Unlikability and Female Villains in the Works of Gillian Flynn

Cannon Elder Lane
High Point, North Carolina

Bachelor of Arts, English, University of Virginia, 2017

Bachelor of Arts, Spanish, University of Virginia, 2017

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Introduction:

In recent years, television and popular fiction have begun to feature a new type of female character termed the "unlikable" woman. From popular novels such as Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* and Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train* to TV shows such as Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* and Lena Dunham's *Girls,* popular cultural products in recent years have begun to center on a depiction of women distinct from any before—at least in terminology.[1] In each of these works, female writers depict troubled women, from murderers and alcoholics to narcissists, each unwilling to conform to the standards and expectations of representations of women. In each of these works, the authors of these characters refuse to position them as role models, instead focusing on their extreme negative capacity, presenting their story arcs not as ones of redemption or correction, but as ones of continuous development and iteration of personal defect. Against the trend of hailing positive representations of women in fiction, these flawed and profoundly human characters slide the scale in the opposite direction. Instead of proving the equal intelligence, strength, and positive capacity of women, these characters work to accentuate the negative.

For male characters of this type, the term antihero usually applies. From Milton's Satan and Shakespeare's Macbeth to, more recently, *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White, *Mad Men*'s Don Draper, and *Fight Club*'s narrator/Tyler Durden, the male antihero has long occupied the pages of fiction. While the same term has been attempted for female

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[1] While earlier examples of troubled, unruly women include Euripides' Medea, Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, Tess Durbeyfield of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles,* Becky Sharp of *Vanity Fair*, Emma Bovary of *Madame Bovary*, popular fiction and television of late has featured these character types with a higher frequency than before.

characters, in popular conversation, another term has instead stuck. In popular jargon, instead of antihero, these characters tag as “unlikable.” Between these two terms lies a chasm of gendered implication. While the term "antihero" stems from an established line of literary criticism, the term “unlikable” carries less academic implications. Though both terms describe a similar set of traits, the difference between the two terms lies on the axis of gender. While numerous books have explored the character of the male antihero, many less do so in relation to the character of the female antihero. Instead, discussions of these characters spin on notions of gender. Though defined by similar or identical traits, a male character might be read as an antihero while a female character as simply unlikable. Inherent in this critique is the assumption that the female characters in question ought to be personally liked by the reader. Though in negative, this logic highlights ideas that female characters in texts and that women, by nature of their gender, ought to please others in some way. That it matters not who they are, but rather what someone else thinks of them.

The flip side of this argument, of course, is the question of the limits of the positive effects of these negative representations. At what point does the negativity of the representation outweigh the positivity of the full spectrum representation of female characters? When do negative representations of women become sexist representations? In both of these questions, the context of the work reigns supreme. By examining the works of Gillian Flynn, a popular American novelist whose work addresses these ideas, we might begin to parse the limits of the productiveness of these representations while examining more strictly how they function within the text and speak to wider questions of gender. In examining the reconfiguration of traditional archetypes in Flynn’s works, I

argue for the productiveness of female perpetrated violence as a subversive and consciousness-raising element of Flynn's fiction. By combining female villains with a narrative focalization of these "unlikable" female character types, Flynn's work provides a new barometer of the bounds of female behavior.

In this project, I plan to analyze the perverse component of Flynn's novels, *Sharp Objects, Dark Places,* and *Gone Girl,* to track the ways in which these works characterize and represent female violence and female characters. To what extent does Flynn present violence perpetrated by women as feminized violence or, if possible, no-gendered violence? In the remainder of this thesis, I plan to analyze the specific characterizations of these female characters alongside the different incidents of their violence, with particular attention to the way in which these representations contradict gendered expectations.

Expanding Jung's Archetypes: The Bitch and The Unlikable Female Character

As one of the oldest methods of literary criticism, character analysis has produced many iterations of itself perhaps most foundationally articulated in the work of Carl Gustav Jung. Between 1934 and 1954, Jung published *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* which literary critics soon applied to the study of texts. According to Bettina Knapp, Jungian archetypal theory, "takes the literary work out of its individual and conventional context and relates it to humankind in general … This unique approach lifts readers out of their specific and perhaps isolated worlds, and allows them to expand their vision, and thus to relate more easily to issues that may confront them and to

understand their reality as part of an ongoing and cyclical reality" (x). In practice, Jungian archetypal critics sought to identify recurring character types in fiction as manifestations of humanity's "collective unconscious" (*Collected Works,* 9).

Early adopters of Jung's theories in the field of literary criticism include both Leslie Fiedler and Richard Chase. In *Love and Death in the American Novel,* Leslie Fiedler notes how in American fiction texts often "bifurcated [female characters] into Fair Virgin and Dark Lady," and how, "all through the history of our novel there had appeared side by side with the Fair Maiden, the Dark Lady" (296). Similarly, in his analysis of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans,* Richard Chase notes how female characters tend, "to be seen obliquely and rather with a covert displeasure, or unhappy fascination, or secret vindictiveness" (Chase, 64). In these critiques, both Fiedler and Chase identify the preponderance of hyperbolized female characters, either appearing as pure, virginal, and appropriately feminine, or as deviant and therefore improper and unacceptable.

Following this line of feminist criticism, critics in the 1980s and early 1990s began a study of feminist archetypal theory with the goal of reworking the original archetypes of Jung to allow for female subjectivity. Categorizing these early recovery efforts, in her introduction to *The New Feminist Criticism*, Elaine Showalter writes:

> In its earliest years, feminist criticism concentrated on exposing the misogyny of literary practice: the stereotyped images of women in literature as angels or monsters, the literary abuse or textual harassment of women in classic and popular male literature, and the exclusion of women from literary history. (5)

Responding to this stereotyping of women in literature as either "angels or monsters," feminist critics argued the exclusive use of these categories of representation typed women based on their compliance with the standards of patriarchy. As a part of this same

second wave feminist movement, feminist authors during this time, also frustrated with the limited range of female representation in fiction worked to create dynamic and complex female characters complete with their own subjectivity. In this reformation and expansion of female archetypes, feminist literature and criticism left behind the image of the Dark Lady, relegating negative representations of female characters to an earlier era of sexist representation. With this, female archetypal critics of the second wave created a new limitation of female representation. While having rescued the subjectivity of the heroine, these critics and texts focused increasingly on positive representations instead of rehabilitate negative archetypes of women from their sexist formations.[2]

In *The Bitch is Back: Wicked Women in Literature,* published in 2001, Sarah Appleton Aguiar notes how, "somewhere along that road to subjectivity, mixed with the refuse discarded at the curb, something had been lost. That vital woman, empowered with anger, wit, ruthless survival instincts—the *bitch*— had been banished from the pages of feminist fiction" (1). Explaining this banishment as the effect of feminist authors' focus on, "creating positive role models for women, as well as dispelling false stereotypes" Aguiar also posits how this focus left behind a "conspicuous void" in fiction (2, 3). Continuing on, Aguiar argues that while, "reality more than suggests that 'female' is not, nor should be, classified as synonymous with 'virtue' … [i]ronically, in feminism's goal to eradicate the traditional stereotyping of female characters— particularly the demons and the fiends that have proliferated throughout literary history— the resulting literature may seem equally biased in its promotion of female nobility" (3).

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[2] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's 1979 text, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination,* represents a notable exception from this trend, notably rehabilitating the figure of the "madwoman" in Victorian literature.

To remedy this gap, Aguiar argues for the recognition and integration of the "bitch" into archetypal feminist criticism. Arguing for an expansion rather than a specification of these archetypal categories, Aguiar defines the traits of the "bitch" in literature as often including, "an appropriation of the male sphere, a seemingly incongruent knowledge of evil, and, of course, a lack of moral and sexual virtue" (5). To distinguish between sexist negative representations of women and merely negative representations of women, including the bitch, Aguiar establishes a standard of subjectivity. If the negative female character is allowed motivations for her actions and exposition on why she acts in the way that she does, then according to Aguiar, this representation likely does not fall into the category of sexist representation. Advocating for a splintering of the bitch character from the Jungian archetypal characters of the "maiden, mother, crone" Aguiar warns that "a woman who does not acknowledge her own inclinations towards evil, unsavory behavior, flaws, failings, and downright nastiness may find herself as objectified as any other silenced heroine" (6). "Indeed," she concludes, "morality itself may reside in the heart and the mind of the bitch" (6). The effect of this acceptance of the bitch, Aguiar argues, "include the endowing women with the idea— a liberating notion— that femininity is not necessarily synonymous with weakness, capitulation, good manners, and subservience" (136).

Integral to Aguiar's definition of feminist archetypal theory is the redefinition of the rigidity of archetypes to allow for "fluidity and the capacity to evolve" while also allowing for a significant degree of variance among feminist archetypes (134). By Aguiar's definition, "[t]he bitch is not a singular archetypal figure" (27). As argued by Estella Lauter and Carol Schreier Rupprecht in *Feminist Archetypal Theory:*

Interdisciplinary Re-Visions of Jungian Thought, feminist archetypal theory seeks "to reformulate key Jungian concepts to reflect women's experiences more accurately" thus allowing for significant range within a single archetype (3).

While archetypal literary theory seeks to account for the manifestations of the "collective unconscious" in the sphere of literature, the very nature of the "collective unconscious" reveals the form distinction as an arbitrary limitation. Though arguably evident in many forms of literature, the same archetypal theories apply to film, television, and other forms of character creation as a crystallization of the archetypes posited by archetypal theory to exist within our own psyches.

In 1996, five years prior to the publication of Aguiar's *The Bitch is Back,* writer and former Ms. Magazine intern Andi Zeisler founded the magazine *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* with similar intentions of reclaiming the word "bitch" to take away its power to belittle women and instead claim deviance from patriarchal expectations as an empowering trait. Though different in scope from Aguiar's conception of "bitch" as including the malevolent, or even evil female characters, both efforts to reclaim the term seek a rethinking of the categories used to describe women both in fiction and in life.

While explaining the choice of the title "*Bitch*" in a 2014 interview, Zeisler acknowledges the shifting meaning of the word since the magazine's naming. While in 1996, "bitch" functioned mainly as an insult used specifically against women usually for not pleasing men, Zeisler now describes the term as "a staple of television and radio, a pan gender casual greeting, and a signifier of female badassness" ("We Were…", x). Once subversive, "bitch" no longer carries the precise weight as in the late 1990's and

earlier 2000's. Perhaps as a result of this shift, in recent years the latest iterations of Aguiar's bitch archetype no longer registers to viewers under the same term. Instead, in the early 2010s, a new term began to emerge to describe the latest iteration of female characters, typed by television viewers and popular culture critics, if not literary critics, as the "unlikable female character."

In a 2014 essay, "Not Here to Make Friends" writer and cultural critic Roxane Gay discusses the character of Mavis Gary from the 2011 film *Young Adult* and the definition of the category of the "unlikable" female character. Gay reasons, "[b]ased on this character's critical reception, an unlikable woman embodies any number of unpleasing but entirely human characteristics. Mavis is beautiful, cold, calculating, self-absorbed, full of odd tics, insensitive, and largely dysfunctional in nearly every aspect of her life. These are, apparently, unacceptable traits for a woman, particularly given the sheer number working in concert," mirroring the definition of bitch offered by Aguiar as unconformity to standards of feminine manners as imposed by patriarchy, "a seemingly incongruent knowledge of evil, and, of course, a lack of moral and sexual virtue" (*The Bitch*, 5).

Seemingly expressive of both a personal opinion and a societal judgement, Gay notes how, "likability is a very elaborate lie, a performance, a code of conduct dictating the proper way to be. Characters who don't follow this code become unlikable. Critics who fault a character's unlikability cannot necessarily be faulted. They are merely expressing a wider cultural malaise with all things unpleasant, all things that dare to breach the norm of social acceptability." Though framed in the language of personal preference, the category of likability, when combined with the category of gender as in

analyses of characters, reflects a judgment on gender performance. While both the terms "bitch" and "unlikable" reflect the judgmental language of the term, the popular shift away from the former to the latter marks a shift in popular conceptions of female characters. While "bitch" reflects an obviously gendered critique, "unlikable" obscures the gendered element of the censure.

In C*upcakes, Pinterest and Ladyporn,* Elana Levine defines the study of feminized popular culture as helpful to "understand[ing] the ways such products speak to, and about, the broad category of beings identified by the terms *feminine*, *female*, and *woman"* while also understanding the "feminized cultural forms as sites of hegemonic negotiation between the demands of patriarchy and the needs and desires of women" (Levine 1, 3). Beyond mapping the history of the study of feminized popular culture as a key form of feminist scholarship during the second wave of feminism. Levine emphasizes the importance of analyses of feminized popular culture to assisting and theorizing the ways in which media seeks to form and define femininity. Through its titling, marketing, and focus on traditionally feminine concerns such as love, dating, and marriage, *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn falls under this category of feminized popular culture. Applying Levine's theory of feminized popular culture as a site of hegemonic negotiation refigures *Gone Girl* as the site of tension between precisely the "needs and desires of women," in this case more equal representation of women's negative capacity, and reader's expectations of the likability of female characters in media (Levine, 3).

Implicit in the term "unlikable" is a viewing subject. As a result, the characterization of female characters as unlikable speaks to the specific relationship between character and reader as opposed being inextricable from the specific personality

or actions of the character alone. With the implied universality of the term "unlikable" we can also gather that this is not an unmediated term speaking solely to the specific relationship of a single reader to a single subject, but rather a judgement meant to apply widely to the sentiments of readers of the subject. In defining "unlikability," we must then consider the definition of the term along with the wider societal rules and judgements meant to constitute the terms of this definition.

The very term "unlikable" proves difficult to pin down as having a single fixed meaning or interpretation. Carrying two separate meanings, the Oxford English Dictionary defines the term as both "not likable," with likable defined as "easy to like, pleasing, agreeable," and "not easy to like" dually defining "unlikable" as both "not easy to like" and "not pleasing or agreeable" ("unlikable..."; "likeable…"). Implicit in this character typing is the judgement of the typed female character in relation to a wider group, as the category of "likability" implies a wider social group than one. In relation to gender, the term "unlikable female characters" in effect creates an ideological stutter as the very use of the term "unlikable" already implies a female subject. Inextricable from the meaning of the word "unlikable" is the judgement of a social group operating under the assumption that a woman, however fictional, should strive to please others.

In each of Flynn's works, she includes both aspects of the unlikable female character as well as the female villain. While the Oxford English Dictionary defines villain as "an unprincipled or depraved scoundrel; a man naturally disposed to base or criminal actions, or deeply involved in the commission of disgraceful crimes," critics rarely perform the same tasks of definition. In *Anatomy of Criticism,* Northrop Frye uses the villain archetype to construct the archetypal tragedy, while only hinting at a definition

of "villain" by acknowledging the "moral antithesis of heroism and villainy" (196). By this definition, "villain" implies a moral failing similar to the category "unlikable." Extending this definition, archetypal feminist critic Catherine S. Quick notes how in traditional archetypal theory, "[c]ertain female figures are labeled "villainesses" because they embody certain actions which potentially threaten the patriarchal construction of the feminine, and thus the construction of the masculine. Tradition, therefore, must portray these women and what they represent as evil in order to undermine any power they might exert over patriarchy" (44). Implicit in the typings of characters as "unlikable" or as a "bitch" we see these same structures described by Quick at work, though to a lesser degree. Instead of registering as evil for subverting gendered norms of behavior, the "collective unconscious" of the present registers these new characters as merely distasteful instead of actively corrosive. Extending the definition of the unlikable female character, in Flynn's works the manifested villains also possess a specific set of shared traits: each is female, prone to violence and has committed murder. Perhaps operative of Jung's shadow and trickster archetypes, the female villain in the work of Flynn kills not out of an inherent evilness of spirit. Instead, Flynn allows her villains real motive and backstory, providing psychological context to their actions, and while not sanctioning their actions, separating their own villainy from a blanket condemnation of the female gender.

By first examining these novels and characters we might better begin to construct the figures of the unlikable woman and the female villain to then characterize the ways in which these characters challenge or reinforce gender norms and how Flynn's novels represent a reworking of archetypal figures to both allow and censure a widening

archetypal characterization of women in literature. Across these different works we might begin to posit the ways in which a certain kind of violence is feminized, the feminine is refigured as violent, and what ideological effects this may have.

Gillian Flynn and Negative Representation

In 2015, Chicago based author Gillian Flynn published her third novel, *Gone Girl*, an international hit that topped the New York Times bestseller list for 37 weeks. Selling more than fifteen million copies worldwide, the publication catapulted Flynn and her other two novels into the national spotlight. Later adapted into a film with the screenplay also written by Flynn, for a time, *Gone Girl* dominated the American movie and literary culture fascinating audiences with its sharp plot and complete abstraction from the usual constructions and portrayals of female characters. With the success of *Gone Girl* companies soon bought the rights to Flynn's other two novels, with *Dark Places* premiering in 2015 and HBO currently filming a TV adaptation of Flynn's first novel, *Sharp Objects*.[3]

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[3] As of yet, Flynn's popularity has yet to translate into literary studies. More frequently cited in the fields of psychology, film studies, and gender studies, academic articles focusing on Flynn and her novels include: *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Women and Power in Contemporary Fiction Malice, the Victim and the Couple* by Rossella Valdrè; "The Neoliberal Gothic: Gone Girl, Broken Harbor, and the Terror of Everyday Life" by Emily Johansen, ""I'm the Bitch that Makes You a Man": Conditional Love as Female Vengeance in Gillian Flynn's Gone Girl" by Patrick Osbourne; "Cool Girls and Bad Girls: Reinventing the *Femme Fatale* in Contemporary American Fiction" by Kenneth Lota. Perhaps more indicative of their popularity, Flynn's novels have met with a wider range of reviews with *The Guardian* and *Publishers Weekly* reviewing *Sharp Objects*, *The Guardian* and *The New Yorker* reviewing *Dark Places*, and *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* reviewing *Gone Girl*.

Gillian Flynn, whose entire body of work features similarly complex female protagonists, includes on her website her personal manifesto explaining why she writes the types of female characters that she does. She writes:

> "Isn't it time to acknowledge the ugly side? I've grown quite weary of the spunky heroines, brave rape victims, soul-searching fashionistas that stock so many books. I particularly mourn the lack of female villains — good, potent female villains. Not ill-tempered women who scheme about landing good men and better shoes … I'm talking violent, wicked women. Scary women. Don't tell me you don't know some. The point is, women have spent so many years girl-powering ourselves — to the point of almost parodic encouragement — we've left no room to acknowledge our dark side. Dark sides are important." ("I Was Not...).

In this representation based argument, Flynn strikes at the center of recent trends focusing on the "dark side" of female characters breaking from the previous "many years of girl-powering ourselves." ("I Was Not…) Here, Flynn's argument critiquing the unequal representation of the "ugly side" of women in fiction, positions her works as opposed to the post-feminist mindset. With post-feminism defined by Angela McRobbie in *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change,* as an "undoing of feminism" by framing the goals of feminism as accomplished making the feminist movement itself unnecessary, obsolete, and passé, in this representation-based argument, Flynn's works argue against this post-feminist assumption (McRobbie, 11). Not unlike feminist archetypal critics from the 1970s and 1980s, Flynn and those of her strain argue for a more equal representation of women. Unlike these critics, Flynn's works focus on showing the equal negative capacity of women instead of an equal positive capacity. Using the term "dark side," in a representation based critique, Flynn's terminology also begins to approach that of Carl Jung in his exposition of the "shadow" as the projection of the personal unconscious including "everything negative" (*Archetypes,* 27). Further, Jung, like Flynn, argues for the necessity of an acknowledgment of the "shadow" as, "it

cannot be argued out of existence or rationalized into harmlessness…the account has to be settled sooner or later" (*Archetypes,* 27). In this sense and in accordance with the work of archetypal feminist critics, Flynn's works, though perhaps unknowingly, reformulate the concepts articulated by Jung to allow for the inclusion of women's equal personhood.

At their core, the works of Gillian Flynn, like most horror and thriller books, center on violence. What sets Flynn's books apart, however, is their particular focus on female violence and how this violence differs from more typical constructions of violence as perpetrated by men. Before moving into this analysis, however, we might begin by offering a snapshot of crime statistics in the United States during both the lifetime of the author, Gillian Flynn, and the times in which Flynn sets her individual works to show the rise in fictional representation of female violence not paralleled by a rise in actual rates of female violence in the United States.

While Flynn's texts, among others, focus on female aggression, unlikability, and female perpetrated homicide, the increased popularity of this subject in fiction does not necessarily parallel crime statistics in the United States. Though of the thriller genre, the work of Gillian Flynn has captured the public eye and drawn on many popular themes resonant in today's culture - in particular, that of female aggression and crimes committed by women. This growing representation of female aggression and unlikability does not, however, mimic trends in crime in the United States. In a 2008 report released by The Bureau of Justice Statistics, the statistical agency of the U.S. Department of Justice, since 1991 rates of homicide in the United States have been in steep decline. Though surging between the years of 1970 to 1990, the late 1990's and 2000's have seen a marked decline in rates of homicide. To offer a brief overview of homicide in the

United States, according to The Bureau of Justice Statistics, across data from 1980 to 2008, "males represented 77% of homicide victims and nearly 90% of offenders," with women comprising 10.5% of all homicide offenders (3). Further, between 1980 and 2008 the offending rate for females declined from 3.1 per 100,000 to 1.6 per 100,000 (9). In later reports, The Bureau of Justice Statistics shows these trends continuing through 2011 with the offending rates for both men and women dropping by 50% between 1992 and 2011 (*Homicide in,* 3). In *The Murder Mystique,* Laura Nalepa and Richard Pfefferman outline an increased public fascination with violent acts, particularly those perpetrated by women, across a variety of forms of media. While data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation shows a significant drop in homicide, and in homicide perpetrated by women, in the United States from 1976 to 2005, Nalepa and Pfefferman posit that "female killers are now more prevalent *in our minds"* (xi).

In her autobiographical essay titled "I Was Not a Nice Girl…," Flynn lays out her own manifesto on why she chose to focus female-gendered violence as the driving force of her books. Noting the lack of mainstream discussion of female violence or of acceptance of violence as a female-gendered trait. She writes:

> "And we [women] still don't discuss our own violence. We devour the news about Susan Smith or Andrea Yates — women who drowned their children — but we demand these stories be rendered palatable. We want somber asides on postpartum depression or a story about the Man Who Made Her Do It. But there's an ignored resonance. I think women like to read about murderous mothers and lost little girls because it's our only mainstream outlet to even begin discussing female violence on a personal level. Female violence is a specific brand of ferocity. It's invasive. A girlfight is all teeth and hair, spit and nails — a much more fearsome thing to watch than two dudes clobbering each other. And the mental violence is positively gory. … It's not a particularly flattering portrait of women, which is fine by me. Isn't it time to acknowledge the ugly side? I've grown quite weary of the spunky heroines, brave rape victims, soul-searching fashionistas that stock so many books."

In each of her novels, Flynn resists supplying readers with palatability. Women murder their children for reasons not explained until many pages later. Women orchestrate the institutional murder of a spouse with no wavering feelings of guilt. With no concern for the redemptive, Flynn frames each of her characters, male in addition to female, as troubling often unlikeable characters, if not as villains. The difference between these two types in the world of Flynn novels is not any inherent difference or a difference in morals so much as a difference in the object of their violence and motivation.

Though seemingly contradictory, Flynn frames this focus as a project of equal representation that shows the dark side of women to counter the usual representation of feminine violence prompted by vanity, jealousy, or madness. Instead, Flynn's works center around capturing what she terms the "dark side" of women with a particular focus on the extremities of this violence. Far from capturing the subtleties of everyday social violence, Flynn plots deliberate violence fundamental to her characters, with particular focus on avoiding the stereotypes of female villainy usually followed in texts. In showing the worst of female characters, Flynn positions her works as the antithesis of ideas of the inherent purity or superiority of women. By refusing to participate in the positive representation of female characters, Flynn's works argue for the extremity of female equality. Feminism claims women's equality, Flynn focuses the full breadth of this claim.[4] Women's violence and equal capacity for cruelty are centered as the project of

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[4] In opposition to the recent trend in popular feminism to label cultural products such as novels and movies as either feminist or otherwise, in this project, I will not attempt to make such a categorization, especially as the author herself avoids the same. In instances where authors and publishers attempt to sell their products using feminism, with feminism functioning as a branding strategy, I find such judgments necessary. Such conditions more than warrant a critique of content

this work, and according to Flynn, that's why women like it. Though perverse, Flynn's argument acts as a corrective to the overly positive project of women's representation in fiction. Instead of women's equal capacity for good, Flynn sketches a capacity for an insidious negativity existent in female characters, not as a direct effect of their gender, but rather rooted in past experiences and the trauma experienced by an individual. By portraying, what Flynn terms, "good, potent female villains," and categorizing their motivations and past experiences, Flynn's works avoid a blanket demonization of the female sex. Though violent and murderous, Flynn's works allow for the humanity and personhood of even her cruelest characters. In this sense, Flynn's works avoid the essentialization of traits as feminine, as she positions each villain's actions not in relation to their gender, but rather in relation to their past experiences and individual psyche.

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as they claim some sort of inherent feminism that then attempts to associate and align every aspect of the product with a complex movement. In such instances, I advocate for an approach in line with bell hooks' 1984 text *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*. In this text, hooks attempts to navigate the personalization of the feminist movement and the subsequent barrage of personal attacks framed as attacks against feminism by uncoupling individual identities with the wider feminist movement. While people usually announce their identification with the feminist movement by calling themselves feminists and thereby conflating themselves with the movement, hooks argued that instead, people identify their affinity by saying, "I advocate feminism." Under this analysis, criticisms of feminism can escape essentialist tendencies to create a single fixed identity for a text where after careful weighing of feminist versus neutral and antifeminist sentiments a text is proclaimed as either feminist or not. Such reductive analysis ignores the complexity of texts while further muddling the word "feminism" by the current market-based drive to use the term as a brand. In keeping with hooks, my analysis of Flynn's works along feminist lines will critique the ideological impact of different aspects of the work and the extent to which these effects produce positive change in promoting the equality of the sexes.

Further, while Flynn does not categorize her books as feminist works, her description of the ideological work she hoped to accomplish with her text aligns well with feminist goals and early feminist literary scholarship centered on the recovery of feminist texts and the equal and accurate representation of women in fiction. In this sense, Flynn's ideological project might be characterized as a perverse feminist project of the equal negative potential of women.

Sharp Objects and *Dark Places:* Flynn's First Iterations of Violence and Unlikability

Each of Flynn's early novels contains two types of character: the unlikable female heroine and the female villain. While terming this character "the female villain," more specifically this character manifests as a killer in each of Flynn's works alongside the unlikable female protagonist. By examining these specific characters, we might better posit the ways in which these character types are similar and different based on their shared failed gender performance. In terms of plot, Flynn's novels each present a mystery to be solved within the text. Usually framed within the context of murder mysteries, the heroines in each of these texts work to identify the person responsible for the violence and crimes in the text.

In Flynn's first novel, *Sharp Objects,* Camille Preaker returns to her hometown to investigate the strangulation of Ann Nash, age nine, and disappearance and later strangulation of Natalie Keene, age ten. Narrated by Camille, *Sharp Objects* presents a violence-saturated world. Due to this style of narration, the text is somewhat confined in its description of Camille. From the speech and reactions of other characters, the reader learns that Camille is beautiful. From the narrated actions of Camille herself, the reader learns that Camille is a troubled alcoholic who carves words into her own skin. Far from a positive representation of a role model character, from the start of the novel, Camille appears as a somewhat broken individual forcibly coming to terms with her own past, and, most particularly, the death of her younger sister, Marian, years earlier.

As Camille investigates the murders of the two young girls she interviews a young boy who claims to have seen a woman abduct Natalie Keene while the two were playing in the park. Later, Camille learns that both girls were pampered before they were

killed, with the killer shaving Ann's legs and painting Natalie's fingernails. From the beginning figurations, the text constructs public conception of violence as informed by gender. Despite the testimony of the young boy, the residents and police of Wind Gap assume that the killer is male. In the character of Camille, the text filters through the gendered assumptions of the other characters. While everyone assumes a male killer, Camille continues to ask police if they have any evidence to support these claims. With this rhetoric, Camille begins to pry apart assumptions of gender to allow for a wider range of suspects.

As the novel continues, the death toll rises from two to three as Camille begins to question the cause of her sister's death years earlier. While police originally arrest Camille's mother, Adora Crellin, for the murders of Ann Nash and Natalie Keene after finding a pair of pliers containing their blood among Adora's possessions, they additionally identify the death of Camille's younger sister decades earlier as a poisoning. Within the text, detectives diagnose Adora with Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy, a mental illness in which a caregiver intentionally causes the illness of a child in order to gain attention and sympathy since reclassified as Fictitious Disorder Imposed on Another ("Fictitious Disorder…"). Though a representation of violence in a female character, this depiction of female violence and the FDIA diagnosis does not represent a subversive instance of female violence as its characterization maintains a distinctly gendered element. Applied predominantly to women and theorized as a malfunction, of sorts, of the maternal gene, the presentation of the murderous Adora works within confines of gender, merely as an extreme offshoot of a supposed natural maternal desire to nurture and care for a child.

Within the text, the invocation of this syndrome calls into question the process and goals by which Flynn works to re-inscribe gendered assumptions of violence. While Flynn claims to attempt to reframe assumptions of women's violent capacities, the character of Adora extends gendered notions of violence rather than challenging them. Though entirely abhorrent, the violence shown by Adora stems from an excess of female-gendered traits. In this sense, the text offers a feminized violence stemming from women's gender and associated traits rather than questioning fundamental assumptions of femininity as docile. While the feminization of violence in this sense could be argued to deconstruct assumptions on the limits of female behavior due to gender by incorporation physical violence into already female-gendered traits and behaviors such as childcare, such representations function negatively in terms of women's equal representation. With violence stemming from a female gender, such a configuration could easily work to demonize women by figuring particular forms of violence as inherently female forms implying an inherently female gender. In its logic, such figurations approach an essentialization of women and of violence reinforcing binaries with only a slight extension. Similar to the evil stepmother figure provoked by vanity or jealousy, the violence of Adora Crellin grows out of feminized traits, resulting in a feminized form of violence.

In the final pages of the novel, the text partially corrects this feminization of violence. After the arrest of Adora for the two murders in Wind Gap, along with the killing of Camille's sister decades earlier, Camille assumes custody of her thirteen-year-old half-sister, Amma, and the two move back to Chicago. Some weeks later, a friend of Amma's from her Chicago school goes missing and is later found strangled with her teeth

removed. Finding the girl's teeth as the ivory floor of Amma's dollhouse, police arrest Amma on three counts of homicide.

In multiple instances the text positions violence as an inherited trait from mother to daughter in the form of physical and psychological abuse. With this contextualization of the origins of the violence of the female villains of the novel, Flynn's work moves beyond a flat demonization of characters to instead provide psychological realism to their acts of violence. Though not explicitly stated, the text implies that in addition to Adora, Adora's mother Joya may also have had Fictitious Disorder Imposed on Another and also may have abused Adora as a child ("Fictitious Disorder…"). In turn, Camille and Amma each inherited a form of violence from their mother, not genetically, but rather from growing up under her violent care.

Though undergoing a similar abuse, the text shows this violence as manifesting differently in the two half-sisters. While treating Amma for a fever in Chicago, Camille confronts and rejects her own penchant for abusive care. Administering the aspirin to Amma, Camille worries, "One or two pills. So easy to give. Would I want to give another, and another? Would I like taking care of a sick little girl?" before pouring the bottle of aspirin down the drain (245-246). With abusive care engendering abusive tendencies, Camille rejects sadism and instead manifests her past abuse in self-inflicted harm, specifically in the form of cutting herself. With her body covered with the scars from past cutting, Camille internalizes abuse into masochism through Flynn's constructed genealogy of inherited abuse. Though matrilineal, the contextualization of such abusive and violent tendencies as inherited from experiences of past abuse provides a depth of character instead of an essentialization of women as violent, evil, and corrosive. Taking

up the task of feminist archetypal critics, with this contextualization Flynn's work provides a broadening of Jung's archetypes to include a broader range of humanized female behavior.

As the inverse of Camille, in the character of Amma, the text shows sadism as a trait also potenatially inherited from past abuse. While Camille links her masochism to the death of her younger sister Marian when both were children, before her realization of Adora's abuse, Amma's violence manifests as externalized. As with Jung's theory of the "shadow side" Amma shows a lack of understanding of her own condition, revealing her sadism as an unconscious compulsion. After a night of bonding just as the two are falling asleep Amma asks Camille:

> "Camille?" Her voice quiet and girlish and unsure. "You know how people sometimes say they have to hurt because if they don't, they're so numb they won't feel anything? … What if its [*sic*] the opposite?" Amma whispered. "What if you hurt because it feels so good? Like you have a tingling, like someone left a switch on in your body. And nothing can turn the switch off except hurting? What does that mean?" (188).

Though ignored by Camille, in this passage Amma reveals her own form of violence as stemming from a desire and a pleasure in harming others. After killing another girl in Chicago because she suspected Camille might like her better, Amma shrieks, "I like violence" while Camille reasons, "A child weaned on poison considers harm a comfort," positioning Adora's poisoning and abuse as the origin of Amma's violence, sadism, and psychopathy (251).

To complete this troubling picture, the text broadens this single depiction of violence in its final pages when Amma commits her third and final murder. With this final confirmation, the text casts Amma as the female villain character type alongside her

mother. While women who defy gender roles and traditional standards of morality bear the title of "unlikable." Murder propels characters such as Adora and Amma from the comparatively bland censure of "unlikable" to villainous- a heavier moral critique and condemnation. While violence defines Camille, Amma, and Adora, the externalization of this violence, and inflicting on others to the extent of murder separates the three characters into the two categories of unlikable and villainous. In terms of broadening the depiction of women's negative capacity in fiction, both the inclusion of both milder "unlikable" characters and truly destructive, violent and sometimes sadistic female villains, work to expand representation in differing degrees of negativity.

In this violence saturated text, violent actions do not confine themselves to villainous characters -even the young murder victims themselves retain a streak. Though unknown until the ending of the text, the novel as a whole rotates around the effects of violence committed by women generally, and young girls more specifically. While Adora's specific brand of violence stems from a gendered source and enacts itself through a seemingly intensified need for caring for others, the text shows this violence as partially inherited through abuse. As statistically women diagnosed with Fictitious Disorder Imposed on Another vastly outnumber men, though violent, this particular representation of female violence represents a feminized form of violence rather than a reconfiguration of the feminine. With her illegal anti-malarial pills for inducing fever and blurred vision, industrial grade laxatives, bottles of ipecac syrup used to induce vomiting, and horse tranquilizers, to drug her children into an artificial illness, Adora's violence stems not from sadism but rather from a desire to be needed, receive attention, and care for others. In her diary entries included at the end of the text, the text provides Adora's

confession to preface that of Amma. Hidden in a hat box, written in a flowered diary, Adora writes, “Marian is such a doll when she’s ill, she dotes on me terribly and wants me with her all the time. I love wiping away her tears” (242). After diary entries describing her outfits and flirtations with different doctors at the hospital, on May 10th, 1988 she writes, “Marian is dead. I couldn’t stop” underscoring the compulsiveness of her own actions. While Camille compulsively cuts and Adora compulsively sickens her children, Amma hints at sadist compulsion, but ultimately kills targets with purpose and with motive.

Though disturbing, the textual representation of Amma’s violence presents a picture of violence apart from gender-based assumptions. Despite her age and gender, though likely as a result of her parenting, Amma enjoys killing. Placing the killer where least expected, Amma evades suspicion due to her gender, age, and physical appearance. By presenting violence in the form of sadism, the text upends the assumptions of violence respecting gender and then works to dismantle them. While reprehensible as a character, the inclusion of Amma and her sadistic violence work against the gendered expectations of violence.

Unlike *Sharp Objects*, the narration in *Dark Places* moves between characters and time periods, beginning with Libby, set in the present, and shifting back between Libby’s mother, Patty, and brother, Ben, years earlier. Despite this shifting narration, *Dark Places* retains the dark and gritty tone characteristic of Flynn’s work. Similar in set up to *Sharp Objects* in Flynn’s second novel, *Dark Places*, Libby Day delves into her past to investigate the murder of her mother, Patty, and two sisters, Debby and Michelle twenty-

four years earlier. As one of two survivors of the killings, at the age of seven Libby testified to her fifteen-year-old brother, Ben Day's, guilt, putting him in prison for twenty-four years. In addition to Libby's testimony, police in the novel fixated on satanic symbols written in blood on the walls of the Day house linking those to reports of Ben Day's involvement with Satan worship. In the twenty-four years since the murder, Libby never visited her brother, and still considers him the killer of her family.

As the story unfolds, Libby and the reader together piece together the events of January 2nd, 1985, the day of the murders. Working with Lyle Wirth, a member of the Kill Club, Libby visits Ben in prison and slowly discovers the truth of the events of the murders. By its end, the text reveals Ben Day as not the killer of his family. Instead, on the night of the murders, accused of child molestation by a young Krissi Cates, Ben Day and his pregnant girlfriend, Diondra Wertzner, attempt to leave town. That night, with Diondra under the influence of several drugs, Ben and Diondra go to the Day house to retrieve money. While there, Michelle Day, Ben's nine-year-old sister find the two together. High and angry, Diondra strangles Michelle while Ben stands by.

Earlier that day, with a house in foreclosure and fear of police charges against Ben and an excellent life insurance policy, Patty Day arranges a plan to provide her children with the money required for a better future. Though unknown to any of the children, on the same night which Ben returned to the house to collect his money and run, Patty had arranged for her own death at the hands of a killer known as "the angel of debt." While the agreement was for the killer to murder only Patty, in the commotion of Diondra strangling Michelle, Debby awoke, saw the killer and was shot. Unseen by Ben,

Libby, and Diondra, the angel of debt left the Day house leaving Libby to crawl out of a window and Diondra to draw Satanic symbols on the wall in an attempt to confuse police.

In her investigation of these events, Libby uncovers the truth of Ben and Diondra's relationship and Diondra's pregnancy, as well as the fact that Diondra has been missing since the night of the murders. Tracking her to a nearby town in Missouri, not suspecting Diondra's personal involvement in the murders, Libby finds both Diondra and her and Ben's child, Crystal. While talking to the two, Crystal accidentally mentions a detail from Michelle's missing diary. Just as Libby begins to suspect, Crystal swings an iron at her head, knocking her unconscious. Again, attempting to conceal Diondra's murder of Michelle, Diondra then climbs on top of Libby and begins to strangle her. After a chase, Libby escapes and reports the attack to police. With the capture of the angel of debt and Libby's testimony on Diondra, the novel ends with Libby beginning to hope for Ben's release. As with *Sharp Objects*, the novel ends with the heroine looking towards a future less violent than her past.

Within each of their texts, both Camille Preaker and Libby Day each represent a failure of acceptable femininity placing each in the category of the unlikable female character. While Camille's failure rests mainly in her penchant for violence through her job as a crime reporter, along with her alcoholism and sexual promiscuity, Libby's failure manifests rather with her own selfishness, kleptomania, and callous nature. In the opening line of *Dark Places*, Libby declares, "I have a meanness inside of me, real as an organ. Slit me at my belly and it might slide out, meaty and dark, drop on the floor so you could stomp on it" (1). With this, the novel begins its positioning of Libby as the figure of the unlikable female character. Defying gender norms Libby describes herself as

"sullen and boneless" with "bulging pockets under my eyes, drunk-landlady eyes" (1). She continues, "[d]raw a picture of my soul, and it'd be a scribble with fangs" (1).

In various forms, the text positions the character of Libby in various relations to the violence that characterizes the work as a whole. From these characterizations of cruelty, the text proceeds to capture the selfishness and lethargy of Libby. Thinking of another little girl who had lost her entire family to her father's arson, Libby laments, "how if she hadn't stolen my thunder, I'd have twice as much money" (4). Aware of her own twisted logic, even in her reflection, Libby replicates her own selfishness by congratulating herself on how, although it "was a horrible thing to think of course… I at least knew that" (4). Inverting this meanness onto herself, Libby's narration oozes self-loathing. Describing herself in infantile language as a "child ghost" with the red roots of her dyed blonde hair making it look like her scalp was bleeding, Libby presents an intentionally grotesque self-representation (5). In both of these descriptions, Libby characterizes herself in terms of violence, with "child ghost" invoking the murders of her sisters and vividly "gory" imagery of her bleeding scalp (5).

With these descriptions, the text establishes Libby within the bounds of the unlikable female character. Though descriptively more childlike than adult, her failure at empathy and selflessness, key components of acceptable femininity, along with her more actively negative traits of cruelty and kleptomania establish her as an unlikable character by placing her outside of the bounds of acceptable femininity and depriving her of the moral standing necessary for the status of a role model within the text. As a character, Libby does not serve as a model of proper, correct, or advisable behavior. Instead, her

corrosive traits challenge the gendered notions of behavior which partially define her failure.

By centering both Camille and Libby as the protagonists of her novels Flynn dismantles gendered notions of what types of characters warrant representation, redefining the limits of negativity represented in female characters while retaining subjectivity. Instead of presenting simplistic and demonized characters, Flynn shows a partial failure of morals and gender in the unlikable female characters, characterizing female violence in both its ordinary and its extreme, while also extending this characterization to show the humanity of her characters. Extended beyond the villainous characters, in each of these novels the text integrates violence and femininity to allow for a more brutal and realistic form of violence. In Flynn's novels, the degree of this violence alone separates the unlikable characters from the villainous, with the unlikable committing minor crimes, and the villainous committing murder.

In *Dark Places* few female characters emerge without violent characteristics. Across the text, these forms of violence present themselves in many different iterations, with their degree and target distinguishing between unlikable and villainous characters. Exemplary of the importance of both degree and target are the actions of Patty Day. While Patty's arrangement of her own assisted suicide rises to the degree of homicidal violence, as she intended only to harm herself she does not fall in the same category of villainy as Adora and Amma Crellin. Similarly, Camille Preaker in *Sharp Objects* engages in self-harm in the form of cutting, showing the boundary between sadism and masochism as a measure of differentiation between unlikable and villainous characters within the texts.

In *Dark Places*, while two killers, the Angel of Debt and Diondra Wertzner, also operate within the text, only Diondra figures as a significant character present within the story. Different from Libby, the primary unlikable heroine in the text, Diondra participates in and enjoys physically harming others. During a satanic ritual, Ben Day observes Diondra as, "[s]he stabbed at the bull's face, chopped its left eye into a mess, the eye rolling back into its head" (343). When Ben begins to stab the bull, "Diondra busted out laughing" (346). Beyond lacking empathy, Diondra, like the other villains of Flynn's novels, find pleasure in the pain of others, separating her motivations from those of characters such as Camille who may enjoy hurting themselves, but not others.

Following the attempted and failed strangulation of Libby by Diondra, the text again incorporates yet another iteration of violence when Diondra and Ben's daughter Crystal knocks Libby unconscious with an iron and then attempts to shoot her. While Libby later rationalizes these acts as possibly "momentary madness, born out of love," she ultimately decides not to implicate Crystal out of a desire not to have her testimony put another family member behind bars.

While both the unlikable and the villainous characters violate gender norms and the standards of acceptable femininity, while unlikable female characters violate those standards mainly by failures of thought and emotion such as a lack of empathy or selfishness, villainous, and low-grade violence, villains do so by finding the extremes of these traits and enacting harm against others. With the murder of Michelle, again in the form of strangulation, and later attempted strangulation of Libby, the character of Diondra works within the novel to redraw the lines of the possibilities of possible female behavior to question assumptions of the violence of which women are capable. To add to

this subversion, Diondra commits the murder of the bull and of Michelle while pregnant with her daughter, underscoring the assumptions of femininity subverted by her actions.

Gone Girl and the Weaponization of Likability:

Aware of the standard of female likability, Flynn's texts show the weaponization of such a judgement. Unlike Flynn's other novels, *Gone Girl* combines the character types of the unlikable female protagonist and the female villain into the single character of Amy Dunne. Additionally, while each of Flynn's earlier novels is focalized through a non-villain character, *Gone* Girl situates the reader in direct conversation with the character of Amy. As the most popular of her three novels, *Gone Girl* progresses through segments of narration alternating between a married couple, Nick and Amy, with part one of the novel alternating between segments of Nick's first-person narration and excerpts from Amy's diary. While Nick's narration begins on the morning that Amy goes missing, marked in the text as "The Day of," Amy's diary begins with the day that she and Nick met, narrating the story of a fairytale relationship turned toxic.

In the next of Amy's diary entries, the text begins to manifest its awareness of the constructed likability of the characters. After not hearing from Nick for months after their first meeting, Amy describes their second chance meeting with her walking down the street for lunch and him trailing close on her elbow. As a personality quiz writer for a women's magazine, Amy often includes short quizzes in her diary. In this instance, while walking down the street Amy notices Nick coming towards her months after she gave him her number and he never called. With Nick walking towards her, Amy quickly

retrospectively describes her process of determining what to say to him. She lists four options, parenthetically including her measurement of how Nick might perceive each, writing each out in the pages of her diary:

> "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" (25-26).

Displaying an acute awareness for the effects of her actions on Nick's perception of her, while Amy characterizes only the first option as manipulative, the existence of the quiz suggests a calculated self-awareness hidden beneath Amy actions and the diary's "light, playful, laid-back" effect on the reader.

Throughout this section of the text, Amy's diary works to construct the essence of likability. With sharp humor, self-awareness, and strength, the text creates an image of a strong woman in a position of vulnerability, taking steps to secure her own security but also trusting her relationship and her spouse. Walking the line between strength and female vulnerability, the diary evokes a post-feminist approach to gender relations and to Amy's role as a wife and as a woman. In the first diary entries, Amy positions her narrative clearly in this movement of ironized feminism otherwise known as post-feminism.

In the first pages of the diary, Amy describes the party where she meets Nick and her relief at their relationship immediately reverting back to traditional gender roles. She writes, "He has claimed me, placed a flag in me: *I was here first, she's mine, mine.*" before reflecting, "It feels nice, after my series of nervous, respectful, post-feminist men, to be a territory" (*Gone Girl*, 13). Through this commentary, Amy enacts the mechanisms

of post-feminism, rendering feminism passé and a return to traditional gender roles, such as women as passive territory to be claimed, as refreshing and attractive, undoing the progress of feminism in its assumptions of its accomplishment.

In the background of Amy's diary entries, and of the novel as a whole, are a series of children's books titled, Amazing Amy, written by Amy's parents as a loose representation of Amy herself -their only child. In her diary entries, Amy uses the series as a way to minimize her own lists of accomplishments. Described throughout the text as beautiful, intelligent, and funny as well as extremely wealthy, the positioning of the Amazing Amy series as a reflection of an even more perfect Amy creates a sympathetic feeling of inadequacy in the character of Amy. In her second included diary entry, Amy describes the book launch party for her parents' most recent addition to the Amazing Amy series, *Amazing Amy and the Big Day*, noting how, "whenever I screw something up, Amy does it right: When I finally quit violin at the age of twelve, Amy was revealed as a prodigy in the next book ("Sheesh, violin can be hard work, but hard work is the only way to get better!)" all the way up until the final book with the perfect wedding of Amazing Amy in contrast to the real Amy's "perpetually single state" (*Gone Girl*, 26).

While readers would likely not empathize with the upper-class status, Harvard education, and extremely good looks, the positioning of the Amazing Amy series humanizes Amy and presents her insecurities through the lens of humor. With lines such as, "yep, single, motherfucker" against the irony of the *Amazing Amy's Big Day* book launch party, Amy comes across as sympathetic in addition to funny, beautiful, extremely intelligent and accomplished. With this doubling of Amy against an even more perfect version, the text projects readers' potential dislike of Amy on to the figure of her

metafictional counterpart, ironizing the likability of the beloved book character and creating a more authentic and seemingly organic likable ordinary Amy. Through the establishment of this double, the diary manages to redirect Amy's unlikability due to her privileged status onto the untouchable and uncaring Amazing Amy.

From here, Amy's diary entries spin towards social commentary, analyzing the situation of her own single status and the reactions of others about her status as well as a more cynical take on marriage itself. By combining this incisive social commentary with a post-feminist perspective, Amy's diary protects the actions of Amy against post-feminism by showing Amy to be extremely intelligent, aware, and interested in her own equality. Though not believing herself to be inferior than men or less deserving than men, Amy's ironized and somewhat cynical take on relationships and gender roles suggests, like post-feminism, that Amy is beyond the debates of feminism and able to live and act in a world where she will be perceived as equal and treated as equal even if she chooses to engage in traditional gender roles and ideologies. Through the logic of post-feminism, these actions represent not repressive retrogressive ideologies, but rather a progressive move as Amy chooses such roles because, as with feeling claimed by Nick as territory, she enjoys it. Similar to the sleight of hand between Amy and Amazing Amy that siphons negative perceptions of Amy onto her metafictional counterpart, Amy uses post-feminism to knowingly engage with anti-feminist logics under the supposed endorsement of feminism.

As the novel continues, Amy's diary begins to answer many of the questions surrounding her disappearance, with the content of her diary transitioning from that of a quippy love story to a documentation of Nick's abuse of Amy. With this spin, the diary

provides a motive for Nick's murder of Amy, slowly sculpting his diary representation from a handsome Midwesterner to a calculated killer. As parallel texts documenting two separate psyches, Nick and Amy's narratives finally converge when police find Amy's diary containing what they consider to be Amy's testimony of her abusive relationship with Nick. Blending verifiable truth and sinister detail, Amy's diary spins a story of likability into a death sentence for her husband Nick as police arrest him for her murder. With extreme organization, attention to detail, and planning, Amy reveals her plot to frame Nick for her murder. Directly addressing the reader, Amy writes, "Don't fret, we'll sort this out: the true, the not true, the might as well be true," revealing Diary Amy as a fictional creation of the real Amy designed to be credible, likable, and sympathetic and so very different from what she terms "Actual Amy" (220).

At the heart of Amy's manifesto lies the crux of the novel, popularly referred to as "The Cool Girl Monologue." Combining Diary Amy's sharp social critique with Actual Amy's rage, the Cool Girl Monologue propels a story of infidelity to a wider commentary on gender performativity and gender roles providing Amy's sociopathy with a logic inherent in the assignation of gender roles: the idea that successfully performing an established gender role is sufficient to maintain a happy and successful relationship. Amy writes:

> "That night at the Brooklyn party, I was playing the girl who was in style, the girl a man like Nick wants: the Cool Girl. Men always say that as *the* defining compliment, don't they? *She's a cool girl.* 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 that 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.* I'd want to grab the poor guy by his lapels or messenger bag and say: *The bitch doesn't really love chili dogs that much – no one loves chili dogs that much!* 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.")
>
> I waited patiently —y*ears*— for the pendulum to swing the other way…[b]ut it never happened. Instead, women across the nation colluded in our degradation! pretty soon Cool Girl became the standard girl. Men believed she existed—-she wasn't just a dreamgirl one in a million. Every girl was supposed to be this girl, and if you weren't, then there was something wrong with *you*. (222-223).

Through these passages, the novel positions Amy's likability as a carefully constructed persona designed to sway public opinion, the police, and the judicial system. After discovering Nick's affair with a younger, newer Cool Girl, Amy begins to plot her murder of Nick, under the guise of his murdering her. At the crux of this plot lies the category of likability. While the charm of Diary Amy appears as a natural representation of Amy, Part Two of the novel corrects the difference between the reality of the text and of the meta-text diary. Just as the characterization of unlikable requires an audience, so does the term likable. Protecting against this assumption, the implied privacy of the form

of the diary works to safeguard against suspicious against Amy. Corroborating her story with medical records and fainting fits at blood donations, Amy assumes the new persona of the perfect victim during the months leading up to her disappearance, with the sole purpose of framing her husband for her own murder. With this, Amy assumes a new power in her ability to shift between personalities as she weaponizes her likability against Nick to turn public opinion against him, convict him in the public eye, and ultimately place him on death row.

In this turn the character of Amy shifts from the incredibly likable Diary Amy to the violent, manipulative, and calculated Amy of Part Two, moving from the category of the "perfect victim" to the arch-villain. In keeping with Flynn's partiality for "good, potent female villains. Not ill-tempered women who scheme about landing good men and better shoes … I'm talking violent, wicked women. Scary women," while Diary Amy produces a conventional and acceptable representation of femininity, Amy herself bends many of the standards of behavior of female characters ("I Was Not…"). With a constitution bordering on sociopathic, Amy's lack of empathy, violence, and patience place in her a category of female villainy in contrast with the expectations of gender, while centering gender and gender roles as the cause of Amy's anger. In her manifesto at the beginning of Part Two, Amy balances the reveal of her own nearly sociopathic nature, specific to her, with a critique of gender roles and expectations with which many readers identify. Transcending the category of likability, in this second portion of the text, Amy presents a reasoning for her plotted murder of Nick rooted in a system of gender encouraging assimilation to predefined categories over self-expression and the catastrophic effects of relationships built on the empty performativity of gender roles.

Beyond an expression of the equal negative capacity of women, *Gone Girl* expresses anger at the system of gender catalyzed by marriages and relationships.

From this point forward, the novel follows Amy as she moves through her many checklists plotting her faked murder before deviating after having her getaway money stolen. Calling Desi, an old high school boyfriend, to her aid, Amy reasons, "[i]t's good to have at least one man you can use for anything" (324). Again, twisting gender roles, Amy uses Desi's penchant for playing the white knight and spins, "a Gothic tale of possessiveness and rage" to "satisfy Desi's craving for ruined women" (325). Hiding away in Desi's mansion of a lake house, Desi's own possessive tendencies soon become inconvenient for Amy and she again begins to plot. Until this point in the novel, though psychopathic, Amy has yet to personally commit an act of physical violence. Deciding to return to Nick, Amy plans Desi's murder as the solution to all of her problems. Inventing a story of Desi's kidnapping her and subsequent abuse, Amy provides physical evidence by seducing Desi before feeding him a sleeping pill and slicing his jugular. Returning to Nick later that day covered in Desi's blood, Amy provides a statement for police clearing Nick from suspicion. Hiding violence with assumptions of gender roles and behavior, Amy convinces the police of Desi's guilt and gets away with murder.

From Nick's interpolated sections, the reader learns of Amy's penchant for institutionally enacted violence. Though different in form, as Amy personally killed Desi, the murder figures as another item on Amy's long list of violent acts. Just as she attempted to use the police and criminal justice system to orchestrate Nick's death by framing him for her murder, so she falsified stalking charges against a high school friend

and framed an ex-boyfriend for sexual assault. In each of these instances, Amy later explains her motivations for the violence she commits.

In the manifesto that begins Part Two of the novel, in a downpour of rage including the "Cool Girl" monologue, Amy describes the psychological trauma of her childhood as triangulated through comparison with the idealized miscarried siblings and Amazing Amy- the main character of her parents' children's book series. Frame their husband for murder? - "What kind of woman would do such a thing?" she asks (220). Reflecting on her mother's seven miscarriages prior to her birth, Amy describes the psychosis of a standard of perfection: "seven dead dancing princesses. They get to be perfect without even trying, without even facing one moment of existence, while every day I must try, and every day is a chance to be less than perfect" (222). On Amazing Amy, Amy confesses, "I'd never really felt like a person, because I was always a product. Amazing Amy has to be brilliant, creative, kind, thoughtful, witty, and happy" (224).

"Always a product," the Amy-narrated sections of *Gone Girl* continuously invoke their own archetypal figures as Amy transfigures her life and the persons in it into character types. Obliging husbands figure as "dancing monkeys" who perform menial tasks in order to prove their love to their wives. Women who conform to the easy-going male fantasy of a woman figure as "Cool Girl." Describing her chosen metamorphoses from Amazing Amy to Cool Amy to "Average Dumb Woman Married to Average Shitty Man" to Diary Amy, finally, in her original plan Amy fantasizes on her final metamorphosis into "Dead Girl" (234). Identifying the catalyst of the marriage drama, Amy writes,

> "being happy with Nick, made me realize that there was a Real Amy in there, and she was so much better, more interesting and complicated and challenging, than

> Cool Amy. Nick wanted Cool Amy anyway. Can you imagine showing your true self to your spouse, your soul mate, and having them *not like you?*" (225).

With the revocation of her own likability, between the rift of archetype and full representation and expression of self, Amy plans her final archetypal metamorphosis. She confesses, "I began to think of a different story, a better story, that would destroy Nick for doing this to me. A story that would restore my perfection. It would make me the hero, flawless, and adored. Because everyone loves the Dead Girl" (234).

Ironically, for readers of *Gone Girl* Amy's plan performs the opposite effect. Instead of making Amy, "the hero, flawless, and adored," for readers, she instead figures as psychopathic and murderous. Far from demonized, from Part Two of the novel forward, the text allows Amy to explain herself, providing context to her actions, a history to her psyche, and a complexity of character denied to demonized women of the Jungian archetypal figuring. Defying her own archetypal constructions, Amy provides a reworking of her character type to allow for her own transgressions, violence, and extremely destructive, negative, and murderous capacity.

Conclusion: The Recognition of Representation

According to archetypal theory, as works of popular fiction, Flynn's novels intervene precisely at the origin of the archetypes themselves: The collective unconscious. Stretching back thousands of years, according to Mary Daly, "it is thanks to myth that we believe that women must be either 'angel' or 'monster'" (316). Distinct from the femme fatale, the seductress, the siren, or the witch, Flynn's villains leave the realm of myth and misogyny for, ironically, that of science, psychology, and the DSM. Similarly, instead of the likable, positive, role model, 'angel' heroine, these novels offer

morally dysfunctional female protagonists, with each expanding the range of women's representation.

Psychologizing villainy and focalizing unlikability, Flynn's works perform the feminist project of redefining archetypes to include a broader range of women's experiences. Tracing the roots of psychosis to childhood abuse, neglect, and obsession with perfection Flynn's unlikable women and villains alike map a wider range of female representation insistent on the negative capacity of all persons, including women. Through the means of these psychopathological typings, Flynn's works reclaim the language of women's negative capacity from misogynistic reductions. Expanding and complicating the reductive misogynistic dismissal of women as "crazy," Flynn's works provide a logic of violence, a web of motivations, and humanization of brutality.

For many years, parents, pundits, psychologists, and researchers have worried about the effect of representations of violence in varying forms of media and increased rates of violence. The focus of many studies in the field of psychology, the results of these studies vary in the degree of the correlation found between increased exposure to media violence and increased violent behavior in the viewer/reader. While certain studies show a correlation between childhood exposure to violence and later aggression, other studies have found that while violent media, including books, may increase aggression in adults for a short time, it does not result in most lasting behavioral effects (Anderson; Bushman). On the whole, in adult readers and viewers, increased exposure to violence such as that included in Flynn's text has not been conclusively proven to significantly increase the violent behavior of adults. While I realize the seeming backwardness of arguing for violent representation as progressive and potentially productive towards a

reconfiguration of gender norms, I do so with this assumption that Flynn's texts would not encourage readers to personal violence. Further, while offering descriptions of certain instances of violence, the detective-novel mechanisms of Flynn's texts work to narratively condemn the violent actions found within them, with Adora and Amma Crellin of *Sharp Objects* and Diondra Wertzner of *Dark Places* each placed in prison by the end of their respective novels.

Instead, with the persistent female perpetrated violence saturating Flynn's texts, they argue for an acknowledgement of this violence. They argue that women, from the young Ann Nash and Natalie Keene with their scissors and sharp teeth to Adora Crellin with her rainbow of pills, commit violent actions. In each of the novels, the text captures a criminal justice system and a public focusing on the probability of a male perpetrator. While *Sharp Objects* positions a male drifter, and then John Keene, the brother of second murder victim Natalie Keene as suspects, *Dark Places* shows the conviction of fifteen-year-old Ben Day for the murders of his mother and two sisters, while *Gone Girl,* though orchestrated by Amy, implicates Nick in the murder of Amy. Though representing women, yet alone thirteen-year-old Amma, as beyond suspicion of murder, both *Sharp Objects* and *Dark Places* represent a public frenzy to arrest boys only a few years older. Aware of this double standard, each of Flynn's three novels insists on the pervasiveness of female perpetrated violence. Dramatizing the risks of such a double standard, in *Gone Girl,* Flynn positions these gendered assumptions as allowing Amy to get away with the murder. Using her image of perfectly acceptable femininity along with a narrative of abuse and male perpetrated violence, Amy evades police suspicion, while the reader possesses a knowledge of her true villainy, violence, and psychopathy.

By redefining archetypes to accommodate for a wider range of female characters, novels possess the ability to change the way that people think and act making popular fiction the ideal form of expression, especially as they transcend to film adaptations with viewership in the millions. Far from provoking readers to unleash their own violence, these novels posit a critical reevaluation of the representation of women, even in feminist literature. Cutting away gendered expectations, Flynn's works show good, evil, violence, goodness, and empathy as characteristics of an individual, not a gender.

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