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Film Genre and David Fincher's *Gone Girl*

A Thesis Presented

by

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Dedication

To Neil Loren VanLeuvan, and his unparalleled mind.

Introduction: *Gone Girl* in Context

In 1995, director David Fincher, a filmmaker previously known for his work with music videos and the film *Alien III* (1992), released *Seven*. Starring Brad Pitt, who later went on to play an important role in Fincher's cult classic *Fight Club* (1999), and Gwyneth Paltrow as a married couple that moves to the city from the suburbs, *Seven* is generally considered to be a neo-noir crime thriller. The narrative focuses on apprehending a ruthless murderer, yet this film also explores the communication breakdowns that exist in the marriage between Tracy (Gwyneth Paltrow) and David (Brad Pitt). Alienated by her new, urban environment, Tracy turns to David's partner Detective Somerset (Morgan Freeman) as a confidant. When Tracy finds out that she is pregnant, Somerset voices his opinion that the city is an unfit place to raise a child. He also suggests that if Tracy decides to get an abortion, she should not tell David in order to avoid creating tension. Ultimately, the marriage dissolves when Tracy is murdered, yet Fincher's depiction of their marital dysfunction represents a theme that is woven throughout many of the director's works: heterosexual relationships expose destructive incongruities between men and women. Critic Matt Singer comments on *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008) and notes that "even Fincher's most romantic movie is sad and cynical," as its depiction of the doomed relationship between Benjamin (Brad Pitt) and Daisy (Cate Blanchett) follows in the vein of Fincher's other films to suggest that "...love, even true love, is fleeting and impermanent."

Gone Girl (2014), the director's most recent film, is a cinematic adaptation of Gillian Flynn's best-selling novel of the same name. Like *Seven* and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, the rudimentary plot structure of the film deals with an ill-fated

relationship. Specifically, it depicts the challenges in the marriage between Amy Elliot Dunne (Rosamund Pike) and her husband Nick (Ben Affleck). On their fifth wedding anniversary, Amy goes missing, and Nick is implicated in the case. Attempting to work with detective Rhonda Boney (Kim Dickens) and Officer James Gilpin (Patrick Fugit) to find Amy even as he is trying to dodge suspicion, Nick eventually realizes that the disappearance is Amy's own act of retributive justice. In order to fulfill her desire to punish Nick for the ways in which he has betrayed her, Amy, frequently lauded for both her beauty and her brilliant mind, fakes her own murder. The film was a box office success, and Rosamund Pike was nominated for an Academy Award for her portrayal of Amy.

Reviewers of *Gone Girl* are quick to attempt to classify it as belonging to a fixed film genre; some claim that it is a definitive work of modern film noir, while others argue that it is undoubtedly a thriller. In a review for *Esquire*, Nick Schager argues that the film is a black comedy:

Contrary to what you've heard, *Gone Girl* is not a thriller. Nor is it a mystery. Rather, it's a comedy, an outrageously pulpy, black as midnight satire about identity, desire, marriage, the media, and the lengths we'll go to for happiness. Stuffed to the gills with knotty themes that it investigates via a ridiculously loopy narrative, it's an out-and-out laughter and disguise.

While Schager emphasizes the elements of black comedy in his reading of the film, his comments nevertheless point to an important critical concern regarding *Gone Girl*: its controversial status from the perspective of genre studies. While it is difficult to firmly define the characteristics of specific genres, such as the western, the gangster, or the

horror film, critics agree that films can be categorized as belonging to particular genres if they follow certain patterns or conventions in content (for example, types of characters and settings) and form (such as particular narrative structures and aesthetic elements). Classic westerns are set in the American West and contain stock character archetypes such as the cowboy and the outlaw, while films in the musical genre share the common structure in which songs and often dances are woven throughout the narrative. Genre characteristics frequently overlap in any given film, and thus in any reading that relies on genre theory, it is important to note that a film's association with specific genres is fluid.

Genre theory is often criticized as lending itself to an oversimplified interpretation of a text; a scholar can discern how a film such as *Stagecoach* (1939, dir. John Ford) adheres to the conventions of the Western through its inclusion of a melancholy cowboy character and conflicts pertaining to the wilderness versus civilization, yet the challenge then becomes to consider how such patterns lend themselves to a critical analysis that goes beyond a cursory reading. Daniel Chandler argues for the value of genre criticism, observing, "current genres go through phases or cycles of popularity (such as the cycle of disaster films in the 1970s), sometimes becoming 'dormant' for a period rather than disappearing. On-going genres and their conventions themselves change over time." The prevalence of different genres waxes, wanes, and evolves, yet the space for critical debate is in the question: why?

As film genres constantly shift and change in response to cultural influences, genre studies affirms the importance of analyzing the relationship that exists between films with similar archetypes and tropes, and it also creates a mirror through which one can evaluate the values of a society. In "Film Genre and the Genre Film," Thomas Schatz

contends that “Genre films not only project an idealized cultural self-image, but they project it into a realm of historical timelessness” (575) and “Typically, films produced later in a genre’s development tend to challenge the tidy and seemingly naïve resolutions of earlier genre films” (575). As Schatz asserts, identifying and contextualizing a film’s generic elements and associations helps us to understand the ways in which the work speaks to social and cultural concerns. Additionally, genre study offers a lens through which one can analyze directorial creativity. If a filmmaker chooses to purposefully invoke genre elements in a work, then not only are the implications of the intertextuality this creates noteworthy, but the degree to which the work deviates from standard tenets of the genre also becomes significant.

Thus a fruitful interpretation of *Gone Girl* should not be rigidly preoccupied with interpreting the film as an example of a fixed genre. A more meaningful way of reading Fincher’s film explores the complex and metacinematic ways in which it contends with conventions from multiple genres in order to expose the manipulation and cynicism that are central to contemporary American notions of an ideal, loving marriage. Flynn’s original novel, lauded by *The New York Times* critic Janet Maslin as “...wily, mercurial, subtly layered, and populated by characters so well-imagined they’re hard to part with” also uses Nick and Amy’s relationship to present an iconoclastic depiction of a modern marriage. The novel begins from Nick’s perspective, and as the narrative point of view shifts between Nick’s first-person narration and Amy’s first-person diary, it is up to the reader to distinguish the lies that Nick and Amy tell about their relationship from the truth. Flynn’s work functions on a structural level as a mystery novel; its plot features an unsolved crime and is suspense-driven. However, *Gone Girl* is a far cry from a

straightforward mystery in the vein of Agatha Christie, for the novel is “ice pick sharp” (Maslin) and offers scathing social criticism regarding the nature of modern marriage. Fincher’s adaptation, in which Gillian Flynn wrote the screenplay, both sustains and advances the provocative thematic concerns of Flynn’s original novel, and a close reading of the film through the lens of genre theory unearths an intersection of many genres that is both complex and purposeful.

The early scenes in the film adaptation of *Gone Girl* purposefully recall tropes from clichéd “chick flick” romantic comedies to provide a sarcastic commentary on the ways in which 21st century mainstream American culture still insists on marriage as the primary indicator of success for a heterosexual female, and to explore the repercussions of postfeminist beliefs that obtusely equate marriage with personal validation and also note Hollywood’s culpability in sustaining such ideals. Amy Elliot Dunne’s character rebels against the paradigm wherein a wife, succumbing to the pressure to adhere to social norms and get married, subordinates her own interests in order to indulge a male fantasy of the easygoing, unfailingly compatible woman. Additionally, to critique this construct of contemporary marriage and the deeply problematic expectations it creates, the film invokes another popular film genre: film noir. However, through the incorporation of a visual aesthetic that is sympathetic to Amy’s suffering, the ambiguity that derives from Amy’s dual role as both the femme fatale and the protagonist, and the re-envisioning of traditional iconography associated with the femme fatale archetype, *Gone Girl* subverts the conventions of classic noir. As it probes the dysfunction at the heart of marriage and domestic life, Fincher’s film also conjures aspects of various thriller subcategories such as the Hitchcockian suspense thriller, the horror thriller, and

the postmodern “preposterous” thriller. Characteristics of Hitchcockian thrillers and horror enable Fincher’s film to challenge the notion that the institution of marriage itself fosters emotional intimacy, suggesting instead that important aspects of each spouse’s identity can remain hidden despite the routine familiarity of marriage. *Gone Girl* also relies on aspects of the preposterous thriller, itself rooted in exaggeration and dark comedy rather than realism, using social satire to explore the ways in which the institution of marriage can reduce a healthy relationship to a mere struggle for autonomy, a game wherein each spouse competes to be the most valued or desired member of a marriage.

Invoking “The Chick Flick” to Critique the Effects of Postfeminist Ideology

The cultural phenomenon known as the “chick flick” refers to films that are marketed directly towards women, and box-office hits such as *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001, dir. Sharon Maguire), *Legally Blonde* (2001, dir. Robert Luketic) and *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days* (2003, dir. Donald Petrie) are well-known examples of films that embody the hallmark characteristics of this genre. In her introduction to a collection of essays entitled *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies*, Suzanne Ferriss usefully traces the origins of the term “chick,” noting that in the 1970s, “chick” was rejected by second-wave feminists as a pejorative word that infantilized women (14). However, in recent decades, the term has been appropriated by the post-feminist generation as a word that is “...wielded knowingly to convey solidarity and signal empowerment” (Ferriss 15). While the modern use of the word “chick” reflects liberation from the pre-existing confines of the term, its use is indicative of the more placatory

agenda of third-wave feminists. Ferriss situates “chick flicks” within the context of postfeminist ideology and asserts that:

Chick flicks illustrate, reflect, and present all of the cultural characteristics associated with the postfeminist aesthetic: a return to femininity, the primacy of romantic attachments, girl power, a focus on female pleasure and pleasures, and the value of consumer culture and girly goods, including designer clothes, expensive and impractical footwear, and trendy accessories. (16)

In chick flicks “the primacy of romantic attachments” is certainly a recurring thematic concern. Linda Ruth Williams’s essay “Movies, Smart Films, and Dumb Stories,” considers the ways in which a feminist reading of *Legally Blonde* might be problematic, reading this trope in relation to the film’s protagonist, Elle Woods (Reese Witherspoon). Williams comments, “Elle succeeds in turning attitudes around in the classroom, befriending a former rival, and overturning preconceptions about herself and her sex...yet *Legally Blonde* starts and ends with the promise of marriage proposals: despite her hot legal career, Elle still considers the perfect end to the perfect graduation day would be a marriage proposal” (50). While *Legally Blonde* suggests that pursuing both a career and marriage are not necessarily mutually exclusive, Elle’s selfhood is not affirmed until she is presented with proposal and adheres to traditional patriarchal conventions.

The emphasis on matrimony is a particular cultural current that is relevant to *Gone Girl*, which criticizes the “primacy of romantic attachments” and reduces the traditional notion of an ideal, loving marriage to an act of mere performance. The viewer is given access to the early stages of Nick and Amy’s relationship through flashbacks in Amy’s diary, and while the idyllic account of their courtship is certainly made more

intriguing by Amy's unreliability as a narrator, it nevertheless offers a purposeful metacinematic invocation of the trademark "chick-flick" tropes that inform the cultural values of modern females. Amy Elliot Dunne is characterized at the beginning of the film as the archetypal single girl who is looking for a male rose amongst the sea of thorns that exist in the New York City dating scene. The setting of New York City itself is noteworthy, as the city has been traditionally presented as a breeding ground for fulfilling romantic fantasies in works that form the core of the "chick-flick" canon, such as *Maid in Manhattan* (2002, dir. Wayne Wang), HBO's popular television series *Sex and the City* (1998-2004, dir. Michael Patrick King) and *27 Dresses* (2008, dir. Anne Fletcher). Vivian Ruiz comments on the way in which New York City acts as the "mecca" of chick-flick culture in her dissertation entitled *Of Bridgets, Rebeccas, and Carries: Chick Culture Defines Woman*, noting that "New York City, specifically Manhattan, emerges as a fun, glittery, exotic place of posh glamour, opportunity, and adventure" (105), yet she also observes that the cosmopolitan qualities of the city create a detached quality that leads to it simultaneously being a "cruel place to inhabit" (122). Perhaps New York City offers the ideal backdrop for a plethora of formulaic love stories because when two people do ultimately meet and fall in love in a city that is so vast, it reinforces the belief that they are "meant to be together" and they are fulfilling their destiny.

From the beginning of *Gone Girl*, Fincher relies on his female audience members' familiarity with this trope: when Amy recounts meeting Nick for the first time, it is Nick's recognition of Amy's jaded attitude towards New York City dating culture that initially generates magnetism between the two characters. In an integral flashback scene, Nick and Amy cross paths at a birthday party for a mutual friend. The cinematography

embodies the hallmarks of Fincher's work as an auteur: the shadowy camerawork recalls the movies of Orson Welles, yet his trademark use of desaturated colors — in *Gone Girl*, dark grays and yellows in particular — creates a highly stylized aesthetic. The scene opens with a medium shot of Amy at the party, wearing a casual striped sweater and holding two beers, narrating in a voice-over, "I met a boy. A great, sweet, gorgeous, cool-ass boy." A subjective shot from her implied point of view captures a man and a woman talking to each other. The girl giggles shyly while the man gently touches her arm. Conspicuously holding a beer in his other hand, he is presumably on a quest for an alcohol induced one-night stand, and as the camera abruptly cuts to a shot of Amy, the brief suggestion is that she could be subjected to a similar fate. But immediately Nick, in a wholesome collared shirt, sweater, and faint beard to indicate his laid-back personality, enters the frame and introduces himself to Amy. He connects with her by musing, "Let's see —who's your type?" and points to a variety of men who are pretentiously holding their drinks and waxing self-indulgently about their passions. "I don't see you sitting quietly while he bloviates on his post-grad thesis about Proust," Nick comments while pointing to a mousy man in a tweed blazer and thick-framed glasses. As Nick and Amy become more immersed in conversation, the background noise from the party fades and Trent Reznor's melodic, dream-like score streams in. A medium close-up shot reveals Amy's charmed, amused expression as she asks Nick, "And you — who are you?" Nick replies confidently, "I'm the guy to save you from all this awesomeness."

The witty dialogue between Nick and Amy recalls the tone of "...an observant anthropologist who studies human behavior" (107) that Vivian Ruiz asserts is used by Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex and the City* to analyze the dating patterns of Manhattanites, and

just as Carrie uses her descriptions of New York to live out a created fantasy of the “single girl looking for love in the city,” Nick and Amy bond by creating their own fantasy, one wherein their relationship possesses an authenticity and effortlessness that is devoid of the pretentiousness of the New York City hipster scene. Nick fulfills the role of the “knight in shining armor” archetype that is essential to any traditional romantic illusion when he resolutely declares that he plans to rescue Amy from the banal superficiality of both the party and the New York City single-girl life. His sarcastic use of the word “awesomeness” implies that he, too, shares her cynical outlook on the hollowness of social obligations and dating, allowing him to position himself as a sympathetic, observant character with similar values to Amy.

Immediately following their encounter at the party, Nick and Amy leave together, and after continuing to engage in flirtatious banter on an elevator, the two find themselves roaming the streets of New York City hand-in-hand. Nick leads Amy down an alleyway while a bakery truck is being unloaded, and the sugar from the truck creates billowy, romantic clouds. In these clouds of sugar, they share their first kiss. The use of non-diegetic auditory cues enforce the fairytale quality of the scene, as Reznor’s tentatively melodic, yet hopeful score “Sugar Storm” suggests that Nick and Amy’s relationship is sweet, whimsical and filled with romantic possibility. This kiss becomes the key moment in the flashback scenes detailing Nick and Amy’s courtship, and such flashbacks reflect hallmark qualities of chick flicks; the “fairytale-shaped narrative” (Ruiz 134) wherein Amy experiences exhilaration and becomes enraptured with Nick as a result of his charm and attentiveness “...cements monogamy and heteronormativity as keys to happiness” (Ruiz 134). However, Nick and Amy’s relationship profoundly fails

to fulfill the prophecy that the euphoric bliss of their courtship creates, and Fincher's ultimate and darkly comedic subversion of the romantic-fantasy tropes he establishes in the first half of the film forces viewers to re-interpret such scenes as a satire of the fictions in which idealized heterosexual relationships are rooted.

In the final act of *Gone Girl*, Amy and Nick are reunited. After she engineers her disappearance she hides out in disguise in a local campground, where she is robbed of all her money. Forced to seek the help of her controlling and narcissistic former boyfriend, Desi, she ends up imprisoned in his Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired lakeside mansion. Amy manages to escape from Desi and she returns to Nick, who has appealed to her emotions by appearing on a national talk show apologizing for his transgressions and begging for his wife's forgiveness. The "fairytale shaped narrative" of classic chick flicks generally involves a couple surrendering to their true love after overcoming conflict and adversity, and often the dynamics of this trope provide male characters with autonomy. As Heather Brook notes, it is frequently the female character's ability to adhere to the idealized vision that her male counterpart possesses of her that cements their relationship and affirms the woman's ability to be loved. Brook offers the example of the film *Bridesmaids* (2011, dir. Paul Feig), in which the neurotic, disillusioned Annie (Kristen Wiig) is encouraged to pursue her abandoned dream of being a baker by Officer Rhodes (Chris O'Dowd) and thus restore stability to her life. However, while the final scenes of *Gone Girl* are presented to the media as being aligned with a male-oriented power dynamic, one in which Nick, knowingly understanding that Amy belongs safely at home with him, provides a safe haven for her after the trauma she claims to have endured with

Desi, the reality of the resolution is that Nick, having publicly acknowledged that he has cheated on his wife, is at the mercy of Amy's turbulent justice.

In Amy's homecoming scene, Amy, wearing a virginal white dress drenched in blood, dramatically staggers into Nick's dumbfounded arms. While the lights and cameras from local news stations click away, Nick subtly murmurs to her, "You fucking bitch" as Amy falls into his arms in a melodramatic swoon that recalls Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler's passionate embrace in the epic romantic drama, *Gone with the Wind* (1939, dir. David O. Selznick). The gasps from the members of the press are audible, as the media is enthralled by the sensationalism of Amy's return and at publicly witnessing what they believe to be a romantic, "happily-ever-after" moment. The scene closes with a crane shot in which the camera pans away from Nick and Amy, opening the frame and emphasizing the ironic contrast between the reality of their dysfunctional marriage - "You fucking bitch" - and the media's idealized perception of it. This vital scene represents a subversion of the formulaic, patriarchal endings of the standard romantic comedy, for here it is Amy, instead of Nick, who possesses narrative control. Todd VanDerWerf provides a commentary on the end of *Gone Girl*, observing that, "Because in the end, what she's reduced Nick to is the character so many women are asked to play in movies just like this — the supportive spouse, who sits by his wife's side and smiles and says all the right things and never once gets to be anything but what she says he is." The darkly comedic quality of the scene derives from Amy's performance, even caricature, of the damsel in distress archetype so common in fairytales and chick flicks, her [tearful] homecoming immediately preceded by scenes in which she coldly and calculatingly plans a murder. When she emerges from her car at her home in Missouri,

dripping in blood and dramatizing her helplessness and vulnerability, once cannot help but find humor in her unfailing commitment to bring Nick to justice for his marital transgressions. The non-diegetic sound in the scene, again Trent Reznor's wistful "Sugar Storm," creates an association with the courtship scenes from the early days of Nick and Amy's relationship and promotes a cynical reflection on the ways in which "*Gone Girl* suggests that marriage is less about love and companionship and building a life with someone than it is about agendas and lies and inevitable secrets" (McWeeny). Ironically, as Nick and Amy present the story of their relationship to the media as nothing short of something out of a tabloid narrative, Nick is forced to play the role of a dutiful and devoted husband, one he has failed to perform in real life. The emphasis on marriage as a performance is rich with self-reflexivity and dramatic irony; Nick and Amy are performing the ending of a happily-ever-after tale, when in fact their relationship is teeming with resentment and distrust.

Fincher's representation of Nick and Amy's tumultuous marriage skewers preconceived notions of marital bliss and highlights the ways in which marriage, or "the primacy of romantic attachments," is not only indispensable to the plot of the chick flick but to contemporary Western female identity. In a flashback scene that both provides the viewer with insight into Amy's relationship with her parents and acts as a metaphor for her life in general, Amy brings Nick to her parents' book signing. The setting of the signing, an upscale bar in New York City, is filmed with shadowy, low-key lighting. The use of chiaroscuro suggests there is a sinister quality to the party that derives from the ways in which her parents' series of children's books exploits Amy. When Amy's mother, Marybeth (Lisa Banes) appears onscreen, commenting in an accusatory manner

to Amy, “I thought you were going to wear white to match the wedding theme [of the book]”, she is filmed from a very subtle low angle which places her in a position of power and reflects her controlling qualities. Marybeth is not truly villainous, yet the cinematography presents her as a [mild] parody of the overbearing, dictatorial mother.

Amy sardonically relates the nature of her parents’ work to Nick, explaining that the *Amazing Amy* children’s book series, while successful, is a plagiarized and improved-upon version of her own life. Amy dabbled in the cello when she was younger, and in response, her parents wrote a story in which “Amazing Amy” becomes a prodigy. When Amy was cut from the volleyball team freshman year, her literary alter ego made varsity. In the most recent addition to the series, “Amazing Amy” is grown up and gets married, while the real Amy spent many years being single before meeting Nick. The scene encapsulates the ways in which the *Amazing Amy* books “...acted like a standard they [Rand and Marybeth Elliot] were setting for their daughter that she could never quite meet” (Chamberlain). Specifically, the “standard” that exists in dialogue with modern chick flicks stresses the importance of achieving self-acceptance by becoming a wife. An example of a film that shamelessly promotes this paradigm is Anne Fletcher’s *27 Dresses*, which stars Katherine Heigl as Jane, a beautiful woman who, despite being a model employee, friend, and daughter, feels unfulfilled because she is “always the bridesmaid, never the bride” and cannot find a husband of her own. Throughout the course of the film, Jane struggles to overcome an unrealistic crush on her boss and find true love with Kevin (James Marsden), a handsome reporter. Mary Elizabeth Williams critiques this “wedding-centric romantic comedy,” asserting, “*27 Dresses* is a film that wants to deflate its wedding cake and eat it too. It may slyly suggest that weddings are an

overpriced way to trot out our tackiness...but ultimately, it reassures, it's OK, because deep down, a big wedding is what everybody really wants." At the end of the book-signing scene in *Gone Girl*, Nick proposes to Amy, and like Jane in *27 Dresses*, the clear suggestion is that the proposal is a relief for the female protagonist, as it saves her from the burden of having to identify herself as an unmarried woman in her thirties.

However, Fincher's film challenges the notion that the "big wedding" is what Amy craves, stressing instead that Amy's desire to get married stems from deeply ingrained sociocultural values that foreground the importance of marriage for women. In "Marriage is an Abduction," a review of *Gone Girl* for *The New Yorker*, Elaf Batuman concisely deconstructs the nature of this pressure:

There's nothing new about lovely girls, expensively educated in how to become brilliant wives. But *Amazing Amy* stands for a new kind of creation: lovely girls, expensively educated to seize success for themselves (Amy has diplomas from Harvard and Yale) and yet still groomed for the dream of a beautiful dress and a white cake [...] [I]f no longer vital to a woman's success as a human being, marriage is still understood as her crowning success, the event without which her life wouldn't be fully complete. When *Amazing Amy* grows up, she can't *not* get married. The world is still no place for single women. They are regularly bombarded – and I say this, let's face it, from experience – by both well- and ill-intentioned comments about their inability to find that special man.

Thus, despite the fact that Amy is an intelligent and self-sufficient contemporary woman, Fincher still suggests that her privilege does not grant her immunity from the dated ideals perpetuated through "chick flicks" that ask females to define themselves by their roles as

wives. At her parents' book signing for the *Amazing Amy* series, reporters barrage Amy with questions about her own marital status. The media's invasiveness at the party may serve as a metaphor for the pressure women in their thirties face to get married, and notably, it is only when Nick swoops in to propose to Amy that she is emancipated from the journalists' interrogation into her personal life.

The troubling phenomenon that Batuman outlines, one wherein modern women are highly educated and accomplished yet still expected to adhere to an antiquated trajectory ending in matrimony, is clearly conveyed in *Gone Girl* when Nick reports Amy as missing and Detective Boney arrives at the Dunnes' tasteful, but generic, McMansion to investigate the case. Glancing around Amy's office, Boney cannot help but admire Amy's prestigious diplomas from Harvard and Yale that are displayed on the wall, commenting "Impressive gal." Nick barely acknowledges Boney's awe of Amy's scholarly accomplishments, muttering a quick "Yeah," and proceeding to ask her a question about the case. In later conversations with Boney, it is revealed that since moving to Missouri, Amy has not worked, and Nick is unable to describe for the police how she spends her time during the day. While Amy possesses an extraordinary intellect, this important aspect of her identity is dismissed once she marries Nick.

By exploring the pressure to marry that women face, and by invoking and subverting the post-feminist ideals of the chick flick genre, *Gone Girl* ultimately offers a scathing critique of third-wave feminist values. The platform of the postfeminist movement emphasizes a rejection of the radicalism of the second-wave feminists, choosing to promote a more placatory ideology in which resistance to patriarchal oppression is minimized. In particular, through the film's celebrated articulation and condemnation of

the “Cool Girl” archetype, Fincher critiques the unrealistic expectations that stem from such basic interpretations of femininity. After Amy finishes her plan to frame Nick for her murder, she drives away and seethes in a voiceover monologue adapted for the film by Gillian Flynn:

Nick loved a girl I was pretending to be. “Cool girl.” Men always use that, don't they? As their defining compliment: “She's a cool girl.” Cool girl is hot. Cool girl is game. Cool girl is fun. Cool girl never gets angry at her man. She only smiles in a chagrined, loving manner. And then presents her mouth for fucking. She likes what he likes, so evidently he's a vinyl hipster who loves fetish Manga. If he likes girls gone wild, she's a mall babe who talks football and endures buffalo wings at Hooters. When I met Nick Dunne I knew he wanted “Cool girl.” And for him, I'll admit: I was willing to try.

The tone of Amy's monologue conveys a caustic and bitter attitude towards the unattainable expectations she feels women are pressured to strive for in both their marriages and their relationships with men. During the voice-over Amy abandons the indicators of her hyper-feminine identity; a sequence in which she transforms her appearance by cutting and dyeing her hair is intercut with shots of her driving across the country, away from Nick, indulging in fast food and tossing out of the window the pink fluffy pen that she had used to craft her fictional diary. The open windows in Amy's car and the vast landscape that stretches before her represent the liberation she experiences as a result of no longer feeling pressured to maintain the “cool girl” ideal. The “cool girl” archetype is the ultimate embodiment of what Becca Rothfield deems “the new sexism” in her review “*Gone Girl* Has Offered Feminism a New Hero.” According to Rothfield,

“...the new sexism wants a woman who doesn’t care too much, a woman who bows out as soon as she’s no longer wanted, who makes no demands and puts up no resistance.” Rothfield’s notion of the “new sexism” outlines a patriarchal framework in which “cool” is used as a euphemism for the less positive adjective of “passive.” Within this construct is a set of deeply paradoxical social expectations, as it reflects a demand for women to subordinate their own interests in order to indulge a male fantasy of the unfailingly compatible wife or girlfriend.

Twenty-first century feminists, who emphasize individual identity and radical action, are a far cry from the acquiescent ideal that Amy condemns. The “cool girl”, who is content to occupy an existence that is defined by her male counterpart, is immune to the urgency of modern feminism’s agenda. Amy’s parents indirectly create an unattainable ideal for their daughter through the *Amazing Amy* books they author, and similarly, Nick’s desire for the perfect “cool girl” reflects a set of unrealistic expectations that Amy feels pressured to meet. If one chooses to read Amy’s pink pen as a symbol of the constraints of third-wave feminist beliefs, then by throwing her pen out the window, Amy rejects the limitations of the postfeminist platform. Carole Dole observes that third-wave feminism offers an embrace of femininity, commenting on the resurgence of the color pink in the early 2000s and noting, “Suddenly, at the outset of the new millennium, women were ready to reclaim pink...the color pink was part of a larger fashion trend toward brighter colors, sexier styles, and longer hair in the early years of the new century” (84-85). In *Legally Blonde*, Elle Woods uses a similar pen when she enters Harvard Law, a prop that suggests that even though Elle desires an education and is embarking on a quest for knowledge, she represents an insignificant threat to the powers

of patriarchy because she still retains a sense of feminine whimsy and prioritizes her girlishness. In abandoning the pen and cutting her hair, Amy not only works to sever ties with her role as Nick's appeasing wife, but she also symbolically denounces cultural currents that promote the belief that in order for women to be modern, intelligent and still accepted by mainstream society, they must also adhere to traditional patriarchal conventions.

In an essay for *The New Yorker* entitled "Flick Chicks: A Guide to Women in the Movies," comedian Mindy Kaling wittily defines many of the static tropes that female characters in modern Hollywood chick flicks embody. Kaling outlines archetypes such as "The Ethereal Weirdo," also known as "The Manic Pixie Dream Girl," "The Sassy Best Friend," and "The Klutz," a character who is conventionally beautiful but to whom audiences can relate because of her palatable "flaw" of being clumsy. While Kaling's piece is intended to be humorous, it undoubtedly emphasizes not only the lack of complex roles available to female actresses, but also the capacity for chick flicks to enforce unattainable ideals through simplistic genre conventions. The comedian also comments on the appeal of romantic comedies, confessing:

I like watching people falling in love onscreen so much that I can suspend my disbelief in the contrived situations that occur only in the heightened world of romantic comedies. I have come to enjoy the moment when the male lead, say, slips and falls right on top of the expensive wedding cake. I actually feel robbed when the female lead's dress doesn't get torn open at a baseball game while the JumboTron camera is on her.

Kaling's sentiments are a wry commentary on the chick flick's target female audience and its appetite for fairytale love stories, but her observations also call attention to the ways in which films in the genre avoid exploring complexities in relationships between men and women, choosing instead to complicate their narratives through superficial and banal elements of slapstick. The manipulation of such conventions of the chick flick is a vital aspect of *Gone Girl's* sharp-edged critique of the oppressive gender norms in twenty-first century marriage. By incorporating motifs associated with these limited and recognizable roles for women, *Gone Girl* also critiques the role chick flicks play in promoting harmful post-feminist values.

Amy's Agency and the Subversion of Traditional Noir Elements

Roger Ebert's *Guide to Film Noir* declares that works of film noir are "the most American" of films. While many classic noir movies, such as *The Maltese Falcon* (1941, dir. John Huston) and *The Big Sleep* (1946, dir. Howard Hawks), were indeed adapted from American hardboiled detective novels and reflect themes that respond to the concerns of American citizens, the conception of the term itself can be attributed to French critics. In evaluating the works produced in Hollywood both during and after World War II, scholars such as Nino Frank observed the sense of pessimism and despair that permeated American films of the 1940s and coined the phrase "film noir" to describe works that convey a prevailing sense of darkness, both stylistically and thematically. In his essay "Notes on Film Noir," Paul Schrader cites disillusionment stemming from World War II as a primary influence on the thematic concerns of film noir, yet he also notes the ways in which German Expressionism impacted the formal motifs in noir films.

Cinematic techniques that can be traced throughout many works of noir include dark lighting, a partiality for shadows, incongruent lines, and a preference for compositional tension as opposed to action (Schrader 586-597). Many scholars consider film noir to be one of the most creative movements in Hollywood cinema, and thus it is not surprising that many films throughout the remainder of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first clearly demonstrate noir influences.

Recent decades have seen an increasing number of films that reflect the noir perspective, a cinematic phenomenon broadly described as “neo-noir.” In *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, Mark T. Conard says “The term *neo-noir* describes any film coming after the classic noir period that contains noir themes and noir sensibility” (2), citing works such as *Chinatown* (1974, dir. Roman Polanski), *Reservoir Dogs* (1992, dir. Quentin Tarantino) and *Sin City* (2005, dir. Robert Rodriguez) as films that contribute to the core of the neo-noir canon. While works of neo-noir are comparable to traditional noir films in that they share a cynical tone, many similar archetypes, and a fondness for crime and violence, the development of filmmaking technology allows directors to creatively explore ways in which conventions of noir stylistics can be re-envisioned. *Gone Girl*'s manipulation of traditional noir elements, particularly its creation of a noir aesthetic that serves to humanize Amy, the characterization of Amy as both the femme fatale and the protagonist of the film, and the destabilizing of traditional visual cues that are related to the archetypal femme fatale all endow Amy with autonomy within the [world of the] narrative and enable the film to foreground the oppressive gender dynamics within contemporary marriage.

The apocalyptic town of North Carthage, Missouri and the sterile suburban neighborhood in which Amy and her husband Nick live are elements of the setting that function to metaphorically convey disillusionment and doom. Traditional noir films frequently employ a seedy, urban backdrop to express the cynicism of a typically male protagonist — for example, in *The Big Sleep* the cityscape of Los Angeles represents the crime-ridden world that has hardened detective Philip Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart) — whereas the suburban setting in *Gone Girl* lends itself to the probing of Amy’s anxieties about her relationship with her husband. North Carthage is characterized through an opening montage that depicts the town as a bleak representation of mundane Midwestern suburbia. Film reviewer Emanuel Levy comments on Fincher’s visual style in *Gone Girl*, noting that “The physical world of *Gone Girl* mirrors the internal state of its characters — or perhaps vice-versa — with its portrait of recession-era American full of comforting facades that, upon closer inspection, are fraying at the seams. The result is a kind of *noir Americana*, a darkly hypnotic angle on misplaced American dreams.” Shots of empty storefronts and abandoned buildings are elements of the *mise-en-scène* that suggest that the community is in decay, and the notable lack of any pedestrians on the street reflects the overwhelming sense of isolation that permeates the town. The montage concludes by cutting to a shot of Nick resignedly taking out the trash, as the camera pans over the Dunnes’ cul-de-sac to reveal a large landscape of suburban homes, intended for bustling families, that are now empty and for sale. By following the opening shots of North Carthage with an introductory image of Nick, “the camera does everything it can to keep him perfectly centered against the backdrop of his suburban life [...] we are, instead, watching Nick’s story” (VanDerWerff). However, this premise is problematized as

Amy's character gains narrative control in the film, and soon a relationship between Amy's "story" and the metaphoric Midwestern wasteland that initially reflects Nick's worldview can be traced.

An integral flashback scene depicts Amy leaving her sophisticated brownstone in New York City and traveling to North Carthage with Nick so that the unemployed couple can care for Nick's ailing mother. As Amy silently walks down the steps of her New York City apartment to say goodbye to her parents, she is filmed through an objective, medium-long shot. The contrast between Amy's bright blonde hair and the muted colors of the New York cityscape draws the viewer's attention to her figure, and while Nick and her parents remain in the background to say final farewells, Amy occupies the foreground of the frame as she strides ambivalently to the car. Instead of walking to the vehicle together, Nick and Amy approach it separately. Such an action not only suggests that they are no longer united in their marriage, but it also foreshadows the ways in which the move to Missouri will further their estrangement.

Here the noticeable lack of emotion on Amy's face contrasts sharply with the voice-over narration in the scene. Amy comments on the move, "I don't mind. I just — wish he'd ask." After Nick and Amy exchange an almost imperceptible grimace with each other in their Volvo, the scene abruptly cuts to an objective shot of the couple driving through their cul-de-sac for the first time. The suburban aesthetic, its dystopian qualities advanced through the use of a heavy filter, is familiar to the viewer from the opening sequence of the film. This disorienting shift in setting mirrors Amy's feelings upon entering her new neighborhood, and a long shot from Amy's subjective perspective in the passenger seat reveals the couple's sizeable but anonymous new home. Nick

immediately runs out of the car to greet his mother and twin sister, demonstrating a disregard for his wife, while Amy hesitates to embrace her new environment by remaining inside the vehicle. Thus the apocalyptic suburbia of North Carthage, which the opening scene of the film initially depicts as a representation of Nick's dissatisfaction, is here represented through Amy's implied gaze; as an aesthetic, it is now associated with her subjectivity. By shifting the associative and affective significance of the setting away from Nick and towards his wife, Fincher creates space within the film to humanize Amy and explore her anxieties.

Through the move to Missouri, Amy finds herself embodying the role of a docile, undervalued wife, and the scene's visual and structural cues align Amy's experience with a familiar noir trope: "It is this factor of being forced to the goals and purposes formulated by *someone else* which accounts in large measure for the feelings of alienation and helplessness in film noir" (Harvey 39). A film that offers a more romanticized depiction of a couple embarking on a new chapter of their life might emphasize the exuberance and energy with which they approach the task of moving house, yet Fincher chooses to foreground the "feelings of alienation and helplessness" Amy experiences as a result of Nick's failure to acknowledge her emotions about the move. Nick and Amy do not verbally communicate with each other throughout the entire scene, and the only opportunity Amy is given to express herself directly is through her voice-over narration. The scene pertinently conveys the "new sexism" described by Becca Rothfield: a close reading of the diction in Amy's narration, such as the use of the passive phrase "I don't care" to precede her plea for Nick's recognition, indicates that Amy indeed feels pressure to embody the role of the woman who "makes no demands

and puts up no resistance.” One could consider Amy’s “misplaced American dream” (Levy) that the suburban wasteland of Carthage represents as being one in which it is her passivity, as opposed to her voice, that is valued in her marriage.

Amy Elliot Dunne’s physical beauty and the cold, at times calculating affect she presents, encompass qualities that link her to the classic femme fatale archetype of 1940s film noir. Rita Hayworth’s title role in Charles Vidor’s 1946 film *Gilda* and the character of Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) in *Double Indemnity* (1944, dir. Billy Wilder) are examples of the stock femme fatale, characters who according to scholar Christine Gledhill “are defined by their sexuality, which is presented as dangerous and desirable to men” (16). Additionally, Gledhill notes that in classic film noir, “often the work of the film is the attempted restoration of order through the exposure and then destruction of the sexual, manipulating women” (16). However, while Amy’s character is undoubtedly dangerous, desirable, sexual, and manipulative, she cannot be dismissed as a one-dimensional archetype who is ultimately scorned at the end of the narrative. In *Gone Girl*, Fincher offers an iconoclastic, radical depiction of the femme fatale by including scenes that truly probe Amy’s interiority. Thus Amy may be considered both the femme fatale and the protagonist of the film: while she may be murderous, she is also depicted as possessing a vulnerability that results from being pressured to fulfill the role of the ideal wife and daughter. In her relationships with other characters, Amy’s true subjectivity is [over]shadowed by their fantasies of who they desire her to be. While Amy is murderous and manipulating like the other femme fatales of classic film noir, “...she’s also sort of *justified*, within the film’s cinematic grammar” (VanDerWerff). Through “justifying” Amy’s actions, or sympathetically exploring the unrealistic expectations she rebels

against in her vengeful scheme, Amy can be viewed as an ironic anti-hero. Critics of *Gone Girl* claim that Amy's characterization reinforces the stereotype of an unstable female; Amanda Dobbins reduces Fincher's work to "a very entertaining story about a man whose crazy wife ruins his life," yet her representation in the film is arguably too multifaceted for such a label.

Amy's complexity is further advanced through the visual images and symbols linked with her character. Traditional iconography of the femme fatale relies on highly sexualized cues to convey the danger that is associated with her femininity, yet such indications inherently adhere to conventions of patriarchy wherein the femme fatale's empowerment depends on an aesthetic of male fantasy. In an essay entitled "Women in Film Noir", Janey Place observes a common association between the femme fatales of films such as *Double Indemnity*, *Murder My Sweet* (1944, dir. Edward Dmytryk) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946, dir. Tay Garnett) wherein "the *femme fatale* is characterized by her long, lovely legs" (54). For example, "In *Double Indemnity*, Phyllis's legs (with a gold anklet significantly bearing her name) dominate Walter's and our own memory of her as the camera follows her descent down the stairs, framing only her spike heels and silk-stockinged calves" (54). In contrast, close-ups that characterize Amy through images of her head frame *Gone Girl*. The repetition of these shots in both the beginning and the end of the film suggests that it is not Amy's physical attributes that define her identity but rather an understanding of her mind that is imperative in order to comprehend her subjectivity.

In the opening shot, the back of Amy's skull is centered in the frame as Nick gently strokes her hair. Nick's voice-over relates, "When I think of my wife, I always

think of her head. I picture cracking her lovely skull, unspooling her brains, trying to get answers.” The sheer aggression of Nick’s words is juxtaposed with the tender manner in which he caresses her, creating a sense of alarm in the viewer. While it certainly adds intrigue to the film, Nick’s violent and invasive metaphor also implies that he feels threatened by the complexities of Amy’s intellect. Amy is frequently referred to as “brilliant,” and it is the intricate scavenger hunt she creates for their anniversary that eventually undermines Nick’s façade of integrity. Amy may embody the archetypal “spider woman” (53) theorized by Janey Place; the woman who weaves a metaphoric “web” to trap Nick and expose his shortcomings. However, she is subversive in that the source of her ability to ensnare Nick does not derive from her seductive powers in the manner of a character like Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950, dir. Billy Wilder). Instead, as the close-ups of her head that frame the film narrative clearly suggest, her autonomy can be traced to her keen intelligence.

The argument that Amy is an untraditional femme fatale is problematized when she is robbed at a motel and forced to seek the aid of her ex Desi. This aspect of the narrative complicates the depiction of Amy as self-sufficient, but as a plot device it allows her to overcome yet another male figure who attempts to strip her of her agency. Additionally, it is only when Amy triumphantly returns home and announces to the media her escape from Desi’s alleged sex slavery that she is able to defy the noir convention wherein a femme fatale ultimately faces consequences for her deviant behavior. According to E. Ann Kaplan’s introduction to *Women in Film Noir*, a femme fatale traditionally receives “punishment” at the end of the narrative by returning to a role that subordinates her within a patriarchal framework (18). At the conclusion of *Gone Girl*,

Amy reveals to Nick that she is pregnant. Nick, realizing that he cannot abandon his child, remains in his marriage to Amy despite her volatile and vindictive behavior. As Todd VanDerWerf argues, Amy's vision of justice involves subverting traditional gender roles and requiring Nick to embody the role that is so often occupied by wives in more traditional films – that of the supportive spouse. Thus Amy's character is iconoclastic throughout *Gone Girl*, as she fails to be returned to her proper "patriarchal place" within the narrative of the film and instead, the trope is applied to Nick.

Critics of *Gone Girl* suggest that the work is misogynistic and an endorsement of gender stereotypes that associate women with mental and emotional instability. However, a close reading of Fincher's postmodern manipulation of classic elements of noir suggests that the film reflects a contemporary, progressive perspective that criticizes the cultural tendency to compartmentalize female identity. Commenting on noir as a genre, Sophia Harvey asserts, "Like an echo chamber, film noir captures and magnifies the rumbles that preceded one of those earthquakes in human history that shift the hidden foundations of a society, and which begin the displacement of its characteristic and dominant systems of values and beliefs" (35). To contextualize *Gone Girl* within this metaphor, one must consider the origins of the values and beliefs that the film attempts to displace and return to the film's commentary on female identity. At the end of *Gone Girl*, Nick is very much aware that Amy is not the fantasy wife whom he married. Ultimately, the liberty that Amy wrestles for herself within the world of the narrative, to reveal that she is not the ideal wife, that she is in fact manipulative and sadistic, offers a definitive triumph. The grotesque aspects of Amy's identity are revealed to Nick, and in choosing to remain married to her, he accepts her in spite of them. Rather than

interpreting *Gone Girl* as a “disturbing threat to the male domain” as outlined by Leslie Coffin, we should instead consider Nick’s acceptance of Amy’s deeply flawed, yet passionate, identity as a dramatized urge to abandon antiquated ideals that value the yielding, subservient wife.

The Thriller, Horror, and Marital Intimacy

In 1927, Alfred Hitchcock released his third silent film, *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog*. Prior to beginning work as a director, Hitchcock worked in production as a title designer. The first two films in which he took a directorial role were commercial failures, and it wasn’t until he released the German Expressionist-inspired *The Lodger* that his work met with critical success. The film’s narrative focuses on a landlady and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Bunting (Maire Ault and Arthur Chesney), who rent a room to a quiet lodger (Ivor Novello). The enigmatic tenant bears a strong resemblance to “The Avenger,” a man who is wanted in London for the killings of seven blonde women. The lodger befriends the Buntings’ daughter, Daisy, a blonde model, and to the dismay of Daisy’s police officer boyfriend Joe, a relationship between the two begins to develop. When a series of mysterious events concludes with the murder of yet another blonde girl close to the Buntings’ home, the lodger is arrested under the suspicion that he is the serial killer. It is only when the man is approached by an angry lynch mob and beaten that news is received that the real Avenger has been apprehended, and the Lodger is free from suspicion.

While the film contains many motifs that Hitchcock continued to weave throughout his subsequent works, such as the incorporation of blonde female characters, a

conflict that is rooted in tensions between the individual and society, and an exploration into fetishistic behavior, it also offers an early example of the suspense thriller genre. In *The Suspense Thriller: Films in the Shadow of Alfred Hitchcock*, Charles Derry asserts, “Among directors, only Alfred Hitchcock seems to have a firm (and uncomplicated) understanding of the suspense thriller” (18) and notes that, with special consideration to Hitchcock’s work, defining characteristics of the suspense thriller include the incorporation of thrills, or depictions of danger, and purposeful timing, in order to engage the viewer by invoking feelings of anxiety and anticipation.

While Hitchcock is certainly not the only director to contribute to the suspense thriller genre, he is renowned as an influential auteur for his ability to use the camera to craft sophisticated films that provoke strong psychological responses in his audience. The works of Brian DePalma reflect the inspiration of Hitchcock, as films such as *Obsession* (1976) and *Dressed to Kill* (1980) also contain elements of voyeurism, suspense, and an exploration into the nature of obsession. Since Hitchcock’s work with suspense thrillers in the first half of the twentieth century, multiple subgenres of the thriller generic category have evolved. Crime thrillers, such as Fincher’s *Seven*, generate suspense from a core narrative that involves the investigation of a criminal case. Erotic thrillers, such as *Basic Instinct* (1992, dir. Paul Verhoeven) and *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999, dir. Stanley Kubrick), use the sexual relationship between the characters to create a sense of danger, while horror thrillers like *Jaws* (1975, dir. Steven Spielberg) present a synthesis of the horror and thriller genres, blending suspense, tension and mystery with gore and visceral violence.

More recently, critic Anne Billson has defined the postmodern “preposterous thriller.” This subgenre of the thriller lacks verisimilitude and comprises films that “...seem to have given up all pretense to plausibility in favor of non sequiturs and baffling plot developments.” Billson cites *Dead Man Down* (2013, dir. Niels Arden Oplev) and *Trance* (2013, dir. Danny Boyle) as examples of the preposterous thriller and notes six motifs that can be traced throughout films in this subgenre. The reoccurring elements outlined by Billson include the incorporation of an absurd “evil master plan,” wickedly intricate murders, lesbian characters, the “mad killer rant,” elaborate locations, and well-known actors playing psychiatrists. Despite the presence of numerous plot loopholes in the preposterous thriller, the lack of realism in these films contributes to their inherently mythic quality, allowing these texts to function as postmodern parables.

Gone Girl presents an intersection of thriller subcategories, yet ultimately the different threads of the thriller genre that are woven throughout the work are synthesized to develop the domestic dysfunction that plagues Nick and Amy Dunne. In its examination of marital intimacy, Fincher recalls elements of Hitchcockian suspense films. Just as Hitchcock generates intrigue in his movies through his aloof yet complex characters and purposeful plot structure, Fincher incorporates similar elements to explore the complexities of marriage and suggest that complete familiarity with one’s spouse is unattainable. *Gone Girl* also evokes the horror film and aspects of the preposterous thriller in order to exaggerate and satirize the lengths to which a person in a marriage will go in order to assume autonomy.

The careers of actresses such as Grace Kelly, Kim Novak, and Tippi Hedren have been defined by their iconic roles in Hitchcock’s suspense films. Hitchcock possessed a

notorious penchant for casting sophisticated blonde actresses in his works, and many meaningful parallels can be drawn between the “Hitchcock blonde” archetype and Amy Elliot Dunne. In *The Birds* (1962) the character of Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren) first appears on screen through a hyper-feminine aesthetic, wearing a fitted skirt that reveals her legs and the silhouette of her body while the characters in the background are costumed in bulky trench coats. While Melanie is presented in a highly sexualized manner that reflects the “voyeurism and fetishistic fascination” (12) that Laura Mulvey so closely associates with Alfred Hitchcock, she also evinces a subversive independence and impulsivity. When Melanie meets Mitch Brenner (Rod Taylor) in a bird shop, she takes the initiative to pursue him by seeking him out at his home in the seaside town of Bodega Bay. At a birthday party for Mitch’s sister Cathy, he questions Melanie about jumping nude into a fountain in Rome and also accuses her of “running with a pretty wild crowd, who didn’t much care for propriety of convention or the opinion of others.” Like Melanie Daniels, Amy is well-dressed and refined, yet she is also resourceful and clever, choosing to frame Nick for her murder by creating a scavenger hunt that calls attention to Nick’s marital infidelities. Just as Melanie flouts tradition and chooses to live a lurid lifestyle instead of getting married, Amy ultimately also rejects cultural expectations by refusing to embody the role of “the cool girl” in her marriage.

On a structural level, *Gone Girl* recalls works in the Hitchcock canon as well. As reviewer Graham Lee observes, much of the suspense in Hitchcock films derives from “reversals,” or “...an event that shifts the audience’s expectations radically changing the trajectory of the story.” In Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958), Scottie Ferguson (Jimmy Stewart) plays a former police detective who is forced to retire early because he develops

acrophobia and vertigo because of field-related trauma. A friend, Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore), hires Scottie to follow his wife Madeline (Kim Novak), whom Gavin believes is possessed. The first Hitchcockian “reversal” that occurs in *Vertigo* happens when Madeline commits suicide, as her death terminates the preliminary narrative apparatus of the film and causes the viewer to wonder how the remainder of the story will continue. When Scottie meets and falls for a woman who looks strikingly like Madeline named Judy Barton (also played by Kim Novak), the story arc shifts again. In *Gone Girl*, the viewer’s expectations are first altered when it is revealed that Nick, who is initially presented as being straightforward and direct, has been having a long-term affair with one of his students, Andie (Emily Ratajkowski). This plot development causes the viewer’s trust in Nick to waver, and his innocence is questioned. The second “reversal” in *Gone Girl* transpires when Amy’s voice-over reveals that she in fact framed Nick for her murder, and most of the journal entries that detailed their courtship are fictitious. The relationship between the suspenseful structure of *Gone Girl* and Hitchcock films not only serves to keep the viewer engaged, it also creates a dynamic wherein both Nick and Amy compete for narrative control over the film, just as they contend for autonomy within their marriage.

The scene in which Amy murders Desi emphasizes the unsettling, visceral violence of the murder, and it offers an example of the one moment in the film where Fincher chooses to elicit the horror film and shock his audience not through the more subtle means of plot twists and suspense, but through a graphic representation of violence and gore. The origins of the modern horror genre can be traced back to the terror-inducing Gothic tales of eighteenth-century England, and subsequent Gothic-inspired

novels such as *Frankenstein* (Mary Shelley, 1818), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Robert Louis Stevenson, 1886), and *Dracula* (Bram Stoker, 1897) have profoundly influenced the horror genre historically in both literature and film. In early cinema, German Expressionist directors such as F. W. Murnau explored the nature of obsession and the supernatural by creating highly stylized aesthetics and incorporating elements of fantasy. In the second half of the twentieth century, the release of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) inaugurated a period wherein the horror film came to "...encompass predatory sexual psychopaths stalking every day, domestic settings as much as supernatural doings in Gothic manors" (Worland 87). The villain in *Psycho* is not a blood-sucking vampire, but rather a young man named Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) who suffers from multiple personality disorder. By removing elements of fantasy from the horror film and suggesting that fear and danger can exist within the safety of the domestic domain, the horror genre adopted a more realistic, and thus more discomfiting, means of generating terror in audiences.

Collectively, films in the horror genre feature few examples of female murderers, as many films choose to adhere to a more conventional pattern in which females, as the more vulnerable sex, are the victims of male pursuit. Emily Rauber, in her essay "The Lady Killers: Considering the Female Killer in Horror," asserts that such a framework has its roots in patriarchal values:

That version of the cat-and-mouse game depends on playing into standard gender dynamics; the male villain is the aggressive agent and it's up to the heroine to defend him off or defeat him if she can [...] [R]elying on a female character to

drive the story is still a rarity in a business that seems to serve up women in peril, not women in power.

When considered in relationship to *Gone Girl*, Rauber's deconstruction of the penchant for horror films to incorporate male, as opposed to female villains, creates space for a critical debate that allows one to generate meaning from Desi's murder scene. Should one consider Amy to be a cold-hearted murderer, or a damsel in distress? As Amy is humanized through other aspects of the film, and scenes such as her parents' book signing probe her interiority, it is impossible to read her character as a static villain. However, Amy's plan to kill Desi is unquestionably premeditated, for in the scenes prior to the murder, she attempts to distract him from her sinister intentions through flattery. When he asks whether she is bored she indulges his inflated ego: "Desi, how can I be bored? You can discuss eighteenth-century symphonies, nineteenth-century poetry, you can quote Proust in French. Nick's idea of culture was a reality TV marathon." She also takes great pains to stage evidence to suggest that Desi sexually assaulted her, an aspect of the film that has prompted controversy because of its depiction of a fabricated accusation of rape.

The cinematography in the sequence leading up to the murder scene employs the film's signature yellow and dark tones, creating an aesthetic that adds to the sinister, ominous quality of the events in the narrative. When Desi arrives home from work, Amy, who waits on the edge of the couch with her legs crossed, greets him with an ill-omened "Hello, Mr. Collings." Shadows veil Amy's face, creating mystery and contributing to the suspense of the scene. Amy guides Desi to the bedroom and the camera switches to a medium-long, subjective shot that reveals Amy's back. Her costuming is notable, for the

virginal white lingerie she wears offers an ironic contrast to the sordid act she commits. While Amy and Desi engage in intercourse, the camera alternates angles multiple times in the moments leading up to Desi's climax and ultimate slaying, employing an aerial view twice to capture Desi's vulnerability on the bed. When Amy does kill Desi by slashing his throat with a knife, it is from her implied perspective, intensifying the horror the viewer experiences at the depiction of such a barbaric act. After Amy cuts Desi's throat Fincher employs several fast cuts to capture the blood gushing out of Desi and onto Amy's white lingerie. The technique of using fast cuts to film the murder not only constitutes an allusion to the infamous shower scene in *Psycho* in which Norman Bates, in the character of his mother, brutally murders Marion Crane (Janet Leigh), but it also provides a means of developing the intensity of the sequence. Prior to the murder, Fincher chooses to refrain from using any non-diegetic sound, but as Amy brings her knife to Desi's throat and his blood starts flowing, Trent Reznor's menacing score exaggerates Amy's savage actions.

While Amy's murder of Desi certainly invokes traditional elements of the horror genre and the slasher film through its depiction of unremorseful acts of violence and graphic imagery, it too reflects an invasion of a safe, domestic space. As the viewer is unaware of Amy's capacity for evil when she appears in the first half of the film, the scenes in which she falls in love with Nick create an unsettling incongruity when placed in relationship with her barbaric slaying of Desi. Nick Shager also notes the director's incorporation of humor in the scene, observing "...Amy's larger-than-life monstrosity also reveals the movie's own black-comedy heart. She is impossible not to view as a spoof, as in the hysterical moment when she flips a bloody strand of hair out of face with

nonchalant annoyance.” The satirical aspect of the murder serves to detract from the authenticity of the scene and subvert the sinister nature of Amy’s actions. Ultimately, Fincher’s use of humor in such a grotesque scene suggests that perhaps Amy cannot be interpreted as either a murderer or a damsel in distress, but rather a hyperbolic representation of the unsettling idea that the true identities of people we consider ourselves to be close to can be unknown; it is impossible to truly know anyone, even a person’s wife or husband. One has to imagine that when Nick first met Amy, a beautiful blonde woman with a trust fund who writes personality quizzes, he certainly could not imagine that she was capable of murder. Similarly, Norman Bates’s character in *Psycho*, whose name itself recalls the adjective “normal,” has an unassuming appearance and quiet demeanor, qualities that are certainly not suggestive of villainy.

By accenting Desi’s murder scene with satire, Fincher deviates from the conventions of horror and aligns the film more closely with the tenets of the preposterous thriller, as is evident when comparing *Gone Girl* to a preposterous thriller such as *Dead Man Down*. In this film Farrell plays Victor, the henchman to Alphonse (Terrence Howard), a drug lord. Victor creates an elaborate revenge scheme to bring those who have wronged him in the past to justice, but his personal plans are waylaid when he develops a relationship with his neighbor, Beatrice (Noomi Rapace). Beatrice, who has evidence of Victor committing sordid acts for Alphonse, blackmails Victor by demanding that he kill the drunk driver who disfigured her face. The remainder of the film’s narrative consists of a convoluted combination of plot twists and unresolved conflicts, offering a strong example of the postmodern preposterous thriller, wherein “characters and their behavior bear no relation not just to life as we know it, but to any sort of

properly structured fiction we may have hitherto encountered” (Billson). Similarly, Amy’s plot to frame Nick for murder in *Gone Girl*, her “evil master plan,” involves obsessive preparation and elements that extend beyond the realm of verisimilitude.

In addition to its incorporation of the evil master plan, *Gone Girl* includes other elements of the preposterous thrillers outlined by Billson. Amy’s “cool girl” speech functions as the “mad killer rant,” a monologue in which her interiority is probed. While the film doesn’t feature any “well known actors playing psychiatrists,” the famous Tyler Perry appears as Tanner Bolt, a defense attorney who assumes the role of a kind of mentor to Nick. Both Bolt and Nick’s sister Margo (Carrie Coon) are vital supporting characters in the film, as their reactions to Nick and Amy’s absurd marital games confirm the viewer’s suspicions regarding the implausibility and outlandishness of their relationship dynamics. As Tristan Eldrich states, Bolt is “...finally a character in the movie [who] articulates in his whole demeanor what we have been feeling throughout: ‘Man, who the *fuck* are these people? What planet are they from?’ It’s a peculiar universe in which we finally feel grounded in the presence of a celebrity defense attorney.” Additionally, Desi’s random Frank-Lloyd Wright inspired mansion in the woods, where he keeps Amy hostage under the scrutiny of an advanced security system, offers an example of the unconventional settings common in preposterous thrillers. By incorporating the motifs of this subgenre in *Gone Girl*, Fincher not only engages viewers, but he also creates a world within the film that, like the characters themselves, lacks a sense of reality. It is through this challenge to verisimilitude that *Gone Girl* is able to present an embellished depiction of a dysfunctional marriage, one that satirizes and

exaggerates marital tension until it is reduced to an unlikely nightmare that may on some level ring with emotional truth.

The voice-over sequence in which Amy relates the process of planning to frame Nick for her murder is intercut with a series of scenes that convey Amy carrying out her master plan. In a bitter yet matter-of-fact tone, Amy says, “To fake a convincing murder, you have to have discipline. First, you befriend a local idiot.” The narration is paired with a shot of Amy practicing domesticity by tending to her garden and waving in a friendly manner to her pregnant neighbor Noelle (Casey Wilson), an inane Midwestern housewife, as she walks by pushing a stroller. The subtle humor that exists in this scene derives from the juxtaposition between how Amy is perceived by the neighbor, as being a friendly fellow stay-at-home wife, and the reality of how she is in fact highly disdainful of Noelle and plans on exploiting her as part of her intricate ploy to get revenge for Nick’s infidelities.

As this lengthy montage continues, Amy’s narration reveals her egoism and propensity for self-congratulatory comments that are so insensitive and crass, they are humorous. Against the backdrop of a scene in which she takes a walk with her neighbors and their children, embodying the ideal of female solidarity, she declares, “America loves pregnant women. As if it’s so hard to spread your legs. You know what’s hard? Faking a pregnancy.” In the scenes that ensue, Amy details the hair-brained process of manipulating Noelle by inviting her over, offering her copious amounts of lemonade, stealing her urine, and substituting it for her own at the doctor’s office to ensure that her medical paperwork has records of a positive pregnancy test. As the story Amy fabricates in her diaries in order to vilify Nick revolves around her fictitious pregnancy, it is

imperative that the information in the diary be supported by evidence. Amy's voiceover then details the process of staging her own murder scene, seizing opportunities to criticize Nick by referring to her "clueless husband" and commenting on how it is necessary to clean up the blood "poorly, like he would." While Amy's commitment to her scheme is formidable, aspects of her strategy, such as using Noelle's urine to take a positive pregnancy test, seem outlandish and unrealistic, thus embodying the motif of the "evil master plan" that Billson argues is present in preposterous thrillers, a plan "which is so outrageously convoluted and obsessive that you end up almost feeling sorry for the villains."

Amy indeed adheres to the archetypal preposterous thriller villain outlined by Billson, for even though she is merciless, Fincher also chooses to incorporate scenes in *Gone Girl* that highlight her vulnerability as a protagonist, enabling the viewer to feel sympathetic towards her. After Amy flees her home in North Carthage, she assumes the identity of a lower class woman with a penchant for Fritos and Kit-Kats named "Nancy" and hides out in a campground in the Missouri Ozarks. The scenes at the campground provide insight into the nature of her grand master plan and probe her subjectivity, as they suggest that her motivations for framing Nick for her murder derive from desires for revenge and control that are so extreme, they verge on the absurd.

Amy's arrival at the cabin begins with a sequence in which she adapts her campground quarters to meet her standards of cleanliness. Scenes in which she empties the dingy fridge of an expired milk carton and re-makes her bed with freshly purchased sheets highlight her obsessive and thorough nature, elements of characterization that are advanced even further through an extreme close-up shot in which she fastidiously runs

her hand over the thick accumulation of dust on the refrigerator. She vengefully narrates, “You think I’d let him destroy me and end up happier than ever? No fucking way,” and continues to strategize Nick’s demise by placing the different steps of her plan on a calendar in sticky notes. Reminders to “post anonymous comments,” “ditch car” and even “kill self?” are so nonchalant that they are almost comical, for a humorous incongruity exists in the way in which her sordid plan is mapped out in the same domestic manner a suburban soccer mom would plan out her children’s after-school extracurricular activities.

Additionally, Amy’s excessive narcissism is depicted with comedy when she watches the *Ellen Abbot* talk show special with Greta, the girl who resides in the cabin next to Amy’s. When the topic of the talk show shifts to the disappearance of Amy Elliot Dunne, Greta, oblivious to the fact that she is in fact sitting next to Amy herself, comments contemptuously, “Poor little rich girl married a lying, cheating asshole. Seems like she paid the ultimate price.” Furious at being referred to in such clichéd terms, Amy waits until Greta walks into the other room and then spits in her preservative-laden, sugary soda. Amy’s pressing desire for revenge towards Greta’s passing comment is comically immature, and the scene characterizes her spitefulness as juvenile.

Much of Amy’s empowerment is dependent on her ability to sustain control over her scheme, as is evident in the way she relishes meticulously mapping out the steps of her plan on a calendar. Her independence and the maintenance of an anonymous identity rely heavily on having a reservation of cash, and it is when Amy is robbed of her money that her frustration and despair humanize her. As Amy enters the campground to pay for her cabin, a sequence of close-up shots in which she carefully takes the money out of her

cloth purse and places the crumpled-up bills on the counter foreground its importance. Another shot captures Amy, sitting alone on the stark bed in the cabin, compulsively double-checking her cash supply. In a close-up Amy runs her hands through the bills, reinforcing the reassuring, consolatory power of the money for Amy. The degree to which she depends on the money for comfort is almost pitiful, as it highlights her loneliness and the ways in which her life is devoid of meaningful interactions with others. Amy accidentally drops her money belt during a game of mini-golf with Greta and Jeff, a man covered in crude tattoos who also stays at the campground, and not long afterward the two unsavory characters forcibly enter her cabin and rob her. Despite Amy's caustic and malevolent attributes, she is so unstably obsessive that the viewer cannot help but feel sympathy then she is stripped of this aspect of her agency.

In *Dead Man Down*, cited by Anne Billson as a hallmark example of the preposterous thriller, the character of Victor is similar to Amy in his ruthless desire for revenge. However, just as Amy's character is softened through the desolation she experiences after discovering Nick's affair and after being callously robbed of all she has, Victor is humanized through the traumatic loss of his wife and daughter and his child-like love of cookies. The campy, "absurdist, off-the-deep-end bent" (Shager) that is evoked when Amy brutally murders Desi derives in part from the juxtaposition between the scenes in the Ozarks campground, where Amy is depicted as being vulnerable, and the sinister antagonism of the murder that she commits. The incongruence of this brusque shift in characterization borders on implausibility; after the viewer has sympathized with Amy, it is impossible to see her as a static, merciless villain. Imran Siddiquee's essay "The Everyday Horror of Masculinity" examines *Gone Girl* through a feminist lens,

noting that instability is frequently associated with females; even the etymology of the word “hysterical” stems from the Latin root for uterus. Siddiquee interprets Amy’s character by stating, “In that sense, *Gone Girl*’s Amy – the thin blonde woman who frames her husband for murder, becomes tabloid famous, kills a man during sex, returns to her lover soaked in blood, and is soon-to-be pregnant – is the ‘hysterical’ woman of patriarchy’s nightmares [...]” Thus, one can consider the scene in which Amy commits murder to be an exaggerated parody of the “psychotic bitch” archetype that is frequently used to categorize women.

By choosing to invoke elements of more traditional genres, such as Hitchcockian suspense and horror, and then subvert them by deliberately removing Amy’s ploy from reality, Fincher also hyperbolizes her vow to seek retaliation against Nick and thus cultivates a social satire on the ways in which marriage breeds resentment and a desire for retribution for perceived injustices that occur within the relationship. According to Nick Schager, “*Gone Girl* is a wacko saga about how people get their ideal mate not through luck or fate, but through sadistic manipulation, and just as importantly, self-manipulation. That Amy is a ruthless monster who would frighten even Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction* gives the material its crazed edge.” While referring to Amy as a “ruthless monster” is certainly an oversimplified interpretation of her characterization, Schager’s comments note the film’s purposeful lack of verisimilitude and its function as a critique of marital manipulation. *Gone Girl* suggests that the institution of marriage promotes a framework in which one contorts one’s identity to meet the socially influenced expectations of a spouse. As is seen in Nick and Amy’s relationship, either member failing to meet these standards creates feelings of bitterness and the desire for

revenge. In *Gone Girl*, Nick ceases to embody the role of the adoring husband who is teeming with intellect and creativity that Amy so desired at the beginning of their relationship, choosing instead to run a hometown bar and conduct an affair with one of his students at the local community college. While Nick certainly does not fulfill the idealized fantasy of Amy's "dream man," one who is humble yet accomplished, easygoing yet also intense, outlined in their early courtship scenes, the significant conflict in their relationship stems, perhaps, from the fact that he loses the desire to even try. Amy is also certainly guilty of attempting to contort her identity, namely into that of the "cool girl," but she considers Nick's actions to be more reprehensible because they reflect an abandonment of personal ambition. After seeing Nick on a national television show and believing that he is remorseful about his infidelity, Amy murders Desi to free herself from his control and return home. At the end of the film, Amy asks Nick, "You think you'd be happy with some nice Midwestern girl? No way, baby!" suggesting that she believes that her ability to push, or manipulate, Nick beyond his comfortable boundaries is an important aspect of their relationship.

Conclusion: *Gone Girl* and Contemporary Media Culture

When one conducts a rudimentary Google search of *Gone Girl*, words such as "slippery," "lunatic," and "enigmatic" appear, foregrounding the complexity of form and tone in Fincher's film. Just as Nick and Amy project identities onto each other as husband and wife, the multiple genres that are woven throughout the work create a structural intricacy that mirrors the convoluted diegesis of the movie. Shager summarizes:

Everyone, and every institution, in *Gone Girl* is occupied with some form of fictionalized denial, right down to the "Amazing Amy" books that recast their real-life inspiration into a more perfect form. And ultimately, *Gone Girl* itself is engaged in pretending to be something it's not, feigning interest in red-herring clues and thriller surprises while, in fact, eyeing an investigation of domesticity as an everyday hell, uneasy to escape, forcing you to assume a role you don't want.

Ultimately, like the characters in the film, *Gone Girl* utilizes its associations with different genres to assume many façades. In the work's early depiction of Amy Elliot Dunne as a single girl looking for love in the city, the film embodies the "chick flick," presenting itself as a movie that is primarily interested in love, romance, and a "happily ever after" ending. The idealism of the early scenes in *Gone Girl* is countered with the incorporation of motifs relating to cynicism and disillusionment that are hallmark traits of film noir, and the suspense and intrigue generated throughout the film recall that of the thriller and its subgenres. Fincher constantly subverts and destabilizes these generic associations until the structure of *Gone Girl* itself becomes a metacinematic metaphor for the manipulation that the characters in the film and the media engage in. As a lens, genre theory provides a mirror through which cultural values are revealed and human nature is interrogated, and the reflection generated by *Gone Girl* is grim. For as much as *Gone Girl* includes satire and exaggeration in depicting Amy and Nick Dunne and the society in which they live, many aspects of the couple's relationship are very real – they even own a cat that acts as a minor character in the film, a subtle symbol that quietly reminds viewers that while Nick and Amy are outlandish characters, they are not completely isolated to the dystopian world of *Gone Girl*.

Geoffrey MacNabb contends, “*Gone Girl* is a study of a marriage falling apart. The film’s treatment of marriage seems superficial in the extreme until you realize that the relationship between Nick and Amy is itself an extraordinarily shallow one. They buy into an image of one another that is no deeper than a profile on an online dating site.” Indeed, the appearance-versus-reality motif that is consistently evoked throughout *Gone Girl* is critical, for it adds an element of universality to the film that extends beyond a feminist reading of the text. *Gone Girl* develops the notion that Nick and Amy’s marriage and their mutual preoccupation with the *idea* of each other that each has created, is a microcosm that represents America’s increasing obsession with image. Reviewer Tyler Coates comments:

It perfectly reflects our cultural need for a strongly plotted, juicy narrative. Flynn’s book and her script are impressive because of her incredible sense of detail and plotting. And it reflects the almost too-good-to-be-true nature of the public narratives we — and TV news producers — construct whenever a high profile story is unfolding before our very eyes on CNN or the front page of a newspaper. We put together these stories from a string of assumptions, crafting the perfect dime store novel plot. Yet, as *Gone Girl* proves, it’s nearly impossible to know the complete truth.

From the very beginning of the film, Fincher criticizes the American thirst for intrigue and excitement, a desire that *Gone Girl* suggests is exacerbated through the media. When Amy Elliot Dunne goes missing, her story is sensationalized and preyed upon by the national news. Rand and Marybeth Elliot organize a search party to help find Amy, and Nick is coerced into smiling and taking a picture with Shawna Kelly (Kathleen Rose

Perkins), an attractive yet obtuse woman who with her heavily hair-sprayed hair and thick Midwestern accent offers to make Nick her “famous Frito pie,” but ungraciously refuses to delete the photo when Nick asks her to. Shawna’s refusal to remove the picture from her phone reflects the capacity for photos, especially those used for social media, to be invasive, and when the image is released, talk-show host Ellen Abbot (Missy Pyle) uses the picture to support the scathing depiction of Nick she creates to gather ratings. “The hallmark of a socio-path is a lack of empathy,” Ellen Abbot tells her viewers ignorantly. Abbot cites Nick’s smile in the photo as being representative of a lack of sorrow over his wife’s disappearance, when in reality the circumstances surrounding the picture are taken out of context and Abbot truly has no valid basis for deeming Nick to be a sociopath. This scene again reflects the power of an “image,” for:

In the contemporary U.S. that Fincher portrays with such satirical relish, reputations are made and destroyed on social media and TV chat shows. Guilt and innocence are not only to do with what murderous deeds you may have committed, but with the image you present. A selfie in the company of the wrong person is as incriminating in the court of public opinion as a blood stain on the wall. (McNabb)

In a society in which the term “selfie” is officially defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “an image of oneself taken by oneself using a digital camera especially for posting on social media networks” and the reality television star Kim Kardashian’s published collection of selfies (*Selfish*) is available to purchase at Barnes and Noble, one has to wonder if the collective preoccupation with images that is criticized in *Gone Girl* is ultimately leading Americans towards a debilitating narcissism – or certainly an

inability to maintain a marriage. The common element of characterization that both Nick and Amy share is their egocentricity, a commitment to selfishly projecting and attempting to fulfill romanticized visions of themselves. In emphasizing this shared character trait, one can consider *Gone Girl* to function in part as a cautionary tale that warns against the dangers of allowing an obsession with appearances to be prioritized over developing and maintaining meaningful relationships.

The majority of reviewers of *Gone Girl* choose to focus their interpretation of this dysfunctional marriage around a reading of Amy, as it is her character who propels the dark and twisting narrative of the work. However, the story of Amy's toxic relationship certainly wouldn't exist without Nick, and his character also provides rich opportunities for analysis. In an interview in which he discusses the appeal of Nick's character, Ben Affleck comments on how he was attracted to the different personas Nick assumes throughout the film – from the knight in shining armor, to the unemployed writer, to the victimized husband. According to Affleck, “I got to try to keep shifting the audience's evaluation of me as the movie went on so they were hopefully making different assessments about my character: ‘What kind of guy is this? What kind of marriage did they have?’” (Rodriguez). Affleck's remarks certainly speak to Nick's duplicitous nature, an aspect of characterization that not only acts to generate suspense for the viewer but also functions to inform the themes of Fincher's work. Imran Siddiquee argues that Amy's character is less threatening than Nick's because she is a “hyperbolic fictional character,” an exaggeration of the scorned wife. In contrast, Siddiquee asserts, “But Nick Dunne? The man at the bar with the subtle resentment towards women? The one who occasionally slams a desk or shatters a glass in frustration? He's all too real. Nick is our neighbor...the

man in the police uniform...our husband.” Ben Affleck gained fifteen pounds in order to embody the role of Nick (Rodriguez), and it is his weight gain and penchant for wearing plaid button-downs that contributes to the “everyman” quality his character possesses.

If Nick Dunne is representative of males at large, then Fincher’s film undoubtedly depicts masculinity through an undesirable lens. While both Amy and Nick certainly possess significant flaws that contribute to the tension in their relationship, Nick’s weakness is foregrounded throughout the narrative. When Nick loses his job and his writing career fails, he succumbs to a sedentary lifestyle in which he passes his time ordering Chinese takeout and playing videogames. Nick and Amy’s move to Missouri creates further conflicts in their marriage, and instead of confronting these issues, Nick begins an extramarital affair with one of his students. However, Nick also has charisma – Amy falls in love with him during a romantic adventure through a sugar cloud in New York City, and even the no-nonsense Detective Boney delays in arresting him, in part because of his amiable personality. Thus it is through Nick that Fincher comments on a man’s ability to balance his prevailing selfishness with a “good guy” façade, with charm that can easily be misidentified as sensitivity.

Before appearing in *Gone Girl*, Rosamund Pike’s name was not a household one. Pike starred in the 2002 James Bond movie *Die Another Day* (dir. Lee Tamahori), but then went on to assume smaller roles in films such as an adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* (2005, dir. Joe Wright) and *An Education* (2009, dir. Lone Sherfig). Ben Affleck, however, is a celebrity in every sense of the word. He is lauded for his creativity and genius as both an actor and a director, yet tabloid headlines frequently detail his love of drinking, gambling, and chasing women. Fincher’s casting of Ben Affleck in the role

of Nick unquestionably reflects a relationship between Nick's character and Affleck's celebrity persona, for just as Nick is placed in the eye of the public and the topic of talk show gossip, Affleck himself is linked with an extreme degree of media scrutiny. Inevitably, the viewer of *Gone Girl* associates the details surrounding Affleck's personal life with Nick, and such purposeful casting on Fincher's behalf develops Nick as a character who is untrustworthy.

Following the release of *Gone Girl* in 2014, Ben Affleck and his wife Jennifer Garner announced their plans to divorce. A scandal leaked to the tabloids involving Affleck's affair with the family's nanny immediately after the couple released their statement, and the ironic parallel between the drama of the Afflecks' personal lives and the narrative of *Gone Girl* is certainly worthy of acknowledgement. Reflecting on her divorce for a *Vanity Fair* interview with Krista Smith, Jennifer Garner commented on her husband, noting, "When his sun shines on you, you feel it. But when the sun is shining elsewhere, it's cold. He can cast quite a shadow." Garner's words describe Affleck, yet they could just as easily be applied to Nick as well; the man who can carry on witty banter at a New York City apartment party, yet also sit despondently on a couch amongst empty takeout boxes. *Gone Girl* presents a disturbing interpretation of marriage and modern gender dynamics, but the audience can take solace in the fact that its account of Nick and Amy's relationship is fictionalized. However, the similarities between Ben Affleck's personal life and Nick's character undeniably cause the film's story of a marriage gone terribly wrong to be more difficult to be dismissed, and perhaps the definitive answer to Tanner Bolt's incredulous question, "Who the *fuck* are these

people?” is that Nick and Amy could ultimately be anyone – celebrities, neighbors, family members, or even the couple sharing popcorn and viewing the movie together.

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