

# **“I’m the *Bitch* that Makes You a Man”: Conditional Love as Female Vengeance in Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl***

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## **Abstract**

Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* presents a satirical response to violence against women perpetuated by patriarchal simulations in the media. Her goal throughout the novel is to provide an outlet for female violence and presents revenge as a response to a consumer culture that impedes female happiness through the construction of emphasized femininity, inequality in marriage, and ‘raunch culture’. Amy Dunne breaks under the pressure generated by hyperrealities and narcissistic desires of America’s consumer culture that suffocate the traditional bonds of marriage, and her deviance is a reaction to a patriarchal social structure that reinforces gendered illusions of self-actualization and allows male entitlement to remain unchallenged.

1 In the summer of 2012, Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* captured the world’s attention with a caustic and transgressive satire concerning the dissolution of marriage within America’s contemporary culture of narcissism. The novel focuses on the disappearance of Amy Dunne who has gone missing on her fifth wedding anniversary to her husband, Nick Dunne. Following a series of diary entries serving as red herrings to misdirect the audiences’ attention, Amy reveals herself in the second half of the novel to be the mastermind of a malicious plot to frame her husband for murder in response to his infidelity. David Itzkoff deemed the novel “the year’s biggest literary phenomena for a book not containing the words ‘Fifty Shades’ in the title” (“New Two-Book Deal), and, with the aid of its 2014 cinematic adaptation, *Gone Girl* spent over 130 weeks on the *New York Times* Bestseller List (“Praise for *Gone Girl*”). Much of the book’s success derives, of course, from its ingenious and original take on the classic whodunit that consistently manipulates the reader with shocking plot-twists and unreliable narrators. Yet, moreover, *Gone Girl* speaks to an American society that has increasingly grown cynical concerning the transcendent power of love. Bell Hooks decries in *All About Love: New Visions* that “youth culture today is cynical about love. And that cynicism has come from their pervasive feeling that love cannot be found . . . To them, love is for the naïve, the weak, the hopelessly romantic. Their attitude is mirrored in the grown-ups they turn to for explanations . . . [and this] cynicism is the great mask of the disappointed and betrayed heart” (xviii-xiv). *Gone Girl* exposes the improbability of unconditional love because of America’s consumer culture that breeds a

narcissistic selfishness that forces impossible demands on relationships due to self-seeking behaviors.

2 Perhaps Americans are justified in their anxieties regarding love and marriage. The divorce rate in the United States is known to range between a staggering 44-50% (Kennedy and Ruggles 588), and many scholars suggest that America's culture of expressive individualism has constructed much higher expectations on marriage than the past by demanding its fulfillment of self-actualization goals on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs: a hope that ultimately leads to a greater sense of disappointment when it is not fully achieved (Neff and Morgan 96). Yet while American's are increasingly demanding more from their marriages, they are simultaneously putting less time in the cultivation of their relationships. Many cultural critics, beginning with Tom Wolfe in 1976, define the self-expressive era as a cultural shift towards consumer narcissism: i.e. the emergence of the "Me Generation." Wolfe suggests, that "the old alchemical dream was changing base metals into gold. The new alchemical dream is changing one's personality—remaking, remodeling, evaluating, and polishing one's very self- . . . and observing, studying, and doting on it. (Me!)" (143, emphasis and ellipses in original). The transformation of the American Dream from production based to consumer driven ultimately incites narcissistic desires to revise the self through conspicuous consumption, as the symbols of success (e.g. fitness indicators) are readily available for purchase. Following this transition, cultural critics began declaring the sense of communal belonging that governed previous consumption practices was being replaced by the establishment of individual identity and new standards of comparison that are increasingly difficult to obtain (Schor 10). This consumer capitalism, of course, not only profits when "it can address those whose essential needs have already been satisfied but who have the means to assuage 'new' invented needs—Marx's 'imaginary needs'" (Barber 9). The American Dream within consumer culture thus becomes elusive, repackaged as an ever-changing product that must be obtained by an individual who anxiously measure him/herself against the accomplishments of his/her peers in the quest for identity and self-actualization.

3 This consumer narcissism likewise worms its way into marriages by transforming the two partners into consumer subjects that must bolster each other's self-esteem, help the other achieve a sense of self-actualization, and are constantly pitted against the hyperrealities glorified by the media. This creates an internal conflict between an individual's desire to find an 'authentic' self (i.e. self-actualization) and the continual pursuit of self-image, or the attempt to construct an

‘inauthentic’ self. Inauthentic individuals maintain a more fragile self-esteem dependent on external validation such as goal achievement or the approval of others (Davis et. al. 117). The concept of self-actualization is gendered in American society and, for this reason, the quest for individualism constructs two diverging paths for men and women: “For women, the process is within the context of intimate relationships, and for men, its outside the context of intimate relationships” centering on the acquisition of success in the work force (Coy and Kovacs-Long 142). Contemporary American media simultaneously dramatizes the decline of social rules while emphasizing the rise of the individual’s agency in a consumer-driven culture. For this reason, over the last few decades, a self-centered view of relationships has become much more prominent and the influence of mass media produce both a fear of compromising personal desire and becoming hurt because of emotional ties.

4 Accordingly, Jean M. Twenge suggests that many Americans feel entitled to relationships that are built off instant gratification and do not involve much personal sacrifice: i.e. an infantilist ethos perpetuated by consumerism. Sexual relationships devoid of feelings and concern for others are often presented as a way in which to “do what feels good for you” (i.e. self-expression) without the threat of attachment and/or emotional effort that conceivably lead to disappointment (22; 168). The progression of gender equality in education and the workforce has likewise influenced this transition by allowing women to rely less on finding suitable partners as means of obtaining financial stability. Over the last few decades, both men and women in the United States have been postponing marriage to earn a college education and enter the workforce focusing more on personal growth than forming lasting relationships. For this reason, the “age at first marriage is at an all-time high; the typical groom is 27; the typical bride is 25” (Bogle 2). Consequently, contemporary marriage places less emphasis on financial gain and greater emphasis on idealized notions of romantic love and the needs concerning self-actualization. The inadequate investment required to meet such goals of self-actualization in romantic relationships has lead scholars to propose a “suffocation model of marriage” to understand America’s rising cynicism and disappointment concerning their relationships:

In short, as Americans have increasingly looked to marriage to help them fulfill higher needs, a process that requires a strongly nurtured relationship, they have increasingly deprived their relationships of that nurturance. The squeeze emerging from these two processes—insufficient fuel to meet the demands contemporary Americans are placing on their marriage—gives the suffocation model its name. (Finkel, et.al. 240)

Amy and Nick desire the perfect relationships reflected in the hyperrealities produced by America's consumer culture. When the two partners reveal their 'authentic' selves the marriage ultimately dissolves as the notion of the ideal partner is exposed as an illusion.

5 In discussing his cinematic adaption of *Gone Girl*, David Fincher claims "in America there's a narcissism in choosing a mate . . . The façade begins to crack, and you realise that the person your spouse has presented themselves as is entirely different . . . the film is very much about the resentment and dissonance that is created by having to admit to the person you're most intimately involved with that you're not going to keep up your end of the bargain" (qtd. in James 20). Nick lucidly discusses such resentments concerning the hyperrealities of consumer culture and the construction of a false-self in *Gone Girl*:

I can't recall a single amazing thing that I've seen firsthand that I didn't immediately reference to a movie or a TV show. A fucking commercial. I've literally seen it all, and the worst thing, the thing that makes me want to blow my brains out, is: the secondhand experience is always better. The image is crisper, the view is keener, the camera angle and soundtrack manipulate my emotions in a way reality can't anymore. I don't know that we are actually human at this point . . . It's a very difficult era in which to be a person, just a real, actual person, instead of a collection of personality traits selected from an endless Automat of characters. And if all of us are play-acting, there can be no such thing as a soul mate, because we don't have genuine souls. (99)

Jean Baudrillard argues that "America is neither dream or reality. It is a hyperreality. . . because it is a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved" (*America* 28). Consequently, American culture worships an idol: a contagious image serving as a system of "luxury prefabrication, brilliant syntheses of the stereotypes of life and love" (*America* 59). This idealized notion of love in American culture derives from "the generation by models of a real without origins in reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 1). It constructs a situation in which the "real" implodes; the "real" and the imaginary continually collapse into each other, and, at times, the simulation can be perceived as better than the real thing. Furthermore, simulations are presented as more real than the real itself so that a simulation ultimately creates a perceived social reality. In this sense, a representation does not just stand slightly removed from reality but can become reality itself. The media's idealization of romantic love and representation of gender roles serve as powerful simulations that inculcate men and women with normative modes of behavior pertaining to their marriages. Dorris Rhea Coy and Judith Kovacs-Long argue, "the result is men who are trapped in isolation and self-sufficiency with no means of, and

no knowledge of how to go about making connections or how to have relationships, and women who are trapped in the responsibility for developing and maintaining relationships with few means to develop and maintain their competencies” (144). Thus, the hyperrealities of America’s postfeminist media cultures create two distinct gendered paths for self-actualization that are ultimately damaging to successful relationships.

6 Many women in America are currently finding themselves pressured to conform to consumer culture’s depictions of romantic relationships and the increasing demands of their professional lives. Lia Macko and Kerry Rubin suggest that the current culture of individualism and self-expression is more detrimental to women than men, and, for this reason, many American women today embody “a generation in the middle of a Midlife Crisis at 30” (15). Women are expected to live up to the dreams and expectations achieved by second-wave feminists and are simultaneously expected to conform to the gender norms of doting wife and mother. This, of course, creates an impossible double bind of juggling both personal and professional desires that may lead to a fear of missing out by choosing one or the other. Rosalind Gill argues such postfeminist sensibilities construct a neoliberal version of femininity encouraging women to “render one’s life knowable and meaningful through a narrative of free choice and autonomy, however constrained one might actually be” (260). Neoliberal and postfeminist discourses thus instruct women to focus on individual self-expression and their consumer capacities as forms of empowerment. Accordingly, consumer culture creates additional strains for women by presenting female power as an act of conspicuous consumption required for achieving impossible beauty standards necessary for attracting men/husbands. Susan J. Douglas argues that the media and advertising ultimately present women fantasies of power: “They assure girls and women, repeatedly, that women’s liberation is a *fait accompli* and that [they] are stronger, more successful, more sexually in control, more fearless, and more held in awe than [they] actually are” (5). Although this is the so-called “girl power” generation, Douglas suggests “the bill of goods [women] are repeatedly sold is that true power comes from shopping, having the right logos, and being ‘hot’ . . . enlightened sexism sells the line that it is precisely through women’s calculated deployment of their faces, bodies, attire, and sexuality that they gain and enjoy true power—power that is fun, that men will not resent, and indeed will embrace” (6; 10). Flynn presents such fantasies of power as detrimental to the female psyche throughout *Gone Girl*. Amy ultimately breaks under the pressure generated by hyperrealities and narcissistic

desires of America's consumer culture that ultimately suffocate the traditional bonds of marriage, and her deviance is a reaction to a patriarchal social structure that reinforces such gendered illusions of self-actualization.

7 Flynn argues that violent actions “really don’t make it into the oral history of women. Men speak fondly of those strange bursts of childhood aggression, their disastrous immature sexuality. They have a vocabulary for sex and violence that women just don’t” (“I Was Not a Nice Little Girl”). This is because violent women become “doubly deviant” in the eyes of society and therefore “remain potentially troubling figures for feminism . . . Enacting revenge against violent men is more controversial and raises questions about the acceptability of the use of violence and, particularly pertinent for feminist criminologists, debates on the best means of achieving justice” (O’Neil and Seal 44-45). Although Flynn identifies herself as feminist, her body of work has been heavily criticized for promoting misogynistic portrayals of villainous women.<sup>1</sup> While her texts are indeed ambivalent in their portrayal of feminist ideologies (particularly, their depiction of rape culture), her work is ultimately a satirical response to violence against women perpetuated by patriarchal simulations in the media that construct idealized notions of love and marriage. Accordingly, *Gone Girl* is representative of the transgressive tradition: a genre of writing often characterized by protagonists that feel confined by their society and, for this reason, violate norms in deviant and/or criminal ways. Such writing employs excessive aberrations as agents of subversion. Flynn overemphasizes the negative influences of American society to grossly delineate the way consumer narcissism negatively effects marriage, and through the novel’s hyperbole provide a fuller understanding of cultural institutions and numerous agents of socialization that construct postfeminist sensibilities. Her goal throughout her *Gone Girl* is to provide an outlet for female violence, and, in doing so, presents Amy’s revenge as a response to a patriarchal consumer culture that impedes female

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<sup>1</sup> Lev Grossman of *Time* magazine reports, “even people who didn’t love *Gone Girl* had strong feelings about it. ‘I’ve certainly been called a misogynist,’ Flynn says, ‘and that to me is strange. It feels so old-fashioned to think because you write about awful women that you don’t like women. To me it’s worse to only write about good women’” (48). Eliana Dockterman notes “nobody can agree if [*Gone Girl* is] a sexist portrayal of a crazy woman or a feminist manifesto. The answer is it’s both, and that’s what makes it so interesting” (1), and Nile Cappello of *Huffington Post* claims “*Gone Girl* is decisively misogynistic. There is not a single woman in the entire novel that isn’t a complete and utter mess” (“How ‘Gone Girl’ is Misogynistic Literature”).

happiness and success through the construction of emphasized femininity, inequality in marriage expectations, and the emergence of “raunch culture.”<sup>2</sup>

8 Angela McRobbie argues that, “rather than stressing collectivity or the concerns of women per se, [postfeminist discourse] replaces feminism with competition, ambition, meritocracy, self-help, and the rise of the ‘alpha girl’” (181). She suggests, such processes ultimately produce a “new gender regime repeatedly framed along the lines of female individualization” achieved via conspicuous consumption (181). Amy, in *Gone Girl*, can be read as a feminist anti-hero that rejects (yet also ambivalently overconforms to) the postfeminist simulation: “cool girl”: A modernized version of femininity derivative of a “messy suturing of traditional and neoliberal discourses” that “(re-)present[s] [desirability] as something to be understood as being done for yourself and *not* in order to please a man” (Gill 261). She employs violent revenge to regain agency in her marriage by forcing her husband to reject the simulation and ultimately accept her as an inherently flawed individual—a step closer to her goal of self-actualization. For this reason, Amy believes that unconditional love does not exist and can only be achieved through violence and other manipulative tactics necessary to “win” in a relationship. Accordingly, Amy concludes her story by suggesting “love should have many conditions. Love should require both partners to be their very best at all times. Unconditional love is undisciplined love” (554). Marriage in *Gone Girl* is thus presented as an arena in which those involved strive to maintain power within a reciprocal system of exchange; power that is often portrayed as violent and demeaning to the other via the concept of the “dancing monkey” which entails submitting to another’s conditions and ‘proper’ gender performativity (74). In this sense, the novel serves as a transgressive satire concerning the current state of marriage/love in American society providing commentary on how the culture of narcissism and expressive individualism negatively effects relationships. By the conclusion of the novel, Amy has usurped the patriarchal role of the head of her household, and, because of her vindictive response to infidelity, is deemed a “psycho bitch” by the men in her life—and, most likely, the audience as the novel’s numerous accusations of misogyny suggest (Flynn 528). *Gone Girl* elucidates the effects patriarchal violence extolled by the consumer culture has on the female psyche, and, presents her deviant actions as a response to a patriarchal social structure that reinforces gendered illusions of self-actualization and allows male entitlement to remain unchallenged.

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<sup>2</sup> See Ariel Levy’s *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*.

### **“Our Time Was Done”: Masculinity During the Great Recession**

9        *Gone Girl* emerged during a critical time in American history and reflects the male anxieties that followed the economic crash in 2008. During the Great Recession, 8 million Americans lost their jobs of which 75% were male oriented professions sharing a strong machismo identification (Fradd 130). This sudden loss of employment and downward mobility negatively affected men’s perceptions concerning their loss of gender statuses (Michniewicz et. al. 94), and many conservatives believed the so-called “he-cession” was a product of “reverse gender discrimination” (Christensen 369). Katherine Newman notes that “about one in five American men skid down the occupational hierarchy in their working lives. In recessions and depressions, their numbers grow at a particularly rapid rate” (*Falling* 7). Yet, even during such economic hardships, American culture remains steadfast to the rising demands produced by a consumer-driven economy. Following the attacks on the World Trade Center, President George W. Bush striving to “find a metaphor for normalcy . . . seized on shopping—imploping Americans to show Al Qaeda its patriotic backbone by going to the mall and getting on with the business of consuming” (Barber 41). Americans, as Twenge suggests, have consequently “been taught to expect more out of life at the very time when jobs and nice houses are increasingly difficult to obtain” (109). The result is an exacerbation of social strain often leading to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and antisocial behavior.

10       While material expectations in America are increasing, many men are finding themselves on a trajectory of downward mobility which comes as an extreme sense of shock often creating a “volatile combination of anomie and entitlement” (Kimmel, *Guyland* 42). Men, as Susan Faludi observes, are “not only . . . losing the society they were once essential to, they are ‘gaining’ the very world women so recently shucked off a demeaning and dehumanizing” (39). Many men are thus feeling emasculated, humiliated, and ultimately betrayed by the American promise of economic prosperity and the pursuit of happiness. They are not alone in this sentiment. Over the last few decades, there has been a vast increase in external control beliefs in America leading to

an overarching sense of hopelessness.<sup>3</sup> Fierce competition for jobs and education, an ever-increasing divorce rate, the perception of government corruption, a culture of fear, and the constant demand for consumption in the wake of downward mobility all contribute to a pessimistic view that future success is beyond reach. For this reason, Twenge suggests that external control beliefs “increased about 50% between 1960s and the 2000s” resulting in a “rising wave of apathy and cynicism” (140).

11 As an alienating social construct, the American Dream establishes two major pieces of a rigid social structure individuals must negotiate to find prosperity. First, the symbols that equate wealth and status in the United States instill an aspirational reference within the population at large—i.e. its ideology socially constructs common goals, interests, and purposes for all Americans. Thus, the mythos of the American Dream constructs lofty aspirations within the populace that are economically unattainable to many individuals yet also feel entitled to due to the Dream’s inherent promises. Lauren Berlant argues such neoliberal discourses create an affective structure of an optimistic attachment that is ultimately cruel “when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving” (2). As a source of such cruel optimism, the American Dream instills an “attachment to what we call ‘the good life,’ which is for so many a bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it” (Berlant 27). Consumer culture and third wave capitalism further incites, promotes and intensifies feelings of social strain stemming from this cruel optimism:

The spread of consumerist culture, especially when coupled with increasing social inequality and exclusion, involved a heightening of Mertonian “anomie.” At the same time the egoistic culture of a “market society”, its zero-sum, “winner-loser”, survival of the fittest ethos, eroded conceptions of ethical means of success being preferable . . . and ushered in a new barbarism. (Hall, Winlow and Ancrum 6)

To acquire the cultural symbols of success, American’s must negotiate the second element of the social structure: the permissible means for acquiring wealth and success within a society. Because the aspirational references perpetuated by the mythos of the American Dream are inaccessible to many, especially in a recessionary period, the regulatory norms that dictate their realization (e.g. adequate paying jobs) ostracize a large segment of the population and ultimately

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<sup>3</sup> Twenge suggests “people who believe they are in control are ‘internal’ (and possess ‘internality’); those who don’t are ‘external’ (and have ‘externality’)” (138).

perpetuate social strain. This is especially true for men, as “downward mobility strikes at the heart of the ‘masculine ideal’ for the American middle class. When a man of the house has failed at the task that most clearly defines his role, he suffers a loss of identity as a man” (Newman 139). *Gone Girl* illustrates this loss of masculine identity and its detrimental effects on marriage through its representation of Nick’s response to unemployment.

12     Faltering under the pressure of the Great Recession and losing confidence with his ability to provide for his family, Nick is a socially strained archetype: an everyman for the recessionary twenty-first century. Nick bemoans,

I had a job for eleven years and then I didn’t, it was that fast. All around the country, magazines began shuttering, succumbing to a sudden infection brought on by the busted economy. Writers (my kind of writers: aspiring novelists, ruminative thinkers, peoples whose brains don’t work quick enough to blog or link or tweet, basically old, stubborn blowhards) were through. We were like women’s hat makers or buggy-whip manufacturers: our time was done. (5)

A byproduct of the economic crash and the remediation of print, Nick perceives himself as obsolete and believes that only his career can bolster a sense of wholeness and self-actualization. Delineating *Gone Girl* as neoliberal gothic, Emily Johansen argues the “very aspirations that are supposed to guide the success of our characters are what turn them into monsters and destroy them . . . actions [that] follow the logic of normal neoliberal subject formation” (42). Socialized to strive for the symbols that equate wealth and status in American society but unable to achieve them following the loss of his job, Nick becomes resentful of the promises he feels entitled as prescribed by the American Dream. Consequently, he lashes out against his wife who now maintains financial superiority over him and ultimately falls into a state of depression because of his loss of masculine status.

13     In this sense, *Gone Girl* presents Nick’s loss of work as a catalyst for anxiety and rage that damages his marriage as he attempts to reclaim his masculinity through sexual conquest with Andie. His strain is indicative of a noxious value system produced by America’s unbridled commitments to the American Dream, a frame of reference that forces many men to cope with a sense of aggrieved entitlement: the “sense that those benefits to which you believed yourself entitled have been snatched away from you by unseen forces larger and more powerful” ultimately justifying male rage (Kimmel, *Angry* 18). Nick claims, following his loss of control, that “over just a few years, the old Amy, the girl of the big laugh and the easy ways, literally

shed herself, a pile of skin and soul on the floor, and out stepped this new, brittle, bitter Amy. My wife was no longer my wife but a razor-wire now daring me to unloop her, and I was not up to the job with my thick, numb, nervous fingers” (66). For this reason, Nick constantly battles the misogyny he sees reflected in his father. He claims, “I feel my father’s rage rise up in me in the ugliest way . . . I felt a momentary spurt of fury, that this *woman* presumed to tell me what to do in *my own home*. . . stupid bitch (83; 79-80, emphasis in original). Nick thus becomes a statistic of violence that followed the economic crash, as men’s abusive behavior saw a rapid increase as a response to unemployment during the Great Recession (Schneider et. al. 472). Kimmel argues, “this model of violence as the result of a breakdown of patriarchy, of entitlement thwarted, has become the bedrock of the therapeutic work with violent men. Again and again, what research on rape and domestic violence finds is that men initiate violence when they feel a loss of power to which they felt entitled” (*Angry* 186). Throughout *Gone Girl*, Amy states she is fearful of Nick’s patriarchal response to his loss of power (whether this is true or not) and her revenge is a tactic to “make him a better person” that does not “glid[e] through life . . . [on] his beloved child-entitlement” (316-317).

14 Nick’s misogyny also takes the form in less aggressive ways as he regresses into a state of extended adolescence, or what Kimmel deems *Guyland*: a period of limbo in which men remain in a space of irresponsible boyhood while waiting to achieve the traditional markers of masculinity such as a career or the purchasing of a first home. Since such markers are much harder to obtain in contemporary America, Kimmel suggests men reside in a state of extended adolescence that further contribute to their symptoms of anxiety (*Guyland* 3). Following his loss of work, Nick transforms from a “laid-back and calm, smart and fun and uncomplicated” man (53), into a “dull-eyed” lazy partner that constantly drinks beer and surfs porn (114). Consequently, Amy feels she has lost equality in her marriage as she must constantly nag Nick to fulfill his most basic familial obligations. To reclaim his masculinity and loss of identity, Nick opens a bar which he frequents throughout the novel: “I won’t make that mistake again: the one plentiful herd of magazine writers would continue to be culled—by the internet, by the recession, by the American public, who would rather watch TV or play video games or electronically inform friends that, like, rain sucks! But there’s no app for a bourbon buzz on a warm day in a cool, dark bar. The world would always want a drink” (10). Flynn’s depictions of male coping strategies in *Gone Girl* are indeed in line with discourses concerning America’s crisis of

masculinity. During the Great Recession, alcohol abuse drastically increased with 770,000 adults becoming binge drinkers (Bor et. al. 346). Heavy alcohol use is, of course, a coping mechanism to deal with the anxieties of unemployment, but, more importantly, allows men to reclaim power in a culture experiencing a crisis of masculinity: “It allows [men] to prove their manhood and hold onto their boyhood all at the same time. All the freedom and none of the responsibility” (Kimmel, *Guyland* 109). This lack of responsibility is detrimental to marriage as Amy suggests: “I think it’s fair to say garbage shouldn’t literally overflow . . . that’s just being a good grown up roommate. And Nick’s not doing anything anymore, so I have to nag, and it pisses me off” (116). Having lost equality in her relationship, Amy’s revenge is an attempt to force Nick to comply with the basic promises/responsibilities of marriage.

15 Porn consumption is another way in which some men strive to reclaim a sense of masculinity. Kimmel notes that sexual conquest is a time-honored way in which men prove their manhood. Yet, women, as sexual-gatekeepers, become the primary obstacle for such validation. Thus, the pornographic hyperreality becomes a safe-space in which men bolster their masculinity as the pornographic actress willingly submits to sexual advances through the male gaze (*Guyland* 169-170). In addition, pornography alters men’s perceptions concerning sex in real-life via the simulation. In a study concerning the effects of porn consumption, Pamela Paul found that pornography conditions men to accept certain sexual practices as reality: A “massive exposure” group consumed forty-eight minutes of porn a week for six weeks, while an “intermediate exposure group” watched two hours of porn during the six-week period. A third group didn’t watch any porn over the course of the experiment. Following the six weeks, the massive exposure believed 67% of Americans had oral sex (close to actuality), while the no exposure group said 34%. The massive exposure group thought more than twice as many Americans engaged in anal sex than the no exposure group (29 versus 12%) and the massive exposure group believed 3 in 10 Americans engaged in group sex, compared to 1 in 10 for those that did not consume any pornography (78). Such findings suggest pornography consumption greatly effects men’s beliefs concerning sexual activity as they accept hyperreality as reality.

16 Nick’s infidelity stems from his desire for the simulation (what Amy deems “cool girl”) and the need to bolster his self-esteem via sexual conquest. His description of his mistress, Andie, is purely physical and makes her appear non-human, an object solely for male sexual pleasure: “an alien fuck-doll of a girl, it must be said, as different from my elegant, patrician wife

could be” (198). Furthermore, he claims Andie makes him feel “like a worthwhile man, not the idiot who lost his job, the dope who forgot to put the toilet seat down, the blunderer who just could never quite get it right” (199). Unlike Amy, Andie is submissive to Nick’s desires and grants him the entitlement he feels towards his hegemonic masculinity. She is easy to get along with, does not make demands, and never scowls at him. Such submission ultimately makes him believe true love is “*the permission to just be the man you are*” (*Gone Girl* 204, emphasis in original). Nick therefore justifies his adulterous actions and ultimately rejects Amy who he perceives as domineering and ruinous to his identification as a man. Accordingly, he conditionally “love[s] a girl who doesn’t exist,” a postfeminist simulation that he has been inculcated to believe should “bow to [his] wishes” (*Gone Girl* 299; 303).

### **“It’s Tempting to Be the Cool Girl”: Buying Femininity in America’s Consumer Culture**

17 The most shocking and ingenious aspect of Flynn’s *Gone Girl* is that there are two drastically different sides to Amy: a meek and devoted woman delineated in the fictitious journals employed to frame her husband for murder and the bitter psychopathic avenger revealed in part two of the novel. Yet, while both personalities are strikingly distinct, they both are shaped by patriarchal social structures that define femininity in America. Diary Amy is the embodiment of emphasized femininity. R.W. Connell argues, “emphasized femininity is organized around compliance with gender inequality,” and is “oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men” (187). It is a pattern of femininity accentuating “the display of sociability rather than technical competence, fragility in mating scenes, compliance with men’s desires for titillation and ego-stroking in office relationships, acceptance of marriage and child care as a response to labor-market discrimination against women” (188). Accordingly, emphasized femininity maintains inequality as an “adaptation to men’s power” by stressing empathy, nurturance and playing by the rules as a norm (188). Some of the first words uttered by Amy in *Gone Girl* are, “I met a boy” and her diary subsequently delineates her first encounter with Nick: “I’m too self-conscious. I feel myself trying to be charming, and then I try to be even more charming to make up for the fake charm, and then I’ve basically turned into Liza Minnelli: I’m dancing in tights and sequins, begging you to love me” (14-15). In the early sections of *Gone Girl*, Amy’s life centers around Nick, the desire to be swept off her feet, and to fulfill a man’s emotional needs. Her desires for self-actualization therefore conform to the gendered expectations of female

fulfillment through marriage. She further claims to reject feminist notions of courtship (her “Independent Young Feminist card”) (52), and revels in Nick’s masculine dominance: “He has claimed me, placed a flag in me: *I was here first, she’s mine, mine*. It feels nice, after my recent series of nervous, respectful post-feminist men, to be a territory” (18). Flynn highlights Amy’s emphasized femininity to misdirect the audiences’ attention from her involvement in her own disappearance and construct the twist in part two, but, more importantly, to demonstrate her desire to gain self-actualization via marriage and her commitment to nurturing her relationship.

18 Many women maintain a curious view of love that incorporates both a critical distance and hope for obtaining a more traditional romantic ideal. As Macko and Rubin suggest, “the term ‘soul mate’ comes up a lot when you talk about love with Gen-X/Y women . . . most of the women [they] interviewed insisted they were not looking for a Prince Charming—then, without missing a beat, they described an equally unattainable ideal” (89-90). This dichotomy derives from the pressure to conform to gender roles concerning courtship, the demands of individualism, and the reinforcement of stereotypic gender messages by the media. In part one of *Gone Girl*, Amy internalizes American culture’s postfeminist sensibilities. Such sensibilities,

include the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; the articulation or entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. (Gill 255)

Amy’s early notions of relationships stem from postfeminist media cultures, her misconceived perceptions of her parents’ perfect marriage (she claims they are soul mates), and the *Amazing Amy* stories they write which extol notions of emphasized femininity to which she is expected to conform.

19 Furthermore, Amy is a writer of personality quizzes for women’s magazines. Her contributions articulate and prescribe the relative roles and duties of men and women in dating scenes. For example, concerning the fact she has not heard from Nick weeks after their first kiss, Amy writes: “a) Do I know you? (manipulative challenging) b) Oh, wow, I’m so happy to see you! (eager, doormatlike) c) Go fuck yourself. (Aggressive, bitter) d) “Well, you certainly take your time about it, don’t you, Nick?” Answer: D” (35). Essentially, her thought processes stem from conduct manuals of the twenty-first century: a postfeminist media culture producing a

model of desirable femininity. In regards to *Cosmopolitan* magazine, Antoinette E. Gupta, Toni S. Zimmerman and Christine A. Fruhauf note “women receive messages about how to change themselves by learning how to change the way they talk and behave with men, and how to make men feel good by fulfilling their sexual and emotional needs. This implies that women need to compromise and sacrifice themselves to be in a relationship. If such is the case, then women internalizing these messages may be placing unrealistic expectations on themselves” (263). Such magazines construct an illusion of female agency achieved through male validation that is ultimately based on masculine sexual fantasies: a neoliberal femininity emerging from the sexualization of culture and represents a remodeling of patriarchal power: “a shift from an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze. I would argue that it represents a higher or deeper form of exploitation than objectification -- one in which the objectifying male gaze is internalized to form a new disciplinary regime” (Gill 258). This is essential to a postfeminist discourse that perpetuates permissive notions that sexual equality has been achieved for women and that fulfilling male sexual desire equates female empowerment.

20 In the one of the most significant passages of *Gone Girl*, Amy defines and rejects the postfeminist simulation “cool girl”:

Men always say that as *the* defining compliment, don’t they? *She’s a cool girl*. Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she’s hosting the world’s biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. *Go ahead, shit on me, I don’t mind, I’m the Cool Girl*. (299-300, emphasis in original).

The notion of the “cool girl” represents a revised patriarchal model in which a conflict between embedded feminism and enlightened sexism is developed. Douglas argues, “because women are now ‘equal’ and the battle is over and won, we are now free to embrace things we used to see as sexist, including hypergirliness. In fact, this this is supposed to be a relief” (12). Consumer culture extols this postfeminist simulation by presenting female power as an act of conspicuous consumption that joins in on female objectification as a means of obtaining impossible beauty standards necessary for attracting men/husbands, and thus ultimately dismisses outlandish and degrading stereotypes of female sexuality. As Amy claims, “every girl was supposed to be this girl, and if you weren’t, then there was something wrong with *you*” (301, emphasis in original).

In this passage, Amy critiques a postfeminist sensibility that demands self-surveillance in accordance with the male gaze.

21 Many scholars have commented on this transformation and marketing of female sexuality as the rise of “porn chic,” “the sassy woman,” “the phallic woman,” or what Ariel Levy deems “raunch culture”: a performance of wanton sexuality necessary to be accepted and granted attention in a patriarchal society (163). Levy argues, in America there resides

a disconnect between sexiness or hotness and sex itself . . . Sex appeal has become a synecdoche for all appeal . . . Passion isn’t the point. The glossy, overheated thumping of sexuality on our culture is less about connection than consumption. Hotness has become our cultural currency, and a lot of people spend a lot of time and a lot of regular, green currency trying to acquire it . . . But when it pertains to women, hot means two things in particular: fuckable and salable . . . Hotness doesn’t just *yield* approval. Proof that a woman actively *seeks* approval is a crucial criterion for hotness in the first place. For women, and only women, hotness requires projecting a kind of eagerness, offering a promise that any attention you receive for physicality is welcome. (30-33)

Accordingly, women are compelled to uphold raunch culture in fear of being ostracized. Levy suggests, “the only alternative to enjoying *Playboy* (or flashing for *Girls Gone Wild* or getting implants or reading Jenna Jameson’s memoir) is being ‘uncomfortable’ with and ‘embarrassed’ about your sexuality. Raunch culture, then, isn’t an entertainment option, it’s a litmus test of female uptightness” (40). Such depictions of feminine power inadvertently uphold patriarchy and, for this reason, act as a product of masculine desire. As Susan Moore and Doreen Rosenthal note, regulatory norms of masculine culture shape the sexual behaviors of both genders and therefore provide no safe way for women to express their sexuality (54). Women are repeatedly told that projecting a kind of sexual eagerness is necessary for the acquisition of male validation, and, because of this, the only alternative to being sexual is being deemed uncomfortable with one’s sexuality. By endorsing the raunch culture as an avenue to female empowerment, postfeminist media cultures present an illusion of sexual liberation that ultimately creates an arrangement that trades sex for male approval and potential devotion.

22 Amy rightfully claims that the rise of raunch culture is an impediment to female happiness as women are pressured to conform to “cool girl” stereotype and consequently lose their identity by becoming a product celebrated by consumerism. Flynn states that the notion of “cool girl” was partially inspired by Cameron Diaz in *There’s Something About Mary* (Dockterman). The trope of the “cool girl” has become increasingly more prevalent in

contemporary media, pornography, and romantic popular culture consumed by young adults. Such “romance, surprising as it may seem, shapes the postfeminist mindset. But even more interestingly, postfeminism is reshaping romance” in contemporary Hollywood cinema (Schreiber 4). Films like *There’s Something About Mary* present an illusion of a postfeminist society in which the aims of feminism have already been achieved. Accordingly, films such as this create a depiction of women that, albeit liberated, use their freedom in a manner that ultimately strengthens previously established patriarchal constructs. As Amy suggests, men “*are not dating a woman, [they] are dating woman who has watched too many movies written by socially awkward men*” (300, emphasis in original). The postfeminist romance, Michele Schreiber argues, is “always about a woman who has choices, but the most important choice—of romantic partner—has already been predetermined” (4). The “cool girl” successfully obtains the romantic ideal and gains agency in her relationships via sexual attraction and submission. Women obtain this power by suppressing their desires for equality and achieve male approval by submitting to the male gaze that upholds the body as cultural currency. In this sense, the female body becomes the sole basis of a sexual contract that exchanges sex for potential devotion. This message is problematic. Carole Pateman argues that such sexual contracts ultimately subject women to subordination: “Women are the subject of the contract. The (sexual) contract is the vehicle through which men transform their natural right over women into the security of civil patriarchal right” (6). Women are inculcated by the “cool girl” stereotype to strive to purchase the standard of beauty/sexuality, a social system that greatly benefits men, due to the expectations that beauty/sex can provide future commitment.

23 Flynn strives to present the postfeminist simulation, “cool girl,” as a hyperreality that does not truly exist. Women are compelled to adapt to the role in their relationships and consequently negate self-actualization, remodeling the self as a “figment of the imagination of a million masturbatory men” (*Gone Girl* 303). Accordingly, she presents the gender norm a source of inequality in her relationships, as marriage becomes an arena in which those involved strive to maintain power within a reciprocal system of exchange. Women are continually expected to perform an ‘inauthentic’ model of femininity while men feel entitled to hegemonic masculinity within a patriarchal social structure. Social exchange theory provides a compelling framework for understanding this gender discrimination in relationships, as individuals weigh the instrumental value of the other and even view relationships in terms of winners and losers

(Hughes, Morrison and Asada 52; Snapp et. al. 50). Delineating social exchange theory, Linda D. Molm argues that

in an exchange relation between actors A and B, A's *power* over B is defined as the level of potential cost that A can impose on B. It derives from, and is equal to, B's dependence on A. Each actor is *dependent* on the other to the extent that the outcomes valued by the actor are contingent on exchange with the other. This contingency is primarily a function of two variables, value and alternatives. B's dependence on A increases with the *value* of B of the exchange resources that A controls, and decreases with B's *alternative* sources of the same (or equivalent) resources. (29, emphasis in original)

Power, within a system of sexual exchange, is defined throughout *Gone Girl* as the ability compel the other to conform to the "cool" ideal and thus become complacent via the notion of the dancing monkey: the "horrible things women make their husbands do to prove their love. The pointless tasks, the myriad sacrifices, the endless small surrenders" (74). In this sense, Nick gains power in the relationship as Amy is compelled via the notion of the "cool girl" to submit to her own degradation allowing him to remain irresponsible in the nurturing of their relationship. Amy attempts to regain agency by abandoning the simulation and is ultimately rejected by Nick because he has been inculcated into accepting the hyperreality. As a result, he replaces her with another woman that conforms to the role of the "cool girl." Amy abandons the unsustainable performance of femininity influenced by postfeminist sensibilities and embraces her 'authentic self' that requests equality in her marriage. Amy states, Nick "truly seemed astonished when I asked him to *listen* to me" (303), and goes on to ask: "can you 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" (304). In response to Nick's abandonment, Amy employs violent revenge to regain power in her marriage by forcing her husband to reject the simulation and ultimately accept her as an inherently flawed individual; loving her as outlined in the conditions of the traditional marital contract.

### **"No, He Does *Not* Get to Win": Evaluating Amy Dunne as a Feminist Anti-Hero**

24     Embittered by the dissolution of her marriage, Amy vindictively frames her husband for murder in an effort to destroy his life and make him pay for the perceived crime of not loving her on her terms. Because of Amy's malevolence, Flynn has been accused of misogyny by many critics of *Gone Girl* (Grossman 48). Indeed, it is easy to perceive Amy's wickedness as a negative portrayal of women and reduce her actions as the crazed response of a "psycho bitch,"

as she is, in fact, a narcissistic criminal.<sup>4</sup> Yet, to fully understand Flynn's aim in *Gone Girl*, it is necessary to read the novel in accordance with the transgressive tradition that employs hyperbolic aberrations as agents of subversion. Transgressive fiction, as a genre, is often characterized by protagonists that feel confined by their society and, for this reason, violate norms in deviant and/or criminal ways to circumnavigate various social institutions that impede their desires. At the heart of such feelings of confinement, often stems an excruciating sense of alienation derivative of an anomic division of labor, the ever-increasing commodification of society, and, in the context of *Gone Girl*, oppressive gender norms.

25 Many literary works deemed transgressive by reviewers and critics derive from a long history of satirical writers that aim to exaggerate perceived obscenities within their culture to stimulate repulsion, and, in consequence, a desire for social change. Robin Mookerjee argues that the roots of transgressive fiction can be found in Greek antiquity and that many writers within the genre can be read as contemporary reiterations of the Menippean School of satirists: Such writers aim to undermine the social systems and ideologies of their time by promoting an extremely regressive worldview that opposes the cultural and political establishments deemed progressive by their society, and, in doing so, aggressively attack the audience's sense of morality and views concerning civilization (14). Many contemporary transgressive authors strive to visually render a Sodom and Gomorrah for their audiences to compel them to turn away from the deviant aspects of their narratives. Such works overemphasize the negative influences of their culture by grossly delineating the potential threats various socializing agents may cause, and through their hyperbole provide a fuller understanding of cultural institutions and numerous agents of socialization. Popular culture and mass media act as an ever-increasing agent of socialization in contemporary society and indubitably inculcate various ideologies and reinforce normative values. For this reason, many transgressive writers highlight this great socializing potential within their works by constructing deviant characters that are grossly influenced by the negative aspects of popular culture and mass media and/or completely reject the socializing process altogether.

26 For women, the idea of happiness and self-actualization is directed towards the achievement of male validation and the acquisition of romantic relationships. Sara Ahmed claims

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term, "psycho bitch," in reference to Nick's perceptions of Amy following her return. He claims Amy is a "petty, selfish, manipulative, disciplined psycho bitch" (529).

“statements on the conditionality of happiness—how one person’s happiness is made conditional upon another’s—ensure that happiness is directive: happiness becomes what is given by being given as a shared orientation toward what is good” (56). This conditional happiness, Ahmed claims, often “means following somebody else’s goods” that some may find as objectionable (56). The female trouble maker, or “feminist killjoy,” thus destroys something thought as good by others in refusing to share the promise of happiness (Ahmed 65). The feminist killjoy has a long literary history. The avenging woman in literature “serves as vehicles of the kind of ‘narrative excess’ that provides room for readings of the representations of the violent woman as agents of subversion” (Mäntymäki 444). Exploring such potential of feminism in rape-revenge narratives, Johanna Schorn claims such stories provide agency to female characters that sharply contrast the passive role regularly used to depict rape survivors (17). Tiina Mäntymäki likewise argues stories of female murders permit an arena in which the performance of violence is employed to critique patriarchal power structures and articulate less-passive modes of resistance (452). Delineating Amy as a modern reiteration of the femme fatale, Kenneth Lota suggests *Gone Girl* provides a social commentary concerning gender expectations in America and rather than simply “present[ing] Amy as an essentialized vision of female evil . . . [serves as] an unflattering mirror held up to millennial gender roles” (163). Amy’s deviance is a response to a patriarchal culture that constructs notions of female happiness and self-actualization.

27     Unable to achieve self-actualization and agency in her marriage with Nick, Amy employs revenge to compel her husband to accept her ‘authentic’ self and ultimately reject illusory gender expectations. Accordingly, she embraces patriarchal aggression that demands respect and status via restorative violence. Scholars struggle to successfully theorize female violence. Violent women remain troubling figures for feminism and their violence is often overlooked due to the widespread denial of female aggression and the idealization of motherhood (Motz 3). Furthermore, the violent woman may be read as a reiteration of the “phallic girl” that gives an impression of having achieved equality by acting like a man, however, ultimately fails to critique masculine hegemony through the adoption of the phallus (McRobbie, *The Aftermath* 83). Judith Halberstam refutes such claims suggesting such “role reversal never simply replicates the terms of an equation. The depiction of women committing acts of violence against men does not simply use ‘male’ tactics of aggression for other ends; in fact, female violence transforms the symbolic function of the feminine within popular narratives and simultaneously challenges the

hegemonic insistence upon the linking of might and right under the sign of masculinity” (250-251). Historically, criminological theories delineated female deviance as a product of biological determinism while viewing male crimes as a response to economic and sociological forces (Belknap 6). More recent feminist understandings of female criminality argue that oppression and social conditioning compel women to cope via deviant channels (Motz 6). *Gone Girl* takes such a feminist approach in explicating Amy’s vengeance. Jacinda Read suggests that if scholars desire to understand the feminist implications to female revenge narratives, they must seek to understand the way in which such stories “engage with, negotiate and rework these ‘mass cultural fictions of femininity’” (10). Amy’s violence strives to negotiate and rework the inequalities of marriage, and, much like Nick, she experiences a sense of justified aggrieved entitlement that acts as a catalyst for rage: She demands his contributions toward the nourishment of their relationship, that he fully accept her ‘authentic’ self, and feels entitled to respect and loyalty as defined in the traditional marriage contract. Yet, such basic stipulations are not conducive to a society in which patriarchy and male entitlement go seemingly unquestioned. Therefore, she retaliates with violence in an effort to challenge patriarchal power and demand equality within her marriage.

28 In regards to the “cool girl” stereotype, Amy states she “waited patiently—*years*—for the pendulum to swing the other way, for men to start reading Jane Austin, learn how to knit, pretend to love cosmos, organize scrapbook parties, and make out with each other while we leer. And then we’d say, *Yeah, he’s a Cool Guy*. But it never happened” (301, emphasis in original). Rather than passively submitting to her assigned role, Amy employs revenge to force her husband to perform the role of a doting spouse as she has likewise been expected via her gender role. In doing so, she deconstructs hegemonic masculinity by appropriating patriarchal violence. *Gone Girl* elucidates the effects patriarchal violence extolled by the consumer culture has on the female psyche, and, by regendering it, satirically demonstrates the way females have no outlet for violence, as she is deemed a “psycho bitch,” while it remains completely acceptable for men like her husband. By the conclusion of the novel, Amy forces Nick to conform to the notion of the ideal male extolled by postfeminist media cultures just as she has been previously expected. Amy’s vengeance ultimately forces Nick reject the postfeminist simulation and become a better husband via nurturance and connection within marriage. He becomes what Peter Douglas deems the postfeminist man: the “postfeminist man, responding to the unfortunate rhetoric of a mythical

postfeminist era, believes his primary responsibility to be personal transformation. So he aims to become sensitive, nurturing, domestically proficient, emotionally expressive, and develops intimate and mutually supportive relationships with other men” (32). Bell Hooks argues,

patriarchal masculinity teaches males to be pathologically narcissistic, infantile, and psychologically dependent for self-definition on the privileges (however relative) that they receive from being born male . . . In a partnership model male identity, like its female counterpart, would be centered around the notion of an essential goodness that is inherently relationally oriented. Rather than assuming that males are born with the will to aggress, the culture would assume that males are born with the inherent will to connect. (*The Will to Change* 117)

Amy’s vengeance demands Nick to conform to such a partnership model masculinity. As Amy declares, “he is learning to love me unconditionally, under all my conditions” (555). Nick also acknowledges the transformation he undergoes in response to Amy’s restorative justice: “I can feel her changing me again: I was a callow boy, and then a man, good and bad. Now at least I’m the hero” (553). While Amy’s plot for revenge is indeed contemptible, and has been viewed by many as the vengeance of a “psycho bitch,” she is, in fact, the “*bitch* who makes [Nick] a man” (*Gone Girl* 530, emphasis in original).

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