident or opinionated, *bitch* has become a linguistic reflex that is applied to a superabundance of situations, perfectly illustrated by Nick's constant deployment of the word. As Lena Kremin observes in "Sexist swearing and slurs: Responses to gender-directed insults", the word bears a gendered double standard. She argues that "when directed towards a woman, would indicate that she was acting too aggressively, but when directed towards a man, the same word would imply that he was being weak or cowardly" (21). This dichotomy underlines how slurs police genders, whether it be male or female; one is punished for being too independent while the other is condemned for failing to epitomize masculinity. Moreover, Nick's abuse of the term emerges when his interaction with a woman doesn't go his way, reinforcing the near animalistic submission that he expects from his female entourage. For instance, when a woman describes him negatively during a talk show, Nick and his sister "cursed for a while. *Fucking Shawna crazy bitch whore*" (184) or "*Ellen Abbott, you fucking cunt*" (185). Thus, women are reduced to an entirely different or 'other' species that need to be tamed or controlled, imitating interspecies domination and hierarchy. Nick weaponizes language to invalidate Amy, constructing a

narrative that casts her as a hysterical woman, as evidenced in his repeated address to her as " 'Psychos? Crazy psycho bitches?'" (441).

Nick's behavior is a symptom of the patriarchal pressure, much like Amy's "Cool Girl" identity. Even though he is never overtly physically violent towards Amy, Nick indirectly benefits from and perpetuates the harmful behaviors of other men, such as his father. Men who do not abuse or sexual assault women will still benefit from the violence of the men who do. The mere existence of these aggressive men creates a harmful ripple effect, as society lowers its standards regarding the treatment of women. Instead of holding all men accountable, those who don't assault are praised for the bare minimum. As a result, basic decency in men is seen as an "exceptional trait", rather than a norm.

Indeed, like Amy's external pressure to embody "Amazing Amy", Nick feels compelled to cast himself as a patient and virtuous man, a "Perfect Husband", who is better than his father. Nonetheless, he unconsciously perpetuates his father's misogynistic views onto the women he is close with, stating "I heard my father's voice. Sometimes, in particularly shameful moments, I heard his voice in my head … His words emerged in wet bubbles like something from a rancid dog. *Bitch bitch bitch*" (57).

As readers, we are given insight into his inner thoughts, revealing his heinous and sexist beliefs which contrast with the "nice guy" facade he tries to maintain. Haunted by his father's sexist remarks, Nick's identity can also be considered to be fractured, as he struggles to balance his desire to be "good" with his inherited inclination to dominate and belittle women. As a result, Amy and Nick's relationship (before Amy's kidnapping) was based on performances based on gendered expectations, which collapsed once Amy found out about his infidelity. This event compelled them to discard the acts of "Amazing Amy" and the "Perfect Husband", as Amy reverts to weaponizing her identity, while Nick regresses to using his father's misogynistic language.

Indeed, in response to Nick's affair, Amy decides to purposefully overplay and manipulate the submissive/dominant and victim/abuser part. Unlike Nick, who uses gendered slurs to degrade women, Amy employs them to further her agenda. For instance, in her diary entries, she adopts specific idioms to her advantage, stating "*Nick's dad was right about you. You are a dumb bitch*" (222), thus deliberately putting herself down using Nick's father's language. By doing so, she further adds realism to the intentionally thought-out performance she created, underlining how language can be used to subvert patriarchal control. Moreover, once Amy returns home to Nick and they are away from the public eye, he drops his "nice guy" act to humiliate her:

> "You think any nice woman will touch you? You'll only get—'
>
> 'Psychos? Crazy psycho bitches?' He's pointing at me, jabbing the air.
>
> 'Don't call me that.'
>
> 'Psycho bitch?' (441)

Amy's resistance, "Don't call me that", demonstrates her effort to reclaim a form of humanity and reject reductive terms, as she sees herself as more than merely "crazy", "psycho" or a "bitch". Indeed, a shift occurs in this very scene, as Amy begins to accept that Nick has, and most likely always will make her out to be a "madwoman". Despite this, it becomes clear that Amy still craves his approval and makes a final attempt to gain credit for her intelligence:

> "It'd be so easy, for him to write me off that way. He'd love that, to be able to dismiss me so simply.
>
> 'Everything I do, I do for a reason, Nick,' I say. 'Everything I do takes planning and precision and discipline.'

'You are a petty, selfish, manipulative, disciplined psycho bitch—"(441)

Amy challenges Nick's notion that everything she did was out of madness as he labels her as a hysterical woman through the redundant use of "Crazy psycho bitches" (441). She demands to be acknowledged for her plan and its execution and has had no restraint in advocating for her own brilliance, as she notes "I was smart, I left no other evidence" (446) and "Pay attention, because this is impressive" (290). The stereotypical insult *bitch* is qualified by Nick as "disciplined bitch" which is an implicit yet perverse acknowledgement of her genius and strategic undertaking. However, Nick's discourse, whether he is aware of it or not, is changing, reflecting a progressing perception of Amy. Nick had previously admitted "Good Lord, I hated her, but you had to admire the bitch" (386) to the reader, which he would never willingly disclose in front of Amy, otherwise, this would mean he considered her as an equal.

Moreover, Nick needs Amy to be crazy and to embody every nasty, degrading word he thinks of her in order to soothe his own guilty conscience and fit his narrative. He requires this to justify his infidelity and position himself as the victim of their marriage, claiming "Of course I'd find myself attracted to an uncomplicated, good-natured hometown girl. It's like when people with iron deficiencies crave red meat" (305). Comparing himself to a person who suffers from anemia allows him to dismiss his affair as a biological need, thus unburdening him of any accountability for Amy's behavior.

Amy's plan is a direct response to Nick's behavior. She felt his performance as the "Perfect Husband" was lacking, motivating her to create an elaborate scheme to punish him. However, her reaction to Nick is paradoxical and unstable. On the one hand, she covets Nick's approval, yet also rejects the misogynistic ideologies and preconceptions he has about her. This underlines the psychological tension that drives their patriarchal relationship; a need for

recognition with the risk of reductive clichés. She craves to be recognized for her brilliance, yet Nick's entrenched gender biases will always lead him to categorizing her as a *bitch*, a reality she comes to terms with by pointing out "Just like your dad. We're all bitches in the end, aren't we, Nick? Dumb bitch, psycho bitch" (442). This intentional reminder of Nick's father, whose habits of calling all women "bitches", critiques Nick's similar pattern of belittling the women that surround him (the news anchorwoman, Detective Boney, a volunteer for Amy's search, his own sister). Though he clearly states he despises this side of his father, his own comportment exposes a troubling contradiction.

While accepting this role; Amy wields it as a tool against Nick, " 'I'm the bitch who makes you better, Nick …'I'm the *bitch* who made you a man' " (442). Therefore, Amy reclaims agency by employing a term that has repeatedly been used to discredit and humiliate her. She remolds the meaning of the reductive appellation, a phenomenon that has been widely observed within oppressed communities; the act of reclaiming a previously insulting word. Indeed, many women have come to use 'bitch' or 'slut' and have turned them into "terms of endearment in an effort to reclaim these words as a symbol of female power" (Kremin 22).

Indeed, Amy's fractured identity stems not only from her parents' book series, but also from Nick's maintenance of this expected facade. This continuous chain of exploitation gives her the impression of only being worthy of love when she is following a socially ascribed role. She personally delivers the origins of her rage through a scathing accusation of her transactional relationship with both her parents and Nick:

> My parents are worried, of course, but how can I feel sorry for them, since they made me this way and then deserted me? They never, ever fully appreciated the fact that they were earning money from my existence, that I should have been getting royalties. Then, after they siphoned off my money, my 'feminist' parents let Nick bundle me off to

> Missouri like I was some piece of chattel, some mail-order bride, some property exchange. Gave me a fucking cuckoo clock to remember them by. *Thanks for thirty-six years of service!*
>
> They deserve to think I'm dead, because that's practically the state they consigned me to: no money, no home, no friends. They deserve to suffer too. If you can't take care of me while I'm alive, you have made me dead anyway. Just like Nick, who destroyed and rejected the real me a piece at a time – *you're too serious, Amy, you're too uptight, Amy, you overthink things, you analyze too much, you're no fun anymore, you make me feel useless, Amy, you make me feel bad, Amy.* He took away chunks of me with blase´ swipes: my independence, my pride, my esteem. I gave, and he took and took … That whore, he picked that little whore over me. He killed my soul, which should be a crime. Actually, it is a crime. According to me, at least. (268)

This indictment of the "Amazing Amy" persona reveals Amy's sociopathic need for vengeance was a culmination of her existence, which found its limit when faced with Nick's infidelity. She exposes her parents as entrepreneurs who were "earning money from my existence" rather than being responsible caregivers. Additionally, Nick's treatment, in her eyes, was but a continuance of her commodified reality, thus anchoring her identity as a disposable and dehumanized product, as she states, "I was some piece of chattel, some mail-order bride, some property exchange".

The fragmentation of identity within Flynn's protagonists are both caused by a similar source; a failure from their loved ones to recognize them as independent, worthy of love and capable of agency. For Camille, fragmentation stems from her narcissistic mother's neglect, who viewed her daughter as a tool for social validation rather than a broken and traumatized child. Amy's fractured identity is the result of a suffocating pressure for perfection, first

imposed by her parents and then maintained through her husband's demands. Their fragmented identities, either unconscious or deliberate, is a direct response to their upbringings; Camille scars her body as a way to reclaim some control over a body whose perimeters were defined by narratives of female beauty, a narrative she was repeatedly erased from, while Amy's "Cool Girl" persona is an attempt to repurposes her parents' "Amazing Amy". Chapter One establishes that the patriarchal or parental pressure and trauma that the characters' experience impact their lives in destructive ways. As such, an urgent need for external expression becomes their only outlet and survival strategy. Chapter Two will focus on how mental distress can manifest physically, through intentional acts and coping mechanisms.

Chapter 3: The Spectacle of Female Pain

A. The Body as a Site of Pain and Power

As rendered evident in the previous chapter, the narrative style of psychological thrillers aptly lends itself to delving deep into a character's psychology. In particular, it addresses the stigmatized themes of female mental illness and hysteria, thus redefining and repurposing reductive feminine tropes in a disruptive narrative. Through this lens, pain, rather than simply being a symptom, becomes a "spectacle" that is deployed to validate and assert one's identity or internal suffering. As such, Gillian Flynn casts the female body as a living text and testament to a person's identity. Though both Camille and Amy implement their bodies as tools, their respective instrumentality of their corporeal envelopes are diametrically opposed. Camille silently proclaims pain through cutting, inscribing trauma on her skin, while Amy sculpts and alters her body and personas to fit ideals and expectations.

I- Camille: Destructive Behaviors

a. Alcoholism and Numbness

As a result of her scarring and complex upbringing which includes the death of her sister and a sexual assault, Camille developed numerous coping mechanisms. These include alcohol, as a way to control her emotions, and engaging in self-harm, specifically by cutting words into her skin. Trauma at a young age engenders numerous consequences in adulthood. Camille's

coping strategies to these damaging experiences are a paradox, for they erase and reshape her identity all at once, constraining her to exist in a liminal space between reality and dissociation. For instance, her frequent alcohol consumption is more than a simple vice, it becomes a way for her to numb herself, embodying the stereotype of the "broken woman". Her alcoholism is a subject she has come to normalize, and she uses it as a method of protection to desensitize herself from the world around her and from her unresolved trauma. Because of her inability to control her thoughts, she seeks temporary refuge in substances that act as an emotional anesthetic on her fragmented and troubled mind. As such, Camille relies on vodka to fall asleep, and is rarely sober during the day, as she needs the harsh lines of her life to be softened, "I walked to the door a bit blurrily, the vodka giving me that first necessary layer to deal with this particular place on this particular day. I'd been good about booze for six months, but nothing counted here" (51). Her choice of words reveals much about her relationship with alcohol. The 'blurriness' she equates to alcohol's effects mirrors the psychological state she longs to be in to avoid her reality, particularly when in Wind Gap. Instead of a mere social lubricant, Camille abuses alcohol in order to perform an illusion of functionality. The casual tone in which she states, "nothing counted here", highlights her resignation to how futile she deems the idea of being sober while surrounded by her family, in a place which has hosted her worst memories.

The age at which her sexual assault took place also greatly plays into shaping the addictions she developed; "Childhood sexual abuse is found to be associated with increased risk of suicidal attempt, alcohol abuse and eating disorders later in life" (Chaudhury et al. 3). Though her composure can be described as distant and cold, her mind overthinks and analyzes everything, involuntarily forcing her to relive the past on a loop. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* by Cathy Caruth, Kai Erikson states that "The classic symptoms of trauma range from feelings of restlessness and agitation … to feelings of numbness and bleakness at the other."

(184). While numbness can be an undesirable symptom for some, Camille pursues it relentlessly through alcohol. Her alcohol intake appears unending, as she seeks solace at the bottom of a bottle, yet is never fully satisfied, only to repeat the cycle. Shoshana Felman's chapter in Caruth's *Trauma; Explorations in Memory* expresses that the act of drinking can be "transformed into the surprisingly abusive figure of an endless torture and a limitless exposure, a figure for the impotent predicament and the unbearable ordeal of having to endure, absorb, continue to *take in* with no end and no limit" (35). Similarly, Camille continuously attempts to drown herself out of reality in order to avoid interactions that may be too painful, or feelings that may be too overwhelming.

Camille's perception of her traumatic experiences is very complex. While she consciously recognizes her ongoing struggle to accept Marian's death, she also subconsciously rejects her assault as mere "stupid choices" (141) made during her adolescence. Her resistance to labeling the event as sexual assault demonstrates a deep psychological denial. Bessel van Der Kolk's book entitled, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma,* supports this notion, stating that "Medications, drugs, and alcohol can also temporarily dull or obliterate unbearable sensations and feelings. But the body continues to keep the score" (39). Camille's trauma divides into two parts; the one she acknowledges and battles everyday (her sister's death), and the one she represses (her sexual assault). Her mental wounds are carried through her body and her mind: whether the trauma is cast aside or ignored, it still exists and begs to be felt.

Her return to the town of Wind Gap plays a major role in the decline of her mental health, as she is once again confronted with her feelings of inadequacy. The longer she stays there, the worse she feels, embodying another classic trope found in psychological thrillers; mental deterioration. As she states herself "I felt no particular allegiance to the town. This was the place my sister died, the place I started cutting myself. A town so suffocating and small,

you tripped over people you hated every day. People who knew things about you. It's the kind of place that leaves a mark" (94-95). Camille's description of her stay in Wind Gap is hyperbolic, yet her choice of words comes to reveal her tormented psychological state. The phrase "so suffocating and small" highlights the claustrophobia she feels. This notion is reinforced by the phrase "you tripped over people you hated every day", thus depicting the town as an inescapable maze she can't untangle herself from. The short anaphora she employs "this was the place my sister died, the place I started cutting myself", stages the geographical location of Wind Gap as a catalyst for her most traumatic experiences. By repeating "the place", Camille grants the town an almost haunting essence, its mere occupancy forcing her to relive her past on a nightmarish loop.

b. Self-harm

Camille's mental decline manifests itself through alcoholism, as well as self-inflicted corporeal harm. Though she consistently cut herself from the ages of thirteen to thirty, she admitted herself to a rehab facility, which she left only 6 months before the beginning of the story. Early on, she confesses to the readers that she maintains an obsessive relationship with language, stating that "By eleven, I was compulsively writing down everything anyone said to me in a tiny blue notepad" (77). This word-related fixation takes on an unhealthy dimension when she turns thirteen, after her sister's death, as she begins to feel the need to "not just see them, but feel them" (76). She starts to obsessively carve words into her skin to feel control over them. She doesn't select these words at random, rather, they revolve around themes of femininity, shame or are, as she says, are "flat-out negative" (76). The words carved in her skin are:

"cook, cupcake, kitty, curls, baby-doll, harmful, petticoat, wicked" (76), *"queasy, perky, cunt"* (that was later turned into "*can't"*), *"cock" (*transformed into "*back"*), *"clit"* (also edited to look like "*cat"*), *"vanish, panty, cherry, sew"* (*78), "bad, cry"* (79), "*freak*" (236), "*Falling*" (300)

Most of her carved words are delivered with a frustrating lack of context, making it impossible for us to pinpoint the events that provoked such a gruesome response. However, many passages point to their different functionality:

> Sometimes my scars have a mind of their own.
> I am a cutter you see. Also a snipper, a slicer, a carver, a jabber. I am a very special case. I have a purpose. My skin, you see, screams. It's covered with words - cook, cupcake, kitty, curls - as if a knife-wielding first-grader learned to write on my flesh … The one thing I know for sure is that at the time, it was crucial to see these letters on me, and not just see them, but feel them. Burning on my left hip: petticoat. (76)

Camille's scars are personified, as they are described as 'crying', while she is reified, reduced to a cutter, or at best infantilized, reduced to a first grader. The narrator and her scars become interchangeable, as if one of the same. Within them, the tragedy of her psychological turmoil is vividly rendered evident. As such, her scars serve as palpable reminders of her suffering. It is through the scars that her past is brought to life, yet paradoxically, it is also through them that she stifles it:

> Sometimes I can hear the words squabbling at each other across my body. Up on my shoulder, panty calling down to cherry on the inside of my right ankle. On the

> underside of a big toe, sew uttering muffled threats to baby, just under my left breast. I can quiet them down by thinking of vanish, always hushed and regal, lording over the other words from the safety of the nape of my neck. (79)

Though she has spent "thousands of hours in therapy" (76) trying to uncover the thought process and reasoning behind her selection of words, she observes that some, such as *baby-doll, cupcake, kitty, curls, petticoat, dumpling*, are often linked to cultural and societal ideas of femininity. Much like the color pink, which has arbitrarily been associated to feminine ideals, these words stem from stereotypical traits. The words *cook*, *cupcake*, *kitty* and *curl* appear immediately after she states that her scars 'scream', creating an alliteration that reiterates the screaming sound while also hinting to the violence perpetrated by socially constructed feminine ideals. This fixation on superficial femininity might also stem from her mother's strange desire to dress her daughters up like dolls, which she successfully gets Amma to do. Ironically enough, Camille manages to control these clichés of femininity not only by refusing to abide by her mother's rules, but also by imprisoning them in the form of scars hidden under her clothes, reminding her of the worst trauma the body can endure, the trauma of being a social construction alien to what the self may choose.

There are, however, certain words that have seen an evolution. For instance, "cunt" was turned into "can't", suggesting her intention to either reclaim or subside words that are often used to shame or curse out. She does, however, reveal that certain words are directly linked to her environment "Tell me you're going to the docto r, and I'll want to cut *worrisome* on my arm. Say you've fallen in love and I buzz the outlines of *tragic* over my breast" (79). As a result, there are eleven words on her body that are synonyms for "anxious", but she does not disclose what those specific words are.

The first word she ever carved was: *wicked.* This event happened during the summer when she turned thirteen, lost her sister, got her first period and began masturbating. Additionally, this was when she first realized she was as beautiful as her deceased sister:

> That summer, other things happened. I become quite suddenly, unmistakably beautiful. It could have fallen either way. Marian was the confirmed beauty: big blue eyes, tiny nose, perfect pointy chin. My features changed by the day, as if clouds floated above me casting flattering or sickly shadows on my face. (77-78)

This passage suggests that she felt guilty for becoming beautiful after her sister's death, or that her sister's beauty had somehow segued to her. Therefore, the word 'wicked' could allude to the guilt she felt by replacing her sister in the public eye or might reflect the shame she felt because she was masturbating, thus receiving undeserved pleasure while her sister was recently deceased.

Camille has restrained herself from cutting since her return to Wind Gap, which consequently leads her to using alcohol as her main emotional crutch. Nonetheless, she doesn't give into her compulsion to carve longer, more complex and more telling words (such as "*equivocate*", "*inarticulate*," and "*duplicitous*" (79)), and manages to refrain, either due to her time in the hospital, or the lack of space on her body. Her urge remains, because, as she states, "My skin, you see, screams" (76). However, much like individuals who struggle with addiction, she has somehow learned to control her harmful habit.

The last word she ever carved, *vanish* (78), serves as a powerful symbol for her desire to escape her past. *Vanish* encapsulates her struggle with her seemingly never-ending grief, as if this word could erase and expunge every harrowing event she had to endure. Camille turns to the only outlet she has access to; pain. Due to her emotionally neglectful mother, Camille can express neither the feelings of grief linked to her sister's death, nor the shame and sadness she felt after the assault, thus compelling her to carve on her skin what she feels on the inside. Though she started out by cutting words in places that would go unnoticed when dressed, she has since covered her entire body, except for "a circle of perfect skin the size of a fist" (79), on her back. She desperately needs to physically see and feel them. Much like Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), a mental illness which causes intrusive thoughts that compel individuals to perform routine acts to relieve stress, Camille's obsession with words causes her extreme anxiety. For instance, when people talk around her, if she lacks tools to document every word, she states that: "Every phrase had to be captured on paper or it wasn't real, it slipped away. I'd see the words hanging in midair … and anxiety coiled up in me as they began to fade, like jet exhaust. Writing them down, though, I had them … I was a lingual conservationist" (77). By carving or writing words down, she feels she can hold onto the past. She documents everything, as she requires proof of reality in order to soothe her fear of losing these moments to time. She needs control over these words, as compensation for not having control over her past.

However gruesome the act, her description of the aftermath is romanticized, as she affectionately says, "I adored tending to myself" (78). Her wounds were something she could wield power over; how much it hurt, how deep to cut, and when to stop. As professor of psychiatry and human behavior, Kim L. Gratz states in "Measurement of Deliberate Self-Harm: Preliminary Data on the Deliberate Self-Harm Inventory", self-harm "may be used to alleviate

overwhelming emotions and decrease tension" (253). The aftercare she provides for herself is an attempt to fill the void of her mother's absence, waiting on her lacerations as one looks after a child, with patience and tenderness. Though the ritual she created to care for herself reassures her, the consequences are detrimental to her mental health. Self-harm creates a never-ending cycle from which she cannot escape; she cuts because of her self-loathing, yet the shame from these cuts accentuates her mental anguish.

As such, the body becomes more than a mere physical entity, it is used as a stage to reflect her emotional states, as well as a site of control. The act of cutting allows Camille to exteriorize and render tangible feelings she fails to express, such as grief and guilt. As such, by 'writing' on herself, she is granted a release and a way to control her unstable thoughts. She states herself:

> For those who need a name, there's a gift basket of medical terms. All I know is that the cutting made me feel safe. It was proof. Thoughts and words, captured where I could see them and track them. The truth, stinging, on my skin, in a freakish shorthand. Tell me you're going to the doctor, and I'll want to cut worrisome on my arm. Say you've fallen in love and I buzz the outlines of tragic over my breast. I hadn't necessarily wanted to be cured. But I was out of places to write, slicing myself between my toes - bad, cry - like a junkie looking for one last vein. Vanish did it for me. I'd saved the neck, such a nice prime spot, for one final good cutting. Then I turned myself in. I stayed at the hospital twelve weeks. It's a special place for people who cut, almost all of them women, most under twenty-five. I went when I was thirty. Just six months out. Delicate times. (79-80)

For Camille, cutting is paradoxically a safety valve but also a self-destruction tool. Camille associates the act of cutting with "proof" that she maintains autonomy and agency over her emotional turmoil. Nonetheless, personified, the cuttings on her body can talk, argue, and interact with each other, thus developing their own agency and becoming active participants in her suffering. As Camille is a fairly solitary character, her words accompany her and offer her companionship that act as witnesses to validate her pain.

Furthermore, Camille concedes a hierarchical system to her words. 'Vanish', in particular, stands out as it is described as "hushed and regal" (78-79), thus granting it a noble and distinctive status. It is also prominently placed amidst the other words, on the nape of her neck. Throughout the novel, Camille comes back to the word 'vanish' repeatedly, as one would to a soothing mantra "*Vanish*, *vanish*, *vanish*, pleading from my neck" (307). As such, its repetition is significant, as Camille comes to use it as an almost ritualistic coping mechanism in times of stress:

> I thought about that word at the back of my neck. Vanish. Vanish will banish my woes, I thought loopily. Vanish will banish my troubles. Would we have been this ugly if Marian hadn't died? Other families got over such things. Grieve and move on. She still hovered over us, a blonde baby girl maybe a hair too cute for her own good, maybe just a bit too doted on. (212)

Freud's 'Fort-Da game' mentioned in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* finds particular relevance in Camille's case. His grandson, Ernst, found satisfaction in the act of "flinging all the small objects he could get hold of far away from himself into a remote corner of the room, under a bed" (81). When throwing the object, he would exclaim "*Fort*!", which translates to 'gone' or

'away', and when it reappeared, a "joyful *Da!* ('Here!')", a game which recreated his mother's departure and arrival (82). Freud found interest not in the reasoning behind such actions, but rather, in how it was possible to derive such gratification from a repeated action that was once a source of pain. Similarly, Camille's repeated use of 'vanish' can be interpreted as a way to manage her trauma by calling upon the notion of being imperceptible or erased. Much like Ernst's game which repeats an action to cope with absence and loss, Camille feels secure through the repetition of this word. Her obsessive repetition of the word "vanish" may be understood as her wish for safety through death. This belief may stem from the public's adoration for her sister which went uninterrupted even in death. Amma has seemingly also internalized this credence, as she states, "Then I'd never have to worry again. When you die, you become perfect. I'd be like Princess Diana. Everyone loves her now" (85).

Beyond serving as a comfort habit for Camille, the word *vanish* holds immense significance, as it represents a turning point in her self-harm, stating, "slicing myself between my toes—bad, cry—like a junkie looking for one last vein. Vanish did it for me. I'd saved the neck, such a nice prime spot, for one final good cutting. Then I turned myself in" (79). Indeed, *vanish* seemingly satisfied her obsessive cutting, thus assisting her in the act of seeking professional help in a rehab center. Though her surrender presumably originates from a lack of space to continue cutting, the word was nonetheless transformed into an incantation she can anchor herself to. *Vanish* reminds Camille of her ability to save herself when no one else can or will.

Consequently, Camille's self-harm is multifaceted, as it satisfies her desire for self-expression and control as well as her somatic need for proof amid her chaotic mindset. "Vanish" highlights her fragility, for its safety also hints at the thin boundary between Camille's survival

and surrender. Though this behavior is toxic, she uses irony to deflect from the seriousness of her condition, telling herself: "I've made my own private jokes. *You can really read me. Do you want me to spell it out for you? I've certainly given myself a life sentence.* Funny, right?" (79). Even though she hides it through humor, she is deeply ashamed of her scar-covered body, which she cannot bear to look at "without being completely covered" (79). Her carved words grant her freedom to express herself, yet they prevent her from opening up, as seen with her relationship with Detective Richard Willie. They sleep together but she remains dressed, never truly letting her guard down or exposing her bare skin:

> "I like it with my clothes on."
>
> "No. I want to touch you."
>
> "No, baby, my way." (220)

At the beginning of the novel, Camille appears resigned and wants to blindly go through life by numbing her mind as much as possible, but her resilience persists in subtle, often self-destructive ways. Her narrative demonstrates that identity is far from linear or whole, and can be fractured and nuanced due to trauma. As such, her identity can be considered to be a dialogue between trauma, power and survival.

Camille's character embodies the raw and paradoxical ways in which women can navigate trauma, where using one's body can be both a rebellion and a coping strategy. However, while Camille's scar-covered body serves as a testament to her trauma and isolation, Amy's 'injuries' are a part of her calculated and proactive script of manipulation, thus defining her relationship to her body through the act of self-construction.

II- Amy: A Weaponized Body

In stark contrast to Camille, Amy not only "exploits" her own body as a tool, she weaponizes it. She treats her body as a calculated and calibrated instrument in her battle against Nick, unafraid of altering or injuring it to reclaim agency over her own narrative. As such, though her appearance has always been dictated by her parents' and then Nick's standards, she does not equate her body to suffering, rather, she sees it as a strategic asset she can wield against those who have wronged her.

Indeed, once we learn that Amy has masterminded her own abduction, we uncover a "new" identity, the one she fabricated to ingeniously frame Nick. We are offered glimpses of this overly strict, self-aware, yet cautious identity in her diary entries, but the second part of the novel "Boy Meets Girl", delivers her without filter. We finally get her "real" voice, or at most, the one she believes to be her authentic one, referred to as the "Actual Amy" (249). This identity is the one who delivered the 'Cool Girl' monologue, thus is hyperaware of the feminine condition and its harmful tropes. She anchors us in her perceived reality which, for the most part, is the absolute opposite of 'Diary Amy'. The juxtaposition of Amy's two most distinctive identities, 'Diary Amy' and 'Actual Amy', reveals a contradicting character, who entirely dismantles her previous narrative, as she notes "I *did* mind when he didn't show up for drinks with my friends. That ludicrous diary entry? *I don't need pathetic dancing-monkey scenarios to repeat to my friends, I am content with letting him be himself.* That was pure, dumb Cool Girl bullshit" (253). This meta-narrative passage makes the readers reassess every aspect of her personality they thought they knew. By countering statements, she made earlier in the storyline, she implicitly reveals the artificial nature of her performance. Amy prioritizes perception over

reality, complicating her narrative by confirming that, much like Nick, she is an unreliable narrator.

Indeed, this identity reveals the cold, calculated, and weaponized side of her character. 'Actual Amy' is prepared to go to extreme lengths in order to perform the role of 'victim', particularly when it comes to utilizing her corporality. She sees her body as a malleable resource to which she has unlimited access, which allows her to choreograph her life into fitting specific narratives. For instance, she plans out how to harm herself as one would write out a to-do list or a medical protocol, "Item 22: Cutting myself has been on the list a long time" (247). Though her acts are unthinkable, absurd and often involve gore, she recounts them with distance and unwavering indifference, "it takes a very special discipline to slice oneself past the paper-cut layer, down to the muscle. You want a lot of blood, but not so much that you pass out" (247). Unlike Amy, she does not cut or hurt to feel relief, she needs these injuries to convincingly produce evidence.

Consequently, Amy's character sparks fear and discomfort due to her atypical intelligence and procedural willingness to hurt her own body, which enables her to adapt alarmingly well to new parameters. When needing to incriminate Desi Collings, she is willing as ever to injure herself for the sake of narrative power, "I took a wine bottle, and I abused myself with it every day, so the inside of my vagina looked…right. Right for a rape victim" (435). This sentence highlights how Amy solely cares about the verisimilitude of her injuries to the criteria of the 'Ideal Victim', where a victim of assault will more likely be considered if certain criteria are met, such as violence and blamelessness (qtd. in Duggan 12). The vague adjective "right" further underscores the public's need for credibility rather than reality. By confirming her body looked "right", she establishes her body as a tool onto which she can cast societal expectations to fit her desired narrative and outcome. In Leslie Jamison's essay *A Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain*, female suffering is elucidated as an aesthetic

manufactured by society. She argues "[Women's] tragedy is radiant; it makes her body something sculpted … Violence turns them celestial" (114). This very observation is essential to Amy's strategic performance, as she draws from the public's absurd demand for the perfect victim. As such, Amy curates the 'aesthetic of pain' and utilizes it as an active weapon to embody the 'spectacle' of pain, ensuring total manipulation and control. Indeed, when she is examined after her return, her body arrives with "my rope-wreathed wrists, my damaged vagina, my bruises – the body I present them is textbook. An older male doctor with humid breath and thick fingers performs the pelvic exam – scraping and wheezing in time" (417). By controlling the damage of her body within this 'aesthetic of pain', she transforms the violent nature of a sexual assault into a reproductible performance, thus staging her body as the "perfect" prop. Not only is her script visual, but it also implicates auditory cues. Amy notes she was "wheezing in time" during her pelvic exam, thus shifting the traumatizing experience of undergoing a rape-kit to a performance, in which impeccable timing is paramount.

This need for complete control is not limited to her personality, as she later admits to her obsessive behavior regarding her physical appearance. Indeed, as mentioned previously, her body is repeatedly used as a tool to embody the different identities she seeks to perform. She states:

> My body was a beautiful, perfect economy, every feature calibrated, everything in balance. I don't miss it. I don't miss men looking at me. It's a relief to walk into a convenience store and walk right back out without some hangabout in sleeveless flannel leering as I leave, some muttered bit of misogyny slipping from him like a nacho-cheese burp. Now no one is rude to me, but no one is nice to me either. No one goes out of their way, not overly, not really, not the way they used to. (281)

Though she notices that she has become invisible since she intentionally gained weight, thus shedding the weight of the male gaze, her 'freedom' is an illusion. Amy's logic is paradoxical, for she fails to recognize that the controlling gaze she was subject to has merely shifted. Indeed, her decision to gain weight was in no way a natural occurrence, rather, she views it as another detail of her meticulously calculated plan. The control mechanism has simply been relocated from "some hangabout in sleeveless flannel" to her own strict planning and policing, once more reiterating that she views her body a site of unyielding management. In "Normative White Femininity: Race, Gender and the Politics of Beauty", Kathy Deliovsky contends that:

> there is constant self-surveillance and self-management in service of this beauty myth. When women do not give the appearance of self-care and weight management there can be self-condemnation and condemnation from family and society for having "let oneself go" This failure to live up to the beauty myth is, of course, most painfully experienced at the personal level. (53)

Consequently, Amy's strategic weight gain and attempts to look 'ugly' can be considered to be yet another performance. She plays with Deliovsky's notion of "self-surveillance" and distorts for her own purposes. Beauty has long been used as a tool to police women and their value within society. The systemic utilization of beauty as a tool to oppress women has been christened the "beauty myth", researched by feminist writer and journalist Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth: how images of beauty are used against women*. Wolf states that:

> "Beauty" is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief

> system that keeps male dominance intact. In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves. (12)

Though Amy is capable of a profound reflection regarding her personal condition as a woman, she does not stray from denigrating other women when they do not adhere to beauty standards. Indeed, not only does Amy pride herself on betting that she is smarter than everyone around her, but she also considers herself to be more physically attractive than most. As her character fits the Western European norm of conventional beauty – blue eyes, blond hair and slim, she feels entitled to judge others based on her esteemed superiority, stating "I think Greta is deciding whether she'll make Jeff another of her disastrous mating choices. Jeff would like it. He prefers her. She is much prettier than I am, right now, in this place. Cheap pretty" (313). Amy uses a condescending language when referring to Jeff and Greta, as she continuously places herself above them in every way possible. Even when complimenting Greta, who she describes as "much prettier than I am", she adds the qualifier "right now", suggesting her beauty is permanent, while Greta's is simply situational. For Amy, context is everything, for she has willingly made herself uglier as a camouflage in order to blend in and be unrecognizable. She considers that if she were in her 'natural' habitat, she would easily surpass Greta's "cheap pretty", revealing how she actively upholds a hierarchical and patriarchal system regarding beauty. As such, even her hatred and rejection of the system remains a patriarchal performance, for she positions herself at the top rather than attempts to deconstruct it.

Amy's chilling inclination to physically harm herself or alter her appearance for the sake of victimization parallels her desire for narrative control. Her body becomes a tool that

she can alter, manipulate and mutilate to enhance plausibleness, which mirrors her narrative. Much like individuals with Munchausen syndrome, who are willing to fabricate symptoms to gain the 'status' of a patient and obtain attention and emotional care, Amy is willing to falsify injuries to be considered a 'victim'. Nonetheless, a clear distinction is to be made, as she does not seek mere attention, she strives for power. Although nothing compelled her into fabricating the sexual assault aspect of her narrative, in an effort to garner as much pity as possible, she inflicted even more harm onto herself to hijack the medical proof of her manipulation. Amy can be classified as a "strategic Munchausen", as she co-opts the mechanisms of said syndrome while shifting the outcome to fit her agenda; sympathy from the public and the legal system.

Though she acts as if she has a full grasp on her different identities, stating, for instance, that Diary Amy is a "work of fiction" (248), the myriad of roles she takes on fractures her sense of reality. Indeed, as Judith Butler states, identity is in "no way stable", it is delicately formed through a "*stylized repetition of acts"* (519). Amy performs this version of herself in order to create the perfect narrative to frame Nick and garner as much sympathy as possible from the public eye and mainstream media. But by repeatedly acting out and forcing herself to play the part, it nonetheless becomes a new portion of her identity as "a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe" (Butler 520). As such, Amy is willing to destroy and build herself back up if that means maintaining control. Her body is the primary text onto which she rewrites each credible persona.

Though a strong dichotomy is evident in Amy and Camille's attitude towards their corporality, both have resorted to "exploiting" their bodies as a way to regain agency. Camille's destructive coping mechanisms are physical manifestations of her pain, a plea to be heard.

Conversely, Amy's intricate maneuver of her body allows her to craft believing narratives, thus granting her control over public perception.

B. Victimhood and the "Ideal Victim"

The "Ideal Victim" is a concept introduced by Norwegian sociologist and criminologist Nils Christie forty years ago, which finds significant influence and authority when applied to rape cases and the nature of victimhood. This theory categorizes the characteristics that define the criteria of a supposed "perfect victim". As such, five attributes are delineated: (1) being weak, sick, or old, (2) "carrying out a respectable project", and (3) being completely blameless. Additionally, (4) the offender is unmistakably "big and bad" as well as (5) unknown to the victim in any kind of personal way (qtd in. Duggan 12). Christie's sixth and final characteristic of the "Ideal Victim" is the ability to "successfully claim the status of an ideal victim" (14). Indeed, these parameters highlight how details of an assault are scrutinized and dissected, prioritizing the attributes Christie identified over the reality of the said assault. As such, Christie's "Ideal Victim" is highly unrealistic and unattainable. Stephanie Fohring exemplifies the rigidity of Christie's "Ideal Victim", noting that a woman who fails to meet any of these requirements, who would be "out drinking with friends … engaged in a not-so-respectable activity, who is assaulted by a partner or acquaintance – an offender who is neither big nor bad, nor unknown to the victim" (qtd. in Duggan 197) is denied the "status of victim" for failing to concord with the idealistic expectation. The narrative of the "Ideal Victim"- implying that the latter is ideally a virgin, who has never had alcohol and has proof and witnesses to back up their story- has an immense impact not only on the public and judiciary perception of an individual's victimhood. This will consequently affect the victim's own perception of themselves.

These same narrative conditions constrain victimhood to the brutality of the assailant and physical resistance of the victim, disregarding more complex situations. As such, if a victim's account of an assault mirrors any of these elements, such as a lack of a fight, the survivor is then blamed and shamed for their actions, invalidating their trauma. As a result, toxic discourse surrounding rape victims often end up oscillating between victim blaming or excusing and justifying the acts of the offender.

The social environment depicted in *Sharp Objects* and *Gone Girl* illustrate how the "Ideal Victim" narrative and the banalization of rape culture go hand in hand. Within the context of the psychological thriller, rape culture and victimhood become the backdrop for the development of fractured identities and alienated selves. This examination further reflects how psychological thrillers have shifted from suspenseful narratives to offering a more complex critique of gendered power dynamics, often blurring the lines between victim and perpetrator.

I- Camille: Rape culture

Both Camille and Amy's identities reveal how women are negatively impacted by harmful narratives concerning victimhood, an evolving theme within psychological thrillers. Indeed, though victimhood has long been a central theme in psychological thrillers, modern iterations have been approaching the topic through the complex interplay of identity and gender issues. Camille fights against the victim's "status", thus hindering her from properly healing, while Amy covets the societal benefits gained from embodying its "aesthetics". Indeed, Camille's character doesn't embody the representation of society's "perfect" victim. She deviates from this categorization as she continuously exhibits self-destructive behavior. Her character sets her apart from the idealized suffering female figure that has inhabited the Western

cultural production of gendered imagery. The sculpture, *The Pietá*, by Michelangelo illustrates the epitome of the suffering female figure, providing through lasting artistic traditions the representation of the weeping Mary cradling the dead body of her infant son Jesus Christ. This medieval and idealized portrayal circles back to the limiting tropes often associated with women; the virgin and the mother. This dichotomic perception of woman was first articulated and theorized by Freud as the *Madonna-Whore complex,* in which women are split "between the virtuous mother pattern and the virulent women of ill repute can be moderate, or it can be extreme" (Hertler et al. 372). As such, the Virgin Mary in *The Pietá* serves as a powerful foil to examine Camille's status as a victim. While Mary is depicted as silently suffering, Camille's pain is "loud" and visually noticeable. As Camille doesn't fit the stereotypical molds of female victimhood, she is trapped in an in-between state.

As explored in its literary origins, the narrative style of psychological thrillers reflects anxieties of its era. In the case of contemporary psychological thrillers, heightened awareness of issues like rape culture are often addressed. Indeed, sexual violence and rape culture in *Sharp Objects* mirrors the pervasive threat of sexual violence women must navigate. We learn about Camille's sexual assault through an interaction with Richard Willis, a Kansas City detective sent to investigate the murders. However, there is a gap between what the reader can view with distance and relative objectivity, in contrast to Camille's distorted version of reality. For instance, in view of the investigation of the murdered young girls, Detective Richard Willis asks Camille to recall any violent incidents that occurred in town. She does so with an almost sociopathic composure, first stating that in fifth grade, a few bullies forced a girl to penetrate herself with a stick, while classmates watched. The girl was required by the teacher to apologize because "Young ladies must be in control of their bodies because boys are not" (139). Her capacity to communicate such violent events with so little emotions may reveal that she has

normalized the sexual violence of her town, epitomized by the teacher's reactions. Crucially, many elements show that her attitude demonstrates a tendency to detach from reality when violence is involved. This aptitude for dissociation is, as explored through her coping mechanisms, due to her upbringing, which forced her to adapt to traumatizing situations. Then, she recounts a distressing story that we later discover happened to her, yet she presents it in a way that preserves her anonymity:

> "Once, an eighth-grade girl got drunk at a high-school party and four or five guys on the football team had sex with her, kind of passed her around. Does that count?"
>
> "Camille. Of course it counts. You know that, right?"
>
> "Well, I just didn't know if that counted as outright violence or…"
>
> "Yeah, I'd count a bunch of punks raping a thirteen-year-old outright violence, yes I sure would."
>
> … "I'm not arguing that it's wrong, Richard; I'm just trying to get your criteria for violence."
>
> "Right, and I'm getting a good picture of exactly the kind of violence we're dealing with here, just by the fact that you're asking me if that counts. Were the police notified?"
>
> "Of course not."
>
> "I'm surprised she wasn't made to apologize for allowing them to rape her in the first place. Eighth grade. That makes me sick." He tried to take my hand again, but I tucked it away in my lap.
>
> "So it's the age that makes it rape."
>
> "It'd be rape at any age."

> "If I got a little too drunk tonight, and was out of my head and had sex with four guys, that would be rape?"
>
> "Legally, I don't know, it'd depend on a lot of things—like your attorney. But ethically, hell yes." (139-140)

Camille's defensiveness highlights how violent acts against women are normalized in Wind Gap, for she perceives Richard's reactions as excessive and misogynistic, contending that women don't need to be protected. She displays a strong sense of denial and depersonalization in this encounter with the detective, a coping mechanism she uses to protect herself from the harrowing truth. The dehumanizing euphemism she employs "passed her around", effectively reduces the victim of the assault from a living girl to a commodified object. As Camille's discourse demonstrates, rape culture seeps its way into her own perception of her rape experience; preventing her from developing a clear-cut conception of victim and assailant, thus hindering her from seeing the reality of her status as a victim, both of rape and of a discourse that blatantly banalizes it. Camille's alienation from herself is the best illustrated that rape culture shapes everyday life, whether through normalized misogynistic comments or the glamorization of sexual violence on television, surviving due to victim blaming and a lack of awareness. Sentences such as "they were asking for it", or "boys will be boys" contribute to wilful ignorance surrounding the subject, encouraging women to learn to avoid sexual assault, rather than teach men to be held responsible for their inappropriate behaviours.

Contrastingly, Richard's insistent need to repeat the word "rape" can be seen as a linguistic resistance, as he refuses to dismiss the events as belonging to a grey area. As a detective, he pushes back against the erasure of such injustice. Additionally, his mention of the "legality" in the assault being considered outright violence or not hints to the complex and

inhuman laws that determine whether a victim is to be believed, in accordance with their adherence to certain criteria. This is directly followed by him stating "ethically, hell yes", once more demonstrating that a rape's legitimacy is governed by the legal system's ability to collect admissible evidence. Richard's reliance on legal discourse – "Were the police notified?" – is seen as paternalistic to Camille, as he views the assault as a legal issue while her rapport to the situation is much more complex. Richard's wording risks oversimplifying the events, whereas her approach to the same event denotes the deeply entrenched coping mechanisms she has put in place to protect herself. Richard expresses moral outrage while Camille's clipped replies demonstrates her internalization of the normalization of blatant acts of violence in Wind Gap. By asking, "If I got a little too drunk tonight, and was out of my head and had sex with four guys, that would be rape?", she asks a rhetorical question as a veiled confession. Camille wants Richard to validate her experience without having to admit she was the girl in the story. She refuses to accept that she was a victim in this situation, since this would entail that she was violated, once more reiterating that she didn't have control on a situation– much like the lack of control she felt when her sister died. She maintains that she "didn't know if that counted as outright violence", even after describing an obvious case of sexual assault, further highlighting the distance she establishes between herself and the event. As one would easily agree that this event is categorized as "outright violence", her defiance to use such terms reveals how distorted her vision of violence remains. A deeper analysis will reveal that this distortion may be salutary for Camille.

In *Trauma: Explorations of the Mind* by Cathy Caruth, Laura S. Brown states that "when we admit to the immanence of trauma in our lives, when we see it as something more likely to happen than not, we lose our cloak of invulnerability" (108). In other words, denying the traumatic experience shields an individual from facing the reality of being a victim.

Camille's denial of her traumatic experience is an expression of her refusal to abandon her "cloak of vulnerability" and thus ensure psychological and emotional survival. However, this denial comes at a cost. By avoiding confronting her past, she is left unprepared to how the trauma continues to affect and shape her. Indeed, Brown suggests that true protection comes from acknowledging the trauma, thus allowing individuals to face the reality of their triggers and coping mechanisms. However, Camille does the exact opposite, which undermines her ability to heal. Though she unconsciously comprehends that she was sexually assaulted, she reverses the situation and projects blame onto other victims, stating "sometimes drunk women aren't raped; they just make stupid choices" (140-141). Camille's almost stubborn refusal to accept the victim 'status', even when confronted by Detective Willis, explains the hold the harmful ideologies that permeate Wind Gap have on her. She blames herself for what happened to her, holding her thirteen-year-old self more accountable than the high schoolers who assaulted her. As such, emotional protection and the toxic environment of her hometown are at the heart of her denial. This culture is illustrated in the attitude of the inhabitants of Wind Gap who turn a blind eye to recurrent sexual assaults. Recalling the story of a former classmate, Camille says:

> "That would be Faye Murray. She went to my high school. They called her Fag Murray. The boys would take her out after school into the woods and take turns having sex with her. Her mother kills herself, and sixteen years later, Faye has to fuck every boy in school."
>
> "I don't follow.
>
> "To prove she isn't a lesbian. Like mother, like daughter, right? If she didn't fuck those boys, no one would have had anything to do with her. But she did. So she proved she

> wasn't a lesbian, but that she was a slut. So no one had anything to do with her. That's Wind Gap. We all know each other's secrets. And we all use them." (92-93)

Fay's story bespeaks a history of sexual violence foregrounding a hierarchy of socially approved sexual norms, wherein being a "slut" is better than being a lesbian. The proverbial expression, "like daughter like mother" seems an utterance by the common voice of Wind Cap inhabitants whose ignorance and intolerance doomed Fay to inherit her mother's sexual orientation. Fay Murray's experience exemplifies the community's effort to police and regulate an individual's identity to conform to the heteronormative ideal, even if that mechanism entails rape. Camille internalizes this logic by deploying the same proverbial expression, thus employing a "pseudo-logical" mindset that mirrors Wind Gap's toxic reasoning. Indeed, Camille is conditioned by the town's beliefs that women must conform in order to survive or even be considered, no matter the alienation and pain this entails.

Sexual violence goes beyond restricting sexual orientation, or turning a blind eye to rape, as it is also about dismissive attitudes towards women's complaints regarding the sexual assaults they have endured. When examining the myths around rape culture, the most prevalent is the belief that women fabricate rape narratives. Camille's family dynamic, which, at the time of her assault, consisted of an absent father and a neglectful mother, explains her reticence to report the assault, as she was likely to be ignored at home (due to her mother's lack of concern for her fate and obsessive grief over Marian's death) or wouldn't be believed. Camille's character is imbued with harmful myths surrounding sexual assault and a survivor's right to report it to the authorities. The town's dynamic has taught her to deny traumatic events rather than seek help and recognize herself as a victim, which explains her response to Richard when he asks if the police were notified, to which she replies, "Of course not" She has minimized the

assault to the point that she no longer views the event as what it truly was: a traumatic experience. Camille's character is flawed and upholds toxic standards that go against feminist views. Her dissociative and dismissive behavior towards the topic of sexual assault is a product of her own unresolved trauma paired with Wind Gap's toxic environment.

Additionally, by carving words into her body, she infringes on the unspoken standard that women must stay conventionally attractive to be considered a victim. This notion once more remains relevant as one of the many myths that permeates rape culture, which state that, " 'Attractive' men don't rape women, and 'unattractive' women are never raped" (Tilton 410). As such, it is rendered evident that a woman's credibility and consideration as a 'real' victim stem from numerous factors, including their physical appearance and adherence to beauty standards. Camille illustrates this phenomenon, as Detective Willis takes a romantic interest in her up until he sees the scars that cover her body for the first time, "his mouth fell open. He tilted my head to one side, and looked at the cuts on my neck. Pulled open my robe and flinched. "Jesus Christ." A psychic wobbling: He teetered between laughter and fear" (307). His physical reaction, which wavers between "laughter and fear", reveals a cultural response to female pain. The mention of "laughter" is in no way for comical reasons, but a nervous reflex to an unfamiliar situation. Instead of offering a sympathetic reaction, his own reaction overwhelms him, as the image of the "perfect victim" he had of her has shattered. While Richard Willis' reaction is that of shock when faced with Camille's "ugly" reality, as he abruptly cuts their communication after this episode, female pain has widely been associated with fetishization and glorification. Once female pain enters the public sphere in any form other than demure, it is considered "messy" to the male gaze, who prefers the *spectacle* of suffering rather than its reality.

In a recent study entitled "Pretty When They Cry: An Analysis of the Influence of Commodified Feminine Emotion in Popular Music on Young Girls and Women, Examined through Internet Aesthetics" (2024), Avani C.S. states that female pain "finds itself praised and set on a pedestal since time immemorial by art" (80). A significant example of this is John Everett Millais' painting, *Ophelia* (1851-2) which portrays a dead Danish noblewoman from Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. The depiction of her drowning is revered for its aesthetics, thus romanticizing her cadaver which is stripped of any agency or emotion. In "Something Strangely Perverse", Peter Brix Søndergaard further argues the unnatural glamorization of her floating body, stating "In her ethereal, feeble passivity, she represents an absolute availability to man" (123). The idealization of female pain is best summed up by Edgar Allan Poe, who writes, "the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world" (*The Philosophy of Composition* 6). The suffering of women has persistently been glorified, from the sacrificial figure of the mother to the routine reality of menstruation and pregnancy. The endurance of these imposed realities becomes a trophy to be won. Indeed, the "ideal" suffering women is a passive agent in her own narrative, granting men opportunity to project their own fantasies and allows them the freedom to violate, abuse and objectify without consequence.

The normalization of violence against women is rendered evident and observable through the eroticization of rape and brutality centered on women in pornography. Indeed, women in pornography are subjugated, humiliated, and referenced as Harper Alderson states "'sluts', 'whores', and 'cunts'" (3), a terminology that is regularly employed to degrade and deprecate women in day-to-day lives. The consequences of this systematic objectification are clearly illustrated in Camille's first rapport with pornography, as she recounts a formative yet unsettling memory:

> When I was still in grammar school, maybe twelve, I wandered into a neighbor boy's hunting shed, a wood-planked shack where the animals were stripped and split. Ribbons of moist, pink flesh dangled from strings, waiting to be dried for jerky. The dirt floor was rusted with blood. The walls were covered with photographs of naked women. Some of the girls were spreading themselves wide, others were being held down and penetrated. One woman was tied up, her eyes glazed, breasts stretched and veined like grapes, as a man took her from behind … At home that night, I slipped a finger under my panties and masturbated for the first time, panting and sick. (18)

Camille's disturbing recollection highlights how early exposure to violence against women can come to shape and distort a young person's outlook on sex and female agency. Pornography culturally conditions men and women to desensitize themselves to the blatant abuse women are subjected to. As such, Camille's arousal to the images in the shed underscores how violence has been repeatedly normalized, to the point that its eroticization forms skewed notions regarding sexual relations. As Terrie Schauer notes, pornography functions "by juxtaposing arousal and abusive or hierarchical images, the two become conflated at a subconscious level … Much like Pavlov's dogs, the pornographic audience salivates– in this case manifests a sexual response—when the bell of subordination is rung" (45). As a result, pornography effectively accustomed its audience to frame coercion, domination and female pain as something that is desirable, eroding the boundaries of consent. As Alderson perfectly articulates, "It is more difficult for women to identify what "rape" is when that becomes what "sex" is for men" (3). Notably, Amy's response, "panting and sick" underscores the violent dissonance of her physical versus psychological reaction. The "panting" is reminiscent of an animalistic response, a reflexive mimicry of the photographs, much like the Pavlovian salivation Schauer evokes. Nonetheless, the "sick" that follows acts as a counter-reaction, a

discordance to what is commonly associated with pleasure. This highlights an internal revulsion to her own complicity that equates violence to gratification. The juxtaposition of the raw and violent images of slaughtered animals– "stripped and split", with the pornographic photographs of women, "spreading themselves wide", creates a disturbing and deeply jarring parallel. This scene pushes Camille to confront the objectification of women while smudging the lines of animal and human, meat and sex. The pink butchered flesh of the animals mimics the exposed genitalia of the photographs, thus correlating the notion of stripped agency with pleasure.

The weight of this horrific reality is illustrated in *Sharp Objects* through Camille's struggle to reclaim an identity impervious to violent environment in which she grew up in. The novel reflects the avid consumption of female pain, not only through Camille's experiences but through the sensationalism of the young girl's murders in Wind Cap, which she was encouraged to cover. Camille bridges the gap between psychological and physical brutality. Though Camille was able to escape her hometown, successfully distancing herself from the harmful and deeply sexist setting she was forced to inhabit, she remains internally trapped. As Margaret Atwood argues in *The Robber Bride* (1993), the feminine experience often relies on the internalized gaze of a man, prompting women to police their own behaviors. This misogynistic Russian doll of a "woman with a man inside watching a woman", further fractures one's identity:

> Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies? Up on a pedestal or down on your knees, it's all a male fantasy: that you're strong enough to take what they dish out, or else too weak to do anything about it … Even pretending you aren't catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you're unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-

> present watcher peering through the keyhole, peering through the keyhole in your own head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur. (Atwood 366)

Camille Preaker exemplifies the concept of the patriarchy "peering through the keyhole" into the subconscious of women. This is rendered evident through Camille's strict behavior regarding her appearance as she covers as much skin as possible at all times. She has become her own predator, policing her own body and actions through the lens of a man's sexist and punitive perspective, terrified of being judged for her scars.

Consequently, the expression of pain has been influenced by the way it is represented, hence mistaking feelings for their performance. The performance of pain precedes and shapes the act of feeling it, thus teaching women to express their pain "in a way that was socially acceptable; palatable and diluted so they could portray beauty over pain. Femininity, not humanity" (Avani 80). Detective Willis' rejection after seeing Camille's scars validated her fears and insecurities, once more proving how female victimhood is inherently linked to preconceived patterns, the most evident of which is physical harm. Though Richard Willis had prior knowledge of Camille's struggle with mental health issues, his limit is drawn when he comes face to face with the consequences of said issues that have altered her body. Gillian Flynn doesn't deliver a happily ever after ending to their story, opting for a more realistic scenario; Camille is damaged and Richard takes advantage of her, then discards her once he doesn't need her anymore. Throughout the novel, he constantly manipulates and badgers her for information about the town to aid his investigation, while scarcely reciprocating the favor.

However, Camille's victimhood is perceived differently from young John Keen. Beyond any moralizing judgments of the controversial relationship between the thirty-something Camille and the much younger John, who is not yet twenty, this unsettling bond reveals something profound about the healing power of understanding the psychological consequences of sexual trauma. John sees her scars and isn't repelled or disgusted like Richard, instead, he offers her a safe space to exist:

> "Can I look?"
>
> "No." I tried again to pull away.
>
> "Let me see, Camille." He held on.
>
> "No one sees, John."
>
> "I do." (267)

John's "seeing" goes beyond the visual; it denotes a deep acceptance. Both John and Camille lost their sisters, bonding them in shared grief. John sees Camille for who she truly is, beyond her trauma and scars. As research has demonstrated, people who experience trauma often find themselves imprisoned in a specific period of their lives, forced to relive events without fully moving forward. Camille endured two extreme traumas during her teenage years: the death of Marian and her own sexual assault. Inevitably, her emotional development was stunted as she was never truly able to mourn her sister's passing. Thus, Camille relates to and trusts John because he, too, is a traumatized teenager who lost his sister, a psychological state in which Camille unwillingly still lingers.

Female victimhood does not limit itself to the mere experience of harm, as it has come to encompass a woman's socially constructed 'status' as a victim. As such, portraying female

victimhood along with agency has posed challenges and has widely matured and obtained recognition since the #MeToo movement of 2017, offering women a digital platform and a chance beyond duality within their identity. While some authors opt for universally likeable female leads, this often results in avoiding nuance and realism in their depictions.

This type of over-polished and unrealistic characterization fits into the framework of the male gaze, a concept introduced by Laura Mulvey in 1975, which produces female characters who cater to please male audiences. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Mulvey argues that women are "simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (809), thus confining them to be an erotic object for either the spectators or the characters within the story itself. Others, however, attempt to share an authentic portrayal of female experiences and psychology, often at the cost of a character's likeability and popularity among readers. As such, these female characters are morally complex or ambiguous and express emotions that are conventionally accepted as "masculine". For instance, "assertiveness, aggressiveness—all characteristics of a male life of "significant action" —are "monstrous" in women precisely because "unfeminine' " (Gilbert and Gubar 63).

Camille's behavior is defiant of the predetermined roles that patriarchy pressures women into believing. While Camille does uphold and perpetuate patriarchal ideas about female victimhood, the novel strays from fetishizing female pain, or transforming them into marketable and consumable narratives. The article Camille's boss pressures her into writing about the missing girls and Richard Willis' interrogations about violence in Wind Gap could be read as metatextual references to the narrative trends that market female pain and feed on its gory details. Through the affordance of the psychological thriller, Gillian Flynn makes of

Camille the illustration of the complex impacts of patriarchal violence on women. Her story reveals that the "Ideal Victim" narrative shapes Camille's perception of herself and the world around her. While telling a story of female victimhood, Gillian Flynn exposes the nefarious effects of similar narratives that capitalize on the appeal of the victim figure. Instead, by casting a complex female character, and portraying her coping mechanisms as both damaging and a plea for help, Flynn sheds new light on the psychological impact of inherent violence within a woman's identity.

II- Amy: The Power of the Perfect Victim

As the "Ideal Victim" relies on being as palatable as possible for the public to digest, Amy, unlike Camille, deliberately performs this unrealistic standard. While Camille "failed" to articulate her victimhood, Amy understands the "rules" of victimhood and engineers its aesthetics and behavioral cues to fit its absurd demands. Ironically, while the status of "Ideal Victim" is out of reach for actual victims, Amy manufactures this status for herself in the public sphere. Her desire to be perceived as the ultimate victim drives her to grasping every opportunity to pass as an authentic altruist, deliberately crafting a narrative in which she is a damsel in distress, her husband's devoted wife, and a survivor. Amy's metamorphosis into the "Ideal Victim" is a recurrent motif throughout the novel, as it serves as the primary tool in her plan for manipulation.

Amy's manipulation begins when she creates the diary, so as to ensure the police will have "proof" of Nick's abuse, establishing the origins of her "victimhood". However, once Nick admits his infidelity on television and begs for forgiveness, Amy wants him back, thus compelling her to radically reshape her initial narrative strategy to remain the sole victim. As

such, she seeks help from her ex-boyfriend, Desi Collings, who she ends up killing to frame him as her kidnapper, thus ensuring she would return as the sole "survivor". Amy downplays her diary accusations against Nick and uses their unborn child (conceived from Nick's previously frozen semen) as leverage to force him into compliance.

Though Amy's diary vulnerability is manufactured, the self-deprecation she shares illustrates how a real victim's self-image and worth can be contorted and twisted in a psychologically abusive relationship. In *Psychological Abuse in Violent Domestic Relations*, O'Leary and Maiuro report that "Ridiculing of [a female partner's] traits, however– an attack on her character– is more likely to shatter her sense of hope, security in the relationship, and even her sense of self" (199). Indeed, her fabricated narrative is fueled by Nick's comments, which are rarely relayed verbatim but implicitly conveyed through her diary entries, once more granting Amy full control of the narrative. As a result, Nick is progressively made out to be dismissive and unappreciative of his wife's efforts, which is rendered evident through Amy's fabricated narration of isolation, "He promised to take care of me and yet I feel afraid" (115), "Sometimes I feel Nick has decided on a version of me that doesn't exist … I don't know what to do. I'm trying" (136) and "I've been so lonely" (193). These "admissions" further support the narrative of Amy as the innocent martyr, a role she carefully cultivated even before the kidnapping.

To make her story more credible, she also builds her performance on another socially approved role, that of the mother and caregiver. Amy purposefully included a fake pregnancy to her narrative, reinforcing her gendered role of mother and caregiver through her diary entries. To do so, she leverages her relationship with Nick's mother, Maureen, to create an indirect allusion that Amy is in fact still mothering Nick. This is reinforced through the continuous

portrayal of Nick as overtly babied during his childhood and well into his adult life; stating "[Maureen] peeled and sliced his grapefruit for him … all the crusts had been cut away … I am married to a thirty-four-year-old man who is still offended by bread crusts" (210). This representation serves two purposes; it casts Nick as a perpetual child, while framing her as a caring yet weary "substitute mother". By expressing her "disappointment" at constantly failing to meet Nick's childlike demands, she once more invokes the reader's empathy.

The crafting of a credible diary warranted exterior help. As such, she deliberately pursued a close friendship with Noelle Hawthorne. Amy's choice of friend also gave her the opportunity to pass off Noelle's urine as her own, thus successfully faking a positive pregnancy test later to be included in her medical record. Amy describes Noelle as:

> a pliant friend for my plan, someone I could load up with awful stories about Nick, someone who would become overly attached to me, someone who'd be easy to manipulate, who wouldn't think too hard about anything I said because she felt privileged to hear it. Noelle was the obvious choice. (290-291)

Indeed, Noelle was a strategic choice for Amy, especially considering that a singular woman's voice is rarely considered enough to corroborate a story of abuse, which explains the need for a third party to confirm Amy's charming character.

The stories with which Amy "loaded up" her friend Noelle were not random. They were deliberately crafted to further build the persona of a kind and caring woman. This profile is reminiscent of Nils Christie's "Ideal Victim" whereby the "granting the complete and legitimate status of being a victim" which only occurs when said individual is "a good person or deserving victim" (qtd. in Duggan 33). Amy's performance and narrative, particularly after she returns from being "kidnapped", checks 4 out of 5 of Christie's "Ideal Victim" characteristics, adding

further weight to her fabricated victimhood. As such, Amy's testimony to Detective Boney is a perfect construction of her "victim" profile.

First, in order to satisfy the criterion of being as "weak, old or sick", she fakes a pregnancy, thus granting herself biological vulnerability and framing herself as a mother in need of protection. Second, Amy's "respectable project" was witnessed by Noelle, as she loaded her "up with awful stories about Nick" (290), and was, at the time of her attack, "been about to iron my dress" (420), reinforcing the persona of the devoted housewife.

Third, as she was inside her own home at the time of Desi's assault, she is effectively exonerated of any blame, as she wasn't at a bar or 'asking for it"; Desi was a threat in her own domestic sanctuary. Finally, the offender was made out to be "big and bad", as she describes Desi as "determined-looking" and "flustered and kind of frantic" (420), thus establishing he is unstable and unpredictable. Additionally, she highlights his aggressiveness "he had me by the wrists and was twisting it behind my back" (420) and his obsession with her, "Desi has written me letters all my life" (419).

Indeed, Amy recognizes the public's desire to believe that "bad people deserve bad outcomes" (qtd. in Duggan 34). Consequently, much like Desi, Nick was also easily cast as the "big and bad" offender, while Amy remained the "Ideal Victim". In order to support this portrayal, Amy depicts Nick as a threatening and violent husband. She does so with startling realism, as she purposefully describes his behavior as *progressively* neglectful and disrespectful, rather than an exaggerated caricature of the abusive husband. Indeed, the abuse is gradual, from threats "No, Amy. Not right now … I can't handle one more thing to worry about. I am cracking under the pressure. I will snap" (213), to actual physical violence "he took

three big steps toward me, and I thought: He looks like he's going to … And then he was slamming against me and I was falling" (221). Amy's use of the ellipsis "He looks like he's going to …" credibly reinforces her image as a faithful wife who is in denial of her husband's violent side. While the ellipsis also builds suspense, Amy's objective is to allow the reader to anticipate violence from Nick, without having to outright say it. At the end of a diary entry, she notes "I don't really think Nick would hurt me. I just would feel safer with a gun" (222). This paradoxical yet deliberate admission anchors Nick as an active threat to her life, while enforcing the narrative of Amy as a victim of domestic abuse in profound denial.

The power in Amy's intentional construction of victimhood is rendered evident through her manipulations aimed towards the media. Amy knows she can leverage the fact that her privileged status– being a white woman and the daughter of the socio-economically privileged authors of "Amazing Amy"- will grant her disappearance instant mediatization and consequent press coverage. Research shows that cases concerning white women in particular "received more media coverage than missing people from racial minority backgrounds, and missing White people's stories were more likely to receive repeated attention" (Slakoff and Fradella 82).

Amy's efforts to be portrayed as an angelic figure proved fruitful, as a passage where one of Nick's high school friends, Stucks, demonstrates the tendency people have to venerate those who have disappeared or died. As Stucks shares "She's such a sweet person. One time she saw me out painting a house … and she drove on to 7-Eleven, got me a giant pop, and brought it back to me, right up on the ladder" (126). The power of Stucks' story lies in its utility to Amy's agenda, to which Nick directly recognizes its fabricated nature, as he remarks "This was a lie. Amy cared so little for Stucks or his refreshment that she wouldn't have bothered to piss in a cup for him" (126). Nonetheless, this exchange demonstrates Amy's success in

planting the idea of her self-sacrificing persona in the collective memory of her entourage. Indeed, Amy grasps how the press thrives on performative or exaggerated displays of grief. Moreover, by anticipating Nick's inability to stand up to these manufactured and often theatrical expectations of mourning, she ensured that his public image would quickly be tarnished, fueling further suspicion for his behavior. Amy's character acts as a merciless critique regarding media manipulation and expectations. By weaponizing a very real risk that abused women must live with every day, she exploits the societal bias that men are violent while women remain vulnerable. Furthermore, Amy's diary was uncovered much later in the investigation and acted as the final nail in Nick's coffin. As such, its discovery came to confirm the preconceived opinions that the media and the public were actively fabricating regarding their story. Amy exposes the effortless way in which truth can be manufactured thanks to narratives whose sole value is their convergence with expected definitions of social roles: the good woman, the victim, the villain.

This manipulation, as explored in the section dedicated to the weaponization of Amy's body, extends to a physical performance of victimhood. Indeed, once Amy decides she needs to kill Desi, her internal monologue, which is in drastic opposition to her diary persona, further demonstrates the clinical dimension of her logic, as she weaponizes domestic intimacy in her plan for murder:

> I have found a piece of old twine and an empty wine bottle, and I've been using them for my project ... Discipline. This will take discipline and focus. I am up to the task. I array myself in Desi's favorite look: delicate flower. My hair in loose waves, perfumed. My skin has paled after a month inside. I am almost without makeup: a flip of mascara, pink-pink cheeks, and clear lip gloss. I wear a clingy pink dress he bought me. No bra.

> No panties. No shoes, despite the air-conditioned chill. I have a fire crackling and perfume in the air, and when he arrives after lunch without invitation, I greet him with pleasure. I wrap my arms around him and bury my face in his neck. I rub my cheek against his. I have been increasingly sweeter to him the past few weeks, but this is new, this clinging. (406)

This passage juxtapositions mundane objects such as "old twine" and "empty wine bottle" with domestic related items "perfume" and "fire crackling", successfully transforming a romantic rendezvous into Amy's meticulously curated crime scene. Her preparations are described as a "project" that requires "discipline and focus" thus framing the murder as a bureaucratic task rather than the act of self-defense she is attempting to recreate. Crucially, the deliberate construction of her physical appearance as a "delicate flower" by wearing a "clingy pink dress" and "No bra. No panties. No shoes" feigns vulnerability and is a calculated move to lower Desi's defenses. The novelty of her "clinging" is a conscious escalation to her manipulation in order to mimic an Ideal Victim's progressive trust after being abused. As such, Amy weaponizes symbols of femininity (flowers, pink, perfume, makeup) as camouflage in her plan to murder, thus seducing Desi into an appealingly orchestrated trap.

Amy's return to Nick acts as an apotheosis of her performance. Indeed, even when returning home, she deems it essential that she emerge as a triumphant "survivor". She returns to Nick, in what can be called a classic "damsel in distress" moment, just as the police were closing in on him as the primary suspect. As such, her appearance and body language are, as she puts it "textbook" (417) of a victim:

> Amy Elliott Dunne stood barefoot on my doorstep in a thin pink dress that clung to her as if it were wet. Her ankles were ringed in dark violet. From one limp wrist dangled a piece of twine. Her hair was short and frayed at the ends, as if it had been carelessly chopped by dull scissors. Her face was bruised, her lips swollen. She was sobbing. (413)

This scene intentionally contrasts the couple's public performance to their toxic domestic reality. Amy falls into Nick's arms, "damsel in distress" style, to which he cries out "Amy! My God! My God! My darling!" (413), while he quietly whispers in her ear "You fucking bitch" (414). The very attire "thin pink dress" she used to manipulate Desi into his death is recycled to act as gory proof of her battle to escape her kidnapper. The media's response in this scene validates her goal in being the ultimate survivor to the public; the victim who fought, survived, was sexually assaulted, only to return alive to her disloyal husband. While Amy's entire plan revolves around the performance of victimhood, there is a startling scene in the novel where Nick's abusive thoughts intrude into reality:

> I pressed tighter and brought her to the ground. She made wet clucking noises and scratched at my wrists. We were both kneeling, in face-to-face prayer for ten seconds.
>
> *You fucking crazy bitch.*
>
> A tear fell from my chin and hit the floor.
>
> *You murdering, mind-fucking, evil, crazy bitch.*
>
> Amy's bright blue eyes were staring into mine, unblinking.
>
> And then the strangest thought of all clattered drunkenly from the back of my brain to the front and blinded me: *If I kill Amy, who will I be?*
>
> I saw a bright white flash. I dropped my wife as if she were burning iron.
>
> She sat hard on the ground, gasped, coughed.

> When her breath came back, it was in jagged rasps, with a strange, almost erotic squeak at the end. (443)

This violent and visceral confrontation effectively dismantles the narrative in which Nick's abuse is solely a part of Amy's scripted performance. In this scene, Amy cannot act or put on a facade, as she truly is a victim of domestic violence. Nick's interrogation "*If I kill Amy, who will I be?"* confirms that murdering her was a viable option in his mind, even if for a few seconds. However, Nick's fear of embodying the abusive husband she made him out to be in her diary prevents him from going any further. Amy's physical reaction, making "wet clucking noises" and "scratched at my wrists", strips away any sort of theatricality. This animalistic response suggests that in this moment, she is no longer the calculated and composed manipulator, but a vulnerable creature fighting to survive, thus putting her in a near primal state. Though Amy comes to embody the very performance she cast herself as, she does not accept the status of an "abused woman". Whether through denial or obsessive need for control over her narrative, she exonerates Nick for his attempted murder:

> [W]e can work on our rebuilding. Start with the facade. We will have a happy marriage if it kills him. "You're going to have to try again to love me,' I told him. The morning after he almost killed me … but he didn't mention it. My husband has had enough of my gifts. 'I forgive you for last night,' I said. 'We were both under a lot of stress. But now you're going to have to try again.' (445)

Instead of adopting the role of a "real-life" victim, Amy offers forgiveness. This allows her to seize the moral high ground, not to help heal but rather, to co-opt the narrative of the "Ideal

Victim" and corner Nick into a cycle of guilt. In doing so, Amy illustrates how her perception of victimhood is about detaining power rather than expressing any sort of real suffering.

As such, Amy's version of the "Ideal Victim" trope is far from a pathologized victim of the system. Instead, she is a master of her performance who "shapeshifts" to adapt to new environments and knows exactly how to play her cards right to gain control.

Conclusion

This thesis endeavored to explore the manner in which psychological thrillers redefine the representation of feminine identity, trauma, and hysteria. This work argues that in Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects* and *Gone Girl*, hysteria is recontextualized as a visceral response to consequent and repeated trauma or patriarchal pressure. Camille Preaker and Amy Dunne are compelling foils to examine each other's characterization and coping mechanisms as they both subvert and challenge the binary portrayal of "madwomen" in literature. Female characters are intrinsically linked to the author's understanding of the feminine identity within the patriarchal bounds of society, thus offering rich canvases to examine how trauma and misogyny can shape, make, or ultimately break a woman's sense of self. As such, this work explored how psychological thrillers can intimately reveal intricate layers inherent to the construction of female identity through the study of their trauma.

The methodology of this thesis relied on a comparative analysis in order to highlight the distinctive ways in which women can respond to, or cope with, oppression and systemic violence. As such, the psychological thriller emerges as a proliferous medium for this inquiry, due to its considerable flexibility and inherent ability to blend realism and delusion, mirroring the fractured nature of trauma.

Through Freud's concepts of the *uncanny* and the return of the repressed, I was able to analyze Camille's narrative and temporal fracture. As such, this work argues that Camille's "hysterical" responses can be reflected through a fragmentation of the self, where Cathy Caruth's trauma theory revealed how unhealed traumatic wounds cause identity and perception of time to be shattered. Conversely, through the application of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, I dissected Amy Dunne's character, which posits that identity is more than a site where societal expectations are imposed, it can be a deliberate and aggressive performance. As such, I was able to deconstruct her personas proving that her manipulation of "stylized

repetition of acts" (Butler 519) is in fact a meticulous strategy of survival. Indeed, Amy is unapologetically a brilliantly evil manipulator, as the narrative isn't imposed *onto* her, she intentionally *makes* it happen. Additionally, drawing upon Elaine Showalter's *Hystories*, this work first contextualized the pathologization of women's suffering to later integrate Nils Christie's sociological framework of the "Ideal Victim", demonstrating the strict criteria women must navigate to be taken seriously.

Furthermore, Camille's fragmented reality isn't depicted as wholly defective, as my analysis asserts that her self-harm, denial, and dissociation also act as proof of resilience. This is rendered evident through her persistent refusal to accept self-harm and the victim status as more than pathologized symptoms, but rather as attempts to reclaim agency over her own body and narrative. As such, though Camile's community and family structure continuously dismiss her suffering, a dynamic explored by John Bradshaw's work on shame-based relationships, Camille strives to survive in any way possible, even if that entails destructive habits. Contrastingly, Amy's shift from "Amazing Amy" to the "Ideal Victim", demonstrates that her staged "hysterical" response is a deliberate procedure to invert patriarchal power dynamics. Amy is unrepentantly willing to weaponize feminine tropes and resort to violence to ensure her own survival, even if murder and self-mutilation are required. By manipulating the media's sensationalism as well as legal biases regarding white female suffering, Amy's character reveals how the only way to become an active agent in a patriarchal society is to internalize and exploit its script. As such, this work calls attention to the systemic obstacles women endure when seeking justice and equal treatment, exemplified through Freud's restrictive "Madonna-Whore" complex and the "Ideal Victim" archetype's mechanisms, demonstrating the violence in reducing women to binary categories. Moreover, through the lens of corporality, this work underlines the routine commodification and hypersexualization of women's bodies, drawing on Laura Mulvey's "male gaze" theory and Leslie Jamison "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain", arguing that female suffering is often aestheticized and glorified.

Camille and Amy reclaim, through often disruptive and visceral methods, their bodies as sites to declare their existence. Indeed, neither of their narrative trajectories are constructed to grant them "redemption arcs" or absolve them from destructive behaviors. Furthermore, Flynn is shown to reappropriate the mechanics of Gothic fiction, pouring the horrors of systemic violence into the construction of female identity. As such, I posit that these characters can be considered to be their own "haunted houses"; where ghostly flashes of the past and intolerant, misogynistic perfectionists are pulling the strings. This work demonstrates how psychological thrillers can host more than the mere effects of gender norms and societal expectation on women, by aptly depicting the internalized misogyny that perpetuates a relentless cycle of blame maintained by women themselves.

Together, Amy and Camille illustrate that the "hysterical madwoman" is a man-made invention that discredits and dismisses women's suffering. As such, the comparative analysis of these two protagonists highlights the limiting options of true female agency in literature, as well as the lack of ambiguity awarded to female figures, often oscillating between victim/villain or sane/mad. This very ambivalence is at the core of Flynn's work, thus adding malleability to women's characterization. Though depictions of female figures have evolved, the full spectrum of female nature is watered down, as Gillian Flynn argues "we've left no room to acknowledge our dark side. Dark sides are important. They should be nurtured like nasty black orchids" (2015).

This analysis finds its relevance in the critical examination of contemporary cultural conversations on the topic of women, trauma and the #MeToo movement. While women's pain and mental health remain a stigmatized and glorified domain, the analysis of Flynn's work suggests that "hysteria" is a defense mechanism that women are forced to adopt in order to counter the violent and oppressive world that disproportionately persecutes their every move. As such, psychological thrillers offer a productive ground to confront and redefine the

"hysterical woman", allowing women to take up space and be awarded the same consideration and unrepentance traditionally granted to male characters. This allows female protagonists to exist without their inability to conform being weaponized as cautionary tales of moral failure. Both Camille and Amy resist being punished into fitting certain conventions; Camille rejects being the "perfect daughter" and Amy refuses to be "Amazing Amy". Indeed, fictional women will only achieve true multidimensionality once they are permitted to be bad, brilliant, monstrous and everything in between.

Ultimately, this thesis poses lingering questions; What remains of identity when free from the persistent and crushing presence of the male gaze? How does female trauma articulate when exempt from the patriarchy? While patriarchal shame trickles down from mother to daughter, maintained and forcibly beaten into the subconscious mind through internalized misogynistic expectations, resilience and identity can be reclaimed within these destructive or decaying foundations. The true strength of psychological thrillers lies in its ability to foster new, defiant identities, often built upon the scars of trauma and oppressive mechanisms. As such, this thesis calls for a recognition of the complex construction of female identity, and a re-evaluation of the dismissive "hysterical" label.

Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. *The Robber Bride.* McClelland and Stewart, 1993.

Baxter, Judith. "Feminist Post-Structuralist Discourse Analysis – a New Theoretical and Methodological Approach?" dissertation, Aston University, 2008.

Bearman, Sophie, et al. "The Fabric of Internalized Sexism." *Journal of Integrated Social Sciences*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2009, pp. 10-47.

Benstead, Lindsay J. "Conceptualizing and Measuring Patriarchy: The Importance of Feminist Theory." *Political Science Faculty Publications and Presentations,* 2020, pp. 1-8. archives.pdx.edu/ds/psu/31037.

Bertolote, José. "The roots of the concept of mental health." *World Psychiatry: Official Journal of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA)* vol. 7, no. 2, 2008, pp. 113-6, doi:10.1002/j.2051-5545.2008.tb00172.x.

Books, Powell's. "I Was Not a Nice Little Girl…." *Medium*, 17 July 2015, medium.com/@Powells/i-was-not-a-nice-little-girl-c2df01e0ae1. Accessed 12 May 2026.

Bradshaw, John. *Healing the Shame That Binds You*. Health Communication, Inc, 1988.

Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1988, pp. 519–31, doi:10.2307/3207893.

Caracciolo, Marco, and Thom van Duuren. "Changed by Literature? A Critical Review of Psychological Research on the Effects of Reading Fiction." *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2015, pp. 517–539, doi:10.5325/intelitestud.17.4.0517.

Caruth, Cathy. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory.* The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

---. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Castrillo, P., and P. Echart. "Towards a narrative definition of the American political thriller film". *Communication & Society*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2015, pp. 109-123.

Chandini, S., et al. "Hysteria: A Historical Perspective." *Archives of Medicine and Health Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 2, Jan. 2020, p. 312, doi:10.4103/amhs.amhs_220_20.

Chaudhury, Suprakash. "Psychological Aspects of Rape and Its Consequences." *Psychology and Behavioral Science International Journal*, vol. 2, no. 3, Mar. 2017, doi:10.19080/pbsij.2017.02.555586.

Cleghorn, Elinor. *Unwell Women: Misdiagnosis and Myth in a Man-Made World*. Penguin, 2021.

Deliovsky, Kathy. "Normative White Femininity: Race, Gender and the Politics of Beauty." *Atlantis Critical Studies in Gender Culture & Social Justice*, vol. 33, no. 1, Jan. 2008, pp. 49–59, doi:10.7202/1120970ar.

Derry, Charles. *The Suspense Thriller: films in the shadow of Alfred Hitchcock*. Jefferson, McFarland, 1998.

Duggan, Marian. "Revisiting the 'Ideal Victim': Developments in Critical Victimology." *Kent Academic Repository (University of Kent)*, Jan. 2018, doi:10.46692/9781447339151.

Dutton, Mary Ann. "Understanding Women's Responses to Domestic Violence: A Redefinition of Battered Woman Syndrome." *Hofstra Law Review*, vol. 21, no. 4, Jan. 1993, pp. 2–63, doi:10.1023/a:1022973315359.

Dworkin, Andrea. *Our Blood: Prophecies and Discourses on Sexual Politics*. HarperCollins Publishers, 1976.

Edmundson, Mark. *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism and the Culture of Gothic*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997.

Erikson, Kai. "Notes on Trauma and Community." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 183-199.

Felman, Shoshana. "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 13-60.

Freeman, Jo. "The Origins of the Women's Liberation Movement." *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 78, no. 4, 1973, pp. 792–811. http://www.jstor.org./stable/2776604. Accessed 20 May 2026.

Freud, Sigmund. *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*. Reprint of Dodo Press, 2006.

---. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings.* Translated by John Reddick, introduction by Mark Edmundson, Penguin Classics, 2003.

---. *The Interpretation of Dreams.* Translated by James Strachey, Basic Books, 2010.

---. *The Uncanny*. Translated by David McLintock, introduction by Hugh Haughton, Penguin Books, 2003.

Fries, Maureen. "Feminae Populi: Popular Images of Women in Medieval Literature." *The Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 14, no. 1, June 1980, pp. 79–86, doi:10.1111/j.0022-3840.1980.1401_79.x.

Fritz, N., et al. "A Descriptive Analysis of the Types, Targets, and Relatives Frequency of Aggression in Mainstream Pornography." *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, vol. 49, no. 8, 2020, pp. 3041-53, doi:10.1007/s10508-020-01773-0.

Ge, Yifan. "Analyzing the Image of "Hysterical Madwoman" from a Feminist Perspective--Analysis of the Causes and Expression Effects of the Related Images in Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights;" *SHS Web Of Conferences*, vol. 220, Jan. 2025, p. 01010, doi:10.1051/shsconf/202522001010.

Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic*: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination. 2nd ed., Yale University Press, 2000.

Gillian, Flynn. *Gone Girl*. Phoenix, 2012.

--- . *Sharp Objects*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007.

Gilman, Sander L., et al. *Hysteria Beyond Freud*. University of California Press, 1993, doi:10.1525/9780520309937.

Glover, David. "The Thriller." *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, edited by Martin Priestman, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 135–153.

Goodyear, M., et al. "Preventing Intergenerational Trauma Transmission: A Critical Interpretive Synthesis." *Journal of Clinical Nursing,* vol.28, 2019, pp.1100-113, doi:10.1111/jocn.14735.

Grant, Jon E., and Samuel R. Chamberlain. "Trichotillomania". *American Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 173, no. 9, 2016, pp. 868–874, doi:10.1176/appi.ajp.2016.15111432.

Gratz, Kim L. "Measurement of Deliberate Self-Harm: Preliminary Data on the Deliberate Self-Harm Inventory." *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment*, vol. 23, no. 4, Dec. 2001, pp. 253–63, doi :10.1023/a:1012779403943.

Herman, David, et al. *Theory and Interpretation of Narrative*. The Ohio State University Press, 2012.

Hertler, Steven, et al. "An Evolutionary Explanation of the Madonna-Whore Complex." *Evolutionary Psychological Science*, vol. 9, no. 3, May 2023, pp. 372–84, doi:10.1007/s40806-023-00364-1.

Hiwarkhedka, Shubhangi M., and Anshu Sharma. "Patriarchal Dominance in English Literature." *International Research Journal on Advanced Engineering and Management (IRJAEM)*, vol. 2, no. 04, Apr. 2024, pp. 1228–31. doi:10.47392/irjaem.2024.0165.

Hogle, Jerrold E. "Introduction: The Gothic in Western Culture." *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Ed. Jerrold E. Hogle. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 1–20.

Jamison, Leslie. "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain." *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, vol. 90, no. 2, 2014, pp. 114–28, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44714543. Accessed 27 May 2026.

Jewell, Lisa. Instagram direct message to the author. 4 Feb. 2025.

Joyce, Laura, and Henry Sutton. *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, doi:10.1007/978-3-319-69338-5.

Kaplan, E. Ann. *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature.* Rutgers University Press, 2005.

King, Stephen. *Danse Macabre*. Gallery Books, 2010.

Kremin, L. V. "Sexist Swearing and Slurs Responses to Gender-directed Insults." *LingUU Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, Nov. 2017, linguujournal.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Kremin-2017-Sexist-swearing-and-slurs.pdf.

Larcombe, Wendy. "The `Ideal' Victim V Successful Rape Complainants: Not What You Might Expect." *Feminist Legal Studies*, vol. 10, pp. 131–48, doi:10.1023/A:1016060424945.

Love, Spencie, and Elaine Showalter. "HyStories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture." *Journal of American History*, vol. 84, no. 4, Mar. 1998, p. 1598, doi:10.2307/2568242.

Lucas, Jolina M., and Sweetchields Ordeniza. "Representation of Women in Literature Through Different Era." *Technoarete Transactions on Language and Linguistics*, vol. 2, no. 1, Jan. 2023, doi:10.36647/ttll/02.01.a002.

Manne, Kate. *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. Oxford University Press, 2018, doi:10.1093/oso/9780190604981.001.0001.

Mecholsky, Kristopher. "The psychological thriller: An overview." *The American Thriller,* edited by G. Huppenstand, Salem Press, 2014, pp. 48-70.

Merone, Lea, et al. “Sex Inequalities in Medical Research: A Systematic Scoping Review of the Literature.” *Women's health reports,* vol. 3, no. 1, Jan. 2022, pp. 49-59, doi:10.1089/whr.2021.0083.

Michelangelo. *The Pietá*. 1498-99, St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City.

Millais, John Everett. *Ophelia.* 1851-52, Tate Britain, London.

Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, Sept. 1975, pp. 6–18, doi:10.1093/screen/16.3.6.

Namra Najam, et al. “Gender Performativity and Fluctuating Hierarchies: A Postmodern Feminist Study of Gillian Flynn’s Gone Girl”. *Research Journal of Social Sciences and Economics Review*, vol. 3, no. 2, June 2022, pp. 48-55, doi:10.36902/rjsser-vol3-iss2-2022(48-55).

Nezhat, Camran, et al. “Endometriosis: Ancient Disease, Ancient Treatments.” *Fertility and Sterility*, 2015, pp. 13–127, doi:10.1007/978-3-030-52984-0_2.

O’Leary, K. Daniel, and Roland D. Maiuro. “Psychological Abuse in Violent Domestic Relations.” *Springer eBooks*, 2001, ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA50556794.

Poe, Edgar Allan. “The Philosophy of Composition.” *Harvard University Press eBooks*, 1924, doi:10.4159/harvard.9780674732513.c10.

---. *The Tell-tale Heart / the Premature Burial*. Bantam Classics, 1983.

Ramos, Ester, et al. "Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy: A Review." *Einstein (São Paulo)*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2017, pp. 516-21.

Rosenheim, Shawn, and Stephen Rachman. *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe.* Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

Rotman, Deborah L. “Separate Spheres?: Beyond the Dichotomies of Domesticity.” *Current Anthropology*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2006, pp. 666–74, https://doi-org.buadistant.univ-angers.fr/10.1086/506286. Accessed 23 May 2026.

Ruben, E. Justin. "Psychological Thriller Fiction of Stephen King." *International Journal of English: Literature, Language & Skills*, vol. 11, no. 4, Jan. 2023, pp. 45–50.

Rubin, M. *Thrillers*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.

S. Avani C. "Pretty When They Cry: An Analysis of the Influence of Commodified Feminine Emotion in Popular Music on Young Girls and Women, Examined through Internet Aesthetics." *CONSPECTUS: A Journal of English Studies*, vol. 18, 2024, pp. 79-96.

Schauer, Terrie. "Women's Porno: The Heterosexual Female Gaze in Porn Sites 'For Women'." *Sexuality and Culture*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2005, pp.42-64, doi:10.1007/s12119-005-1007-8.

Scull, Andrew. *Hysteria*. 2009, doi: 10.1093/oso/9780199560967.001.0001.

Simpson, Philip. "Noir and the Psycho Thriller." *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, edited by Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, pp. 187–197.

Slakoff, Danielle C., and Henry F. Fradella. "Media Messages Surrounding Missing Women and Girls: The 'Missing White Woman Syndrome' and Other Factors that Influence Newsworthiness." *Criminology, Criminal Justice, Law and Society*, vol. 20, no. 3, Dec. 2019, pp. 80–102.

Slater, Elaine. "Diagnosis of Hysteria." *British Medical Journal,* vol. 1, no. 5447, 1965, pp. 1395-9, doi:10.1136/bmj.1.5447.1395.

Sokolove Law. "Sexual Abuse Statistics: Abusers & Rates (2026)." Edited by Ricky A. LeBlanc, *Sokolove Law*, 4 May 2026, www.sokolovelaw.com/personal-injury/sexual-abuse/statistics/.

Søndergaard, Peter Brix. "'Something Strangely Perverse'. Nature and Gender in J. E. Millais's Ophelia." *Romantik*, vol. 7, no. 1, Dec. 2018, pp. 115–26, doi:10.14220/jsor.2018.7.1.115.

Springhall, John. "'Disseminating Impure Literature': The 'Penny Dreadful' Publishing Business Since 1860." *The Economic History Review*, vol. 47, no. 3, Aug. 1994, pp. 567-584, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2597594.

Sutton, A.G. "Blanchard, Gypsy Rose." *Encyclopedia of Domestic Violence*, edited by Todd K. Shackelford, Springer, 2023, doi:10.1007/978-3-030-85493-5_121-1.

Szeman, Imre, et al. *A Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory.* John Wiley and Sons, 2017.

Tasca, Cecilia et al. "Women and hysteria in the history of mental health." *Clinical practice and epidemiology in mental health: CP & EMH* vol. 8, 2012, pp. 110-9, doi:10.2174/1745017901208010110.

Tilton, Emily C. R. "Rape Myths, Catastrophe, and Credibility." *Episteme*, vol. 21, no. 2, Mar. 2022, pp. 408–24, doi:10.1017/epi.2022.5.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Poetics of Prose*. Translated by Richard Howard, foreword by Jonathan Culler, Cornell University Press, 1977.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. "Global Study on Homicide 2023." *Global study on homicide*, 2023, doi:10.18356/9789213587386.

Van der Kolk, Bessel A. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma.* Penguin Books, 2015.

Vandoorne, Saskya, et al. "Exposing a Global 'Rape Academy'." *CNN*, 26 Mar. 2026, https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2026/03/world/expose-rape-assault-online-vis-intl/index.html

Walby, Sylvia. "Theorising Patriarchy." *Sociology*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1989, pp. 213–34, http://www.jstor.org.buadistant.univ-angers.fr/stable/42853921. Accessed 28 May 2026.

Warhol, Robyn R., and Susan S. Lanser. *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*. 2015.

"Violence against Women." *World Health Organization*, World Health Organization, www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women. Accessed 3 May 2026.

Alderson, Harper. "The Left Must Demand the Abolition of Online Pornography." *The Monitor*, vol. 1, no. 1, Apr. 2026, pp. 1-11.

Abstract

Women in Psychological Thrillers: Redefining feminine identity, trauma, and hysteria.

This thesis explores how psychological thrillers' unique structure and heritage provides the ideal medium for the representation of feminine identity, trauma, and hysteria. Through the complementary analysis of two female protagonists, born of author Gillian Flynn, Camille Preaker (*Sharp Objects*, 2006), and Amy Dunne (*Gone Girl, 2012*), hysteria is recontextualized as a visceral response to consequent and repeated trauma, as well as patriarchal pressure. This work showcases the complex and multifaceted spectrum of of female identity, through the contrasted study of Camille's uncanny and destructive self, and Amy's weaponized performance of victimhood. These distinct yet analogous characters challenge the traditional pathologized "madwoman" as a necessary strategy to survive systemic oppression, thus reclaiming a sense of agency within their narrative.

Key words: psychological thrillers, trauma, hysteria, feminism, identity, fragmentation, psychoanalysis.

Résumé

Les femmes dans les thrillers psychologiques : redéfinition de l'identité féminine, du traumatisme et de l'hystérie.

Cette thèse explore la manière dont la structure et l'héritage unique des thrillers psychologiques constituent un support idéal pour la représentation de l'identité féminine, du traumatisme et de l'hystérie. À travers l'analyse complémentaire de protagonistes féminines créées par l'autrice Gillian Flynn, Camille Preaker (*Sharp Objects* 2006) et Amy Dunne (*Gone Girl* 2012), l'hystérie est recontextualisée comme une réponse viscérale à une exposition répétée et intense à des traumatismes et à une pression patriarcale. Cette recherche s'intéresse aux spectres complexes et protéiformes de l'identité féminine, à travers une étude contrastée du 'soi' étrange et destructeur de Camille, et l'instrumentalisation du 'rôle' de victime d'Amy. Ces personnages distincts mais analogues remettent en question la figure traditionnelle de la « femme hystérique », l'introduisant comme un mécanisme de défense nécessaire pour survivre à l'oppression systémique afin de retrouver un sentiment d'autonomie au sein de leur récit.

Mots-clefs : thrillers psychologique, traumatisme, hystérie, féminisme, identité, fragmentation, psychanalyse.