“What a Perfect Monster!”
*Gone Girl*’s Destabilization of Feminine Archetypes in Popular Media

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The post-modern, post-industrial, post-Freudian world might seem an unlikely place for monsters to dwell. One assumes they have all long ago been unmasked, disempowered in the face of critical analysis, and rendered obsolete by metaphors and modernity. Nevertheless, even the most cursory glance at the offerings of local multiplexes, primetime lineups, or contemporary fiction sections of bookstores reveals the fictional monster to be alive and well in popular culture. Critical theorist Jack Halberstam and cultural historian Scott Poole have both defined the monster as a ‘meaning machine’—an embodiment, not of a natural or innate psychological terror, but something mutable and ever changing. The forms the monster has taken over the ages and throughout literature are innumerable. A monster—in any form—may be a bundle of contradictions, simultaneously a threat to an ordered society and the standard that society is maintained against.

Across mediums, genres and texts, and over the course of centuries, the monster has been a symbol of deviance, an object of sympathy, and an image of erotic desire. In spite of its many incarnations, the monster always represents the disruption of categories, the disruption of boundaries, and the presence of ‘Otherness’. Jacques Derrida has said, “Faced with a monster, one may become aware of what the norm is and when this norm has a history.” Through the figure of the monster, readers and critics alike may uncover social values and societal critiques, as well as the potential of genres of literature, from fairy tales to gothic stories, noir mysteries to contemporary fiction, to both portray and interrogate those values. As such, the monster often becomes the primary locus of interpretation in its narratives, for critics as well as audiences and readers.

If one imagines classic representations of monsters in literature and popular culture, most of the images that immediately come to mind are likely male—Dracula, Frankenstein’s Creature, the Wolfman. When one looks at such images and representations through the lens of gender, the emphasis in these stories has been on woman as victim of a male monster. Such a trend implies innate or essential distinctions between the masculine and the feminine, particularly their capacity for—or susceptibility to—evil. Moreover, such classic examples shroud numerous genres and mediums in an illusion of predictable misogyny, of active and powerful men positioned against passive and habitually swooning women. Yet monstrous women have of course been fixtures of myths, folktales, novels and films since the inception of these mediums. Gillian Flynn’s 2012 novel, Gone Girl, and David Fincher’s 2014 cinematic adaptation, offer an image of a female villain and narrator utterly dynamic in her embodiments of monstrosity.

Gone Girl spins a dark tale of marriage between two writers, Nick and Amy Dunne, after an economic crisis and family illness lead them from Manhattan to a decaying Missouri town. The narrative of their relationship spirals from a post-feminist meet-cute of a beginning into a neo-gothic mystery as Amy goes missing on the couple’s fifth wedding anniversary, with evidence of a violent struggle immediately putting her husband under police suspicion. Throughout the novel, defined as ‘chick noir’ by some reviewers, the self-constructed image of woman as a victim of a monstrous male is contrasted with the image of a seemingly all-powerful female monster. Through the alternating narrators, the novel plays with the notion of archetypes, of male subjectivity and female objectivity. The 2014 film,

which Flynn wrote the screenplay for, does much of the same, but utilizes character’s fantasies to destabilize narrative cohesion. Throughout the novel and the film, the national news media is indicted for its constructions of palatable gendered identities, and its fetishizing of subjects as either victims or monsters.

This paper will use Flynn’s Gone Girl (2012), and David Fincher’s cinematic adaptation, as mediums through which to examine the archetype of the monstrous woman in contemporary American popular culture. Public interpretations of the novel and film are dramatically mixed, with some claiming it is brimming with misogyny, others finding it full of radical misandry. Thus Gone Girl, in both forms, is ripe with interpretive potential. Though a joint analysis of literary and cinematic forms is an innately thorny endeavor, Flynn’s screenplay allows a reading of the two as manifestations of the same narrative and cultural processes. Moreover, while the novel invokes a legacy of genre tenets, the majority of influential critical analyses of contemporary monsters in media have been in the field of film criticism. Therefore to abide by an analysis determined by disciplinary gatekeeping would be highly detrimental to a critical reading of the narrative.

A psychoanalytic reading of these texts, inspired by Barbara Creed’s notion of the ‘Monstrous Feminine’, would suggest that Flynn’s heroine is reflective of innate psychological terrors rooted in the reproductive and sexual powers of the female body—she is a witch, a femme fatale, a vengeful castrator, a vampire, a possessed body, a monstrous womb. Early feminist film theory, from which Creed draws her analytical inspiration, might read the female character within Fincher’s film as an object of an oppressive male gaze determined to maintain the boundaries of the gendered and sexual social order. On the other hand, contemporary analysis of the noir genre—in which category I place Flynn and Fincher’s text—by critics like Julie Grossman, and readings of the monster figure in popular culture by Jack Halberstam and Scott Poole, demand the necessity of narrative and socio-historical interpretive context. This paper asserts that these seemingly conflicting readings need not be mutually exclusive. These feminine archetypes identified by Creed hold fast to the public imagination and are go-to tools for literary and cinematic representation. Their embodiments ebb and flow, appearing and vanishing at various points in history, becoming objects of near cultural obsession throughout different periods. The employment of monstrous female archetypes, therefore, must have socio-historical meaning, and the embrasure of archetypes in contemporary media must be socio-culturally contextualized.

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2 Of great value to Creed’s work was Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema” (1975), an interpretation of the male gaze in cinema, and male castration anxiety, dependent on the Freudian notion of woman as castrated. Mulvey analyzes the relationship between the screen and the spectator, particularly the male spectator, and identifies the female figure in narrative cinema as inherently either an object of narrative punishment or an object of desire. In her work, “When A Woman Looks” (1984) Linda Williams attempts to utilize the gaze in horror cinema to find a subversive potential within narratives of female victimization generally interpreted as misogynistic. Williams does this by highlighting the affinity between the monster and the woman in cinema. According to Williams, the woman’s look, her gaze toward the monster, acknowledges their similar status in relation to patriarchal structures. The woman’s act of ‘looking’ at the monster amounts to a recognition and their bodies represent a fearful form of sexuality, and threats to vulnerable male power.

3 Grossman, Halberstam and Poole push back against the notion of monster as strictly a symbol or metaphor.
Stevie Simkin observes that contemporary Western society is “a world caught in the flux of gender confusion.” Our culture is progressively moving towards a non-binary understanding of gender, and of a denaturalization of identities based on biological sex. Yet we are accustomed, even in the postmodern and apparently post-feminist age, to popular representations of women that adhere to traditional gendered archetypes. On one hand a woman in popular narratives may be the embodiment of socio-cultural feminine ideals, a benignly plucky heroine searching for love, a dutiful mother, an angelic victim. Contrarily, an unruly, deviant, or monstrous woman overstepping her prescribed place in society will usually be knocked back into her rightful place with a fatal blow by the close of her story. Simkin confirms, “the image of the disobedient woman is [still] frequently set against her polar opposite: the maternal, the chaste and the virginal. It is the familiar binary of the whore and the virgin that has been understood for many of years as pivotal in conceptualizing female identity in Western culture.” These dichotomies manifest not only in fictional narratives but also in real-life crime stories in which women are the victims, such as Laci Peterson and Elizabeth Smart, or the alleged perpetrators, such as Jodi Arias and Amanda Knox. According to Helen Birch “the always shifting boundaries between fact and fiction, reality and representation, have in some cases become so blurred as to be almost indistinguishable.” These fictive archetypes are still regarded as fact, as handy means of representing and understanding complex identities.

In the portrayal of Amy Elliot Dunne’s character, Gillian Flynn and David Fincher lay the groundwork of an archetypal portrayal of woman as victim of a male monster before intentionally and violently overturning that assumption. Therefore, Gone Girl reveals itself as a meta-analysis and overt commentary on what we, as an audience, come to expect in portrayals of women in popular media. Gone Girl is a reaction to literary and cinematic traditions, which replicate and largely fail to interrogate gendered archetypes, as well as a news media which remains hell-bent on portraying woman as simplified embodiments of either the Madonna or the whore, the perfect victim or the perfect monster.

A Monstrous Lineage of Women

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4 Stevie Simkin, Cultural Constructions of the Femme Fatale: From Pandora’s Box to Amanda Knox (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014) 100.

5 Here I am referring to the progressive social acceptance of gender queer and trans identities, as well as to feminist critical theory that interprets gender as a social construct distinct from biological sex. The seminal work on this subject is of course Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble. Butler argues that our conception of a naturalized gender is in actuality a system of repeated gendered performances. She further reasons that gender is a social construction that suppresses its own history and embraces its cultural fictions as natural realities in order to maintain the idea of a distinct binary. Butler argues that in order to transform the cultural significance of gender, it must be exposed as a fictive production. In her 2000 work “Reconfiguring Gender with John Dewey”, Shannon Sullivan utilized Dewey’s notion of habit to illuminate the impact of individual action and repetitious choices in the reification of gendered norms. When one discontinues a gendered habit, or acquires a new habit that is contrary to patriarchal norms, those norms are revealed as unstable and impermanent, as well as fictive.

6 Simkin 6.

7 My intent here is in no way to comment on these women’s guilt or innocence, but strictly to examine their representation within popular media.

8 Simkin 13.
Barbara Creed, in *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, argues that all societies have a concept of the monstrous feminine, of that which is shocking, terrifying, and abject. These images have evolved from those that haunted the dreams, myths of forbearers many centuries ago within phallocentric and patriarchal ideology, and are related to the problem of sexual difference. Creed utilizes post-psychoanalytic feminist discourse to name the many faces and manifestations of the monstrous feminine, invoking the theories of Freud, Jung and Lacan in the process. Embracing Jung’s theory of the archetype, of collectively inherited unconscious ideas and images universally present in the human mind, Creed outlines the figures of the monstrous feminine as, alternately, the witch, the beautiful but deadly seductress or femme fatale, the vengeful castrator, the monstrous womb, the possessed body, and the primordial/amoral mother.

Through her utilization of psychoanalysis, Creed theorizes that it is the image of the monstrous woman as castrator rather than castrated that instills terror in man. This monstrous female figure is not a simple inversion or reflection of the male monster, but an archetypal image defined by her biology, her sexuality, and her reproductive capacity. Her sexual difference is intrinsic to the fear she causes and the danger she poses. According to Elizabeth Lowry, “While the monstrous feminine is associated with the same sick and violent acts that we attribute to a monster, the monstrous female is the soul of duplicitousness and a skilled seductress—qualities that evoke all the more fear and loathing on the part of her victims.”9 It is the archetypally feminine aspects of the monster that are her ultimate source of horror.10 In her work *Goddesses and Monsters: Women, Myth, Power and Popular Culture*, Jane Caputi further synthesizes Creed’s argument, “the femme fatale, witch, or vamp represents an outlawed form of female divinity, potency, genius, sexual agency, independence, vengeance, and death power.”11

As noted above, representations of monstrous women have been core elements of myths, folktales, and novels since the very origins of these cultural forms. Pandora of Greek Myth, the first woman formed from clay by the gods, was endowed with “a bitch’s mind and a knavish nature,” and unleashed torment on humankind.12 The image of the beautiful but deadly woman can of course be traced back to early Christian tradition’s Eve, and Lilith (the first wife of Adam, banished from paradise for refusing to submit to her husband). Though these archetypes permeate cultural creations and fictive representations throughout history, one can read cultural conditions and concerns in their portrayals. According to Julie Grossman, “‘bad women’ become an effective vehicle for diverting energy for social change into forms of social hysteria, reflecting generalized anxiety surrounding gender roles during times of transition.”13

During the Enlightenment and the development of a ‘culture of childhood’ in the 1700s, images of evil women and virtuous damsels were incorporated into fairy tales, delineating the boundaries of acceptable gender roles, and warning readers of the dangers of

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sexual transgression. During the antebellum period, when the ‘Cult of True Womanhood’ and ‘Cult of Domesticity’ played a pivotal role in shaping feminine ideals, Scott Poole writes, “Traditionalism constructed women who refused to be the “angel of the house” as monsters roaming the national landscape, seeking to destroy the family and the scripturally sanctioned rule of male over female in marriage.”

During the Victorian period and the zenith of gothic literature, culturally repressed sexuality combined with notions of innate gender distinctions between the masculine and the feminine to people popular stories with women as the victims of predatory sexuality, or as monstrous threats to a strictly gendered social hierarchy. In her critical work *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1995) Susan Bordo synchronously notes that “The second half of the nineteenth century, concurrent with the first feminist wave…saw a virtual flood of artistic and literary images of the dark, dangerous, evil female.”

Julie Grossman, Jack Halberstam, Tim Nelson and Scott Poole further trace this cycle of monstrous representation as a response to shifting norms throughout the twentieth century. Nelson’s *Phantom Ladies: Hollywood Horror and the Home Front* examines how the upheaval of wartime in the 1940s, the entrance of women into traditional male work, resulted in a cycle of female-monster movies. According to Grossman, the very development of the noir film and the blossoming of the femme fatale archetype was a projection of male anxiety in the wake of World War II, regarding changing and ambiguous gender roles. After the relative conservatism of the 1950s, “struggle[s] for the liberation of women and sexual minorities in the 1960s raised numerous questions about the nature of family life in America.”

Women’s sexuality and reproductive abilities became the focus of numerous horror films throughout the 1970s, exposing American nervousness over contraception, abortion, the sexual revolution, and the changing nature of the family. According to Scott Poole, in the wake of second wave feminism, the horror narratives of the 1980s and early 1990s focused on the dangers of the sexually empowered woman who acted on her own agency. He writes, “Conservative critics of feminism explicitly portrayed sexually liberated women as unnatural monsters.” Again, Susan Bordo’s work illuminates that this flourishing

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15 Scott Poole, *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting* (Baylor University Press: 2009) 77. Here Poole specifically referencing Edgar Allen Poe’s female characters.
16 In the critical work, *Horrifying Sex: Essays on Sexual Difference in Gothic Literature*, Ruth Anolik argues that, “Every contemporary horror text carries the blueprint of the eighteenth-century English gothic novel and thus carries viable traces of genre conventions” (Anolik 233). This blueprint carries with it a particular formula of male and female figures—heroes, villains, victims, and monsters, the stereotype of the young and virginal woman under attack from a monstrous male, who represents either a social, sexual, or a psychological threat to the heroine.
18 Poole notes that stories and comics from this period responded to Betty Freidan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) which argued that mystique that middle-class American women, were dissatisfied and trapped in their domestic roles. Poole references *Entertaining Comics*’ tale “The Neat Job,” in which a housewife, tired of her husband’s insistence that she always keep the house clean, kills him with an axe and does “a neat job” for him by placing his body parts into labeled jars.
19 Examples include *The Exorcist, Rosemary’s Baby* and *Carrie* (Poole 170).
20 *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic Instinct*, for example.
21 Poole 162.
of images of monstrous women is habitually a norm of representation “during periods when women are becoming independent and asserting themselves politically and socially.”

**Gone Girl Analysis**

With *Gone Girl*, Gillian Flynn has created a chillingly monstrous female figure who calls for an intricate analysis—though the truth of her monstrous nature remains well hidden for the first half of the narrative. The novel begins with the male narrator, Nick Dunne, under suspicion for the mysterious disappearance of his wife—evidence of a struggle, a staged crime scene, hastily mopped up pools of blood, all lead to Nick as the likely culprit. Even the first-person perspective does nothing to assuage the readers’ suspicions. Nick’s narrative account is openly unreliable, withholding his recollections and motivations from the readers as much as he does from the police. He reveals a propensity for dishonesty (“That was my fifth lie to the police. I was just starting”), bouts of misogynistic rage (his internal monologue when dealing with a female detective is “Bitch bitch bitch”), and an enmity for the strong women he encounters (“I was not good with angry women. They brought out something in me that was unsavory”). On occasion, Nick appears to clue the readers in on his guilty conscience with recollections such as: “The Amy of today was abrasive enough to want to hurt, sometimes.” Flynn and Fincher both toy with reader and viewer narrative expectations, and common media representations—“It’s always the husband. Just watch *Dateline*.”

Through his wife Amy’s journal entries, discovered by the police, the readers are introduced to a character that seems to embody the female ideal, a wealthy debutant, a so-called ‘cool girl’ and a loving, angelic wife. Her diary entries exclaim, “I have become a wife, I have become a bore, I have been asked to forfeit my independent Young Feminist card. I don’t care. I balance his checkbook, I trim his hair. I’ve gotten so retro, at one point I will probably use the word *pocketbook*, shuffling out the door in my swingy tweed coat, my lips painted red, on the way to the *beauty parlor*”. Through such comments, Amy further fashions her identity as a benign post-feminist heroine with whom readers of contemporary texts are likely familiar. These journal entries also present the breakdown of Amy’s marriage at the hands of her abusive and philandering husband. Her diary chronicles, “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 […] What scared me was the look on his face as I lay on the floor blinking, my head ringing. It was the look on his face as he restrained himself

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22 Bordo 161.
24 Flynn 52.
25 Flynn 70.
26 Flynn 64.
27 Flynn 58.
28 Flynn 58.
29 Here Flynn constructs ‘Diary Amy’ as a typical romantic-comedy heroine reminiscent of Angela McRobbie’s readings of *Bridget Jones* as a post-feminist figure: an economically stable, white, blonde woman working in journalism and publishing, willing to sacrifice independence and forgo feminist politics in order to achieve a fairy-tale ending. Later, in Amy’s infamous ‘Cool Girl’ speech, she will tear this image of womanhood to shreds.
from taking another jab.”  

Over the course of the journal entries, the resentments, arguments, and physical violence crescendo into a situation of seemingly mortal peril for Amy. Upon her own joyful discovery of her pregnancy, a long-hoped-for miracle that Nick Dunne aggressively does not want, she confesses, “Sometimes, the way he looks at me? The sweet boy from the beach, man of my dreams, father of my child? I catch him looking at me with those watchful eyes, the eyes of an insect, pure calculation, and I think: This man may kill me.”  

These early chapters and scenes of Flynn and Fincher’s texts definitively construct a dichotomy of a female victim and a male monster.  

Midway through the novel, the narrative and the gendered dynamic it has thus far developed, is upended. The perspective switches from the masculine narrator to Amy, who is very much alive, having plotted for the last year to frame her husband for her murder. She teases, “I can tell you more about how I did everything, but I’d like you to know me first. Not diary Amy, who is a work of fiction (and Nick said I wasn’t really a writer, and why did I ever listen to him?), but me, Actual Amy. What kind of a woman would do such a thing?”  

Through meticulous planning, and chilling schemes, Amy has manipulated everyone and everything around her. Her experiences of domestic abuse were (as far as the audience can tell) purely fictitious. Her carefully woven webs have utterly ensnared her husband, virtually ensuring that he will go to prison, and ultimately be executed for her feigned murder.  

The journal entries through which the readers have known and understood her are revealed to be fake, merely an exercise through which construct an image of the ideal feminine victim, and false evidence to mislead authorities. Amy explains:  

One hundred and fifty-two entries total, and I don’t think I ever lose her voice. I wrote her very carefully, Diary Amy. She is designed to appeal to the cops, to appeal to the public should portions be released. They have to read this diary like 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 me. Her.  

Every beneficent aspect of her character, every quality that would make her the perfect victim in traditional media narratives—particularly her pregnancy—was a falsehood. Not only is that ideal feminine identity—the romantic and besotted wife, the endangered damsel—revealed as disingenuous, it is also entirely constructed.  

In part, Amy’s lack of innate identity is blamed on her position as the life-long inspiration for her parents’ children’s book series, Amazing Amy. She describes the perfect and hyper-accomplished fictional character she is always compared to, “my literary alter ego, my paper bound better half, the me I was supposed to be,” revealing a never-ending mirror-stage in which her notion of selfhood is derived from a fictional caricature of female virtuousness. Amy reveals that as a result, “Nick loved a girl who didn’t exist. I was pretending, the way I often did, pretending to have a personality. I can’t help it, it’s what I’ve always done: the way some women change fashion regularly, I change personalities. What persona feels good, what’s coveted, what’s au courant?”  

Thus she levels brutal commentary

30 Flynn 228-229.  
31 Flynn 163.  
32 Flynn 254.  
33 Flynn 274.  
34 Flynn 43.  
35 Flynn 256.
on the ideal feminine archetype as well as the notion of any essential feminine identity, exposing that femininity is a conscious performance.

The true Amy is revealed as a cunning villain, fed up with a dull suburban life and her philandering husband. Having tried for too long to maintain an appearance of virtuousness and blissful domesticity, her affections for her husband has turned to near-maniacal rage. She claims, “He took chunks of me with blasé swipes my independence, my pride, my esteem. I gave, and he took and took […] 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.” 36

She is brilliant, scheming, plotting, and vengeful, proudly attesting “My list, the master list entitled Fuck Nick Dunne, was exacting, it was the most complete, fastidious list that has ever been created.”37 She watches from a distance as her carefully laid plans come to fruition, and her husband is vilified in the national media while she is sanctified in return. While on the run and in hiding, she shows herself capable of brazen atrocities, brutally slaying an ex-lover when her attempts to control her, and ultimately framing him for her kidnapping and rape once she has decided to return to Nick and rescue him from his consigned fate.

“What a perfect monster!” exclaims Nick, in reference to his once-beloved wife as she returns to their home, bloodied, a play-acting the victim before the camera flashes of media frenzy.38 Amy is able to masterfully sway perceptions of the media and the police toward an unadulterated adoration of her. She is even able to convince her husband to give up his mistress and stay with her, in spite of her murderous tendencies. By the close of the narrative, she is pregnant with his child. In one of Nick Dunne’s closing lines, he admits, “The fact is, my wife is a murderess who is sometimes really fun…My wife, the very fun, beautiful murderess, will do me harm if I displease her…I am a great husband because I am very afraid she may kill me.”39 In many ways, Amy Dunne is the embodiment of abject and horrifying femininity, as identified by Barbara Creed.

In various points of the film and the novel, Amy embodies the manipulative and powerful witch, the femme fatale, the vampire, the vengeful castrator, and the monstrous womb. In her plots to have her husband imprisoned for life, she takes heed that his “nightmares have always been about being wronged, about being trapped, a victim of forces beyond his control.”40 At times, her power to ensnare and entrap him seems almost omniscient and omnipotent. Nick Dunne acknowledges her seemingly unnatural influence, admitting, “I was her puppet on a string,”41 aligning her with the allegorical image of the witch—a seemingly all-powerful and all-knowing figure, able to malevolently bend nature to her will. In her seduction of her ex-lover, Desi Collings, and her resistant husband, she embodies the femme fatale, yet in her brutal murder of Collings, she is arguably depicted as a vampire. When describing the corpse of her victim—killed by a sliced jugular during sex—Amy relays, “They’ll find him naked and drained, a stunned look on his face, a few strands of my hair in his clutches, the bed soaked in blood.”42 Upon Amy’s return to Nick near the novel’s close, her mode of gaining control over him reveals her as the quintessence of the monstrous womb—she has impregnated herself with her husband’s discarded sperm sample,
ensuring herself of his loyalty and protection should the police ever question her ever-altering stories. Upon this revelation, Nick abandons his plans to publish a book incriminating his wife of her numerous crimes, concluding, “We had spent years battling for control of our marriage, of our love story, of our life story. I had been thoroughly, finally outplayed. I created a manuscript, and she created a life.” Her ability to procreate, and to do so effectively without him is an expression of ultimate ‘monstrous’ feminine power.

The threat of castration, both literal and figurative, is subtly present throughout Gone Girl, but available to any reading driven by thick description. As mentioned, Amy stabs Collings mid-coitus, but it is her husband who is repeatedly depicted as under threat of losing his manhood. Nick Dunne frequently exposes that he feels ‘powerless’ and ‘impotent’ in comparison to his wife. After learning of his wife’s terrible plots, Nick seeks refuge in a relaxing shower and notices a once commonplace but now threatening object, revealing, “I closed my eyes and let the spray dissolve the dirt from my dad’s house. When I opened them back up, the first thing I saw was Amy’s pink razor on the soap dish. It felt ominous, malevolent.” This threat is artfully underscored when, once Amy had returned, she forces her husband to disrobe and enter the shower where she can confess her crimes without the threat of being overheard by wiretaps. Notably, within Fincher’s film, the only nudity is a full-frontal shot of Nick as he enters this shower with Amy, emphasizing his absolute vulnerability. Such images evoke Creed’s claim that women are not images of monstrosity and terror because they are castrated, but because they are potential castrators.

As established above, this text is part of a lengthy history of representation. Gone Girl’s author, Gillian Flynn, is well versed in this literary and cinematic lineage, referencing trope and genre repeatedly within her work. Her characters frequently make reference to the various genres their behavior or situation relegates them to, indicating a self-aware commentary. Of her falsified account of abuse, Amy writes, “I tell a gothic tale of possessiveness and rage, of Midwest steak-and-potato-brutality, barefoot pregnancy, animalistic dominance. Of rape and pills and liquor and fists. Pointed cowboy boots in the ribs.” Characters make frequent reference to fairy-tale figures and themes, such as when Amy describes her ex-lover, who she will eventually murder, as someone who “would like knowing I was stowed away under glass. The ultimate white-knight fantasy: He steals the abused princess from her squalid circumstances and places her under his gilded protection in a castle that no one can breach but him,” or when Nick describes his wife as “A storybook princess. And I, of course, was the lickspittle hunchback of a husband who would bow and scrape the rest of my days.” Markedly, characters also allude to Flynn’s own genre in a particularly meta-like fashion. While one character laments, “God it’s like a bad noir movie,” Amy derides her own fulfillment of genre tropes with comments like, “I am penniless and on the run. How fucking noir.”

With this awareness of tropes and narrative expectations, Flynn breaks with tradition at the close of her narrative. Unlike depictions of the majority of monstrous women in

44 Flynn 462.
45 Flynn 308.
46 Flynn 364.
47 Flynn 368.
48 Flynn 430.
49 Flynn 182.
50 Flynn 357.
fiction and film, Flynn refuses to justify her heroine’s violence or punish her transgressions of the norm. Barbara Creed, referring to the monstrous woman as a mythical sphinx, attests that she must be destroyed according to patriarchal and narrative tradition. Creed writes that when “[the] Sphinx, who…knows the answers to the secret of life…[is] no longer the subject of the narrative, [she] has become the object of the narrative of the male hero. After he has solved her riddle, she will destroy herself.” Yet there is no punishment for Amy, no oven for her to be pushed into, no stake to plunge into her heart. One could argue perhaps that her return to her marriage indicates an allegorical softening of teeth, a re-domestication process capable of de-wiring her explosive potential. Yet at the narrative’s close, her husband is left in an admittedly fair amount of mortal peril. While genre tenets and literary lineage would require that Amy follow through with her initial plan of suicide, or be killed for her crimes, it is Amy who emerges from the narrative unscathed and utterly victorious.

Flynn’s narrative begins with androcentric dominance, with a ghostlike voice of the feminine perhaps speaking from beyond the grave. It ends with a hostile takeover of the narrative, a bloodless invasion in which the monstrous feminine gains deific control. While in the opening scenes of Fincher’s film we witness a fictional memory in which Amy is hiding is the locked guest bedroom from her husband, at the end of the novel Amy reveals that Nick now “sleeps in the downstairs guest room with the door locked.” As a biting parallel to Amy’s narrative of domestic terror, Nick recounts, “I turned my back on her, and then I pictures her with a knife in her hand and her mouth growing tight as I disobeyed her. I turned back around. Yes, my wife must always be faced.” Though the novel began with his perspective, with Nick in control of how the story was told, Amy ultimately silences his narrative, and ends their story on her own accord. While her husband had dreamed of writing a book about his wife’s crimes, Amy finally reveals: “I have a book deal: I am officially in control of our story. It feels wonderfully symbolic […] I don’t have anything else to add. I just wanted to make sure I had the last word. I think I’ve earned that.” In a media culture adept at reducing female figures to archetypes and objects, Flynn’s monstrous heroine maintains power over her own representation.

Critical and Popular Reactions to Gone Girl

Flynn’s novel has sold more than fifteen million copies worldwide, spending 130 weeks on the New York Times bestsellers list, and thirty-seven weeks in the number one spot. Lev Grossman of Time magazine labeled it as “one of the essential books of our present

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51 Creed 26, quoted in Lowry.
52 Here I am particularly thinking Kate Chopin’s classic 1889, The Awakening, in which a wealthy but unhappy New Orleans woman struggles to negotiate her desire for personal freedom with social expectations of marriage and motherhood. After transgression and infidelity, Edna commits suicide by drowning herself in the Gulf of Mexico. Notably, Amy pretends to be from New Orleans while on the run, and plans to commit suicide by drowning herself in the Mississippi, imagining her body floating out into the Gulf of Mexico. In Fincher’s film, Amy notes that her body will sink ‘down past all the other abused, unwanted, inconvenient women.’
53 Flynn 447.
54 Flynn 432.
55 Flynn 466.
The cinematic adaptation has grossed over $369,000,000 at box offices worldwide, and was nominated for four Golden Globe awards in 2014, including Best Screenplay. Film critic Chris Lee dubbed it “The rarest of Hollywood entities: the critically acclaimed blockbuster.” In a film review for *America* magazine, Jim McDermott found it to be “one of the most disturbing films about marriage, gender, and family to be mounted in the United States in recent memory.” Despite, or perhaps due to, the novel’s bestseller status and the film’s victory at the global box office, *Gone Girl* has sparked a wide range of conversation and illuminated interpretive quandaries.

Responses—particularly feminist responses—to the film are decided mixed. As mentioned above, interpretations of Amy range from those that view her as a radical feminist, a misandrist, and those that claim the narrative is blatantly misogynist and harmful to woman. McDermott scathingly mocks the former idea, and aligns himself with the latter notion that the novel and the film are socially dangerous to women. He writes, “To imply that the character of Amy Elliott Dunne represents some sort of a ‘liberation’ is absurd. *Gone Girl* may raise deep questions about marriage, but when it comes to its portrayal of women, I can't help feeling that it is irresponsible.” It is not the endeavor of this paper to depict Amy as radical feminism incarnate, but nor is it my belief that her character is simply an expression of misogyny simmering under the surface of every popular text. Rather, she is an interpretive quandary, compromising overly present archetypes, and needing to be contextualized within her narrative and its contemporary culture. Within *Gone Girl*, Flynn takes a positional approach, acknowledging the archetypes female figures are compared against in contemporary media, embracing the binaries of gendered representation before subjecting them to critique and ridicule.

The narrative techniques presented within the pages of *Gone Girl* are not wholly unique among the novels of Gillian Flynn. Within each of her four published works to date, *Sharp Objects* (2006), *Dark Places* (2009), *Gone Girl* (2012) and *The Grownup* (2015) Flynn has taken the image of the woman as the passive victim or the angelic figure to task. In a 2013 interview with Flynn for *The Guardian*, columnist Oliver Burkeman notes “It's true of all Flynn's novels that her women can be reliably predicted to outdo the men in their capacity for moral depravity,” and as a result, critics “have accused her of peddling "misogynist caricatures", and of "a deep animosity towards women." When Burkeman asks Flynn if she worries that she is damaging the cause of feminism “in the quest for narrative shocks,” Flynn responds:

To me, that puts a very, very small window on what feminism is. Is it really only girl power, and you-go-girl, and empower yourself, and be the best you can be? For me, it's also the ability to have women who are bad characters … the one thing that really frustrates me is this idea that women are innately good, innately nurturing. In literature, they can be dismissably bad – trampy, vampy, bitchy types – but there's still a big pushback against the idea that women can be just pragmatically evil, bad and selfish ... I don't write psycho

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58 Jim McDermott 44. Web.
59 Jim McDermott “Marriage, Violence, the Synod and *Gone Girl,*” *America,* Web.
bitches. The psycho bitch is just crazy – she has no motive, and so she's a
disable person because of her psycho-bitchiness.  

Martha McCaughy and Neal King appear to agree with Flynn’s analysis. In Reel Knockouts, their tome-like anthology of critical work on violent women in cinema, McCaughy and King express their desire to analyze texts featuring violent and monstrous women: …not simply in terms of whether they properly represent women or feminist principles, but also as texts with social contexts and possible uses in the reconstruction of masculinity and femininity. We can use these images, whether they are lies or not…These analyses of violent women will enable feministic to question assumption about gender, violence, pleasure, and fantasy. They will enable film theorists to question models of female passivity and narrative closure.  

Similarly, within her work, Julie Grossman takes issue with film critics and feminist thinkers who make judgments about the appropriateness of gendered representations within a text based on role modeling and already canonized images of woman. According to Grossman, within the interpretive model utilized by many feminist critics, if female characters do not present positive and optimistic models of gender roles for the viewers, the text fails as a feminist narrative. Grossman argues that in place of such a limiting scope of interpretation, which seems to reify the powers of misogynistic archetypes, female characters must be placed “in a broader history of representations of women that gives us insight into the relationship between text and context, the film and gender roles in society.” Rather than simply rejecting these negative feminine archetypes, which represent persistent anxieties about female agency, Grossman seeks to put them in context with their historical parallels, and thereby to rediscover their cultural importance. She proclaims: “Fantasies of women are socio-historically based and thus affected by the position of women in any given historical moment.”  

According to a personal essay, Gillian Flynn is determined to present an image of female evil, inspired by the wicked archetypal figures of myth and folklore. When discussing her creative inspiration, she pronounces, “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. Screw the blonde, gentle heroines, it was those wicked queens and evil stepmothers I adored.” While referring to the cultural context in which she has chosen to write about monstrous women, she explains, “We 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.”

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61 Flynn, quoted in Burkeman.
62 Martha McCaughy and Neal King Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies (University of Texas Press) 12.
63 Grossman 17.
64 Grossman 3.
Throughout *Gone Girl*, the novel and film, Amy comments that women in media only ever “bleed and clean, clean and bleed” women are allowed to be domesticated wives and mothers, or they are allowed to be a bloody body, a victim. Crucial to a reading of *Gone Girl* is a contextualization of Amy within the true crime stories of women who have captured the national imagination, either with their embodiments of the feminine ideal as victims or through their constructions as monsters. Perhaps the woman who garnered the most media attention is recent years for her alleged monstrosity is American-born Amanda Knox, charged with the murder of a roommate, convicted, released upon appeal, retried, and acquitted again by the Italian court system between 2007 and 2015. Throughout the years of legal drama, Knox was referred to as a femme fatale, a monster, a witch, and a devil, while critics called the investigation itself a witch-hunt. Though American media sources were in large part critical of the Italian media and justice system’s embrasure of gendered archetypes during this case, it frequently utilizes the same tropes of representation. Stevie Simkin explains:

> Ideological constructs of women such as the femme fatale, the Medea-like murderous mother or the female monster are very often and very swiftly, mobilized against woman who seem to transgress cultural norms [...] such characters, especially when they cross over the line between representation and reality, tend to provoke a particularly conflicted tangle of emotions, including horrified fascination, titillation, stern reproach and damning judgment. Very often the judgments are tied up in assumptions about women’s inherent propensity towards evil.\(^66\)

Throughout the Amanda Knox trial, Knox’s transgressions of idealized modes of femininity were used as evidence against her, particularly when her virtue was compared to that of her alleged victim.

Just as Gillian Flynn’s narrative speaks to traditions of fiction, *Gone Girl* is also very transparently a reaction to portrayals of women in media, which adhere to limiting gendered archetypes. Markedly, Flynn originally planned to spend her career confronting non-fictional evil, having trained in journalism at Chicago’s Northwestern University with the intention of becoming a crime reporter.\(^67\) In a 2012 interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Gillian Flynn acknowledges that her *Gone Girl* narrative was influenced by the common tropes of true crime and news media. She states, “I’m a true-crime addict. It’s not something I’m particularly proud of, but I can’t stop. You watch those shows like everyone else does. A wife goes missing; you assume that the husband did it. To me, that was a very interesting idea.”\(^68\) As we have seen, though Amy reveals herself to be far from a quintessential feminine ‘victim’ in *Gone Girl*, her character is continually contrasted with that archetypal figure—one that mimics the representations of numerous real world women.

Paul Farhi notes, “You remember their names because the media wouldn’t let you forget them: Laci Peterson, Natalee Holloway, Chandra Levy, Lori Hacking—young girls

\(^{66}\) Simkin 7  
\(^{67}\) Burkeman 1.  
who disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Gone girls.” Of course, these women’s cases attract the national spotlight not by happenstance but because they fulfill particular standards of representation. They are all young, white, heterosexual, middle-to-upper class women, and as such they embody an American feminine ideal. Media reaction to these cases in the early 2000s led Sheri Parks, Professor of American Studies at the University of Maryland in College Park, to diagnose the phenomenon as ‘Missing White Women Syndrome’ indicting the media for not portraying cases of women who are poor, Black, Asian, Latina, overweight, or unattractive, with the same fervor.

Of particular relevance to Gone Girl is the disappearance of Laci Peterson. Like Flynn’s Amy Elliot-Dunne, Laci Peterson was an attractive, white, middle-class wife and soon-to-be mother whose case held the national media in thrall. Also akin to the fictive narrative Amy constructs for her husband’s punishment, Laci’s husband was found to be having an affair, and was eventually convicted and sentenced to death for her murder. While Flynn states that she had no singular inspiration for Nick and Amy, she admits, “One could point to Scott and Laci Peterson […] they’re always good-looking couples […] You don’t normally see incredibly ugly people who’ve gone missing and it becomes a sensation […] that was what kind of interested me: the selection and the packaging of a tragedy.”

Paramount in Amy’s packaging of her own fictive tragedy is her supposed pregnancy, feigned through a urine theft of a caricatured pregnant neighbor and revealed after she has disappeared. In Gone Girl, the media crews teem around a press conference, an image now quite familiar to viewers of nightly news segments, and when they hear claim that the missing Amy is with child, a veritable frenzy erupts. A crowd swarms Nick Dunne, chasing him through the town green, a contemporary corollary to villagers with torches and pitchforks (or in this iteration, video cameras and iPhones). The power of the maternal figure in the media, and the association of maternity with virtuousness, is further reified when Amy announces her true pregnancy at the close of the narrative. The announcement silences any remaining doubts surrounding her fantastical and unverifiable story. Through the binarial lens of the media, to be maternal is (or should be) to be virtuous.

A second media intertext discernible in Gone Girl is the murder investigation and trial of Jodi Arias. In 2013, Arias was convicted of killing her ex boyfriend five years prior. In the intervening years, the national media developed a fascination with the accused murderess. According to Lois Lowry, media discourse surrounding Arias structured her story around a dichotomy of good/evil and actively took part in the cultural tradition of monster making. Throughout the various iterations of Arias’ defense and prosecution, the term “monster” frequently came into play. Initially, Arias alleged that she had witnessed her lover being killed by “monsters” who had broken into his home. After admitting that she had in fact been the one to kill him, she claimed that he had been an abusive “sex monster” who she had only killed in self-defense. Lowry notes that throughout the trial, the popular press and prosecution appropriated conventions of classic horror films to present Arias herself as a

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70 The physical resemblance, in Fincher’s film, between Nick Dunne (played by Ben Affleck) and Scott Peterson is remarkable.
71 Lee 1.
72 Lowry reads Arias as representative of Creed’s ‘Monstrous Feminine.’
monster deserving of the death penalty, particularly in the parallels drawn between Arias and Glenn Close’s character in Fatal Attraction.73

Reflections of this case are easily visible in Flynn and Fincher’s narrative. Not only does ‘Diary Amy’ falsely construct her partner as an abuser in order to portray herself as a victim, but Amy’s physical transformation as she goes into hiding mimic’s the change of Arias’ appearance throughout her trial. While on the run, Amy cuts and dyes her hair a “hamster” color and dons fake glasses. Though before her trial Jodi Arias had long platinum blonde hair, Lowry attests, “the Arias on trial later seemed to have changed dramatically […] wearing large unfashionable glasses, no makeup, and drab colors. Newscasters drew frequent attention to this, calling Arias’s new look that of the “mousy librarian.””74 According to Lowry, this look is emblematic of the archetypal ‘final girl’ in horror cinema, described by theorist Carol Clover, who defeats the monster that has plagued her and emerges from her narrative a triumphant heroine. In spite, or perhaps because, of these attempts at self-authorship, the media continued to portray Arias as a femme fatale, a deadly seductress. Karen Haltunnen writes: “Any story of murder involves a fictive process, which reveals much about the mental and emotional strategies employed within a given historical culture for responding to various transgression in its midst.”75

Stevie Simkin notes that “the crossover of the authentic and the representational, the real and the fictive, is always in evidence when we read accounts of newsworthy events; journalists will habitually make links between crimes and familiar landmarks of popular culture.”76 This tendency is on almost garish display Margaret Talbot’s 2013 human interest story in The New Yorker, “Gone Girl: The extraordinary resilience of Elizabeth Smart,”77 (which also illustrates the way in which Gone Girl has become a part of cultural lexicon in regards to female victims and villains). In addition to the puzzling choice to reference Flynn’s work in the title of the piece, Talbot veers towards literary and folkloric feminine tropes throughout her portrayal of the young survivor. The author opines, “Smart is a member of a tiny sorority of women who have escaped from modern-day Bluebeards,” perpetuating gendered archetypes even as she attempts to humanize her subject.78 Ultimately, these popular media accounts of ‘real’ women outlined above deny their subjects the complexity or self-authorship of Flynn’s fictive creation.

73 Lowry notes that the media made numerous comparisons between the crime scene and the shower scene in the film Psycho, revealing that HLN’s hosts built a replica of the crime scene in their television studio. Lowry also notes that a forensic psychiatrist and defense attorney compared Arias to Glenn Close’s character, Alex Forrest, in Fatal Attraction, further illustrating how the fictive the ‘real’ interplay in media representation of women.
74 Lowry
76 Simkin 13.
78 “Bluebeard” is a folktale penned by Charles Perrault in 1697. In the original tale, a young maiden marries a wealthy but mysterious man harboring a deadly secret. Given the keys to his castle, she is permitted to explore his property at will, yet sworn to never enter one particular room, lest she incur her new husband’s wrath. Try as she might to resist the temptation, the girl is bested by her own feminine weakness and curiosity; she opens the forbidden door to find the corpses of her husband’s three former wives—all murdered for the same transgression and disobedience she has just committed. Generally this tale is conveyed as a parable of feminine weakness and folly.
Conclusion

“We are too fond of our fictions to let go of such clear-cut characters and narratives,” concludes Simkin. Within the pages of Gone Girl, Gillian Flynn toys with the utter demolition of our most common feminine cultural archetypes—the angel woman and the devil woman, the victim and the monster. If Flynn’s novel was a fairytale, Amy would be both damsel and the Wicked Queen, the beautiful woman supposedly killed by the woodsman, and the all-powerful sorceress whose rage turns murderous when her image of her own perfection is disturbed by the appearance of a younger, fairer rival. While genres of the past have tended to ultimately restore all characters to their rightful place in society, with the monster punished and the victim back in her happy and safe domestic sphere at the tales’ conclusions, Flynn denies her audience any such comfort or resolution. Julie Grossman provides a quote from Engels, which explains the import of such an authorial maneuver:

The novelist perfectly fulfills his function, when through a faithful representation of existing social relations, he destroys conventional illusions about the nature of those relations, shakes up the optimism of the bourgeois world, forcing it to doubt the endurance of the existing order, even if he does not indicate a solution, even if he does not, in an obvious way, take sides.

Gone Girl, and likely many such similar texts, is the product of a society awash in challenges to cultural norms and riddled with ambiguities. Amy, Flynn’s protagonist, anti-hero, and monster is a symptom of contemporary struggles over the notion of sexed and gendered identities as either essential or as constructed fictions. Contemporary American culture is progressively moving towards a non-binary understanding of gender, and a denaturalization of identities based on biological sex. Yet as illustrated above, there is a disparity between progressive critical and social ideologies—which allow for the queering or destabilizing of binaries and view gender as purely performative—and the vast majority of media representations.

Through Gone Girl’s representation of Amy, its unique narrative structure and intertextual nature, Flynn portrays feminine ideals and archetypes as socially mediated fictions. Gone Girl reflexively acknowledges both social and narrative expectations, assuming, likely correctly, that the archetypes of gender are ingrained in our cultural consciousness. Gone Girl’s place within the lineage of genres, its self-aware manipulation of tropes, and its depiction of gendered roles that are both constructed and malleable, destabilizes archetypes of monstrous women and feminine victims. Though Amy embodies the many faces of Creed’s monstrous feminine, she is not a mere symbol or metaphor, as many of her real-world counterparts are reduced to in their representations. Through her subjectivity and her maintenance of narrative control, Amy reveals herself as a conscious and self-aware social commentator and notable product of her sociocultural moment.

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79 Simkin 176.
80 Friedrich Engels, Marx Engels Correspondence 1885, quoted in Julie Grossman, 14.
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