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“Catastrophically Romantic”: Radical Inversions of
Gilbert and Gubar’s Monstrous Angel
in Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl*

ASHLEY E. CHRISTENSEN
Florida State University, USA

Abstract

In their landmark text *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (1970), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar pose a series of hypotheses concerning women-authored fiction in the nineteenth century, identifying two archetypal female figures in patriarchal literary contexts – the Angel in the House, and the Monstrous (Mad)Woman. Gilbert and Gubar echo a Woolf-ian call to action that women writers must destroy both the angel and the monster in their fiction, and many contemporary women authors have answered that call – examining and complicating Gilbert and Gubar’s original dichotomy to reflect contemporary concerns with female violence and feminism. Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* (2012), and in particular the character of Amy Elliott Dunne, explores modern iterations of the Angel v. Monster dynamic in the guise of the “Cool Girl,” thus revising these stereotypes to fit them in a postmodern socio-historical context. The controversy that surrounds the text, as well as its incredible popularity, indicates that the narrative has struck a chord with readers and critics alike. Both Amy and Nick Dunne represent the Angel and the Monster in their marriage, embodying Flynn’s critical feminist commentary on white, upper-middle class, heterosexual psychopathy.

Keywords: Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl*, feminist fiction, contemporary fiction, domestic noir, female violence, gender, performative femininity

Despite having previously published two novels, in early 2012, Gillian Flynn (b. 1971) was relatively unknown in contemporary fiction, though her background as an Arts and Entertainment writer for *Entertainment*

Weekly posed some potential allure to readers looking for acerbic commentary on various elements of popular culture from an ostensible insider. However, by the end of the year, Flynn was a household name and her crime thriller *Gone Girl* (2012) had entered the cultural consciousness and had become one of, if not the, literary phenomenon of 2012, spending eight weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list and selling two million copies in its first year alone (Marso 870). Nearly a decade onward, critics are still grappling with the ramifications and critical implications of Flynn's most successful novel and its effects on a burgeoning genre that the author has often found to be most conducive to conducting her scathing critiques on gender, class, and capitalism: the domestic noir novel. Through its foundations in the crime/ mystery novel, Domestic Noir employs similar tools, namely frameworks that allow readers to question and critique the philosophical and psychological nature of the "truth," how and by whom it is constructed (Ingersoll 74). Moreover, Domestic Noir can often comment on institutional consequences of committing a crime, as well as on the mediatization of crime and the criminal, in turn, casting "a critical eye on the macro-social impact of an industry that feeds on human misery and transforms it into entertainment" (McNair 295).

Originally termed "Chick-Noir" in a series of articles published throughout 2014, the genre drew attention for its fusion of conventions most commonly associated with both crime novels and "chick lit" in order to "effectively interrogate many of the positions and perils of women in modern literature – both 'chick' and 'noir' – as well as in contemporary society" (Kennedy 21). By 2016, the moniker "chick noir" was phased out in favor of the less derisive terminology of the Domestic Noir, coined by author Julia Crouch in collaboration with her publicist (Kennedy 20). Generally speaking, the Domestic Noir is defined by its focus on the female experience and their relationships with others, is primarily set in the home or workplace, and takes a broad feminist stance that domestic spaces can often be just as perilous for women as those outside. Flynn's *Gone Girl* is considered to be one of the quintessential examples of this new genre, but it is not the author's first foray, as both of her previous novels are also considered to be Domestic Noir. While the growing

conversation around the genre is well-deserved, historical considerations about its roots outside of the 20th and 21st centuries remain somewhat unexplored. For while the contemporary domestic noir is strongly informed by the postmodern condition and the logic of late capitalism, it also includes many references and owes a debt to some of the literary traditions pioneered by women authors in the 19th century, so astutely synthesized in the work of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their landmark work *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteen Century Literary Imagination* (1979). Within their extensive study, both scholars present a powerful hypothesis about conventions in literature by women at that period in time:

We found what began to seem a distinctively female literary tradition, a tradition that had been approached and appreciated by many women readers and writers but which no one had yet defined in its entirety. Images of enclosure and escape, fantasies in which maddened doubles functioned as asocial surrogates for docile selves, metaphors of physical discomfort manifested in frozen landscapes and fiery interiors – such patterns recurred throughout this tradition, along with obsessive depictions of diseases like anorexia, agoraphobia, and claustrophobia. (Gilbert and Gubar xi)

What is fascinating about the arguments posed by Gilbert and Gubar fifty years ago is their applicability to current Domestic Noir fiction being published by women, such as Flynn. Similar to their 19th century counterparts, contemporary authors of domestic noir are consumed with questions of feminine agency, narrative power and subjectivity, as well as the consequences of when women finally snap. However, the domestic noir, by virtue of its contemporary temporal subject position, is not only able to build on the fiction of its 19th-century foremothers, but also further complicate and expand its consideration of modern gender politics and its intersections with class, race, and sexual identity through a contemporary postmodern lens, while also integrating a growing understanding of gender fluidity. In addition to her contribution to the reinvention of and discussion surrounding the genre of Domestic Noir, Flynn comments on and extends Gilbert and Gubar's arguments about women's fiction while also radicalizing and inverting one of their most well-known dichotomies

in order to emphasize the manner in which patriarchal narrative traditions and literary figures can be transformed and integrated into new literary genres and movements under different guises despite serving the same problematic patriarchal purpose.

Gilbert and Gubar's original thesis is predicated upon the patriarchal conceptualization of narrative authority and authorship, whereby the "pen is a penis" – locating male physiology and sexuality as the nexus of literary power, in turn placing women writers in a harrowing double-bind that denies them their own artistic subjectivity. They further argue that, for centuries, male authors have been responsible for crafting patriarchal and toxic ideals of femininity, against which their real-life counterparts have been widely judged, forming a

complex of metaphors and etiologies simply reflecting not just the fiercely patriarchal structures of Western society but also the underpinning of misogyny upon which that severe patriarchy has stood. The roots of 'authority' tell us, after all, that if woman is man's property then he must have authored her, just as surely as they will tell us that if he authored her, she must be his property. (Gilbert and Gubar 13)

Therefore, women authors and laywomen alike are "penned in" by their masculine counterparts. In Gilbert and Gubar's estimation, this internalized misogyny is most clearly displayed in the work of male authors who seek to "kill" the natural and unknowable woman, both literally and figuratively. The primary method of this annihilation is the repetitive authoring of idealized, patriarchal images of womanhood and femininity which focus on the female sex's subjugation to their masculine betters. Such is the "Angel" in the House, an archetypal synthetization of intensively passive feminine traits prioritized by institutionalized patriarchal power structures. Crafted in the image of the Judeo-Christian Virgin Mary, the Angel is identifiable by a concerted focus on pleasing the men in her life – a coercive lifestyle elevated to an artform, as "she has no story of her own" (Gilbert and Gubar 22).

However, even the Angel never holds true dominion over domestic spaces, and it is only after a beautifully lingering death, once the Angel has been cleansed of the physical taint of gendered womanhood, that she becomes patriarchally transformed into an asexualized deity-like figure to

be deployed against women still living as an example of acceptable femininity and adherence to gender roles. While the angel does hold sway over the Kingdom of the Dead, the position is mostly powerless, as the angel is again subsumed by the needs of others in the spiritual realm.

By contrast, female bodies, sexuality, and desire are equated with disgust, disease, and immorality, in turn creating the Angel's dark double – the Monstrous Woman. Gilbert and Gubar contend that “the sexual nausea associated with all these monster women helps explain why so many real women have for so long expressed loathing of (or at least about) their own, inexorably female bodies. This disgust and loathing is typified in the Angel's opposite and dark double, the Monster or Monstrous Woman” (31). Ultimately, both scholars summarize and echo the Woolf-ian assertion that women writers must symbolically destroy the Angel and the Monster in order to write our way out of these literal and figurative prisons:

at this point we really must dissect in order to murder. And we must particularly do this in order to understand literature by women because the images of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’ have been so ubiquitous throughout literature by men that they have also pervaded women's writing to such an extent that few women have definitively ‘killed’ either figure. (Gilbert and Gubar 17)

And while the above call to action is a powerful invitation to women writers to carve out new subjective and artistic territories for themselves and readers, the patriarchy has been far more recalcitrant to let go of the Angel/ Monster dichotomy, which has continued to evolve like a debilitating disease over the past century under different guises depending on the cultural context in which the figures are being deployed. This means that despite their focus on literature and women of the 19th century, Gilbert and Gubar's analysis and arguments are still startlingly relevant to the feminist literary project, a fact that is further indicated by the continuing critical conversation around the scholars' pivotal stances.

In the introduction to her anthology, *Gilbert and Gubar's Madwoman in the Attic after Thirty Years*, editor Annette Frederico powerfully avows that Gilbert and Gubar's

astonishingly original approach to Victorian women's writing changed our understanding of the gendered nature of nineteenth century literary culture and of contemporary critical practices. Breathing beneath dominant Victorian myths of women as domestic angels and fairy tale maidens were patterns of confinement, starvation, monstrosity, and rebellion. And pulsing beneath standards of objectivity and critical distance was the urge for experiential, even transformative, reading. (2)

The applicability of Gilbert and Gubar's original thesis across interdisciplinary fields of literature, media, and cultural studies accounts for its durability over in ever-changing critical feminist landscape, but also contributing to their continued relevancy is the continued attempts of patriarchal discourse to forcibly categorize real women into sexist dichotomies and subject positions. This masculinist discourse and its ideological aims persist, despite both critical and cultural backlash. Gilbert and Gubar's call for transformative readings of broader cultural forms establishes fecund ground for critics and authors alike to dabble, complicate, refute, and transform their readings of the Angel vs. Monster dichotomy in not only nineteenth century women's fiction, but in contemporary women's fiction as well, suggesting that women writers (and readers) are still grappling with the derivative Madonna/ Whore binaries forced upon them. And so, many of the critical concerns and issues raised in Gilbert and Gubar's original tome are still ubiquitous in popular culture and literature, confirming that many of these crucial ideological battles are still being fought within popular media, and women authors of Domestic Noir are on the frontlines.

Analogous to popular "chick lit" narratives, the protagonists of Domestic Noir often exist within metropolitan settings and are urban socialites associated with, whether through career or hobby, arts and media. They are often intelligent, talented, empathetic individuals who are still mistreated in their relationships, romantic and platonic alike, and have a growing sense of dissatisfaction with their obsessively gendered existence, despite having come of age after the feminist gains of the Women's Movement. As Victoria Kennedy succinctly argues:

These novels thus address what we might call the modern feminist dilemma: when being everything isn't enough. While most protagonists of chick lit are struggling to climb to the top, both professionally and

personally, most of the protagonists of chick noir are already there; at the start of their narratives they are married and have (or used to have) fulfilling careers. Yet, chaos and crime soon overtake their lives. In this way, chick noir picks up at the end of the chick lit narrative and becomes a dark sequel that calls into question the stability chick lit associates with relationships, a successful career, and belonging to a privileged social class. (26)

In many ways, the Domestic Noir novel unravels many of the proto/post feminist elements that are considered to be the bread and butter of women's fiction that has been codified as "chick lit" – showing the brutal reality after a so-called happy ending. But most importantly, Domestic Noir gives voice to the jarringly ambivalent position contemporary women are placed into as inheritors of a feminist legacy who are also subjected to intensive misogyny and patriarchal discourse, as well as the media's propensity to laud feminist goals while engaging in rhetoric that often repudiates those same gains. Described by Andrea Press as a sort of "double jeopardy," she contends that contemporary women are:

Exposed to what they perceive as the demands of the feminist world – to achieve in the public realm – even as more traditional demands on women – to shoulder the bulk of work in the family, to present themselves as desirable sex object – remain in place ... Aspects of these young women's culture that have been affected and partially changed by the success of feminism have in some cases left them with an increased rather than decreased set of pressures. Although this claim feels almost heretical and even dangerous for a feminist scholar to make, I believe it carries explanatory power rather than blame. (110)

The Domestic Noir novel appears to be, at least in part, a response or reaction to the sometimes insurmountable position contemporary women are placed in. If "chick lit" charts women's navigation to the supposed mountain summit of feminine ambition (i.e. a postfeminist capitalist combination of liberation and orthodoxy), then the Domestic Noir illustrates what happens when she is unceremoniously pushed down the other side and it is not pretty.

But what marks the Domestic Noir as particularly hospitable to a feminist lens or reading is that the tumble down the other side mountain is often merely a prelude to the transformation that moves the novel's

primary character from hopeful "chick lit" protagonist to *femme* anti-hero. This transformation is embodied most fully in its transgressive use and reclamation of the figure of the *femme fatale* or "Spider" Woman.ⁱ While originally first appearing in the genre of Hardboiled Detective fiction (Kennedy 30), the *femme fatale*'s most famous iteration has been a hallmark of film noir. Despite outlasting the original film noir genre in which she was birthed, and being present in most cultures, the *femme fatale* is most closely associated with the thrillers of the 1940s/ 1950s and is a direct response to growing anxieties about women's liberation and movement into the workforce during WWII (Crewe 17). Moreover, in film noir, the *femme fatale* is often defined by her natural foil and distinct opposite, the "good" girl or nurturing womanⁱⁱ (Lota 153). The *femme fatale* of film noir is ostensibly the true villain of her narrative, and it is only through her destruction and a return to heteronormative gender roles that the conflict can be resolved, as "the threat that femmes pose to masculinity means they must always pay the price," despite her appearance being crucial to the popularity of the genre (Smith 45). Yet the *femme fatale* has been far from a static character ever since her inception in the mid-twentieth century, as a figure she has constantly evolved in order to respond to anxieties about women's agency in whatever time period in which she is created. In turn, this renders any discussions based on whether the *femme fatale* is truly feminist/ misogynistic to be ultimately reductive as "while the new femme fatale is reflective of both a sharp decline in censorship and a certain degree of feminist progress, she can also be a weapon deployed by the patriarchy to indict that progress. Whether we read any given contemporary *femme fatale* as evidence of a misogynist text or a progressive one, it is clear that she is an important barometer of cultural attitudes about gender" (Lota 155).

But contemporary *femmes fatales*, or the *femmes* anti-heroines of Domestic Noir further complicate and restructure this character to match the complex intersection of internalized misogyny and feminist gains that define contemporary women's subject position. Domestic Noir presents far more complex and nuanced character development to explain the actions of the *femme fatale*, as well as more understandable motivations (Smith 46). They are also rendered more sympathetic to the reader and

presented as an average woman pushed to the brink, who, in turn, believes her crimes are justified. Most poignantly, in *Domestic Noir*, the *femme fatale*/ Anti-Hero not only survives her narrative (unlike her film counterpart) but is often the victor of whatever conflict that led to the collapse of her status quo and so resists the same textual suppression that led to the downfall of her foremothers. This victory, symbolic or otherwise, “may be read as feminist wish fulfillment – representations of women who are able to hit back at the men and the systems that keep them economically dependent and socially degraded” (Kennedy 32). Perhaps it is because of its focus on the middle ground between aspirational feminism and the realities of living in gendered society that the genre of *Domestic Noir* has faced both academic and popular controversy with feminist critics. As Lori Marso so adroitly points out:

The way the heroines refuse victimhood cannot be contained by the liberal feminist frame: these are not stories of the conventional feminist heroine who takes control, becomes empowered, or “leans in” to assert herself. Female agency in these [texts] is shown as significantly compromised or distorted, but nevertheless the possibility for agonistic action appears in even the most narrow or negative spaces and could potentially be better directed toward collective action. (873)

The implications of Marso’s arguments are compelling and in turn suggest that instead of attempting to force cultural content created by women and for women into a rigid liberal feminist framework, scholars need to instead frame our critical feminisms to meaningfully react to and engage with content that does not easily fall into either camp and so cannot be easily categorized as feminist or anti-feminist. While critique is integral and necessary to the feminist literary project, studies that rely on authoritatively codifying women-produced content as either passing or failing some kind of feminist bar can engender reductive conversations which fail to engage with the complexity of women-focused cultural content and reader-made textual meaning. A version of this new dynamic feminist framework can be seen in the continued evolution of the *femme fatale* and the critical conversation which surrounds her. The early *femme fatale*, steeped in misogynistic attitudes about women’s liberation and sexuality, has given way to more complex and nuanced iterations in the

intervening decades, and with the Domestic Noir, she seems posed to transform yet again. Our critical frameworks must transform with her and the new genre in which she seems to find her feminist home, as well as examine the roots of her new feminist leanings.

It is imperative that feminist scholars engage with the Domestic Noir and examine how its narrative traditions are both recycling elements of women's fiction which came before and inventing new conventions to speak to contemporary socio-political contexts. Domestic Noir is permeated with "this sense of inescapability of the past and women's entrapment within social systems that continue to replicate the problems faced by previous generations of women" (Kennedy 27). The genre's focus on thematic elements of feminine imprisonment, symbolic or otherwise, and eventual escape directly connects to the arguments posited by Gilbert and Gubar about common tropes of women's literature in the 19th century, while also adapting to include postmodern feminist concerns about race, class, and capitalism. Flynn's *Gone Girl* serves as a poignant example of this new *femme* subject position and as continued mediations on the legacy left to women writers after the publication of Gilbert and Gubar's foundational text. *Gone Girl* presents a caustic and piercing interrogation of gender relations in middle-class, white, suburban America, deconstructing traditional patriarchal narratives, subverting them, and then re-writing their prescribed endings. Flynn advances this agenda and perverts established narrative tropes to an almost *disturbing* degree, a purposeful artistic decision that has nevertheless contributed to the mixed feminist critical reactions her work has thus received. Yet through the marriage of Nick and Amy Elliot Dunne, Flynn is able to continue Gilbert and Gubar's original critique of the Angel v. Monster binary, before then radically inverting the gendered power structure of the Dunne coupling in order to pose new *femme*-focused narrative possibilities that both subvert and complicate simplistic patriarchal feminine identities. Additionally, she uses the novel's commentary to acknowledge the pervasive nature of patriarchal gender roles and their place within the socialization of Western culture.

Gone Girl opens the morning of Nick Dunne's fifth wedding anniversary as he bemoans "the return of a long-lost sound: Amy making

breakfast [...] a culinary orchestra tuning up, clattering vigorously toward the finale, a cake pan drum-rolling along the floor, hitting the wall with a cymballic crash" (Flynn 6). Despite the suggestion that his wife is doing something thoughtful in order to mark the occasion, Nick's reaction is perplexing as he articulates that "there's something disturbing about recalling a warm memory and feeling utterly cold" as "bile and dread inched up [his] throat" (7). The interaction between Nick and his wife in the first chapter is brief as he rushes off to work at the bar, which was bought with his wife's money, that he runs with his twin sister, Margo. However, when Amy is seemingly abducted from their home that same morning and Nick makes a series of errors, he quickly becomes the police's (and the reader's) prime suspect in her disappearance. As the first half of the novel continues, the chapters alternate between Nick's perspective from the morning his wife goes missing, and Amy Dunne's Diary, wherein she recounts the couple's meeting, courtship, and eventual marital woes as she proclaims in one of the final entries, "this man might kill me. So, if you find this and I'm dead, well [...] Sorry, that's not funny" (205).

Despite being one of our protagonists, questions of Nick's guilt are never fully answered in the first half of the text. He ostensibly cooperates with the police investigation into his wife's disappearance but remains cagey with the reader about the depths of his involvement. Nick never directly denies doing violence unto his wife, despite directly addressing the possibility to the reader at multiple points, including addressing the possible motivations he may have for the crime. As Amy, via her diary, fears for her own safety in the event of the dissolution of her marriage, Nick can only assign blame and argues to the reader that the fractured nature of their relationship is a result of Amy undergoing

[a]n awful fairy tale reverse transformation. Over just a few years, the old Amy, the girl of the big laugh and easy ways, literally shed herself, a pile of skin and soul on the floor, and out stepped this new, brittle, bitter Amy. My wife was no longer my wife but a knot of razor wire daring me to unloop her, and I was not up to the job with my thick, numb, nervous fingers... When I'd hold up the bloody stumps, she'd sigh and turn to her secret mental notebook on which she tallied all my deficiencies, forever noting disappointments, frailties, shortcomings. (Flynn 49)

But while Nick is busy peddling patriarchal tales of woe for the reader, Flynn's critical commentary on gender roles in the Dunne marriage is just beginning, as Nick never entertains the possibility that he is possibly also at fault for the failure of his marriage or that his demands of Amy to be the "girl of the big laugh and easy ways" are unreasonable in any way. The patriarchal hypocrisy of Nick's position becomes even more glaring when it is revealed that he has been engaging in an affair with one of his community college students, a much younger woman named Andie, for over a year leading up to his wife's disappearance.

But regardless of his philandering ways and how it may affect the reader's perception of him, Nick continues his patriarchal blame game by arguing that the Amy he fell in love with "was not the thing she became, the thing I feared most: an angry woman. I was not good with angry women. They brought out something in me that was unsavory" (49). As Amy moves from cherished wife to angry woman, she ceases to become a person, but a "thing." Nick places fault for his sexist ways on his equally misogynistic father, a man who "just didn't like women. He thought they were stupid, inconsequential, irritating. That dumb bitch. It was his favorite phrase for any woman who annoyed him: a fellow motorist, a waitress, our grade school teachers, none of whom he actually met, parent-teacher conferences stinking of the female realm as they did" (Flynn 60). While Nick is superficially critical of his dad's gendered beliefs about the female sex and the fact that they do not share a close relationship, he admits he feels his "father's rage rise up in [him] in the ugliest way. Amy could tell you about that. She would definitely tell you, if she were here" (61). Nick's comments to the reader and several unorthodox displays of questionable behavior early in the investigation, along with the knowledge he has been engaging in an affair, leave the police (and reader) highly suspicious of Nick's aw-shucks country boy persona and the middle-class, white, heterosexual toxic masculinity simmering below the surface.

The novel's impending sense of doom and claustrophobia is present in Nick's narration, but comes to the fore in Amy's diary entries, which spans over seven years, or the duration of the couple's relationship. The

Amy presented in the earlier entries is idealistic, naïve, and passive as she begins with “I am embarrassed at how happy I am, like some technicolor comic of a teenage girl talking on the phone with my hair in a ponytail, the bubble above my head saying: I met a boy!” (Flynn 10). But Nick ends up ghosting Amy, and she fails to hear from him for almost eight months before a random chance encounter on the streets of New York, where she categorizes her possible reactions to Nick’s sudden reappearance and half-baked excuses in the following manner:

I didn’t break my stride, just turned to him and said:

- a) ” Do I know you?” (manipulative, challenging)
- b) “Oh, wow, I’m so happy to see you!” (eager, doormat)
- 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 (Flynn 25)

It is here that Amy’s identity as a fledging Angel in the House comes into focus for the reader. The questionnaire format of Amy’s possible responses references her career as a journalist, though she self-deprecatingly refuses to call herself such, since her primary job is to create *Cosmopolitan*-esque quizzes that test women on various facets of their femininity and romantic relationships. Moreover, even though Amy makes a living as a writer, the cultural denigration of women’s magazine content is present in her anxieties about her career, which are exacerbated by a robust trust fund. Nick is also a journalist at a more male-skewed magazine, and as such has no compunction in claiming the title and the respect it commands, while denying his spouse the same consideration in an effort to undercut her financial affluence outside of his own contributions.

Unfortunately, Amy’s grooming to become the archetypical vision of the domestic Angel in the House begins long before she meets Nick and is propagated by her own parents, two children’s book authors who plagiarize and revise their own daughter’s childhood for their *Amazing Amy* series. Amy’s mistakes and choices as a child are often paraded for her parents’ general reading public as the “real Amy is always measured against the achievements of Amazing Amy, the myth that structures and

haunts the real woman's experiences" (Marso 862). Amy tacitly accepts the series and its success due to her sense of financial debt since her trust fund is built from the book series' proceeds. In the early days of their courtship, Amy's frustration with her parents and the public's obsession with Amazing Amy actually bonds her and Nick, as she conceptualizes his presence in her life as that of an ally. Regardless, the narrative personhood presented in Amy's diary closely aligns with the common characteristics of the Angel in the House. Her romantic relationship with Nick is the primary focus of each entry the reader is privy to, meaning we only learn about Amy through the prism of her husband and their relationship. Diary-Amy epitomizes the self-sacrifice of the Angel – indeed she is always supportive of others even when they deliberately mistreat her, as is the case with Nick and her parents. When he stands her up on their anniversary, in front of her friends no less, in order to get drunk with work buddies, the entry is primarily concerned with Amy's guilt at reacting so negatively to his actions, and eventually she acquiesces and apologizes. She admits "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" (Flynn 38). When Nick is laid off during the 2008 recession, he loafes around the house, spending Amy's trust fund indiscriminately, but when the recession also reveals the financial failures of Amy's parents, he is livid when she offers to drain most of her trust fund to bail them out. Amy does this despite knowing that her own lay off is just around the corner and that the resulting financial difficulties will cause her to suffer. When Nick's mother is diagnosed with cancer, without consulting his wife, he tells his sister that the couple will relocate from New York City to Carthage, Missouri, in order to help care for her. Amy, ever the Angel, dutifully follows.

Once the couple relocates, Amy uses the remaining dregs of her trust fund to purchase a home in a gated community gutted by the housing market collapse, as well as the aforementioned bar Nick runs with his sister. But far from being the fresh start she originally hoped for, the move engenders more tension within the Dunne marriage which Amy desperately attempts to salvage, all while refusing to relinquish her identity as the Angel. As Nick becomes more abrasive and eventually

mentally and physically abusive, Amy buys a gun for protection but does not leave or confront him, simply arguing that she would feel safer without making the logical connection between her increasingly erratic husband and her own fears. When Amy does finally disappear, it is with her Angel in the House image intact, so, unsurprisingly, the case is quickly picked up by the national news cycle. The case also garners the attention of Ellen Abbott,ⁱⁱⁱ a so-called protector and avenger of wronged women with her own cable network show. Amy's identity as an Angel in the House means that she is lauded as the ultimate victim, as she is white, heterosexual, married, upper middle class, and eventually, pregnant – the perfect idealized depiction of feminine tragedy. And so, the dichotomy is complete: Amy is the innocent Angel in the House, and Nick is the possibly-murderous monster who haunts her. But all is not what it seems, and Flynn utilizes a radical narrative shift to comment on the gendered construction of both figures and the bias which creates them, while also creating a millennial *femme* anti-heroine who will stop at nothing to be the author of her own story.

In a compelling turn at the halfway point in the novel, Amy boldly declares to the reader, "I'm so much happier now that I'm dead. Technically, missing. Soon to be presumed dead. But as shorthand, we'll say dead" (Flynn 220). Far from being an unfortunate victim, Amy has willingly disappeared after meticulously framing her unfaithful husband not only for her own murder, but that of their (fake) unborn child's as well. Diary Amy is revealed to be, at least in part, an elaborate falsification masking Amy's psychopathy in a complex rhetorical strategy meant to cater to the misogynistic inclinations of patriarchal, white middle-class America. However, the diary also represents the first step Amy takes in reclaiming and asserting her authorial agency against those who have threatened her subjectivity. When Amy discovers Nick's affair with the much younger Andie, it marks a watershed moment as she realizes she would "rather burn the world down than succumb to its gendered division of care – although she (and the novel) are hesitant to frame this preference in the language of feminism, despite the potential to read her anger through this lens. She refuses to capitulate to Nick's gendered logic and so asserts her choice to articulate herself as a subject

for whom there is no authentic self" (Johansen 45). From childhood, Amy is written upon by discourses out of her control, from her mother's difficulty carrying pregnancies to term, her parents psychopathically revising her childhood via *Amazing Amy*, to Nick's decision to trade her in for a younger version of the girl she used to be. All of which coalesce into a growing epiphany for the reader and Amy that she "is an artifice crafted not only by her parents but also by Nick's imagination, by capitalist profit motives, by her own expectations and perceived shortcomings" (Marso 882).

Flynn presents Amy's crisis of self in a similar narrative structure as Nick's previous chapters, a confessional tell-all style in which she coyly teases "I can tell you more about how I did everything, but I'd like you to know me first" (Flynn 220). By Amy's calculation, framing Nick for her murder is fairly metered out justice as her symbolic death can only be assuaged by Nick's own literal death by being consigned to death row for premeditated murder. However, Amy's motives far outstrip those of jealousy and wrath over an unfaithful husband, which she articulates in the most pivotal passage of the book: The Cool Girl monologue. Amy communicates to the reader her deep abiding rage and resentment at a system rigged in favor of patriarchal institutions that she has heretofore capitulated to, emulating "the girl who was in style, the girl a man like Nick wants: the Cool Girl [...] 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" (Flynn 222). While the Cool Girl figure Flynn articulates throughout the passage is marked by her contemporary socio-political context, the archetypal traits encapsulated by the Cool Girl render her a millennial version of Gilbert and Gubar's Angel in the House. Flynn's critique of performative gender also comes into focus in the passage as Amy willingly admits to knowingly enacting the Cool Girl persona in order to "win":

I waited patiently – years – for the pendulum to swing the other way, for men to start reading Jane Austen, learn how to knit, pretend to love cosmos, organize scrapbook parties, and make out with each other while we leer. And then we'd say, Yeah, he's a Cool Guy. But it never

happened. Instead, women across the nation colluded in our degradation [...] Every girl was supposed to be this girl, and if you weren't then there was something wrong with you. (Flynn 223)

Ultimately, Amy recognizes such performances are inherently fraudulent and unfulfilling. Nick's earlier comments about Amy undergoing a horrible transformation come into clearer focus for the reader as they come to the understanding that Nick's true conflict with his wife stems from his expectations of narrative authority, performative femininity, and her eventual acceptance of her role as a domestic Angel. When Amy, in his opinion, fails to effectively perform the patriarchal gender roles she did earlier in their relationship, instead of enacting productive self-reflexive considerations of his own faults, Nick seeks a new Cool Girl in the guise of Andie. And so, Amy begins 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). As Nick continues his affair, convinced his wife is clueless at home, Amy commandeers his narrative authority and begins to create a chronicle of her own that satirically caters to and deconstructs the rigid performative gender binaries women are forced to exist within.

Post-disappearance Amy is the primary site whereby Flynn continues her critique and deconstruction of feminine gender roles and patriarchal control of women's narratives. While hiding out at a rural mountain motel and watching television, Amy acerbically observes, "tampon commercial, detergent commercial, maxipad commercial, Windex commercial. You'd think all women do is clean and bleed" (Flynn 245). Yet, when Amy first leaves her life and marriage, she still struggles to fully divest herself from the mantle of the Cool Girl and still plans to kill herself in a manner that would suggest her body has been dumped by her husband. It is only after she has spent several days away from the marital home and has reasserted her narrative subjectivity to the reader that she makes the decision to live. Amy embraces themes of self-discovery as she begins to experiment with her gender performativity and recognizes much of her identity has been constructed for her to such a

point that she is unsure of even what hobbies she may like or not. Her body is also no longer a site for clear patriarchal discourse:

[Amy's] body was beautiful, perfect economy, every feature calibrated, everything in balance. I don't miss it. I don't miss men looking at me. It's a relief to walk into a convenience store and walk right back out without some hangabout in sleeveless flannel leering as I leave, some muttered bit of misogyny slipping from him like a nacho-cheese burp. Now no one is rude to me, but no one is nice to me either. No one goes out of their way, not overly, not really, not the way they used to. I am the opposite of Amy. (Flynn 250)

As Amy holes up in her cheap rented cabin, waiting for the national news cycle to pick up her case, she begins the arduous process of getting to know herself outside of gendered constraints and allows her more monstrous antipatriarchal impulses to rise to the surface.

It is Amy's disturbing actions, not her commentary, that primarily mark her as a *femme* anti-hero and explain why feminist critics seem recalcitrant to associate Amy and other Domestic Noir protagonists like her with the feminist literary project. As the narrative progresses, it is revealed that Amy has a history of dishing out her own version of vigilante justice. In addition to framing the (somewhat) innocent Nick for kidnapping and murder, she also fraudulently sets up and accuses a former boyfriend of rape before eventually dropping the charges.^{iv} After she becomes jealous of a childhood female friend,^v she manipulates her into posing as an *Amazing Amy* stalker to scare Amy's parents, which Amy, deceptively playing along, meticulously documents before then using said proof to have the friend legally prosecuted for stalking. Amy seeks little solidarity with the other women in her life, often characterizing them with sexist or misogynistic terms, such as when she refers to her neighbor Noelle, who she dupes into unknowingly contributing to Amy's plan to frame Nick, as a "good dog" (Flynn 266).

However, Amy's most controversial act in the narrative is the framing and murder of Desi Collings. After being robbed by other motel occupants who have discovered her real identity, Amy is penniless and on the run, Nick not yet having been arrested for her murder though he has fallen under suspicion. Unable to make money of her own, Amy is forced

back into the arms of the patriarchy when she reaches out to Desi, a former adolescent boyfriend she has remained in contact with, who has the resources to assist her and is unlikely to turn her in. While Desi intonates that he will provide Amy with funding as she plans her next steps, instead he intends to ensconce her as his own Angel in a (much larger) house. Amy grows increasingly anxious about her circumstances, as Desi “says I [Amy] am safe and loved even though he won’t let me leave, which doesn’t make me feel safe and loved. He’s left me no car keys, nor house keys, nor the gate security code. I am literally a prisoner – the gate is fifteen feet high, and there are no ladders in the house [...] He brings me something nice to eat, but not as nice as he’s had: he’s thinning me up, he always preferred his women waify” (Flynn 362). When Amy asks about the resources that Desi promised her when she first approached him, he menacingly replies, “if you ever left here and I didn’t know where you were, I’d have to go to the police. I’d have no choice” (363). Meanwhile, Nick has finally put the pieces together and recognized that not only does his wife know all his misdeeds in excruciating detail, she is also setting him up. Knowing that his only chance to remain free is to get Amy to reveal herself, Nick begins playing a performative game of his own, namely by reverting back to the charming awe-shucks country boy persona he originally used to lure Amy into courtship. But more importantly, Nick finally begins to see his wife for who she is and surprisingly, is not entirely horrified, admitting to the reader:

I’d had this feeling too, in the past month, when I wasn’t wishing Amy harm [...] I’d detect a nib of admiration, and more than that fondness for my wife, right in the middle of me, right in the gut. To know exactly what I wanted to hear in those notes, to woo me back to her, even to predict all my wrong moves [...] the woman knew me cold. Better than anyone in the world, she knew me. All this time I’d thought we were strangers, and it turned out we knew each other intuitively, in our bones, in our blood. It was kind of romantic. Catastrophically romantic. (Flynn 385)

As Nick comes to the stunning above realization, Amy grows increasingly desperate as Desi continues to corral her back into a passive performative subject position as Angel in the House. When she realizes that Nick is playing her game and asking her to return to save him, Amy enacts her

most violent plan yet by manufacturing evidence to suggest that she has been held against her will by Desi Collings for the entire duration of her disappearance and he is ultimately responsible for kidnapping her from her home. When Desi returns to Amy after a day of work, she seduces him and after he ejaculates, providing more damning physical evidence, Amy slits his throat, and he bleeds out. By murdering Desi, Amy finally repudiates her former identity as Cool Girl and Angel in the House, and ultimately embraces a new identity as Gilbert and Gubar's Monstrous woman. Soaked in Desi's blood, Amy returns to Nick, ready to hash out concessions and new rules for their fundamentally restructured marital identities.

Despite glaring inconsistencies in her narrative, due to Amy's masterful manipulation and newly discovered ability to don and shed performative femininity like a second skin, she is able to convince the police that Desi is the perpetrator of her ordeal. Playing on the patriarchal impulses of the detectives assigned to her case, Amy gleefully performs her perverse role of a passive feminine victim, and with the exception of one female detective, they swallow her tale of woe without question. Amy is able to return to her former life, but far from being a regression, she does so in the superior power position and in a manner that allows her to regain much of the affluence she lost when moving to Missouri. In one stroke, Amy is able to rewrite Nick's narrative from that of possible wife-killer to flawed hero who was wrongfully accused – a gift she can rescind at any time. When Nick begins writing a tell-all about his wife's crimes, subtly titled *Psycho Bitch*, Amy enacts her ultimate parody of patriarchal social codes and using a semen donation Nick thought was destroyed, inseminates herself. The resulting pregnancy effectively solidifies Amy's ideological victory over her husband, who in a radical reversal becomes the self-sacrificial Angel in the House. Destroying what little evidence he has managed to collect proving his wife's misdeeds, Nick ultimately deletes *Psycho Bitch* while admitting, "I had been thoroughly, finally outplayed. I created a manuscript, and she created life [...] I deleted my story" (Flynn 411-412). It is a subversive reversal of fortunes as the 'penis' is no longer required in order to create feminine subjecthood and narrative authority. Amy begins to inhabit the masculine gender roles in

her marriage, dictating decisions she previously had little say in. Conversely, Nick becomes the nurturing man, focused on questions of parenthood and a concerted effort to right the wrongs of both his and Amy's past, as he accepts that he is "a prisoner after all. Amy had me forever, or as long as she wanted, because I needed to save my son, to try to unhook, unlatch, debarb, undo everything Amy did. I would literally lay down my life for my child, and do it happily" (Flynn 411-412). And so, the novel's gendered inversion is complete: Amy embraces her identity as a Monstrous woman while continuing to pervert the figure's common tropes by also becoming a mother, an act usually only reserved for the Angel, and Nick willingly sacrifices his own subjectivity in order to raise and protect his child, becoming the Angel in the House.

However, *Gone Girl*'s ending leaves much ambiguity for the reader and for the characters of the text. Despite being ostensibly afraid of his wife and what she could possibly do to him, Nick comes to the stunning realization that even if he could escape from his current predicament, his own identity is so enmeshed with that of his *femme fatale* wife:

Who would I be without Amy to react to? Because she was right: as a man, I had been my most impressive when I loved her – and my next best self when I hated her. I had only known Amy seven years, but I couldn't go back to life without her. I couldn't return to an average life. I knew a part of me would be looking at [a 'normal' girl] and thinking: you've never murdered for me. You've never framed me. You wouldn't even know how to begin to do what Amy did. You could never possibly care that much. (Flynn 397)

Nick is unerringly changed by witnessing his monstrous wife at work and while he may be shocked by the actions she takes, he has far more respect and consideration for the real monstrous version of Amy than he ever did for performative angelic Amy. Nick closes his last chapter by articulating a complete and unconditional surrender of gendered binaries that once governed his marriage and his identity, as he rises to his "wife's level of madness. Because I can feel her changing me again: I was a callow boy, and then a man, good and bad. Now at last I'm the hero. I'm the one to root for in the never-ending war story of our marriage. It's a story I can

live with. Hell, at this point, I can't imagine my story without Amy. She is my forever antagonist. We are one long frightening climax" (Flynn 413).

Gone Girl, along with Amy and Nick's tumultuous mutating marriage, displays an interesting mediation on contemporary gender roles and the repressive binaries women are forced to exist within. Flynn also interrogates instances of feminine rage and violence, forcing the reader to confront their own gendered notions of womanhood and differing feminisms. Much of the controversy surrounding the text is focused on Amy's disturbing acts of vengeance and violence, but as Marso astutely points out:

Why shouldn't feminists take an interest in these texts featuring women who might be easily dismissed, even condemned as crazy, vengeful, and slutty? Viewers are presented with stories about women who embody the characteristics of seemingly idealized femininity – they are white, middle-class, heterosexual, and cosmopolitan. And yet, the eruption of female violence against a man in each signal deep levels of dissatisfaction and anger [...] With Beauvoir, we can see how women's seemingly pathological feelings and acts of violence, produced in isolation and conditions of oppression, might be read as signs of resistance. They also signal the need for feminist collectivity and solidarity. (869)

Flynn echoes Marso's final point in her novel – though for all intents and purposes Amy "wins" the ideological conflict that has dominated the text, in many ways her victory is somewhat hollow. While Amy has incited deep abiding change within the gendered realities of her relationship, any gains she makes are ultimately contained within the Dunne marriage and will not contribute to any sense of feminist solidarity and growth. This is evidenced in the restless nature of Amy's last chapter, which also ends the novel itself, when she attests, "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" (Flynn 415).

Moreover, Flynn's work, along with other Domestic Noir fiction, represents a contemporary reckoning with the Angel/ Monster dichotomy posited by Gilbert and Gubar decades previously. As an author, Flynn is able to effectively integrate her background as an entertainment journalist with astute critiques of contemporary popular culture, while also continuing Gilbert and Gubar's mission of complicating fiction-based

gender binaries by calling attention to the plethora of ways modern women are still subjected to rigid feminine gender roles and their reactions to such an imprisonment. Where Flynn expands Gilbert and Gubar's original thesis is by applying the Angel/ Monster dichotomy to more fluid conceptions of biological sex and gender, reflecting our growing cultural awareness about gender fluidity and toxic masculinity. This is illustrated in Nick's narrative journey from monster to feminized angel, despite his biological and gender identity being definitively male and masculine. Both Amy and Nick embody clear components of the Angel and Monster at various points in the text, usually in direct opposition to each other. When the novel opens, Diary-Amy is the only connection the reader has to "missing" Amy, and she is the quintessential Angel in the House and Nick is her Monstrous counterpart. As the narrative develops, these identities and their gendered roots are forced into collision within the microcosm of the Dunne marriage. As Amy reveals her true nature, the scales begin to tip in reverse order as Amy slowly gives in to a more authentic and rageful self while Nick learns what it is to live with gendered constraints and acquiesces into the Angel in the House.

It is understandable that Gilbert and Gubar echo the Woolf-ian call for women artists to annihilate both the Angel and the Monster, as it is difficult to propose a context where the use of such archetypes could be useful for the feminist project. However, patriarchal institutions are under no such compunction and will continue to obsessively apply such reductive, simplistic gender binaries in any media they are able, though these figures may go by many names depending on the socio-historical context, such as the *femme fatale* or the Manic Pixie Dream Girl. As such, it is imperative that women creators of cultural content and feminist scholars alike continue to engage, complicate, and re-envision how these reductive stereotypes can be redeployed with feminist goals, even if the actions of those characters deliberately make us uncomfortable. Flynn does not kill either the Angel or the Monster in *Gone Girl*, but instead employs tropes from these eponymous archetypes and their various cultural derivatives to conduct a scathing critique of white, heterosexual middle-class America's obsessive adherence to gender roles, while also expanding Gilbert and Gubar's original hypothesis by incorporating

postmodern awareness of gender fluidity and discussions of toxic masculinity.

Notes:

ⁱ This is an obvious reference to and expansion of Gilbert and Gubar's Monstrous (Mad)Woman.

ⁱⁱ This is a thinly-veiled reference to Gilbert and Gubar's Angel in the House.

ⁱⁱⁱ A biting satire of news anchor Nancy Grace.

^{iv} It should be noted that David Fincher's film adaptation *Gone Girl* (2014) drastically changes how this conflict plays out. While in the novel she drops the charges before he can be convicted, in Fincher's version she follows through, ruining her former lover's life by making him a sex offender – in turn making Amy even more monstrous than her novel counterpart. It is difficult not to find Fincher's creative decision as yet another example of masculinist interruptions of Amy's narrative, even after the publication of the original novel.

^v *Gone Girl*, like many Domestic Noirs, focuses on heterosexual pairings in order to conduct their gender critiques. However, out of the four individuals that Amy "punishes" for perceived misdeeds, three are former lovers, suggesting that Amy's victimization of her childhood girlfriend is also motivated by sexual attraction and jealousy. This presents possibilities for a queered reading of Amy and *Gone Girl*.

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