

‘Safer to be feared than loved’: The Domestic Noir Fiction of Gillian Flynn

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Declaration

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Summary

This thesis explores the American crime writer Gillian Flynn's contributions to the subgenre of domestic noir fiction and the extent to which these contributions have been fundamental in formally and thematically shaping the subgenre, which has exploded in popularity over the past ten years. The subgenre takes as its focus the inner lives of women for whom the domestic space and the roles that they inhabit therein (wife, mother, mistress, victim) prove challenging, sometimes violent and existentially threatening. The introduction expands on existing critical work on the crime genre and the extent to which this thesis builds on the work of those critics while contributing to the burgeoning body of scholarship on domestic noir fiction.

Chapter one discusses Flynn's debut novel, *Sharp Objects*, and the genesis of certain domestic noir 'tropes'. This chapter is divided into a section on the malign maternal influence embodied by the character of Adora, a section on the *filles fatale* who populate the novel, and a section on the physical and mental trauma exhibited by the women of Wind Gap. The first section of this chapter touches on Lee and Katharine Horsley's writing on the *mères fatale* and the dearth of maternal subjectivity in cultural depictions of murderous and violent mothers. The negotiation of maternal identity and the struggle to retain a sense of self amidst the demands of motherhood has become something of a thematic cornerstone of the domestic noir subgenre, and Flynn's examination of the (literally) toxic maternal bonds which shape and bind her characters exemplifies its potential to engage with ideas of maternal subjectivity. The second section of this chapter explores the figure of the *fille fatale*, embodied by Amma, and the generational trauma which informs her character and has driven her to a violent reclamation of power. The work of Samantha Lindop and Kristen Hatch informed my reading of Amma as a 'mean girl' who is grappling

with the gendered limitations of her position and inflicting pain as a survival mechanism. The third section of this chapter looks at the extent to which the novel's female characters have internalised the gendered violence which pervades their world and resorted to modes of self-destruction in order to better understand it. These instances of self-harm punctuate the novel and throw into sharp relief the violated female bodies which symbolically dominate the genre; Flynn confronts what Delys Bird and Brenda Walker calls the 'maleness' of the genre via her depiction of female aggression, particularly female aggression turned inward.

Chapter two focuses on Flynn's second novel, *Dark Places*, and discusses the ways in which it, like *Sharp Objects*, explores and expands upon the developing generic framework of domestic noir. The first section of this chapter examines the mythologization of male violence and the extent to which Flynn deconstructs that mythologization of that violence. The gendered paradigms of violence and victimhood are exposed through her depiction of 'Satanic panic' and the construction of true crime narratives that validate those paradigms. The second section of this chapter centres on the role of affective labour in the novel and its depiction of working poverty, something which the subgenre has largely refrained from exploring in the years following the publication of Flynn's 2009 novel. The financial precarity of the central characters is a key plot point throughout the novel, and through the character of Patty the reader is privy to the nigh-impossible balancing act of debt, affective labour and work outside the home which drives her to offer herself up as a sacrifice in the futile hope of ensuring financial security for her children. The third section of this chapter discusses Flynn's decision to map her female characters' trauma onto animal bodies throughout the novel, something which, again, challenges the crime genre's tendency to centre violated and exposed female bodies. This section is informed by the work of Susan McHugh, Angela Carter, and Carol J. Adams, and takes as its starting point the Derridean assertion that 'murder' is something of a privileged term which exposes our implicit biases

with regard to victimhood and subjectivity. The exploited and brutalised animal bodies which dominate this novel call to mind, and invite us to question, the destroyed female body as spectacle.

The third chapter examines Flynn's most recent and well-known novel, *Gone Girl*, which has served as something of a domestic noir 'blueprint' for the novels which followed it. The first section of this chapter discusses the spectre of female domesticity and the ways in which main character Amy both embraces and abjures this spectre; the work of Melanie Waters and Rebecca Munford, who assert that the postfeminist mystique serves to glamourize domestic femininity and the figure of the 'happy housewife', informed this section. Within it, I examine the inevitably violent consequences of Amy's struggle to navigate this role. The second section of this chapter looks at the 'dead girl' worship which Amy exploits in her act of self-erasure; as the 'gone girl', she is deified, sought after, and beloved. Flynn's examination of the 'missing white woman' syndrome and the perceived value of certain female lives (and bodies) is the focal point of this section, and Amy's ability to exploit her own status as a 'dead' middle-class white woman reveals the fundamental imbalance of structural power which drives media narratives like the one she has created and manipulated to her own ends. The final section of this chapter explores the ever-controversial 'girl'hood of Amy, and the domestic noir heroines who have followed in her footsteps. While the 'girl'ing of adult female heroines has often been decried as infantilising and reductive, in this section I explore the possibility that, in claiming or *re*claiming girlhood, these female characters are challenging cultural constructions of girlhood as something frivolous, fleeting and insubstantial. The 'girls' of domestic noir fiction need not be read as women who have fallen victim to a cultural narrative which privileges youth – perhaps they seek to reclaim and reshape that narrative.

The conclusion of this thesis notes the subgenre's continued presence on bestseller lists, despite doubts about its longevity; the 'blueprint' established by Flynn has been

fundamental to the success of authors like Harriet Tyce, Megan Abbott, and Jessica Knoll, whose work builds on this generic framework and facilitates the continued evolution of the subgenre. In addition to Flynn's impact on the genre, I briefly discuss her upcoming projects and offer a synopsis of the preceding chapters. I also discuss the extent to which, in mapping the generic progression of domestic noir via Flynn's work, I became aware of the subgenre's limitations with regard to representation, particularly in terms of class, race, and gender. While domestic noir fiction has illuminated the lived experience of a certain *type* of woman, there is much work to be done in terms of representing female characters who fall outside of that white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class archetype, and I hope that future scholarship on the subgenre will build on my work in examining the subgenre's evolution and potential for representation.

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To my father, Tommy – I wish that you were here to celebrate this milestone with me, but

I know how proud you would be. We cherish your memory every day.

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Introduction

Gillian Flynn's small but highly influential body of work, comprising just three novels and one novella (*Sharp Objects*, 2006, *Dark Places*, 2009, *Gone Girl*, 2012, and *The Grownup*, 2015), has been credited with 'helping to establish one of the hottest new categories in publishing: Domestic Noir.'¹ In particular, Flynn's 2012 novel *Gone Girl* has been heralded as the 'patient zero' of a recent influx of domestic noir narratives², having debuted at number two on the *New York Times* bestseller list upon publication and subsequently spending ninety-one weeks on the list³, while garnering positive reviews from critics and readers alike⁴. The novel was cinematically adapted in 2014, directed by David Fincher and screenwritten by Flynn herself, and reaped further critical plaudits and award nominations for its 'classy narcissistic humour [and] exploitation-inflected thrills.'⁵ Flynn's success paved the way for other authors of domestic noir fiction to climb the bestseller lists, including Paula Hawkins, whose 2015 novel *The Girl on the Train* enjoyed enormous success, debuting at number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list⁶ and earning the author a spot above *Song of Ice and Fire* author George R. R. Martin on *Forbes*'s list of the world's highest-paid authors.⁷ Other runaway domestic noir successes have included A.S.A

¹ Bernice Murphy, 'We Will Have a Happy Marriage If It Kills Him': Gillian Flynn and the Rise of Domestic Noir' in *Twenty-First Century Popular Fiction* [ed. Bernice Murphy and Stephen Matterson] (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p.160.

² Jane Sullivan, *Turning Pages: The dominance of Gone Girl in the domestic noir world* (2015) <<https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/turning-pages-the-dominance-of-gone-girl-in-the-domestic-noir-world-20150904-gjft0.html>> [accessed 10 June 2018].

³ Justin Worland, *Gone Girl Book Sales Surge Before Movie Release* (2014) <<http://time.com/3461960/gone-girl-book-sales-surge-before-movie-release/>> [accessed 8 June 2018].

⁴ For more on positive reviews from critics see: Janet Maslin, *The Lies That Buoy, Then Break a Marriage* (2012) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/30/books/gone-girl-by-gillian-flynn.html>> [accessed 9 June 2018].

⁵ Mark Kermode, *Gone Girl review – two different readings of a modern marriage* (2014) <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/oct/05/gone-girl-review-two-different-readings-modern-marriage>> [accessed 9 June 2018].

⁶ *The Girl On The Train is a #1 New York Times Bestseller* (2015) <<http://www.penguin.com/newsroom/girl-train-1-new-york-times-bestseller/>> [accessed 2 June 2018].

⁷ Alison Flood, *Girl on the Train carries Paula Hawkins into list of world's richest authors* (2016) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/aug/03/girl-on-the-train-carries-paula-hawkins-into-list-of-worlds-richest-authors>> [accessed 8 June 2018].

Harrison's *The Silent Wife* (2013), which saw a boost in sales following the tremendous success enjoyed by *Gone Girl*⁸, and Jessica Knoll's 2015 novel *Luckiest Girl Alive*, which was the most successful debut novel of 2015.⁹ More recently, the success of A.J. Finn's 2018 debut novel *The Woman in the Window* has indicated that readers have not yet tired of the domestic noir genre; Finn's novel earned him a \$2 million dollar advance and debuted at number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list.¹⁰

Defining domestic noir

Domestic noir -- sometimes referred to as 'suburban noir', the 'marriage thriller', 'grip lit' or, more sneeringly, 'chick noir'¹¹-- is a sub-genre of crime fiction that centres on the lived experience of women whose identity is tied to the private sphere and the unique anxieties therein. The term 'domestic noir' has been used to describe female-centric film noir of the 1940s and 50s, such as *In A Lonely Place* (1950) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) and even older novels of psychological suspense such as *The Woman in White* (1859), *Jane Eyre* (1847), and *Rebecca* (1938).¹² According to Sally Williamson, who refers to

⁸ Julie Bosman, *A Sleeper Success Defines Novelist's Debut and Legacy* (2013)

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/05/books/the-novel-silent-wife-benefits-from-success-of-gone-girl.html?mtrref=www.google.com&gwh=E7EAA25FEC83A48AFE71216C78C5006E&gwt=pay>> [accessed 8 June 2018].

⁹ Seija Rankin, *How Jessica Knoll is changing what it means to be a successful author* (2018)

<<http://ew.com/books/2018/05/14/jessica-knoll-success-the-favorite-sister/>> [accessed 8 June 2018].

¹⁰ Keziah Weir, *Your Book Editor Just Snagged Your Spot on the Best-Seller List* (2018)

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/19/books/aj-finn-the-woman-in-the-window-daniel-mallory.html>> [accessed 12 June 2018].

¹¹ See Luana Lewis, *Trends in crime fiction: from psychological thrillers to domestic noir* (2014)

<<http://londonwritersclub.com/2014/06/trends-in-crime-fiction-from-psychological-thrillers-to-domestic-noir/>> [accessed 8 July 2020], and Jon Stock, *Our growing appetite for 'chick noir'* (2014)

<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booknews/10574425/Our-growing-appetite-for-chick-noir.html>> [accessed 9 March 2017].

¹² See Ruth Dugdall, *Ten Things you didn't know about Domestic Noir* (2015)

<<http://www.femalefirst.co.uk/books/nowhere-girl-ruth-dugdall-889157.html>> [accessed 17 May 2018], and Bernice Murphy, 'Gillian Flynn and the Rise of Domestic Noir', in *Twenty-First Century Popular Fiction* [ed. Bernice Murphy and Stephen Matterson] (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p.160. Stefania Ciocia explores some of these cinematic antecedents of domestic noir in her essay 'Hollywood and the Trailblazers of Domestic Noir: The Case of Vera Caspary's *Laura*' in *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction* [ed. Laura Ellen Joyce and Henry Sutton] (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp.27-49. Sarah Weinman's anthology of short stories, *Troubled Daughters, Twisted Wives*, explores some mid-twentieth century examples of psychological suspense fiction, including the short stories of female writers like Margaret Millar

Rebecca as a ‘psychological thriller,’ ‘the genre [of domestic noir] isn’t new, it’s just been called something a little different.’ For Williamson, ‘*Gone Girl* definitely reinvigorated [and] defined [the psychological thriller] for the 21st century’.¹³

Specific anxieties regarding marital discord, economic insecurity, motherhood and suppressed psychological trauma punctuate narratives of domestic noir. According to author and critic Megan Abbott, domestic noir explores and gives expression to aspects of female experience which had heretofore been dismissed as inconsequential:

[domestic noir is] dealing with the sort of perils of being a woman today, of marriages falling apart, of ambivalence with motherhood, the complexities of relationships among women — all this stuff that in some ways isn't taken very seriously by the culture at large, is considered — and I'm quoting here — ‘women's magazine fodder,’ but it's actually very real to readers.¹⁴

As a result, this sub-genre often serves to highlight certain female experiences in a way that much, often male-authored, classical and contemporary crime fiction, (concerned as it often is with ratiocination and the exposition of crime as a social phenomenon) may neglect to.

Much has been written about Flynn and domestic noir; however, given the fact that *Gone Girl* was published so recently, in 2012, and set in train the recent trend for domestic noir thrillers, critical work on Flynn and on domestic noir fiction still exists mainly in non-academic sources: in reviews, newspapers articles, interviews, blogposts, and think pieces.¹⁵

and Barbara Callahan, whose work has been all but forgotten by readers and critics (Sarah Weinman, *Troubled Daughters, Twisted Wives* (London: Penguin Books, 2013).

¹³ Ben East, *On the dark side: a look at the rise of ‘domestic noir’ novels* (2016) <<https://www.thenational.ac/arts-culture/on-the-dark-side-a-look-at-the-rise-of-domestic-noir-novels-1.147670>> [accessed 23 May 2018].

¹⁴ ‘The ‘Girl’ In The Title: More Than A Marketing Trend’, *Morning Edition*, NPR, 22 February 2016, Online Sound Recording, NPR.org <<https://www.npr.org/2016/02/22/467392750/the-girl-in-the-title-more-than-a-marketing-trend>> [accessed 16 May 2018].

¹⁵ See Megan Abbott, *Crime fiction in 2015: the rise of the Girl that could be any of us* (2015) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/dec/29/crime-fiction-gone-girl-on-the-train-2015>> [accessed 8 June 2018], Joanna Rothkopf, *The Anti-Lisbeth Salanders: Gillian Flynn's Tough Heroines* (2012) <<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/09/the-anti-lisbeth-salanders-gillian-flynn-s-tough-heroines/262103/>> [accessed 8 June 2018], and Terrence Rafferty, *Women Are Writing the Best Crime Novels* (2016) <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/07/women-are-writing-the-best-crime-novels/485576/>> [accessed 7 June 2018].

Many of these responses centre on debates with regard to the feminist credentials of the (often pathological) heroines of these novels; these discussions frequently expose many of the gendered preconceptions which the genre seeks to challenge. For example, Amy, the deceitful murderess at the heart of *Gone Girl*, is described by blogger Robert Palmer as ‘stereotypically evil,’ he continues: ‘if we strapped a bunch of Men’s Rights Advocates to beds and downloaded their nightmares, I don’t think we’d come up with stuff half as ridiculous as this plot’.¹⁶ Such criticisms are somewhat reductive, in that they fail to speak to the complexity of the character (perhaps the most notorious heroine of the more recent crop of domestic noir novels¹⁷) and fail to account for her popularity, and that of similar anti-heroines, among readers of a genre which is primarily marketed to, and read by, women, with surveys finding that 68 per cent of thriller readers are women.¹⁸

In light of the phenomenal success of Flynn’s novels and the successive popularity of domestic noir and the as-yet unexplored cultural and literary significance of this popularity, a scholarly study is timely and necessary. Although there are many seminal and highly-respected literary histories and analyses of the crime genre, which will be discussed later in this chapter, it is only in 2018 that we saw the first scholarly work on Flynn (Murphy; Sutton and Joyce). This doctoral study aims to address this critical breach and, in doing so, to argue for the importance of Gillian Flynn and domestic noir in the development of the crime genre.

This doctoral research will explore the work of Gillian Flynn, arguing that her contributions to the domestic noir genre have been fundamental in cementing it as a literary means of exploring and responding to the limitations of depictions of feminine

¹⁶ Robert Palmer, *Gone Girl and the Specter of Feminism* (USA: Interrogating Media, 2012).

¹⁷ Katey Rich, *Why Gone Girl’s Amy Dunne Is the Most Disturbing Female Villain of All Time* (2015) <<https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2015/03/gone-girl-amy-psychopath>> [accessed 8 June 2018].

¹⁸ Rebecca Whitney, *Are women hardwired to love thrillers?* (2015) <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/11440540/Thrillers-and-crime-novels-Are-women-hardwired-to-love-them.html>> [accessed 15 June 2018].

identity in contemporary crime fiction. Flynn's female characters are, in her own words, often 'violent, wicked women. Scary women,' she goes on to explain the importance of shifting attention towards this type of character in crime fiction: 'women have spent so many years girl-powering ourselves – to the point of almost parodic encouragement – we've left no room to acknowledge our dark side. Dark sides are important. They should be nurtured like nasty black orchids'.¹⁹ Crucially, Flynn's work also goes some way towards reclaiming the violent male gaze which has reigned supreme in much of classical and contemporary popular crime fiction. Her narratives rarely shy away from depicting violence against the female body, but do so in a way that is typically anything but titillating or salacious. Her famously pragmatic *Gone Girl* heroine Amy epitomises this when she stages the scene of her own abduction and possible murder – she leaves a room in subtle disarray, with pints of her own blood spilled onto the kitchen floor and then cleaned up with the carelessness she knows to be typical of her husband Nick's housekeeping skills. What remains is a scene suggestive of domestic violence and potentially femicide, with the absence of the destroyed female body and the invisibility of her blood a potent rejoinder to the exploitative deconstruction of women's bodies in many popular crime narratives.

Gender, victimhood, and the dead female in the crime genre

The complex and often exploitative relationship between crime fiction and female victimhood has existed since the genre was in its infancy. Poe's 1841 detective story 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', his first to feature the exploits of his detective Auguste Dupin, a shrewdly analytical precursor to Doyle's more well-known Sherlock Holmes, revolves around the gruesome murder of a Parisian mother and daughter, discovered

¹⁹ Kelly Wynne, *Gillian Flynn, 'Sharp Objects' and the Importance of the Female Antihero* (2018) <<https://www.newsweek.com/gillian-flynn-sharp-objects-and-importance-female-anti-hero-1018562>> [accessed 21 June 2020].

‘fearfully mutilated... the corpse of the daughter, head downward, [had been] forced up the narrow [chimney]... upon the face were many severe scratches, and, upon the throat, dark bruises... [the mother had] her throat so entirely cut that... the head fell off.’²⁰ The curious circumstances of the crime provides an irresistible puzzle for the male detective (both women were in a locked room four storeys above ground level, no valuables appear to have been taken, and witnesses report hearing a pair of unfamiliar voices at the time of the murder). Dupin’s famed love of ‘ratiocination’, the process of reasoned deduction by which he meticulously ascertains the series of events which have culminated in this grisly tableau of female dismemberment, allows him to ‘solve’ the mystery, using the butchered and inevitably silent bodies of both women to emphasise his own prodigious male intellect, grounded as it is in cool logic.

‘Rue Morgue’ set something of a precedent for Poe’s Dupin, as he would go on, in the 1842 tale ‘The Mystery of Marie Rogêt’, to again use the dehumanised and destroyed female body as the foundation of his ratiocinative enterprise. In this story, based on the real-life murder of Mary Rogers, a young woman whose body was found in the Hudson River in 1841 and whose killer has never been found, Poe attempts to use Dupin’s impeccable reasoning to ‘solve’ this crime, with mixed results. The descriptions of Marie’s body lack some of the salaciousness of those afforded to the ‘Rue Morgue’ victims - perhaps because Poe attempts, with this story, to criticise the sensationally gruesome media coverage of such crimes, saying that: ‘we should bear in mind that, in general, it is the object of our newspapers rather to create a sensation – to make a point - than to further the cause of truth. The latter end is only pursued when it seems coincident with the former’.²¹ Her remains, however, are still pored over with something akin to voyeurism:

²⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Barnes & Noble Inc, 2006), p.375-376.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p758.

‘the flesh of the neck was much swollen... she had been subjected to brutal violence. A piece of lace was found tied so tightly around the neck as to be hidden from sight; it was completely buried in the flesh’.²²

Dupin’s efforts to solve the enigma presented by this woman, silenced so violently as to have her throat crushed, constitute something of an additional violation, as her life and death is subsequently framed by his passionless and painstaking investigative technique. Her body, according to Lucy Elizabeth Frank, becomes a collection of discretely decipherable clues via which the male detective can once again substantiate his own superior intellect, reduced ‘to so much rotting material and a jumble of dismembered, de-sexed parts’.²³ Certainly, Poe’s own assertion that ‘death [is most melancholy] when it most closely allies itself to Beauty: the death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world’²⁴ is central to the gendered balance of power in these early detective stories, and has been perpetuated, to greater and lesser degrees, in many of the crime narratives which followed. The classical detective novel, espoused by Poe and Doyle, then, was typically a celebration of the ‘detached rationalism’²⁵ of the (often male) detective, and thus the object of his investigative prowess (usually a victimised woman).

By contrast, the hardboiled detective fiction made popular by the likes of Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain in novels such as *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940) and *Double Indemnity* (1943), described by Chandler as a sort of antidote to the classical detective story²⁶, which he criticised for its over-reliance on plot contrivances and lack of realism, is equally reliant on a heteronormatively gendered binary with regard to the paradigms of

²² Ibid., p.759.

²³ Lucy Elizabeth Frank, *Representations of Death in Nineteenth-century US Writing and Culture* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), p.173.

²⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Barnes & Noble Inc, 2006), p.179.

²⁵ Lee Horsley, *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.36.

²⁶ Raymond Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

victimhood and villainy. While the terms ‘hard-boiled’ and ‘noir’ are often used interchangeably, they denote two slightly different types of narrative: the hardboiled novel (*The Maltese Falcon*, 1930, and Chandler’s *The Long Goodbye*, 1953, for instance), typically revolves around the figure of the detective, whose immersion in a world of violence and degradation is crucial to the momentum of the plot. These novels tend to be more action-based, with gangsters, fistfights and dangerously alluring women on every other page: ‘Hard-boiled crime fiction transformed [classic detective fiction] by radicalizing its tensions. In the novels of Cain, Hammett, Chandler, and their peers, civil society can no longer contain private desire [...] the idea of a common culture seems both profoundly appealing and ultimately unbelievable’.²⁷

Most of Chandler’s contributions to the genre revolve around the violent tribulations of a jaded, hard-drinking private investigator named Philip Marlowe, a man who lacks the quasi-omniscience of Dupin and Holmes, but makes up for it with a cynical knack for discerning the worst impulses of the people around him. *The Big Sleep* (1939), the first novel-length Marlowe tale, centres on his attempts to disentangle a mystery surrounding two sisters, where he confronts murder, blackmail, sexual jealousy and female violence. As with Dupin, the ultimate object of his investigative interest is the female body – in this case, not a silent receptacle for male violence but an implicit, and active, threat to masculine supremacy in the public sphere. Many of the women Marlowe engages with in his novelistic debut and later in *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940) fit the *femme fatale* archetype – they are typically coded as promiscuous and enigmatically hostile, posing an ambiguous threat to the supposed gendered dominance of the ‘tough guy’ detective. According to Horsley, Chandler positions these women in such a way that Marlowe’s desperation to

²⁷ Sean McCann, *Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), p.4.

avoid succumbing to the creeping contamination he is surrounded by is brought to the fore:

In fact, he habitually places the dangerous woman at the centre of his plots, in what many have interpreted as a neurotic response to the sexy manipulative woman, associated with ‘the nastiness’ of which Marlowe fears he has become a part. Resistant to the depraved society around him, Marlowe assumes a role often compared to that of the questing knight, undergoing tests that involve skill in arms, fearlessness, and integrity.²⁸

Whereas the ruthlessly logical protagonist of the classic detective novel was usually allowed to engage with the silenced female body on his own terms (Dupin’s ‘reading’ of the brutalised body of Marie Rogêt, for example), Marlowe, the epitome of hardboiled masculinity (complete with a profound internal struggle to lay claim to that masculinity in an urban landscape tainted with sexual and racial conflict), must ‘solve’ the problems these women pose even as they actively, and skilfully, attempt to thwart him. Vivian and Carmen Sternwood, the sisters at the centre of *The Big Sleep*, upset the gendered balance of power by withholding crucial knowledge from Marlowe and attempting, at various points in the novel, to exercise sexual control over him. Marlowe’s own vulnerability is apparent in these moments, and we see him tied up, knocked out, beaten and unconscious, and this is quite common for the hardboiled hero. According to Megan Abbott, ‘These men repeatedly find themselves dissembling, fainting, unconscious, overpowered, and out of control while their ideals of masculinity continue to require of them self-discipline, toughness, and the quintessential hardness that gives the genre its name’.²⁹

The instability and incoherence underpinning this disjunction between masculine ideal and painful reality is reflected in the urban landscape men like Marlowe traverse. It’s ugly, dark and treacherous, teeming with conmen and killers. The Los Angeles of the

²⁸ Lee Horsley, *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 81-82.

²⁹ Megan Abbott, *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p.7.

hardboiled crime novel, according to Mike Davis, is ‘a deracinated urban hell’.³⁰ In the midst of this bleak chaos, the male detective can only take control of the narrative via the subjection of the female body, refusing to submit to her sexual dominance, dismissing her as ‘crazy’ or impulsive and using the male gaze to diminish her. Maysaa Husam Jaber writes that ‘the body of the criminal woman speaks of her femininity and is an object of desire, yet it also operates as a means for the woman to express agency through using bodily charms to perform acts of transgression [...] the body is seen as a threat, a danger that has to be regulated’.³¹

According to Christopher Breu, ‘hard-boiled masculinity, in its externalization of masculinity as a prophylactic toughness, its investment in moral detachment [...] emerged as a modernist and class-inflected rejection of the Victorian conception of middle-class white manliness’.³² In other words, the meticulously discursive understanding of the destroyed female body evidenced by the likes of Dupin is intrinsically linked to an understanding of ‘manliness’ as fundamentally civilised and guided, at all times, by rational thought. The hard-boiled detective, tormented as he is by fears of moral contamination and existential dread, must work harder to actively refute the threat of the feminine.

According to Greg Foster, the hardboiled narrative, at its core, centres on:

A masculine hero confronted everywhere with murder and mayhem, and encountering in the course of his search a host of attractively scary women whose violent threats to his psychic integrity he could counter only with violence... violent fantasies that confused the boundaries they sought to establish.³³

Marlowe remarks, towards the end of *The Big Sleep*, that ‘you can have a hangover from other things than alcohol. I had one from women. Women made me sick’³⁴, and in doing

³⁰ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 2006), p.37.

³¹ Maysaa Husam Jaber, *Criminal Femmes Fatales in American Hardboiled Crime Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p.26.

³² Christopher Breu, *Hard-boiled Masculinities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p.2.

³³ Greg Foster, *Murdering Masculinities: Fantasies of Gender and Violence in the American Crime Novel* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp.2-3.

³⁴ Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p.174.

so gives voice to the gendered anxiety which shapes his engagement with the women he so distrusts; their agency (bodily, psychologically and sexually) poses a challenge to his investigative and masculine authority, and so they must be safely contained within the parameters of the male gaze.

The 'noir' novel, born out of the hardboiled tradition, examples of which include Dorothy Hughes' *In A Lonely Place* (1947) and Patricia Highsmith's *Strangers on a Train* (1950), is steeped in dread and doom, suspenseful and grim, with criminal protagonists making their way in a world leeched of hope or contentment. Detection is inefficient, corrupt, or entirely absent. According to Frank Krutnik, 'noir's appropriation of the hard-boiled tradition [is linked] to the popularization of Freudian psychoanalysis in American culture at the time: rather than regarding crime as organized or the result of social problems, it was attributed to individuals with psychological problems'.³⁵ In other words, noir embodies something of a topographical shift for the narrative landscape of criminality – a move inwards. Whereas the hard-boiled detective hero traverses urban spaces which are as desolate as they are treacherous, the noir protagonist is more likely to struggle with his or her own fraught inner world, often expressing the fears, desires or frustrations of a criminal mind. For example, *In A Lonely Place*'s protagonist, Dixon 'Dix' Steele, obsessively ruminates on his own misogynistic rage and the murderous violence he inflicts on the women he encounters, observing that 'there wasn't any girl worth getting upset over. They were all alike, cheats, liars, whores...'.³⁶ While he does use the corrupted urban space of Los Angeles as a 'hunting ground' of sorts, his thoughts, riven with gradually-intensifying fury, are the only ones the reader is privy to. The result is a bleakly gripping narrative, one which refuses to allow the reader to escape the doggedly pitiless perspective of a psychopath. Although detectives do sometimes appear in 'noir' novels (*In A Lonely Place*

³⁵ Charles Rzepka and Lee Horsley [ed], *A Companion to Crime Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), p.347.

³⁶ Dorothy Hughes, *In a Lonely Place* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1947), p.165.

features Brub, a police detective and old friend of Dix's, whose wife Sylvia proves instrumental in the climatic arrest), his or her presence or her role is not to put right what has gone wrong or to facilitate a return to the ordered status quo.

Domestic 'noir' fiction, then, is born out of a tradition of bleakly self-aware noir crime fiction, where the presence of the detective is incidental, and happy, pat endings are eschewed. In Flynn's novels *Sharp Objects* and *Dark Places*, the presence of various legal authorities fails to provide reassurance or resolution, as they prove unable to 'fix' the insidious toxicity of the domestic spaces they have entered. *Sharp Objects'* Camille engages in a brief, abortive romance with the detective tasked with solving the murders she is reporting on; when he becomes aware of her propensity for self-harm and the poisonous family legacy which has helped to shape her, the romantic connection is severed: 'I never again heard from Richard. After the way he looked at my marked-up body, I knew I wouldn't'.³⁷

With the rise of domestic noir, there has been a renegotiation of power of sorts, as the protagonists in this sub-genre are almost always women engaging with violence, deceit, and murder not in a professional or investigative capacity, but from within their own lived experience. According to Emma V. Miller, this signifies an unambiguous repudiation of the paradigmatic construction of female agency and victimhood in popular crime fiction:

The dead female has been identified as the ultimate in female passivity for a commercial culture that has fetishised and commodified the inanimate female body in everything from fashion photography, to advertising to film. However, the novels of, amongst others, Megan Abbott, Flynn and Hawkins, characterise what we might term the "active turn" in crime writing. The female protagonist in these texts is not restricted to a small number of roles: the inert body to be looked at, dissected and penetrated both criminally and then in the pursuit of justice; nor is her only participatory role as part of an established patriarchal culture, in the position of police officer or pathologist. In the domestic noir she is an individual, in her

³⁷ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.249.

own space, whether that be her commute, her gym, her home or some other setting; it is the place of her choosing, and she plays a crucial role in shaping and directing the narrative.³⁸

Domestic noir fiction, then, and the work of Gillian Flynn in particular, renegotiates the gendered power dynamics of the contemporary crime novel in a way that builds on the work of the ‘domestic noir’ antecedents mentioned above (many of which explore marital discord, domestic violence, female agency and deviant mobility). It does this, responding to the overabundance of broken female bodies at the centre of much of the popular crime fiction of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, by proffering female characters whose often warped, self-serving and sometimes malign engagement with the world around them renders their lived experience far more worthy of focus than the silent, prone female victims who commonly feature in popular crime narratives. Flynn has spoken of her desire to examine female villainy and psychological complexity via the domestic noir fiction that she writes:

Men write about that all the time, the darkness within and what you inherit from your parents as far as your psychological wiring goes. I felt like that wasn't there as much for women, and I was very interested in it. Isn't it time to acknowledge the ugly side? I've grown quite weary of the spunky heroines, brave rape victims, soul-searching fashionistas that stock so many books. I particularly mourn the lack of female villains.³⁹

The figure of the *femme fatale*, whose wily exploitation of her own sexual power is, rather ubiquitously, the catalyst for many a noir hero's descent into mayhem and bloodshed, goes some way towards addressing this villainous shortfall, but as Megan Abbott has pointed out, her role is less to embody an autonomous malignancy than to serve as a fundamentally unknowable vessel for the most profound anxieties of the (male) detective:

³⁸ Emma V. Miller, ‘“How Much Do You Want to Pay for This Beauty?”: Domestic Noir and the Active Turn in Feminist Crime Fiction’, in *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction* [ed. Laura Ellen Joyce and Henry Sutton] (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p.90.

³⁹ Oliver Burkeman, *Gillian Flynn on her bestseller Gone Girl and accusations of misogyny* (2013) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/may/01/gillian-flynn-best-seller-gone-girl-misogyny>> [accessed 1 June 2018].

They're "a projection of male anxiety," she says, vampy caricatures whose primary purpose is to use their irresistible charms to lure the detective-hero into a setup. As Abbott sees it, classic noir "always comes back to the idea of femininity as a kind of dark continent." Male writers "really don't want to look in there," she says. They want to believe female violence "is always an aberration ... What if those stories had been told from the femme fatale's point of view? Think how different they would look."⁴⁰

Domestic noir fiction explores and expands upon the characterisation of the *femme fatale*, finding narrative value in her lived experience rather than positioning her as a mysterious threat to the sexual and existential dominance of a male protagonist. Rather than a vacantly enigmatic embodiment of various male anxieties, the *femme fatale* of Flynn's domestic noir is imbued with her own potent agency and functions as a potentially murderous figure of menace, one who serves to test the symbolic and social boundaries of neoliberal feminism. *Gone Girl's* Amy, for example, is the darkly parodic epitome of 'girl power', driven purely by self-interest and a sociopathic desire to construct her 'best' life: 'Not that love is a competition. But I don't understand the point of being together if you're not the happiest'.⁴¹ As with Patricia Highsmith and Dorothy Hughes' 'noir' fiction, Flynn's work explicates the internal landscape of the sociopath, allowing the reader to engage with the malign agency of these female characters even as the skill with which they manipulate these narratives ensures that any objective truth seems beyond reach.

Libby Day, the protagonist of Flynn's 2009 novel *Dark Places*, has learned to capitalise on the perverse attentions of the men who seek to frame her as both victim and villain, a child nicknamed 'angel face' following the massacre of her family and imprisonment of her surviving brother, a fetishized object of their pity and disgust:

⁴⁰ Ruth Franklin, *Megan Abbott's Bloodthirsty Murderesses* (2018) <<http://www.vulture.com/2018/06/megan-abbott-on-give-me-your-hand.html>> [accessed 3 July 2018].

⁴¹ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.300.

Donations were placed in a conservatively managed bank account, which, back in the day, saw a jump about every three–four years, when some magazine or news station ran an update on me [...] Brave Baby Day’s Sweet 16! (Me, still miniature, my face aglow with birthday candles, my shirt too tight over breasts that had gone D-cup that year, comic-book sized on my tiny frame, ridiculous, porny).⁴²

Libby is ultimately forced to confront the seething complexity of the violent female agency which has shaped her past, and Flynn is adept at contextualising and explicating the roots of this violence, ensuring that her female characters are not framed as enigmatic receptacles for the gendered anxieties of their male peers, but active (often violent) participants in their own stories. Flynn’s novels consistently centre on female characters who, according to Murphy, ‘challenge conventional notions of female identity, media representation and victimhood’.⁴³ The heavily gendered investigator-victim model discussed above is turned on its head in these narratives, as Flynn’s characters are imbued with a penetrating self-awareness and ability to critique the fetishization of dead, missing and destroyed women, even as they are expected to re-tread the all-too-familiar territory surrounding female victimhood. *Gone Girl*’s Amy engineers her own transformation from a disenchanted suburbanite, spitefully obsessed with the shortcomings of her faithless husband, into ‘the beautiful, kind, doomed, pregnant victim of a selfish, cheating bastard’.⁴⁴ She controls the narrative surrounding her own disappearance and apparent death with exceptional skill and foresight, ensuring that in ‘death’ she embodies a model of victimhood that proves not just palatable, but irresistible to the hordes of strangers eager to speculate and fantasise about her grisly fate. She meticulously charts her own grim celebrity as it blossoms, unable to resist tuning in to watch the likes of ‘the permanently furious Ellen Abbott, a former prosecutor and victims’ rights advocate’⁴⁵ fill in the blanks

⁴² Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), p.2.

⁴³ Bernice Murphy, ‘Gillian Flynn and the Rise of Domestic Noir’, in *Twenty-First Century Popular Fiction* [ed. Bernice Murphy and Stephen Matterson] (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p.166.

⁴⁴ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.284.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.161.

she has left behind, including the vacant space where her body ‘should’ lie – it is onto this space that Abbott and her legions of viewers project the all-too-familiar image of the broken and betrayed woman. Amy even leads her husband Nick on a scavenger hunt in her absence, a viciously incisive nod to the investigatory ‘blueprint’ which she has so successfully manipulated; these investigators cannot hope to ‘solve’ the problem she poses, because she has broken out of the model of victimhood by embracing it.

The domestic noir narrative, on the other hand, works to emphasise the latent dread and oblique violence of the domestic space, with the lived experience and psychological landscape of the *femme fatale* used to problematise and deconstruct the façade of contented middle-class domesticity within which these (invariably white) women exist. Taglines like ‘the perfect marriage?’ and ‘a perfect life is a perfect lie’⁴⁶ are commonly used to promote these narratives, and serve to emphasise the limitations of a neoliberal feminism which frames the privileged existence of these wealthy wives and mothers as the pinnacle of female success. In Flynn’s novels, the dead female body is actively reclaimed and even weaponised as a means of exercising agency; in *Dark Places*, the mother-figure Patty carefully orchestrates her murder in order to reclaim control of her own narrative and rescue her children from destitution by way of her life insurance. In *Gone Girl*, Amy deliberately positions herself as the missing/dead wife of a philandering husband, knowing that observers will rush to salivate over imagined visions of her beautiful dead body which, indeed, they do. She briefly contemplates it herself: ‘picturing my slim, naked, pale body, floating just beneath the current, a colony of snails attached to one bare leg, my hair trailing like seaweed until I reach the ocean and drift down down down to the bottom, my waterlogged flesh peeling off in soft streaks, me slowly disappearing into the current like a

⁴⁶ ‘The perfect marriage?’ graces the cover of B.A. Paris’ 2016 novel *Behind Closed Doors*, in which a woman (named Grace Angel, a nod to the anachronistic absurdity of the domestic role she is playing) plots to murder her abusive husband, while ‘a perfect life is a perfect lie’ was used to promote the TV adaptation of Liane Moriarty’s 2014 novel *Big Little Lies*, which centres on three women whose marital and maternal anxieties are made violently manifest via the murder of an abusive husband.

watercolor until just the bones are left'.⁴⁷ *Sharp Objects*' Amma observes that 'sometimes if you let people do things to you, you're really doing it to them... if someone wants to do fucked-up things to you, and you let them, you're making them more fucked-up. You have the control'⁴⁸, while her older sister Camille self-harms, cutting into her skin the words which she can't bring herself to speak. In each case, these women are aware of the potential power of their silenced and destroyed bodies and use that power to their own advantage.

If Dashiell Hammett 'took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley'⁴⁹, Flynn and her fellow authors of domestic noir fiction have relocated murder to the homes of twenty-first century women, and in doing so have bestowed a degree of agency onto the female characters whose role is so often to present as merely dead, broken objects of the male investigator's curiosity and disgust, or as 'problems' for men to solve.

Critical history of the crime genre

Chandler was undoubtedly correct when he memorably suggested that, 'Since the form has never been perfected, it has never become fixed. The academicians have never got their dead hands on it. It is still fluid, still too various, still putting out shoots in all directions'.⁵⁰ The "offshoot" which I would argue has the closest ties to the modern narrative of domestic noir is what Lee Horsley's seminal study has termed "the noir thriller". The thriller is an offshoot of the detective novel or classic 'whodunit', which

⁴⁷ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.246.

⁴⁸ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.182.

⁴⁹ Raymond Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), p.12.

⁵⁰ Raymond Chandler, quoted in the introduction to Lee Horsley's *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.1.

Tzvetan Todorov, in his seminal 1977 work *The Poetics of Prose*, asserts is reliant on a duality: “This novel [the classic detective novel/whodunit] contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation. In their purest form, these two stories have no point in common”.⁵¹ The fiction of Agatha Christie exemplifies this duality; Christie’s detectives Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple (who, Todorov notes, are necessarily immune from the violence and death with which they deal) manage, without fail, to meticulously and neatly piece together various clues to restore order following the story of the crime, with what he calls “geometric architecture.” For Todorov, “[Christie’s] *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), for example, offers twelve suspects; the book consists of twelve chapters, and again twelve interrogations, a prologue, and an epilogue (that is, the discovery of the crime and the discovery of the killer).⁵²

The thriller, according to Todorov, is distinct from the ‘whodunit’ because it fuses the first story with the second, or ‘suppresses the first and vitalizes the second’.⁵³ In other words, the narrative of the thriller runs alongside the action, resulting in a curiosity about the potential fates of the characters: “This type of interest was inconceivable in the whodunit, for its chief characters (the detective and his narrator) were, by definition, immunized: nothing could happen to them. The situation is reversed in the thriller: everything is possible, and the detective risks his health, if not his life.”⁵⁴ He terms this effect *suspense*. The suspense novel, a form which Todorov argues has developed between whodunit and thriller, has ‘sought to rid of the conventional milieu of professional crime and to return to the personal crime of the whodunit [...] [the protagonist] is at the same time the detective, the culprit [...] and the victim’.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p.44.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.45.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.47.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.47.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.51.

Writing in 1977, Todorov concludes that it is too early to tell whether the forms of detective fiction he describes will evolve independently or continue to coexist alongside one another. With the considerable benefit of hindsight, we can say that these forms have splintered and occasionally mutated to create a myriad of ‘thriller’ offshoots. For Horsley, the noir thriller is linked to the hardboiled detective novel: both noir and hardboiled fiction share a propensity for self-destructive male protagonists, but in the case of noir, this character needn’t be a private investigator or detective. As Horsley explains, ‘private eyes play a part, but so do transgressors and victims, strangers and outcasts, tough women and sociable psychopaths’.⁵⁶ Corruption (literal and figurative), moral degradation and hopelessness often characterise the noir thriller. Lee Horsley has described it as a popular genre that gave expression to certain modernist impulses: ‘although the aesthetic sophistication and deliberate difficulty of the modernist response was not appropriate to a popular genre, modernist techniques as well as themes helped to shape literary noir, encouraging, for example, the use of irony, non-linear plots, subjective narration and multiple viewpoints’.⁵⁷

This is true of Gillian Flynn’s domestic noir fiction, too; her protagonists are typically female, often writers or journalists whose interaction with those around them is undercut with a biting self-awareness and blisteringly unapologetic unlikability: *Sharp Objects*’ Camille writes for a newspaper and routinely engages in self-harm as a means of externalising the trauma of a harrowing childhood; *Dark Places*’ Libby is the only survivor of a family massacre who describes herself as a ‘deeply unlovable adult. Draw a picture of my soul, and it’d be a scribble with fangs’.⁵⁸ The narrative of *Gone Girl* is split between Amy and Nick, a husband and wife whose violent marital decline becomes fodder for the never-ending American news cycle. We get two ‘versions’ of Amy – the one who exists only in a

⁵⁶ Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.3.

⁵⁸ Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), p.1.

diary she has left behind as a testament to the kind of woman she supposedly was – accommodating, optimistic, and increasingly fearful that her husband might harm her, and the one who has meticulously choreographed her own disappearance as a means of framing her unfaithful husband for murder. The first half of the novel is shared by ‘diary Amy’ and Nick, a man who betrays an ironic awareness of the obnoxious figure he cuts: ‘I have a face you want to punch: I’m a working-class Irish kid trapped in the body of a total trust-fund douchebag. I smile a lot to make up for my face, but this only sometimes works’.⁵⁹ As ‘diary Amy’ confides that Nick has grown increasingly hostile towards her, the reader is encouraged to categorise this as an all-too-familiar narrative about male violence and a victimised woman whose only presence in the narrative of her destruction is filtered through the disembodied voice of ‘diary Amy’. Midway through the novel, however, we discover that Amy is still very much alive and has been manipulating both her own narrative and Nick’s from the beginning.

Broadening Critical Discourse

Stephen Knight’s 2004 publication *Crime Fiction Since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity*, serves as a comprehensive survey of the development of the crime genre, from the detective fiction of Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle to the domestic puzzles of Agatha Christie, the hardboiled fiction of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett and the police procedurals and psychological thrillers of the 1980s and 1990s. Knight does touch on the work of Barbara Vine, an undeniable influence on the domestic noir fiction of the twenty-first century, and credits Vine with a ‘power to elaborate the multiple motives and fully credible bizarreness of human behaviour’⁶⁰, but stops short of trying to explore or

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.3.

⁶⁰ Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction Since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.152.

explain Vine's deftness in creating female characters whose complex toxicity lends them a subversive power which destabilises the power dynamics of the domestic sphere (such works as 1986's *A Dark-Adapted Eye* and 1987's *A Fatal Inversion* exemplify this most prominently). Knight's systemic overview of the genre concludes with a look at the postmodern crime fiction of Paul Auster (*The New York Trilogy*, 1987) and Bret Easton Ellis (*American Psycho*, 1991), alongside what he terms the 'thriller of violence', made popular towards the end of the twentieth century by the likes of Val McDermid and Thomas Harris, as mentioned above. He asserts that "These ferocious recent representations seem not just demonisable media exploitation but a coherent form of contemporary anxiety. In art and theatre, as well as in critical theory and the previously calm pastures of literary criticism, the pains, distortions and potential fragmentations of the human body have become a central, even obsessional topic".⁶¹ As this thesis will prove, the rise of domestic noir fiction, just over a decade later, has gone some way towards redressing the gendered balance of power which seems, at least in part, to drive this contemporary anxiety, and Knight's summary of the evolution of the genre unfortunately does not encompass this development, as his study was published in 2004, eight years before the publication of *Gone Girl* and nine years before Julia Crouch coined the term 'domestic noir'.

Julian Symons' *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel* (first published in 1972), likewise provides a thoroughly researched taxonomy of the genre and its evolution from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century; Symons emphasises the hybridity of the detective novel, and refers to the detective story, the spy story, and the thriller as a 'hybrid creature we call sensational literature... the tree is sensational literature, and these are among its fruits'.⁶² Symons' study encompasses everything from the seminal Sherlock Holmes stories to the Golden Age fiction of Agatha Christie and the spy novels of John le

⁶¹ Ibid., p.199.

⁶² Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel* (New York: Mysterious Press, 1992), p.4.

Carré, but, as is the case with Knight, fails to pay much attention to non-canonical or female contributions to the development of the crime genre.

Both Knight and Symons take male-authored, canonical crime fiction as their central focus, something which critics like Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan (*The Lady Investigates: Women Detectives and Spies in Fiction*, 1981), Maureen T. Reddy (*Sisters in Crime: Feminism and the Crime Novel*, 1988), Sally Munt (*Murder by the Book?: Feminism and the Crime Novel*, 1994), Kathleen Klein (*The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre*, 1995, and *Diversity and Detective Fiction*, 1999), Gill Plain (*Twentieth Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body*, 2001), Lee Horsley (*The Noir Thriller*, 2001, and *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction*, 2005), and Adrienne E. Gavin ('Feminist Crime Fiction and Female Sleuths', in the *Blackwell Companion to Crime Fiction*, 2010), would seek to rectify in their own surveys of the genre, many of which highlighted the capacity of crime fiction to give expression to a range of identities, races, genders and sexualities: as Klein puts it, 'much contemporary detective fiction explores issues of cultural interaction – race, class, gender, ethnicity, age, and more – as it moves through the investigation of serious crime'.⁶³ These critics have used feminist literary theory to initiate a rewriting of the history of the canon, exploring and emphasising the contribution of female authors and the extent to which the form of the detective novel, traditionally reliant on the compelling rationality and superior intellect of a male investigator like Holmes or Dupin, is undermined or reappropriated by the proliferation of fictional female sleuths, alongside writers whose work has gone beyond the heteronormative parameters which help shape these novels. Much as Elaine Showalter's 1977 work *A Literature of Their Own* aimed to 'reconstruct the political, social, and cultural experience of women'⁶⁴ by charting the development of female-authored fiction from the nineteenth century to the present day, the work of critics like Klein, Munt, Reddy, Craig

⁶³ Kathleen Klein [ed.], *Diversity and Detective Fiction* (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Press, 1999), p.2.

⁶⁴ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), p.8.

and Cadogan and Lee Horsley illuminates what Reddy describes as ‘an emerging countertradition in crime fiction’⁶⁵, one which Knight, Symons and Mandel neglect to investigate in their respective surveys of the history of the genre.

Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan’s 1981 work *The Lady Investigates: Women Detectives and Spies in Fiction* makes no such omissions, mapping the evolution of the figure of the female sleuth in British and American detective fiction from 1861 to 1981. The initial chapter provides a concise overview of the earliest fictional female sleuths, asserting that ‘they laid the foundations of an enduring genre, creating prototypes which could later be refurbished according to the changing tastes of the succeeding decades’.⁶⁶ As this statement indicates, Craig and Cadogan’s work is largely historicist in its approach, combining textual analysis of these early works of crime fiction with an examination of the milieus in which they were created. Their survey charts the development of the female sleuth from 1861 to 1981, exploring the work of Anna Katharine Green, the emergence of the fictional female spies of the First and Second World Wars, including Bernard Newman’s *Lady Doctor – Woman Spy* (1937), the spirited amateurs made popular in the ‘golden age’ by Dorothy Sayers, Agatha Christie, and Margery Allingham, the enterprising girl detectives of the mid-twentieth century, including Carolyn Keene’s Nancy Drew, whose popularity exploded ‘at a moment in time when optimistic ideas about women’s capabilities prevailed (ten million American women were actually in full-time employment, although the imminent Depression would reduce this figure by one-fifth)’.⁶⁷ They conclude with a look at the then-contemporary early work of P.D. James and Amanda Cross, whose female sleuths Craig and Cadogan herald as representative of the culmination of over a century of ‘lady detective’ fiction: ‘Through all the changes in social attitudes, and through all her varied

⁶⁵ Maureen T. Reddy, *Sisters in Crime: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (New York: Continuum Publishing Agency, 1988), p.2.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.37.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.163.

incarnations, the woman detective stands out as the most economical, the most striking and the most agreeable embodiment of two qualities often disallowed for women in the past: the power of action and practical intelligence'.⁶⁸ Their academic synopsis is wide-ranging in its analytic scope, but as a result is somewhat lacking in critical rigour and focus; they are also occasionally prone to literary value judgements ('we are dealing with works of such varied quality [...] no one expects evocative prose from Agatha Christie'⁶⁹), which implicitly undermines the sincerity of the project – namely, bringing to the fore the critically-neglected work of 'feminist' authors of crime fiction, whose work within an already-marginalised genre aims to redress the gendered binary at the heart of 'classic' detective fiction. My research is broadly inspired by that of Craig and Cadogan, in that I will take a similarly historicist approach, teaming textual analysis and close reading of Flynn's work (particularly her exploration of liminal female identities and female villainy as a response to or reaction against neoliberal feminist ideals) with an examination of its position within the incredibly popular 'domestic noir' genre and within postfeminist media.

Maureen T. Reddy's 1988 study of the genre, *Sisters in Crime: Feminism and the Crime Novel* will also provide inspiration, questioning as it does the rigid codification of the 'rules' of the detective genre, which have

[contributed] to the establishment of a canon of detective fiction and [allowed critics] to define many novels as noncanonical; unsurprisingly, that canon is overwhelmingly masculine [...] sexist bias masquerading as objective, aesthetic judgement is rampant in literary criticism, as so many feminist critics have shown, and the field of crime fiction is not exempt.⁷⁰

Reddy argues for a broadening of the definition of crime fiction, asserting that in many female-authored crime novels, the plot is driven less by the collection and 'cracking' of

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.246.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p.14.

⁷⁰ Maureen T. Reddy, *Sisters in Crime: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (New York: Continuum Publishing Agency, 1988), pp.4-5.

physical clues, and is instead centred on the ‘conjunction of the personal and the social’⁷¹; in other words, importance is placed on the intersection of private and public, the dynamics of the relationships between characters as potentially revelatory as any discovery of fingerprints or secret missives. Reddy notes that all too often the figure of the female detective merely embodies a male authority figure in women’s clothing, so to speak, with the gendered conventions of the genre remaining unchallenged (Reddy does credit Sara Paretsky, author of the V.I. Warshawski series, with bringing a ‘feminist and subversive’⁷² approach to the genre), something which underscores the extent to which the rigidity of canonical borders has served to exclude writers who have been unwilling to adhere to these conventions:

strong women detectives are found filling the (gum) shoes of strong male detectives, with only the gender changed. Leaving the role of detective unaltered but for gender is the hallmark of the woman writer working within narrowly defined genre limitations, themselves the products of an incomplete literary history.⁷³

In order to revisit and fill in some of the blanks of this ‘incomplete’ literary history, Reddy seeks to explore an alternative history of the genre, beginning with a look at the sensation fiction of Wilkie Collins, Ellen Wood and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, alongside the gothic fiction of Ann Radcliffe. Noting that the sensation and gothic genres were ‘dominated by women authors’⁷⁴, Reddy explores the relationship between the likes of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (described by a critic as ‘the first successful thriller’⁷⁵) and *Lady Audley’s Secret* and the contemporary female-authored crime novel: ‘current women writers of crime fiction belong on a continuum that begins with the writers of female gothic and that occasionally intersects with the continuum that includes Poe and Conan Doyle. A feminist tracing of

⁷¹ Ibid., p.5.

⁷² Ibid., p.11.

⁷³ Ibid., p.6.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p.7.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.9.

the history of crime fiction would acknowledge literary foremothers as well as forefathers'.⁷⁶ While the aim of this thesis is not to provide a complete history of the genre, feminist or otherwise, I hope to assess the extent to which Flynn's work has emerged out of the very counter-tradition that Reddy has identified.

The ongoing success of the female-dominated domestic noir genre, and Flynn's contributions to it, reliant as they are on the manipulation and subversion of thematic and stylistic elements of canonical, male-authored noir fiction, indicates that Reddy's assertion that Gilbert and Gubar's 'paradigmatic female story' (which they describe as one that encapsulates the anxiety and frustration of a woman who is never allowed to forget or forsake the space she occupies: 'the paradigmatic female story inevitably considers also the equally uncomfortable spatial options of expulsion into the cold outside or suffocation in the hot indoors, and in addition it often embodies an obsessive anxiety both about starvation to the point of disappearance and about monstrous inhabitation'⁷⁷) is 'immediately recognisable as [a precursor] of the modern crime novel'⁷⁸ (in this case, the domestic noir novel) is as true today as it was in 1988.

Reddy argues for a strategically feminist approach to reading crime fiction, asserting that '[the system] teaches everyone to read as men [...] for the most part, crime fiction *must* be read in this way to be at all satisfying'.⁷⁹ In other words, she believes that the literary imperative to utilise authoritatively masculine power structures in order to 'solve' the crime necessitates a reading which implicitly accepts the validity of this authority. I don't necessarily agree with this caveat - after all, the put-upon detectives of Chandler and Hammett's work are nothing if not ambiguous or ambivalent signifiers of masculinity in

⁷⁶ Ibid., p.9.

⁷⁷ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1979), p.86.

⁷⁸ Maureen T. Reddy, *Sisters in Crime: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (New York: Continuum Publishing Agency, 1988), pp.8-9.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p.12.

crisis, and to engage with them is to re-examine any preconceived assumptions about gendered authority. I believe that the ‘feminist reading’ advocated by Reddy (which involves a ‘[refusal of] the suspension of feminist sensibilities’⁸⁰) is analogous to the reading of Flynn’s work within the feminist counter-tradition identified by Reddy which I will carry out in this thesis. This reading is centred on ‘a puzzle [that] extends well beyond the boundaries of the text [...] of female character and female development in a male-ordered world’.⁸¹ It will include an examination of Flynn’s ability to reconfigure the gendered dynamics of narrative authority and female archetypes in crime fiction; her female characters occupy the spaces between sleuth, victim, and villain (Flynn’s protagonists tend to be journalists and writers, whose ability to read, write and re-write certain violent or criminal acts - in which they are often complicit - lends an extra dimension to their narratives), and this conjunction of character paradigms is something which heralds a broadening of the boundaries of popular crime fiction, certainly as far as characterisation is concerned.

Sally Munt’s 1994 work *Murder by the Book?* provides a critical overview of ‘feminist’ crime fiction and its relationship to the developing feminist scholarship of the twentieth century, including a chapter on liberal feminist crime fiction, which looks at the film and radio adaptations of Sara Paretsky’s 1984 novel *Killing Orders* and the work of Amanda Cross, author of the Kate Fansler mysteries, in terms of what Munt argues is their capitulation to a traditional male-female binary, as they offer ‘strong female characters’ who, crucially, embody ‘the liberal feminist idea of the liberated woman, who is equal to the male role, but still retains femininity – strong *within* her gender role’.⁸² Munt builds on Reddy’s work in her assessment of the solitary female sleuth as a model of liberal individualism, using Sue Grafton’s Kinsey Millhone as an example of one such heroine:

⁸⁰ Ibid., p.12.

⁸¹ Ibid., p.13.

⁸² Sally Munt, *Murder by the Book?: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.32.

This discourse of individualism is reflected in the classical liberal view that women and men compete equally as candidates for criminality or insanity. Disregarding social practices which are more likely to categorise women as mad or bad, Grafton's fictions have a preponderance of crazy female villains. The perpetrators are dehumanized, as they are deprived of rationality, serving to reinforce the primacy of the central, stable, rationalist hero.⁸³

Flynn has been accused of misogyny precisely because she refuses to write 'likeable' female characters, and instead offers female antiheroes or women who exist somewhere on a spectrum between victim and villain. Critics have accused her of displaying the same propensity for 'crazy female villains' which Munt has identified as a key component of 'liberal feminist crime fiction' (linked as it is to the idea 'that solitary individuals can select and reject social roles at will, [thus] it has a limited political expediency as a vision of autonomy, of vital use to any group structured as a servant class'⁸⁴), but Flynn refutes this, arguing that the complicated toxicity of her female characters marks them out as far more complex than any stereotypical 'psycho bitch': 'there's still a big pushback against the idea that women can be just pragmatically evil, bad and selfish ... I don't write psycho bitches. The psycho bitch is just crazy – she has no motive, and so she's a dismissible person because of her psycho-bitchiness'.⁸⁵ The malignant and profoundly damaged women who populate Flynn's novels exhibit a hostility that's as self-conscious as it is destructive. *Gone Girl's* Amy revels in her performance of the wounded wife, even as she rails against the gendered limitations of her social position. *Sharp Objects'* Adora weeps over the loss of the children she is painstakingly destroying, and as a result they break the 'crazy female villain' mould which Munt cites as a cornerstone of the liberal feminist crime fiction 'in which radicalism is expunged, in its different forms, from the narratives. The threat is defused by

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p.46.

⁸⁴ Sally Munt, *Murder by the Book?: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.47.

⁸⁵ Oliver Burkeman, *Gillian Flynn on her bestseller Gone Girl and accusations of misogyny* (2013) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/may/01/gillian-flynn-best-seller-gone-girl-misogyny>> [accessed 9 August 2018].

being spoken for, and assimilated. Despite the presence of parody in several of these novels the radical content is derailed by the deep structures of conventionality undermining it'.⁸⁶ I believe that Flynn's work embodies a conscious rejection of these structures of conventionality, in that she reconfigures the lone female sleuth made popular by Sue Grafton, Sara Paretsky and P.D. James, whose heroines, Maureen Reddy observes, are 'cut off from their families of origin'.⁸⁷ Flynn's heroines, at a glance, are somewhat similar – while they aren't detectives *per se*, they are tasked with 'solving' certain violent crimes (*Sharp Objects*' Camille is sent back to her barren hometown by the newspaper she works for in the wake of two unsolved child murders; *Dark Places*' Libby is persuaded to help investigate the massacre of her own family by a group of serial killer enthusiasts). Rather than heroic individualism, however, their narrative progression is marked by toxic familial bonds, the destructive impact of which has fundamentally shaped these women (Amy is haunted by the spectre of her never-born sisters: 'My mother had five miscarriages and two stillbirths before me [...] but I've always been jealous too, always – seven dead dancing princesses. They get to be perfect without even trying, without even facing one moment of existence'⁸⁸, while Camille struggles with the memory of her mother's poisonous nurturance). If, as Munt, argues, the liberal feminist crime novel rejects the primacy of the biological nuclear family unit, leaving its female protagonist 'free to choose non-traditional intimacies in order to reformulate as 'pretended' family units'⁸⁹, Flynn's work seeks to challenge this dynamic - she positions her female 'sleuths' in relation to their own pervasive familial or marital trauma, and ensures that the notion of 'restored order', which is a central tenet with regard to the liberal feminist 'structures of conventionality' identified by Munt, is thoroughly problematised. Although the pivotal 'crime' may be

⁸⁶ Sally Munt, *Murder by the Book?: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.58.

⁸⁷ Maureen T. Reddy, *Sisters in Crime: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (New York: Continuum Publishing Agency, 1988), p.104.

⁸⁸ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.222.

⁸⁹ Sally Munt, *Murder by the Book?: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.47.

solved, and the perpetrators apprehended, the coherence and security of the family unit has been irretrievably undermined (Nick and Amy end the novel as expectant parents to a child who has already become a weapon in their marital war of attrition; Camille relinquishes her disturbed younger sister to the care of the state and attempts suicide), the protagonists haunted by these destructive legacies. Munt's delineation of 'liberal feminist crime fiction' is useful in that it allows us to assess the extent to which Flynn has taken that narrative formula and built on it to create a brand of crime fiction that simultaneously performs and critiques the paradigms of neoliberal feminism.

Munt's study of the genre, like Reddy's and Craig and Cadogan's before that, broadly looks at the evolution of the genre as it relates to models of feminist thought. Rather than a strictly historicist approach, hers is theory-based, with each chapter exploring a text or number of texts in relation to a particular school of feminist thought. In addition to the aforementioned chapter on 'liberal feminist crime fiction', she examines 'socialist feminist crime fiction' (including Hannah Wakefield's 1987 novel *The Price You Pay* and the work of South African author Gillian Slovo), 'psychoanalysis and feminist crime fiction' and Sarah Schulman's 'postmodernist crime fiction'. The book concludes with a look at the extent to which crime fiction can be an instrument of feminist thought:

Perhaps it is more efficacious to examine those specific clichés imbuing crime fiction which, possibly *within an overall conformity*, can be appropriated by feminists for political ends. For example, many a misogynist has filled the need for that staple convention, an 'eminently murderable man'. The simple expansion of the moralistic dualism good/ evil can incorporate a further specification female/ male, or femininity/ masculinity.⁹⁰

Munt's theory-based approach will inform my own methodology, in that I will similarly assess the extent to which Flynn's work within the domestic noir genre signifies the marriage of formula and feminist philosophy. I believe that Flynn uses the conventions of

⁹⁰ Sally Munt, *Murder by the Book?: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp.192-193.

the genre to explore the compartmentalisation of female identities as a response to the demands of neoliberal feminism and an arguably ‘postfeminist’ America in which the politics of class, race and gender continue to shape the lived experience of these women.

According to Kyle Fitzpatrick of the *Los Angeles Review of Books*:

What’s clear in examining Flynn’s books is that there is an obsession, a focus, on economics that is out in the open but not necessarily acknowledged directly, an illustration of a sort of mastercraft writer who can create such complex — and real — worlds that the most obvious, relatable aspects are overlooked. For Flynn and her characters, to have too little or too much money causes trauma and, in many cases, is the prick that prickles her princesses. The economic tendencies that Flynn has makes her stories even more powerful as America is currently deep in a quiet war between the powerful and the powerless, as class divides widen even greater because rich politicians and leaders turn up their noses to notions of their having privilege.⁹¹

In this sense, Flynn’s work is ‘feminist’ crime fiction in that it exposes and dramatizes the discordance between these identities; her heroines exist in privilege and poverty alike, with varying degrees of power and agency explored via the central mysteries at the heart of their interpersonal relationships.

Kathleen Klein’s contributions to the establishment of an academic ‘counter-history’ of crime fiction are considerable: they include her 1995 work *The Woman Detective – Gender and Genre* (first published in 1988, with this later addition including a greater number of female detectives and an afterword which looks at the ‘current state’ of crime fiction), and her 1999 edited collection *Diversity and Detective Fiction*, an edited collection which explores crime fiction and the politics of difference and ‘the convergence of two points: the increasing responsibility of educational institutions to address America’s multicultural society and the often overlooked opportunities present in the cultural texts of detective fiction’.⁹² *The Woman Detective – Gender and Genre* is a study of the evolution of professional

⁹¹ Kyle Raymond Fitzpatrick, *The Real Enemy In Gillian Flynn’s Works? Class*. (2018) <<http://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/reviews/real-enemy-gillian-flynn-works-class/>> [accessed 15 August 2018].

⁹² Kathleen Klein [ed], *Diversity and Detective Fiction* (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999), p.2.

female detectives in fiction, and like the work of Klein's predecessors, provides an extensive survey, via feminist analysis and a new historicist approach, of the evolution of lady detectives, from Andrew Forrester's 1864 work *The Female Detective* to the female sleuths of the American dime novel and golden age detective fiction, with a look at the conjunction of gendered detection visible in male-female literary partnerships, and a concluding chapter on the relationship between feminism and the detective novel, which queries whether the formula is fundamentally incompatible with feminist ideals:

The feminist detective winds up supporting the existing system which oppresses women when she re-establishes the ordered status quo. This contradiction between feminist ideals and detectives' behaviour is more apparent when the private eyes turn their criminals over to the law; however, no woman detective escapes the prospect of assisting in her own or other women's oppression whether women characters are the criminals, victims or merely bystanders. Adopting the formula traps their authors.⁹³

Unlike Munt before her, Klein concludes that the detective genre is essentially inhospitable with regard to feminist politics, arguing that 'radical feminism cannot work within even the broadest boundaries of the detective genre'.⁹⁴ She argues for a 'reinterpretation' of the genre, asserting that an imaginative and ideological re-shaping of the gendered power balance at the heart of the detective novel is possible via the readers of the genre: 'a reinterpretation of detective fiction is crucial; abandoning the formula as an unprofitable site for women's stories merely leaves the old imperatives in place [...] women-centered, gender-aware detective fiction can and must reinvent the genre; its beneficiaries will be writers and readers alike'.⁹⁵ Klein's conclusion reads as somewhat ambivalent, particularly in light of her earlier claim that 'the genre's inherent conservatism upholds power and privilege in the name of law and justice as it validates readers' visions of a safe and ordered world. In such a world view, criminals and women are put in their proper, secondary

⁹³ Kathleen Klein, *The Woman Detective - Gender and Genre* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1995), p.201.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.220.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.229.

places'.⁹⁶ This, to me, seems a rather unfair assessment of the readers of detective fiction as a whole – can we really say that the eschatological undertones of the noir fiction of Jim Thompson and Dorothy B. Hughes encourage visions of a safe and ordered world? Is the wickedly suspenseful golden age fiction of Agatha Christie and Gladys Mitchell, concerned as it is with subjects like deadening class tension, incest, and child abuse, geared towards upholding power and privilege? Klein tasks readers with instigating a sort of paradigm shift for the genre, without acknowledging the wealth of crime fiction which encourages and rewards subversive engagement and differing interpretations. Klein's 1999 edited collection, *Diversity and Detective Fiction*, acknowledges 'the changes of the past 25 years [...] the current range of socially provoked innovations began with gender – most sharply delineated in the female private-eye novel – and moved then to introduce race and ethnicity'.⁹⁷ The collection includes essays on the racial politics of crime fiction and the critical counter-tradition of which this thesis is a component: 'the more recent critical approaches [...] show greater sensitivity to issues of race, gender, ethnicity, class, and reader preference, demonstrating how newer writers are working to revise and resist the masculinist legacy'.⁹⁸ This collection offers a more hopeful assessment of the genre's potential to give voice to minority populations. Gill Plain's 2001 work *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* offers a similar interpretation of the genre, arguing that

It is possible to stretch the genre to include the 'new' man, the gay man, the female detective, and the lesbian policewoman, but perhaps more importantly, these examples also beg the question of whether changes in the subjectivity of the detective can effect a more fundamental challenge to wider socio-political structures.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Ibid., p.1.

⁹⁷ Kathleen Klein [ed], *Diversity and Detective Fiction* (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999), p.1.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p.7.

⁹⁹ Gill Plain, *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2001), p.88.

Plain sets out to challenge and ultimately disprove the notion of crime fiction as an inherently conservative genre and offers a re-examination of the theoretical framework within which we engage with the genre. The book is divided into three sections: a first part entitled ‘Establishing Paradigms’, which examines the ‘universally received paradigm’ of crime fiction via the work of Raymond Chandler and Agatha Christie:

Although Marlowe’s glass is half-empty, and Poirot’s half-full, they are both drinking from the same glass, and that glass is crime fiction. Surface differences, no matter how substantial, should not obscure a fundamental shared concern with the disruption of order, the violence of shattered community and the search for some form of viable resolution that will set the world back within its familiar, if tarnished, parameters.¹⁰⁰

This section is followed by ‘The ‘Normal Science’ of Detection’, which looks at writers who Plain believes ‘push boundaries – but ultimately they do not break or exceed them’.¹⁰¹ These include Joseph Hansen, author of the Dave Brandstetter series, and Sara Paretsky, whose work Plain describes as a fundamentally patriarchal inversion of gendered power dynamics: ‘her tough-talking, wise-cracking approach is thus both familiar and new – a female appropriation of ‘masculine’ discourse. But is such an appropriation anything more than a crude inversion, proving only that women can perform roles of patriarchal dominance as successfully as men?’.¹⁰² This echoes Maureen Reddy’s concerns about the female detective and patriarchal models of authority, and Plain concludes that ‘the desires and needs of a lone pro-active feminist voice remain fundamentally at odds with the demands of hard-boiled narrative, and what begins as a fairy tale of feminist agency is ultimately torn apart by structural contradictions’.¹⁰³

The book’s third section explores challenges to the structural integrity of the form via the lesbian investigator and the rise of the serial killer narrative. The figure of the lesbian

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p.20.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p.87.

¹⁰² Ibid., p.93.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p.93.

detective, according to Plain, signifies a potential destabilisation of the symbolic edifice of the detective novel, as the intrusion of the (female) 'other' challenges 'reactionary and repressive social forces... and [destabilises] the foundational misogyny of hard-boiled narration'.¹⁰⁴ The serial killer fiction of Thomas Harris, Plain argues, signifies a shift from the comforting model of 'order restored' to a gorier exploration of bodily destruction and the corporeal reality of murder itself:

Crime fiction no longer occupies a stable position in relation to contemporary cultural desires. Where once it sought to allay the anxieties of its readership, it now seems designed only to satisfy their appetites. Crime fiction has become the pre-eminent genre of the consumer age. It is bigger, better, and comes with 25 per cent extra free. That excess is largely comprised of variously dismembered, decomposed, displayed and eroticised bodies. Contemporary crime fiction is unflinching in its confrontation of the corporeal, and its readership, myself included, is remorseless in its consumption of that excess. Crime fiction has become a literature of self-assertion, endlessly pressuring its boundaries to satisfy audience demand, and to prove its own strength. This is the formula that knows no fear and walks a tightrope over crisis: the point at which the pleasure of the text becomes the abject horror of 'death infecting life' (Kristeva, 1982:4).¹⁰⁵

This is the paradigm shift which, Plain argues, marks the genre out as the *opposite* of conservative, at least in its contemporary iterations; rather than reassuring parables about authoritative justice and things 'made right' in the aftermath of the act of murder, these narratives are unsparing in their depiction of dead and destroyed bodies, ensuring that this grisly excess eclipses any hope of a restoration of order by the end. Although Plain is writing in 2001, four years prior to the publication of Stieg Larsson's Millennium trilogy debut, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, it is difficult not to think of the immense popularity of that series when reading Plain's postscript, 'The Death of the Detective?'. The boundaries of the genre, she believes, are being tested and ultimately broken by a brand of crime fiction which urges readers to reflect on their own powerlessness in the face of chaotic and meaningless violence (inflicted primarily, it must be noted, on female bodies).

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., pp.195-221.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p.245.

Where does domestic noir fiction, specifically the fiction of Gillian Flynn, fit in here? I believe that as a response to this post-Harris and Larsson wave of dead female bodies, domestic noir fiction has begun to sharpen the focus of crime fiction again, building narratives around minutely devastating acts of considered, often female-led, violence, rather than chaotic explosions of masculine rage, and Flynn is at the forefront of this. The body count in her novels is relatively low, and the violence she explores seems inevitable in its narrow trajectory – it is consistently cultivated from within and shaped by the shifting power dynamics of the women who wield it. Plain's study of the expanding paradigms of the genre will be invaluable in contextualising Flynn's re-shaping of the genre's gendered archetypes.

The work of Lee Horsley, mentioned above, will also inform this thesis. Horsley's 2001 work *The Noir Thriller* explores the influence of American and British noir on the contemporary thriller. Horsley uses the terms 'crime novel' and 'thriller' interchangeably, and couples 'noir' with 'thriller':

In this study (as the reader will have observed from the title) 'noir' is coupled with 'thriller'. A label such as 'the noir crime novel' also describes the texts I have included: as defined by Julian Symons, the crime novel (as distinct from the classic detective story) need not have a detective (and hence does not need clues or forensic details), makes characters and their psychological make-up the basis of the story and often radically questions 'some aspect of law, justice or the way society is run'. All of these characteristics are to be found in the texts discussed, and 'crime novel' will be used interchangeably with 'thriller'.¹⁰⁶

Her own definition of 'noir' is as follows: 'the main elements in my own definition of noir are: (i) the subjective point of view; (ii) the shifting roles of the protagonist; (iii) the ill-fated relationship between the protagonist and society [and] (iv) the ways in which noir functions as a socio-political critique'.¹⁰⁷ Horsley's study ranges from the pulp fiction of

¹⁰⁶ Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.8.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.8.

1920s America, in which ‘the anxious sense of fatality is usually attached to a pessimistic conviction that economic and socio-political circumstances will deprive people of control over their lives by destroying their hopes and by creating in them the weaknesses of character that mark them out as victims’¹⁰⁸, to the literary noir of the twentieth-first century (including the work of Megan Abbott, David Peace and Anthony Neil Smith). Along the way she examines the mid-century psychopaths of Jim Thompson and the *femmes fatales* of James M. Cain, the noir fiction of the 1970s and 1980s, in which ‘the fates towards which characters move are not simply the product of necessity but of sheer engagement with and enjoyment of the activity, the creation and consumption of spectacles’.¹⁰⁹ In other words, these narratives (her chosen examples include Andrew Vachss’ 1988 novel *Blue Belle* and George V. Higgins’ 1989 work *Trust*) are often driven by the vacillations of probability and the impulse to ‘win the game’. Horsley describes the term ‘noir’ as ‘a label that at the very least invokes ‘a network of ideas’ that is valuable as an organising principle. Such is the ‘flexibility, range, and mythic force’ of the concept of noir that it belongs ‘to the history of ideas as much as to the history of cinema’ and is too useful to abandon as a means of textual classification’.¹¹⁰ Her work here will be useful in contextualising ‘domestic noir’ fiction as part of a long and ongoing narrative tradition.

Horsley’s later work *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, published in 2005, explores different theoretical approaches to the study of the genre, providing a look at the evolution of the crime narrative from Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes to the twenty-first century crime fiction of Val McDermid and James Ellroy. The book is structured in such a way that historical context and critical interpretation are placed alongside one another, and the result is a work that provides an introduction to the study of the genre that’s both concise and wide-ranging. Like her critical forebears, Horsley aims to interrogate the critical assumptions of

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p.17.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., pp.198-199.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p.6.

earlier scholars whose work had centred on male-centred ‘canonical’ texts and led to the delineation of the genre as a conservative one:

Some recent critics have suggested that the charge of conservatism is based on a misapprehension about the way in which we read detective fiction. Is it really true, they ask, that we read primarily for the *ending*? There has been a tendency (especially amongst structuralist critics) to stress the finality of the closure reached at the end of the investigation as opposed to its ‘critical, speculative aspects’. It is, however, a whole process of investigation, which cannot simply be (as Moretti argues) ‘negated’ by the narrative resolution. Those who see the sub-genre as less rigidly conservative will realize that the reader’s experience contains more questions than answers, and it is arguable that this process of disruption is what readers of the genre find most compelling.¹¹¹

This brings to mind Reddy’s assertion that a ‘feminist reading’ of crime fiction is possible, and that it may be useful in interrogating the genre as source of commentary on the social politics of female identity:

This ‘disarticulation’ of conventions is at the heart not just of feminist critique but of all oppositional uses of crime fiction. For the better part of the twentieth century, writers who have wanted to subvert the conservative assumptions and practices of their society—whether with respect to class, race, or gender—have found a ready instrument in the crime novel, the narrative structure of which *requires* the disruption of apparently stable social arrangements.¹¹²

The appropriation of the nominally conservative conventions of the genre thus becomes a method of deconstructing those very conventions and the resulting overturning of expectations – be they grounded in sexual, racial, or class politics – is a truly subversive act. This thesis will assess the extent to which Flynn is contributing to this ‘disarticulation’ of conventions via her domestic noir fiction, which critiques the representation of violated female bodies both in crime fiction and, more broadly, in twenty-first century America.

Adrienne Gavin’s chapter ‘Feminist Crime Fiction and Female Sleuths’, published in the Blackwell *Companion to Crime Fiction*, will also prove useful in examining Flynn’s work as

¹¹¹ Lee Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.19.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p.287.

part of this counter-tradition. Gavin provides a history of female sleuths in fiction, similar to that of Craig and Cadogan and Maureen Reddy. She posits that rather than a deviation from a masculine 'norm', these female writers and investigators are central to the history of the genre: 'women crime writers and investigators, however, while clearly expressing issues of female concern, have from the start been an integral part of the history of crime writing rather than simply an adjunct or reaction to it'.¹¹³ Gavin, in step with Reddy and Maurizio Ascari, whose 2007 work *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction* explores the merging of elements of supernatural, gothic and sensational fiction as crucial to the origins of detective fiction. She revises the canon accordingly, locates the origins of the lady sleuth in the gothic fiction of Ann Radcliffe and the sensation fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Wilkie Collins, going on to chart the evolution of the 'lady detective' through to the fiction of Patricia Cornwell and Barbara Neely, whose heroine Blanche White, an African-American domestic worker turned amateur sleuth, uses her own lack of social currency to her advantage: 'both her race and her job give her a cultural invisibility that aids in her crime solving'.¹¹⁴ Gavin concludes with a reference to the ongoing debate about the role of violence against women in crime fiction:

The central concern of feminist crime fiction remains violence against women. Women are victims: captured, raped, murdered, butchered and in the hands of forensic detectives dissected into evidence. In emphasizing violence against women, feminist detective fiction makes a gendered protest. It also implies a gendered question: if even the detective figure is violated and attacked, is justice possible? Some critics argue that, in portraying such shocking scenes, violence against women is condoned or capitalized upon by authors. Others respond that in describing confrontations with violence the feminist detective and writer are simply telling it like it is, and in so doing are asserting, if not control over violence, then the power to express it in their terms.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Adrienne Gavin, 'Feminist Crime Fiction and Female Sleuths', in *A Companion to Crime Fiction* [ed. Charles Rzepka and Lee Horsley] (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p.258.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.267.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.268.

This thesis will touch on this debate with reference to Flynn's work, which has been criticised as misogynistic not for its graphic descriptions of violated female bodies but for its depictions of actively hostile female bodies; Flynn writes women who engage with their own seemingly inevitable victimisation on their own terms, refusing to capitulate to cultural pressure to embrace 'likeability'.

In conclusion, this thesis will build on the work of these critics in helping to establish a canon which encompasses the work of writers like Flynn, who employs and subverts the conventions of the genre in equal measure as she spearheads the re-shaping of the paradigms of the genre via domestic noir fiction. It is notable that the majority of the scholarship mentioned here centres on female 'sleuths' or 'investigators', professional or amateur. As I have noted, Flynn's protagonists loosely fit this archetype, in that they are involved in 'investigation', but they also defy it (in much the same way that the female protagonists of Barbara Vine and Patricia Highsmith tend slip between categories), refusing to be strictly defined as 'lady investigators'. I have thus identified something of a gap in these cornerstone works of scholarship, as they fail to critically accommodate these female characters, whose role in the crime novel marks them out as neither fully heroic nor fully villainous, as they shift between categories and elude rigid categorisation. Flynn is certainly not the first crime writer to employ such complex female characters, but I believe that her work is the contemporary pinnacle of the genre in terms of its utilisation of the domestic noir form as a means of exploring their complexity. Flynn's female characters occupy a space somewhere between sleuth, victim and villain, and this conjunction of female archetypes is something that earlier critics have failed to consider - my approach will build on the work of these critics in assessing Flynn as part of the feminist counter-tradition. This will include a reading of her work as political - is Flynn critiquing or satirising the excesses and compromises of neoliberal feminism? She is writing fiction that

challenges the rigid categorisation of female archetypes in crime fiction, as her female protagonists rewrite/reclaim the identity of the *femme fatale* while also challenging the traditional idea of the ‘female sleuth’ - ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ crimes that they are often complicit in. As many of these critics have done, I will demonstrate how Flynn’s work challenges the notion of crime fiction as a conservative genre, as her work has proven consistently subversive in terms of gender, power and victimhood. I will also engage in a close reading of each of the texts, exploring the. In contrast to the overtly feminist heroines (often single and/or explicitly queer, ass-kicking women) of Val McDermid, Sue Grafton and Sara Paretsky’s work, and the nubile frigidity of the Scandi-noir heroine, Flynn’s women are in constant dialogue/conflict with their own social positions re: neoliberal feminism, ‘having it all’ (something which DN consistently interrogates), even as they re-embody and re-shape the *femme fatale*.

Although crime fiction scholarship has begun to take heed of the explosion of domestic noir (see below), in the past decade or so it has primarily divided its attention between the gender politics of Scandi-noir and the reconsideration of the Golden Age detective novel. Since the global success of the Millennium trilogy, the gendered power dynamics of these narratives, which typically centre on the exposure of the bleak underbelly of seemingly progressive Scandinavian nations and on the women who exist within these broken social structures, have come into critical focus. Sexual violence is a major component of this genre, and many of these criticisms look at the ‘rape revenge’ aspect of novels like Stieg Larsson’s Millennium trilogy. Works including Paula Arvas and Andrew Nestingen’s *Scandinavian Crime Fiction* (2011), Barry Forshaw’s *Death in a Cold Climate: A Guide to Scandinavian Crime Fiction* (2012), *Rape in Stieg Larsson’s Millennium Trilogy and Beyond: Contemporary Scandinavian and Anglophone Crime Fiction* (edited by Berit Åström, Katarina Gregersdotter, and Tanya Horeck, 2012), Kerstin Bergman’s *Swedish Crime Fiction: The Making of Nordic Noir* (2014), and Steven Peacock’s *Swedish Crime Fiction* (2015) have

explored the popularity and cultural impact of these narratives. Simultaneously, works like Peter Haining's *The Golden Age of Crime Fiction* (2012), Samantha Walton's *Guilty But Insane: Mind and Law in Golden Age Detective Fiction* (2015), Martin Edwards' *The Golden Age of Murder* (2015), Jamie Bernthal's *Queering Agatha Christie: Revisiting the Golden Age of Detective Fiction* (2016), Megan Hoffman's *Gender and Representation in British 'Golden Age' Crime Fiction* (2016), and Laird Blackwell's *H.C. Bailey's Reggie Fortune and the Golden Age of Detective Fiction* (2017) have sought to shed critical light on the potentially subversive aspects of a body of work which has routinely been dismissed as little more than cosy escapism. I hope that this thesis can help redirect critical attention towards domestic noir fiction, particularly Gillian Flynn's work, as it continues to grow in popularity and tests the boundaries of the genre as a whole.

Chapter One: *Sharp Objects*, Malignant Maternity and Fatal Girls

This chapter will examine Flynn's 2006 debut novel *Sharp Objects*, with a particular focus on the novel's toxic mother/daughter and sisterly relationships and how these relationships challenge ideas of power, authority, and violence against the female body in the crime genre. I will also briefly discuss the critically-lauded 2018 limited series TV adaptation of the novel, which Flynn was instrumental in bringing to the screen, having written or co-written all eight episodes and served as a series producer.¹¹⁶ The novel focuses on Camille Preaker, a Chicago-based journalist in her thirties who returns to her barren hometown of Wind Gap, Missouri, in search of a story following the murder of nine-year-old Ann Nash and the disappearance of ten-year-old Natalie Keene. Camille's editor is transparently hopeful that there is a serial killer at work in the town: 'Now another one's missing. Sounds like it might be a serial to me. Drive down there and get me the story. Go quick. Be there tomorrow morning'.¹¹⁷ This early mention of a potential serial killer, which Camille echoes in her own coverage of the case, is indicative of Flynn's genre-savvy ability to subvert expectations, as both Camille and the reader are encouraged to believe that this killer fits the mould of the antagonist from a 'serial killer thriller', i.e. a predatory, sexually violent man: 'Women didn't kill this way, they just didn't'.¹¹⁸ The invocation of this archetype emphasises Flynn's ability to engage with the generic tradition and rewrite it, as the killers at work in Wind Gap are indeed women, reliant upon a performatively vulnerable femininity as a means of masking their devastating agency.

¹¹⁶ Christina Radish, *Gillian Flynn on 'Sharp Objects', Amy Adams, and Writing for TV* (2018) <<http://collider.com/gillian-flynn-interview-sharp-objects-hbo/#marti-noxon>> [accessed 4 October 2018].

¹¹⁷ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.4.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.70.

Camille returns to her childhood home and her mother Adora, a middle-aged southern belle with a deceptively doll-like exterior: ‘Glowing pale skin, with long blonde hair and pale blue eyes. She was like a girl’s very best doll, the kind you don’t play with’.¹¹⁹ She, along with her husband Alan and daughter Amma, Camille’s half-sister, occupies the largest house in Wind Gap, a southern gothic mansion that perches on the town’s southernmost tip:

An elaborate Victorian replete with a widow’s walk, a wraparound veranda, a summer porch jutting toward the back, and a cupola arrowing out of the top. It’s full of cubbyholes and nooks, curiously circuitous. The Victorians, especially southern Victorians, needed a lot of room to stray away from each other, to duck tuberculosis and flu, to avoid rapacious lust, to wall themselves away from sticky emotions.¹²⁰

As she struggles with the emotional fallout of her homecoming, Camille is haunted by memories of her late sister Marian, whose premature death she remembers only through an obfuscating veil of trauma. Marian is described as a living ghost, a perpetually ill child whose existence is marked by seemingly unending suffering, over which Adora faithfully watches: ‘Marian was a sweet series of diseases. She had trouble breathing from the start, would wake in the night spluttering for air, splotchy and gray. I could hear her like a sick wind down the hall from me, in the bedroom next to my mother. Lights would click on and there would be cooing, or sometimes crying or shouting’.¹²¹ As she attempts to uncover the truth behind the murders of Ann and Natalie, Camille is brought to the realisation that Marian’s recurring illnesses and eventual death were the result of Adora’s twisted desire to simultaneously nurture and annihilate her daughters; she suffers from Munchausen by proxy syndrome, and is compelled to repeat a cycle of intentionally sickening and ‘treating’ her children, via homemade concoctions and mysterious pills (ultimately revealed to be a mixture of anti-malarial medication, industrial-grade laxatives,

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p.24.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p.23.

¹²¹ Ibid., p.76.

ipecac syrup and horse tranquilizers). This, combined with the revelation that Amma is responsible for the brutal deaths of Ann and Natalie, as well as the murder of another young friend, points to a generational compulsion towards ancillary aggression, a deep-seated yearning to absorb and inflict harm on the passive female body. *Sharp Objects* is a novel in which ‘women neither revel in nor aspire to what one of them describes, facetiously, as ‘girl power.’ Mothers will not forbear to remind their children that they do not love them. They discard make-believe personalities as snakes shed skin. Above all, no one seeks to be likable’.¹²² This self-aware rejection of ‘likability’, implicitly linked as it is to a neoliberal concept of female success, ensures that Flynn’s female characters are unrestricted by any gendered moral imperative, particularly with regard to motherhood or ‘sisterhood’.

The character of Adora is particularly subversive (especially with regard to the established norms of motherhood, centred as they are on munificence and selflessness, as she inhabits that role with a covert venom which implicitly undercuts her maternal persona) in that she quite eagerly performs vulnerability and altruistic maternalism, but uses this performance to mask some profoundly disturbing impulses which lead her to harm her children. Lee and Katharine Horsley have written about noir fiction and maternal subjectivities, and their work will inform my reading of Adora’s deadly maternal presence, as her pathological existence is ‘all the more disturbing because of her duality – her apparent conformity to the opposing archetype of the “good” (loving, nurturing) mother’.¹²³ Horsley and Horsley note that in the traditionally male-centred noir fiction of Horace McCoy (*Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*, 1948) and Robert Bloch (*Psycho*, 1959), the

¹²² A.J. Finn, *Thank you, Gillian Flynn, for giving women permission to be bad* (2018) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/gillian-flynn-sharp-objects-gives-women-permission-to-be-bad/2018/07/05/99d23d86-7e03-11e8-b0ef-ffffcabe946_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.b6fd1b38b35a> [accessed 11 October 2018].

¹²³ Lee Horsley and Katharine Horsley (1999), *Mères fatales: maternal guilt in the noir crime novel*. *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, 45 (2). pp. 369-402, p.370.

subjectivity of the murderous maternal figure goes unexplored: ‘what we do not have is access to the mothers' own subjectivity: in terms of the crime narrative, they have caused the mental instability which accounts for the violence of their sons; they are objects, figures in the background, guilty violators of an idealised patriarchal feminine (the angelic, perfectly nurturing mother)’.¹²⁴ While the reader engages with Adora primarily via Camille, who is largely a product of her mother’s damaging influence, Camille’s psychological landscape is so thoroughly dominated by Adora’s vicious subjectivity that she is anything but a ‘figure in the background’. Her violation of the maternal ideal is undercut by a conscious rejection of the paradigmatic framework of that very ideal. Towards the end of the novel, Adora’s voice emerges through the diary entries that are ultimately used to convict her, and they starkly illuminate the depth of her pathological need to corrupt her children: ‘the nurses are somewhat troubling. Probably jealous. Will have to really dote next visit (surgery seems likely!)’.¹²⁵

This chapter will be divided into three sections: the first will be a section on the malignant maternal influence of the character of Adora, whose relationship with her daughters, living and dead, is marked with a veiled toxicity which has rendered them somewhat dependent on the infliction and absorption of harm. This section will also explore what Camille and others refer to as the ‘sickness’ of Wind Gap femininity, a sort of venomous network of co-dependency which shapes the relationships and identities of the women of the town, from the precocious cruelty of Amma’s girl-gang to the genteel bitterness of Adora’s pill-popping middle-aged female acquaintances.

The second section will look at the generational trauma shared by the sisters and how this trauma manifests via Flynn’s renegotiation of the *femme fatale* figure, particularly with

¹²⁴ Ibid., p.381.

¹²⁵ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.242.

regard to Adora's youngest daughter, Amma, a sexually precocious thirteen-year-old murderess. Amma's inability to come to terms with the abuses she has suffered at the hands of her mother drives her to simultaneously internalize and externalize her pain, something which she attempts to give voice to early on in the novel: 'sometimes if you let people do things to you, you're really doing it to them... if someone wants to do fucked-up things to you, and you let them, you're making them more fucked-up. You have the control'.¹²⁶ Amma embodies what Kristen Hatch and Samantha Lindop have termed the *fille fatale*, an adolescent variant on the *femme fatale* whose relationship to her own budding sexual identity and violent impulses is shaped by the pervasive male gaze: 'acting sexy for the benefit of the adult gaze, she [becomes] sexy in fact [...] she presented a blank visage, and adults projected their own desires onto it'.¹²⁷

In Amma's case, this projection forces her to continually shift between roles, performing complicit juvenility at home and 'mean girl' cruelty in public. As a result, her identity is predicated on a toxic duality, one which gives rise to the homicidal urges by which the plot is driven. While Flynn has breathed new life into the *femme fatale* in all three of her novels (via Diondra in *Dark Places* and Amy in *Gone Girl*), this adolescent iteration is particularly interesting in terms of Amma's ability to navigate and transcend the gendered limitations of her world, even as she is continually victimized by it.

The third section will centre on the internalization of gendered violence which is evident in the novel, most notably with regard to Camille, who grapples with the compulsion to violently inscribe her own skin with the words which haunt her, words like *vanish*, *cherry*, *baby*, and *tragic*, hinting at the complexity of her own latent sexual trauma and desire to understand the weaponized vulnerability wielded by her mother:

¹²⁶ Ibid., p.182.

¹²⁷ Kristen Hatch, 'Fille Fatale: Regulating Images of Adolescent Girls, 1962-1996' in *Sugar, Spice, and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood* [ed. Frances K. Gateward and Murray Pomerance] (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), pp.172-173.

I am a cutter, you see. Also a snipper, a slicer, a carver, a jabber. I am a very special case. I have a purpose. My skin, you see, screams. It's covered with words—*cook*, *cupcake*, *kitty*, *curls*—as if a knife-wielding first-grader learned to write on my flesh. I sometimes, but only sometimes, laugh. Getting out of the bath and seeing, out of the corner of my eye, down the side of a leg: *baby-doll*. Pulling on a sweater and, in a flash of my wrist: *harmful*.¹²⁸

Adora's own method of self-harm underscores her façade of defencelessness: 'She pulls at her eyelashes. Sometimes they come out. During some particularly difficult years when I was a child, she had no lashes at all, and her eyes were a constant gluey pink, vulnerable as a lab rabbit's. In winter time, they leaked streaks of tears whenever she went outdoors. Which wasn't often'.¹²⁹ The juxtaposition of these self-inflicted cruelties and those visited upon the bodies of Ann and Natalie, the prepubescent murder victims whose deaths necessitate Camille's inauspicious homecoming, underscores the extent to which Flynn challenges and subverts the conventions surrounding violence against female bodies in popular crime fiction. As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, these conventions typically rely on a gendered power differential which privileges the violent agency of the (often male) perpetrator, compounding the disparity between the autonomous masculine and the supine feminine. Flynn's female characters, preoccupied as they are with carving and marking their own bodies, repudiate the limitations of the 'victimised female' role. Ann and Natalie are found strangled, their teeth having been extracted: 'Natalie Keene's lips caved in around her gums in a small circle. She looked like a plastic baby doll, the kind with a built-in hole for bottle feedings. Natalie had no teeth now'.¹³⁰ Unlike Adora and Camille, whose acts of self-mutilation are, at least in part, the manifestation of their own destructive agency, these girls are acted *upon*, brutally objectified, the raw pink vulnerability of their flesh exposed by someone *else*. The fact that that someone else is ultimately

¹²⁸ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.28.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.25.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.28.

revealed to be a female peer solidifies Flynn's reconfiguration of the power dynamics underlying the perpetually reoccurring spectre of the destroyed female body in the crime novel. Thus, she engages in what Delys Bird and Brenda Walker describe as a 'confrontation' with the maleness of the genre: 'women writers of crime fiction, then, working in a male preserve with a genre always considered definitively masculine despite its numerous very well-known female practitioners, might now use the genre in a way that challenged and confronted its maleness. Women readers too could identify with those challenges'.¹³¹ Flynn's depiction of female-led violence against female bodies serves as a challenge to what Bird and Walker define as the apparent 'masculinity' of traditional crime fiction, in that it speaks to the subjectivity of female victimhood and explores the complexity of (potentially violent) destructive female desire in a gendered landscape engineered to inhibit, control or diminish those impulses.

'I hope I have enough poison left in me'¹³²: The Malignant Maternal Influence

Adora's relationship with her daughters is perhaps best exemplified by a troubling reminiscence of Camille's; in the years following Marian's death, Adora surrounds herself with female friends, most of whom seem to thrive on a routine of self-medication and genteel bitchiness. During one of these gatherings, a child is brought into their orbit:

For hours, the child was cooed over, smothered with red-lipstick kisses, tidied up with tissues, then lipstick smacked again [...] My mother finally was handed the baby, and she cuddled it ferociously. *Oh, how wonderful it is to hold a baby again!* Adora jiggled it on her knee, walked it around the rooms, whispered to it, and I looked down from above like a spiteful little god, the back of my hand placed against my face, imagining how it felt to be cheek to cheek with my mother. When the ladies went into the kitchen to help tidy up the dishes, something changed. I remember my mother, alone in the living room, staring at the child almost lasciviously. She pressed her lips hard against the baby's apple slice of a cheek. Then

¹³¹ Delys Bird, *Killing Women: Rewriting Detective Fiction* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1993), p.12.

¹³² Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.308.

she opened her mouth just slightly, took a tiny bit of flesh between her teeth, and gave it a little bite. The baby wailed. The blotch faded as Adora snuggled the child, and told the other women it was just being fussy.¹³³

This disturbing amalgamation of violence and affection shapes Adora's relationship with her own daughters, as she is unable or unwilling to perform her maternal duties unless they capitulate to her poisonous manipulation. Marian, whose unfortunate desire to comply with Adora's destructive needs leads to her demise, is an unremitting presence in the house, the memory of her slow, sweet death all the sharper for the pointedly cruel allusions Adora is prone to: "And now you come back and all I can think of is 'Why Marian and not her?'"¹³⁴ Both Camille and Amma continually reflect on their respective positions in Adora's dubious affections in light of the sainted Marian, and their own relationship is shaped by their memories of her, or lack thereof (early on in the novel, Camille locks herself "away from that horrible little girl, who was not like Marian at all."¹³⁵, while Amma questions her about their long-deceased sister, Adora's cherished 'doll' in the wake of whom they must exist). Adora's own girlhood, we are told, was governed by a domineering mother, Joya, who took tactile pleasure in doling out small cruelties to her daughter:

Her mother used to come into her room in the middle of the night and pinch her when she was a child [...] never saw your grandma Joya smile at her or touch her in a loving way, but she couldn't keep her hands off her. Always fixing the hair, tugging at clothes, and...oh, she did this thing. Instead of licking her thumb and rubbing at a smudge, she'd lick Adora. Just grab her head and lick it. When Adora peeled from a sunburn—we all did back then, not as smart about SPF as your generation—Joya would sit next to your momma, strip off her shirt, and peel the skin off in long strips. Joya loved that.¹³⁶

It is heavily implied that Adora has inherited her deadly maternal habits from Joya, having presumably been forced to endure a childhood of induced sickness not unlike that of

¹³³ Ibid., p.97.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p.149.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p.60.

¹³⁶ Ibid., pp.165-201.

Marian and Amma. Her friends remember that she was continuously sick with a ‘little bit of everything [...] she was always having tubes and needles and such stuck in her’.¹³⁷ Lee and Katharine Horsley term the deadly maternal figures of noir fiction the ‘*mères fatales*’, or fatal mothers, explaining that these characters are a variant on the classic *femme fatale* figure with an emphasis on the reclamation of the subjectivity of these characters. Horsley and Horsley argue that female-authored noir fiction provides a narrative space for the exploration of maternal guilt and wrongdoing from the perspective of the woman whose job it is to maintain the symbolic coherence of this role: ‘what we have called a-heroic noir, in which the protagonists are most often subordinate and impaired, is an exploration of the condition of powerlessness [...] [there is] no plot resolution that acts to re-establish patriarchal orderings’.¹³⁸ Flynn’s depiction of Joya and Adora’s successive devotion to toxic ‘mothering’ would certainly place her within this tradition of female-authored noir fiction in which ineffective or non-existent patriarchal power structures are superseded by the foregrounding of female experience.

The invocation of this memory of Adora’s bruised and violated pubescent body, alongside those of Marian, Ann, and Natalie, underscores the pervasiveness and seeming inevitability of this ‘sickness’, perhaps best understood as a means of engaging with and ultimately perpetuating the cycle of veiled brutality which the women of Wind Gap are destined to endure. Towards the end of the novel, Camille becomes Amma’s guardian, and worries that her desire to ‘care’ for Amma is a manifestation of the same warped compulsion: ‘was I good at caring for Amma because of kindness? Or did I like caring for Amma because I have Adora’s sickness?’.¹³⁹ Camille’s self-harm, which began during the summer following Marian’s death, is linked to her fears of ‘inheriting’ Adora’s disorder –

¹³⁷ Ibid., p.201.

¹³⁸ Lee Horsley and Katharine Horsley (1999), *Mères fatales: maternal guilt in the noir crime novel*. *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, 45 (2). pp. 369-402, p.377.

¹³⁹ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.252.

she chooses to turn her destructive impulses inward, simultaneously internalising and externalising her pain and confusion as she brands herself with a litany of words: ‘most of the time that I’m awake, I want to cut. Not small words either. *Equivocate. Inarticulate.*

Duplicious.¹⁴⁰ The third section of this chapter will look at her self-mutilation in greater detail, but it is worth considering the contrast between these violent impulses and those of Adora, Amma, and the other women of Wind Gap, and the extent to which they are a reaction against a seemingly inescapable and oppressive victim-victimiser binary.

When Camille is reunited with some of her old classmates, now comfortably ensconced in deadening middle-class domesticity, she observes this shifting balance of power and pain in suburban microcosm. Camille’s interactions with these groups of women, including Adora’s jaded friends and Amma’s coven of teenage followers, serve as a deft inversion of the investigative model preferred by the protagonists of the ‘detective’ novel – a model which relies on careful observation of the crime scene, if not the corpse itself, and subsequently the precise deduction of facts. Dupin, for example, functions as a patriarchal authority whose role is to ‘solve’ the enigma posed by the murdered female body. His interest in the murders of Madame L’Espanaye, her daughter, and Marie Rogêt is primarily intellectual, and so his attempts to ratiocinatively deconstruct/reconstruct the particulars of the crime are devoid of any emotional imperative, since these dead women serve as little more than puzzles via which he can assert his intellectual superiority.

Interviews are conducted in the manner of a scientific investigation, with the bare facts of the case taking precedence over any consideration of the social or emotional impact of the crime. Camille’s investigative process is markedly different, as she must negotiate the complex and often contradictory power dynamics of groups of women for whom the emotional resonance of these crimes, and of their shared history, is all-important. She is

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p.20.

not invested with any true authority, and lacks the institutional support of the patriarchal forces of law; thus, her attempts to learn the truth of what happened to Ann and Natalie are reliant on her ability (or lack thereof) to unpack and unpick the tangled social threads which unite and divide the women of Wind Gap. This emphasises the extent to which Flynn has successfully appropriated domestic noir's capacity to broaden and blur the rigid archetypal lines which have limited female characterisation in crime fiction. These are the kind of female characters Kathleen Klein calls 'producers of textual meaning and redefiners of generic conventions'.¹⁴¹ Camille is at once vulnerable and canny as she moves between roles in search of long-buried truths – journalist, investigator, daughter, sister, survivor. She may lack the patriarchal privilege of being permitted to work within official structures of power (her unsuccessful attempts to garner information and support from the male police chief of Wind Gap are marked by a distinctly misogynistic irritation on his part, as he dismisses her journalistic interest in the case as ghoulish and unfeminine), but her ability to infiltrate and utilise networks of female knowledge lends her a considerable advantage. These acts of girl-on-girl viciousness are best understood from within the claustrophobic and complicated relationships that breed them.

Camille reflects that her ability to engage with these groups is advantageous: 'like Annabelle, Jackie, and that catty group of my mother's friends, this gathering was likely to yield more information than I'd get through a dozen formal interviews'.¹⁴² As these women bond and bicker over seemingly inconsequential anxieties – the 'women's magazine fodder'¹⁴³ which domestic noir fiction has foregrounded and validated as subject matter for crime fiction, according to Megan Abbott – the brutal undercurrents of female violence,

¹⁴¹ Kathleen Klein, *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre* (USA: Illini Books, 1995), p.2.

¹⁴² Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.129.

¹⁴³ 'The 'Girl' In The 'Title: More Than A Marketing Trend', *Morning Edition*, NPR, 22 February 2016, Online Sound Recording, NPR.org <<https://www.npr.org/2016/02/22/467392750/the-girl-in-the-title-more-than-a-marketing-trend>> [accessed 16 May 2018].

explicit and implicit, are exposed. ‘Why are girls so cruel to each other?’¹⁴⁴, they ponder, as they engage in a perverse re-enactment of their own high school days, backbiting and using the local tragedy to sanctimoniously reflect on their own social successes: “Camille doesn’t have any children,” Katie said piously. “I don’t think she can feel that hurt the way we do [...] I don’t mean this to sound cruel,” Tish began, “but it seems like part of your heart can never work if you don’t have kids. Like it will always be shut off”.¹⁴⁵ Camille reflects on the toxicity of these gatherings when she returns to her childhood bedroom, the site of Adora’s early attempts to subject her to the sicken-nurture routine, the perpetual cycle of female cruelty and despair shadowing her nightmares as she lies in this (sick)bed:

Those little girls. *What’s wrong with the world?* Mimi had cried, and it had barely registered, the lament was so commonplace. But I felt it now. Something was wrong, right here, very horribly wrong. I could picture Bob Nash sitting on the edge of Ann’s bed, trying to remember the last thing he said to his daughter. I saw Natalie’s mother, crying into one of her old T-shirts. I saw me, a despairing thirteen-year-old sobbing on the floor of my dead sister’s room, holding a small flowered shoe. Or Amma, thirteen herself, a woman-child with a gorgeous body and a gnawing desire to be the baby girl my mother mourned. My mother weeping over Marian. Biting that baby. Amma, asserting her power over lesser creatures, laughing as she and her friends cut through Natalie’s hair, the curls falling to the tile floor. Natalie, stabbing at the eyes of a little girl. My skin was screaming, my ears banged with my heartbeat.¹⁴⁶

It is during this devastating contemplation that she alludes to her own neuroses regarding motherhood, the effect of Adora’s abuse apparent in her dread of birthing a child: ‘I wanted to slice *barren* into my skin. That’s how I’d stay, my insides unused. Empty and pristine. I pictured my pelvis split open, to reveal a tidy hollow, like the nest of a vanished animal’.¹⁴⁷ It’s telling that she envisions her womb, in this moment, as a clean, blank space – she has been pulled back into the same contaminated duality which governs Amma’s

¹⁴⁴ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.105.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.134.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.149.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.149.

existence; in this house, Adora's daughters are required to perform vulnerability and girlhood, implicitly giving her ownership of their bodies and minds as she carries out her invasive 'treatments'. Towards the end of the novel, Camille wonders if there is a dormant but profound sickness waiting to bloom in every woman, a consequence of the major and minor bodily invasions they are consistently subject to: 'women get *consumed*. Not surprising, considering the sheer amount of traffic a woman's body experiences. Tampons and speculums. Cocks, fingers, vibrators and more, between the legs, from behind, in the mouth. Men love to put things inside women, don't they?'.¹⁴⁸ This observation is indicative of the extent to which Flynn's work within the crime genre signifies a paradigm shift, particularly with regard to the symbolic construction, destruction and depiction of female bodies in crime fiction. The silenced, violated, dissected female body has become so generically ubiquitous as to be unremarkable in the twenty-first century crime narrative, and Flynn challenges this troubling ubiquity by offering us female characters who can, and frequently do, reflect on their own objectification and penetrability. Their articulation of their own vulnerability with regard to these processes of physical and symbolic reduction lends the narrative a clarity which throws into sharp relief the overarching generic tendency towards empty, silent, broken women.

What are we to make, then, of the fact that Marian, Amma, Camille, Ann, and Natalie are ultimately consumed by a malevolence that is distinctly female? It is worth noting that female violence, and particularly mother-on-child violence, is habitually framed as 'sickness' (or as Sally Munt might put it, 'madness' rather than 'badness'¹⁴⁹), in popular culture and within a larger societal framework. Thus, the likelihood of conviction and imprisonment for such crime is lower; according to Helen Birch, 'the criminal justice system's response to mothers who kill their children best fits the 'chivalry hypothesis'. It is

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p.204.

¹⁴⁹ Sally Munt, *Murder by the Book?: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.46.

clear that mothers were less likely than fathers to be convicted of murder or to be sentenced to imprisonment, and were more likely to be given probation and psychiatric dispositions'.¹⁵⁰ The gendered implications of this are quite apparent – female violence is something to be *treated*, rather than *punished*, the agency of the murderess reduced to a containable pathology. With this in mind, the 'sickness' which seems to plague the women of Wind Gap takes on a new dimension, as Flynn's female killers take ownership of this 'sickness', both literally and figuratively, using it to simultaneously validate and conceal their violent desires.

Within the larger context of crime fiction, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, women certainly are routinely *consumed*, whether by male violence (the brutalised women who silently dominate Stieg Larsson's work come to mind, as do the dissected female corpses which are so central to Patricia Cornwell's Scarpetta novels), the rapacious gaze of the male investigator, whose job it often is to use the broken remains of the female body to 'solve' a crime (e.g. Marie Rogêt), or by the reader, who is encouraged to view these dead and destroyed women not in terms of their personhood or their ability (or lack thereof) to engage with victimisation, but as puzzle pieces, to be picked up, examined for clues, and more or less discarded once their purpose, with regard to moving the plot forward, has been served. Flynn's female characters defy this narrative treatment, and in doing so renegotiate the gendered power differential upon which crime fiction has so often relied; these women *consume*, acting upon the world around them in quietly devastating ways. Even Ann and Natalie, the latest in a long line of dead Wind Gap girls, are remembered as strange and ferocious; like Adora, they were prone to biting: 'both of them. They had serious tempers. Like scary-time tempers. Like boy tempers. But they didn't hit.

¹⁵⁰ Helen Birch, *Moving Targets: Women, Murder and Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p.205.

They bit. Look.” She held out her right hand. Just below the thumb were three white scars that shone in the afternoon light’.¹⁵¹

The word *consume* is again brought to mind – in the case of Adora, the perversion of her maternal role facilitates this consumption. Just as she babies and brutalises her girls in equal measure, we are told that she took a personal interest in both Ann and Natalie while they were alive, welcoming them into her gothic mansion for tutoring sessions which occasionally turned violent: “your mom was tutoring her and Ann didn’t understand. She completely lost it, pulled some of your momma’s hair out, and bit into her wrist. Hard. I think there had to be stitches.” Images of my mother’s thin arm caught between tiny teeth [...] a scream, a release’.¹⁵² We are left with the impression of an infectious hunger, an insatiable need to exercise the violent agency which ultimately kills Ann and Natalie. Adora’s hunger is particularly interesting, as it manifests as practically vampiric, driving her to leech the life from her own children. When her diary is discovered in the wake of her eventual wrongful arrest for the murders of Ann and Natalie, the perverse internal logic of her protracted abuse of her daughters is revealed: ‘I love wiping away her tears [...] Marian is dead. I couldn’t stop. I’ve lost 12 pounds and am skin and bones. Everyone’s been incredibly kind. People can be so wonderful’.¹⁵³ Here, again, her desire to contaminate is framed as an act of cruelty that is at once parasitic and self-sabotaging; she is physically diminished by the act, revelling in the frail beauty of her self-inflicted grief and tormented by a craving for pain that even she doesn’t fully understand.

A young witness to the abduction of Natalie describes seeing a woman in a white dress emerge from the woods to take the girl, a woman he describes as ‘old like a mother’.¹⁵⁴ The image evoked is that of a fairytale witch, and there is indeed the sense that Adora, and her

¹⁵¹ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.127.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p.127.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.242.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.51.

younger counterparts in Wind Gap, are labouring under a curse of sorts, the awareness of their ultimate powerlessness (they are variously rendered toothless and tied up, pinched, bitten and destroyed from the inside out by a poisonous ‘mother’s milk’ as intoxicating as it is lethal) driving them to *consume*. In a broader sense, this ‘woman in white’ (who turns out to have been Amma, roaming the woods in search of prey: ‘Amma had stolen one of our pristine white sheets and fashioned it into a Grecian dress, tied up her light-blond hair, and powdered herself until she glowed. She was Artemis, the blood huntress’¹⁵⁵) signifies further archetypal distortion or distension on Flynn’s part. This is a spectral *femme fatale* emerging from the forest, a child-snatching serial killer who herself is a child bent on recreating the cycle of stifling indulgence and abuse from which she cannot escape – we are told that Amma and her friends, prior to both murders, spent time with the girls, feeding them, dressing them up, and painting their nails. Just as Adora is unable to refrain from inflicting sickness on her daughters, even as she coddles and cares for them with overbearing devotion, Amma offsets her brutality by nurturing her victims, ministering as she destroys, just like Joya and Adora before her.

This entanglement of cruelty and care signifies an interesting mutation of the classic *femme fatale* archetype – the focus of their aggression is not a man (although FBI agent Richard does eventually, and incorrectly, arrest Adora for the Wind Gap murders, he and his male peers are largely ineffective in putting an end to the female-on-female violence), and they are a far cry from the wily, obliquely oversexed female adversaries of noir fiction, whose motives are as inscrutable as they are inevitably thwartable by a conflicted male protagonist (*The Maltese Falcon*’s ill-fated Brigid O’Shaughnessy and *Farewell, My Lovely*’s Velma are key examples). Adora and Amma are anything but enigmatic ‘psycho bitches’¹⁵⁶;

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p.248.

¹⁵⁶ Oliver Burkeman, *Gillian Flynn on her bestseller Gone Girl and accusations of misogyny* (2013) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/may/01/gillian-flynn-bestseller-gone-girl-misogyny>> [accessed 1 June 2018].

their rage has roots and a rationale that the reader, via Camille, is ultimately privy to, as these women consume and are consumed in equal measure. Another aspect of their characterisation which sets them apart from the stereotypical notion of *femmes fatale* is Flynn's refusal to filter their narrative existence through the violent male gaze. Camille is our only narrator, and it is from her perspective that we engage with Adora's chilly maternal presence, as the only quasi-sexual power she seems to wield is linked to the tactile power plays she inflicts on her daughters (Adora's relationship with her husband Alan is, by all accounts, one of sexless complicity; Camille even succinctly dismisses Alan as 'the opposite of moist'¹⁵⁷). With Amma, in possession of a blossoming sexuality which she struggles to understand even as she attempts to weaponise it, Flynn offers a tongue-in-cheek nod to Amma's Lolita status even as she makes it clear that Amma is herself playing on this trope as a means of testing her burgeoning sexual power:

Amma stayed up, staring down John, rubbing suntan oil on her shoulders, her chest, breasts, slipping her hands under her bikini top, watching John watching her. John gave no reaction, like a kid on his sixth hour of TV. The more lasciviously Amma rubbed, the less flicker he gave. One triangle of her top had fallen askew to reveal the plump breast beneath. Thirteen years old, I thought to myself, but I felt a spear of admiration for the girl. When I'd been sad, I hurt myself. Amma hurt other people. When I'd wanted attention, I'd submitted myself to boys: *Do what you want; just like me*. Amma's sexual offerings seemed a form of aggression. Long skinny legs and slim wrists and high, babied voice, all aimed like a gun. *Do what I want; I might like you*.¹⁵⁸

This conscious re-writing of the unfathomably destructive sexuality of the *femme fatale* is again indicative of Flynn's ability to subtly reconceptualise these female archetypes; Camille does not feel threatened or emasculated by Amma's clumsy attempts at seduction, rather, she understands them as a survival mechanism, a means of negotiating her transition from child to object of male sexual desire, a transition over which she does not seem to have any great degree of control. At one point, Camille wonders whether Amma's

¹⁵⁷ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.25.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.152.

accelerated puberty is linked to the ingestion of animal hormones: ‘all those milk-fed, hog-fed, beef-fed early years. All those extra hormones we put in our livestock. We’ll be seeing toddlers with tits before long [...] pigs were pricked with chemicals till they plumped and reddened like squirting cherries, till their legs couldn’t support their juicy girth. But it was done at a more leisurely pace’.¹⁵⁹ The local hog farm, the town’s epicentre of employment and likely fount of hormonal contamination, is part of Camille and Amma’s heritage, having been established by their grandfather and subsequently served as the main source of the Preaker family’s wealth. The family is thus overtly coded as responsible for the aggressive sexualisation of Wind Gap’s girls, and Camille’s reflection on their culpability with regard to the effect on the town’s young women serves to foreshadow the eventual reveal, which centres on the violent externalisation of this desire to physically alter and destroy their female peers.

If Adora, then, is indirectly responsible for her young daughter’s violent transformation into a girl-woman, even as she aggressively babies Amma, dressing her in childish clothes (‘she looked entirely her age—thirteen—for the first time since I’d seen her. Actually, no. She looked younger now. Those clothes were more appropriate for a ten-year-old’¹⁶⁰) and drip-feeding her the ‘medicine’ which renders her utterly dependent on maternal benevolence. The poisons which she relies on to control her daughters and satiate her own cruel appetites are thus working in opposition to one another, with the capitalistic endeavours which she has inherited from her father implicitly triggering a premature and profoundly damaging outward shift from ‘little girl’ to sex object, while her pathological compulsion to perform a caring role, undoubtedly learned from Joya, reduces Amma to juvenile helplessness, as she is forced to become little more than Adora’s swaddled baby doll, a role which she has become so used to that she attempts to revert to it following

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., pp.114-130.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p.43.

Adora's arrest: "you need to rub alcohol on me," she whimpered. "No Amma, just relax." Amma's face turned pink and she began crying. "That's how she does it," she whispered. The tears turned into sobs, then a mournful howl. "We're not going to do it like she does it anymore," I said".¹⁶¹

The tension between gendered forces which is apparent in the duality of Adora's toxic ministrations is one Flynn cleverly uses to undercut readerly expectations regarding female aggression and poison as 'a woman's weapon' in the domestic sphere – Adora's poisons differ from those employed by the protagonists of an Agatha Christie or Dorothy Sayers novel (where strychnine, arsenic, and monkshood are habitually used to dispatch friends and spouses alike). Her ultimate goal is not to kill her daughters (as we see when she expresses her written disappointment and shock at Marian's death), but to render them as figuratively toothless as Amma has Ann and Natalie, to cause them to weaken and wane in order to be *needed*, as her performative caring role fulfils a need which answers theirs, a need to re-enact Joya's perverse displays of control over her teenage daughter's body. At the same time, the pig farm, source of Adora's power and wealth and site of such casual cruelty to nursing sows that Camille reflects that 'the sight of it actually does something to you, makes you less human. Like watching a rape and saying nothing'¹⁶², potentially causes a hormonal spike which pushes Amma into early womanhood. Amma's only escape from Adora's desire to nurse her, a desire which utterly strips her of agency within the walls of their tomb-like house, haunted as it is by the memory of Marian, is the deviant control she exercises over her peers and the sexual power she has only begun to understand and which shapes her interactions with the men who seek to objectify her. Adora thus becomes the arbiter of Amma's disintegrating sense of self, as she administers toxins which work to keep her daughter suspended between perpetual childhood and an untimely sexual

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p.246.

¹⁶² Ibid., p.99.

maturation. This dichotomy of contamination indicates that the malign maternal influence which Adora has inherited and chooses to perpetuate on her own children is one driven by a desire to exercise control over the consumable female body, thus (in theory) transcending the gendered power dynamics which ruin and restrain the women of Wind Gap.

‘I will never understand where your penchant for ugliness comes from’¹⁶³:

Generational Trauma, Sisterhood, and the Postfeminist *Filles Fatale* of Wind Gap

As touched on in the first section of this chapter, the violent homosocial bonds which shape the power dynamics between the women of Wind Gap are honed in the town’s playgrounds and high school corridors. These bonds are fundamental to their fluctuating desires to inflict harm, on themselves and others, as they are encouraged to walk a fine line between sex object and aggressor, enduring the sexual victimisation visited upon them by their male peers even as they are implicitly and explicitly shamed for doing so. According to David Schmid, the social space of the high school functions as an amplifying chamber of sorts for the resulting rage and trauma: ‘the high school is the space where the most intense dramas get played out, and where the violence of these teenaged relationships is displayed in all its glorious and hyperbolic fury’.¹⁶⁴

Camille casually relates the tale of a classmate whose mother’s suicide (the end result of what was rumoured to be a lesbian love affair, according to malicious town gossip) leaves her desperate to prove herself *consumable*, at least as far as the unforgiving male gaze is concerned:

“The boys would take her out after school into the woods and take turns having sex with her. Her mother kills herself, and sixteen years later, Faye has to fuck every boy in school.” “I don’t follow.” “To prove she isn’t a lesbian. Like mother, like daughter, right? If she didn’t fuck those boys, no one would have had anything to do with her. But she did. So she proved she wasn’t a lesbian, but that she was a slut.”¹⁶⁵

Amma, and to a lesser extent her friends, embody what Samantha Lindop has termed the *fille fatale* – ‘powerful young women who are not yet *femmes* but are just as deadly as their

¹⁶³ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.84.

¹⁶⁴ David Schmid, *Suburban Crime Fiction* <<https://buffalo.academia.edu/DavidSchmid>> [accessed 13 June 2019].

¹⁶⁵ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.73.

adult counterparts [...] an emphasis on misplaced Oedipal attachments and the utilisation of childishness as masquerade'.¹⁶⁶ Lindop charts the development of the *fille fatale* from the 1990s to the postmillennial period (including the 1994 film *Léon: The Professional*'s twelve-year-old protagonist Mathilda, who becomes enamoured of a much older hitman, *Cruel Intentions*' schoolgirl antiheroine Kathryn, who gleefully masterminds the sexual humiliation of her peers, and *Hard Candy*'s Hayley, who schemes to reclaim sexual autonomy from a predatory older man), exploring an emergent archetypal tradition which Amma, with her disarming ability to control the people around her via the appropriation of an ostensibly harmless 'mean girl' persona, is part of.

It is interesting to consider Mark Waters' and Tina Fey's 2004 film *Mean Girls*, released two years prior to *Sharp Objects* and loosely based on Rosalind Wiseman's exploration of the unforgiving social politics of high school, *Queen Bees and Wannabes* (2002), in light of the characterization of Amma and the layers of the façade of girlhood she uses to simultaneously conceal and explore her darker impulses. Like its predecessor *Heathers* (1988), it is a film in which the complex microaggressions and emotional conflict which often characterize relationships between teenage girls explode into actual violence, with the characters tricking one another into consuming weight-gain supplements, physically fighting in school corridors and the film's antagonist, Regina George, ultimately getting hit by a school bus. The climax of the film involves the distribution of pages from a 'burn book', a journal filled with cruel observations about the school's teenage girl population, and the subsequent eruption of female rage and physical violence. The film provides a tongue-in-cheek but incisive deconstruction of the dynamics of *fille fatale* friendship and the latent violence therein; this is female aggression brought to its natural, deadly apex, with comically exaggerated instances of girl-on-girl hostility serving to explicate the profoundly sadistic undercurrents which

¹⁶⁶ Samantha Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-noir Cinema* (Queensland: University of Queensland, 2015), p.93.

shape these relationships. We may read Amma's acts of violence as a similar extension of the hostile micropolitics she practices on a regular basis, with her 'mean girl' and 'deadly girl' personas two sides of the same coin. Dawn Currie, Deirdre Kelly and Shauna Pomerantz have written about the idea of teenage girl 'meanness' as a gendered social construct which shapes our understanding of female power and its limitations:

Explanations for mean girl behaviour coalesce around the idea that meanness is a 'girl thing' (Bright 2005) [...] like the expression 'boys will be boys', the expression 'what girls do' suggests that girls have the tendency to perform certain negative behaviours as a part of 'who' they are [...] as the logic goes, because girls are denied access to typical 'masculine' aggression, such as fighting or other straightforward ways of dealing with a problem, teenage girls are relegated to the use of relational aggression, where they can carry out their dirty deeds in secret.¹⁶⁷

Amma is well-practiced at such relational aggression, having been hot-housed in Adora's gothic mansion, a space in which aggression and violence are habitually couched in the aesthetics of care and even the act of murder is a poisonous and perfumed drip-feed of self-indulgent blood-letting. When Camille discovers Amma's guilt at the close of the novel, she makes the gruesome discovery that Ann and Natalie's missing teeth have been used to recreate the ivory floor of Adora's bedroom floor in Amma's dollhouse replica of the mansion: 'made from pure ivory, cut into squares, it lit up the room from below [...] the floor of my mother's room. The beautiful ivory tiles. Made of human teeth. Fifty-six tiny teeth, cleaned and bleached and shining from the floor'.¹⁶⁸

Another victim's hair has been used to braid a tiny rug for the dollhouse. Camille is willing to accept Amma's assertion that these tokens were chosen merely for decoration, as

¹⁶⁷ Dawn H. Currie, Deirdre M. Kelly and Shauna Pomerantz, *'Girl Power': Girls Reinventing Girlhood* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009), p.34.

¹⁶⁸ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), pp.69-247.

‘the dollhouse had to be perfect’¹⁶⁹, but we may read it as something else - the deliberate transmutation of this oppressive space, the site of so many ‘relational aggressions’ and covert bodily violations, into a material reminder of Amma’s ability to control her own violent agency and perform ‘masculine’ aggression, transgressing the deeply ingrained gendered limitations of the violence that she is ‘allowed’ to engage in. The fact that she and her friends repeatedly return to the dollhouse, which she describes as her ‘fancy’, poring over these macabre details, indicates that their destructive cravings extend beyond the desire to merely inflict pain and humiliation on girls like Ann and Natalie, who, in life, take unapologetic pleasure in ‘acting out’ in ways which epitomise the precise opposite of ‘ladylike’ behaviour.

They were both locally notorious for running wild, socialising with younger, working-class boys, and lashing out at the women who try to coerce them into a more socially acceptable performance of femininity: ‘[Amma] got bitten. I saw the wound on her hip, but had failed to realize what that jagged half-moon meant’.¹⁷⁰ In using ‘masculine’ aggression to brutalise and ultimately silence these girls, Amma and her friends are violating the gendered binary of violence which has governed the ongoing war of attrition between the women of Wind Gap. In killing Ann and Natalie, who themselves threatened the established structures of symbolic power, with their refusal to play by the rules of ‘girl warfare’ and preference for unambiguous and bloody harm, Amma begins to mirror them, eschewing the complex microaggressions of teenage girl conflict in favour of actual bodily destruction. Her confession includes the revelation that her violent pursuit of Ann involved the younger girl’s attempted escape and capture: ‘the little girl, sensing an ill wind, had tried to run away, but Amma chased her down and tackled her. Hit her with a rock [...] the three blondes held Ann down, while Amma strangled her with a clothesline she’d stolen from a neighbor’s tool shed. It took an hour to calm Jodes down and another hour for Amma to pull the teeth’.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p.250.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p.247.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p.247.

The novel is punctuated with references to hunting as a masculine pursuit – we see hunting sheds and rifles, and the pig farm is coded as a male space in which the female animal is stripped of dignity and routinely objectified. Camille, at one point, observes Amma watching this intensive and dehumanising process with apparent glee and enjoyment. Her incursion into this space and her ‘hunting’ of Ann signifies a conscious shift from the ‘relational aggression’ she is so adept at to the kind of sadism the police are all too keen to wave away as ‘masculine’. Her statement that ‘if someone wants to do fucked-up things to you, and you let them, you’re making them more fucked up’¹⁷² is particularly interesting in light of this – not only is she aware of the inverse ‘power’ she holds over Adora via her willingness to submit to the latter’s care, as mentioned in the previous section, but she acknowledges that these acts of violence have changed her and perhaps allowed her to transcend the restrictive and wearying imperatives of being simply a ‘mean girl’, whose ease at inflicting emotional and psychological damage on her peer group has begun to bore her.

It is during this conversation that she confides in Camille that ‘sometimes [I] need to hurt’.¹⁷³ Camille, whose own body is the primary site of the physical violence she inflicts, misunderstands this and asks if Amma is self-harming. Amma’s reaction is telling: “I hurt,” she squealed, and twirled out onto the street, spinning flamboyantly, her head back, her arms outstretched like a swan. “I love it!” she screamed”.¹⁷⁴ As Amma revels in her capacity to ‘hurt’, the reader is made aware of just how divergent their respective interpretations of ‘hurt’ are; having grown up in the same house, one in which maternal love and affection comes at the cost of bodily autonomy and the notion of control is ever-shifting and elusive, Camille and Amma are uniquely positioned to understand and replicate these warped dynamics.

While there are references to teenage Camille’s social success and the degradation of her peers which expedited this success (“these are precocious little girls. We did some pretty

¹⁷² Ibid., p.182.

¹⁷³ Ibid., p.184.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p.184.

wild things ourselves at not much older.” Katie’s voice got huskier with her smoke. She blew it up and watched it hover blue above us. “We never did anything that cruel.” “We came pretty damn close, Camille.”¹⁷⁵), she appears to have largely internalised her pain as an adult, fighting her pervasive urge to cut and self-medicate with alcohol and prescription medication. By all accounts, this is not too far from the Wind Gap norm – Camille, when visiting her mother’s friend Jackie, observes the older woman’s pharmaceutical collection, a series of numbing agents which Jackie herself acknowledges the futility of: “Oh sure. I’m terribly lucky.” I could smell her anger mixed with tomato juice. “OxyContin, Percocet, Percodan, whatever new pill my latest doctor has stock in. But I got to admit, they’re fun.” She poured a few round white tablets into her hand and shot them back, smiled at me’.¹⁷⁶

While women like Jackie and Camille have learned to turn their pain inward, using alcohol, pills and razor blades to cope with the eruptions of their trauma, Amma has learned to weaponise her pain and deals with her ongoing trauma by unloading it on the girls of Wind Gap. As mentioned above, Flynn clearly and deliberately delineates the gendered regulation of victimhood and violence throughout the novel; the men of the town are the aggressors, the women their prey or their property. Although Adora is ostensibly ‘in charge’ of the town’s hog farm operation, and certainly profits from it, in practice it is a male-led endeavour, overseen by men who appear to take callous joy in the quasi-sexual subjugation of the animals in their charge: ‘the pig lay nearly comatose on its side, its belly exposed between metal bars, red, bloody nipples pointing out like fingers. One of the men rubbed oil on the goriest one, then flicked it and giggled’.¹⁷⁷ The parallels between this behaviour and the routine sexual humiliation and debasement of teenage girls like Amma are clear, but the fact that Amma is present and visibly enjoying herself during this scene, which Camille

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p.219.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p.199.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p.100.

is profoundly disturbed by, underscores just how different their positions in this ‘hierarchy of victimhood’ are.

Amma adopts a cross-legged pose, a conscious reminder of her youth and the pretence of girlish ‘innocence’ which she uses to mask her sociopathy. As she watches these men strap down the sows and force them to nurse, a process which Camille assures us ‘makes [them] want to die’¹⁷⁸, Amma is seen “smiling and squirming”¹⁷⁹, the spectacle of her palpably obscene enjoyment simultaneously evoking images of babyish joy and sexual pleasure. Her presence in this scene, after which Camille is physically repulsed (‘I walked, first slowly, then broke into a scramble to my car. Door shut, radio blasting, warm bourbon stinging my throat, I drove away from the stink and sound. And that child’¹⁸⁰), indicates that she has broken out of the binary of suffering which the women of Wind Gap are expected to live their lives around, using her own trauma to reposition *herself* as an aggressor, a predator with the ability to disguise herself as prey. As a result, she embodies a considerable threat to the established parameters of gendered aggression, a teenage girl who rejects the limitations of ‘mean girl’ conflict in favour of the starkly gruesome violence more closely associated with her male peers.

It is noted that neither Ann nor Natalie show signs of having been sexually abused prior to their murders, and this is described as a mercy of sorts by many observers. Ann’s father intimates that “he didn’t rape her. Everyone says that’s unusual in a killing like this. I say it’s the only blessing we got. I’d rather him kill her than rape her”.¹⁸¹ However, elements of the crimes are distinctly evocative of the kind of sexual violation these men are so fearful of. These fears seem to be rooted in the myth of ‘stranger danger’. ‘Stranger danger’ warnings, which encouraged children to be aware of the potential dangers posed by seemingly friendly

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p.100.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p.100.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p.101.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p.20.

strangers, became commonplace in American and British newspapers in the 1960s, particularly as stories of killers like Myra Hindley and Ian Brady, who chose their young victims opportunistically, dominated the headlines.¹⁸² Public service films were likewise employed in the 1970s and 80s as a means of raising awareness of ‘stranger danger’. Jen Baker has explored the parallels between these cautionary films and fairy tale narratives which explicitly warn children to beware of outsiders.¹⁸³ While these newspaper campaigns were later criticised for perpetuating the myth that children are primarily at risk from people they don’t know, they very effectively played on fears of the ‘other’ and implicitly validated the notion that violence and sexual abuse are more likely to occur outside the home) and sexual violence as something which only happens as a result of predatory outsiders. Bob Nash refers to the killer simply as “them, him, whatever. The bastard. The sick baby killer. While my family and I sleep, while you drive around doing your reporting, there is a person out there looking for babies to kill”¹⁸⁴, even as it becomes more and more clear that at the rotten core of Wind Gap there is a pervasive culture of silence designed to protect and maintain the structural and sexual inequality which has given rise to the gendered imbalance of power discussed here. As Camille’s investigation proceeds, the parallels between past and present, particularly regarding this culture of silence, become more apparent. Shocked as she is by the brutal sexual politics which seem to shape the social hierarchy of Amma’s peers, her own reminiscences are dominated by an awareness of the performance of sexual power which gives rise to ‘queen bee’ status, ephemeral as it may be: ‘girls growing up in Wind Gap studied the older girls obsessively: who dated the football stars, who was homecoming queen, who mattered. You traded favorites like baseball cards. I still remember CeeCee Wyatt, Calhoon High prom queen from when I was a girl. I once bought eleven drugstore

¹⁸² Steve Humphries, *How stranger danger changed the way children play* (2009) <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8399749.stm>> [accessed 9 January 2019].

¹⁸³ Jen Baker, ‘Paedophilic Productions and Gothic Performances’, published in *Disgust and Desire: The Paradox of the Monster* [ed. Kristen Wright] (Amsterdam: Brill Rodopi, 2018), p.208.

¹⁸⁴ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.19.

lipsticks trying to find the exact shade of pink she wore when she said hello to me one morning'.¹⁸⁵

Like the sows at the family hog farm, Ann and Natalie are pinned down, parts of them *harvested* (milk, meat, teeth, hair), their tormentors taking cruel enjoyment from playing with them prior to the act of violation: '[the girls] pretended they'd have a tea party of sorts. They prettied Ann up, played with her a bit, then after a few hours, got bored'.¹⁸⁶ Amma, the ringleader, has learned to absorb and replicate the dynamics of patriarchal violence (with no plans to stop, as we learn that she had been planning the murder of her friend Jodes, and does kill another girl while in Chicago), and in doing so she has ascended to *fille fatale* status. Samantha Lindop has linked the emergence of the literary *fille fatale* to the pressures of a feminism co-opted by neoliberal thinking, one which emphasises the importance of personal success and the vague notion of 'female empowerment' via capitalistic achievement. Lindop asserts that:

The adolescent *neo-noir fatale* often goes unpunished for her transgressions. Moreover, she is savvy, self-inventive, and extremely formidable [...] the deployment of 'girl power' articulates the notion that girls have attained all the autonomy they need, or could ever want. Therefore, girl power is used to symbolise the achievement of independence and equality, the implication being that young women should be satisfied and content with the current social order.¹⁸⁷

Lindop uses the advent of 'girl power' in the 1990s to contextualise the rise of the *fille fatale*, driven as it was by a focus on individualism and success within the existing structures of power rather than any truly revolutionary action or social upheaval. We may interpret the upsurge of 'deadly girls' in popular culture (Lindop marks the influx of *fille fatale* revenge thrillers in the mid-1990s and early twenty-first century, many of which feature female antagonists who stalk, harass, blackmail, and occasionally murder the primarily male targets

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p.104.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p.247.

¹⁸⁷ Samantha Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-noir Cinema* (Queensland: University of Queensland, 2015), p.100.

of their obsession, effectively inverting the patterns of patriarchal exploitation and abuse which often dominate the experience of girlhood in popular culture. These films include *The Crush* (1993), *Blown Away* (1993), *Malicious* (1995), *The Craft* (1996), *Devil in the Flesh* (1998), and *Swimfan* (2002), all of which depict manipulative, violent, and largely middle-class and/or white ‘deadly girls’) as a reaction against this ideology, with the narrative exploration of violent female agency used to underscore the limitations of a belief system which encourages a ‘race to the top’ of sorts, urging girls to pursue personal success rather than work to address the structural inequalities which underpin the ongoing marginalisation of certain groups of women (inequalities which are often born out of the intersection of racial and class-based oppression and heterosexism in addition to gendered subjugation).

The result is a consumer-focused brand of female emancipation which ‘not only undermines feminism through its insistence that it is a spent force, it is also marginalising since it is only available to those who can afford the right products’.¹⁸⁸ In many ways, Amma is the literal embodiment of this philosophy, albeit with a tongue-in-cheek sociopathic twist – the self-appointed ‘leader’ of her group of friends, her fanatical desire for perfection in all things becomes clear early on, when Camille witnesses a tantrum caused by an out-of-place piece of dollhouse furniture:

“You said it would all be perfect. You promised!” Her voice wavered and tears started dripping down her face. “Now it’s ruined. The whole thing is ruined. It’s the dining room—it can’t have a table that doesn’t match. I hate it!”

“Amma...” Alan folded his paper and went to put his arms around her, but she wrenched away.

“This is all I want, it’s all I asked for, and you don’t even care that it’s wrong!” she was screaming through her tears now, a full-blown tantrum, her face mottled in anger.

“Amma, calm yourself,” Alan said coolly, trying to get a hold of her again.

“It’s all I want!” Amma yelled.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p.100.

¹⁸⁹ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.60.

The refrain of ‘all I want’ is significant, particularly when we think about it from within the context of a feminism that exhorts women to ‘have it all’ (a concept which domestic noir fiction often explores, as mentioned in the introduction to this thesis – women who have ‘the perfect life’ are typically front and centre in these narratives, with the extent to which this postfeminist measure of female success is restrictive and potentially damaging usually examined to greater or lesser degrees) without providing any guidance with regard to the structures of power which exist precisely to prohibit marginalised groups from posing any real threat to the status quo. Lisa Coulthard has written that the neo-noir *femme fatale*, violently powerful and skilled at moving between public and private spaces, personifies certain feminist anxieties regarding the often-fraught relationship between women and the public sphere; she exists as an articulation of ‘feminism and in particular of the public face, collective action, and political engagement of feminism. Indeed, an overwhelming number of films featuring violent women can be seen to have at their core a narrative resolution of the entry of women into the public sphere and the resulting tension between ties to the familial and the social, of woman’s relation to public space and community, that is at the core of feminism [...] a postfeminist discourse of individualistic, “have it all” feminism that yokes violence to individual, personal, erotic, and financial success’.¹⁹⁰

The appeal of ‘girl power’ (a catchphrase originally affiliated with ‘Riot Grrrl’, the underground feminist punk subculture popular in the American northwest during the 1990s, later made popular by the Spice Girls, and premised on the notion that individual female success, particularly within capitalist spheres of production, is ultimately empowering for women as a whole) to these women is clear. For a generation of women coming of age just as the aims of third-wave feminism, an iteration of the movement broadly spanning from the early 1990s to the second decade of the twenty-first century which focused less on the

¹⁹⁰ Lisa Coulthard, ‘Killing Bill: Rethinking Feminism and Film Violence’, in *Interrogating Feminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* [ed. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker] (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007), p.172.

attainment of legal rights than on the validity of individual female identities¹⁹¹, seemed to have been achieved, particularly in an American context (the attainment of reproductive rights and apparent sexual liberation of young women chief among them, as access to contraception and abortion was expedited by American non-profits like Planned Parenthood and the Center for Reproductive Rights), this brand of feminist philosophy must surely have seemed as logical as it was revelatory. The harmful social consequences of this agenda, however, are made clear via Flynn's depiction of a psychotic individualism. This individualism drives a girl like Amma to devour and destroy the women around her, 'having it all' as she performs youthful coquettishness and plays the role of bitchy teen-queen while indulging in the bodily deconstruction of her peers. In much the same way that *Gone Girl's* Amy is a caricature of postfeminist existence, fatally obsessed with being 'the best' at everything she does, including transforming herself into America's latest murdered sweetheart, Amma's ability to simultaneously inhabit two symbolic spaces, that of victim and aggressor, underscores the extent to which this postfeminist milieu has served to narrow the idea of female success, even as the notion of 'having it all' becomes ever more ubiquitous.

According to Sarah Projansky:

Girlness – particularly adolescent girlness – epitomizes postfeminism. If the postfeminist woman is always in process, always using the freedom and equality handed to her by feminism in pursuit of having it all (including discovering her sexuality) but never quite managing to reach full adulthood, to fully have it all, one could say that the postfeminist woman is quintessentially adolescent.¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford's edited collection *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) provides a concise but comprehensive overview of the emergence and development of third-wave feminist philosophy, including chapters on trans feminism, ecofeminism and girl power. As noted above, this wave of feminist thought prevailed from the early 1990s until 2011/2012, when, Gillis, Howie and Munford note, slippage between 'third wave' and 'postfeminism' becomes inevitable. While these timelines and terms are far from universally agreed upon, this definition of third-wave feminism has informed my own work.

¹⁹² Sarah Projansky, 'Mass Magazine Cover Girls: Some Reflections on Postfeminist Girls and Postfeminism's Daughters', in *Interrogating Feminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* [ed. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker] (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007), p.45.

Building on Projansky's assertion that the postfeminist woman is distinguishable by her state of perpetual *becoming*, always on the cusp of some nebulous pinnacle of 'success', the *fille fatale* as a variant on the classic *femme fatale* figure provides an archetypal lens by which to examine feminine identity in a postfeminist world; Flynn's young murderess is at times almost literally torn between the identities she adopts and the acts of psychological and physical violence she performs on herself and others. She reveals her uncertainty to Camille during a rare moment of vulnerability: "The second I fuck up, the second I do something uncool, they'll be the first to gang up against me. Sometimes I sit in my room before bed and I write down every single thing I did and said that day. Then I grade it, A for a perfect move, F for I should kill myself I'm such a loser".¹⁹³ There is certainly a sense that, having inherited the 'achievements' of her female forebears, in addition to their propensity for moving in social circles that encourage girl-on-girl conflict and self-destructive behaviours, Amma has become trapped in a kind of existential undertow, one symptomatic of an inherently flawed and futile mode of ontological engagement with this postfeminist milieu. She is at once the embodiment of female potential, a sharp and self-sufficient young woman whose ability to manipulate the people around her is as remarkable as it is alarming, and the subject of her mother's regressive and harmful desire to nurture her into something else, a pliant and feeble little girl, a living ghost to inhabit the family's Victorian mansion.

The tension between these selves, and the carnage that that tension ultimately wreaks on Amma's psyche and on the town of Wind Gap, exemplifies the disorientation and uncertainty of a generation of girls who have been encouraged to believe in the feminist project as a set of goals fulfilled, even as those gains appear under constant siege and various, harder to quantify, inequalities proliferate. Projansky posits that 'many of the ways in which contemporary popular culture represents girls can be understood to be working through

¹⁹³ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.186.

questions about the effects of postfeminism – on mothers, daughters, and the gendered organisation of the present and future society'.¹⁹⁴ I believe this is certainly the case with *Sharp Objects*, as Flynn's *filles fatale* struggle to come to terms with the illusory nature of the power and control that is ostensibly their feminist legacy, violently personifying the neoliberal maxim of 'every woman for herself' as they do so.

Girlhood in *Wind Gap* seems to require a negotiation of power as delicate as it is fundamentally brutal. Young women like Amma and her friends (whom Camille thinks of as the 'Four Little Blondes', a moniker which draws attention to their youth and lack of sophistication even as it hints at some unpleasant connotations with regard to the potential fetishization of these Barbiefied girls, hungry for the validation of their male peers) are compelled to give just enough of themselves over to teenage boys who jostle for sexual attention. Camille regards these boys as 'babies in loose skater shorts and sneakers'¹⁹⁵, while remaining careful to avoid the potentially ruinous designation of 'slut', embracing the notion of sexual agency as a vehicle for empowerment which is foundational to the neoliberal appropriation of the feminist project.¹⁹⁶ Alison Phipps uses the commodification of female bodies via sex work as a means of exploring the relationship between capitalism and this pretense of 'empowerment': '[money] is used to finance a certain lifestyle, with the world of sex work being rife with conspicuous consumption (Fensterstock 2006) and ideas about economic 'necessity' reflecting the operation of social privilege. These values underline the relationship between contemporary sex-radical politics and the neoliberal context'.¹⁹⁷ The

¹⁹⁴ Sarah Projansky, 'Mass Magazine Cover Girls: Some Reflections on Postfeminist Girls and Postfeminism's Daughters', in *Interrogating Feminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* [ed. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker] (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007), p.46.

¹⁹⁵ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.176.

¹⁹⁶ Alison Phipps has written on the contemporary emergence of 'sex positive' feminist philosophy, which frames women's consensual sexual expression as a healthy and constructive means of encouraging body positivity and self-love. Her 2014 work *The Politics of the Body: Gender in a Neoliberal and Neoconservative Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), winner of the 2018 FWSA prize, explores the extent to which this discourse has been co-opted by both neoliberalism and neoconservatism, resulting in a contemporary conceptualization of 'female sexual empowerment' which kowtows to heteronormative paradigms of sexuality and curtails women's freedom to choose even as it professes to enable them to reclaim sexual autonomy.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.98.

refrain of female ‘consumption’ which Flynn uses to punctuate her narrative is particularly interesting when we consider the discursive links which have been forged between ‘sex positivity’ and the idea of the female body as a consumable product.

Flynn cleverly underscores the problematic and complex nature of this thinking as she positions Amma as both huntress and prey. Several scenes revolve around these young men hunting and dissecting animals, including a scene where Camille discovers a hunting shed ‘where the animals were stripped and split [...] the walls were covered with photographs of naked women. Some of the girls were spreading themselves wide, others were being held down and penetrated’.¹⁹⁸ Amma appears to offset her lack of bodily autonomy at home with an outward performance of sexual aggression which she claims she is in control of: “it’s weird,” Amma said. “After she takes care of me, I like to have sex [...] if someone wants to do fucked-up things to you, and you let them, you’re making them more fucked up. Then you have the control. As long as you don’t go crazy”.¹⁹⁹

We are told that Amma and her friends have sexually victimised their female peers, including Ann and Natalie: “they took one of their old friends, girl named Ronna Deel they’d fallen out with, took her to a party, got her drunk and...kind of gave her as a present to some of the older boys”.²⁰⁰ These instances of girl-on-girl cruelty serve to compound the sense that the precocious sexual autonomy they wield is as much a defence mechanism as it is a means of asserting power over their peers; for these girls, sex is equal parts commodity and weapon, as they become more and more disconnected from any authentic bodily or sexual awakening in the midst of this all-consuming battle against their own misguided desire to be consumed by the male gaze. Ariel Levy, in her seminal 2005 work *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, published just a year before Flynn’s debut, writes that ‘adolescent girls [...] have a very difficult time learning to recognize their own sexual

¹⁹⁸ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.14.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.182.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.219.

desire, which would seem a critical component of *feeling* sexy [...] if there's a way in which grown women are appropriating raunch as a rebellion against the constraints of feminism, we can't say the same for teens. They never had a feminism to rebel against'.²⁰¹

In other words, Amma and her peers exist in a postfeminist milieu in which sexual desire and desirability is performed as a means of validating one's feminine identity, sexual subjugation repackaged as 'empowering' for a generation of young women who have been sold the myth of male desire as a crucible in which sexual value is forged. And so they victimise their female classmates by forcing them to participate in this schoolyard sexual marketplace, reinforcing the very balance of gendered power which will shape their lives in Wind Gap: "another little girl they cornered and made her lift up her shirt and show the boys. Because she was flat. They made her say dirty things while she was doing it".²⁰²

The relationship between the *femme fatale* and the weaponization of sexual desire is thus renegotiated; whereas the classic *femme fatale* is 'constructed as the site of an excessive and dangerous desire that leads to the destruction of everyone around her, including herself'²⁰³, these *filles fatale* are seemingly in control of their objectification, taking ownership of their own violent desires and the desires of the men around them in order to maintain a social hierarchy which rewards patriarchal complicity and capitulation to the sexual authority of heterosexual men, packaged as it is as 'girl power'. While Amma and her friends enjoy a modicum of power during their juvenile period of social dominance, they unwittingly enact and reinforce the desires and demands of the patriarchal structures of power which supersede their own, relatively meagre, degrees of power. Amma vocalises the dissonance and futility of this 'girl power' when she relates a supposed social victory to Camille: "Like tonight, Dave Rard, who's a very hot junior, told me he didn't know if he could wait a year,

²⁰¹ Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2005), p.168.

²⁰² Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.219.

²⁰³ Joy Ramirez, 'Silent Divas: The *Femmes Fatales* of the Italian *Cinema Muto*', published in *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts* (ed. Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe) (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.65.

you know, to get with me, like until I was in high school? And I said, ‘So don’t.’ And walked away, and all the guys were like, ‘Awwwww.’”²⁰⁴ While she clearly considers herself the victor in this verbal sparring contest, the fact that she herself is the prize somewhat negates the feminist potential of her supposed triumph.

The *femmes fatales* of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett’s fiction are decisively framed by the gaze of the initially beguiled male detective (according to Lee Horsley, ‘she appropriates masculine powers, creating a persona that both attracts and threatens the noir male’²⁰⁵) – we first encounter *The Maltese Falcon*’s ‘Miss Wonderly’/Brigid O’Shaughnessy through Sam Spade, and he notes her ‘cobalt-blue eyes [...] both shy and probing [...] [her] erect and high-breasted’²⁰⁶ body. Their allure is linked to a pull of seduction as potent as it is mysterious (Chandler’s Vivian Sternwood comes to mind, with the ‘sulky droop to her lower lip [...] she was worth a stare. She was trouble’²⁰⁷, as she uses her sexual influence over Marlowe to protect her sister, something which the detective only realises at the close of the novel, having been thoroughly distracted by what he perceives to be genuine desire on her part). These classic *femmes fatales* have been described by noir scholar Janey Place as ‘the dark lady, the spider woman, the evil seductress who tempts man and brings about his destruction’²⁰⁸ – in contrast, Flynn’s killer teenagers are bubblegum-pink and adept at disguising their sociopathy, even as they attempt to exert a pathological control over the bodies of their female peers.

We see these girls as Camille sees them, and free of the distorting lens of the male gaze, it is apparent that the sexual desire they perform is as much a weapon as a diversionary tactic; when Amma taunts John Keene, Natalie’s older brother and chief suspect in her murder, at

²⁰⁴ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.183.

²⁰⁵ Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.132.

²⁰⁶ Dashiell Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), p.4.

²⁰⁷ Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p.16.

²⁰⁸ Janey Place, ‘Women in Film Noir’, published in *Women in Film Noir* (ed. Elizabeth Kaplan) (London: British Film Institute, 1998), p.47.

least as far as town gossip is concerned, this becomes clear. Fully aware of his innocence, she nonetheless engages in an ostentatious performance of adult lasciviousness, alluding to the rumours surrounding his potential involvement in the murders as she does so:

The Four Little Blondes in fluorescent bikinis at one end of the pool, passing a joint between them, and John sitting in the shade at the other end, watching. Amma looked tan and blonde and delicious, not a trace of yesterday's hangover on her. She was as tiny and colorful as an appetizer [...] "yeah, John, might quell some of your urges. They can be deadly, you know? We don't want more little girls showing up without their teeth."²⁰⁹

Flynn's conscious re-writing of the *femme fatale* archetype is particularly evident here, as Amma, aptly likened by Camille to an 'appetizer' (yet another reference to her consumability), hints at her own promiscuity while making allusions to John's alleged criminal appetites. Chandler's Vivian Sternwood or Hammett's Brigid O'Shaughnessy are in possession of motives which are somewhat understandable, if not entirely wholesome. Their deceits are ultimately a means of self-preservation and/or financial gain, their ability to discomfit their male adversaries premised on a sexual autonomy which must ultimately be brought to heel. The conclusion of *The Maltese Falcon* includes the revelation that Brigid has been deceiving Spade and is guilty of at least one murder. In the aftermath of this reveal, she confesses her love for the detective, who summarily rejects her: "I won't play the sap for you".²¹⁰ According to Lee Horsley, the necessity of this rejection is linked to the detective's seemingly futile attempts to reject and repress the incursion of urban criminality and (sexual) decay: 'the kinds of intrusion [he] seems to find most disturbing and repellent are those that surface in personal relationships, particularly those which threaten bodily violation, as encounters with sexually attractive, dynamic women do'.²¹¹ Amma does not appear to benefit from her goading of John. If anything, it places her in greater danger of discovery, as John,

²⁰⁹ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.154.

²¹⁰ Dashiell Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), p.215.

²¹¹ Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.40.

who already suspects her involvement in his sister's death, only becomes more determined to expose her homicidal tendencies as a consequence of it.

Amma appears to be breaking the established archetypal 'rules' which earlier noir and hardboiled fiction had relied upon with regard to the characterisation of 'deadly women' as manifestations of male anxiety. She is certainly significantly younger than her literary forebears, most of whom are undeniably 'women', and, as noted above, acknowledges this by weaponising her own 'Lolita' status throughout the novel. Camille, and subsequently the reader, finds it difficult to symbolically situate this 'deadly girl', who has allowed herself to become something of a conduit for the generational trauma visited upon her by her maternal forebears. Mary Ann Doane has described the *femme fatale* as 'the figure of a certain discursive unease, a potential epistemological trauma. For her most striking characteristic, perhaps, is the fact that she never really is what she seems to be'.²¹²

This seems a fitting description of Amma, who certainly carries with her the promise of 'epistemological trauma' as she appears to hover on the brink of sexual maturity while submitting to Adora's abnormal mothering, using her social standing to torment her young, vulnerable peers, while befriending those same girls and indulging in feral girlhood: "we had fun, running around in the woods. We were wild. We'd hurt things together. We killed a cat once".²¹³ These seemingly contradictory personas (babied daughter, vicious queen bee, untamed child) indicate that her relationship with pain is somewhat more complex than that of Chandler, Hammett and Cain's slippery female antagonists, most of whom are defined by their propensity for sexual aggression and clever manipulation of the men who seek to symbolically pin them down (e.g. *Red Harvest's* Dinah, who 'seems to have had everybody on her string at one time or another'²¹⁴ and *Double Indemnity's* Phyllis, who 'thinks of [herself] as

²¹² Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p.1.

²¹³ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.250.

²¹⁴ Dashiell Hammett, *Red Harvest* (New York: Vintage Crime, 1992), p.29.

Death, sometimes. In a scarlet shroud, floating through the night.²¹⁵). At the close of the novel, Camille reflects that ‘Amma enjoyed hurting. *I like violence*, she’d shrieked at me. I blame my mother. A child weaned on poison considers harm a comfort’.²¹⁶

Amma attempts to exercise her agency with regard to this cycle of victimhood, and her own ongoing trauma has warped her understanding of psychological and physical harm; she expresses envy with regard to the attention that the murdered girls continue to draw and even steals tributes left at the site of the discovery of Natalie’s corpse: ‘my half sister snatched up two candles, a bouquet of flowers, and a teddy bear. All but the bear went into her oversized purse [...] “why are you writing a story about two dead girls who no one noticed to begin with? Like getting killed makes you popular.”’.²¹⁷ Camille dismisses this cold-blooded bravura as ‘provocative girl talk’, and judging by her own interactions with former high school classmates, who fondly reminisce about the ruthlessness of their teenage supremacy (“Remember [...] what we thought was cool became cool, who we didn’t like everyone hated?”) She sounded fairy-tale dreamy, as if she were thinking of a land of ice cream and bunnies²¹⁸) it is a somewhat sociopathic extension of the fierce and futile hierarchy of power which governs Wind Gap girlhood.

The general consensus seems to be that, as the murderous protagonist of Dorothy Hughes’ 1947 noir novel, *In a Lonely Place*, reflects, ‘the only exciting thing that had ever happened to [those girls] was to be raped and murdered’.²¹⁹ A currency of victimhood of sorts is evident, one which rewards the ‘right’ sort of girls (middle-class, white, popular, beautiful but not a ‘slut’) for enduring the dully inevitable everyday traumas of womanhood while working to maintain the gendered status quo which compounds these traumas and ensures that the internal politics of these peer groups are engineered to punish and exclude

²¹⁵ James M. Cain, *Double Indemnity* (New York: Vintage Crime, 1992), p.16.

²¹⁶ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.251.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.78.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.218.

²¹⁹ Dorothy Hughes, *In a Lonely Place* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1947), p.41.

the ‘wrong sort’. Camille recites a litany of these casually dehumanising violations, reflecting on the seemingly insatiable male appetite to invade the female body with phallic substitutes: “bananas and bottles, a string of pearls, a Magic Marker, a fist. Once a guy wanted to wedge a Walkie-Talkie inside of me. I declined.”²²⁰

JonBenét Ramsey, the iconic child murder victim so central to this notion of the ‘perfect’ victim, is invoked twice in the novel, once when the local police chief expresses doubt about the potential benefits of publicising the murders, and again when Camille is discussing the case with an old school friend: ‘there was talk of a celebrity tell-all she was reading, and whether childrens’ beauty pageants were forever stigmatized by JonBenét. *Mackenzie is just dying to model*’.²²¹ These references are indicative of the extent to which ever-popular true crime narratives²²², which Mark Seltzer calls ‘one of the popular genres of the pathological public sphere’²²³, symbolically shape this currency of victimhood. The still-unsolved murder of Ramsey, an infant groomed to resemble an adult, provided onlookers with a comfortably middle-class mystery centred on a suitably angelic child. In many ways, the fictional murders of Ann and Natalie serve to throw into sharp relief the perversity of this fetishization of victimhood.

We can assume that both Ann and Natalie are the ‘wrong sort’; Ann is part of a sprawling and chaotic working-class Wind Gap family, while Natalie is remembered as boyish and hostile. Both girls are described as inexplicably violent: “Ann had killed a neighbor’s pet bird with a stick. She’d sharpened it herself with one of her daddy’s hunting knives. Natalie, hell, her family moved here two years ago because she stabbed one of her classmates in the eye with a pair of scissors back in Philadelphia”.²²⁴ It is this violence which

²²⁰ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.204.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, p.216.

²²² Mark Lawson, *Serial thrillers: why true crime is popular culture's most wanted* (2015) <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2015/dec/12/serial-thrillers-why-true-is-popular-cultures-most-wanted>> [accessed 16 January 2019].

²²³ Mark Seltzer, *True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p.2.

²²⁴ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.45.

initially draws Amma into their orbit, as some savage kinship between the girls blossoms into a twisted friendship between these odd, rough tomboys and queen bee Amma.

Camille's former classmate Katie is a prime example of the cycle of cruelty and compromise which shapes Wind Gap femininity; she has married well and lives a comfortable suburban life with a husband who happily cedes to her domestic and maternal authority: 'Brad Brucker was the type of husband to live where Katie said, impregnate Katie when she asked, buy Katie the Pottery Barn sofa she wanted, and otherwise shut up. He was good-looking if you looked at him long enough, and he had a dick the size of my ring finger'.²²⁵ Katie seems to enjoy her role as gatekeeper of the 'right' sort of femininity, throwing occasional barbs at members of the group whom she believes 'just don't fit in'. Her shallowness and calculated spite is reflected in her choice of home – she resides in 'a flimsy mansion her parents built when we were ten—after they'd smashed their old Victorian into shards'.²²⁶

Another former friend of Camille's, Angie, lives in a home that 'looked like a child's drawing of a mansion: It was so generic it was barely three-dimensional'.²²⁷ Flynn emphasises this symbolic alignment between the female body and the home in which it resides throughout the novel, and the final section of this chapter will expand on the links between the inner worlds of these women, many of whom engage in various kinds of self-harm as an attempt at reclamation or a declaration of ownership, and the domestic spaces they inhabit.

'Sometimes my scars have a mind of their own'²²⁸: The (In)habitation of the Female Body, the Internalisation of Gendered Violence and Self-Harm

²²⁵ Ibid., p.29.

²²⁶ Ibid., p.98.

²²⁷ Ibid., p.130.

²²⁸ Ibid., p.75.

Flynn's authorial decision to emphasise the symbolic links between the female body and the domestic space is one which lends an extra theoretical dimension to her literary assessment of this postfeminist milieu and the women who engage with it through the lens of female victimisation – their own and others. The majority of the time Camille spends 'investigating' Wind Gap is spent moving between these domestic spaces, from the perfumed chill of Adora's mansion, heavy with resentment and inspiring something akin to an allergic reaction in Camille ('the air was so teasy with pollen, my eyes watered'²²⁹) to the jaundiced, sticky environs of the town's 'low-rent' section, a place marked by 'a cluster of broken-down, two-bedroom houses'²³⁰ and populated mainly by factory workers. Her incursion into these spaces allows her to symbolically dissect them; as she searches for 'clues' to help solve the mystery of Ann and Natalie's murders, she acquires a considerable degree of information about the women who inhabit these spaces – the 'investigation' thus becomes less about solving or putting right what has gone wrong, and more about gaining an understanding of the sociocultural context within which such violence happens and the lived experience of the women who are subject to it.

This exemplifies what Reddy identifies as an fundamental element of 'feminist' crime fiction: '[there is] an essential subversiveness, with women writers borrowing familiar features of detective fiction in order to turn them upside down and inside out, exposing the genre's fundamental conservatism and challenging the reader to rethink his/her assumptions'.²³¹ In this case, the subversive re-writing is applied to the conventional model of 'detection' and the gathering of clues. Camille is not an agent of the law, and as such exists outside of the inherently conservative paradigms of a legal investigation, reliant on it is on the presumed supremacy of patriarchal authority. Her motives for positioning herself as the

²²⁹ Ibid., p.24.

²³⁰ Ibid., p.49.

²³¹ Maureen Reddy, *Sisters in Crime: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (New York: Continuum Publishing Agency, 1988), p.2.

‘interpreter’ of these instances of violence are less than clear, even to herself (while she is there at the behest of her editor, who is as much a father figure as a boss to her, she quickly becomes emotionally invested in the investigation and loses control of the narrative she has been tasked with building, reflecting that ‘Curry was wrong: Being an insider here was more distracting than useful’²³²), and as the novel progresses it becomes apparent that any resolution or ‘solving’ of these crimes will have devastating personal consequences for her.

The clues that she finds are not necessarily indicative of ‘whodunit’, rather they help paint a picture of a social environment driven by the victimisation of women, an ideological space in which the female body is subject to endless invasion and dissection and survival is dependent on one’s ability to capitulate or learn to replicate these invasions, as Amma does. The domestic noir thriller is often described as a ‘whydunit’²³³, rather than a ‘whodunit’, and this is a useful descriptor in delineating the distinction between the classic detective novel and this iteration of crime fiction – the identity of the murderer, and the reveal of his or her identity, is secondary to the contextualisation of the crime and the process of deepening our understanding of the ‘motives’, conscious and subconscious, of the perpetrator. Flynn intentionally leaves the ultimate ‘reveal’ of the killer’s identity until the novel’s final chapter (and in the TV adaptation, Amma’s guilt is exposed only in the final seconds of the show’s final episode and then expanded upon in a seconds-long post-credits sequence), focusing instead on the emotional impact of the murders and an exploration of the town’s class tensions and deeply entrenched misogyny, and the endemic violence these dynamics have gestated. The investigatory process thus becomes less about putting things ‘right’ and more about Camille’s ability or inability to ‘investigate’ her own existence within this toxic framework. The significance of the spaces in which these women live and die, then, is

²³² Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.36.

²³³ Paul Hirons, *Harrogate Dispatches #3: Domestic Suspense with Paula Hawkins, Clare Mackintosh, Alex Marwood, Helen Fitzgerald and Julia Crouch*. (<https://thekillingtimestv.wordpress.com/2016/07/22/harrogate-dispatches-3-domestic-suspense-with-paula-hawkins-clare-mackintosh-alex-marwood-helen-fitzgerald-and-julia-crouch/>) [accessed 27 November 2018].

apparent, not merely insofar as they can be scrutinised for evidence of wrongdoing, but evidence of a life lived in relation to patriarchal structures of power that urge them to victimise or be victimised, consume or be consumed.

Flynn is participating in a considerable cultural tradition here; Linda McDowell, Marjorie Garber, Rebecca Munford, and Melanie Waters have written on the relationship between place, space, and female identity. McDowell has examined female social mobility in and the notion of domestic femininity in the context of contemporary neoliberal framings of womanhood: ‘the older associations between home, domesticity, and femininity are being challenged by active labour market policies that insist that the key social responsibility of the ungendered individual at the centre of neo-liberal policies is labour market participation [...] the home increasingly is a space marked by absence’.²³⁴ In Flynn’s work, this *absence* typically takes the form of a murdered woman, the vacant space where she ought to be a source of existential unease which can never be corrected or alleviated. There is a noticeable absence of living women in these domestic spaces, too; Ann and Natalie’s mothers are rarely physically present when Camille visits their homes, and when they are, they are conspicuously silent. When Camille meets with her old schoolfriends, their homes, although immaculate and filled with all of the signifiers of domestic success, are cold and symbolically vacant, haunted by the unhappiness of the women within.

The noticeable dearth of effective male ‘detection’ in Flynn’s novels, and in the broader context of the emerging domestic noir canon, signifies a deliberate rejection of those ratiocinative paradigms and a foregrounding of the narrative and symbolic relationship between female bodies (living and dead) and interior spaces, the recurring spectre of domestic femininity and the reconfiguration of the ‘happy housewife’ in a postfeminist world. While police chief Bill Vickery and detective Richard Willis work (often against one

²³⁴ Linda McDowell, ‘Rethinking Place: Thoughts on Spaces of the Home, Absence, Presence, New Connections and New Anxieties’, in *The Domestic Space Reader* [ed. Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei] (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), pp.54-55.

another) to solve the murders, albeit fruitlessly, their methods are markedly different to those employed by Camille. Working within the patriarchal structures of power which Camille does not have access to, they base their investigation on the assumption that the killer is male, something which fosters a myopia with regard to the pervasive female violence at the heart of Wind Gap. Natalie's brother John, who is ultimately revealed to be innocent of any wrongdoing, is their prime suspect, primarily because they are suspicious of the visible magnitude of his grief at the death of his sister, something they view as unnaturally feminine and potentially degenerate. Richard ultimately reveals that he has been suspicious of Adora for much of the novel, although his adherence to official channels of information and institutional access hamper his investigation into her crimes; Camille, on the other hand, works outside these channels and comes to the truth in a manner that is as organic as it is personally devastating.

Munford and Waters' 2014 edited collection *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique* examines the evolution of the 'happy housewife' archetype. They cite Betty Friedan's seminal 1963 work *The Feminine Mystique* as a defining critical 'moment' with regard to the problematisation of this archetype (the origins of which may be traced back to Coventry Patmore's semi-eponymous 'Angel in the House', whose initial literary debut took place in 1854), asserting that Friedan:

Offers a suggestive model for considering the cycle of repression and return in which the housewife (as well as the feminist) is prevailingly caught, providing clues as to why representations of domestic femininity are so often accented by the uncanny. If the Freudian uncanny is characterized by the 'return of the repressed', then feminism, in repeatedly seeking to displace the figure of the housewife, has inadvertently set the stage for her various returns.²³⁵

We may say, then, that the postfeminist domestic space is a site of ideological conflict, one in which women urged to 'have it all' struggle to build an existence around a model of femininity which can perhaps never truly be exorcised or divorced from association with the

²³⁵ Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters [eds.], *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2014), p.76.

private sphere, a repressive ideal which may be criticised and subverted but not vanquished, at least while caring responsibilities and home duties continue to be framed as ‘women’s work’, no matter how liberated her sisters who work within capitalist power structures in male-dominated public spaces claim to be.

Munford and Waters look at some cultural manifestations of this ‘happy housewife’ figure, arguing that in the context of postfeminist media, ‘women who inhabit this role [...] do so playfully, with a knowing, empowered, ‘postfeminist’ awareness of its social currency’.²³⁶ In terms of Flynn’s work, concerned as it is with configurations of victimhood and the ways in which women in twenty-first century America engage with these configurations, the ‘happy housewife’ is a figure whose cognizance of her own ideological spectrality or disequilibrium is exhibited through the muted acts of self-harm which Camille both observes and partakes in throughout the novel. While her own gradual scarification is an extreme example of this punishing process of self-destruction, her peers are equally inclined to cause themselves bodily harm, inflictions usually carried out within the private sphere. Her mother’s friends exist in a haze of pills and plastic surgery, while her own high school acquaintances regularly gather for ‘Pity Parties’, during which they drink alcohol and bemoan the mediocrity of their staid suburban existences with a degree of self-awareness which indicates that these gatherings function as a coping mechanism of sorts, a space in which anxieties and repressed desires may be safely expressed under the guise of female bonding: ‘drink a bunch of wine, watch a sad movie, cry, gossip’.²³⁷

It is during this get-together that the conflicting demands of domestic femininity in a world where shifting ideas of female ‘success’ seem to have forced women into a double-bind of sorts, as the impetus towards educational and professional accomplishment, while largely viewed as important, has not culturally dislodged the expectation that the work of

²³⁶ Ibid., p.81.

²³⁷ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.129.

raising children and maintaining the domestic sphere (in a symbolic sense as well as a material one) is a 'female' responsibility. As a consequence, women are encouraged to pursue success in the public sphere while they remain intrinsically linked to the preservation of the private sphere. Camille's former friends express their frustration with regard to the tension between these roles and the pressure of 'having it all' in the following exchange:

"I've gone back to work," she announced in a wail, pressed coral pink fingernails across her eyes. Angie poured wine and patted her knee, stared at her with a showy concern. "Good God, sweetie, why?" Katie murmured. Even her murmur was girlish and clicky. Like a thousand mice nibbling crackers. "With Tyler in preschool, I thought I wanted to," Tish said between sobs. "Like I needed a purpose." She spat the last word out as if it were contaminated. "You have a purpose," said Angie. "Don't let society tell you how to raise your family. Don't let feminists"—here she looked at me—"make you feel guilty for having what they can't have."²³⁸

While there is a snide veneer to this discussion, with a certain amount of hostility aimed at Camille, the childless outsider, it gives expression to a very real and very present contemporary anxiety, what we may understand as a twenty-first century variant on Friedan's 'problem that has no name'. These women, cocooned in a bubble of middle-class privilege, are experiencing a degree of existential uncertainty, as they are ostensibly free to pursue individual success outside of the home (which neoliberal manifestations of 'feminist' thought would have them believe is the pinnacle of female triumph), but remain symbolically and socially bound to a regressive ideal of motherhood that inevitably works to prohibit this success. The result is an unquantifiable sense of guilt and/or failure, as they struggle to meet the demands of a domestic role that has ostensibly become 'less important' while pressured to make gains in the public sphere.

These 'Pity Parties', then, serve as a reflective space in which the idea of postfeminist domestic identity can be safely explored. We may also read these gatherings as a variation on

²³⁸ Ibid., p.131.

Camille and Adora's propensity for self-mutilation; this is a space in which pain is contained, shared, magnified, and dissected, parcelled out for the approval or judgment of one's peers. Camille witnesses the 'snowballing' effect of this salon of female pain, as the women critique their own emotional turmoil using the language of choice and 'empowerment':

"This happens pretty much every week," she said and half rolled her eyes, pretending to be less annoyed than bemused.

"Cathartic, I guess," I offered. I could sense her wanting me to say more. I knew the feeling. When I'm on the edge of getting a good quote, it seems like I can almost reach inside the person's mouth and pluck it off their tongue.

"I had no idea my life was so miserable until I started coming to Angie's little get-togethers," Becca whispered.²³⁹

This final quote from Becca, also something of an outsider to the group, encapsulates the incongruity of these women, who live comfortably on the 'right' side of the Wind Gap class divide, coming together to give expression to the disequilibrium and disenchantment they feel despite their seemingly charmed lives. Pregnancy and child-rearing seem to be the focal point of this intangible discomfiture, and this is perhaps linked to a combination of fear and desire to be *inhabited* (just another means of being consumed, Flynn might argue, because, as she reminds us, "men love to put things inside women, don't they?"²⁴⁰). The pregnant female body has long been interpreted as a 'vessel' for the potential life within, and centuries of ideological conflict with regard to the reproductive autonomy of the pregnant woman indicates that this perception remains prevalent. Flynn describes the exertion of male sexual power over female bodies as a process of colonisation of sorts; to impregnate a woman, then, is to inflict permanent bodily change on her in order to ensure that the patriarchal line of inheritance is protected. While second-and-third wave feminist theorists (among them Johnnie Tillmon and Astrid Henry) worked to deconstruct essentialist notions of 'female labour' and explored the idea of pregnancy as a form of female subjugation, in a postfeminist

²³⁹ Ibid., p.132.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., p.204.

context, pregnancy has been ideologically repackaged and ‘sold’ to women as empowering and even ‘sexy’.

Imogen Taylor has written about the fetishization of maternal bodies as a means of diminishing women, with the inhabited female body reduced to a neoliberal project: ‘pregnant beauty is a shining embodiment of this post-feminist ideology of ‘having it all’. Pregnancy has been reconfigured as a neoliberal project of self-realization, a ‘body project’ to be directed and managed, another site of feminine performance anxiety and thus ironically a new kind of confinement for women’.²⁴¹ The women at the ‘Pity Party’ are struggling to articulate their frustration with the conflicting pressures placed on them, pressures couched in the language of choice and empowerment, to the extent that the patriarchal metanarratives which shape these ‘choices’ go unremarked upon. The rituals of self-injury practiced by these women, whether they take the form of Camille’s cutting, Adora’s trichotillomania (the compulsion to pull out her own eyelashes), Jackie’s drinking and penchant for self-medication, Amma’s sexual promiscuity, or the beleaguered ‘Pity Party’ mothers’ verbal dissection of their own disappointments and fears, are in part a reaction against this bodily colonisation and the vernacular of autonomy which encourages women to believe that the balance of power therein favours them. In choosing to exercise a degree of agency with regard to the violations and mutilations visited upon them, they reclaim some of this power. As mentioned above, Flynn draws parallels between the homes these women physically inhabit and their own inhabited/colonised bodies.

Adora’s house in particular seems to have an effect on her daughters that is almost primal in its physicality. The house is quite literally a contaminated space, as the price they must pay to live there is acquiescence to Adora’s malignant influence. Camille, who we are told has recently spent some time at a psychiatric facility, finds her urge to cut intensifies

²⁴¹ Imogen Taylor, ‘Pregnant Beauty: Maternal Femininities Under Neoliberalism’, in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* [ed. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff] (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p.29.

when she is in the house: ‘my body was heading into a flare. I paced a bit, tried to remember how to breathe right, how to calm my skin. But it blared at me. Sometimes my scars have a mind of their own’.²⁴² She goes on to describe her self-harm as a cleansing process: ‘cleaning myself. Digging in deeper. Cleaning myself’.²⁴³ A quote from Flynn’s most recent work *Gone Girl* comes to mind when reading this passage: ‘tampon commercial, detergent commercial, maxipad commercial, Windex commercial. You’d think all women do is clean and bleed’.²⁴⁴ The novel’s protagonist Amy makes this observation while waiting for a news report on her own disappearance/murder, and it hints at a pervasive anxiety regarding the female body and its inhabitation of interior space, particularly the paradoxical vulnerability of a woman in the private sphere, ostensibly ‘her’ space.

The repetition of ‘bleed’ and its association with the home in both Camille and Amy’s narratives is striking and renders the domestic space treacherous, as the mention of bloodletting suggests both violence (statistically, the home is a considerably dangerous place for most women, particularly women of colour, with nearly three American women killed per day by an intimate partner in 2017²⁴⁵) and the trauma of childbirth. Annmarie Adams has written about the longstanding symbolic association between the private sphere and the female ‘interior’, using the Victorian conceit of a ‘lying-in room’ to illustrate this correlation:

The architecture of lying in, in its posture of isolation within the house and its distinct material culture, was as much a way of protecting the family from the woman in childbirth as of isolating her from the family. The special furniture, the newspapers on the floor, and the spatial separation of the lying-in room from the other rooms in the house were ways of sequestering and controlling the polluting power of women’s ‘interiors’.²⁴⁶

²⁴² Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.28.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.29.

²⁴⁴ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.245.

²⁴⁵ Mary Emily O’Hara, *Domestic Violence: Nearly Three U.S. Women Killed Every Day by Intimate Partners* (2017) <<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/domestic-violence-nearly-three-u-s-women-killed-every-day-n745166>> [accessed 5 December 2018].

²⁴⁶ Annmarie Adams, ‘Childbirth at Home’ in *The Domestic Space Reader* [ed. Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei] (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), pp.28-29.

When we consider Adora's Victorian mansion in light of this traditional link between the inside of the home as a place in which the visceral and dangerous reality of childbirth can be contained, if not hidden, it seems a curiously bloodless space. With its famous ivory floor and cold, pristine rooms, it is suggestive of a barren interior landscape. While Adora, with her three daughters, is certainly fertile in a literal sense, Flynn draws deliberate parallels between her occupation of this space and her destructive influence – if this home is a uterine analogue, it is one incapable of fostering life. Camille's preoccupation with cleaning her wounds and disguising or erasing her own acts of self-harm ('pouring bleach over the knife and sneaking through the kitchen to return it'²⁴⁷) is perhaps an unconscious effort to preserve the perverse purity of this contaminated space, to ensure that no trace of her blood, spilled in order to demonstrate that she retains some control over the damage that is physically and psychologically inflicted on her, stains this deadening space in which she and her sisters have suffered for Adora's sins.

The second episode of the TV adaptation of *Sharp Objects* (entitled 'Dirt' and initially aired on July 15, 2018) features a scene in which Camille, invited into the Keene family home after Natalie's burial and under pressure from her editor to learn more about the victims, sneaks into the murdered girl's bedroom. Along with a collection of spiders, a find which seems to underscore Natalie's 'otherness' and potentially echoes the (primarily male-centred) scenes of animal entrapment and abuse which we've already been privy to (Camille sets the spiders free after she finds them, another indication of the fundamental differences between her and Amma, Natalie, and Ann, particularly in terms of their relationship to the gendered power differential which seems to govern Wind Gap), she discovers a 'like/hate' list written on a mirror which includes Ann's name on both sides, with the 'liked' Ann crossed out. This scene, absent from the novel but written for television by Flynn, provides a visual example

²⁴⁷ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.29.

of the symbolic alignment between female bodies and interior spaces which is underscored throughout the novel – Camille is aware that her invasion of Natalie’s vacant bedroom is a major violation, but, eager to create a narrative that will appeal to readers seeking to vicariously experience the grim thrill of child-murder, she justifies it and writes the story, implicitly desecrating Natalie’s space, all that remains of her, in a manner somewhat reminiscent of Adora’s recurring violation of her daughters’ bodies and the sexual abuse which seems to have dominated Camille’s teenage years.

As touched on in the introduction to this thesis, the gendered occupation of space has long been a concern of crime writers, along with the symbolic and social conflicts which often arise when the ideological boundaries between public and private space shift. Lee Horsley traces the evolution of ‘hard-boiled’ fiction back to popularity of the frontier novel, a brand of fiction typically preoccupied with absurdly ‘masculine’ heroes and their ability to tame and dominate the American landscape: ‘the genre’s frontier heritage can be related to what are often seen as marked anti-feminist and homoerotic tendencies, evident in anxieties about gender (fear of the ‘dangerous woman’) and the longing for a male ideal - the lone male, strong, ruggedly handsome, and resisting the confining, emasculating spaces of a domestic life’.²⁴⁸ Sally Munt has described the classically liberal female-authored and female-centred detective novels of the likes of V.I. Warshawski as a literary re-framing or re-forming of the public/private gender divide, rather than a rejection:

The significance of ‘family’ may be interpreted in a number of ways: (i) in that women’s social sphere is often the domestic, the defence of this unit is more likely to be represented by a female writer/protagonist than by a male; (ii) the domain of the isolated ‘hard-boiled dick’ has been invaded by obligations which demand overt emotional engagement and responsibilities; (iii) the fact that kinship is unconventionally extended to include non-blood relations suggests a progressive definition of family.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁸ Lee Horsley, *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.74.

²⁴⁹ Sally Munt, *Murder by the Book?: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.43.

In classic detective fiction, the image of the murdered and/or violated female body, situated inside or, more commonly, outside the home is typically invoked as an emblematic consequence of the transgression of this gendered public/private binary. As discussed in my introduction, this is apparent in Poe's influential Dupin stories. The likes of Marie Rogêt, a pretty and popular shopgirl, is punished for her occupation of public space. The fact that she is rumoured to have died as a result of an illegal abortion only serves to underscore the 'aptness' of this punishment, as her attempt to exercise agency over her inhabited body results in her transmutation into an object of curiosity and pity.

Noir fiction of the mid-twentieth century is certainly less inclined towards such violent penalisation of female characters who inhabit public spaces without apology (the *femme fatale* may be defeated or outwitted by the masculine protagonist, but the narrative focus is rarely on her dead/silenced body). These women are still, however, routinely subject to male violence and the damage inflicted on them is largely explored or explained via the internal monologue of a male protagonist, whether he be detective or perpetrator (*The Killer Inside Me*'s Joyce and the victims of *In a Lonely Place*'s Dix come to mind). The impression we are left with is that while her death presents a tragic mystery or puzzle, the public spectacle of her body is little more than a focal point for the psychological deterioration or, conversely, investigative triumph of the man telling this story. More recently, the 'serial killer' thriller has also relied on what might best be described as a visceral *disembodiment* of the female victim, as her body, the object of death and catalysing force with regard to the narrative, is symbolically and physically reduced by lurid descriptions of the lifeless body, with scenes of post-mortem dissection made popular by the likes of Patricia Cornwell's Kay Scarpetta series (1990-2016). In Mo Hayder's debut thriller *Birdman* (1999), a serial killer and necrophiliac takes pleasure in publicly discarding the bodies of the women he has tortured and killed, with the narrator Detective Jack Caffery left to 'solve' the problem posed by these dead women, thoroughly stripped of their humanity in death: '*that? That's a body?* He'd thought it

was a piece of expanding foam, the type fitted from an aerosol, so distended and yellow and shiny it was. Then he saw hair and teeth, and recognized an arm. And at last, by tilting his head on one side, he understood what he was looking at'.²⁵⁰

Once again, female death in the public sphere is reduced to a spectacle, her physical remains used to implicitly condemn the ambiguity of her symbolic positioning, as the ease of mobility with which she moves between public and private has given rise to her physical destruction. The reader is not privy to the inner worlds of these female victims – we can only access them via the investigator, whose job is ultimately to strip away the layers of humanity which could potentially obfuscate the starkly objective ‘truth’ of the act of male violence. The result is a kind of narrative depersonification, a reduction of womanhood to physical and psychological subalternity; she is quite literally the ‘meat’ of the story. As Flynn reminds us, ‘women get *consumed*’.²⁵¹ The rise of domestic noir fiction, concerned as it often is with female mobility, the lived experience of women living in a contemporary ‘postfeminist’ world, and autonomy in the domestic sphere, has foregrounded the symbolic conflict between public and private space and has instigated a generic shift of sorts, as the notion of female bodies as sight/site of masculine failure and triumph gives way to a different kind of *disembodiment*. In these narratives, suspense, mystery and potential danger are explored via the female body as it inhabits space and is inhabited – potential victims narrate their own stories, and the inner psychological space of these *living* women is the focus, rather than the speechless puzzle of their remains.

In the case of Flynn, the vacant, abandoned or barren domestic space is often used in place of the murdered female body, a conceit which serves to emphasise the sense of loss and absence engendered by their removal from these spaces rather than draw the attention of the reader to the explicitly destroyed female body. While Ann and Natalie’s remains are

²⁵⁰ Mo Hayder, *Birdman* (New York: Doubleday Books, 1999), p.1.

²⁵¹ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.12.

discovered and discussed in the narrative, with the facts of what has been done to them recounted in unsparing detail, Flynn doesn't allow her narrator or the reader to dwell on the lurid visual of these murdered little girls. Rather, she accentuates their nonbeing or absence from the narrative via the effect of their violent deaths on the town. While Camille is helping search for Natalie, she witnesses an emotional outburst from a young woman:

A sudden wail shot through the trees, a girl's scream: "Natalie!" My hands began sweating as we ran toward the cry. I saw figures tumbling toward us. A teenager with white-blond hair pushed past us onto the trail, her face red and bundled. She was stumbling like a frantic drunk, yelling Natalie's name at the sky. An older man, maybe her father, caught up with her, wrapped her in his arms, and began walking her out of the forest. "They found her?" my friend called. A collective head shaking. "She just got spooked, I think," another man called back. "Too much for her. Girls shouldn't be out here anyway, not as things stand."²⁵²

This quasi-spectral embodiment of the (perhaps performative) terror and grief that has gripped the women of Wind Gap in the wake of Ann and Natalie's respective disappearances effectively highlights the impact of these crimes while ensuring that the narrative refrains from poring over the destroyed bodies of the girls as a means of eulogizing them or sensationalising their deaths. By comparison, the scene in which Camille stumbles across Natalie's body is marked by muted horror, with the narrative emphasis very much on Camille's response to what she is seeing rather than on the grisly details:

Wedge in the foot-wide space between the hardware store and the beauty parlor was a tiny body, aimed out at the sidewalk. As if she were just sitting and waiting for us, brown eyes wide open. I recognized the wild curls. But the grin was gone. Natalie Keene's lips caved in around her gums in a small circle. She looked like a plastic baby doll, the kind with a built-in hole for bottle feedings. Natalie had no teeth now [...] my eyes picked up images in meaningless flashes: The grimy rubber tip of the old man's cane. A pink mole on the back of the woman's neck. The Band-Aid on Natalie Keene's knee. I could feel her name glowing hotly under my shirtsleeve.²⁵³

²⁵² Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.12.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.28.

Camille is almost physically repulsed by this grim tableau, and she struggles to engage with the scene as result, choosing instead to focus her attention on minor physical details of the people around her and on her own desire to self-harm. As a result, the reader is left with a sense of loss that is almost metaphysical rather than linked to Natalie's bodily deconstruction. Ann's physical remains are also largely absent from the narrative; while the manner of her death is discussed, and the possibility of a (male) serial killer touted, Flynn spends more time exploring the remains of her family, as Camille interviews Bob Nash in the family's messy, sprawling ranch house, while Ann's young siblings do their best to attract the attention of their devastated father. The interview takes place in the master bedroom, an area of the house described as 'an outpost on the edge of a despairing jungle [...] I assumed he was the one who maintained the order of this room; it had the unadorned neatness of a bachelor trying very hard'.²⁵⁴

This is a space marked by absence; not just that of Ann, but also Betsy Nash, her mother, who is mentioned by her husband but does not appear in the narrative until later on, when she is described as 'so insubstantial, I could imagine her slowly evaporating, leaving only a sticky spot on the edge of the sofa'.²⁵⁵ The Nash children are described, on this occasion, as 'little blonde ghosts'²⁵⁶, a phrase which brings to mind the 'four little blondes' and perhaps serves as an early hint with regard to the violent links between the Nash family and Amma's dangerous clique. It also underscores the extent to which this is a haunted space, a place that has been subtly but profoundly *changed* by Ann's absence and the knowledge of what was done to her – the amputation of a member of their family unit has thrown the Nash household off-kilter. In drawing the attention of the reader to the space left behind by Ann, rather than the bodily remains left behind, Flynn subverts the generic impetus towards the fetishization of the dead female body and instead emphasises the

²⁵⁴ Ibid., p.19.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., p.89.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., p.89.

symbolic vacancy at the heart of the formerly occupied domestic space. Adora's home is similarly marked by these moments of quiet disturbance, as Camille discovers that her teenage bedroom has remained unchanged despite the passage of time: 'I'd expected my mother to pave over my bedroom as soon as I'd left the house, but it looked exactly as it was more than a decade before'.²⁵⁷ Marian's room also looks exactly as it did prior to her death: 'the pillow on her bed still had a small indentation'.²⁵⁸ When Camille enters the room, she is hit with a vivid and unsettling memory:

I could see her so easily here, sitting cross-legged on that bed, small and sweat dotted, her eyes ringed with purple. Shuffling cards or combing her doll's hair or coloring angrily. I could hear that sound: a crayon running in hard lines across a paper. Dark scribbles with the crayon pushed so hard it ripped the paper. She looked up at me, breathing hard and shallow. "I'm tired of dying."²⁵⁹

Once again, it is not Marian's corpse that our attention is drawn to, but the lingering memory of her presence and her suffering. The refrain of "I'm tired of dying" works to emphasise the extent to which this house has become a monument to her drawn-out and entirely avoidable death, a place which traps its inhabitants in this moment and refuses to let them move past it. Camille's investigation hinges on these intrusive memories and on the 'absence' of these girls, rather than on an examination of their remains. In the novel, Camille seeks answers regarding Marian's death and is told that the girl was buried before any post-mortem investigations could be carried out; in the TV adaptation, written almost ten years later, the power of Marian's 'absence' is even more pronounced, as Camille is told that her mother ensured that Marian's remains were cremated shortly after her death: 'that tiny body. All the stories it could tell. Gone'.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁷ Ibid., p.40.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., p.166.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., p.166.

²⁶⁰ 'Sharp Objects, Episode 7: 'Falling', dir. by Jean-Marc Vallée (HBO, 2018).

Camille, and the reader, is left to confront these losses via the echoing, empty domestic spaces which the living women of Wind Gap are left to inhabit. We might say that Flynn's decision to centre her narratives on absent women rather than dead women signifies a paradigm shift of sorts for the genre; the crime fiction she writes is more about the 'gone girl' than the 'dead girl'. Amma's grisly trophies, confined to her dollhouse, may in fact be read as an authorial rebuke to the lurid focus on dead female bodies which accompanied the late-twentieth-century surge in popularity of forensic and serial killer thrillers. She furnishes this microcosm of the domestic space with the body parts of the girls she has murdered, employing teeth and hair almost as fetishes, physical reminders that the bodily destruction of women, both inside and outside the domestic sphere, is something of a cultural touchstone, especially with regard to the crime genre. According to Gill Plain, 'it could be argued that the corpse is looked *through* rather than *at* [...] detectives, police and pathologists scrutinise the corpse-as-text, seeking clues to facilitate a reading of the crime, while the material reality of the corpse decomposes beneath their narrative indifference'.²⁶¹ The last-minute 'reveal' of these physical remains and their importance in 'solving' the crimes at the heart of the novel works as a semi-parodic variation on the popular crime narratives whose reliance on a gory reconstruction/deconstruction of the murdered woman strips her of personhood. Amma is apprehended and punished for her crimes as a result of these findings, but they are almost an afterthought – the attention of reader and protagonist has largely remained on the visible absences which punctuate the narrative, the female-shaped 'gaps' in the novel rather than the space occupied by them in death.

²⁶¹ Gill, Plain, *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), p.12.

Chapter Two: *Dark Places*, Working Poverty and Affective Labour

This chapter will focus on Flynn's second novel, *Dark Places*, published in 2009 and centring on the societal impetus towards the mythologisation of male violence and the generational trauma which follows in the wake of a family massacre. Judith Walkowitz, using the discourse surrounding the 1888 Whitechapel 'Ripper' murders as a paradigm, describes this mythologization as something which '[flattens] history into myth [...] it is about female passivity in the face of male violence'²⁶², while Karen Boyle describes the 'discourse' surrounding sexual murder: 'a group of statements that, together, produce particular types of knowledge within the context of a Western patriarchal society'.²⁶³ Male-on-female violence is thus discursively burnished with a ghoulish allure, the brutally chaotic act of murder symbolically reframed as a signifier of sublime authority. Elizabeth Cameron and Deborah Frazer have discussed the potential correlation between the cultural construction of this powerful male figure and the existence of the real-life serial murderer:

Representations help construct and shape people's desires by offering them certain objects, certain channels, certain meanings. What aspirations and pleasures are available, what practices, identities and dreams are even thinkable is determined to a very large extent by the culture. Our culture has violent, pornographic dreams; it has aspirations to (male) freedom and transcendence. Not coincidentally, it has sadistic serial murder.²⁶⁴

As with *Sharp Objects*, *Dark Places*' narrative engages with and recalibrates the figure of the *femme fatale*, offering us a number of female characters who attempt to take control over the acts of physical aggression, both small and large, which are inflicted on them. Whereas Flynn's debut centres on the toxic privilege of inherited wealth and the legacy of sickness, her follow-up takes as its subject the lived experience of women whose financial precarity

²⁶² Judith Walkowitz, 'Jack the Ripper and the Myth of Male Violence', *Feminist Studies*, 8.3, (1982), 542-574 (p. 570).

²⁶³ Karen Boyle, *Media and Violence: Gendering the Debates* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), p.60.

²⁶⁴ Elizabeth Cameron and Deborah Frazer, *The Lust to Kill – A Feminist Investigation of Sexual Murder* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1987), pp.142-143.

continually exposes them to emotional and physical violence. Largely set in rural America, during the height of the ‘Satanic panic’ phenomenon, as widespread fears of children falling victim to Satanic ritual abuse took hold of the public imagination, the novel examines the mythologization of male violence. This is a cultural phenomenon which Judith Walkowitz and Karen Boyle, mentioned above, have written about, and which Flynn explores through her domestic noir fiction. In addition to *Dark Places*, *Sharp Objects* and *Gone Girl* also feature characters whose fascination with imagined acts of masculine brutality causes them to implicitly or explicitly silence and repress the violent agency of their female peers and the erasure or misrepresentation of female violence, particularly with regard to how these acts of violence are filtered through the lens of ‘true crime’ as a form of popular entertainment. This chapter will explore Flynn’s deconstruction of true crime’s urge to modify and/or magnify (through the aforementioned process of retroactively ascribing a kind of ordered profundity to the chaos of murder) acts of male and female violence. Acts of female violence are usually modified rather than magnified – Patricia Pearson has written about the cultural repudiation of female violence, arguing that ‘women more comfortably label their violent impulses as self-destructive... aggressive gestures are directed by cultural expectation: more often inward if you’re female’²⁶⁵ and Karen Boyle describes the gendering of paradigms of violence as follows:

Violence and aggression are intrinsic to our conceptualisation of masculinity. Femininity, however, is associated with nurturing and caring for others, with emotion, passivity and vulnerability. All of this is thrown into crisis when a woman chooses to attack, hurt or kill another human being [...] Moreover, a woman who kills, or acts violently, is always visible as a woman – she is a damsel or angel of death, a black widow, a *femme fatale*, a female serial killer. These labels thus draw attention both to the criminal act and the gender transgression. We do not have equivalent labels for men because their actions are not gender-transgressive but normative.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ Patricia Pearson, *When She Was Bad: Violent Women and the Myth of Innocence* (London: Virago Press, 1999), pp.22-32.

²⁶⁶ Karen Boyle, *Media and Violence: Gendering the Debates* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), p.95.

This chapter will also examine the novel's commentary on the American class divide alongside the significance of invisible female labour, and the symbolic links between the violated or destroyed animal body and the victimised woman in Flynn's work.

The narrative is split between three members of the Day family: Libby, the only survivor of a mass murder for which her older brother Ben has been imprisoned for decades, Patty, the family matriarch who is slowly crumbling under the financial and emotional strain of single motherhood and running a farm, and Ben himself, a frustrated and rudderless teenager whose social isolation leads him to seek the company of troubled, violent outsiders. While Libby's narrative is set in the present day, exploring the shabby reality of a life lived in the shadow of a notorious killing spree, those of Patty and Ben take place in the small, fading town of Kinnakee, Kansas, on the day of the murders in 1985, with their alternating perspectives giving the reader an insight into the chain of events leading up to the violent deaths of Patty and her young daughters Michelle and Debby. While Ben's guilt was verified in court by the testimony of a then seven-year-old Libby, in the present day she reluctantly admits that her memories of the event are confused and unreliable. Persuaded by the leader of the 'Kill Club', a group of serial killer enthusiasts who fervently believe in Ben's innocence, to re-examine the case and potentially discover the truth of what happened in 1985, present-day Libby revisits her memories of the days leading up to the murders, during which Ben had become entangled in a moral panic amidst accusations of Satan worship and child abuse.

Libby, in her early thirties and still financially dependent on the donations of sympathetic strangers who remember the tabloid images of her younger self which dominated the news cycle in the aftermath of the Day family massacre, describes herself as a 'deeply unlovable adult' whose childhood was punctuated by upheaval and defined by poverty:

I was never a good little girl, and I got worse after the murders. Little Orphan Libby grew up sullen and boneless, shuffled around a group of lesser relatives—second cousins and great-aunts and friends of friends—stuck in a series of mobile homes or rotting ranch houses all across Kansas. Me going to school in my dead sisters' hand-me-downs: Shirts with mustardy armpits. Pants with baggy bottoms, comically loose, held on with a raggedy belt cinched to the farthest hole. In class photos my hair was always crooked—barrettes hanging loosely from strands, as if they were airborne objects caught in the tangles—and I always had bulging pockets under my eyes, drunk-landlady eyes.²⁶⁷

Libby's recollections of her family are juxtaposed with the contrasting monologues of Patty and teenage Ben. Patty is crumbling under the financial strain of running the farm, and harbours worries about her children, particularly Ben. As he begins to withdraw from his childhood friends and gravitates towards counterculture, she worries that his interest in the 'ugly, frantic' music which blares from his room signifies a profound personality shift: 'Ben had gone so remote this past year, turned himself into this strange, tense kid who walled himself into his room, kicking around to music that rattled the walls, the belchy, screaming words seeping out from under his door. Alarming words'.²⁶⁸ Patty, preoccupied with these worries and the fear that she will lose the family home, falls into a spiral of self-doubt, reflecting that she is increasingly 'mirthless, pinched, unable to enjoy anything. Every morning she'd crick herself down onto the flimsy rug by her bed and pray, but it was actually a promise: *Today I won't yell, I won't cry, I won't clench up into a ball like I am waiting for a blow to level me. I will enjoy today.* She might make it to lunch before she went sour'.²⁶⁹ Just as her desperation reaches crisis point, she is introduced to Calvin Diehl, the so-called 'angel of debt', a man who arranges for financially struggling Americans to meet fatal 'accidents' and subsequently allow their oblivious surviving family members to live comfortably off the resulting life insurance, without having to live with the knowledge that their loved one chose to die. Patty arranges for Diehl to visit the farmhouse and stage her murder, with Diehl reflecting that the suspicion which will inevitably fall on Runner, Patty's feckless

²⁶⁷ Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), p.1.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.74.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.25.

husband, is but an added bonus: ‘stab the woman through the heart on her doorstep, make this Runner guy sweat some. Let the cops question him, this sorry shit who took no responsibility. Make him take some. Ultimately it’d be written off as a random crime’.²⁷⁰ On the night of the massacre, Diehl and Patty are interrupted by Debby, and he kills the girl in order to protect his identity: ‘pudgy thing, her hair all still in braids, running, and him panicked, seeing her not as a little girl, not yet, but as prey, something that needed putting down. He didn’t want to do it, but no one got to see his face, he had to protect himself first [...] he knew there were more, and he knew he didn’t have the heart to kill all of them’.²⁷¹

In the days leading up to the massacre, Ben, who ultimately escapes this carnage only to be accused of culpability for it, is revealed to have been secretly dating Diondra, a wealthy local girl: ‘his girl with the name that made him think of princesses or strippers, he wasn’t sure which. She was a little of both: rich but sleazy’.²⁷² Diondra seems to take sadistic pleasure in emasculating Ben, while her friend Trey, a local teenager who is rumoured to be involved with Satan worshippers, poses a threat to his developing masculine identity. Ben’s afterschool job as a janitor at the local middle school leads him to establish a friendship with Krissi Cates, a fifth-grade girl from a wealthy family: ‘the girl was the definition of cute, like something on a cereal commercial—blond hair, blue eyes, and just well taken care of. Unlike his sisters, her jeans always fit and were clean and ironed; her shirts matched the color of her socks or barrettes or whatever’.²⁷³ Ben becomes increasingly aware that Krissi, five years his junior, has developed romantic feelings for him, and following a kiss between the two, he is accused of molesting her. The collective fury of the town’s parents, as increasingly sensational details of the Satanic ritual abuse which Ben has allegedly inflicted

²⁷⁰ Ibid., p.409.

²⁷¹ Ibid., p.410.

²⁷² Ibid., pp.56-57.

²⁷³ Ibid., p.104.

on their daughters emerge, is brought to bear on Ben. When Patty attempts to confront his accusers, she is met with a bizarrely quasi-celebratory scene:

They stepped into the home, into a sunken den, and peered out on a scene that looked like a children's birthday party. Four girls were in various states of play. They wore foil stars on their faces and hands, the kind of stickers teachers use to mark good grades. Several were sitting with their parents, eating cake, the girls looking greedy, the moms and dads looking panicked behind brave faces.²⁷⁴

These girls, united by Krissi's lie and emboldened by the assurances of a therapist who rewards them for sharing the details of their abuse, quickly become entangled in this fiction. Within hours of Krissi's accusation, Ben has gone from a teenage nonentity to a 'jackal', the perverted mastermind behind a litany of unspeakable deeds. When Libby tracks down Krissi in the present day, the woman intimates that the power of their lie ultimately overwhelmed the girls: 'and after those murders, all the girls panicked, everyone told the truth. We all felt like we'd really summoned the Devil'.²⁷⁵ Krissi is correct, in the sense that this lie facilitated the 'summoning' of something potentially more powerful – the all-too-familiar spectre of the predatory and sexually dominant male, whose motives are ascribed a sleazy and unearned glamour. Jean Murley describes the cinematic depiction of the powerful male killer as 'instrumental in securing a dubious celebrity status for the figure of the psychopath [...] within the heavy fiction/nonfiction crossover milieu of cinema, our modern monsters appear in all their questionable glory for an audience with an ever-increasing tolerance and accompanying desire for blood and gore'.²⁷⁶ The desire to culturally engage with these figures perhaps signifies a concurrent desire to come to terms with the pervasiveness of male violence in the real world. As noted below, intimate partner violence and domestic homicide remain part of the violent reality of many women's lived

²⁷⁴ Ibid., pp.229-230.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., p.268.

²⁷⁶ Jean Murley, *The Rise of True Crime: 20th-Century Murder and American Popular Culture* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2008), p.79.

experience, and the demonization of Ben as a Satanically-influenced killer indicates a longing to identify and contain the ‘source’ of this violence.

After discovering that Diondra is pregnant, Ben is persuaded to leave town with her. The two make a late-night visit to the Day farmhouse, unknowingly crossing paths with Calvin Diehl as he kills Patty and Debby. While Ben listens to the shotgun blasts and the thud of the axe as Diehl dismembers his sister, Diondra discovers that Michelle knows about the pregnancy and attacks her: ‘he saw Diondra crouched on top of Michelle like some giant predator bird, them both shaking in the dark, and he knew nothing was going to be OK and he also knew he wasn’t going to bring Libby back to the house’.²⁷⁷ While Libby survives with some vague memories of the massacre, Diondra goes into hiding and Ben takes responsibility for all three murders. It is not until the Kill Club take advantage of Libby’s financial desperation and coerce her into reassessing her memories of that night that the truth comes to light, with Diondra and her daughter Crystal, who have been keeping tabs on Libby, going to murderous lengths to prevent Libby from publicly exonerating Ben. The novel concludes on an obliquely hopeful note, with Ben contemplating his impending freedom and Libby returning to the site where the Day farmhouse once stood: ‘I was busy thinking of all the people that had been harmed: intentionally, accidentally, deservedly, unfairly, slightly, completely. My mom, Michelle, Debby. Ben. Me. Krissi Cates. Her parents. Diondra’s parents. Diane. Trey. Crystal’.²⁷⁸ The following section of this chapter will examine the extent to which this harm is a direct consequence of a cultural impetus towards the mythologization of male violence as a means of understanding or ameliorating it.

²⁷⁷ Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), p.402.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.419.

‘It was all part of his satanic thing. I think he’d have sacrificed me’²⁷⁹: Framing Male Violence via ‘Satanic Panic’

While *Sharp Objects’* Adora and *Dark Places’* Patty both broadly fit into Katharine and Lee Horsley’s categorisation of ‘mères fatales’, in that the latent violence of their maternal subjectivity is foregrounded (particularly with regard to the ‘nature of maternal guilt and self-division; [and] the ways in which the “crimes” of the mother can be created by male transgressions [or] by the patriarchal constructions of motherhood and femininity’²⁸⁰), Patty’s destructive tendencies are directed at herself rather than her children, and she intends for her own violent death to allow them to live comfortably. In fact, we may read Patty’s ineffective sacrifice, triggering as it does decades of speculation with regard to the psychotic mystique of the only man in the house, her son, as a commentary on the relationship between ‘true crime’ and the victimised women who often prop up male-centred narratives. Jean Murley has written on the rise of the ‘true crime’ magazine, popular examples of which include *True Detective* and *Inside Detective*, and the iconography of terrorized and/or butchered women, noting that from the 1960s onwards the covers of these magazines tended towards the pornographic, with ‘women [depicted] as depersonalized and sexualized bodies, physical selves without an emotional or intellectual dimension (except for the expression of terror), a new one available each month, symbolic white women serially violated and available for fantasies of violence’.²⁸¹ These women, violently disconnected from their own agency and reduced to silent and aggressively sexualized caricatures of female vulnerability, signify the cultural evolution of Poe’s ‘beautiful dead women’ from ‘poetical’ to pornographic. Murley asserts that the

²⁷⁹ Ibid., p.171.

²⁸⁰ Lee Horsley and Katharine Horsley (1999), *Mères fatales: maternal guilt in the noir crime novel*. *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, 45 (2). pp. 369-402, p.362.

²⁸¹ Jean Murley, *The Rise of True Crime: 20th-Century Murder and American Popular Culture* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2008), p.40.)

increasingly lewd depiction of female murder victims is indicative of a backlash against the female liberation movement of the 1970s: ‘set against the backdrop of the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s, the creation of rise of “crime porn” can be seen as a powerful, sinister counterforce in popular culture, an insistent voice, strident in both textual and visual representations, against women’s sexual and social freedom’.²⁸² Libby tells us that ‘after my mother’s head was blown off, her body axed nearly in two, people in Kinnakee wondered whether she’d been a whore’, while she herself has been approached by ‘fringe nudie mags’ eager to capitalize on her fame.²⁸³ Patty is afforded a portion of the narrative, and it is her version of events which gives the lie to the cultural construction of Ben as a figure of powerful male sexual aggression – through her eyes, we see that he is a lonely and vulnerable boy, struggling to assert his identity as he comes of age in their small farming community.

While Libby and Ben, alive in the present day and eventually given the opportunity to communicate with one another, are ‘heard’ both by the reader and the people around them, Patty’s account of her final day has ultimately been lost to time and is relayed to the reader alone, who can only observe as she moves inevitably closer to an ending that she believes herself to be in control of. Her narrative voice is superseded by the gleeful myth-making of people for whom the massacre of her family is little more than a diverting puzzle to unravel. Lyle, the leader of the ‘Kill Club’, observes that these enthusiasts can be divided into two groups: serious male ‘solvers’ who debate the facts of the case and review the evidence against Ben, and women for whom the case looms large as the kind of nightmare scenario they dread: ‘women come for the, like, networking. They talk about why they identify with the victims—they’ve had abusive husbands or whatnot—they have some coffee, buy an old photo’.²⁸⁴ These male ‘solvers’ (many of whom Libby suspects are

²⁸² Ibid., p.41.

²⁸³ Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), p.14.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., p.57.

retired law enforcement officers) employ the same ratiocinative investigative paradigm preferred by classic detectives like Dupin and Holmes; they ‘read’ the destroyed bodies of Patty, Debby, and Michelle (when Libby first meets these amateur detectives, she notes that one of them is carrying a folder with crime-scene photos, including images of Debby’s violated body: ‘part of a crime-scene photo had slid out of the speaker’s folder: a plump, bloody leg and part of a lavender nightgown. Debby. The man noticed my gaze and tucked it back in, like it wasn’t my business [...] I could see the bloody leg, a sliced-up belly, an arm nearly off²⁸⁵) in the hopes of arriving at a logical explanation for the massacre.

The lived experience of these girls and their mother, and the unapologetic and ostentatious femininity of the private space in which they existed (‘the curtains, the couches, even the candles were all apricot and lace. Little pink shoes and flowered undies and barrettes cluttered drawers and closets²⁸⁶) does not concern the male investigators who seek to explain this as an act of male aggression. While they don’t believe that Ben is guilty of the murders, they suspect that Patty’s errant ex-husband Runner may have been involved (a suspicion which makes sense when we consider the statistical likelihood of such a scenario²⁸⁷). The possibility that these murders are a direct consequence of violent female agency does not occur to them, and the only living female witness, Libby, is dismissed as a ‘scared little girl’ whose account of that night is deemed irrelevant. Through these persistently male-centric re-tellings of the Day family massacre, the subjectivity of the victims becomes indistinct and inconsequential, as the ‘Kill Club’ use Ben’s assumed guilt and subsequent silence to project onto him a narrative which foregrounds his apparent physical and sexual authority. While the women advocating to have Ben exonerated and released from prison assure Libby that her brother is something of a tragic hero (‘he writes

²⁸⁵ Ibid., pp.44-47.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., p.21.

²⁸⁷ *When Men Murder Women: An Analysis of 2016 Homicide Data* <<http://vpc.org/studies/wmmw2018.pdf>> [accessed 9 June 2019].

poetry and music and he's just a force of hope²⁸⁸), they seek to romanticise both the alleged killer and his victims, collecting family photos featuring the murdered girls and offering to buy Ben's unopened letters to Libby. The romanticisation of violent offenders is a cultural phenomenon known as *hybristophilia*; women who seek to establish relationships with convicted murderers have habitually gravitated towards infamous killers like Scott Peterson, Joran Van Der Sloot, Richard Ramirez, Ted Bundy, and John Wayne Gacy Jr., writing them love letters and offering marriage proposals.²⁸⁹ One contributing factor to this paraphilic desire is the veneration of masculine strength and dominance from a safe remove – these women can indulge their romantic or sexual fantasies with regard to men who have victimised *other* women, secure in the knowledge that they themselves are free from danger.²⁹⁰ While the Kill Club's female contingent's interest is not necessarily driven by a desire to solve the mystery of the Day family massacre, they seem to connect with the humanity of the long-dead Day women, using their vicarious experience of this brutal act of violence to establish bonds of sisterhood with their female peers. A dual fascination is established, as their obliquely sympathetic reading of Ben coincides with a desire to connect with these material fragments of the Day women on an emotional level. Lyle remarks, with some puzzlement, that 'they're not solving, they're just looking at stuff they could see online at home'²⁹¹, they also refuse to acknowledge the possibility that this was ultimately an act of violent female autonomy. In choosing to frame the events of that night as an all-too-familiar occurrence of male violence²⁹², they compound the silence

²⁸⁸ Ibid., p.46.

²⁸⁹ Tracy Clark-Flory, *In love with a serial killer* (2010)

<https://www.salon.com/2010/06/23/van_der_sloot_proposals/> [accessed 8 June 2019].

²⁹⁰ Sheila Isenberg, *Women Who Love Men Who Kill* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991).

²⁹¹ Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), p.37.

²⁹² A 2018 study by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime found that home is most dangerous place for women, with 58 per cent of all female victims of homicide killed by intimate partners or relatives. The study also explored the link between domestic violence and homicide, noting that 'nearly a quarter of the men who killed their intimate partner were previously identified by authorities as being violent towards them'. While men comprise a greater percentage of the total number of homicide victims annually, women are far more likely to fall victim to family-related or intimate partner homicide: 'the disparity between the

surrounding Patty's decision to die and Diondra's destructive agency. Diondra is another example of a 'mères fatale', albeit one whose maternal subjectivity remains somewhat remote, as we see her only through the eyes of Libby and Ben, neither of whom truly understand her desire to wreak havoc on the family unit. We are told, however, that her own parents regularly leave her home alone for months at a time, with only their dogs for company: 'she let them in the house when her parents were gone, and they jumped on tables and crapped all over the floor. Diondra didn't clean it up, just sprayed bathroom air freshener on all the shit-entwined carpet threads'.²⁹³ The fact that she associates the domestic space/family home with neglect (in a material sense as well as an emotional one) and isolation perhaps goes some way towards illuminating the furious delight with which she dismantles the Day farmhouse. When Libby eventually catches up to Diondra in the present day, she finds a similarly chaotic space: 'the bathroom was as gross as the rest of the place, mucked with mold, the toilet perpetually running, wads of toilet paper smeared with lipstick dotting the floor around the trash-bin'.²⁹⁴ Interestingly, Libby notes that the cluttered, dirty home Diondra shares with her now-adult daughter '[reminds her] too much of [her] own lost home'.²⁹⁵ There is a sense that Diondra is trying to reconstruct both the grimy solitude of her childhood home and the affectionate disarray of the Day home.

The erasure of the agency and narrative authority of the victims is reflective of the tendency of 'true crime' narratives to valorise acts of male violence, sometimes at the expense of the women on whom they are inflicted. Hallie Rubenhold's 2019 book *The Five:*

shares of male and female victims of homicide perpetrated exclusively by an intimate partner is substantially larger than between male and female victims of homicide perpetrated by intimate partners or family members, with an even greater share of female victims in the total number of homicides committed: roughly 82 per cent were female victims while 18 per cent were male victims, a share that has remained quite stable since 2012. Intimate partner violence continues to take a disproportionately heavy toll on women'. (UNODC, 'Gender-related Killing of Women and Girls' available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/GSH2018/GSH18_Gender-related_killing_of_women_and_girls.pdf) [accessed 9 June 2019].)

²⁹³ Ibid., p.195.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., p.388.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., p.376.

The Untold Stories of the Women Killed by Jack the Ripper explores a perennially popular ‘true crime’ narrative, that of the Ripper murders which took place in 19th century London. In doing so, it challenges the framing of these killings as the inevitable fate of ‘disposable’ women (presumed to be sex workers despite a stark lack of evidence to support this belief), whose brief but violent encounters with a shadowy and powerful male figure have been used to simultaneously define and marginalise them. Rubenhold carefully and deliberately steers her narrative away from ‘the Ripper’ and towards the lives of these forgotten women, whose value has thus far been measured purely in terms of what their deconstructed bodies may tell us about the man who killed them: ‘they are worth more to us than the empty human shells we have taken them for: they were children who cried for their mothers; they were young women who fell in love [...] they wept, they dreamed, they enjoyed small triumphs [...] we may now hear their stories clearly and give back to them that which was so brutally taken away with their lives: their dignity’.²⁹⁶ Judith Walkowitz has also written about the mythological construction of ‘Ripper’ figures, arguing that:

The Ripper episode ... covertly sanctioned male antagonism toward women and buttressed male authority over them. It established a common vocabulary and iconography of male violence that permeated the whole society, papering over class differences and obscuring the different material conditions that provoked sexual antagonism in different classes. The Ripper drama invested male domination with a powerful mystique ... enforcing the segregation of social space: women were relegated to the interior of a prayer meeting or their homes, behind locked doors; men were left to patrol the public spaces and the street.²⁹⁷

The cultural prominence of these ‘Rippers’ is similarly apparent during the time period during which Flynn’s novel is set; in the 1970s and 1980s, serial murderers like Ted Bundy and Richard Ramirez infiltrated the American cultural consciousness and narratives surrounding these men and the acts of sexual violence they committed with seeming impunity cultivated the same ‘powerful mystique’ with regard to their physical domination

²⁹⁶ Hallie Rubenhold, *The Five: The Untold Stories of the Women Killed by Jack the Ripper* (London: Doubleday, 2019), p.13.

²⁹⁷ Judith Walkowitz, ‘Jack the Ripper and the Myth of Male Violence’, *Feminist Studies*, 8.3, (1982), 542-574 (p. 563).

of female victims. These female victims are inevitably diminished by the glare of this mystique, relegated to nameless victimhood in service of a narrative that implicitly validates and even celebrates the masculine authority of the killer.²⁹⁸

Flynn's narrative, divided as it is between one of the female victims, the lone female survivor, and the male suspect, explores the tendency to deflect focus from acts of violent female agency. Satanic ritual abuse had become a major talking point and a focus of mass hysteria since the McMartin preschool trial; the 1987 McMartin preschool case, possibly the most notorious of incidents of 'Satanic Panic' in the United States, involved accusations of sexual abuse being carried out on as many as 360 children at the school. The claims of the children, who were extensively coached and coerced by adult interviewers, included details of semi-public Satanic orgies and a series of secret tunnels beneath the school which they claimed had been used to host Satanic gatherings.²⁹⁹ Despite the ridiculous nature of many of the accusations, which included stories of children being flushed down toilets and abusers displaying the ability to fly, the trial continued, eventually becoming the longest and most expensive criminal case in American history. By the time of his acquittal in 1990, McMartin preschool teacher Ray Buckey had spent five years in prison. The links between Ben and this apparently rampant Satanic cultural influence only serve to amplify his almost preternatural influence in this narrative of female destruction. As these lurid tales of Satanic abuse began to emerge in the 1980s, with titles like *Michelle Remembers* (1981), *Satan's Underground* (1988), and *Suffer the Child* (1989), certain gendered paradigms of victimhood took hold of the public imagination; the victims were primarily female, young, vulnerable, and subject to acts of physical and sexual abuse that were

²⁹⁸ Hallie Rubenhold, *From Jack the Ripper to Ted Bundy, why are dead women's bodies still being used as entertainment?* (2019) <<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/apr/02/from-jack-the-ripper-to-ted-bundy-why-are-dead-womens-bodies-still-being-used-as-entertainment>> [accessed 9 June 2019].

²⁹⁹ Paul Eberle and Shirley Eberle, *The Abuse of Innocence: The McMartin Preschool Trial* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1993).

typically described in outrageous detail. Lawrence Padzer's *Michelle Remembers*,³⁰⁰ published in 1981 and recounting the alleged details of ritual abuse inflicted on then five-year-old Michelle Smith, includes passages which describe the imprisonment, torture and rape of the little girl. Smith's now-debunked story of her recovered memories includes an actual appearance by Satan, who is explicitly gendered as male and forces Michelle to watch as he violates and butchers teenage girls. As preposterous as many of these tales are (Smith and Padzer claim that she once took part in an 81-day long summoning ritual, and also that she was rescued by a manifestation of the Virgin Mary), they lit the fuse of mass hysteria which would burn throughout the 1980s and early 1990s and result in the trial and imprisonment of dozens of innocent people.

The power dynamics are starkly gendered – although those among the accused included women, most notably Virginia McMartin, the founder of the now-infamous McMartin preschool, the allegations typically refer to acts of vaginal and anal penetration, with the recurring image of the restrained child/female subject (the victims, although not always female, are typically penetrable, fragile, sexually obedient and fearful, i.e. symbolically aligned with the feminine) used to underscore the sexual vulnerability of the victims. Deborah Frazer and Elizabeth Cameron's 1987 work *The Lust to Kill – A Feminist Investigation of Sexual Murder* examines the cultural construction of 'sex murderers'/Rippers and concludes that 'the common denominator is not misogyny, it is a shared construction of masculine sexuality, or even more broadly, masculinity in general. It is under the banner of masculinity that all the main themes of sexual killings come together: misogyny, transcendence, sadistic sexuality'.³⁰¹ This is also true of the way in which the Satanic ritual abuser is symbolically constructed; he is primarily a force of male violence, his largely mythical crimes imbued with plausibility precisely because they seem to embody a natural

³⁰⁰ Lawrence Padzer, *Michelle Remembers* (New York: Pocket Books, 1981).

³⁰¹ Elizabeth Cameron and Deborah Frazer, *The Lust to Kill – A Feminist Investigation of Sexual Murder* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1987), p.167.

extension of the gendered microaggressions which have dogged the lived experience of the female observers.

Debbie Nathan and Michael Snedeker point to the potential of these confessional spaces insofar as they facilitate a conversation about female victimisation and perhaps allow for the exploration of latent trauma: '[mothers] used the clinician's couch to consider matters that had troubled them for years, but which they were only able to deal with now because they linked them to their child's victimisation [and some] used their sessions to discuss incest and molestation they had experienced as girls but never talked about'.³⁰² The resulting 'witch hunt' is thus driven by an inhibited desire to give voice to the experience of being subject to male violence; these outlandish tales of ostentatious, bloody rituals a conduit for authentic engagement with their own vulnerability and anxieties with regard to bodily and sexual subjugation. Interestingly, Laura Browder has posited that a percentage of female true crime readers '[are] female survivors of violence [who] read true crime books as a way of narrativizing their own experience'³⁰³. Elaine Showalter, in her 1997 work *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media*, which traces the cultural roots of incidents of mass hysteria, exploring the extent to which these moments of shared paranoia are indicative of societal trauma, discusses Satanic ritual abuse as 'a way of dealing with horrifying human pathologies [...] hystories of SRA are flexible and creative'.³⁰⁴ In addition, these myths enable the people who perpetuate them to rationalise that sexual abuse is primarily something that is practised by dangerous outsiders or brainwashed individuals who aren't fully in control of their actions. The 'stranger danger' narrative which *Sharp Objects* deconstructs comes to mind: 'a belief in evil cults is convincing because

³⁰² Debbie Nathan and Michael Snedeker [ed.], *Satan's Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of a Modern American Witch Hunt* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p.122.

³⁰³ Laura Browder, 'Dystopian Romance: True Crime and the Female Reader', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 39.6, (2006), 928-953 (p. 940).

³⁰⁴ Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p.179.

it draws on powerful cultural axioms. People are reluctant to accept that parents, even those classed as social failures, will harm their own children [...] the notion that unknown, powerful leaders control the cult revives an old myth of dangerous strangers'.³⁰⁵

Ross Cheit has written on this modern-day 'witch hunt', attributing this mass hysteria to 'coercive and suggestive interviews, conducted by biased interviewers, combined with hysterical parents, overzealous prosecutors, and an unduly credulous media'.³⁰⁶ Cheit is correct, but, to expand on his point, we can link this hysteria to a broader cultural impulse towards the valourisation or glamourisation of male violence and the infliction of violence and sexual abuse on female-gendered bodies. Karen Boyle has written about the cultural impetus towards romanticisation of male 'Ripper' figures: 'feminists point to the continuities between the sexual murderer and 'normal' men, between the sexual murderer's pleasure in power and the eroticisation of power and control endemic in patriarchal culture. For feminist critics, the sexual murderer is a product of his society and culture, not its antithesis'.³⁰⁷ These narratives of violence against girls and women are invariably framed in such a way that the sexually violent male is implicitly positioned as the 'hero': 'he is the protagonist, he commits the crimes that drive the story forward and expresses, through murder, his total power and control over another human being. This act of annihilation affirms his own identity – he is subject, his victim is object'.³⁰⁸

In the case of *Dark Places* and Ben's symbolic elevation from self-conscious teenager to bleakly glamorous and dangerous local hate figure, it seems apparent that the narratives of victimisation offered by these young girls are almost surplus to requirements, and that this is at least part of the reason why the veracity of their stories is largely unremarked upon.

³⁰⁵ Jean La Fontaine, quoted in *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p.179.

³⁰⁶ Ross Cheit, *The Witch-Hunt Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.6.

³⁰⁷ Karen Boyle, *Media and Violence: Gendering the Debates* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), p.63.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.63.

Krissi betrays her implicit understanding of this dynamic when she reminisces about the rapid escalation of her confession:

Well, I started out with the kiss, and that was all I was going to say. Just the truth. And I told her and she, she seemed to move away, like ‘OK, not that big a deal. No problem.’ I remember her saying, *Is that all? Is that all that happened?* Like she was disappointed almost, and all of a sudden, I remember, she was already standing up, and I blurted it out, ‘He touched me here. He made me do things.’ And then she was back ... [the psychologist would] ask if Ben had made me do things, sexually, and I said no, and, he’d, like, be mean about it. *You seem like a smart, brave girl, I’m relying on you to tell me what happened. Oh, nothing happened? Gosh I thought you were braver than that. I was really hoping you’d be brave enough to help me out on this. Maybe you can tell me if at least you remember this sort of touching or Ben saying this? Do you remember playing a game like this, can you tell me if you at least remember that? Oh that’s good. I knew you could do it, what a smart, good girl.* And I don’t know, you’re at that age, if a bunch of grownups are telling you something or encouraging you, it just ... it started to feel real.³⁰⁹

It is apparent to Krissi, and to the reader, that these adults are rewarding her for ‘filling in the blanks’ in a pre-existing narrative, one that relies on the voices of these young victims only insofar as they affirm certain gendered preconceptions with regard to victimhood. These girls are encouraged to surrender narrative agency to a male-centred metanarrative which sidelines their autonomy. Krissi reveals that when she confessed the truth to her parents, they were bitterly disappointed, and that her relationship with her mother ultimately never recovered:

My mom, she just never forgave me. I’d come home and tell her about something that happened at school and—and she’d just say, *Really?* Like I was lying, no matter what I said. I could have told her I ate mashed potatoes for lunch and she’d just go, *Really?* And then she just stopped talking, she’d look at me when I came in the door from school, and then she’d walk over to the kitchen and open a bottle of wine, and she’d just keep refilling, wandering around the house, not talking. Always shaking her head. I remember one time I told her I wish I hadn’t made her so sad, and she said, she said, *Well, you did.*³¹⁰

Mrs. Cates’ life-shattering disappointment betrays the extent to which she has enjoyed successfully inhabiting the role of victim-by-proxy, a perversely vicarious pleasure not dissimilar from that of Adora in *Sharp Objects*, whose desire to inflict harm on her

³⁰⁹ Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), pp.265-266.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.268.

daughters in order to perform maternal benevolence drives her to increasingly dramatic acts of violence. Debbie Nathan and Michael Snedeker have written about the gender politics of the ‘social role’ inhabited by the parents of these children, arguing that ‘being the parent of a ritually abused child is a social role. It is one that provokes great distress, but, at the same time, allows middle-class parents – particularly mothers – to vent their tensions openly, without the restraints usually imposed by a world still dominated by masculine rationality and stoicism’.³¹¹

Just as the women at the ‘pity party’ Camille observes in *Sharp Objects* seem to rely on this space as an outlet for certain deep-seated fears and frustrations with regard to the limitations of the gendered social positions they inhabit, the mothers gathered at the Cates household find catharsis in the performance of rage when confronted with the apparent sexual victimisation of their young daughters. Nathan and Snedeker assert that this response can be read more broadly as a reaction against the restrictive demands of motherhood in a patriarchal culture: ‘in patriarchal culture, sexual assault is deemed the worst thing that can happen to “chaste” women or girls. Yet the far more common indignities they suffer from day to day are ignored or trivialised. Under these circumstances, rape becomes a lightning rod for the frustration and anger women feel about inequalities they continue to endure in their jobs and homes’.³¹² In other words, this social gathering functions as a means of channelling their latent disappointment and sorrow at a world which consistently minimises and polices female rage; these gatherings ‘serve as outlets for feminine rage without threatening the patriarchal status quo. During child-saving campaigns, women’s traditional identities as nurturers are reinforced; yet at the same time, activist mothers are allowed to separate themselves from the family in the name

³¹¹ Debbie Nathan and Michael Snedeker [ed.], *Satan’s Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of a Modern American Witch Hunt* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p.120.

³¹² *Ibid.*, p.121.

of championing it'.³¹³ The symbolic parallels between this gathering of women and the female Kill Club members, who forge social connections out of their shared obsession with missing and murdered women, are clear, and indicative of a desire to engage with their own potential vulnerability or victimisation, their interest validated by the men around them, who seek to 'put right' these acts of violence. For Mrs Cates and Ben's collection of female supporters, the lure of these narratives is not necessarily their 'solvability', but the extent to which they allow for a, perhaps coded, discussion about the apparent ubiquity of male violence and the symbolic positioning of women in a world where such violence is rendered enjoyable or entertaining for the men living at a safe distance from it. When Libby initially encounters the Kill Club, she is horrified by the 'role players' – men who cheerfully dress up as famous murderers and murder victims:

A man with a black waistcoat and tall black hat pushed past me, offering me sweets and laughing. Lyle rolled his eyes at me, said, "Frederick Baker freak. We've been trying to push out the role players for the past few years, but ... too many guys are into that [...] "are there role players for ... mine? My family, are there role players here?" A beefy guy with highlighted hair and an inflatable doll in a red dress paused in the crowd, nearly on top of me, not even noticing me. The doll's plastic fingers tickled my cheek. Someone behind me yelled *Scott and Amber!* I pushed the guy off me, tried to scan the crowd for anyone dressed as my mother, as Ben, some bastard in a red wig, brandishing an axe. My hand had balled into a fist.³¹⁴

Although Lyle hastens to establish a distinction between these performers, who he describes as 'less palatable' members, and the 'serious solvers'³¹⁵ who fanatically re-tread details of decades-old cases in the hopes of unravelling their central mysteries, their interest is just as fundamentally untethered from any genuine emotional drive to understand these acts of violence. For some of these men, the Day family massacre is a joke, for others, an inscrutable puzzle, but their inability to contemplate Patty, Debby, Michelle, and Ben in purely human terms prohibits them from uncovering the truth of what happened that

³¹³ Ibid., p.121.

³¹⁴ Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), pp.35-36.

³¹⁵ Ibid., p.39.

night. It is only when Lyle establishes a partnership, and eventually something akin to a friendship, with Libby that he transitions from a ‘solver’ to someone willing to engage with the social and emotional nuances of the case, and ironically, this facilitates the ‘solving’ of the murders, and the reveal that the massacre was sparked by the obliquely violent maternal instincts of two women. This gendered engagement with narratives of female victimhood is reflective of the distinction between male and female consumption of ‘true crime’.

True crime narratives are largely consumed by women; a 2010 study on the gender dynamics of true crime readership found that female readers are more likely to be drawn to these accounts of violent crime, perhaps in part because they offer ‘survival strategies’.³¹⁶ True crime podcasts like *My Favourite Murder*, an incredibly popular weekly series which focuses on a different ‘true crime’ or survivor narrative in each episode, have amassed legions of female listeners, who describe their enjoyment of the show as somewhat cathartic: ‘I feel like in my life I have been told so many times about how because I’m female, I have to be chaperoned in some capacity. I think there is so much strength in this podcast and what it stands for as a symbol of women uniting in their own right under something that has been used to keep them in their place’.³¹⁷ This has led Laura Browder to theorise that these accounts of violence against female bodies provide something of a ‘secret map of the world [...] a world in which women fear violence, but are culturally proscribed from showing an interest in violence’.³¹⁸ Browder describes the appeal of these

³¹⁶ Chris Fraley and Amanda Vicary, ‘Captured by True Crime: Why Are Women Drawn to Tales of Rape, Murder, and Serial Killers?’, *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 1.1, (2010), 81-86.

³¹⁷ Emma Kelly, *Stay sexy, don't get murdered: How a true crime podcast became a worldwide community* (2017) <<https://metro.co.uk/2017/10/27/stay-sexy-dont-get-murdered-how-a-true-crime-podcast-became-a-worldwide-community-7027104/>> [accessed 2 March 2019].

³¹⁸ Laura Browder, ‘Dystopian Romance: True Crime and the Female Reader’, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 39.6, (2006), 928-953 (p. 929).

narratives as ‘dystopian romance’, arguing that ‘the true crime book typically picks up where the romance novel leaves off, and exposes the controlling, sexually dominant male as a dangerous killer [...] many true crime books concern what happens to women who take romance novels too seriously: the genres talk to each other’.³¹⁹ Browder references Janice Radway’s 1984 study *Reading the Romance*, which explores the female readership of the romance genre and the extent to which those narratives serve to validate or contextualise their own relationships with men, arguing that the true crime narrative conversely works to disenchant female readers and offer them a more realistic depiction of male-female relationships, particularly with regard to sexual and domestic violence. In the case of Ben Day, we may argue that the narrative which has superseded his lived experience is one designed to simultaneously validate and renounce what he represents culturally – an inscrutable and destructive masculine force. The next section of this chapter will discuss the class dynamics of the novel and of the domestic noir genre more broadly, examining Flynn’s depiction of female labour, both public and private, with regard to the differing power dynamics of social authority.

‘Today I won’t yell, I won’t cry, I won’t clench up into a ball like I am waiting for a blow to level me. I will enjoy today’³²⁰: Class, Affective Labour and the Reclamation of Power

Much of the tragedy which befalls the Day family is a consequence of their precarious socio-economic status; Patty arranges her own murder in the hope that her life insurance will grant her children a degree of financial security. This sacrifice remains ultimately unacknowledged by the people speculating about Patty’s death, just as her singular efforts

³¹⁹ Ibid., p.938.

³²⁰ Ibid., p.25.

to hold her family and the farm together in life are met with little more than the disapproval of local farmers: ‘everyone in the rotten town blamed her. Vern Evelee made a noise with his tongue whenever he saw her, a for-shame noise. Farmers who weren’t going under never had sympathy, they looked at you like you played naked in the snow and then wanted to wipe your snotty nose on them’.³²¹ Her status as a single mother struggling for financial survival in a male-dominated industry, and attempting to balance public and private lives, compounds her outsider status, and her fate (murdered in a botched attempt at reclaiming some control over her narrative and then consigned to history as the victim of either her husband or her son) emphasizes the insurmountability of the American class divide and the perversity of a culture which only refuses to value her as anything other than a victim of male violence. Flynn’s unflinching portrayal of the fatigue and desperation of working-class poverty is something rarely seen in domestic noir fiction, which typically exhibits ‘a broad concern with the *middle-class* home.’ (emphasis mine)³²² This does raise the question of whether *Dark Places* may indeed be categorised as domestic noir fiction – I believe that we may look to Franco Moretti’s 2000 paper ‘The Slaughterhouse of Literature’ for an answer to this question. Moretti, in his discussion of the formation of the canon of detective fiction, asserts that shaping the paradigms of a ‘new’ genre involves a necessary process of trial and error, and I believe that it is apparent that Flynn, as a foundational author of the domestic noir subgenre, is sampling and evaluating the effectiveness of various narrative and thematic strategies.

While financial precarity is thematically significant in several key works of domestic noir fiction (Paula Hawkins’ *The Girl on the Train* (2015), J.P. Delaney’s *The Girl Before* (2016), and Louise Candlish’s *Our House* (2018) all feature female protagonists who have

³²¹ Ibid., p.80.

³²² Diane Waters and Heather Worthington, ‘Domestic Noir and the US Cozy as Responses to the Threatened Home’, in *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction* [ed. Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton] (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p.200.

lost or will lose ownership of their homes following a relationship or marital breakdown, while Tana French's *Broken Harbour* foregrounds the harrowing psychological experience of a middle-class Irish couple for whom the post-Celtic Tiger recession triggers a sort of existential crisis with tragic consequences), conflict in these narratives typically revolves around the liminality of class identity and the implicit shame of a potential shift from middle to working class. The protagonists ultimately manage, by and large, to avoid having these fears actualized (sometimes because this precise fear has implicitly driven them to murder). In the case of *Dark Places*, the Day family exist firmly in the category of the 'working poor', a social group described by author David Shipler as being 'frequently burdened with low incomes and high needs among the youngsters they raise [...] caught in paralyzing depression, [they] feel resigned, helpless, and defeated'.³²³ This is an apt description of the lived experience of Patty and Ben, both of whom work relentlessly to keep the farm afloat:

Ben worked all week on the farm, and then went back to the school on weekends to work his crap janitor's job [...] He fed cattle and hauled manure at home, and pretty much did the same at school, cleaning locker rooms and mopping the cafeteria, wiping up other kids' shit. And still he was expected to turn over half his paycheck to his mom. *Families share*. Yeah? Well, parents take care of their children, how about that one? How about not squirting out three more kids when you could barely afford the first one?³²⁴

The fact that this section of the population, particularly the women for whom the burden of unpaid labour is augmented by the necessity of additional minimum-wage employment, remains largely invisible in terms of representation within the pages of domestic noir fiction, is troubling and indicative of the need for a broadening of the thematic paradigms of the genre. This section of the chapter will explore the extent to which Flynn challenges these paradigms via her focus on a working-class female protagonist and the daughter whose inheritance of trauma compels her to scrape together a living from her own

³²³ David Shipler, preface to *The Working Poor: Invisible in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), p. x.

³²⁴ Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), p.58.

unreliable memories of the family's massacre. Libby exists so far beyond the boundaries of middle-class 'normality' that when she is asked to consider choosing a career path she is completely unable to envision herself in the working world: 'I tried to picture [...] things that grown-ups did. I imagined myself in a nurse's cap, holding a thermometer; then in a snug blue cop's uniform, escorting a child across the street; then wearing pearls and a floral apron, getting dinner ready for my hubby. That's how screwed up you are, I thought. Your idea of adulthood still comes from picturebooks'.³²⁵

As the introduction to this thesis notes, much of the appeal of domestic noir narratives, certainly from the perspective of the largely female readership base, appears to centre on the deconstruction of the façade of contented middle-class domestic existence within which these (typically white and heteronormative) women exist. The fact that these novels are so often marketed as depictions of the pitfalls and shortcomings of female success in a social milieu that rewards the pursuit of neoliberal ideals is no coincidence – to an point, it's a subgenre that provides space for the exploration of the experience of one specific type of lived femininity – one that's firmly and unambiguously couched in a middle-class perspective. While both *Sharp Objects* and *Gone Girl*, to varying degrees, conform to this model in order to challenge its limitations, *Dark Places* is something of a domestic noir anomaly, in that it turns away from an examination of the comforts and cruelties of bourgeois life and instead explores the violent and disheartening tedium of life below the poverty line. Heath Diehl, in his essay 'Listen to the Silence': Dismantling the Myth of a Classless Society in the Fiction of Marcia Muller and Sara Paretsky', credits these female-centred hard-boiled novels of the 1980s with facilitating a dialogue about poverty and class positioning:

By virtue of their very public nature as examples of mainstream genre fiction, these novels collectively participate in ongoing conversations regarding the roles that socioeconomic

³²⁵ Ibid., pp.11-12.

status plays in shaping the ideological consciousness and material experiences of American citizens [...] class concerns are covered over and “silenced” in American cultural productions, and the need to “listen” to those “silences” to understand how class polemics shape the “lived” experience of the characters within these cultural productions [is important].³²⁶

Diehl describes these re-gendered hard-boiled thrillers as a response to the mythos of the ‘self-made’ man visible in the hard-boiled narratives of Hammett and Chandler – in the hard-boiled detective novel, ‘the depiction of work is a major concern, sometimes pushing crime to the periphery. The central focus becomes the detective at his job’.³²⁷ The job thus becomes a means of self-identification, a way for the male detective to succeed despite his humble roots and create a ‘self’ that is subsequently validated via their professional success. Paretsky’s V.I. Warshawski and Sue Grafton’s Kinsey Millhone are similarly invested in a discourse of individualism, perpetuating, to some extent, the myth of a classless society in which anyone can professionally thrive, regardless of social position (in 1988’s *E is for Evidence*, Kinsey informs us that she ‘[has] no class [...] I was raised in a two-bedroom stucco bungalow, maybe eight-hundred and fifty feet of space, if you counted the screened-in utility porch’.³²⁸ Regardless of this inauspicious start in life, she has achieved considerable professional success as a self-employed PI.) Flynn’s novel, on the other hand, consistently challenges this notion, offering us female characters whose class identity is central to the novel’s mystery and to the eventual solving of the Day family massacre. In doing so, she adds a new dimension to the subgenre, highlighting its potential to examine lived femininities across a spectrum of class, race, and sexuality (and there is certainly scope for a broader framework of representation, particularly with regard to the latter two categories). Throughout the novel, Patty, Ben, and Libby are almost always working or

³²⁶ Heath Diehl, “Listen to the Silence”: Dismantling the Myth of a Classless Society in the Fiction of Marcia Muller and Sara Paretsky”, published in *Class and Culture in Crime Fiction: Essays on Works in English Since the 1970s* [ed Julie Kim] (North Carolina: McFarland Publishing, 2014), pp.49-50.

³²⁷ Ralph Willett, ‘Hard-boiled Detective Fiction’, Resources, British Association for American Studies (1992) <https://www.baas.ac.uk/ralph-willett-hard-boiled-detective-fiction/> [accessed 18 April 2019].

³²⁸ Sue Grafton, *E is for Evidence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), p.58.

thinking about work, whether it be farm labour, the janitorial work which emphasises the widening social gap between Ben and his peers and cements his reputation as an ‘outsider’, or Libby’s reluctant scramble to survive by monetising her pain. Ben’s relationships with Diondra and his classmates are punctuated by moments of resentment, as he is consistently reminded of their positioning with regard to power, labour, and class:

Sometimes Ben felt like a fairy-tale elf who’d creep in and leave everything spotless without anyone noticing. The kids here didn’t give a shit about keeping things clean: They’d toss a carton toward a trash can, the milk drooling all over the floor, and just shrug. They’d spill sloppy-joe meat on their cafeteria seat and just leave it there, hardening, for someone else to deal with. Ben did it, too, just because that’s what everyone did. He’d actually drop a glob of tuna sandwich on the floor and roll his eyes like it wasn’t worth dealing with, when he was the guy who’d be dealing with it in a few days. It was the stupidest thing, he was actually abusing himself.³²⁹

His participation in this culture of teenage entitlement is, as he himself notes, contradictory and ultimately in conflict with his own self-interest, but the desire to perform ‘belonging’ by mirroring the behaviour of his peers ironically drives him to create more labour for himself. Rather than perpetuating the myth of a classless society, Flynn goes to great lengths to depict the extent to which her characters are encumbered by their class positioning, both literally and symbolically. Patty’s sense of herself has become warped by years of financial struggle and by the (implicitly gendered) judgment of her neighbours, who view her as financially and sexually irresponsible: “You’ve got four kids at home,” she continued, her voice tight, her eyes wet. “You can’t afford a one of them. Their daddy’s a drunk. You’re on welfare.”³³⁰ She recalls a last-ditch effort to jettison some of her debt by auctioning farm equipment to the opportunistic neighbours:

They’d had an auction a few weeks later—the Days peeking out through the windows as their neighbors underpaid and underpaid some more for the very equipment she needed to run a working farm. Michelle and Debby had squirmed, seeing some of their schoolmates, the Boyler girls, tagging along with their folks as if it were a picnic, skipping around the farm. *Why can’t we go outside?* they whined, twisting themselves into begging-angry outlines, watching those Boyler girls taking turns on their tire swing—might as well have sold them

³²⁹ Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), pp.95-96.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.231.

that, too. Patty had just kept saying: *Those aren't our friends out there*. People who sent her Christmas cards were running their hands over her drills and disc rippers, all those curvy, twisty shapes, grudgingly offering half what anything was worth.³³¹

This scene is quite portentous, in that these very men, running their hands over the 'curvy, twisty' shapes of the tools of her labour, labour which they have spent years judging her for persisting with, are the same men who will similarly pore over the image of her violated body, judging and speculating that 'she looked at men the way a whore would. In these situations, Vern Evelee always remarked that she should have sold her planter in '83, as if that was proof she was prostituting herself'.³³² Having failed to socially assimilate as a female labourer and experienced first-hand the futility of the notion of ascending the hierarchy of class through hard work, she acquires value, in the eyes of these people, only via her murder, becoming little more than a curiosity or cautionary tale against straying outside of the boundaries of gendered labour. When Ben remarks that Diondra is 'rich but sleazy'³³³, he betrays the confusion and resentment that underlies his desire to realise the American myth of becoming 'self-made', imagining the life they might share following the birth of their child:

They'd drive out of this crap town, to Wichita, where her uncle owned a sporting-goods store and might give him a job. Ben had tried out for both the basketball and football teams and been cut early and hard, in a don't-come-back sort of way, so spending his days in a big room filled with basketballs and footballs seemed ironic. Then again, with all that equipment around, he might be able to practice, get good enough to join some men's league or something. Seemed like there must be a plus-side. Of course, the biggest plus-side was Diondra. He and Diondra in their own apartment in Wichita, eating McDonald's and watching TV and having sex and smoking entire packs of cigarettes in a night.³³⁴

Ben admits to some uncertainty with regard to the gendering of labour, admitting that while his errant father Runner is keen to make jokes about Patty doing 'men's work', his

³³¹ Ibid., p.81.

³³² Ibid., p.84.

³³³ Ibid., p.57.

³³⁴ Ibid., p.60.

mother is the one who taught him to hunt: ‘it was his mom who’d made him a decent shot, taught him how to handle the recoil, when to pull the trigger, how to wait and be patient for hours in the blind’.³³⁵ While he confesses a desire to be a ‘useful’ man, the people in his life who display an aptitude for ‘masculine’ labour are female: both Patty and Diondra are physically strong, and wield guns, axes and knives with assurance. Following the deaths of Patty, Debby, and Michelle, Diondra rampages through the house, using the axe to further violate their bodies and using their blood to mark Satanic symbols on the walls: ‘Diondra was chopping the walls, chopping the couch, screaming with her teeth bared. She’d smeared the walls with blood, she’d written things. She’d tracked blood in her men’s shoes all over’.³³⁶ In doing so, she frames this crime not just as a ‘Satanic’ massacre, but as an act of male labour. The prospect that this rampage may have been carried out by a woman is never seriously entertained by investigators, and this is partially because the hostility and condemnation which resulted from Patty’s efforts to balance the gendered roles she has inhabited out of necessity (second generation farmer-mom, who professes a quiet desire to indulge in the frivolities of performative femininity: “you’ve got four kids—no one expects you to look like a daisy,” [...] but she wanted to look like a daisy every now and then”³³⁷) has become no less pervasive in the years following her death.

Libby remarks that Patty is a source of fascination for ‘solvers’: ‘People always were [fascinated]. They always wanted to know: What kind of woman gets slaughtered by her own son?’.³³⁸ This curiosity and disapproval is implicitly underscored with a judgement of Patty as not just irresponsible but *unnatural*; she has been consigned to history as a woman who tried, and failed, to ‘have it all’, to combine emotional and manual labour and succeed in a world eager to confine her to one role. The fact that Ben has become immortalised as

³³⁵ Ibid., p.156.

³³⁶ Ibid., p.402.

³³⁷ Ibid., p.76.

³³⁸ Ibid., p.19.

her killer only emphasises the link between the narrative that has been forced on her posthumously and the cultural assumption that her death was, at least in part, the inevitable consequence of her disregard for the gendering of labour – according to this narrative, Ben’s vulnerability to Satanic influences has been exacerbated by Patty’s maternal deficiencies. While it is true that Patty is preoccupied with financial woes and the demands of her younger children, the sections of the book narrated by her are shot through with concern for Ben and a desire to connect with him. Her final day is spent on futile attempts to find and communicate with him. Patty, here, is carrying out what is known as immaterial or affective labour. Michael Hardt describes this work, in a feminist context, as ‘kin work’ or ‘caring labour’. Essentially, ‘affective labour’ refers to the largely unseen but crucial (and typically female) work of maintaining relationships, managing and producing emotions, and providing comfort, assurance, and emotional safety. It also includes domestic duties: ‘it requires repetitive material tasks such as cleaning and cooking, but it also involves producing affects, relationships, and forms of communication and cooperation among children, in the family, and in the community’.³³⁹

This kind of labour has been historically gendered as female and linked to women’s role in the private sphere. Carol Gilligan’s seminal 1982 work *In a Different Voice* explores the ‘ethics of care’ and the moral development of men and women. Gilligan found that her female interviewees were more inclined to describe or define themselves in relation to their relationships and networks of support: ‘the contrast between a self defined through separation and a self delineated through connection, between a self measured against an abstract ideal of perfection and a self assessed through particular activities of care, becomes clearer and the implications of this contrast extend by considering the different ways these children resolve a conflict between responsibility to others and responsibility to self’.³⁴⁰

³³⁹ Johanna Oksala, ‘Affective Labor and Feminist Politics’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 41.2, (2016), 281-303 (p. 285).

³⁴⁰ Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982), p.35

This indicates that a woman's sense of self is shaped, to an extent, in relation to the intimate relationships and caring responsibilities which she feels the obligation to fulfil. While Gilligan's work is very much of its time, and somewhat essentialist in its approach, it provides an interesting context for the discussion of affective labour and female identity.

This labour is often considered fundamental to 'maternal duties', and this is evident throughout the novel – Patty is expected not just to ensure the physical wellbeing of her children but to safeguard their emotional and psychological wellbeing, and she is judged accordingly when her son is publicly 'exposed' as a violent deviant. While Patty is never explicitly blamed for the massacre, the unspoken question which underlies discussion about her is verbalised by Libby when she asks 'what *kind* of woman'³⁴¹ this would happen to. The implication here is that she invited trouble and violence into the private sphere when she chose farm labour ('men's work') over the job of cultivating the emotional health of her children. In domestic noir fiction more broadly, the burden of affective labour is often explored, usually via the guilt experienced by working mothers whose efforts to balance 'caring labour' with work in the public sphere are a source of conflict and/or violence. Recent novels, including Liane Moriarty's *Big Little Lies* (2014), Claire Mackintosh's *I See You* (2016), and Harriet Tyce's *Blood Orange* ((2019) have centred this conflict and explored the consequences of the internalisation of maternal guilt. Hardt says that 'caring labour is certainly immersed in the corporeal, the somatic, but the affects it produces are nonetheless immaterial. What affective labour produces are social networks, forms of community, biopower'.³⁴² This (often thankless and unpaid) work is crucial to the preservation of support networks, and is carried out not just by women, but more often than not by women living on the lower end of the spectrums of socio-economic status, race, and class, as 'caring labour' may be outsourced to marginalised individuals (films like

³⁴¹ Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), p.19.

³⁴² Michael Hardt, 'Affective Labor', *boundary 2*, 26.2, (1999), 89-100 (p. 96).

The Hand That Rocks the Cradle (1992), Leila Slimani's 2016 bestseller *Lullaby*, and Gilly Macmillan's 2019 novel *The Nanny* explore the potential perils of passing the burden of this work onto another woman, in some cases placing explicit blame on the mothers and wives who reject cultural pressure to carry it alone). Johanna Oksala has explored this notion of affective labour within the context of feminist politics, arguing that 'the increasing marketization of care work is a paradigmatic example of this trend [towards outsourcing caring labour]. Care workers are predominantly performing affective services today as low-waged laborers, not as innovators and cognitive capitalists. Their work is poorly paid and of low status, and it is disproportionately performed by women from subordinated racial-ethnic minorities in most Western countries'.³⁴³

Patty's final sacrifice is, in a sense, the ultimate act of 'kin work' – she is willing to give her life to ensure the financial and emotional security of her children, allowing herself to be victimised and consigned to history as one of the Kill Club's 'dead girls', just another specimen to be discussed and dissected by generations of men. Her goodbye letter, delivered to Libby following Calvin Diehl's confession in the present day, outlines her desire to die a 'useful death':

Dear Ben, Michelle, Debby and Libby,
 I don't think this letter will ever reach you, but Mr. Diehl said he'd hold it for me, and I guess that gives me some comfort. I don't know. Your grandparents always told me, Make a useful life. I don't feel I've really done that, but I can make a useful death. I hope you all forgive me. Ben, whatever happens, don't blame yourself. Things got beyond our control, and this is what needed to be done. It seems very clear to me. I'm proud in a way. My life has been determined so much by accidents, it seems nice that now an "accident on purpose" will make things right again. A happy accident. Take good care of each other, I know Diane will do right by you. I'm only sad I won't get to see what good people you become. Although I don't need to. That's how sure I am of my kids.
 Love you,
 Mom³⁴⁴

³⁴³ Johanna Oksala, 'Affective Labor and Feminist Politics', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 41.2, (2016), 281-303 (p. 293).

³⁴⁴ Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), pp.407-408.

The pressure she feels to be of service to her family, even in death, is indicative of the extent to which the gendering of caring labour has shaped her sense of herself and exacerbated the shame and guilt she feels as a result of her failure to professionally thrive in a male-dominated industry in which the deck will always be stacked against her.

Libby, in the present day, provides an interesting juxtaposition to the grimly self-sufficient Patty. Having grown into a troubled, barely-functioning adult, she has adapted to survive on the charity of the well-meaning and ghoulish strangers who maintain a fascination with the Day family massacre: ‘I inherited \$321,374 when I turned eighteen, the result of all those well-wishers who’d read about my sad story, do-gooders whose hearts had gone out to me [...] flapping toward one of my many crap-ass childhood homes, my little-girl self at the window, waving and grabbing each bright heart, green cash sprinkling down on me, thanks, *thanks a ton!*³⁴⁵ Having monetized her loss and become reliant on the benevolence of people keen to propagate certain gendered dynamics of victimhood and power with regard to the deaths of her mother and sisters, she is rewarded for a performance of victimhood (and, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the idea of performative victimhood is central to Flynn’s work – Adora has shaped her entire identity around a facsimile of vulnerability, and the following chapter will discuss *Gone Girl*’s Amy and the ease with which she inhabits the role of ‘victimised wife’ for the benefit of onlookers) that validates these dynamics – nicknamed ‘Brave Baby Day, Little Girl Lost [and] Angel Face’³⁴⁶ by tabloid journalists, she allows herself to be culturally constructed as a vacuum for other people’s misplaced grief and macabre curiosity, providing emotional labour for ‘men who’d been orphaned young [...] a special gathering of teenagers whose moms had been killed by their dads. I signed my book for mouth-breathing kids who asked me jarring questions, like did my mom cook pies. I signed the book for gray, needful

³⁴⁵ Ibid., p.2.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., p.6.

old men peering at me from behind bifocals'.³⁴⁷ The 'real' Libby, far from a model of pliant victimhood or a saintly survivor, is imbued with a complicated sense of entitlement and a penchant for stealing, having spent her post-massacre childhood with a parade of relatives whose patience she frequently, and violently, tested: 'I totaled [my aunt's] car twice, broke her nose twice, stole and sold her credit cards, and killed her dog. It was the dog that finally broke her'.³⁴⁸

Libby's decision to become an investigator of sorts in order to stave off abject poverty allows for an interesting contrast to *Sharp Objects*' Camille as investigator. Whereas Camille inhabits the 'lady sleuth' mold, insofar as she is a woman of independent means who uses her insider status to gather information from private (middle class, female-centred) social gatherings (a mode of detection which Craig and Cadogan describe as premised on the acquisition of 'specialized 'feminine' knowledge which suddenly acquires a new respectability, if only for the duration of the tale'³⁴⁹), Libby aligns more closely with what Fay Blake calls the 'working [woman] detective':

Usually a woman from a lower social class who sees detection as a form of employment, one preferable and significantly more profitable than the other primary occupations of the period such as acting, cleaning, or teaching. In contrast to the lady sleuths, 'conventional ladies who solve their puzzles as quickly as possible in order to return to the obscurity of their own homes', Fay Blake describes these working women as both 'truly subversive' and 'freakish'.³⁵⁰

This is a fitting description of Libby, who pursues the truth initially out of financial desperation and eventually finds existential restoration and a degree of closure via her detection. While Camille is shown to employ the intuitive tactics of the 'lady detective', not wholly dissimilar to those practiced by the likes of Mrs. Paschal (1861) or Loveday Brooke

³⁴⁷ Ibid., p.9.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., p.137.

³⁴⁹ Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig, *The Lady Investigates: Women Detectives and Spies in Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p.12.

³⁵⁰ Sally Munt, *Murder by the Book?: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.6.

(1893), her Victorian forebears, in that she displays an aptitude for ‘reading’ the domestic space and its inhabitants in a way that her male peers simply can’t, Libby is habitually coded as an outsider. When she is invited to a ‘Free Day Society’ meeting in a suburban home, she struggles to engage with the women she meets there and reverts to her entitled frame of mind, viewing them as potential prey:

They were all women, more than a dozen, and they were all white. Most looked care-worn, but a handful had the bright, full-hour-in-front-of-the-mirror look of the upper class. That’s how you pick ’em, not by the clothes or the cars, but by the extra touches: an antique brooch (rich women always have antique brooches) or lip-liner that was blended just the right amount. Probably drove in from Mission Hills, feeling magnanimous about setting foot north of the river.³⁵¹

Leaving this gathering with a pilfered Cloisonné candy dish in her pocket and a renewed sense of distrust in the women whose ostensibly benevolent interest in Ben is undercut with a ghoulishly obsessive desire for ‘the truth’, Libby solidifies her status as one of noir’s outsiders. Megan Abbott, describing Chandler’s Philip Marlowe, defines him as ‘uncomfortable in his own skin and yet an explicit outsider to any system but his own set of harassed ethics’.³⁵² This description fits Libby, too – having rejected and been rejected from a series of conventional family units, she lacks a frame of reference for the social sleuthing which Camille is so adept at. The only moments during which she appears at ease around other people are those characterised by their failure to adhere to certain social protocols; she meets and interviews Krissi in a shabby strip-club just off the highway: ‘dismal, crouched blocks of cement, most without any real name, just neon signs shouting Live Girls! Live Girls! Which I guess is a better selling point than Dead Girls’.³⁵³

Whereas Lyle is immediately uncomfortable and cannot relate to Krissi, Libby is unexpectedly at ease here, noting that ‘Krissi reminded me of me. Grasping and anxious,

³⁵¹ Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), p.208.

³⁵² Megan Abbott, *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p.29.

³⁵³ Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), p.164.

always bundling things aside for future use'.³⁵⁴ In the midst of the emotional poverty and grime of this bleak place, Libby feels more 'at home' than she does in the private suburban spaces of the people who express a desire to empathise with her trauma and loss; Krissi, whose unequivocally self-serving co-operation can be bought for the price of a drink, makes sense to Libby in a way that the Kill Club's sisterhood of sympathy does not. When Libby warns us about the 'meanness' which she believes lives inside her, she is alluding not just to her cynicism and latent trauma but to her own construction as an investigator. Raymond Chandler's assertion that the hardboiled detective must possess certain heroic properties, that 'down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid'³⁵⁵, is interesting in light of this. Libby *is* mean, by her own admission, and she is not traversing the 'mean streets' of Philip Marlowe's Los Angeles or Sam Spade's San Francisco³⁵⁶, but negotiating public and private spaces in a way that emphasises the symbolic connection between her and the 'working detectives' visible in the fiction of Sara Paretsky, Sue Grafton and Val McDermid. Maureen Reddy notes that these female detectives are typically 'cut off from their families of origin'³⁵⁷ In Libby's case, she has been quite literally, and violently, 'cut off' from her family, but unlike these heroines, who Sally Munt argues propagate certain liberal feminist myths about autonomy and self-reliance, Libby does not seek familial surrogates via a non-traditional family unit – rather, she works to symbolically resurrect and reconstruct her long-dead family and in doing so

³⁵⁴ Ibid., p.185.

³⁵⁵ Raymond Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), p.17.

³⁵⁶ David Geherin has written about crime fiction's shift from urban spaces to rural environments, noting that while these quieter environs originally played host to 'cozy crime' narratives, in recent years small-town America has become a popular setting for the crime fiction of writers like Karin Slaughter and Julia Spencer-Fleming. 'Crime respects no bounds [...] hard-boiled fiction doesn't require an urban setting [...] if it's the classic LA hardboiled scene, then you have the sun beating down on everything and the palm trees. For me, hardboiled is cold. Really cold weather is so brutal and unforgiving'. (David Geherin, *Small Towns in Recent American Crime Fiction* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2015), p.6.) Libby falls victim to this unforgiving cold during both of her encounters with murderous violence; in 1985, she lost three toes and half a ring finger to frostbite while hiding from Diondra, and in the present day, while she tries to evade Diondra and Crystal, she worries that she is going to 'lose toes again'.

³⁵⁷ Maureen Reddy, *Sisters in Crime: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (New York: Continuum Publishing Agency, 1988), p.104.

merges the sensibilities of these female characters, most of whom exist primarily in working-class spaces and engage in detection not simply out of curiosity or amateur interest but in order to make ends meet, and the domestic noir heroine whom Flynn has been instrumental in creating: a figure who, in many ways, embodies the amalgamation and evolution of character tropes from the broader crime fiction tradition – Libby thinks herself self-sufficient and world-weary, choosing to live on the margins of society and seeming to take pride in her lonely existence.

Her gruff, defensive demeanour is quite deliberately evocative of the aforementioned protagonists of Hammett and Chandler’s work; her opening assertion that you might ‘slit me at my belly and [the meanness] might slide out, meaty and dark, drop on the floor so you could stomp on it. It’s the Day blood. Something’s wrong with it. I was never a good little girl, and I got worse after the murders’³⁵⁸, but also of the women they investigate and interrogate, most of whom are anything but ‘good little girls’. The extent to which Flynn’s female protagonists are representative of the potential of domestic noir fiction to engage with crime fiction’s gendered roles and build on them, challenging the rigidity of the public/private, investigator/victim paradigms, is evident here, as Libby never fully inhabits any of these roles, instead navigating them with tangible confusion, perpetually unsure of the identity which this monumental act of violence has forced upon her. According to Nicoletta Di Ciolla and Anna Pasolini:

With its mass reach, [crime fiction] can contribute to the deconstruction of the fixed paradigms that continue to be in place in the categorisation and evaluation of female behaviour and, through its contribution, can support positive cultural and social changes. Crime fiction is an especially effective tool for this purpose: its popular appeal makes it one of the primary sources through which the general public get their ideas about crime in society, and its facility for interpreting and giving a voice to social and cultural discomfort renders it capable of expressing dissent and triggering in its audiences an appetite for change.³⁵⁹

³⁵⁸ Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), p.1.

³⁵⁹ Nicoletta Di Ciolla and Anna Pasolini, ‘The Violent Mother in Fact and Fiction’, in *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction* [ed. Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton] (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p.138.

This is certainly true of *Dark Places*, which lays bare the aggressive tedium of poverty and the gendering of caring labour which is primarily carried out by women for whom the unacknowledged work of maintaining the private sphere and the emotional wellbeing of the people in it leads to their own diminishment, both physically and symbolically.

‘The girl parts of some animal’³⁶⁰: Mapping Female Trauma on to Animal Bodies

This final section of the chapter will focus on Flynn’s depiction of violence against animal bodies, with a focus on the juxtaposition of violence against animal bodies and the destruction of female bodies – the narrative is dotted with instances of animal cruelty and slaughter, many of them positioned alongside scenes in which female characters are injured or killed – for example, the scene during which Ben, Diondra and Trey slaughter a cow is closely followed by one in which the female members of the Day family are murdered, and the parallels between these scenes hint at symbolic links between the bodily destruction of animals and the symbolic/physical deconstruction of female bodies in crime fiction. The abused and butchered animals scattered throughout the novel are depicted in obscene detail (as the case against Ben gathers pace, his locker is searched, and a ‘gift’ from Diondra is discovered; the reproductive organs of an animal, reminiscent of a dried flower: ‘the corsages unsettled Ben, they looked like organs, with their folds and their twists, their pink-and-purple. They reminded Ben of the stinking globs of meat sitting in his locker right

³⁶⁰ Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), p.25.

now, a horrible gift Diondra had left him—surprise!—the girl parts of some animal³⁶¹), while Flynn refuses to linger on the ‘dead meat’ of her murdered women. My examination of the parallels that Flynn draws between these acts of bodily destruction, and the divergent ways in which she chooses to depict them, will explore Jacques Derrida’s assertion that to write about the human construction of animal identities is to write about crime; specifically, the crime of privileging one life over another when we distinguish between ‘murder’ (taking the life of a *person*) and ‘killing’ (taking the life of an *animal*):

The confusion of all nonhuman living creatures within the general and common category of the animal is not simply a sin against rigorous thinking, vigilance, lucidity, or empirical authority, it is also a crime. Not a crime against animality, precisely, but a crime of the first order against the animals, against animals. Do we consent to presume that every murder, every transgression of the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ concerns only man . . . and that, in sum, there are crimes only ‘against humanity’?³⁶²

‘Murder’ as a term which privileges the human is something that Christopher Pittard has written about in relation to detective fiction, noting that:

The very term ‘animal’, for Derrida, already implies the priority of the human: “*Animal* is a word that men have given themselves the right to give” (ibid., p. 32). Likewise, it is humans who decide what constitutes murder, and who and what is ‘killable’; in most cases, humans are murdered, but animals are merely killed [...] not only is it criminal to talk of the animal in the singular, and to assume that murder is that which is proper to the human, but where detective fiction becomes involved with questions of murder, it also implicitly addresses the question of the animal.³⁶³

The frequency with which Flynn depicts the degradation, abuse, and bodily annihilation of animals (most prominently in *Dark Places*, although *Sharp Objects* also goes to great lengths to throw Wind Gap’s culture of sexual violence into sharp relief via the image of the sows,

³⁶¹ Ibid., p.25.

³⁶² Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* [Translated by David Wills] (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p.48.

³⁶³ Christopher Pittard, ‘Animal Voices: Catherine Louisa Pirkis’ The Experiences of Loveday Brooke, Lady Detective and the Crimes of Animality’, *Humanities*, 7.3, (2018), Article Number: 65.

bound, manhandled, and forced to reproduce until they die), typically positioning these scenes in relation to ones notable for their refusal to wallow in the gory spectacle of the destroyed female body. The distinction between these representations indicates a desire to examine the genre's impetus towards the gleeful deconstruction of its female characters via a reconsideration of the Derridean assertion that violence against animal bodies presents an opportunity for reflection on the established paradigms of criminality and murder, and that the crime genre can serve as a space for a reconsideration of the rigidity of the human/animal binary. Susan McHugh asserts that narratives of human-animal interaction 'situate subjectivity more clearly as a collective production, a disciplinary form of power complementing rather than negating other biopolitical options'.³⁶⁴ Building on this, I argue that in *Dark Places* animal bodies are intrinsic to Flynn's reconfiguration of the noir narrative, as she supplements her reimagining of the *femme fatale* figure (visible in all three of her novels) with the recurring narrative 'invasion' of broken, bleeding, and exploited animal bodies, all of which serve to test the boundary between humanity and animality.

In the case of Flynn, these butchered and violated animal bodies exist as a space for the exploration of crime fiction's (female) 'skeletons in the closet', i.e. the destroyed female bodies on the gendered paradigms of victimhood within the genre rest.³⁶⁵ Glen S. Close has written about the 'morbid eroticism' with which women in hardboiled and 'serial killer' fiction are depicted: 'as a genre it has thrived for nearly a century by pitting ratiocination

³⁶⁴ Susan McHugh, *Animal Stories: Narrating Across Species Lines* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p.3.

³⁶⁵ Angela Carter, in her 1978 work *The Sadeian Woman*, discusses the cultural distinction between 'flesh' and 'meat', and the extent to which the erotic 'desire for flesh' and the 'taste for meat' are entwined: '[flesh] is usually alive, and, typically, human; and meat [...] is dead, inert, animal, and intended for consumption'. (Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), p.137). This is a distinction that Flynn repeatedly draws the attention of the reader to – in one scene, Diondra and Ben taste each other: 'him Draculing into her neck, her demanding more, "Harder, harder, it won't leave a mark if you keep doing it that way, don't tighten your lips, no tongue, no harder ... Do! It! Harder! How can you not even know how to give a hickey?" and with a furious tight face, she'd grabbed him by the head, turned him sideways, and worked at his neck like a dying fish, the flesh going in/out in frantic rhythm'. (Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), p.197.) This serves as an interesting commentary on the dehumanisation of dead and sexually aggressive women in crime fiction; Diondra is compared to a 'dying fish' as Ben is simultaneously reframed as prey, neither of them fully human as the erotic act emphasises the fragility of the boundary between animal and human.

and hermeneutics against the abject and by affirming a knowing and resistant male subjectivity against existential threats frequently emanating from *femmes fatales* [and] the lustful description not of living but of dead female bodies'.³⁶⁶ While Flynn refrains from engaging in this 'morbid eroticism', going to great narrative lengths to humanize Patty and emphasise the trauma of her absence in Libby's life rather than dwelling on the image of her traumatised body (Libby has repressed her memories of the event, and when Ben is confronted with the dead bodies of his mother and sisters, it is the indignity of their final moments which preoccupies him rather than the spectacle of their brutalized bodies), she instead focuses a 'morbidly erotic' lens on vulnerable and victimized animals, inviting the reader to engage with this narrative terrain, littered with the unseen or half-glimpsed remains of female victims, via the tableau of the desecrated animal body, split open and on excruciating display in a way that her massacred female characters *aren't*.

Libby recalls that her long-suffering aunt Diane, the only member of her extended family to repeatedly take her in during her tumultuous youth, finally gave up on her following the death of Diane's dog, Gracie. Gracie, who has a tendency to remind Libby of her disfigurements ('the dog was obsessed with my foot, the bad one, with only two toes, the second and the pinky, skinny gnarled things. Gracie was always smelling at them, like she knew they were wrong somehow. It did not endear her to me'³⁶⁷) is killed after biting one of Libby's remaining toes:

Gracie paused in one of her loops and bit at the pinky toe on my bad foot, just grabbed onto it with her canines and shook. I remember thinking, *If this dog takes one of my last toes*, and then getting enraged at how ridiculous I was: On my left hand was a stump where a man would never put a wedding ring, and my unsupported right foot gave me a permanent sailor's gait in a land-locked town. The girls at school called my finger a nubbin. That was worse, it sounded both quaint and grotesque at the same time, something to giggle at while looking quickly away. A physician had recently told me the amputations probably weren't even necessary, "Just an overambitious country doctor." I grabbed Gracie around her middle, feeling her ribcage, that chilly tremble of a little thing. The tremble only made me angrier, and suddenly I was ripping her off my toe—the flesh going with her—and throwing her as hard as I could toward the

³⁶⁶ Glen S. Close, *Female Corpses in Crime Fiction: A Transatlantic Perspective* (Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2018), p.38.

³⁶⁷ Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), p.138.

kitchen. She hit the pick-axe edge of the counter and collapsed in a twitching pile, bleeding all over the linoleum. I hadn't meant to kill her, but she died, not as quickly as I'd have liked, but within about ten minutes.³⁶⁸

It's worth noting that Libby makes reference to her 'flesh' during this encounter, clearly delineating the boundary between herself (human/flesh) and Gracie (animal/meat), and the image of Gracie, fragile, little more than a 'chilly tremble' in Libby's hands, twitching in a pool of her own blood is far more graphic than any of the descriptions she offers in relation to the bodily destruction of her female family members. While Libby is not especially remorseful following the incident, she knows that this act of violence will essentially destroy her relationship with Diane, and it does. The visibly wounded animal body thus becomes a symbolic site of the familial trauma they are unable to give expression to.

Ecofeminist scholars like Donna Haraway, Carol Adams, and Susan Fraiman have discussed the relationship between acts of patriarchal violence inflicted on female-gendered bodies and those inflicted on animal bodies.³⁶⁹ They argue for 'a recognition of interconnected forms of violence within the home (connections between physical and psychological battering in the home) and without (connections between battering and other forms of male violence)'.³⁷⁰ Adams' 1990 work *The Sexual Politics of Meat* examines the parallels between the implicit and explicit devaluation of female bodies in a society governed by patriarchal values and the subjugation and brutalization of animal bodies in

³⁶⁸ Ibid., pp.138-139.

³⁶⁹ The correlation between animal abuse and domestic violence has been well-established, with women residing at domestic violence shelters 'nearly 11 times more likely to report that their partner had hurt or killed pets than a comparison group of women who said they had not experienced intimate violence'. (F. Ascione, K. Hayashi, J. Heath, M. Maruyama, T. Thompson and C. Weber, 'Battered Pets and Domestic Violence: Animal Abuse Reported by Women Experiencing Intimate Violence and by Nonabused Women', *Violence Against Women*, 13.4, (2007), 354-373 (p. 354).) A 2018 study found that women with companion animals who were in abusive relationships reported that the animal 'had been abused or neglected by their partners, and they had delayed leaving due to concerns for animals left in the home'. (C.M. Tiplay, D.B. Walsh, and C.J.C. Philips, "'The animals are all I have": Domestic Violence, Companion Animals, and Veterinarians', *Society and Animals*, 26.5, (2018), 490-514.)

³⁷⁰ Carol J. Adams, 'Woman-battering and Harm to Animals', in *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations* [ed. Carol Adams and Josephine Donovan] (London: Duke University Press, 1999), p.79.

this same society. Adams uses the term ‘absent referent’ to refer to the necessary disconnection between ‘meat’ and ‘flesh’ which allows us to destroy and consume animal bodies without incurring cognitive dissonance:

Through butchering, animals become absent referents. Animals in name and body are made absent *as animals* for meat to exist. Animals’ lives precede and enable the existence of meat. If animals are alive they cannot be meat. Thus a dead body replaces the live animal. Without animals there would be no meat eating, yet they are absent from the act of eating meat because they have been transformed into food. Animals are made absent through language that renames dead bodies before consumers participate in eating them. Our culture further mystifies the term “meat” with gastronomic language, so we do not conjure dead, butchered animals, but cuisine.³⁷¹

Adams thus describes a violence that is grounded in linguistic detachment from the act itself; a process of justification that allows one to divorce oneself from the visceral reality of the consumption of flesh. This ‘distancing’ tactic which allows us to sidestep any potential moral reflection on the act of destroying animal bodies and meat-eating is similar to the dehumanizing language often used to describe female murder victims, and the subsequent symbolic rendering of their dead flesh as gruesomely attractive or even ‘sexy’. Hallie Rubenhold describes the process by which the victims of Jack the Ripper and Suffolk serial killer Steve Wright³⁷² were implicitly rendered less human in the conversations surrounding the murders, the fact that several of them were sex workers used to validate what had been done to them: ‘[the judge instructed] the jury to lay aside their prejudices against [Wright’s] victims, four of whom were sex workers, before making

³⁷¹ Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-vegetarian Critical Theory* (Twentieth Anniversary Edition) (New York: Continuum, 2010), p.66.

³⁷² Headlines surrounding Wright’s killing spree lingered on the titillating details of his crimes, with many tabloid accounts emphasizing the perverse glamour of Wright as a potential ‘celebrity serial killer’, dubbing him the ‘Suffolk Strangler’: ‘The Mirror front page also has pictures of the four other dead women, each under the headline, “Victim”. It dedicates seven pages to the story, from page 4, clearing page 3 for a story about Beyoncé’s “crazy right boob”. The Sun’s front page is one of the simplest. Dominated by the single figure ‘5’, it features pictures of the five victims above the headline, “He kills them, stores them and dumps them in the dark”. It dedicates seven pages to the story, from two to eight. ‘Sutcliffe took six years to kill five girls... this monster took six weeks,’ says the headline on page two. And on pages four and five: “Get the bastard”’. (John Plunkett, *Analysis of the paper’s coverage of the Suffolk murders* (2006) <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2006/dec/13/pressandpublishing.suffolkmurders>> [accessed 17 May 2019].

their decision about the guilt of the defendant [...] when a woman steps out of line and contravenes the feminine norm, whether on social media or on the Victorian street, there is a tacit understanding that someone must put her back in her place'.³⁷³

The 'ripper' is thus subtly repositioned, transformed from an agent of misogynistic chaos to a moral authority of sorts, a corrective for female sexual agency run amok. With every reproduction of the image of his victims, utterly stripped of their humanity and figuratively transformed into 'dead meat', the impulse to relate to them as fellow humans recedes, the temptation to accept that they are 'other', different, less than us and thus *not* signifiers of what we might become, becomes overwhelming. Just as we happily butcher and consume dead animals, we engage with these narratives of violence against female bodies from a safe remove. With regard to crime fiction, this contrived detachment is visible in the popularity of what Gill Plain calls 'pathology fictions', including Patricia Cornwell's Kay Scarpetta series, which draw the attention of the reader to the dissection of the already-murdered woman: '[they] bring the body centre-stage, often focusing in gruesome detail upon the process of post-mortem examination [...] the corpse is reduced to a series of component parts, its bodily integrity more radically violated by the detective than by the criminal'.³⁷⁴

Plain describes this turn towards bodily decay and deconstruction as a challenge to the 'invisibility' of the body in earlier detective fiction – she dubs this the process of 'putting the corpus back into crime'³⁷⁵, and while this shift towards the corporeal reality of death is certainly an unequivocal break from the rather bloodless Golden Age tradition, I argue that writers like Cornwell and Mo Hayder, who embrace this paradigm of abjectness and refuse to shy away from the spectacle of the female corpse, are enabling a process by which the

³⁷³ Hallie Rubenhold, *The Five: The Untold Stories of the Women Killed by Jack the Ripper* (London: Doubleday, 2019), p.293.

³⁷⁴ Gill Plain, *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), p.16.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.11.

female body becomes what Adams calls the ‘absent referent’. The reader is invited to observe the female victim’s destroyed body, linger on her ligature marks and the lividity of her skin, imagine the violence with which she has been torn open and stripped of power. Consider this excerpt from Hayder’s *Birdman* (1999): ‘Sergeant O’Shea’s men found Joni’s body blocking the narrow hallway. A quick glance told them she was dead. No-one could have lived with these injuries; her spine was clearly snapped and a broken bottle had been inserted in her vagina.’³⁷⁶ This scene is anything but ‘bloodless’; Hayder ensures that the reader is unambiguously confronted with the horror of this broken body, but the obscene details of the violence that has been inflicted on this woman (also a sex worker) do little to foster empathy in the reader – she is an object of pity, disgust, and fascination, not a woman whose personhood we are expected to reflect on. She is meat, not flesh.

It is this absence of personhood which I believe Flynn is engaging with when she employs scenes of dead and violated animals to ‘stand in’ for scenes in which the victimised female body is pored over with repulsion. This is indicative of the potential of domestic noir fiction to challenge this trend towards de-personification and the exhibitionist celebration of ‘dead meat’ within the genre which I touched on in the introduction to this thesis. In *Dark Places*, our discomfort is not linked to our experience of the abject, but to the lived experience of female characters with the agency to describe their own (living) bodies:

She rinsed her hands, chapped, red and hard, and glanced at herself in the mirror, making sure her eyes weren’t wet. She was thirty-two but looked a decade older. Her forehead was creased like a child’s paper fan, and crow’s feet rayed out from her eyes. Her red hair was shot with white, wiry threads, and she was unattractively thin, all bumps and points, like she’d swallowed a shelf’s worth of hardware: hammers and mothballs and a few old bottles.³⁷⁷

³⁷⁶ Mo Hayder, *Birdman* (New York: Doubleday Books, 1999), p.1.

³⁷⁷ Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), p.75.

Flynn doesn't offer her reader the luxury of distance, forcing us to share the pain, humiliation and anxiety of her female characters. Rather than 'meat' for the reader or the investigator to dissect, Patty, Debby, and Michelle are rendered fully, sometimes uncomfortably, vital. We see them worrying, squabbling, running, and fighting for survival – they are presented to us pre-mortem and anything but the inert, dissectible 'dead meat' which female characters within the genre have so often been reduced to. When Libby first meets the members of the Kill Club she is almost confronted with an image of Debby's remains, but Flynn, crucially, refuses to offer the reader little more than a glimpse: "you put that shit away," I murmured. He tucked the photo away again, then held the folder shield-like, and blinked at me".³⁷⁸ These brief glimpses into the carnage of the family's final moments, framed as they are by Patty, Libby, and Ben's accounts of life in the Day farmhouse, and juxtaposed with scenes in which animal bodies are torn apart and discarded, serve not to titillate the reader or to further dehumanize the female victims, but to underscore the depth of the trauma which their absence has wrought.

When Carol Adams discusses the 'disappearance' of the being via our unthinking consumption of flesh, she could so easily be describing the process by which readers of crime fiction are confronted with the female body as 'absent referent' – the perverse enjoyment that we get from being privy to what Poe deems 'the most poetical topic in the world'³⁷⁹, the female corpse, so often described in obscenely graphic detail, prohibits us from identifying with the living woman. While the body is very much present, often to an overwhelming degree, the sense of the woman as *being* is absent. Building on Adams' explication of the symbolic connection between meat-eating and the dehumanization of women, I argue that, in Flynn's work, the 'absence' represented by this 'dead meat' is deconstructed, the brutal and meaningless mistreatment of animals used to hold up a

³⁷⁸ Ibid., p.47.

³⁷⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Barnes & Noble Inc, 2006), p.179.

mirror of sorts to the ubiquity of butchered and dehumanized women in crime fiction.

When Libby and Ben initially reunite after decades apart, they reminisce about the family's cattle:

We had only a small operation, but we still never named our cattle, that was not a good idea, even as a kid I had no interest in getting attached to Bossy or Hank or Sweet Belle because they'd be sent to slaughter as soon as they were big enough. Sixteen months, that rang out in my head. Once they were a year old, you started tiptoeing around them, you started looking at them sideways with disgust and embarrassment like a guest in your home who just farted.³⁸⁰

The unease and guilt that they feel while in the presence of these doomed animals resonates with us, because it is akin to the self-consciousness with which we read Patty and Ben's accounts of the day of the murders, knowing that they are moving ever closer to a catastrophic fate. Diondra's belligerent friend Trey has a reputation for slaughtering animals as part of the Satanic worship he is rumoured to be involved with, and these killings are likewise likened to *murder*:

He had shown up at Diondra's one night in October, cranked and shirtless and smeared with blood. Swore he and some friends had killed some cattle outside of Lawrence. Said they'd thought about going into campus, kidnapping some college kid for sacrifice too, but had gotten wasted instead. He may have been telling the truth on that one—it was all over the news the next day, four cows slaughtered with machetes, their entrails gone. Ben had seen the photos: all of them lying on their sides, big mound-bodies and sad knobby legs.³⁸¹

The language used to describe these massacred bodies is similar to that typically employed by authors of crime fiction to depict murdered female bodies; these vulnerable creatures are undignified, brought low and hollowed out by patriarchal violence. Another explicit parallel between female and animal bodies is drawn when Krissi, one of the narrative's catalysing agents, tracks Libby down in order to tell the truth of what happened with Ben decades previously. Krissi, a self-confessed 'lotion fiend', asks Libby 'have you tried udder cream? It's what they used to put on dairy cows? Like on their udders? And it's

³⁸⁰ Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), p.237.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.155.

so smooth, you can get it at a drugstore'.³⁸² This scene precedes the chapter in which Ben's locker is searched and the genitals of an animal are discovered within, initially mistaken for those of a child: 'we found some ... remains ... in your son's locker. Organs. At first we thought they might be part of a baby, but it seems they're animal. Female reproductive parts in a plastic container, from maybe a dog or a cat. You missing a dog or a cat?'.³⁸³ The appearance of this obscene and quasi-human piece of flesh, positioned as it is in a public and 'human' space, the high school, presents a challenge to the human/animal binary, particularly in terms of ownership of these spaces; Jopi Nyman and Nora Schuurman have written about the presence of animal bodies in human spaces: 'human-animal relationships are affected by the spaces in which they are performed, often carrying different meanings for human and animal, for example in terms of control and freedom [...] the conventional roles of the participants are newly reconstituted as a result of a transforming sense of relationality'.³⁸⁴ This discovery is another instance of narrative 'invasion' – these remains are disturbing not just because they serve as an abject reminder of bodily destruction and decay, but because of the disjunction of their positioning – like Wind Gap, Kinnakee is a town dependent on the exploitation of animal bodies, but there exists a necessary divide between the spaces in which this exploitation is carried out and the private 'human' spaces inhabited by the people who profit from it. The Day farmhouse seems a curiously liminal space in terms of this divide – the line between human and animal space is blurred from the start, such as when Runner returns from a fishing trip with a live catfish with which he terrorizes Libby:

³⁸² Ibid., p.262.

³⁸³ Ibid., p.276.

³⁸⁴ Jopi Nyman and Nora Shuurman, introduction to *Affect, Space and Animals* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p.3.

He came home from fishing one day, clomping through the house with his big wet waders, banging on the door to the bathroom when I was in the tub, just screwing with me. Come on, open up, I gotta surprise for you! He finally flung the door wide, his beer odor busting in with him. He had something bundled in his arms, and then he flung them wide, threw a live, two-foot catfish in the water with me. It was the pointlessness that frightened me. I tried to scabble out of the tub, the fish's slimy skin sliding over my flesh, its whiskered mouth gaping, prehistoric. I could have put my foot in that mouth and the fish would have slid all the way up, tight like a boot. I flopped over the side of the tub, panting on the rug, Runner screaming at me to stop my damnbaby crying. *Every single one of my kids is a scared-ass dumbshit.* We couldn't clean ourselves for three days because Runner was too tired to kill the thing. I guess I get my laziness from him.³⁸⁵

This liminality ultimately culminates in the transformation of the Day farmhouse from a chaotic but largely happy domestic space into a literal slaughterhouse, with blood smeared on the walls and butchered bodies littering the floor.

Flynn also pulls off an interesting bait-and-switch with the locker discovery, both with regard to her characters and her readers. Krissi, Ben's alleged victim, confesses to lying about the Satanic abuse rituals which Ben has spent much of his adult life atoning for, before we are abruptly brought back to this moment of gruesome discovery, the almost-human reproductive organs of a female animal indicating, if only for a moment, that Ben might be capable of genital mutilation and infanticide. Although we know that Krissi's story of sexual violence and degradation is largely untrue, the obscenity of this discovery is not mitigated by the realization that these are animal organs, precisely because Flynn has gone to great lengths to symbolically align 'animal' and 'human female'. It is this symbolic

³⁸⁵ Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), p.91.

alignment which allows her to evoke a profound dread and revulsion in her readers while abstaining from graphic depictions of mutilated and murdered female characters.

Later on, Flynn reinforces this alignment, when Diondra, Ben, and Trey massacre a herd of cattle in a ‘ritual’ annihilation which takes place just prior to the Day family massacre and is described in disturbing detail. Armed with a pick-axe, a knife, and a shotgun, they descend upon a herd of cattle, Trey asserting that ‘we’re going to make your baby a fucking warrior tonight, [Diondra]’.³⁸⁶ While this is little more than a thinly-veiled excuse for Trey and Diondra to indulge their sadistic desires, the act of slaughtering the animals is framed using the gendered power dynamics of Satanic ritual abuse which are discussed at the beginning of this chapter. While the animals they victimise are male, these acts of violent penetration and physical diminishment are described in such a way that they call to mind Debbie Nathan and Michael Snedeker’s assertion that the concept of Satanic ritual abuse provides space for reflection on more implicit forms of patriarchal violence and aggression. As Diondra (female) launches an attack on a bull (male), we see these dynamics play out. It’s worth noting that just prior to this, Diondra is hysterical with fear at the prospect of her pregnancy being discovered by her strict father, who has repeatedly threatened her with physical violence: ‘she started in on that scrunched-face baby-bawl his sisters did when they got hurt. The end-of-the-world cry [...] my daddy’s going to kill me!’ she wailed again, sweat wetting the roots of her hair’.³⁸⁷

Her terror at potentially being subject to patriarchal violence (like *Sharp Objects*’ Amma, Diondra rarely performs vulnerability, but when she does it is almost always linked to fears of parental violence and/or bodily intrusion) is itself channeled into an act of similar violence:

[The bull] took only one step away before she jammed the hunting knife through its throat.

³⁸⁶ Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), p.343.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.339.

It's happening, Ben thought. Here it is, happening. A sacrifice to Satan. The bull was leaking blood like oil, dark and thick—glug, glug, and then all of a sudden it twitched, the vein shifted or something, and blood sprayed out, an angry mist, coating them in specks of red, their faces, their clothes, their hair. Diondra was screaming now, finally, as if this first part had been underwater and she burst through suddenly, her cries echoing off the ice. She stabbed at the bull's face, chopped its left eye into a mess, the eye rolling back into its head, slick and blood-black. The bull stumbled in the snow, clumsy and confused, sounding like a sleeper awakened to an emergency—frightened but dull. Blood spatters all over its white curly fur. Trey raised his blade toward the moon, made a whooping cry, slung his chopper hard underhand and buried it in the animal's gut. The thing's hindquarters gave out for a second, then it bucked up, started to trot drunkenly. The other cows had widened the circle around it, like kids at a fight.³⁸⁸

While Trey and Ben also partake in this violence, with Ben reflecting, as he brings down the axe, that this is 'man's work', Diondra is the most aggressive and effective killer. This potently foreshadows her role in the coming family massacre, with Flynn's reluctance to linger on the gore of that scene cast into relief by her willingness to render the cattle-slaughter scene in punishingly explicit detail. We see blood and bone spraying, a 'red pond' of blood, the mutilated face of a stunned, dying creature. Much of the bodily trauma endured by Patty, Debby, and Michelle, is transposed onto this scene, with Flynn mapping their pain onto these animal bodies and, in doing so, asking her readers to reflect on the 'absence' of visibly destroyed female bodies in the novel.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., pp.343-344.

Chapter Three: *Gone Girl*, domesticity and the power of ‘girlhood’

This chapter will focus on the novel for which Flynn is most well-known - *Gone Girl*, published in 2012 to considerable critical and commercial success. Upon release, the novel spent eight weeks at the top of the *New York Times* hardcover bestseller list, and sold two million copies in its first year. Positively reviewed by *Time* magazine, the *New York Times*, and the *Guardian*, the novel was adapted in 2014, grossed \$400 million dollars at the US box office, and was nominated for several accolades.³⁸⁹ The influence of the gothic on domestic noir fiction must be noted here – many of the tropes which are now synonymous with domestic noir fiction (potentially deadly secrets between husband and wife, the home as a perilous space, and mistaken or switched identities) can be found in gothic suspense fiction, which Stephen Knight argues ‘has powerful appeal as a genre speaking about—and validating—individual feeling, including fear and horror... It... makes central the female experience of powerlessness and oppression, and links these emotive forces to places redolent of the past, the obscure, the mysterious...’.³⁹⁰ The Southern gothic tradition, which *Sharp Objects* draws on, is likewise preoccupied with domestic decay and female oppression: ‘It’s not a whodunnit, but a classic Southern gothic fable about crumbling towns, disintegrating relationships, obsolete legacy families, and an ugly past that must be continually confronted’.³⁹¹

If we consider Flynn as something of a generic architect, we may say that *Gone Girl* has served as a ‘blueprint’ for many of the domestic noir novels which followed. The previous chapter has touched on Franco Moretti’s assertion that canonical formation necessarily

³⁸⁹ Emma Brockes, *The Gone Girl phenomenon: Gillian Flynn speaks out* (2014)

<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/03/gone-girl-phenomenon-gillian-flynn>> [accessed 8 November 2019].

³⁹⁰ Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction, 1800-2000: Detection, Death, Diversity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.19.

³⁹¹ Aja Romano, *Sharp Objects is reclaiming Southern gothic tropes for rebellious girls* (2018)

<<https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/7/15/17563868/sharp-objects-episode-2-dirt-recap>> [accessed 19 September 2019].

involves experimentation, and I argue that Flynn's first two novels exemplify this – while *Sharp Objects* and *Dark Places* contain elements of Southern gothic and rural gothic, respectively, and the preoccupation with middle-class domesticity that would come to define the subgenre following the success of novels like *Big Little Lies* (2014) and *The Woman in the Window* (2015) is less apparent than one might expect, *Gone Girl* is indicative of a creative push forward towards something more like what we would now recognize as 'domestic noir' in its purest incarnation. Flynn has acknowledged the influence of writers like Patricia Highsmith³⁹² on her fiction; when asked about the allure of Highsmith's 'charming psychopaths' as an inspiration for her own work, Flynn credits Highsmith with a masterful command of quiet dread: 'Her stuff isn't overly plotted. It has this sense of wonderful inevitability about it. To me, the things that are suspenseful, that I find frightening, aren't someone jumping out of a closet or those kind of big scares, but instead that slow build of dread, and she does that really well. She kind of takes you by the hand and walks you toward the cliff. I like that sensation, and that's what I try to do in my books'.³⁹³ The cultural resonance that *Gone Girl* has enjoyed, however, suggests that it is more than the sum of its influences. We may say that while her first two novels embody domestic noir fiction in its embryonic phase, with its generic influences still very evident, whereas the publication of *Gone Girl* marks the emergence of the subgenre as something fully-realised which has *built* on these influences to carve out a canonical space of its own.

The novel features a marriage in crisis, a female protagonist whose violent subjectivity and capacity for self-reflection imbue her narrative with a snappy sense of self-awareness, and a much-lauded 'twist' approximately halfway through which casts much of the preceding narrative into doubt. The novel centers on the disintegrating marriage of Amy

³⁹² Alexandra Alter, *WSJ Book Club: Gillian Flynn on Patricia Highsmith* (2014) <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/wall-street-journal-book-club-gillian-flynn-on-patricia-highsmith-1398362234>> [accessed 19 September 2019].

³⁹³ *Ibid.*

and Nick Dunne, a couple whose seemingly idyllic relationship comes under public scrutiny when Amy disappears on the morning of their fifth wedding anniversary. As Nick falls under suspicion, his apparent guilt is compounded by the discovery of Amy's diary, which details his increasingly abusive behaviour in the months and weeks leading up to her disappearance. At this point, the expectations of the reader (likely informed by the kind of domestic homicide statistics mentioned elsewhere in this thesis) are subverted, as the narrative twists and replaces Amy's diary entries with the narration of 'Real Amy' - Amy is alive and staging her own disappearance with the aim of punishing Nick, the prime suspect, for his failure to recognize that the entirety of their relationship has been a grotesque performance of capitulation to gendered expectations, at least on her part:

He truly seemed astonished when I asked him to *listen* to me. He couldn't believe I didn't love wax-stripping my pussy raw and blowing him on request. That I *did* mind when he didn't show up for drinks with my friends. That ludicrous diary entry? *I don't need pathetic dancing-monkey scenarios to repeat to my friends, I am content with letting him be himself.* That was pure, dumb Cool Girl bullshit. What a cunt. Again, I don't get it: If you let a man cancel plans or decline to do things for you, you *lose*.³⁹⁴

The revelation that Amy has engineered her own removal from the narrative and supplanted her own voice with that of a carefully constructed 'Cool Girl', an ideal victim through which the American public might indulge their obsession with missing and murdered white women lends the novel a subversive quality (particularly with regard to the trope of the missing/murdered woman or 'girl' and the dearth of control she is typically accorded in terms of self-representation) and provides space for commentary on the significance of the cultural resurgence of the 'happy housewife' in postfeminist literature. Sady Doyle's 2019 book *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers*, which explores the cultural construction of powerful women as 'monstrous', touches on this 'missing white woman syndrome' via the case of Laci Peterson, which dominated the American news cycle in

³⁹⁴ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.224.

2002 and 2003. Peterson, a woman murdered by her unfaithful husband while eight months pregnant, became something of a totemic figure for the legions of women who mourned her despite never having known her in life. A television movie based on the case, *The Perfect Husband: The Laci Peterson Story*, was released in 2004, and depicted Peterson's husband and killer Scott as what Doyle terms 'one of the many Bluebeards of basic cable [...] it's easy to dismiss this genre as mere melodrama: cheap titillation for midwestern wine moms, vicarious suffering for women with no real problems and no real pain. Yet, if Laci can teach us anything, it's that even well-behaved, well-off suburban women can have much bigger and more painful problems than you might expect'.³⁹⁵ The first section of this chapter will examine this absence and the extent to which Flynn positions the domestic space (particularly in the context of twenty-first century crime fiction) as a site of postfeminist trauma, with Amy embodying a postfeminist 'crisis' of sorts.

'I was supposed to be a housewife for pay'³⁹⁶: the spectre of female domesticity in *Gone Girl*.

While plotting her own disappearance, Amy plans the stage-management of her 'murder' site in order to convincingly implicate Nick. She drains herself of blood and then sloppily cleans it up, leaving the kitchen and living room marked with almost-invisible reminders of her presence, and her potentially violent death, in these spaces:

Item 22: Cut myself has been on the list a long time. Now it's real, and my arm hurts. A lot. It takes a very special discipline to slice oneself past the paper-cut layer, down to the muscle. You want a lot of blood, but not so much that you pass out, get discovered hours later in a kiddie pool of red with a lot of explaining to do. I held a box cutter to my wrist first, but looking at that crisscross of veins, I felt like a bomb technician in an action movie: Snip the

³⁹⁵ Sady Doyle, *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers: Monstrosity, Patriarchy, and the Fear of Female Power* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2019), p.89.

³⁹⁶ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.281.

wrong line and you die. I ended up cutting into the inside of my upper arm, gnawing on a rag so I wouldn't scream. One long, deep good one. I sat cross-legged on my kitchen floor for ten minutes, letting the blood drizzle steadily until I'd made a nice thick puddle. Then I cleaned it up as poorly as Nick would have done after he bashed my head in. I want the house to tell a story of conflict between true and false. *The living room looks staged, yet the blood has been cleaned up: It can't be Amy!*³⁹⁷

While Amy has practical reasons for creating this tableau (she wants police to 'read' this scene as the aftermath of Nick's violent outburst), in doing so, she invokes the spectre of the 'happy housewife'. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* explores the displacement of first-wave feminism's 'New Woman' in the 1950s and 1960s, and her replacement with the 'happy housewife', a (likely college-educated) middle class woman whose world extends only as far as the boundaries of her home and whose sole purpose, in terms of work, is to maintain that space: "in the fifteen years after World War II, this mystique of feminine fulfilment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture. Millions of women lived their lives in the image of those pretty pictures of the American suburban housewife [...] They had no thought for the unfeminine problems of the world outside the home; they wanted the men to make the major decisions. They gloried in their role as women, and wrote proudly on the census blank: "Occupation: housewife."³⁹⁸ The postfeminist 'return' of the 'happy housewife' to the domestic sphere is described by Melanie Waters and Rebecca Munford as an inevitability which underscores the 'ghostliness' of feminism in a postfeminist era: '[feminism's] distorted appearance and decreased visibility imply a peculiar ghostliness: if it is not dead, it is not alive in the same way it once was [...] suspended somewhere between life and death, it is marked by both presence and absence.'³⁹⁹ Munford and Waters build on this idea via Derrida's theory of 'hauntology', using it to '[illuminate] some of feminism's own spectral dimensions.'⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁷ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.220.

³⁹⁸ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1974), p.14.

³⁹⁹ Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), p.18.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.19.

‘Hauntology’ refers to what Derrida describes as a nostalgia or yearning for a lost or nonexistent future – using it to map the spectral presence of Marxism in a world that is supposedly post-Marxist, he asserts that the present moment is subject to continual ‘interruption’ or ‘haunting’ by the spectre of these ‘lost futures’, and so time becomes ‘dislocated’, the present moment fractured and ephemeral. Katy Shaw argues that ‘the critical practice of hauntology turns to the past in order to make sense of the present, to understand how we got to this place and how to build a better future. Since the year 2000, popular culture has been inundated with representations of those who occupy a space between being and non-being, who defy ontological criteria’.⁴⁰¹ Amy, as the ‘gone girl’, certainly occupies the space between ‘being and non-being’⁴⁰², her presumed death or non-existence ontologically complicated by the diary narrative which cuts through Nick’s version of events. Even before the revelation that she has become a sort of living ghost, having shed her previous self in order to oversee her public ‘death’, the reader can only apprehend Amy through these fractured (and fictional) diary entries – we are listening to the ‘voice’ of a dead woman, whose carefully constructed story quite literally ‘interrupts’ Nick’s present moment and renders his story less plausible. Diary Amy successfully invokes the spectre of the murdered women, like Laci Peterson, on whose stories her narrative is built, and in doing so disrupts the ‘here and now’ of Nick’s narrative. In order to consider the hauntological implications of Amy’s quasi-absence, particularly in terms of

⁴⁰¹ Katy Shaw, *Hauntology: The Presence of the Past in Twenty-first Century English Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p.3.

⁴⁰² Amy is the eighth daughter to be born to her parents and the only one to survive past birth; her life has been irrevocably shaped by the shadow of these dead sisters, whose non-existence has rendered them untouchable and, as Amy sees it, unbeatable: ‘My mother had five miscarriages and two stillbirths before me. One a year, in the fall, as if it were a seasonal duty, like crop rotation. They were all girls; they were all named Hope. I’m sure it was my father’s suggestion – his optimistic impulse, his tie-dyed earnestness: We can’t give up hope, Marybeth. But give up Hope is exactly what they did, over and over again [...] I’ve always been better than the Hopes, I was the one who made it. But I’ve always been jealous too, always – seven dead dancing princesses. They get to be perfect without even trying, without even facing one moment of existence, while I am stuck here on earth, and every day I must try, and every day is a chance to be less than perfect’. (Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.221.).

postfeminist context, we must first explore the extent to which feminism functions as a hauntology.

Munford and Waters argue that:

With its investment in notions of otherness, memory, nostalgia, inheritance and futurity, hauntology appears to encompass many of the issues that have beset debates in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries about feminism's relationship to the past and its potential to intervene in women's futures. Derrida's investment in the spectre as a vehicle of nostalgia – for futures that were not realised, or potential that was not fulfilled – speaks, moreover, to postfeminism's idealized formulations of female identities that seem to 'ghost' the styles and politics of previous eras. If feminism is an ontology, a way of being, then it is also a hauntology in the Derridean sense – a way of being that is shaped by anxieties about the past, concern for the future and an overarching uncertainty about its own status and ability to change in a world where its necessity is perpetually cast into doubt.⁴⁰³

In other words, the nostalgia for unrealized futures which is synonymous with hauntology is apparent in postfeminist cultural manifestations of femininity; Munford and Waters discuss the postfeminist reemergence of the 'happy housewife' as part of 'a cycle of repression and return'⁴⁰⁴ which has ironically been facilitated by feminism's attempts to exorcise her: 'marked nostalgically as belonging to the past, the housewife 'desynchronizes time' [...] this disjointed temporality is evinced in contemporary popular culture through a return to the historical figure of the 'happy housewife heroine' as a model for 'new', future-facing feminine – and *feminist* – identities [...] the postfeminist mystique refreshes and reenchants an old-style domestic femininity'.⁴⁰⁵

Munford and Waters note a marked return to American cultural nostalgia in the post 9/11 period: 'thus re-coded as acts of patriotism, marriage and pregnancy were no longer events that might be delayed in favour of the kind of 'feminist' careerism promoted by shows like *Sex and the City*, but the cornerstones of domestic security in a newly vigilant America'.⁴⁰⁶ I would argue that the global recession of 2008, like the 9/11 attacks on

⁴⁰³ Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), pp.19-20.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.76.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.76-77.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.77.

America, had a similar effect, in that it facilitated a re-situation of female labour from the public to the private sphere; although male rates of unemployment during the recession were higher than female, the economic downturn impacted on women's ability to work outside of the home.⁴⁰⁷ In the context of *Gone Girl*, it is in the wake of the recession that Nick and Amy, both newly unemployed, relocate to Missouri to care for his cancer-stricken mother. Amy, previously a magazine writer (fittingly, she compiled personality quizzes for the same women's magazines that cynically proffer these 'idealized formulations' of postfeminist identity as not just achievable but compulsory) is now expected to spend her time in a house that she hates and inhabit a domestic role that she resents:

"Should I remove my soul before I come inside?" Her first line upon arrival. It had been a compromise: Amy demanded we rent, not buy, in my little Missouri hometown, in her firm hope that we wouldn't be stuck here long. But the only houses for rent were clustered in this failed development: a miniature ghost town of bank-owned, recession-busted, price-reduced mansions, a neighborhood that closed before it ever opened. It was a compromise, but Amy didn't see it that way, not in the least. To Amy, it was a punishing whim on my part, a nasty, selfish twist of the knife. I would drag her, caveman-style, to a town she had aggressively avoided, and make her live in the kind of house she used to mock.⁴⁰⁸

Emily Matchar has coined the term 'new domesticity' to describe the post-recession re-emergence of the domestic goddess: 'this current domesticity-mania is unique in that it signals a profound social change among educated, progressive Americans. It's part of a shift away from corporate culture and toward a more eco-conscious, family-centric, DIY lifestyle [...] in a culture of anxiety, it's no wonder so many young people are looking to

⁴⁰⁷ A 2016 report from *The Irish Times* outlined the lasting impact of the recession on women in the workplace, citing a possible reason for the decrease in female labour participation: 'One possible explanation could be that the economics of working deteriorated over this time for those women with young children. The economic adjustment saw incomes fall, particularly in public-sector occupations, which are strongly female, such as teaching, nursing and other care occupations. After-tax incomes fell even further as the tax burden rose to bring the public finances back towards equilibrium. The cost of childcare, however, did not go down. This would have affected whether more mothers opted to stay home for longer to care for children'. (John Fitzgerald, *Recession may have done lasting damage to women in workplace* (2016) <<https://www.irishtimes.com/business/work/recession-may-have-done-lasting-damage-to-women-in-workplace-1.2666258>> [accessed 2 October 2019].)

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.4.

domesticity in search of [a simpler way of life]'.⁴⁰⁹ The valorisation of this way of life is implicitly linked to its 'authenticity', something Jorie Lagerwey has explored in her work on domesticity and motherhood as 'brandable' in a postfeminist era. She argues that 'the mother is a hallmark of postfeminist culture and has become an integral part of how we understand adult women in popular media'.⁴¹⁰ Amy's childless status is a point of contention between she and Nick; while 'Diary Amy' assures us that she loves kids and wants to get pregnant - 'I've been indulging in toddler therapy. I walk over to Noelle's every day and I let her triplets paw at me. The little plump hands in my hair, the sticky breath on my neck. You can understand why women always threaten to devour children: *She is just to eat! I could eat him with a spoon!*'.⁴¹¹ This is later revealed to be another breadcrumb in her false trail, one designed to assure us, her public, that she a safe, trustworthy, *normal* adherent to this 'new domesticity'; an educated, successful, ambitious woman who *chooses* to shoulder the majority of the domestic labour, including child-rearing.⁴¹² Real Amy, of course, is thoroughly contemptuous of these women: 'Americans like what is easy, and it's easy to like pregnant women – they're like ducklings or bunnies or dogs. Still, it baffles me that these self-righteous, self-enthralled waddlers get such special

⁴⁰⁹ Emily Matchar, *Homeward Bound: Why Women are Embracing the New Domesticity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), p.12.

⁴¹⁰ Jorie Lagerwey, *Postfeminist Celebrity and Motherhood: Brand Mom* (London: Routledge, 2017), p.2.

⁴¹¹ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.186.

⁴¹² A 2013 *New York* magazine interview with one proponent of this lifestyle offers an intriguing insight into the mindset; 33-year-old Kelly, a self-described 'flaming liberal', claims to have found a kind of quasi-professional fulfilment from returning to the domestic sphere, and she is described in a way that seems designed to head off criticisms of a regression to the 1950s ideal of the 'happy housewife': 'Kelly is not a Martha Stewart spawn in pursuit of the perfectly engineered domestic stage set. On the day I met her, she was wearing an orange hoodie, plum-colored Converse low-tops, and a tiny silver stud in her nose. In the family's modest New Jersey home, the bedroom looked like a laundry explosion, and the morning's breakfast dishes were piled in the sink. But Kelly's priorities are nothing if not retrograde. She has given herself over entirely to the care and feeding of her family. Undistracted by office politics and unfettered by meetings or a nerve-fraying commute, she spends hours upon hours doing things that would make another kind of woman scream with boredom, chanting nursery rhymes and eating pretend cake beneath a giant *Transformers* poster'. (Lisa Miller, *The Retro Wife* (2013) <<http://nymag.com/news/features/retro-wife-2013-3/>> [accessed 9 October 2019].) Articles such as this one stress a 'natural' affinity that women possess with regard to child-rearing and domestic duties, implicitly suggesting that there is something *unnatural* or lacking about women working in the public sphere, and framing a monumental (and rather thankless) act of self-sacrifice as liberating and revolutionary.

treatment. As if it's so hard to spread your legs and let a man ejaculate between them'.⁴¹³

While we must be mindful of the internalized misogyny with which Amy regards her female peers (who she views as either rivals or easily manipulated dupes), her rejection of this contradictory paradigm of 'empowerment through domestic/maternal labour' is indicative of the extent to which she embodies a larger skepticism with regard to the metanarrative of postfeminism and the faux-liberation that this metanarrative supports. With this in mind, Amy's frustration with regard to the roles she is obliged to play serves not just as a critique of the gendered limitations of her existence, but as a critique of the 'idealized formulations' of postfeminist identity. The 'postfeminist woman' is, by definition, an 'end point' of sorts, a woman who has embraced the social, political, and sexual freedoms handed down to her by way of first-and-second-wave feminist action, and no longer feels the need to engage in feminist activism, rather choosing to engage in a version of social and sexual autonomy which, ironically, underscores the advantages of heteronormative femininity. Whereas second-wave feminism had questioned the limitations of traditional markers of femininity like Barbie dolls, makeup, and high heels, a postfeminist worldview encourages women to reconsider their inculcated dismissal of this brand of femininity, arguing that a reclamation of power of sorts is possible through the cultural embrace of 'girl power' (referenced earlier in this thesis) and all that it entails. Amy's 'cool girl' speech, which serves as a blistering rejoinder to this notion that the road to fulfillment and equality, at least for the twenty-first century woman, involves adhering to norms of femininity that just so happen to be those designed to please *men*, is a concise rejection of this line of thought. Pamela Church Gibson, writing on postfeminism and popular culture, notes the significance of 'girls' in this discourse:

Another media construct linked to the pernicious idea of postfeminism is the figure of the 'girl' – happy and confident in her sexuality, with no need for the tiresome ministrations of

⁴¹³ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.258.

older, meddling feminists [...] it may be worth noting a very recent appearance in the overcrowded ‘Chicklit’ category – an ‘etiquette guide’ for young women, with an entry on ‘Bitter Feminists’ listed amongst those you should handle ‘diplomatically.’ We are told: ‘[w]omen are pretty equal these days. They drink beer, understand the offside rule AND wear low-cut tops. Even if you can’t relate to old-style feminists, be grateful to them’ (Ivens 194). This is an interesting development – pained ‘gratitude’ from those reaping the rewards of earlier struggles.⁴¹⁴

The subject of Amy’s aforementioned ‘cool girl’ speech is remarkably close to this caricature of the contemporary, postfeminist woman:

Men always say that as *the* defining compliment, don’t they? *She’s a cool girl*. Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she’s hosting the world’s biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. *Go ahead, shit on me, I don’t mind, I’m the Cool Girl*. Men actually think this girl exists. Maybe they’re fooled because so many women are willing to pretend to be this girl. For a long time Cool Girl offended me. I used to see men – friends, coworkers, strangers – giddy over these awful pretender women, and I’d want to sit these men down and calmly say: *You are not dating a woman, you are dating a woman who has watched too many movies written by socially awkward men who’d like to believe that this kind of woman exists and might kiss them*. I’d want to grab the poor guy by his lapels or messenger bag and say: *The bitch doesn’t really love chili dogs that much – no one loves chili dogs that much!* And the Cool Girls are even more pathetic: They’re not even pretending to be the woman they want to be, they’re pretending to be the woman a man wants them to be. Oh, and if you’re not a Cool Girl, I beg you not to believe that your man doesn’t want the Cool Girl. It may be a slightly different version – maybe he’s a vegetarian, so Cool Girl loves seitan and is great with dogs; or maybe he’s a hipster artist, so Cool Girl is a tattooed, bespectacled nerd who loves comics. There are variations to the window dressing, but believe me, he wants Cool Girl, who is basically the girl who likes every fucking thing he likes and doesn’t ever complain.⁴¹⁵

It’s clear that the burden of this performativity is, at least in part, responsible for Amy’s departure, both symbolic and literal, from the domestic sphere and from her ‘happy housewife’ role – she contemplates the existence of a Real Amy whose refusal to walk the performative highwire of postfeminist identity renders her disagreeable to men like Nick:

Committing to Nick, feeling safe with Nick, being happy with Nick, made me realize that there was a Real Amy in there, and she was so much better, more interesting and complicated and challenging, than Cool Amy. Nick wanted Cool Amy anyway. Can you

⁴¹⁴ Pamela Church Gibson, ‘Introduction: Popular Culture’, in *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration* [ed. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford] (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.140.

⁴¹⁵ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.222.

imagine, finally showing your true self to your spouse, your soul mate, and having him *not like you*? So that's how the hating first began.⁴¹⁶

The figurative murder of 'Cool Amy' serves as a catalyst for the birth of 'Real Amy', who, rather than a collection of performative impulses designed to please Nick, is lethal in her single-minded dedication to rewrite the narrative of their relationship and publicly expose him as one of Sady Doyle's 'Bluebeards of basic cable'.⁴¹⁷

The 'postfeminist mystique' is a game that Amy has already played and won. In the wake of Amy's disappearance, Nick betrays the lack of insight he possesses in relation to Amy's apparently effortless performance of perfection:

Amy was once a woman who did a little of everything, all the time. When we moved in together, she'd made an intense study of French cooking, displaying hyper-quick knife skills and an inspired boeuf bourguignon. For her thirty-fourth birthday, we flew to Barcelona, and she stunned me by rolling off trills of conversational Spanish, learned in months of secret lessons. My wife had a brilliant, popping brain, a greedy curiosity. But her obsessions tended to be fueled by competition: She needed to dazzle men and jealousify women: *Of course Amy can cook French cuisine and speak fluent Spanish and garden and knit and run marathons and day-trade stocks and fly a plane and look like a runway model doing it.* She needed to be Amazing Amy, all the time.⁴¹⁸

His refusal or inability to understand how or why she is driven to present this façade of uncomplicated brilliance is ultimately the root of her fury; as Amy later rails, she had believed that her adherence to this punishing and paradoxical notion of feminine perfection was a joke they were both 'in on': 'but then it had to stop, because it wasn't real, it wasn't me. It wasn't *me*, Nick! I thought you knew. I thought it was a bit of a game. I thought we had a wink-wink, *don't ask, don't tell* thing going'.⁴¹⁹, and she laments the years

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., p.224.

⁴¹⁷ Sady Doyle, *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers: Monstrosity, Patriarchy, and the Fear of Female Power* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2019), p.89.

⁴¹⁸ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.45

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., p.224.

wasted on performing perfection for a male audience incapable of recognizing her efforts. She does not conceive of her decision to break away from that thankless role and try to become ‘Real Amy’ as a rebirth, however – at least not initially. Amy acknowledges that her relationship with Nick, predicated as it was on a wearying performance of postfeminist ‘liberation’, brought her a measure of happiness of sorts, and doesn’t plan to live for much longer than it takes to see him executed for her murder: ‘it requires discipline, to drown oneself, but I have discipline in spades. My body may never be discovered, or it may resurface weeks, months, later – eroded to the point that my death can’t be time-stamped – and I will provide a last bit of evidence to make sure Nick is marched to the padded cross, the prison table where he’ll be pumped with poison and die’.⁴²⁰ This grim plan is far from the ‘happy ending’ we might expect Amy to construct for herself, and on some level serves as an acknowledgement that to exist outside of the parameters of postfeminist identity is an unfeasible choice for many women; after all, it is apparent that while ‘Cool Girl’ and ‘Dead Girl’ Amy are designed to be palatable to the American public, ‘Real Amy’, who is violent, self-obsessed and, crucially, thoroughly disinterested in performing postfeminist capitulation, would never earn their compassion or understanding.

The fact that Amy ultimately reverts to yet another performance of domestic bliss (this time bolstered by the story of her survival, which she plans to monetise, and the impending arrival of a child who will ensure that Nick remains biologically and financially bound to her) suggests that her efforts to break away from the ‘postfeminist mystique’ have been essentially futile – the novel closes with this exchange between Nick and Amy: ‘He was supposed to say: *You deserve it. I love you.* But he said, ‘Because I feel sorry for you.’ ‘Why?’ ‘Because every morning you have to wake up and be you.’ I really, truly wish he hadn’t said that. I keep thinking about it. I can’t stop. I don’t have anything else to add. I

⁴²⁰ Ibid., p.247.

just wanted to make sure I had the last word. I think I've earned that'.⁴²¹ Nick's disgust and pity, at this point, might be said to mirror that of the reader, who has followed Amy from Cool Girl to Dead/Gone Girl, only for her to end up as a postfeminist variant on the 'Happy Housewife', performatively bound to an identity which will inevitably stagnate and stifle 'Real Amy', dangerous as she is.

Television shows like *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012) were key to the repackaging of domesticity as desirable and 'sexy': '[the show] both co-opts and neutralizes Friedan's critique of the 'happy housewife heroine', implying that women who inhabit this role in the twenty-first century do so playfully, with a knowing, empowered, 'postfeminist' awareness of its social currency'.⁴²² Waters and Munford touch on Betty Friedan and Simone De Beauvoir's respective critiques of the deadening nature of domestic labour: Beauvoir asserts that the housewife '[wages] a battle against dust and dirt that is never won [...] she wears herself out marking time [...] washing, ironing, sweeping, ferreting out fluff from under wardrobes – all this halting of decay is also the denial of life; for time simultaneously creates and destroys'.⁴²³ Friedan argues that there is a perceived 'lack' or 'absence' in the figure of the housewife, quoting a young woman who fears following in her mother's footsteps: 'I can't see myself as being married and having children. It's as if I wouldn't have any personality myself. My mother's like a rock that's been smoothed by the waves, like a void. She's put so much into her family that there's nothing left [...] my mother doesn't serve any purpose except cleaning the house'.⁴²⁴

These reflections on the existential vacancy embodied by the housewife are particularly interesting when set alongside Amy's own observations on the domestic role she is expected to inhabit: 'Tampon commercial, detergent commercial, maxipad commercial,

⁴²¹ Ibid., p.414.

⁴²² Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), p.81.

⁴²³ Ibid., p.84.

⁴²⁴ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1974), p.66.

Windex commercial. You'd think all women do is clean and bleed'.⁴²⁵ This echoes these earlier criticisms of domestic labour as soul-destroyingly futile, but the addition of 'and bleed'⁴²⁶ is interesting – while she is explicitly referencing menstruation (something which has historically served as a cultural justification for confining women to the private sphere), she also obliquely frames her strategic blood-letting and the haphazard clean-up job which implicates Nick as a challenge to the futility of this labour. In the aftermath of her 'staging' the scene via an act of carefully considered self-harm, she makes a quasi-casual reference to the physical and mental trauma of this labour, and in doing so renders this physical space a site of postfeminist trauma – this kitchen, the place where she has been brought low, transformed from 'cool girl' to betrayed housewife, the woman who has to 'call the plumber or listen to gripes about work or remind and remind him to pick up some goddamn cat food'⁴²⁷, becomes the crucible for her self-destruction and the implosion of her marriage. In violently absenting herself from the story of her own 'murder', while planning to take her own life once Nick's punishment is complete, she becomes the 'ghost' that Munford and Waters posit as a signifier of the 'ghostly' nature of feminist ideology – and one that is trapped in this cycle of repression and return, as we know that she will ultimately end up back here, holding on to an illusion of power which obliges her to play yet another role, this time of one of the 'self-enthralled waddlers' she so despises.

'God, it's like some bad noir movie'⁴²⁸: Narrative control, 'Dead Girl' worship, and the self-conscious inhabitation of the *femme fatale* role.

⁴²⁵ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.245.

⁴²⁶ The symbolic invocation of women 'bleeding' adds another layer to this observation, especially in light of the fact that it is couched within a crime fiction narrative; we may read the assertion that 'you'd think all women do is [...] bleed' as a critique of the extent to which the genre has traditionally relied on the spectacle of destroyed female bodies (as discussed in the introduction to this dissertation). In choosing to position *herself* as the 'absent referent' of sorts, Amy reclaims a degree of control over her apparent 'death'.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.248.

⁴²⁸ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.151.

This section will explore the extent to which Amy's attempts to 'rewrite' her life are successful or unsuccessful – as mentioned above, she ends the novel having 'won' the battle with Nick, insofar as he is compelled to stay with her and perform the role of the devoted husband, but is arguably no closer to controlling this narrative than when she stepped into the role of 'Cool Girl', all the while seething with resentment. The overlapping and contradictory narratives surrounding her disappearance and return (her version, the media's, Nick's, and the 'truth', at least as it is relayed to the reader) ensure that 'Real Amy', if she ever truly existed, will not be allowed to shape the story of her disappearance and 'resurrection', at least not to the extent that she had hoped, as the sanctified image of 'Dead Amy' ultimately eclipses the woman who returns, indicating that the 'Dead Girl' has become more of an aspirational figure than a tragic one. This section will explore the extent to which the internalized misogyny which has shaped her perception of the world (and of herself) renders her self-conscious inhabitation of the *femme fatale* role toxic or problematic with regard to its subversive potential.

The violent subjectivity with which Amy carries out her complex revenge is intrinsically married to a noir sensibility, and this is something that she is patently aware of; she quite deliberately positions herself as the *femme fatale* to Nick's faithless, and hapless, husband; interestingly, her transformation into this icon of deadly femininity involves a clever inversion of the vampy aesthetics that we are inclined to associate with the 'evil seductress [...] the spider woman'⁴²⁹ – on the run, Amy is able to move in plain sight precisely because she has rendered herself invisible, at least with regard to the male gaze:

I have dark skin, my mouse-colored helmet cut, the smart-girl glasses. I gained twelve pounds in the months before my disappearance – carefully hidden in roomy sundresses, not that my inattentive husband would notice – and already another two pounds since. I was careful to have no photos taken of me in the months before I disappeared, so the public will

⁴²⁹ Janey Place, 'Duplicity in Mildred Pierce', published in *Women in Film Noir* [ed. E. Ann Kaplan] (London: British Film Institute, 1998).

know only pale, thin Amy. I am definitely not that anymore. I can feel my bottom move sometimes, on its own, when I walk. A wiggle and a jiggle, wasn't that some old saying? I never had either before. My body was a beautiful, perfect economy, every feature calibrated, everything in balance. I don't miss it. I don't miss men looking at me. It's a relief to walk into a convenience store and walk right back out without some hangabout in sleeveless flannel leering as I leave, some muttered bit of misogyny slipping from him like a nacho-cheese burp. Now no one is rude to me, but no one is nice to me either. No one goes out of their way, not overly, not really, not the way they used to. I am the opposite of Amy.⁴³⁰

Her inhabitation of this role actually seems premised on a rejection of the adherence to conventional beauty standards which 'Cool Girl' Amy had relied upon to ease her passage through the world and underscore her status as a woman with sexual and social value – while *this* Amy is the one America mourns (the image chosen to accompany news of her disappearance is one which emphasizes the fact that she is a beautiful white woman: 'a blown-up photo of Amy at her most stunning, that face that made you keep double-checking: *She can't be that good-looking, can she?*'⁴³¹), the Amy who survives and schemes in private has camouflaged herself as dowdy and timid. At her most dangerous, she is the physical antithesis of the classic *femme fatale*, whose 'sequins, shining hair, rippling silks, furs, sleek tailoring and the type of makeup that might be understood as 'grownup'⁴³² mark her out as glamorous, alluring and *visible* to the male gaze, if not actively exploiting it. Amy, with her old-fashioned glasses and mousy hair (more Rose West than Mae West), is a *femme fatale* whose subjectivity we cannot disregard or overlook, one who has shunned the sexual performativity which bestowed a modicum of power on her forebears in favour of a different kind of performativity, one which ensures that her status as an 'invisible' (unfuckable⁴³³) woman will protect her from male scrutiny. Bernadette Wegenstein has

⁴³⁰ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.250.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, p.63.

⁴³² Katherine Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale: Gender, Genre and the American Cinema* (Oxfordshire: Routledge Publishing, 2017), p.23.

⁴³³ Jessa Crispin has written about the dearth of visibly 'ugly' women in popular culture, and the concessions to the male gaze that women are expected to make in order to be seen and heard: 'There are no ugly girls, no old hags in popular culture. Every week we are supposed to pretend like Tina Fey is ugly on *30 Rock*, that America Ferrera was hideous even beneath the glasses and the braces on *Ugly Betty*, that every homely girl is a pair of contact lenses, short dress, and good haircut away from being prom queen. If that is the epitome of public ugliness, well, then the actual hags are way below the line of visibility. Women are allowed to have some power, but only if they're hot. So we have 12-year-old girls in thongs and an emphasis on perfect

written about ‘ugliness’ as a form of female resistance: ‘[ugliness is] an aesthetic category expressing a politics of female resistance that presents that Western female body as a historical site of attack and self-defense [...] this “uglified” fragmented body becomes a body that is “impenetrable” and therefore “unrapeable”’.⁴³⁴

Complicating this reading of Amy’s ‘uglified’ body as a site of feminist resistance is the misogynistic venom with which she disregards other female bodies (“I do wish she hadn’t upstaged my vigil, though – ugly girls can be such thunder stealers [...] I find ugly women are usually overly deferential or incredibly rude”⁴³⁵) – and this internalized misogyny renders her inhabitation of the *femme fatale* role rather less subversive than it might or should be. While her ingenious quest for vengeance and palpable fury with regard to the pressures of performing the role of the ‘Cool Girl’ have led some critics⁴³⁶ to herald Amy as a sort of feminist avenging angel, the fact that she perceives femininity as a game to be ‘won’ and appears wholly incapable of acknowledging the humanity of other women mark her out as something far more complicated and perhaps indicative of the extent to which the toxicity of individualism has bled into feminist ideals.

Amy also repeatedly makes reference to her darkening skin and the contrast between her new darker self and her previous, whiter form: ‘I’m tan, which I’ve never been before – at least not a dark, proud, deep tan. A tanned skin is a damaged skin, and no one likes a wrinkled girl; I spent my life slick with SPF. But I let myself darken a bit before I disappeared, and now, five days in, I’m on my way to brown’.⁴³⁷ As Amy’s skin darkens, she becomes *less* visible, bearing little resemblance to the archetype of white, middle-class

femininity that we haven’t seen in decades’. (Jessa Crispin, *Beauty and the beast: On the unacceptability of ugliness*. (2010) <<https://www.thesmartset.com/article04141001/>> [accessed 14 November 2019].)

⁴³⁴ Bernadette Wegenstein, ‘Agatha’s Breasts on a Plate: “Ugliness” as Resistance and Queerness’, in *On the Politics of Ugliness* [ed. Sara Rodrigues and Ela Przybylo] (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2018), p.277.

⁴³⁵ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), pp.258-374.

⁴³⁶ Richard Lawson, *Gone Girl, Fall’s Most Anticipated Thriller, Doesn’t Disappoint* (2014) <<https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2014/09/gone-girl-review>> [accessed 6 February 2020].

⁴³⁷ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012),p.219.

femininity which ‘Gone Girl’ Amy has become, whose narrative seems bizarrely comforting in its familiarity – *this* is the Amy that America wants to find and/or avenge, and she seems keenly aware that her changed body, ‘brown as a berry’, is one with significantly less social value, particularly in terms of the racial politics of the 24-hour news cycle, which habitually prioritises cases of missing *white* women over those involving women of colour. When she is ‘rescued’ by her old friend Desi, who secures her in lavish compound, every inch of which is under his surveillance, this becomes even more apparent – he encourages her to lose weight and revert to her blonder, *whiter* self: ‘I am almost my normal weight again, and my hair is growing out. I wear it back in a headband he brought me, and I have colored it back to my blond, thanks to hair dye he also brought me: ‘I think you will feel better about yourself when you start looking more like yourself, sweetheart,’ he says’.⁴³⁸ As a ‘brown’ (invisible) woman, Amy tests the boundaries of the *femme fatale* identity she has adopted – at her most dangerous and subversive, she embodies the troubling liminality of the *femme fatale*, particularly with regard to her race: ‘often in [noir], nondominant identities are aligned in some way, in this case, tying together the (white) *femme fatale* with racial Otherness. While the *femme fatale* herself is almost always white, she usually carries a threat of racial or ethnic mixing, while [...] breaching gender norms through her use of sexuality and violence’.⁴³⁹ Amy invokes this when she declares ‘I am the opposite of Amy’⁴⁴⁰ – this recalibrated version of her is almost literally posited as a ‘dark half’, a shadow of her former self who is imbued with an invisibility that renders her even more dangerous.

It is another woman who eventually blows her ‘invisible’ cover – Greta, a young woman with a split lip and a ‘sad, pre-owned vibe’⁴⁴¹ who is renting the cabin next to Amy.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., p.361.

⁴³⁹ ‘Film Noir’ in *Race in American Film: Voices and Visions that Shaped a Nation* [ed. Daniel Bernardi and Michael Green] (California: Greenwood Publishing, 2017), p.297.

⁴⁴⁰ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.238.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., p.262.

Having befriended Greta during her time in hiding (and reacted spitefully to her thoughts on ‘rich bitch’ Amy Dunne: ‘Greta leaves to go to the bathroom, and I tiptoe into her kitchen, go into her fridge, and spit in her milk, her orange juice, and a container of potato salad, then tiptoe back to the bed’⁴⁴²), Amy falls afoul of her and her violent boyfriend Jeff when her disguise is discovered:

‘Your glasses are fake,’ Greta says. ‘They’re just glass.’

I say nothing, stare at her, hoping she’ll back down. These two seem just nervous enough they may change their minds, say they’re screwing with me, and the three of us will laugh and know otherwise but all agree to pretend.

‘And your hair, the roots are coming in, and they’re blond, a lot prettier than whatever color you dyed it – hamster – and that haircut is awful, by the way,’ Greta says. ‘You’re hiding – from whatever. I don’t know if it really is a guy or what, but you’re not going to call the police. So just give us the money.’⁴⁴³

Amy’s status as a missing *white* woman imbues her with a certain importance, at least in terms of media coverage; Sarah Stillman has written about ‘worthy’ versus ‘unworthy’ victims and the media’s positioning of ‘white, wealthy and conventionally attractive’⁴⁴⁴ women as victims worthy of sympathy and attention, while girls and women of colour are afforded little media attention, despite being statistically far more vulnerable to violence, abduction or murder. Stillman notes that white sex workers are something of an anomaly here; referencing the 2006 Ipswich serial murders, she notes a tendency to waver between sympathy and condemnation in media victim profiles; while these women fit the ‘damsel in distress’ archetype in many ways, their status as sex workers renders them ‘deserving’ of shame and blame, according to the established hierarchy of female victimhood. A dichotomy is thus established in which these white ‘damsels in distress’ are positioned as visible and valuable, while their peers, be they working class, indigenous, or otherwise unable to fit into this mold of ideal victimhood, are invisible and *disposable* – their lives (and deaths) pushed to the margins of a global narrative on female victimhood to which they

⁴⁴² Ibid., p.266.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., p.307.

⁴⁴⁴ Sarah Stillman, ‘The Missing White Girl Syndrome’: Disappeared Women and Media Activism’, *Gender and Development*, 15.3, (2007), 491-502 (p. 491).

should be central: ‘news treatments of child abductions in the USA show a particularly glaring bias in favour of cases featuring young white females: between 2000 and 2005, 76 per cent of child abductions featured on CNN News were white children, although only 53 per cent of abductees are white [...] virtually all of the most prominent cases featured conventionally attractive females’.⁴⁴⁵

Amy is a ‘worthy’ victim – worthy of media attention and the sympathy of middle class white women who can all too easily imagine themselves meeting a similar fate, precisely because they have internalized this ‘worthy/unworthy’ binary and have begun to feed into and reproduce it. Tearful vigils are held for Amy, during which her ‘best friend’ Noelle, whom Amy secretly holds in contempt (‘the Midwest is full of these types of people: the nice-enoughs. Nice enough but with a soul made of plastic – easy to mold, easy to wipe down’⁴⁴⁶) takes centre stage. In doing so, Noelle embodies the almost cathartic process via which stories like the one Amy has constructed around herself, centred as they are on women with social value, are scrutinized, retold and internalized in a quasi-ritualistic fashion by white, middle-class women (in much the same way that Adora mourns the dead girls of Wind Gap with a gruesomely performative devotion). These women aren’t merely sympathizing but simultaneously grieving for an ideal of femininity which they crave and resent in equal measure, and resisting that ideal – this mournful collective energy is directed not just at ‘Gone Girl’ Amy, but at what she signifies – a compromised, conciliatory, tidily likeable brand of womanhood which is *worthy* of compassion; a life, and death, deserving of their grief. Stillman argues that ‘every act of seeing is an act of *not* seeing’⁴⁴⁷, and, if we may briefly return to hauntology, we may read this desire to engage with the culturally visible spectacle of the ‘Gone Girl’ as a means of keeping at bay the

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., p.492.

⁴⁴⁶ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.258.

⁴⁴⁷ Sarah Stillman, ‘The Missing White Girl Syndrome’: Disappeared Women and Media Activism’, *Gender and Development*, 15.3, (2007), 491-502 (p. 494).

spectre of the thousands of missing and murdered women who fall outside of the parameters of visibility with regard to female victimhood. In other words, their fixation on Amy is an attempt to exorcise the ghosts of these ‘marginal’ women, along with the unspoken fear that their lives, and deaths, may one day be deemed unworthy of the same level of attention.

We can draw a parallel with the ‘pity party’ in *Sharp Objects*, here – while those women gather to implicitly share their frustrations and fears with regard to the relatively limited lives they are leading, creating a space in which they can safely voice their sorrow and feelings of powerlessness, the women who fixate on Amy’s story and demand ‘justice’ for her are enacting their own catharsis, but on a broader and more public scale. Ellen Abbott, the news anchor who publicizes the story of Amy’s disappearance on a national scale, all the while fomenting her viewers, who are encouraged to believe that Nick has killed his wife, is an interesting figure in light of this. While she is a barely-disguised avatar of Nancy Grace, the host of a current affairs show (and, as of 2009, author of a series of crime novels featuring a female prosecutor) who made her name from the same sensationalized ‘campaigns for justice’ for missing and murdered women that Amy hopes to take advantage of⁴⁴⁸, on a more basic level, she is the personification of the guilt, fear, and indignation of these women, who believe that their considerable privilege should shield them from violence and victimhood, but refuse to yield ownership of the narrative surrounding those things. Amy specifically courts her attention, knowing that the story of her disappearance has all the hallmarks of a good Ellen Abbott case: a beautiful white woman, a handsome but potentially dangerous husband, and a wasted (or stolen) fortune:

⁴⁴⁸ Grace, a former prosecutor, came to prominence as a TV journalist on a CNN-affiliated network from 2005-2016 who claimed to fight for ‘victim’s rights’– her bombastic interview technique and tendency to make outlandish and unfounded accusations quickly marked her out as a controversial figure, but she drew impressive viewing numbers for her ‘investigations’, particularly when she drew attention to the ‘missing white woman’ cases that Stillman identifies as central to a false narrative of female victimhood that suggests wealthy white women are disproportionately represented among missing and murdered women. (Laura Bennett, *Fall of an Avenging Angel* (2016) <<https://slate.com/culture/2016/10/hlms-nancy-grace-goes-off-the-air-why-now.html>> [accessed 6 November 2019].)

'I adore Ellen Abbott, I love how protective and maternal she gets about all the missing women on her show, and how rabid-dog vicious she is once she seizes on a suspect, usually the husband. She is America's voice of female righteousness'.⁴⁴⁹

Amy's characterization of Ellen as the *voice* of female righteousness is spot-on – she exists as a cipher for a collective howl of outrage from the women who continually retell and retread this narrative, caught between their compulsive desire to morbidly fixate on the 'Gone Girl' and their desire to repudiate all that she, in her hollowed-out and narrow ideal of female perfection, stands for. In other words, there is something masochistic and cynical about the beatification of 'Gone Girl' Amy; the ubiquity of her story is unsettling precisely because it emphasizes the extent to which her identity is centered on what is *done to her*; she trades a lifetime of curtailed ambition and acquiescence to patriarchal ideals for a kind of posthumous revenge - in death, she is more visible than she had been in life, more special, more *worthy*, the men who sought to diminish and exploit her exposed as cruel and villainous.

The pursuit of the 'American Dream' in classic noir fiction is typically exposed as a futile endeavor. Lee Horsley explains the function of the noir thriller as follows:

The guilt represented in the noir thriller is both individual and social, and the narrative is thus both transgressive and critical. Noir is 'the voice of violation', acting to expose the inadequacy of conventional cultural, political and also narrative models. It expresses fears and anxieties but also has the potential for critique, for undermining complacency and illusions (the false promises of the American dream; the hypocrisy of the British establishment). The fact that *film noir* was created in the postwar United States is often attributed to an atmosphere in which American society 'came into a more critical focus'. More generally, the noir sensibility may come to the fore at any time of discontent and anxiety, of disillusionment with institutional structures and loss of confidence in the possibility of effective agency. The transgressions represented can be a mirror, the damaged self as an image of the society that caused the deformation or the unbalanced mind as a metaphor for society's lunacy.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁹ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.245.

⁴⁵⁰ Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp.12-13.

I would argue that Gillian Flynn, as a pioneer of the domestic noir subgenre, is participating in this tradition, specifically with regard to her depiction of the complex process of grief and identification that Amy sums up when she reflects that ‘everyone loves the Dead Girl’.⁴⁵¹ The women who publicly and collectively mourn her, including the irascible Ellen Abbott, are enamoured of a dark variation on the American Dream – one that emphasizes not ‘the pursuit of happiness’ or upward mobility, but the glorification of America’s ‘Dead Girls’. Instead of postwar America, the pursuit of this ‘dream’ takes place against the backdrop of recession and the resulting recalibration of the public/private gender divide. As mentioned in the previous section of this chapter, the global economic downturn of 2008 negatively impacted on women’s ability to work outside of the home, and a so-called ‘new domesticity’ came to the cultural fore, encouraging women to embrace unpaid labour as they had in decades past. One consequence of this move from work outside the home to domestic labour or maternal duties is the increased likelihood of women to stay in abusive marriages or partnerships, as the financial and social resources necessary to leave such relationships are more difficult to accrue when one lacks financial independence or a support network outside of the home.

A 2011 study on the impact of the recession on domestic violence services in Ireland found that ‘women [divulged] that their ability to escape domestic violence [was] hampered by the economic difficulties’.⁴⁵² A 2009 Women’s Aid report discloses that ‘women reported they were experiencing domestic violence before the recession but that the economic downturn was leading to more frequent abuse and more severe abuse. In addition, women disclosed that men were using the recession to excuse their behaviour’.⁴⁵³

⁴⁵¹ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.234.

⁴⁵² Claire Harney, ‘The Impact of the Recession on Domestic Violence Against Women and Support Services in Ireland: An Exploratory Study’, *Critical Social Thinking: Policy and Practice*, 3, (2011), 26-39 (p. 27).

⁴⁵³ Women's Aid, *Financial Abuse* (2009) <https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/financial_abuse.pdf> [accessed 8 November 2019].

One woman quoted by Women's Aid talks about how disempowered she feels in her relationship:

I really cannot quite believe how trapped I have become in the relationship. Having had my own independent means and a wide circle of friends, colleagues and family just a few years ago my world has shrunk to the four walls of the house with my two beautiful children my only company. To the outside world our family probably looks rosy and fine but; to be honest, it feels like my entire self has been eroded away and that I cannot get out or away. – Caroline, Dublin, 36.⁴⁵⁴

An American study likewise found that the economic uncertainty of the period led to an increase in men's abusive behaviour and strained the already problematic power dynamics between partners in abusive relationships:

Theoretically, male unemployment may lead to more abuse not only by increasing stress but also by undermining men's feelings of control and economic security, creating an urge to exert greater control over their partners (Melzer 2002). In contrast, women's employment has uncertain effects on their risk of being the victim of abuse. On the one hand, women's employment adds to a couple's collective resources and provides some insurance against male job loss, thus buffering some against the economic stresses of recession. Further, if women have their own source of income and the opportunity for social ties through employment, they may have more power in their relationship and a credible threat of leaving if conditions became unfavorable, which could provide protection from abuse.⁴⁵⁵

The social consequence of this escalation or increase in abuse is a devaluation of female lives and a cultural climate in which the destruction of women seems commonplace, to the extent that it becomes fodder for the news media and the basic cable movies that Sady Doyle argues are typically written off as 'silly stories for silly women'.⁴⁵⁶ These narratives, functioning as a means of processing or coming to terms with female vulnerability, tend to emphasise the beatified dead or disappeared woman, whose victimization is ultimately imbued with a significance that fundamentally erases the idea of her as a real, flawed, complex person, until she is replaced by a version of herself which has been filtered

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ Daniel Schneider, Kristen Harknett and Sara McLanahan, 'Intimate Partner Violence in the Great Recession', *Demography*, 53.2, (2016), 471-505.

⁴⁵⁶ Sady Doyle, *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers: Monstrosity, Patriarchy, and the Fear of Female Power* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2019), p.88.

through an all-too-familiar prism of female martyrdom, her rough edges made smooth.

Diary Amy taps into this when she writes about Nick's outbursts of rage:

'We're under a lot of pressure, baby,' I say. 'We've had a few bumps, and I know a lot of it is my fault. I just feel so at loose ends here ...'
 'So we're going to be one of those couples who has a kid to fix their marriage? Because that always works out so well.'
 'We'll have a baby because—'
 His eyes go dark, canine, and he grabs me by the arms again.
 'Just ... No, Amy. Not right now. I can't take one more bit of stress. I can't handle one more thing to worry about. I am cracking under the pressure. I will snap.'
 For once I know he's telling the truth.⁴⁵⁷

Although Diary Amy is a fiction created to ensure that the reader is invested in her fate, her depiction of Nick as an outwardly charming but privately aggressive misogynist is perhaps not too far off the mark; Nick, a man who despises and resents his woman-hating father, repeatedly labels the women he perceives as troublesome 'cunts', refers to his twenty-three year old mistress as 'an alien fuck-doll of a girl'⁴⁵⁸, and treats said mistress with barely-concealed contempt when he begins to fear that their relationship will come to light: 'I shook her once, hard, a tiny droplet of spit landing on her lower lip'.⁴⁵⁹ As Nick betrays his inherently misogynistic character, we come to appreciate the true genius of Amy's narrative – although her husband is not a murderer, he is a manipulative, self-pitying, short-tempered sexist, exactly the type of man most likely to commit this crime.

These 'perfect victims' are typically the kind that Stillman describes as far more likely to appeal to outside observers – they are white, attractive, middle-class, well-behaved women or girls (prominent examples include JonBenét Ramsey, mentioned in the previous section of this chapter, Natalee Holloway, Madeleine McCann, Laci Peterson and Stacy Peterson) whose misfortunes provide space for a sort of macrocosm of the 'pity party' –

⁴⁵⁷ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.188.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.146.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.240.

the white, middle-class women for whom these tragedies take on a totemic significance can publicly mourn individual victims (and in doing so, give expression to their own discontent) while electing to ignore the social reality of violence against women and girls. The marginal or invisible victims that Stillman draws our attention to (*not* white, *not* wealthy, *not* conventionally attractive, but far more likely to fall victim to this kind of violence) are thus excised from the cultural conversation surrounding female victimhood. The result is a veneer of tragic glamour and grim celebrity with which these victimized white women are perceived, the brutal reality of this violence tidied away behind a morbid romanticisation of their lives and deaths. This ‘American dream’ is less about personal success and more a celebration of unbecoming, a veneration of the ‘Gone Girl’, a woman beyond human, beyond life, and beyond criticism. When Amy reflects on the long-dead sisters who preceded her, she expresses jealousy at the ease with which they have attained the perfection she strives for every day: ‘they get to be perfect without even trying, without even facing one moment of existence’⁴⁶⁰, and this succinctly encapsulates the mindset of the women who performatively grieve ‘Diary Amy’, emotionally investing in the self-created mythos which figures like Ellen Abbott are happy to promote and profit from.

Alice Bolin’s 2018 book *Dead Girls: Essays on Surviving an American Obsession* explores this adoration of dead and destroyed women, using female pop stars as an example of deified, untouchable femininity:

Pop starlets had always been my favorites, but now they were the angels at my side, accompanying me as I made my bewildering way through the city [...] I was sure, for some reason, that these women who had achieved unthinkable success as teenagers and were worshipped for their perfect beauty would understand. It was similar, I guess, to why people buy candles with pictures of saints on them.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁶⁰ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.222.

⁴⁶¹ Alice Bolin, *Dead Girls: Essays on Surviving an American Obsession* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2018), p.102.

Her invocation of the iconography of saints is apt, as the glossy impenetrability of these images is key to their appeal, in the same way that the carefully cultivated images of missing and murdered white women are designed to implicitly emphasise their virtuousness by emphasizing their attractiveness and youth. Katherine Morton has written about the framing of missing and murdered indigenous women via ‘missing’ posters, noting that these women are rarely, if ever, framed as ‘worthy’ victims – the images chosen for these posters are often mugshots, the use of which reinforces the notion that these women are less pure or deserving of rescue than their white counterparts: ‘mugshots demonstrate ugliness in that they set these women apart [...] they are law breakers and therefore categorically outside of the social expectations of mainstream citizens. This outsider status is stacked on top of racial and gendered othering, resulting in [murdered and missing indigenous women] being distanced from the acceptable victim of violence, deserving of sympathy’.⁴⁶²

The image of Amy, beamed into millions of American homes via 24/7 cable news, takes on a significance beyond that of its initial function (to encourage people to report potential sightings) and becomes part of ‘the apotheosis of Amy’.⁴⁶³ As various childhood friends and neighbours are invited to share their memories of Amy, each more fawning than the last, Flynn underscores the artificiality of ‘Dead Girl’ Amy, intercutting their reflections on a thoughtful, benevolent, ‘worthy’ victim with ‘Real Amy’s cutting observations:

Campbell MacIntosh, childhood friend: ‘Amy is just a nurturing, motherly type of woman. She loved being a wife. And I know she would have been a great mother. But Nick – you just knew Nick was wrong somehow. Cold and aloof and really calculating – you got the feeling that he was definitely aware of how much money Amy had.’

⁴⁶² Katherine Morton, ‘Ugliness as Colonial Violence: Mediations of Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women’, in *On the Politics of Ugliness* [ed. Sara Rodrigues and Ela Przybylo] (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2018), p.277.

⁴⁶³ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.266.

(Campbell is lying: She got all googly around Nick, she absolutely adored him. But I'm sure she liked the idea that he only married me for my money.)

Shawna Kelly North, Carthage resident: 'I found it really, really strange how totally unconcerned he was at the search for his wife. He was just, you know, chatting, passing the time. Flirting around with me, who he didn't know from Adam. I'd try to turn the conversation to Amy, and he would just – just no interest.'

(I'm sure this desperate old slut absolutely did not try to turn the conversation toward me.)⁴⁶⁴

The narrative that Amy has created to bolster sympathy and subsequently cast Nick into the worst light possible begins to take on a life of its own, as the allure of the 'perfect victim' supersedes any desire to engage with the reality of the case, or, in a larger context, the reality of female victimization. Bolin argues that 'Dead Girls help us work out our complicated feelings about the privileged status of white women in our culture. The paradox of the perfect victim, effacing the deaths of leagues of nonwhite or poor or ugly or disabled or immigrant [...] victims, encapsulates the combination of worshipful covetousness and violent rage that drives the Dead Girl show'.⁴⁶⁵

Marketing for the film adaptation of *Gone Girl* deliberately played on this paradoxical fascination with the sanctified image of the missing/murdered woman; director David Fincher shot a cover for *Entertainment Weekly* featuring the two leads – as Amy (Rosamund Pike) lies prone on an autopsy table, dressed in white, her blonde hair haloed around her pale but subtly made-up face, Nick (Ben Affleck) curls his (living) body around hers, cradling her head in a posture of adoration. A tray of surgical instruments sits to the side, reminding us that Amy will soon be cut open, exposed and explored. The image incisively captures the cultish fascination with a heavily filtered brand of female victimhood which provides the basis for Amy's revenge. Much of the promotional material foregrounds Amy's vulnerability – the DVD cover features a distraught-looking Nick standing alone as headlines about Amy's disappearance scroll past and her face, superimposed over the

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., p.266.

⁴⁶⁵ Alice Bolin, *Dead Girls: Essays on Surviving an American Obsession* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2018), p.22.

image, serves to remind us of the apparent ephemerality of her physical presence in the narrative. Bolin writes that in the ‘Dead girl show’ (some examples she chooses include *True Detective*, *Twin Peaks*, *Pretty Little Liars*, and *Top of the Lake*), ‘the Dead Girl is not a “character” in the show, but rather the memory of her is’.⁴⁶⁶ In the ‘Dead Girl show’, then, narrative control is rarely, if ever, granted to the victimized woman – instead, her remains (either physical or spiritual) inspire fascination or worship.

There is no opportunity for the subjectivity of the living woman to intrude on this celebration of the ‘Dead Girl’. We see Amy become frustrated when her story begins to turn into a ‘Dead Girl show’ while she is held captive by Desi and forced into a performance of gratitude as he blackmails her into being his own personal ‘Cool Girl’: “Look at you,” he’ll say, tucking my hair behind my ears the way he likes it, unbuttoning my shirt one notch and loosening it at the neck so he can look at the hollow of my clavicle. He puts a finger in the little indentation, filling the gap. It is obscene. ‘How can Nick have hurt you, have not loved you, have cheated on you?’ He continually hits these points, verbally poking a bruise’.⁴⁶⁷ In her attempts to reclaim some control over her life (and death) by transforming herself into the perfect victim, Amy has failed to account for the sheer devotion of the legions of people who have become psychologically and emotionally invested in the ‘Gone Girl’ – in a sense, they don’t *want* her back; they don’t want the narrative of the ‘Dead Girl’ (created by Amy, but no longer truly in her control) to be interrupted by the living woman. She manages to maintain her ‘perfect victim’ image by shaping herself into the mold of ‘survivor’: ‘every day I get calls to tell my story. My story: mine, mine, mine. I just need to pick the very best deal and start writing. I just need to get Nick on the same page so that we both agree how this story will end. Happily’.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., p.14.

⁴⁶⁷ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.361.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., p.400.

‘You’re not a scared little girl’⁴⁶⁹: The Persistence of Girlhood and Amy as the first ‘girl’ of domestic noir

This section will look at the use of the word ‘girl’ as a domestic noir marketing strategy and at the idea of ‘girlhood’ as explored in *Gone Girl* specifically. The success of *Gone Girl* gave rise to a number of similarly named successors⁴⁷⁰ (among them *The Girl on the Train*, Mary Kubica’s *The Good Girl* and Jessica Knoll’s 2015 novel *Luckiest Girl Alive*). The ‘girls’ of these novels are invariably *women* (in 2016, author Emily St. John Mandel charted the rise of ‘girl’-titled books, finding that ‘in many cases, the “girl” in the title is actually not an adolescent or child. St. John Mandel discovered that 65% of the time, the “girl” was in fact a woman, and only 28% of time the character was a “girl” (7% was indeterminate). St. John Mandel was fascinated by this discrepancy, and according to her editor Jennifer Jackson at Knopf, the distinction of “girl” rather than “woman” potentially ‘hints at a vulnerability that raises the stakes’.⁴⁷¹), usually in their mid to late thirties. The fact that they are paratextually framed as ‘girls’ is indicative of a desire to use these narratives to explore or reframe ‘girlhood’ as a cultural phenomenon, and Flynn is at the forefront of that. While some critics have questioned the implicit infantilization of the women at the centre of these novels⁴⁷², the assumption that the suggestion of girlhood is intrinsically disempowering belies the incisive exploration of the dichotomy between ‘girl’ and ‘woman’ that many of these novels achieve. Domestic

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., p.373.

⁴⁷⁰ Perrie Samotin, *Every Book That’s Been Called ‘The New Gone Girl’* (2015) <<https://stylecaster.com/the-new-gone-girl-books/>> [accessed 2 December 2019].

⁴⁷¹ Emily St. John Mandel, *The Gone Girl With The Dragon Tattoo On The Train* (2016) <<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-gone-girl-with-the-dragon-tattoo-on-the-train/>> [accessed 17 December 2019].

⁴⁷² Author Steph Post has criticised the popularity of ‘girl’ titled books featuring women, arguing that the female characters propelling these narratives are diminished by the designation ‘girl’: ‘Most of the female characters in any *Girl* book are women. They are adults, not children. They are usually strong, intelligent, capable and over the age of eighteen. They are often badasses in their own right, and why we feel the need to infantilize these characters is beyond me’. (Steph Post, *Give the Girl a Name, Already!* (2017) <<https://litreactor.com/columns/give-the-girl-a-name-already>> [accessed 6 January 2020].)

noir fiction typically dwells on the disenfranchisement of women for whom the (often literal) trappings of marriage and domesticity prove existentially suffocating, and it is this disenfranchisement that renders their regression (if indeed it *is* regression) to girlhood particularly interesting.

Throughout *Gone Girl*, Amy, whose own girlhood was mirrored by her literary alter-ego ‘Amazing Amy’ even follows her into adulthood and gets married first: ‘yes, for book twenty, Amazing Amy is getting married! Wheeeeeee. No one cares. No one wanted Amazing Amy to grow up, least of all me. Leave her in kneesocks and hair ribbons and let me grow up, unencumbered by my literary alter ego, my paperbound better half, the me I was supposed to be’.⁴⁷³ struggles to break the habit of identifying herself as a ‘girl’, unlike most of the female protagonists of similarly-titled domestic noir novels. *The Girl on the Train*’s Rachel even bemoans the fact that ‘I am not the girl I used to be’⁴⁷⁴, focusing specifically on what she has lost – a stable home, her successful husband, and her youthful good looks.

The construction of ‘girlhood’, particularly a girlhood that is extended to encapsulate the female protagonists of domestic noir, most of whom are in their thirties or forties, is particularly interesting when contextualised with regard to Amy’s precarious economic status and her failure to attain markers of successful ‘womanhood’ (i.e. children, a stable home and a successful marriage). Amy’s parents, both child psychologists, have habitually used her fictional counterpart as a means of passive-aggressively critiquing her life choices:

My parents have always worried that I’d take *Amy* too personally – they always tell me not to read too much into her. And yet I can’t fail to notice that whenever I screw something up, Amy does it right: When I finally quit violin at age twelve, Amy was revealed as a prodigy in the next book. (“Sheesh, violin can be hard work, but hard work is the only way to get better!”) When I blew off the junior tennis championship at age sixteen to do a beach weekend with friends, Amy recommitted to the game. (“Sheesh, I know it’s fun to spend

⁴⁷³ Ibid., p.25.

⁴⁷⁴ Paula Hawkins, *The Girl on the Train* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2015), p.111.

time with friends, but I'd be letting myself and everyone else down if I didn't show up for the tournament.)⁴⁷⁵

This version of Amy is a perpetual, unaging 'girl', and the fact that 'Real Amy', who claims to regard 'Amazing Amy' as ridiculous, still consciously categorises herself according to modes of 'girlhood', implies that she has struggled to establish an identity that is not tied to the fictional girlhood that has dogged her steps for decades. As mentioned in the previous section, financial woes drive Amy and Nick to rural Missouri, and Amy is expected to inhabit a domestic role that she resents – in the wake of the global recession, her labour is repositioned from public to private.

'Amazing Amy' has proven not a blueprint for Real Amy's actual success, but an insipid embodiment of perfection that has distorted her sense of self and her ability to view the world outside of the parameters of competition – if Amy is a victim of the neoliberal impetus to be a woman who 'has it all', her dilemma is compounded by her inability to live up to the impossible standard set by her inescapable fictional shadow. Rebecca Traister's 2016 book *All the Single Ladies: Unmarried Women and the Rise of an Independent Nation* explores the inevitable anticlimax of watching 'girl' heroines become 'women', even invoking Jane Eyre, one of the most well-known forebears of the contemporary domestic noir protagonist:

Oh, smart, resourceful, sad Jane. Her prize, readers, after a youth of fighting for some smidgeon of autonomy? Marrying *him*: the bad-tempered guy who kept his first wife in the attic [...] paths that were once wide and dotted with naughty friends and conspiratorial sisters and malevolent cousins, with scrapes and adventures and hopes and passions, had narrowed and now seemed to lead only to the tending of dull husbands and the rearing of insipid children to whom the stories would be turned over.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷⁵ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.25.

⁴⁷⁶ Rebecca Traister, *All the Single Ladies: Unmarried Women and the Rise of an Independent Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), p.2.

The notion that girlhood exists in diametric opposition to the spiritually stifling demands of domesticity and marriage is something that I will explore in this section, specifically the extent to which the ‘girls’ of domestic noir fiction (and Amy in particular) challenge or uphold this notion. The protagonists of these novels are typically unhappy or disappointed with married life and/or motherhood, but remain trapped in a perennial cycle of regret and a desire to regress to the relative freedom of ‘girlhood’, a time when the weight of those marital and maternal responsibilities seemed potentially romantic or desirable. Robin Wasserman, author of *Girls on Fire*, a 2016 novel centered on an intense friendship between two teenage girls, has written about the phenomenon of ‘girl’ books, arguing that these narratives explore the loss of ‘girlhood’ and what it means to attempt a reclamation of that identity:

If there is a thematic message encoded in the “girl” narratives, I think this is its key: the transition from girlhood to womanhood, from being someone to being someone’s wife, someone’s mother. *Girl* attunes us to what might be gained and lost in the transformation, and raises a possibility of reversion. To be called “just a girl” may be diminishment, but to call yourself “still a girl,” can be empowerment, laying claim to the unencumbered liberties of youth. As Gloria Steinem likes to remind us, women lose power as they age. The persistence of girlhood can be a battle cry.⁴⁷⁷

Robin Wasserman has described this impulse as a response to the fundamental erasure of self that so often accompanies the attainment of those traditionally ‘feminine’ roles: ‘their protagonists lead double lives, an ever-widening gap between the woman they present to the world and the girl hiding within. Despite being domestic thrillers about marriage and motherhood, the *girl* books tend not to actually depict domestic life—instead, they track various escapes from it. These are women in flight or exile from the trappings of womanhood’.⁴⁷⁸ In other words, one of the central conflicts driving many of these narratives is the conflict between the self-as-‘woman’ (whose identity has been eroded by

⁴⁷⁷ Robin Wasserman, *What Does It Mean When We Call Women Girls?* (2016) <<https://lithub.com/what-does-it-mean-when-we-call-women-girls/>> [accessed 3 January 2020].

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.

the cultural demands of motherhood and marriage, something Amy herself references when she notes that women exist to ‘clean and bleed’⁴⁷⁹) and the self-as-‘girl’, with all of the liberating potential that that identity encapsulates. To reclaim a kind of ‘girlhood’ is an act of gendered rebellion, a push back against the notion that their only function is to tend to husbands and children; as a ‘girl’, Amy embraces her own complexity and agency, choosing to act upon the world rather than be acted upon.

Wasserman quotes disgraced comedian Louis C.K, whose description of the girl/woman dichotomy inadvertently sums up the vision of womanhood from which these ‘girl’-women are so keen to escape: ‘[22-year old girls] might say, I’m 22, I’m totally a woman... Not to me, sorry. To me you’re not a woman until you’ve had a couple of kids and your life is in the toilet... when you become a woman is when people come out of your vagina and step on your dreams’.⁴⁸⁰ The rebellion embraced by characters like Amy is one aimed at a destabilisation of this crude, reductive binary, a rejoinder to the concept of girlhood as finite and fleeting: ‘the *girl* books crowding the nonfiction shelf are written by and about women who insist on sticking to that wide path, women who refuse to Jo March themselves into a supporting role in their own life: girlhood as a state of mind’.⁴⁸¹ Wasserman’s invocation of Jo March is amusing, considering she is one of the protagonists of a book centring on adolescent girls but titled *Little Women* – a nineteenth century inversion of the ‘girl’ phenomenon!

Wasserman quotes C.K. again when considering the often-violent eruptions of self at the heart of these novels: ‘there’s a difference between girls and women and it’s not about age. There’s a reason that they call it *Girls Gone Wild*. You notice, there’s no *Women Gone Wild*—cause no one would fucking buy the *Wild Women* DVD. Because when girls go wild,

⁴⁷⁹ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.233.

⁴⁸⁰ Robin Wasserman, *What Does It Mean When We Call Women Girls?* (2016) <<https://lithub.com/what-does-it-mean-when-we-call-women-girls/>> [accessed 3 January 2020].

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*

they show their tits to people. When women go wild, they kill men, and drown their kids in a tub. That's what wild women do'.⁴⁸² While this is another crude description of the perceived differences between 'girl' and 'woman', it does rather succinctly illustrate the psychological and emotional fissures evident in domestic noir heroines like Amy. The confines of the brand of 'womanhood' they have found themselves living (the very confines described by Betty Friedan in 1963: 'the image of the American woman as a changing, growing individual in a changing world was shattered. Her solo flight to find her own identity was forgotten in the rush for the security of togetherness. Her limitless world shrunk to the cozy walls of home'⁴⁸³ that had begun to narrow yet again in the wake of the global recession, as mentioned earlier in this chapter) are so far removed from the concept of 'girlhood', as understood and shaped by patriarchal norms (marked by the same faux-sexual liberation that *Sharp Object's* Amma and her friends are expected to perform) that their sense of self has worn away, leaving a rather formless desire to find liberation in a return to or reclamation of girlhood.

The 'girlhood' embraced by Amy and her literary peers, however, is not the same girlhood imagined into reality by patriarchy and neoliberalism, a 'girlhood' described by Ruth Saxton as a trap of faux-empowerment: 'told she can do anything and become anything, she is also infantilised and expected to keep to her second place in a patriarchal world of glass ceilings and second shifts'.⁴⁸⁴ While the girls of *Sharp Objects* are attempting to break out of this trap by subverting its rules, with limited success, the 'girl' at the heart of *Gone Girl* challenges the girl/woman binary itself; while her rebellion has all of the hallmarks of what Louis C.K. describes as *Women Gone Wild* (she inflicts violence on herself and others, taking pride in transforming the domestic space, crucible of her

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1974), p.38.

⁴⁸⁴ Ruth Saxton, *The Girl: Constructions of the Girl in Contemporary Fiction by Women* [ed. Ruth Saxton] (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), p. xxi.

subjugation, into an abattoir), she revels in her newfound *girlhood*. Freed of the domestic and marital ties that have chipped away at her selfhood, (for which she blames both her husband and her parents: ‘my ‘feminist’ parents let Nick bundle me off to Missouri like I was some piece of chattel, some mail-order bride, some property exchange. Gave me a fucking cuckoo clock to remember them by. *Thanks for thirty-six years of service!* They deserve to think I’m dead, because that’s practically the state they consigned me to: no money, no home, no friends [...] my independence, my pride, my esteem. I gave, and he took and took. He Giving Treed me out of existence⁴⁸⁵) she remakes herself in the image of a girl – not one bound by the infantilising and contradictory social demands mentioned above, but something far more interesting, and far more dangerous.

As a self-identifying ‘girl’, she is free to rewrite the rules of both girlhood and womanhood, challenging the aforementioned dichotomy in a way that’s transformative and *genuinely* empowering, in the sense that it provides space for her to enact control over her life and (performative) death. Patricia Pearson has written about the cultural impulse to repudiate or minimise female violence (particularly female violence in the domestic sphere), arguing that the only way we can come to terms with a woman who kills her husband or her children is by minimising the agency of the act:

What a society perceives about violence has less to do with a fixed reality than the lenses we are given through which to see [...] the sole explanation offered up by criminologists for violence committed by a woman is that it is involuntary, the rare result of provocation or mental illness, as if half the population of the globe consisted of saintly stoics who never succumbed to fury, frustration, or greed.⁴⁸⁶

In light of this statement, let’s revisit Louis C.K.’s observation on ‘wild women’ who ‘kill men, and drown their kids in a tub’ – the women who commit these acts, according to this

⁴⁸⁵ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.25.

⁴⁸⁶ Patricia Pearson, *When She Was Bad: Violent Women and the Myth of Innocence* (London: Virago Press, 1999), pp.6-7.

worldview, are acting outside of the borders of rationality. They are *out of control*, and thus their behaviour cannot be perceived as a fully autonomous choice. True crime narratives often reinforce this narrative; *Snapped: Women Who Kill*, a popular true crime docuseries, concerns itself with the question of what ‘drives’ women to kill:

Who are these women and what drives them to kill? *Snapped* profiles the fascinating cases of women accused of murder. Did they really do it? And, if they did, why? Whether the motivation was revenge against a cheating husband, the promise of a hefty insurance payoff, or putting an end to years of abuse, the reasons are as varied as the women themselves. From socialites to secretaries, female killers share one thing in common: at some point, they all just...*Snapped*.⁴⁸⁷

The distinction between this description of women ‘pushed’ into violence by circumstance or victimhood and the language used to describe violent men is stark; as the second chapter of this thesis notes, male violence is typically invested with an almost mythological or divine agency – there is rarely any question of what ameliorating factors might have ‘pushed’ the likes of Ted Bundy or Peter Sutcliffe to commit their crimes. Rather, there is an assumption that, terrible as their actions are, they were carried out with purpose and a terrible clarity. Lisa Downing has written about the idealisation and idolisation of male serial killers, noting that:

This idealisation of the murdering subject needs to be understood in gendered terms [...] analyses of this kind might notice which category of person (male) may “legitimately” occupy the role of killer, and which category of person (female) is more generally relegated the role of victim in our culture. Female murderers, by extension, become doubly aberrant exceptions in this culture, unable to access the role of transcendental agency since, as Simone de Beauvoir made clear in 1949, only men are allowed to be transcendent, while women are immanent.⁴⁸⁸

In other words, male killers are *special* in their terribleness; they inspire awe, while female killers can only be understood within the already established parameters of female

⁴⁸⁷ Crime Scene Investigation, *Snapped* (2020) <<https://www.crimeandinvestigation.co.uk/shows/snapped>> [accessed 12 January 2020].

⁴⁸⁸ Lisa Downing, *The Subject of Murder: Gender, Exceptionality and the Modern Killer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p.2.

victimhood – we explain them using words like ‘snapped’, ‘broken’, ‘pushed’, or ‘forced’. According to this paradigm, a woman may not legitimately occupy the role of murderous agent, because her agency is intrinsically linked to those (male) individuals who act *upon* her, ‘pushing’ her toward violence. I contend that the reclamation of girlhood mentioned above, apparent in much of domestic noir fiction, is a challenge to this paradigm, a reconfiguration of the ‘snapped’ woman into something else. The first chapter of this thesis mentioned the *fille fatale* in relation to *Sharp Objects*, and this chapter has touched on the reconception of the *femme fatale* embodied by Amy – it may be fair to say that this reconception comprises a marriage of ‘fille’ and ‘femme’, a bloody challenge to the notion that women are dutiful and compliant (unless pushed to the edge), while girls are sexy, frivolous, and harmless.

In disturbing this girl/woman binary, our domestic noir heroines subvert the aforementioned ‘rules’ of female violence. While Amy thinks of Nick’s infidelity as a turning point of sorts, an unforgivable betrayal of her trust and their marital commitment, she plots her revenge with undeniable glee, and the reader is left with the impression that orchestrating her own disappearance and Nick’s arrest is the most fun she’s had in years:

Seven years of diary entries, not every day, but twice monthly, at least. Do you know how much discipline that takes? Would Cool Girl Amy be able to do that? To research each week’s current events, to cross-consult with my old daily planners to make sure I forgot nothing important, then to reconstruct how Diary Amy would react to each event? It was fun, mostly. I’d wait for Nick to leave for The Bar, or to go meet his mistress, the ever-texting, gum-chewing, vapid mistress with her acrylic nails and the sweatpants with logos across the butt (she isn’t like this, exactly, but she might as well be), and I’d pour some coffee or open a bottle of wine, pick one of my thirty-two different pens, and rewrite my life a little.⁴⁸⁹

Wasserman describes the domestic noir heroine as ‘imagining themselves into marriage or out of it; for them, *girlhood* functions as hell and salvation, pathology and refuge, wound

⁴⁸⁹ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.237.

and weapon, all at once'.⁴⁹⁰ This reimagined or reclaimed *girlhood* is a space in which the multiplicity of female identity can be unpacked and the symbolic parameters of victimhood breached, if only momentarily. While hiding out following her disappearance, Amy remarks that she and Greta have begun to 'drift': 'but I'm learning to drift, and I do it quite well. I am overachieving at aimlessness, I am a type-A, alpha-girl lollygagger, the leader of a gang of heartbroken kids, running wild across this lonely strip of amusements, each of us smarting from the betrayals of a loved one'.⁴⁹¹ The use of 'drift' is interesting here in terms of the reclamation of girlhood that this chapter examines – while she is referring to her increased capacity to 'do nothing' and relax into her dearth of domestic responsibilities, she is also gesturing to the *existential* drift that she has undergone, referring to herself and Greta, a woman who has evidently recently escaped an abusive relationship, as 'kids'.

Having broken free from womanhood and the domestic sphere (the motel where they both find refuge is named 'Hide-A-Way' and is comprised of discrete cabins seemingly designed for single men: 'I spent about \$500 on items to nice-up my cabin – good sheets, a decent lamp, towels that don't stand up by themselves from years of bleaching'⁴⁹²), they are remaking themselves using the 'girl' blueprint – this is not a performance of girlhood designed to please or pacify the men around them (see Amy's 'Cool Girl' speech, mentioned above), nor a pretence of frivolity or sexual naivete, the likes of which we have come to expect from portrayals of girlhood in popular culture. Brenda Boudreau has written that 'the adolescent girl's body is socially contained within a femininity script in which she experiences her own sexual desire as 'bad''⁴⁹³, and this succinctly encapsulates the kind of girlhood that young women are 'allowed' to perform or exist within. For all

⁴⁹⁰ Robin Wasserman, *What Does It Mean When We Call Women Girls?* (2016) <<https://lithub.com/what-does-it-mean-when-we-call-women-girls/>> [accessed 3 January 2020].

⁴⁹¹ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.280.

⁴⁹² Ibid., p.247.

⁴⁹³ Brenda Boudreau, 'The Battleground of the Adolescent Girl's Body', published in *The Girl: Constructions of the Girl in Contemporary Fiction by Women* [ed. Ruth Saxton] (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), p.50.

that they may be encouraged to believe in ‘girl power’ (a social movement explained in more detail in the first chapter of this thesis), tolerance for expressions of genuine autonomy or free thinking from young women is limited.⁴⁹⁴ The only kind of ‘girlhood’ that is considered acceptable or valid, according to what Boudreau calls this ‘femininity script’, is one that walks a fine line between innocence and experience – a girl may have sexual desires, but must only acknowledge them as shameful and inappropriate, even as the men around her attempt to take control of her sexuality and shape it into something manageable and patriarchally pleasing. In other words, her bodily autonomy is co-opted in order to neutralise any threat she might pose to the authority of the men who seek to contain her inside this limited imagining of ‘girlhood’. The established dichotomy between this ‘girlhood’ and the kind of ‘womanhood’ that Amy and her peers struggle to break free from becomes a means of suppressing the complexity of femininity, and the result is a culture in which women must ‘snap’ in order to break the binary. Amy’s escape from a life where she is expected simply to ‘clean and bleed’⁴⁹⁵ is testament to the artificiality of this binary.

Wasserman says that ‘the persistence of girlhood can be a battle cry’⁴⁹⁶, and we may certainly interpret the ‘girling’ of domestic noir heroines as a literary riposte to the

⁴⁹⁴ Much has been written about teen climate change activist Greta Thunberg and the extent to which she unsettles older male critics; Thunberg is a seventeen-year-old girl whose campaign to raise awareness of the disastrous effects of climate change has earned her a considerable number of adult detractors, many of whom are sure that she has been conditioned or manipulated by the adults around her: ‘this is an abusive situation and this child does not even realize it. She is being failed by the adults around her and used by others’. (Erick Erickson, *The Left’s Abusive Use of Greta Thunberg* (2019) <<https://theresurgent.com/2019/08/30/the-lefts-abusive-use-of-greta-thunberg/>> [accessed 19 January 2020].) These criticisms exemplify the discomfort with which adults, particularly men, approach the gap between a patriarchally-constructed fantasy of ‘girlhood’ and a living, breathing, politically active girl. Her refusal to be contained by the limitations of this prescribed role is precisely what makes her so threatening. Teenage girls are ‘constantly told to be quiet, be small and meek and always complacent, and stay out of the way – it’s a lot. Their argot is maligned, their speaking habits policed, their manner of dress demeaned and insulted as *vanity*, and their interests automatically deemed shallow, frivolous, and intellectually deficient by their mere association with them’. (Liz Elting, *Greta Thunberg and the Secret Power of Teen Girls* (2019) <<https://www.swaay.com/greta-thunberg>> [accessed 21 January 2020].)

⁴⁹⁵ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.233.

⁴⁹⁶ Robin Wasserman, *What Does It Mean When We Call Women Girls?* (2016) <<https://lithub.com/what-does-it-mean-when-we-call-women-girls/>> [accessed 3 January 2020].

‘girl/woman’ dualism which shapes cultural understandings of femininity. Rather than women who have simply ‘snapped’, they are women choosing to reclaim and revel in their own complexity, and in doing so challenging the cultural concept of ‘girlhood’ as trivial and insignificant. Amy even returns to her teenage boyfriend, Desi, a man who makes no secret of the fact that the version of Amy he prefers is ‘Amy circa 1987’⁴⁹⁷; in other words, a teenage version of Amy, over whom he believes he can exert control. Desi *should* be aware, however, that even as a ‘girl’, Amy was manipulative and untrustworthy; while they were at boarding school, they had a relationship that ended when ‘she began to find him alarming: He talked as if they were engaged, he knew the number and gender of their children. They were going to have four kids, all boys. Which sounded suspiciously like Desi’s own family, and when he brought his mother down to meet her, Amy grew queasy at the striking resemblance between herself and Mrs Collings’.⁴⁹⁸

The reliability of Amy’s stories is, of course, questionable, and it quickly becomes apparent that her description of Desi as a stalker who has spent years harassing her is another of her self-serving fabrications. In the present day, however, he does enjoy keeping her in a gilded cage and reimagining her as the girl he once knew. Amy encourages this, telling him a story designed to evoke the tedium and drabness of the ‘womanhood’ from which he thinks he has rescued her: ‘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, fear and betrayal, parental apathy, isolation’.⁴⁹⁹ Desi isn’t interested in cohabiting with this woman (he makes little effort to disguise his disgust at this older, heavier, darker Amy); he wants a *girl*, someone pliable and naïve. And while Amy has gone to great lengths to break away from her self-as-‘woman’, she has no intention of inhabiting the submissive role he imagines for her. She

⁴⁹⁷ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p.361.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.82.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.325.

physically re-inhabits this idealised version of herself in order to sexually validate Desi and exploits his vulnerability to kill him. Once again, she demonstrates the adaptability and depth of female identity which men like Desi and Nick seem determined to ignore or quash. While she does, ultimately, return to her domestic role and become a mother (the very antithesis of a 'girl', at least according to Louis C.K.), the ease with which she has broken that binary indicates that she is no longer beholden to its reductive classification.

In conclusion, while the use of the descriptor 'girl' to categorise the women of domestic noir fiction has drawn criticisms of belittlement and infantilization, it can be a means of transforming these narrative spaces into explorations of femininity in all of its complexity, with the designated binary between 'girl' and 'woman' deconstructed in service of a broader representation of female existence. The beginning of this chapter notes that *Gone Girl* is indicative of a creative 'push forward' for Flynn and has been fundamental in carving out a canonical space for the subgenre. My examination of the extent to which she unpacks and reimagines the experience of femaleness, within the context of crime fiction and within a larger societal context, demonstrates that in doing so she has helped make space within the canon of 'feminist' crime fiction for domestic noir.

Conclusion

In February 2020, writer Barry Forshaw observed that ‘within the world of crime fiction, it’s clear that the multi-headed Cerberus of psychological crime and domestic noir (in which the home is full of dangerous secrets) is still top dog’.⁵⁰⁰ As readers turn to crime fiction for comfort during a global pandemic⁵⁰¹, the irony of a subgenre that foregrounds the home as a site of violence or existential disintegration maintaining popularity is worth noting. In 2019, the cultural juggernaut of domestic noir showed no signs of slowing or stopping, with the acclaimed TV adaptation of Liane Moriarty’s *Big Little Lies* producing a successful second season⁵⁰² starring Reese Witherspoon (whose book club and production company have proven consistently influential with regard to the promotion of domestic noir narratives like *Gone Girl*, Liv Constantine’s *The Last Mrs. Parrish*, and Jessica Knoll’s *Luckiest Girl Alive*⁵⁰³) and Oscar winner Meryl Streep, while novels like Harriet Tyce’s *Blood Orange* (2019), Samantha Downing’s *My Lovely Wife* (2019), and Allison Dickson’s *The Other Mrs. Miller* (2019) proved commercially and critically successful. *Blood Orange* was chosen for the Richard and Judy Book Club, the film rights to *My Lovely Wife* have been sold to Nicole Kidman’s production company Blossom Films⁵⁰⁴, and *The Other Mrs. Miller* has also been optioned for a TV adaptation.

⁵⁰⁰ Barry Forshaw, *The best in new crime fiction — the depths of domestic noir* (2020)

<<https://www.ft.com/content/1015f538-35fe-11ea-ac3c-f68c10993b04>> [accessed 7 May 2020].

⁵⁰¹ According to the Bookseller’s managing editor, Tom Tivnan ‘there is something about the classic crime structure that can provide solace during times of uncertainty’. (Heloise Wood, *The books that could flourish in this pandemic era* (2020) <<http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20200506-the-books-that-might-flourish-in-this-time-of-crisis>> [accessed 8 May 2020].) <<http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20200506-the-books-that-might-flourish-in-this-time-of-crisis>> [accessed 8 May 2020].)

⁵⁰² Josef Adalian, *The Big Little Lies Finale Broke the Show’s Own Ratings Record* (2019)

<<https://www.vulture.com/2019/07/big-little-lies-finale-ratings-record.html>> [accessed 10 May 2020].

⁵⁰³ Constance Grady, *How Reese Witherspoon became the new high priestess of book clubs* (2019)

<<https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/9/13/20802579/reese-witherspoon-reeses-book-club-oprah>> [accessed 6 May 2020].

⁵⁰⁴ Mike Fleming Jr., *Amazon Studios Acquires For Nicole Kidman’s Blossom Films Samantha Downing’s Bestseller ‘My Lovely Wife’* (2020) <<https://deadline.com/2020/02/my-lovely-wife-movie-deal-nicole-kidman-amazon-studios-blossom-films-samantha-downing-bestseller-1202870547/>> [accessed 14 July 2020].

The cultural impact of Flynn's work is visible in these novels, both in terms of content (they largely follow the narrative and thematic template of 'domestic noir' that she has helped create and establish) and paratext; promotional material for the contemporary domestic noir novel frequently makes reference to Flynn's work in general and *Gone Girl* in particular. Novels like *My Lovely Wife* ('Dexter meets *Gone Girl*' – appendix image 1), Jessica Knoll's *Luckiest Girl Alive* ('with the cunning and verve of Gillian Flynn' – appendix image 2), Greer Hendricks and Sarah Pekkanen's *The Wife Between Us* ('fiendishly clever... in the vein of *Gone Girl*' – appendix image 3), and Mary Kubica's *The Good Girl* ('fans of *Gone Girl* will embrace this equally evocative tale' – appendix image 4) have benefitted from this generic association, something that Bernice Murphy has identified as a key component in the cultural construction of popular literature: '[works of popular literature] tend to have their generic identity clearly identified in the blurb and other marketing materials (e.g. 'A heart-stopping thriller in the tradition of *The Silence of the Lambs*'). Interestingly, our expectations and prior familiarity with plot elements, themes or tropes do not interfere with our enjoyment of the text (unless it fails to engage or satisfy us for some reason)'.⁵⁰⁵ She has spoken about her role as a trailblazer of sorts for the genre: 'You always have to have that one in any genre, in any type of character in a book or a piece of fiction. Once you get the one that proves your theory incorrect, then it opens the doors for so much more,' Flynn explained. 'There've been so many interesting books since then that I think maybe got a chance to be sold and to be properly marketed because people were thinking, 'Well, *Gone Girl*'... It's about giving other writers a chance.'⁵⁰⁶ Such comments are indicative of the self-awareness with which she has helped construct a subgenre that has illuminated and explored the limitations of female characterization within the crime genre,

⁵⁰⁵ Bernice Murphy, introduction to *Key Concepts in Contemporary Popular Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), p.5.

⁵⁰⁶ Lexy Perez, *Gillian Flynn Reflects on 'Gone Girl' Legacy and the Growing Appetite for Anti-Heroines in Books* (2019) <<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/gillian-flynn-reflects-gone-girl-legacy-rise-anti-heroines-1260003>> [accessed 13 May 2020].

and provided an opportunity for (mostly female) writers to test those limitations with complex, often unlikeable protagonists. In late 2019, she reflected on the cultural response to *Gone Girl*, and to the character of Amy in particular:

“What made me happiest about *Gone Girl* is when I was writing the Amy part, it was coming from my belly. Like I felt that character very strongly,” Flynn said. “What I’m thrilled about is that it reminded people that, yes, there is a goddamn appetite for women who are not saints; who are bad, but deliciously so — but [also] you still can kind of believe in. People say, ‘Amy goes so far beyond that.’ It’s like, yes, ultimately. Sure. The fact that people have adapted the cool girl thing shows that there’s enough there that we actually do relate to a fair amount of what she was saying. Would we go to the extent she does? No, we would not. But she’s a relatable, not as soapy, bitchy sort of villainess. You can’t write her off [...] I cannot tell you the number of people who’ve come up to me after large book events and said, ‘I know Amy.’ ‘Amy was my roommate in college.’ ‘Amy was my girlfriend.’ ‘Amy was my best friend.’” I certainly think that the acknowledgement of female anger as a viable emotion, as something that should be dealt with and acknowledged and appreciated and women feeling that way was one of the reasons that so many people connected to *Gone Girl*. I certainly think if it had come too much earlier, it would not have actually done as well.⁵⁰⁷

Flynn’s observation that Amy might have been less popular had she appeared ‘earlier’ is an interesting one. While heroines like Bridget Jones and Carrie Bradshaw had thrived in an earlier postfeminist era, when capitalist excess was heralded as a path towards identity formation and empowerment (according to Diane Negra, ‘hyperconsumerism is postfeminist in the sense that among the other evasions of institutional, social and political power it facilitates is specifically an evasion of the critiques of power and passivity associated with feminism’⁵⁰⁸), an antiheroine like Amy could only prosper in a post-recession climate of fatigue and skepticism.

To build on this, we may argue that domestic noir as a subgenre has blossomed in the wake of global recession (and retains popularity in the shadow of a looming economic depression: ‘I think the psychological thriller trend that [then] followed a few years later was as direct result of [it]: at the heart, what ‘grip-lit’ was all about was that your home was

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁸ Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2009), p.118.

now a dangerous place – and I think that chimed with people who were suddenly literally afraid about their mortgages⁵⁰⁹) and amidst an expanding cultural conversation about abuses of power and sexual exploitation precisely because it provides a narrative space in which these abuses of power and the anxieties of the women who primarily suffer as a result of them can be explored and (often violently) avenged. Flynn discusses the link between Amy’s enduring appeal and the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements in 2017, which emboldened survivors of sexual harassment, violence and exploitation to speak publicly about their experiences and tapped into the same vein of female anger that domestic noir fiction speaks to. She notes that in creating female characters who perform and validate the frustration, disappointment and anger of her female readers, she has made it easier for fellow authors of domestic noir fiction to explore and expand on those feelings through the creation of complex female characters. Authors like Louise Doughty (*Apple Tree Yard*, 2013), Sarah Vaughan (*Anatomy of a Scandal*, 2017) and Alafair Burke (*The Wife*, 2018) have responded creatively to the #MeToo movement, offering female characters who grapple with the culture of silence and the fear of disclosure that has historically ensured the protection of abusers. Canadian crime fiction author Elisabeth Di Mariaffi has written about the subgenre’s potential to confront these fears via the unreliable female narrator, whose perceived unreliability mirrors the lived experience of many women whose courage in publicly speaking about their experiences of victimhood has been met with skepticism and scorn:

In an era of whisper networks, so-called shit lists, and #MeToo, why would women flock so committedly to a genre that almost takes for granted an unreliable narrator—that is to say, a woman who may or may not be trusted? One answer is that the common themes of domestic thrillers—secrets and lies between husband and wife, toxicity, abuse of every sort, but especially the kind of psychological manipulation that pushes a character to act in ways she thought herself incapable of, or keeps her from seeing the truth, or from leaving a relationship—are all the same themes that women have been discussing in real life since

⁵⁰⁹ Heloise Wood, *The books that could flourish in this pandemic era* (2020) <<http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20200506-the-books-that-might-flourish-in-this-time-of-crisis>> [accessed 8 May 2020].)

forever. The unreliable narrator stands on shaky ground, but we're used to that: as women, we are constantly told that our accounts of our own experiences are unreliable. When I look at a genre that sometimes seems to capitalize on women's greatest fears, I wonder if there is not some comfort for women readers in a story written from a woman's point of view, one that meets the societal perception of unreliability head-on, and often confirms those fears to be well and truly grounded after all.⁵¹⁰

Flynn's body of work foregrounds these women in a way that validates the experiences of female readers without sacrificing the complexity of her female characters, whose behaviour is often immoral, if not downright villainous. Their relationship to victimhood is made more interesting by this characterization, and the reader must engage with these complicated power dynamics even as the domestic noir heroine tries to navigate them.

It makes sense that Flynn became the household name that she now is at the brink of the #MeToo and #TimesUp Movements — when women, long quietly pissed off and fed up, were finally becoming pissed off and fed up publicly and collectively. *Gone Girl* was my first Flynn thriller, and when the point-of-view abruptly, unexpectedly shifted to Evil Amy's half-way through, I actually cheered out loud. This was the thriller I hadn't known I'd been longing for all my reading life, and based on the response to Flynn's work, other readers agreed.

The thing that first captivated me about Amy Dunne wasn't just her dark mastermind, but her utterly disturbing normality. Sure, she's violent and unhinged and scary as hell — but at the end of the day she's really just another woman who has been quietly pissed off and fed up for just a tad too long. Who can't relate to that?⁵¹¹

All of Flynn's novels, apart from her 2015 novella *The Grownup*, have been adapted for film or TV, with *Sharp Objects*, the most recent adaptation, garnering critical plaudits and mainstream success. Flynn has largely spent the period following her post-*Gone Girl* success carving out a career in television; having written the screenplay for the film adaptation of *Gone Girl* and served as executive producer and writer for the 2018 adaptation of her novel *Sharp Objects*, she went on to write the screenplay for the 2018 heist movie *Widows*, and will serve as head writer and showrunner for the 2020 conspiracy

⁵¹⁰ Elisabeth de Mariaffi, *Domestic Noir and the #MeToo Moment* (2018) <<https://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2018/03/domestic-noir-and-the-metoo-moment/>> [accessed 14 May 2020].

⁵¹¹ E. CE Miller, *In The Era Of #MeToo, I've Realized Just How Rebellious 'Gone Girl' Really Was* (2018) <<https://www.bustle.com/p/in-the-era-of-metoo-ive-realized-just-how-rebellious-gone-girl-really-was-9843215>> [accessed 9 May 2020].

thriller *Utopia*. In terms of fiction, Flynn's latest project is a contemporary retelling of *Hamlet*, which she has undertaken as part of the Hogarth retelling project⁵¹², due to be released in 2021. While she has, perhaps temporarily, moved away from domestic noir, the ongoing success of the subgenre and its popularization of complicated, often disagreeable female protagonists is indicative of the lasting impression she has made on the subgenre and on crime fiction more generally.

***Sharp Objects* (2006)**

As stated in the introduction, the aim of this thesis was to build on the scholarship of researchers like Sally Munt, Maureen Reddy, Lee Horsley, Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan, all of whom have been foundational in terms of creating a critical framework with which to assess crime fiction and the numerous subgenres therein, and to provide a critical assessment of Flynn's work as the genesis of what we call 'domestic noir' fiction. While examining her work, it became apparent that the generic formation of the 'domestic noir' novel involved a process of trial and error, during which the effectiveness of certain narrative and thematic elements was explored. My first chapter centred on Flynn's debut novel, *Sharp Objects* (2006). The novel focuses on inherited trauma, maternal abuse and self-harm, alongside Camille Preaker's somewhat liminal status as a latter-day 'lady detective' whose investigation is intensely personal and inward-focused, position it as an early 'prototype' of sorts with regard to the subgenre. Flynn's engagement with specific generic features (while Camille essentially works alone, she is aided to some degree by the authorities, while the police presence in Flynn's later works is less benevolent, and at times outright hostile or antagonistic) provides a fascinating look into the process of generic

⁵¹² Emily Martin, *The 10 Best Hamlet Retellings, Ranked* (2020) <<https://bookriot.com/2020/02/20/hamlet-retellings/>> [accessed 19 May 2020].

construction and development. As noted in the chapter, Camille's 'insider/outsider' status renders her somewhat transitional in terms of the 'amateur investigator' (female) figure who has become central to the domestic noir narrative. The domestic noir protagonist, in later well-known examples of the genre such as Julia Crouch's *Her Husband's Lover* (2017) and Erin Kelly's *He Said, She Said* (2017), is typically a woman whose existential shift into an investigator happens as a result of distrust, infidelity, or violence within the home or marriage.

While her investigation doesn't usually rely on the authority of the structures of law or institutional punishment (or only resorts to these authorities when her own sleuthing has run its course), the stakes are extremely high with regard to the integrity of her interpersonal relationships and her ability to feel safe in the home. In *Sharp Objects*, parts of this narrative template are visible, at least in the early stages of the novel. Camille does not initially understand that her connection to the crimes she is investigating is intensely personal, and her journey back to Wind Gap is ostensibly in a professional capacity as a journalist, as her editor urges her to use her local knowledge to garner information about the murdered girls.

The expectations of the reader are thus primed, and then gradually subverted, as Camille's investigation morphs into an examination of the insidiously toxic female relationships which have (quite literally) left their mark on her, and every investigative detour leads back to the private sphere, which is revealed to be considerably more perilous than the town. In altering the narrative trajectory like this, Flynn engages with the generic mould of the 'female investigator' crime novel while shifting the investigative paradigms so that 'solving' the crime becomes less important than acquiring self-knowledge and learning to recover from a legacy of trauma and violence. In doing so, Flynn begins to marry generic traditions; Sally Munt notes that the work of Patricia Highsmith and Ruth Rendell, two foremothers of the domestic noir novel, includes 'a dissolving sense of reality; lack of

self-perception; reticence in moral pronouncements; obsessive, pathological characters; the narrative privileging of complex, tortured relationships [...] along with an acute sense of domestic detail, and intricate plots'.⁵¹³ This is certainly true of the contemporary domestic noir novel as well, although Munt notes that neither Highsmith nor Rendell moves far beyond the depiction of female victims as 'deserving' receptacles of male violence; quoting Klein, Munt criticises Highsmith's representation of women whose departure from repressive sexual norms results in their psychological and bodily destruction. This is something that critic Tom Paulin has also critiqued, arguing that 'it would be wrong to read these stories as indirectly feminist satires on dependency because the real centre of their inspiration is the delight Patricia Highsmith everywhere shows for the brutal ways in which these unlikely women are first murdered and then 'thrown away.'⁵¹⁴ While I don't necessarily agree with Paulin's assessment of Highsmith as a writer who 'delights' in the misogynistic violence that she depicts (particularly when we look at her fiction in light of the advent of the 'serial killer thriller', in which female bodies are often torn apart with gleeful abandon), the argument that these proto-domestic noir thrillers fail to provide a sufficiently nuanced perspective on female victimhood and the lived experience of their female characters is persuasive.

As such, we may say that Flynn has inhabited that tradition of obsessive, complicated, and occasionally violent female characters, but has worked towards a more careful consideration of the violated female body and the motivations of villainous female characters. The *other* tradition she has borrowed from is that which centres on the 'female

⁵¹³ In much the same way that I believe Flynn's work has been fundamental with regard to the establishment of a new generic form, Kathleen Klein credits Highsmith with creating a new fictional form: 'in her refusal to be limited by the conventional standards of the genre [Highsmith is] one of the best and most significant crime writers working today [...] challenging the either/or structure of human thinking in a work ostensibly about a pair of murders and murderers is part of Highsmith's conscious expansion of an established genre into a new and provocative form' (Kathleen Klein, 'Patricia Highsmith', published in *And Then There Were Nine – More Women of Mystery* [ed. Jane S. Bakerman] (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1985), pp.170-177) See also Sally Munt, *Murder by the Book?: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.19.

⁵¹⁴ Tom Paulin, 'Mortem Virumque Cano', *New Statesman*, 25 November 1977.

investigator’ – as noted above, domestic noir has largely shifted the paradigmatic framework of the crime novel away from the professional crime fighter or detective, but the prototypical domestic noir protagonist is a woman whose determination to solve a mystery ‘close to home’ drives the plot. These amateur detectives are part of a tradition which Munt identifies as fundamental to the liberal feminist crime fiction of the 1980s: ‘most liberal feminist writers have chosen the female amateur as their series detective. A favourite choice has been the investigative journalist, of which key figures have included Antonia Fraser’s Jemima Shore (first novel *Quiet as a Nun* (1977)), and Lesley Grant-Adamson’s *Rain Morgan*.⁵¹⁵

Flynn’s debut protagonist, Camille, is likewise a journalist whose role offers her a degree of detachment from the crimes she is investigating (at least initially), and in this sense she has emerged from a tradition of female characters who work outside of the parameters of legal authority, if not in direct opposition to it. Where Flynn diverges from this tradition is with Camille’s aforementioned ties to the crime, which reposition her and problematise her status as an investigator. We may say that the very notion of ‘investigation’ is upended by this shift – as noted in my first chapter, Camille utilises networks of female knowledge in order to ‘solve’ the central mystery; her proximity to Amma’s girl gang and her old school friends, whose ‘pity party’ gives her an insight into the internalised misogyny and bonds of trauma which have warped the women of Wind Gap. This has become something of a thematic mainstay in the domestic noir novel, as the investigative process is far less reliant on the traditional process of evidence-gathering favoured by many of these earlier female amateurs than on the exhumation of private narratives centring female trauma, typically encoded in the private/‘women’s’ sphere and often involving a profound betrayal of marital or maternal trust.

⁵¹⁵ Sally Munt, *Murder by the Book?: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp.50-51.

And so while Flynn has undoubtedly borrowed from this ‘amateur detective’ tradition in establishing the generic borders of the domestic noir novel, she reconfigures the investigative process so that an unravelling of an external mystery is replaced by a kind of cathartic introspection and evaluation of female trauma and villainy. *Sharp Objects*, then, embodies a kind of generic chimera, as Flynn experiments with the conventions of crime fiction and, in doing so, initiates a recentring of sorts, as certain elements of the Highsmith-esque suspense thriller and the ‘amateur female investigator’ are blended and tested against an emerging domestic noir framework.

***Dark Places* (2009)**

Dark Places, Flynn’s second novel, and the focus of my second chapter, similarly engages with the broader crime fiction tradition, this time playing with elements of ‘rural noir’ (a tradition which includes Truman Capote’s 1965 true crime novel *In Cold Blood*, James Dickey’s 1970 novel *Deliverance*, and, more recently, the fiction of Attica Locke and Jane Harper) and elements of the true crime narrative, which, as discussed in the chapter, can contribute towards the mythologisation of male violence. The work of Judith Walkowitz and Karen Boyle, whose examinations of ‘Ripper’ discourses expose the symbolic connection between brutalised female bodies and the valourisation of violent male agency, was useful in contextualising the Kill Club’s cultish fascination with the Day family massacre. As noted at the beginning of the chapter, in contrast to *Sharp Objects*, Flynn shifts focus from middle class trauma to working class poverty, and this shift is particularly interesting when we consider the class dynamics of the contemporary domestic noir novel – for the most part, the subgenre has dwelled in middle class homes and focused on the lived experience of comfortably middle class women.

Dark Places is something of an outlier, then, and again indicative of Flynn's generic experimentation. The protagonists of her second novel are far from comfortable; the Day family exist in working-class poverty, with Libby in the present day obliged to trade on her memories of the family massacre in order to scrape a living, ironically profiting from the trauma which has relegated her to a kind of perpetual childhood. Unable to function as an adult in the working world, she also struggles to maintain personal relationships. It's interesting to note that neither Camille nor Libby embodies what we may now recognise as the prototypical 'domestic noir heroine'. Neither is successful, either professionally or personally, and neither aspires to the symbolic markers of female success which all too often function as a trap for the domestic noir heroine (*Gone Girl's* Amy, of course, believes herself clever enough to turn this trap to her advantage) – marriage, the apparent existential security of suburban life, motherhood and social success. Libby exists, to a certain extent, outside of those societal boundaries and moves closer to them over the course of her investigation – this trajectory actually mirrors the development of Flynn's fiction and its thematic fluctuations as she moves toward a cohesive idea of 'domestic noir' with *Gone Girl*. Megan Abbott describes Chandler's Philip Marlowe as 'an explicit outsider to any system but his own set of harassed ethics'⁵¹⁶, and Libby's characterisation veers closer to *this* tradition of the morally ambiguous outsider than to the now almost ubiquitous model of the domestic noir heroine. To varying extents, both Camille and Libby inhabit this 'outsider' role, but their investigations carry them *inward* with a harrowing inevitability, as the latent trauma of the domestic space continues to manifest, and the importance of 'solving' the central mystery gives way to the necessity of confronting that trauma from within.

⁵¹⁶ Megan Abbott, *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 29.

This move inward is both symbolic and literal, as our protagonists return ‘home’, to the site of their original trauma, and learn to re-negotiate their relationship with that space. The class positioning of Libby also offers an opportunity to explore the ways in which the manifestation of trauma in the private sphere differs when poverty and class become factors; Patty is consumed with guilt and anxiety as she struggles to hold her family together and Libby only opens herself up to her memories of the massacre because she is driven to do so by financial desperation. In this chapter, I discussed the burden of ‘affective labour’/caring labour that Patty is expected to carry, even as she becomes solely responsible for the survival of the family farm. The gendered expectations surrounding this kind of labour have been explored in later works of domestic noir fiction, but commonly through a middle-class lens – the grind of poverty and Patty’s fear of falling into bankruptcy (which ultimately leads her to the desperate choice to sacrifice herself) is something that the majority of subsequent domestic noir novels have not depicted. I will discuss the limitations of the subgenre in greater depth later on, but it’s important to note that *Dark Places* offers a glimpse into the subgenre’s potential to illuminate the troubling intersection of misogyny and classism.

This chapter also included an examination of Flynn’s decision to refrain from offering explicit depictions of brutalised female bodies, with the destruction of animal bodies serving as a symbolic substitute. This juxtaposition provides space for a reconsideration of the human/animal binary within crime fiction, and this reconsideration provides space for the reader to reflect on the genre’s proclivity for dispensing of female characters in ways that strip away their humanity and render them little more than ‘dead meat’. The work of Glen S. Close, as well as ecofeminist pioneers like Donna Haraway and Carol Adams, informed this section of the chapter. Close writes about female cadavers in crime fiction as objects of male fantasy and desire, arguing that ‘nearly all genres of modern crime fiction depend heavily for their compulsive appeal on the inaugural presentation of a cadaver as

spectacle, enigma and menace.⁵¹⁷ The murdered woman as quasi-sex object has become so commonplace that Flynn parodies it with the ‘Kill Club’ and their fascination with Patty, a woman they are certain must have transgressed in some way, a woman whose remains have been pored over so often that she exists as little more than a faded, lurid memory.

Libby mentions that she has been approached by ‘fringe nudie mags’⁵¹⁸, too, her proximity to the slaughter of her family lending her a grisly allure; we later see Kill Club members carrying photos of the crime scene and of the bodies of Libby’s murdered sisters – there is a sense that the images of these destroyed female bodies and the image of Libby’s exposed body are analogous, and that having access to Libby’s body equates to having access to the bodies of her sisters and mother. She is treated with a mixture of reverence and contempt by the members of the Kill Club, and this mirrors the treatment of female bodies in crime fiction more generally; female remains are typically treated as simultaneously abject and alluring. The introduction to this thesis quoted Poe’s assertion that ‘death [is most melancholy] when it most closely allies itself to Beauty: the death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world’⁵¹⁹, and this axiom helps shed some light on the genre’s contradictory perspectives on murdered women. As a survivor, Libby occupies an interesting space with regard to this desire to romanticise/fetishise brutalised female bodies; her memories of the event are traumatic but hazy, and when she talks about her recollection of that night, there is an expectation that the Kill Club members, and by extension the reader, will be privy to the lurid details of the murders:

⁵¹⁷ Glen S. Close, *Female Corpses in Crime Fiction: A Transatlantic Perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p.4.

⁵¹⁸ Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), p.14.

⁵¹⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Barnes & Noble Inc, 2006), p.179.

“Oh. Yeah. Look I just wanted to say ... I’m sorry for your loss. I’m sure even after all this time ... I just can’t imagine. That’s like, something out of Edgar Allan Poe. What happened.”

“I try not to think about it much,” I said, the standard answer.

The guy laughed. “Well, you’re in the wrong place, then”.⁵²⁰

His mention of Edgar Allan Poe betrays his desire to picture these murdered women as ‘poetical topics’, to imagine their bloodied remains as beautifully terrible. When Libby does offer some details, they are far from sensational:

I found my mom lying on the floor in front of her daughters’ room, the top of her head shot off in a triangular slice, axe gashes through her bulky sleeping clothes, one breast exposed. Above her, long strings of red hair were stuck to the walls with blood and brain matter. Debby lay just past her, her eyes wide open and a bloody streak down her cheek. Her arm was nearly cut off; she’d been chopped through the stomach with the axe, her belly lay open, slack like the mouth of a sleeper. I called for Michelle, but I knew she was dead. I tiptoed into our bedroom and found her curled up on her bed with her dolls, her throat black with bruises, one slipper still on, one eye open. The walls were painted in blood: pentagrams and nasty words. Cunts. Satan. Everything was broken, ripped, destroyed. Jars of food had been smashed against the walls, cereal sprayed around the floor. A single Rice Krispie would be found in my mother’s chest wound, the mayhem was so haphazard. One of Michelle’s shoes dangled by its laces from the cheap ceiling fan.⁵²¹

The mentions of Michelle’s shoe and the Rice Krispie, set alongside the image of the walls daubed in blood, serve to underscore the perversely patriarchal desire to sensationalise and sexualise female remains, and in doing so to erase those markers of lived femininity from the site of slaughter. Flynn refuses to allow this – the reader is never given the opportunity to forget that the Day farmhouse is the place where these female characters *lived* as well as died, and that their lives were more meaningful than their violent deaths. At its core, this is what domestic noir fiction is about – using crime fiction to illuminate the lived experience of its female characters, rather than shining a spotlight on their destruction.

⁵²⁰ Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (New York: Random House, 2009), p.32.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, p.52.

Gone Girl (2012)

In my third thesis chapter, I have argued that Flynn's most recently published novel, *Gone Girl*, represents the materialisation of 'domestic noir' fiction as we know it today. Having played with certain generic elements in her first two novels (including, as mentioned above, the presence of an 'amateur female investigator' and the extent to which she uses communal female spaces as a site of 'investigation', and the largely unseen spectacle of the female corpse), Flynn melds these elements in *Gone Girl*, centring the novel around a postfeminist femme fatale whose calculated disappearance leaves a gap in the narrative through which the 'perfect victim' emerges. The influence of Southern Gothic and rural noir, apparent in her earlier novels, is less evident here, as a contemporary 'McMansion' replaces the Victorian pile of Camille's childhood nightmares and Libby's desecrated farmhouse. There is less generic baggage in this space:

A rented house right along the Mississippi River, a house that screams Suburban Nouveau Riche, the kind of place I aspired to as a kid from my split-level, shag-carpet side of town. The kind of house that is immediately familiar: a generically grand, unchallenging, new, new, new house that my wife would – and did – detest. 'Should I remove my soul before I come inside?' Her first line upon arrival.⁵²²

As such, it is the ideal site for the genesis of a new subgenre. As mentioned in my final chapter, context is important when assessing the rise of domestic noir and *Gone Girl's* success in a post-recession world is significant. The spectre of the 'happy housewife' is visible throughout the novel, as Amy first subverts this ideal (her grim acknowledgment that she is expected to do little more than 'clean and bleed' is a particular highlight) and

⁵²² Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012).

then attempts to perform it, imprisoning both herself and Nick, along with their unborn child, in a tableau of domesticity that the reader knows will ultimately stifle ‘Real Amy’. Munford and Waters posit that the housewife is caught in a cycle of repression and return⁵²³, and Amy’s decision to embody this role validates that theory; for all of her self-awareness, she is reluctant to break away from that identity.

The navigation of this role has become a central tenet of domestic noir fiction, and Amy’s conflicted relationship with the domestic space and with marriage is one that has inspired much of what we might call the ‘canon’ of domestic noir (which might be said to include Hawkins’ *The Girl on the Train*, S.J. Watson’s *Before I Go To Sleep*, Liane Moriarty’s *Big Little Lies*, and Louise Doughty’s *Apple Tree Yard*, in addition to Flynn’s work). This chapter also explored the fetishization of the ‘Dead Girl’, something that Flynn’s earlier novels also touch on. It is Amy’s self-conscious inhabitation of this role that makes *Gone Girl* such an incisive commentary on contemporary iterations of the femme fatale and on the cultural preoccupation with missing and murdered white women. As noted below, these narratives invariably skew white and middle-class, and the suggestion that Amy-in-exile has begun to drift outside of the borders of ‘whiteness’ is an intriguing one which hints at the subgenre’s potential to explore the racial politics of victimhood, something it has yet to really achieve. Katarzyna Paszkiewicz argues that ‘one should not overlook the overwhelmingly white middle-class facet of these novels, even if they certainly upset the [image of the domestic ideal]’⁵²⁴, and I agree that in order to truly engage with the lived experience of women in the private sphere, a broader examination of the intersection of class, race, gender, and sexuality is necessary.

⁵²³ Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters [eds], *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2014), p.76.

⁵²⁴ Katarzyna Paszkiewicz, ‘It All Stays in the Family: The Revival of Domestic Noir in 21st Century Crime Fiction’, published in *Family Relationships in Contemporary Crime Fiction: La Famiglia* [ed. Bill Phillips] (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), p.43.

The Limitations and future of the Subgenre

As I have touched on above, while completing this dissertation I mapped the generic development of ‘domestic noir’ fiction via Flynn’s oeuvre, and in doing so I gained a greater understanding of the subgenre’s limitations with regard to representations of race, gender, sexuality, and class. While Flynn, to her credit, offers an unflinching examination of working poverty and the relationship between affective labour and class with *Dark Places*, and unpacks the sanctification of missing and murdered white women in *Gone Girl*, later contributions to the domestic noir canon have explored a version of white middle-class femininity that all too often is said to be representative of womanhood more broadly. There are some exceptions; Julia Crouch’s 2013 novel *Tarnished* centres on a gay woman of colour haunted by her destructive family legacy, while the work of American author Laura Lippman (whose 2019 novel *Lady in the Lake* examines the differing cultural responses to two disappearances: one a young white girl and one an African American woman) centres the experiences of women from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds and races. While Lippman’s work aligns more closely with the police procedural than the domestic noir novel, the critical and commercial success with which she has centred female characters who diverge from the white, heterosexual, middle-class norm of domestic noir is indicative of just how effective this representation can be, and just how sizeable the readership for such representation is.

The aforementioned TV adaption of *Big Little Lies* cast Zoë Kravitz, a Jewish African-American woman, as Bonnie, whose character in the novel was implicitly coded as a white woman, although the show has been criticised for failing to offer much insight into the

lived experience of a woman of colour in an affluent white suburb.⁵²⁵ Authors of domestic noir tend to share certain characteristics of their heroines (and much of their readership), insofar as they usually identify as white, cisgender, heterosexual and middle-class. While I believe that the subgenre challenges and deconstructs many of the more conservative paradigms of crime fiction (particularly with regard to the depiction of brutalised female bodies and the exploration of networks of female support and knowledge), there is still much scope for further deconstruction of these paradigms. In the summer of 2020, the role that systemic racism plays in policing has come under global scrutiny, as the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement has responded to the worldwide epidemic of police brutality, and there has been some discussion about the role that crime fiction plays in normalising the violent behaviour of authority figures. Crime writer John Fram, writing for the *New York Times*, argues that the readership of these novels is a factor in the positive representation of police:

Novelists who choose to honestly depict the failures of the criminal justice system or center the experiences of nonwhite protagonists can face career challenges. “It’s difficult to find an audience in a genre where older white women are the biggest consumers,” said Rachel Howzell Hall, the author of “They All Fall Down” and an acclaimed series of mysteries featuring the black detective Elouise (“Lou”) Norton, in an interview with CrimeReads. “Some readers are unwilling to see past color and are willing to believe that a writer of color has nothing relevant for their life experience.”⁵²⁶

Fram goes on to argue that the popularity of domestic noir narratives is indicative of readers’ desire to engage with narratives that diverge from this conservative, authoritarian paradigm: ‘Gone Girl [...] created a boom in domestic suspense, leaving no middle-class marriage unscathed. Considering the protests currently sweeping our country [...] it’s

⁵²⁵ Kathleen Newman-Bremang, *How Big Little Lies Did Bonnie A Major Disservice By Ignoring Her Race* (2019) <<https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/07/238519/big-little-lies-season-two-bonnie-race>> [accessed 12 June 2020].

⁵²⁶ John Fram, *How White Crime Writers Justified Police Brutality* (2020) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/04/opinion/crime-fiction-police-brutality.html>> [accessed 14 June 2020].

difficult to believe that there isn't an audience ready to read stories about the failures of the criminal justice system'.⁵²⁷ While domestic noir fiction does not, as a rule, centre authority figures or police procedures, there is often the peripheral presence of a detective and occasionally tension or conflict between narrator and authority figure (e.g. between Amy and Detective Boney). These tensions could be framed in more meaningful way if fewer of these narrators were middle-class white women – a female protagonist for whom these authority figures, the people she must turn to when she realises that the private sphere is no longer a safe place, instil fear and distrust rather than relief or a sense of security, could illuminate a lived experience as yet relatively unexplored by domestic noir.

Let's revisit Julia Crouch's original definition of 'domestic noir' for a moment: 'In a nutshell, Domestic Noir takes place primarily in homes and workplaces, concerns itself largely (but not exclusively) with the female experience, is based around relationships and takes as its base a broadly feminist view that the domestic sphere is a challenging and sometimes dangerous prospect for its inhabitants'.⁵²⁸ Maternal anxieties, intimate partner violence, and the occasionally overwhelming responsibilities of caring labour are not concerns exclusive to one subset of the female population; as noted in my second chapter, this work is often outsourced by women whose social positioning allows them to rely on the labour of the less privileged while they pursue the neoliberal ideal of 'having it all'. Leila Slimani's 2016 novel *Lullaby*, based on the 2012 murder of Lucia and Leo Krim⁵²⁹, explores

⁵²⁷ Ibid. [accessed 14 June 2020].

⁵²⁸ Julia Crouch, *Genre Bender* (2013) <<http://juliacrouch.co.uk/blog/genre-bender>> [accessed 12 June 2020].

⁵²⁹ In October of 2012, Lucia, aged six, and Leo, aged two, were murdered by their nanny Yoselyn Ortega in their New York home. Ortega, a Dominican woman who had worked for the family for two years, attempted suicide at the scene but was apprehended and sentenced to life in prison in 2018. It emerged during her trial that she had struggled with depressive episodes which may have been compounded by financial woes and poor working conditions: 'Two days after the murders, she told a police officer at her bedside that the cleaning products she used had hurt her skin. She complained she had been hired as a babysitter, but Ms. Krim asked her to do five hours of cleaning work a week. A few days later, she told a detective she was mad at the Krims because she worked very hard and did not make enough money'. (James C. McKinley Jr., *A Question Hangs Over a Trial: Why Did a Nanny Kill 2 Children in Her Care?* (2018)

this dichotomy beautifully, offering a nuanced critique of the gendered micropolitics of caring labour. I believe that narratives which centre the experience of minority women in such a way could enrich the subgenre and give it scope to engage with a wider variety of concerns regarding class, race, and gender. Some recent novels that exemplify the subgenre's potential for such representation include Ivy Pochoda's *These Women* (2020), in which a community of women set out to untangle a web of gendered violence woven by a serial killer targeting sex workers, and Attica Locke's *The Cutting Season*, which employs elements of domestic noir to shape a story of historical trauma and racial conflict. In order to facilitate this representation, of course, structural change within the publishing industry is needed, and a greater push for minority representation must be made by readers and writers of the subgenre.

The end of the domestic noir wave has been heralded with increasing frequency (as recently as April of 2020 commenters wondered if 'we'd read every iteration of domestic noir'⁵³⁰) since its explosion in popularity following the success of *Gone Girl*, but the subgenre's popularity shows no sign of waning. There are, in fact, signs that it continues to evolve: writers like Elizabeth Kay, Jessica Knoll, Megan Abbott and Araminta Hall have recently authored thrillers which focus on toxic female friendships rather than marital relationships, something which lends a refreshing depth to these explorations of women's inner lives.⁵³¹ It is increasingly evident that the appetite for these narratives, particularly amongst female readers, is voracious, and as authors of domestic noir fiction continue to

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/11/nyregion/nanny-murder-trial-insanity-defense.html>> [accessed 15 June 2020].)

⁵³⁰ Katie Law, *Precious You by Helen Monks Takhar: twisty thriller is the read of the summer* (2020) <<https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/books/precious-you-by-helen-monks-takhar-review-a4500196.html>> [accessed 9 July 2020].

⁵³¹ Katie Law, *Meet Elizabeth Kay, the new face of domestic noir* (2020) <<https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/books/elizabeth-kay-seven-lies-interview-a4407951.html>> [accessed 22 June 2020].

engage with this appetite and speak to a female readership that finds representation within domestic noir, the subgenre that Flynn has been central in creating and popularising will continue to thrive. This thesis is the first comprehensive study of Flynn's importance as a writer whose female-centred crime fiction has foregrounded the lived experience of women for whom the intimate devastation of trauma and violence has forced them to reconsider their relationship to the private sphere. As such, this thesis marks a starting point in an important, and very necessary, discussion of the significance of domestic noir fiction and its cultural role in helping to symbolically navigate these traumas. It is my hope that future scholarship on the subgenre will build on this work in exploring the significance of domestic noir, within the canon of crime fiction and beyond.

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Appendix

Image 1

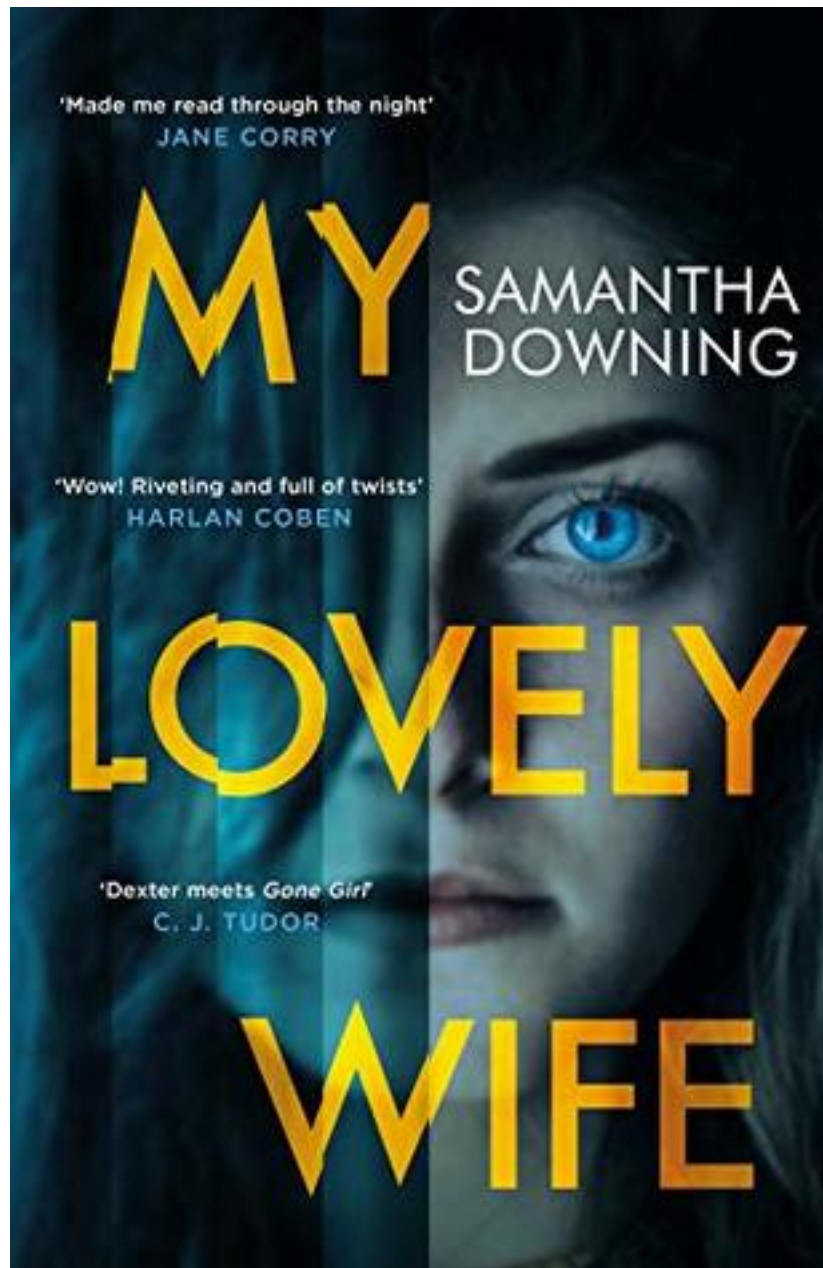


Image 2

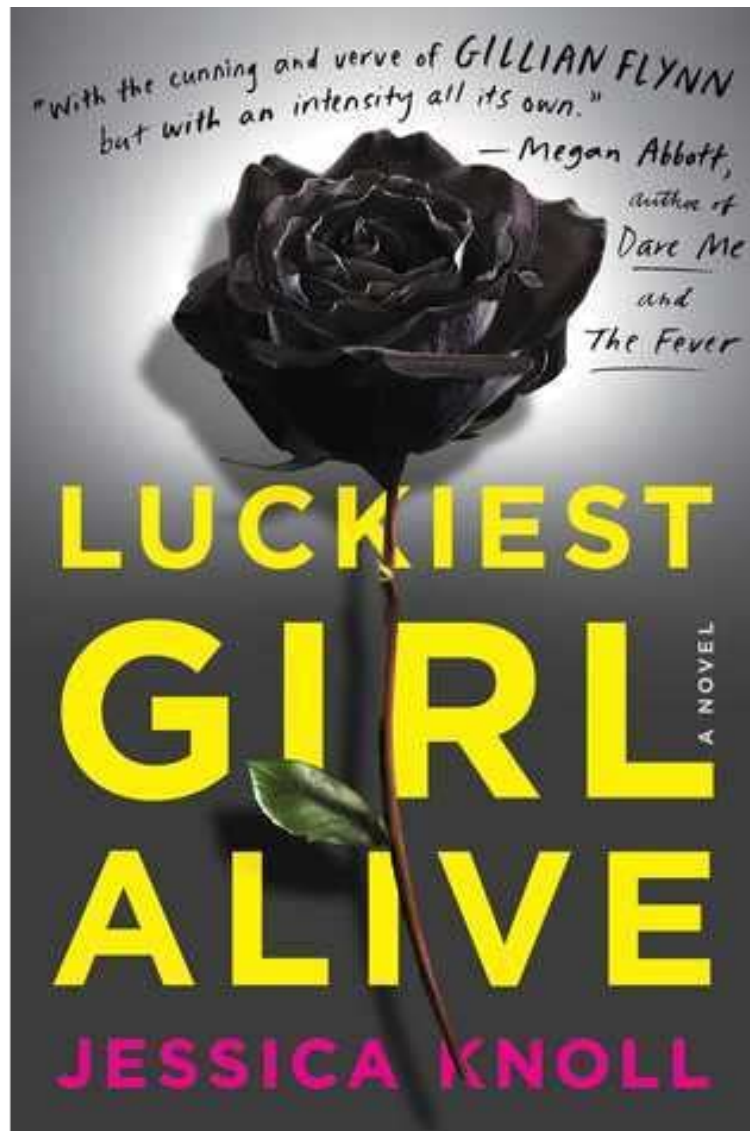


Image 3

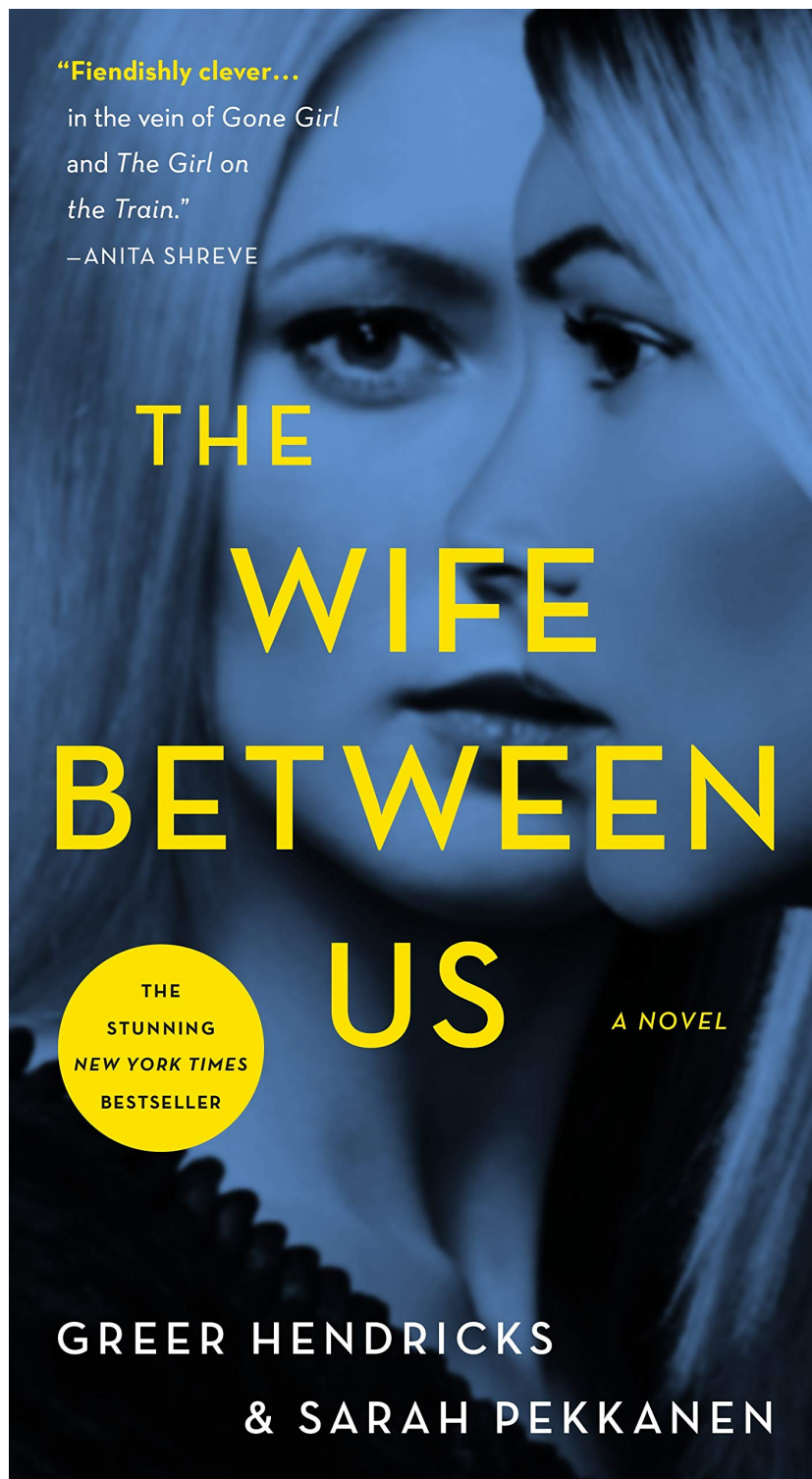


Image 4

