



Universidad
Zaragoza

Undergraduate Dissertation

Trabajo Fin de Grado

“Nick Loved a Girl I Was Pretending to Be: ‘Cool Girl’”: Narration and Ideology in David Fincher’s
Gone Girl (2014)

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2018

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1. INTRODUCTION

Gone Girl, based on the book of the same title written by Gillian Flynn and published in 2012, was directed by David Fincher and released at the New York Film Festival in 2014. Starring Rosamund Pike as Amy Dunne and Ben Affleck as Nick Dunne, the film was marketed as a thriller about Amy's disappearance at the hands of her unfaithful husband. Her disappearance on the day of the couple's wedding anniversary is the backdrop that allows the film to explore issues such as gender roles, the patriarchal abuse of women and the "spectacularisation" of private life in contemporary society. Xan Brooks, writing for *The Guardian*, describes the film as "a bracing, scalding sketch of a marriage in meltdown" and "a thriller that initially invites us to root for the woman and regard the man as pure evil". As Brooks' choice of the word "initially" shows, these expectations are shattered sixty minutes into the film when Amy's narrative voice bursts into the narrative to tell spectators how she had meticulously planned her own disappearance, planting different clues to incriminate her husband. At that moment the roles victim/perpetrator are reversed. Nick the adulterous husband becomes a victim of Amy, and Amy the innocent victim becomes a manipulative woman that is even willing to kill herself so as to punish her husband.

The representation of men as victims and women as manipulative femme fatales is usually traced back to the classical film noir of the 1940s. The figure of the femme fatale in this genre has been analysed as a reflection of male anxieties concerning women's changing role in society in World War II and post-WWII America (Spicer, 90-91). Likewise, a spate of 1980s thrillers featuring female characters as ruthless psycho-killers has been linked to the "backlash" against feminism explored by Susan Faludi in her work *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991). According to Faludi, a new backlash against U.S. women emerged after the September 11, 2001

attacks. As she argues, some specific sectors of the population started to put the blame for the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the gains of feminism. According to this discourse, feminism had transformed U.S. men, who had become “soft” because of women’s independence and the change in gender roles (*Terror Dream* 10). This soft masculinity had turned the U.S. into an easy prey that had proved unable to protect itself from terrorism. Consequently, one of the ways to repair the security breach and make the U.S. “strong” again was to undermine women and feminism (25).

The portrayal of Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl* can be read within the post-9/11 backlash described by Faludi. As will be argued, the film’s specific use of some narrative strategies, in particular the use of two narrators, results in a distinct ideological discourse that demonises the female character and victimises the male one. In order to contextualise this reading of the film within its historical moment, this essay starts with a section on Susan Faludi’s theory of the backlash against independent women and how some of these discourses found their way into the thriller film. The analysis of the film will be divided into two parts. In the first one, special attention will be paid to how the film uses contrasts between past and present scenes together with flashbacks to victimise Amy. In the second part, the analysis will focus on how the film exposes Amy’s plan and her true self in order to demonise her and victimise Nick. Finally, the analysis will move on to explore the ideological implications of these narrative strategies on the construction and portrayal of the female protagonist.

2. SUSAN FALUDI AND THE “BACKLASH AGAINST INDEPENDENT WOMEN”

In *Backlash* (1991) Susan Faludi explains that the backlash against women is not an isolated event, but “a recurring phenomenon” that takes place whenever women make “some headway towards equality” (61). She sees the 1980s backlash as a response to some of the gains of the Women’s Liberation Movement in the 1970s with respect to women’s reproductive rights and their place in the job market. According to Faludi, the 1980s backlash emerged when some conservative sectors of the U.S. population decided to put an end to the progress of feminism and bring back the ethos of women’s domesticity (11). At the same time, men gradually stopped supporting the women’s movement claiming that gender equality had already been accomplished (74). By the early 1980s and helped by Ronald Reagan’s advocacy of conservatism, the backlash was deeply rooted in U.S. society at large. Its strategy was to divide women and to blame the country’s problems on feminism (14). The media played a key role in indoctrinating women by branding their minds with negative, discouraging ideas about women’s liberation and their newly-attained independence (91).

For Faludi, the Hollywood industry actively participated in the spreading of the backlash against women’s independence (*Backlash* 11). So as to fight against the financial insecurity of the decade, Hollywood created stories that underpinned the patriarchal trends of the 1980s (126). Films reinforced the idea that women’s unhappiness was caused by independence, which was believed to have robbed women of motherhood and marriage, the two things that could make them feel accomplished (126). Positive representations of strong-minded and independent female characters became a glaring absence in the films of the decade. Obliging housewives and mothers

became the heroines of cinema, while independent, working women became the villains (129).

According to Faludi, these films worked as “morality tales in which the ‘good mother’ wins and the independent woman gets punished”, as is the case of *Tender Mercies* (dir. Bruce Beresford, 1983), *Someone to Watch Over Me* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1987) and *Moonstruck* (dir. Norman Jewison, 1987), in which heroic housewives protect their families against single women preying on their husbands (126, 129). She sees *Fatal Attraction* (dir. Adrian Lyne, 1987) as the epitome of the 1980s backlash against women and a filmic validation of some of the myths spread by the media at the time, such as “the man shortage” and “the infertility epidemic” (91). As noted by Faludi, independent female characters in these films undergo what she calls a “reverse metamorphosis”: from empowered women to submissive ones that end up either silent or dead (129). This is the case of Alex in *Fatal Attraction*, who is murdered, and therefore silenced, by her lover’s wife. With the help of the media and popular culture, Faludi claims, the conservative sectors of the U.S. society managed to prevent the women’s movement from advancing in the 1980s.

Almost two decades later, the U.S. media continued to undermine feminist gains. The response of the media to the 9/11 terrorist attacks was to reinstate a backlash against independent women and feminism, as they reached the conclusion that the terrorists’ success was a consequence of the feminisation of the country, which had weakened the U.S. (Faludi, *Terror Dream* 10). They wanted to recover what Faludi calls “the myth of American invincibility”, which can be traced back to the origins of the U.S. as a nation (281). This myth is rooted in the idea that U.S. women and families are protected by “the virile and vigilant guardians of its frontier” (187). Faludi explains that, in order to cope with the attacks and reinstate the aforementioned myth, Americans

went through three phases. In the first one, they turned 9/11 into a “domestic drama” and then into “a problem between the sexes, in which the American man and the nation’s vigour were sapped by female influence” (281). This was solved with “a media and political campaign” that highlighted men’s virility and depicted women as vulnerable damsels in distress. Moreover, the media promoted a reenactment of the cultural and moral values of the fifties, such as family union, domesticated femininity and Cold War hypermasculinity (4). These are the same values on which Reaganite politics and the 1980s backlash were based. Oddly enough, one of the first journalists to capitalise on 9/11 was Peggy Noonan, who happened to be Reagan’s speechwriter (97). In an article for the *Wall Street Journal*, she praised the return of Cold-War masculinity and lamented how women’s independence had led to the disappearance of “manliness and its brother, gentlemanliness” (97). In *The Terror Dream*, Susan Faludi provides an account of the different ways in which the aforementioned “cultural troika” focused on spreading the idea that women needed men to protect them (6). All these efforts were made in order to favour the patriarchal agenda and to stop the progress of the feminist cause.

According to Faludi, the post-9/11 backlash against independent women, along with the reenactment of the patriarchal gender roles and myths of the 1980s backlash, was also reflected on cinema. Myths such as the ticking of the biological clock and the man shortage became a motif again. On the one hand, romantic comedies started featuring single, independent, working women yearning for a baby, as is the case of *Baby Mama* (dir. Michael McCullers, 2008) or *The Back-up Plan* (dir. Alan Poul, 2010). Other romantic comedies such as *Knocked Up* (dir. Judd Apatow, 2007) or *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* (dir. Nick Cassavetes, 2012) promoted the patriarchal ideal of families. On the other hand, the erotic thriller continued to provide the cinema

industry with misogynistic portrayals of women in the twenty-first century. *Chloe* (dir. Atom Egoyan, 2009), *Obsessed* (dir. Steven Shill, 2009), and *Unforgettable* (dir. Denise Di Novi, 2017) are examples of the post-9/11 backlash in cinema. Following the plot pattern of the erotic thriller, these films feature a femme fatale that turns into a “psycho killer” obsessed with destroying a couple’s relationship, and who is eventually punished for disrupting the patriarchal order. As can be seen in the promotional posters (Fig. 1), the erotic thriller classifies women into two types: the good female character that is dependent on a man and the evil, independent female character.



Figure 1: Good and evil female characters in post-9/11 erotic thrillers

As was also the case with the femme fatales in classical film noir, the evil female characters of the erotic thriller offer several contradictory readings. Janey Place contests the idea that femme fatales are utterly misogynistic representations of women. She argues that the femme fatale is one of the few active, intelligent and powerful female symbols in classical cinema (45-47). For Place, the fact that the femme fatale is a central character that stylistically and narratively dominates noir films makes this character a defiance of patriarchy (45-47). Sylvia Harvey also agrees that there are

feminist resonances in the femme fatale's subversion of the patriarchal order, which, Harvey claims, prevails in the spectator's mind even after the femme fatale is defeated and the film ends (33). Nonetheless, the idea that femme fatales are feminist representations of women is rejected by other feminist critics as is the case of Mary Ann Doane:

The femme fatale is situated as evil and is frequently punished or killed. Her textual eradication involves a desperate reassertion of control upon the part of the threatened male subject. Hence, it would be a mistake to see her as some kind of heroine of modernity. She is not the subject of feminism but a symptom of male fears about feminism. (2-3)

For Doane, evil, female characters that are punished for abusing men are not feminist heroines but the means through which the narratives end up reinforcing patriarchal values and justifying patriarchal fears of feminism.

The analysis of the representation of women in *Gone Girl* and, more specifically, of its protagonist Amy Dunne offers contradictory readings as well. Scott Mendelson, writing for the media and entertainment section of *Forbes*, claims: "By virtue of its plethora of varied and quality female characters, *Gone Girl* is one of the most feminist films of the year." Equally, Flynn, the author of both the book and script, argues that by creating female avengers like Amy she empowers women, at the same time as she counteracts stereotypical representations of women as docile and simple-minded (qtd. in Cox). Nonetheless, many film reviewers and critics described the film's portrayal of women as misogynistic (see, for instance, Cox, Teitel or Saner). David Cox, film reviewer for *The Guardian*, argues that Fincher's film reinstates gender stereotypes. To support his case he quotes the two leading actors Ben Affleck and Rosamund Pike: "It's a film that strips back and reveals the differences between men and women", Affleck claims. Pike agrees with his male counterpart: "The thing about

Amy is that she could never have been a man. She's purely female. People don't like me saying that, but it's true". For Cox, these statements prove that Amy validates gender stereotypes that depict women as "self-serving, venomous and deceitful" beings that "can get away with whatever they want" and men as women's victims.

It could be argued that *Gone Girl* criticises the social pressure women face in order to comply with patriarchal ideals of femininity. In fact, the fictional character of Amazing Amy and Amy's relationship with her parents could be read in that light. However, due to Amy's narrative evolution in the film and to the narrative strategies used to tell the story, spectators are more likely to see the female character as a manipulative monster rather than reflect on the underlying social criticism. The following part of this paper moves on to describe in detail the way in which the film's narrative structure, in particular the use of narrators and flashbacks, results in the victimization of the male protagonist and the demonisation of the female one.

3. *GONE GIRL*

3.1. “HE-SAID-SHE-SAID” NARRATION

As Celestino Deleyto puts it: “films ‘show’ stories and only occasionally narrate them” (22). The fact that this film is narrated by two characters, whose narrations compete with and contradict each other, has many implications for the film. The narrators, Amy and Nick Dunne, who significantly enough are also the protagonists, play a crucial role in the construction of the narrative and, therefore, in the emotional and ideological impact that the film has on the audience. This “he-said-she-said” narrative struggle shows the audience that there are always two sides of a story as well as the extent to which people, especially women, can be manipulative.

Gone Girl relies on a “he-said-she-said” kind of narration to tell the story of the disappearance of Amy Dunne, of which her husband is a suspect from the beginning. This narration resembles narration in noir films in the use of flashbacks and a voice-over, internal narrator (two in this case) to solve an investigation, which creates a “battleground for competing perspectives” (Hollinger, 247). Unlike in classical film noir, though, the main narrator in *Gone Girl* is the female protagonist. Even if the male narrator is the one who starts telling the story, his role as narrator is soon overshadowed by his wife’s. Apart from the use of two narrators, this narrative struggle is also a consequence of the manipulation that the film’s plot or *syuzhet* makes of the story or *fabula*. The alteration of the chronological order of events, together with the inclusion of scenes of events invented by Amy creates a complex plot which can be divided into two parts. The first part, which goes from the day of Amy’s disappearance to Nick’s discovery of a woodshed full of luxury goods, combines scenes set in the present and flashbacks narrated by Amy. In this part, present and past scenes contradict each other. This, apart from building up suspense, prompts the spectator to identify with Amy. The

second part of the narrative starts when Amy begins to tell how she planned her own disappearance. Its effect on the audience is the opposite of that of the first part. Amy is “unmasked” and she is revealed as extremely evil.

Nick Dunne is a mindscreen narrator as his thoughts are dramatised and verbalised, but they address nobody in particular. His thoughts are the first and last thing that the audience hears when watching the film. It begins with Nick’s voice-over: “When I think of my wife, I always think of the back of her head. I picture cracking her lovely skull, unspooling her brain, trying to get answers. The primal questions of a marriage: What are you thinking? How are you feeling? What have we done to each other?”. These opening lines are the first instrument of manipulation that the film uses to make the spectator become suspicious of Nick and Amy’s relationship. The spectator gets access to Nick’s mind and everything he/she sees from now on is mediated through Nick’s subjectivity. The voice-over accompanies a close-up showing first Amy’s head and then her face through Nick’s internal focalisation. In a way, the spectator sees her through Nick’s eyes and thus he/she is bound to identify with him. This visually-sweet scene contrasts with the aggressive tone of his words. For instance, “cracking her lovely skull” is a rather violent and strange thing for a husband to say about his wife when caressing her head. The spectator, therefore, is likely to think that there is something wrong with their marriage. This is confirmed as they watch the following scenes in which Nick and his sister Margo criticise Amy.

The following scene introduces, either directly or indirectly, three of the main characters of the film—Nick, Margo and Amy—and anticipates the nature of their relationship. Nick enters his bar—The Bar—and meets his sister Margo there. It seems that they have a good relationship. Their relationship with Amy, however, appears to be strained. Apart from their words, this can be seen through the internally-focalised shots

that show their grimaces when talking about her. Moreover, Nick is already asking for alcohol in the middle of the morning, which could be interpreted a sign of distress. Before the scene ends, Margo ironically says that his marriage with Amy has come “fast”, to what Nick answers “and furious”. As he says so, he slides his now empty glass of bourbon over the bar. This triggers Amy’s first narratorial intervention together with a flashback. A fade-out of the scene at the bar serves as a transition to Amy’s account, which makes it look like she is answering to Nick’s bitter words. It is at this moment that the “he-said-she-said” narration starts.

Amy is a written narrator as she narrates her version of events by means of a diary. Her pieces of narration stem from a series of entries that tell how she met and fell in love with Nick. In the first flashback, which is also the first entry of her diary, she narrates their happy beginnings as a couple. This contrasts with Margo’s and Nick’s bitter words about his marriage with Amy. The inconsistency between the unhappy present in which Nick lives and the happy past about which Amy writes prompts the spectator to make assumptions about the protagonists and to take sides. Stylistically, this flashback shows that Amy has been the one in control from the beginning of their relationship. She is portrayed as an active, demanding and powerful woman, which immediately links her to the femme fatales of film noir. Later on, a medium close-up of the back of her head (Fig. 2) shows Nick performing oral sex on her. This shot suggests that he is trapped by her. The pervasive darkness of the flashback and the emphasis on sexuality is reminiscent of film noir while, at the same time, they announce the toxic nature of their relationship even at this very early stage.



Figure 2: Nick performing oral sex on Amy.

Amy's second diary entry is called "Amazing Amy is getting fucking married" and corresponds to the second flashback. Just before, Nick, along with the audience, finds out that his wife is missing, so he calls the police. When detective Boney and her colleague find out that Nick's missing wife is the real life person on which the *Amazing Amy* books are based, Boney says that she loved those books. Nick's cold and awkward reaction towards the detectives' comments are further evidence of his dislike for his wife. Nick's reaction triggers the second flashback, in which we can see how he proposed to her. This flashback tells spectators about Amy's relationship with her parents and her inferiority complex, as she feels overshadowed by her literary alter ego, Amazing Amy. When Amy is embarrassed by a group of journalists that want to know what it feels like to be surpassed by her alter ego, Nick as a knight in shining armour saves her by proposing to her.

Just after detective Boney's interrogation proves that Nick does not know much about his wife, the third flashback and entry of Amy's diary refutes it. It is a vindication of marriage in which Amy wants to disprove well-known myths about marriage and deteriorating relationships. In the flashback, they are doing the treasure hunt that Amy always organises to celebrate their anniversary. They are kissing and

messing around at the library and they end up having sex on a table. Figures 3 and 4, which correspond to the beginning and the end of the scene respectively, show how lighting becomes darker towards the end of the scene, which suggests that sex is a dark aspect of their relationship. Amy's narration in her diary entries often focuses on how good and active their sex life was, showing that sex is rather important for her and their relationship. She is portrayed as a highly sexually active woman, a character trait which she shares with the noir femme fatales that use sex to enchant men. The constant use of low-key lighting and cast shadows also echoes noir films' conventions and expectations.



Figure 3: Beginning of the flashback. Nick and Amy doing the treasure hunt at the library.



Figure 4: End of the flashback. Nick and Amy having sex at the library.

Up until this point, Nick has been portrayed as a good husband that seems to be exhausted by his demanding wife. In fact, he refers to the treasure hunts organised by his wife to celebrate their anniversaries as a “forced march designed to prove what an oblivious and uncaring asshole her husband is”. Nonetheless, the clues that Amy has left for their fifth anniversary start portraying Nick in a bad light, thus altering spectators’ opinion about Nick. “Clue one” leads the detectives to Nick’s office where detective Boney finds a red thong, which makes them think that he is having an affair with a student. There they also find “Clue two” and a reference to a brown house. Nick says he has never heard of that brown house, but then he is caught red-handed at the said house. This house is the place where detective Boney will eventually find Amy’s diary, the incriminatory and ultimate evidence of Nick’s guilt, thus making Nick look even more suspicious in relation to his wife’s disappearance.

The third flashback is triggered by Nick’s utterance of the word “bitch” referring to his wife after he reads “Clue three”. This entry shows the moment in which things between them start going wrong after Nick loses his job. Even if they promise not to let money issues affect their relationship, we soon see them arguing about Nick’s behaviour and expenses now that he is unemployed. Unlike in the previous flashbacks, the composition and framing of these shots shows a widening gap between them, which reflects the deterioration of their relationship. Once again, Amy, who is standing, is shown in a superior position while Nick, who is sitting down, has become economically dependent on her. He starts to resent her and, as a result, spectators can start to imagine possible reasons for him to want her gone.

The fourth and fifth flashbacks are crucial for the victimisation of Amy in this part of the film. They are short but effective at depicting her as Nick’s victim. First, she presents herself a caring wife that follows his husband to Missouri so that he can be

with his mother on her deathbed, but whose efforts are not rewarded. She narrates: “I feel like [...] something to be jettisoned if necessary, something disposable. I feel like I could disappear”. The scene following this flashback confirms that Nick is having an affair with one of her students, thus validating Amy’s feelings that she is disposable. In the next flashback, Amy laments that her husband only turns to her to have sex. A medium close-up of them having sex against a wall (Fig. 5), in which he does not even look her at her face, contrasts with the previous sex scenes because Amy is no longer in control. At the end of this flashback, Nick is portrayed as an abusive husband. After Amy confronts Nick because he does not want to have a baby, he pushes her against the staircase. Unlike in the previous flashback scenes, the low-angle shot of Amy lying on the floor (Fig. 6) highlights her weakness and Nick’s superiority. This flashback ends with Amy’s words “what scared me is I had finally realised I am frightened of my own husband”, which directly points at Nick as the person responsible for her disappearance.



Figure 5: Nick using Amy to serve his sexual needs.



Figure 6: Nick abusing Amy.

Amy's entry from Valentine's Day 2012 is the penultimate flashback of the first part of the narrative and the last time in which the spectator truly regards her as Nick's victim. It is triggered by the detectives' discovery that on the said date she bought a gun. Her narration of how she is so scared of her husband that she sleeps with a gun contributes to framing Nick for her disappearance. In conformity with the previous flashbacks, a detail shot of her hand shows her writing the entry. However, for the first time, she is writing in red ink. Together with the myriad connotations brought about by the use of red, this change also marks a turning point in the narration. The shots of her having a bath and him lurking around highlight her situation as a helpless and innocent victim of an abusive husband and, therefore, add reliability to her narration (Fig. 7-8). This flashback, together with the previous one, incriminates Nick. The evidence against him provided by Amy's diary has accumulated as this part comes to an end. Nonetheless, approximately fifteen minutes later, the spectator will find out that she is a liar and a manipulator.



Figure 7: Point-of-view shot of Nick looking at Amy.



Figure 8: Point-of-view shot of Amy noticing that Nick is lurking around her.

The last scene of this part of the narrative shows, by means of crosscutting, three different actions. One of these narrative threads shows detective Boney and her colleague at Nick's father's house, where they eventually find Amy's diary. Another line of action shows Nick trying to solve "Clue three" while Amy's voice-over recites what is written in the clue: "Picture me. I'm a girl who is very, very bad. I need to be punished and by punished I mean had. It's where you keep goodies for anniversary five, so open the door and look alive". When uttering these words, Amy's voice changes drastically. Although it was never a sweet voice, it did not sound as cold and sinister as it does now. In addition, a close-up of Nick's face portrays him struggling to figure out

what the clue means. Once he seems to have solved it, there is a quick cut to a shot of the detective finding the diary (Fig. 9). These discoveries trigger the last flashback in which Amy is portrayed as a victim. Through crosscutting, images of Amy at the time when she supposedly wrote the last entry of her diary are interspersed with the detective's reaction to reading Amy's diary and Nick's reaction to having found the woodshed full of the goods that he denied having bought with his credit card. The use of crosscutting and quick editing, together with the change in her voice, increases the tension of this specific moment, which ends what I referred to as the first part of the film. It also announces the major change that is about to take place.

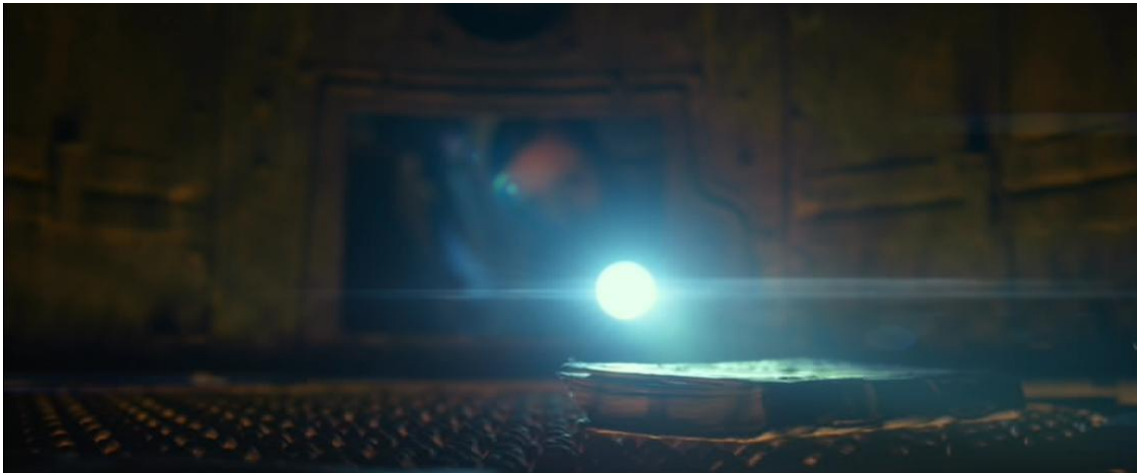


Figure 9: Detective Boney finding Amy's diary at Nick's father's house.

3.2. FROM “COOL GIRL” TO “COMPLETE PSYCHOPATH”

The major turning point occurs sixty minutes into the film. The transition from the first part of the narrative to the second one is clearly marked by a fade-out and a fade-in that leave the screen black for some seconds. Amy’s clinical voice-over starts narrating: “I am so much happy now that I am dead. Technically missing. Soon to be presumed dead”. This scene corresponds with July, 5, the day of her disappearance. A medium-shot shows Amy driving a car and glancing at something offscreen. An eye-line match shows an extensive list of things to do (Fig. 10), which shows how meticulous she is and her determination to make Nick pay for his “crimes”. There are also some significant props in the shot—several pens and a KitKat bar. As she delivers a revengeful manifesto explaining why she wants to frame Nick for her murder, she throws one pen at a time through the car’s window. These pens represent all the concepts of patriarchy that Amy rejects. First she throws out a fluffy, pink pen that may symbolise the patriarchal standard of femininity. Then, she throws out a pen with a bridal couple.

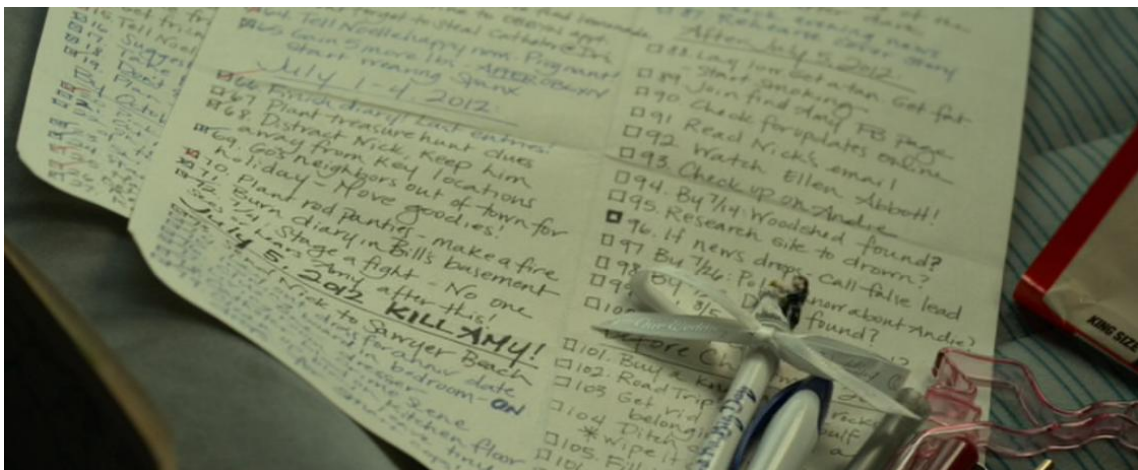


Figure 10: Amy’s to-do list and pens.

Her voice-over outlines the causes for her to have become a “gone girl”. In a cold, flat voice, she explains that she wants to make her “lazy, lying, cheating, oblivious

husband” go to prison for her murder. She alleges: “Nick Dunne took my pride and my dignity and my hope and my money. He took and took from me until I no longer existed. That's murder. Let the punishment fit the crime”. She was an independent woman that was robbed of everything, including her independence, by her husband. He made her move to a place where she feels alienated and he has been cheating on her with one of his students. The spectator, however, is unlikely to sympathise with Amy at this point in the movie. Nick’s “crimes” amount up to almost nothing when compared to her revenge. In addition, the narrative process through which Amy was turned into a victim in the first part of the narrative will also affect spectators’ reaction in this second part. The diary entries we have had access to were just part of her plan. She has been lying to us from almost the beginning of the film.

After outlining the causes of her revenge, Amy narrates all the steps that she has followed for her scheme to be successful. Like in the first part of the film, this narration is accompanied by flashbacks. She reveals that she befriended her neighbour Noelle (Casey Wilson) and lied to her about Nick’s “violent temper” so that she would raise doubts about him once she was gone. Furthermore, she reveals that she stole Noelle’s urine and add it to her own medical record, hence Amy’s positive pregnancy test. She also describes the staging of the crime scene at their house. Finally, she admits to having invented everything that is written in her diary that is negative about Nick, except for his adultery. She explains: “You need a diary. Minimum three hundred entries on the Nick and Amy story. Start with the fairy-tale, early days. Those are true and they are crucial. [...] After that, you invent the expending, the abuse, the fear, the threat of violence”. The spectator is bound to feel disappointed and betrayed, especially because she relies on sensitive issues, such as gender violence, to portray herself as a victim. She writes the diary that is the ultimate proof of Nick’s guilt with the pencils

that she has just disposed of. Symbolically, she seems to be using patriarchal concepts as a weapon against her husband.

She also says that the last step of her plan, which is to drown herself in a river, is yet to be done. She narrates: “And when they find my body, they’ll know Nick Dunne dumped his beloved like garbage. And she floated down past all the other abused, unwanted, inconvenient women”. Although her voice keeps being flat, the emphasis that she puts on the adjectives shows that Nick’s actions truly hurt and damaged her psychologically. Moreover, this claim suggests that she is taking revenge on behalf of all the women that are victims of the patriarchal society and its gender expectations, to which they are pressured to conform. She goes on to say:

“Then, Nick will die too. Nick and Amy will be gone, but then we never really existed. Nick loved a girl I was pretending to be: ‘Cool girl’. Men always use that, don’t they? as their defining compliment. ‘She is a cool girl’. ‘Cool girl is game’. ‘Cool girl is fun’. ‘Cool girl never gets angry at her man’...”.

This is Amy’s elaboration on her manifesto. These statements are accompanied by a series of shots of Amy changing her physical appearance, smoking and eating junk food (Fig. 11-12). Now, it is clear that Nick’s affair is just the tip of the iceberg in Amy’s reasons to rebel against patriarchy. She gives some examples of the things that she used to do to comply with Nick’s expectations, which are based on patriarchal stereotypes of femininity: “I wax-stripped my pussy raw. I drank canned beer watching Adam Sandler movies. I ate cold pizza and remained a size two. I blew him semi-regularly. I lived in the moment. I was fucking game”. Amy is denouncing the perpetration of what Naomi Wolf refers to as “the beauty myth”, which Wolf describes as “a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women’s advancement” (10). According to Wolf, the beauty myth is used to deprive

women of their self-love to prevent them from realising their social importance and, thus, avoid women's demands for gender equality (145). In spite of the gross language used by Amy, this is a well-founded social critique of the pressure that patriarchal society puts on women. However, the fact that it comes from a mentally unbalanced character undermines this piece of feminist criticism.



Figure 11: Amy cutting her hair.



Figure 12: Amy eating junk food.

After Amy arrives in the Ozarks, she meets Greta (Lola Kirke), one of her neighbours. One day they are at the pool and Greta tries to guess how Amy got a black eye. This triggers the last flashback of the film. It is not an entry of her diary, but it reveals a lot about the rationale behind Amy's scheme. The following comment made by Greta stirs Amy's sorrow for having been cheated on by Nick: "You caught your boy

rubbing up on some hot little skank and he apologised to you by busting you a good one”. To this Amy answers:

“Worse. I went to the bar where he works to surprise him. And out he comes with this girl who had no business being in a bar. On the very first night that we met we walked by a bakery that was having their sugar delivered. [...] Before he kissed me, he leaned in and did this [shows Greta what he did]. And guess what? He did the exact same thing with her”.

Although she is manipulative, this is a spontaneous confession that further informs the audience that Nick profoundly hurt Amy. This account is combined with shots of a flashback showing the said moment through Amy’s focalisation. And yet, it is too late for spectators to side with Amy. The shock caused by Amy’s abrupt change from being the victim to being the perpetrator eliminates all possibilities of making her a relatable character.

When Greta and her boyfriend mug all of Amy’s money, she turns to Desi Collings (Neil Patrick Harris) for help, the ex-boyfriend against whom she had issued a restraining order several years earlier. Desi takes Amy to his lake house, where she soon realises that having called him is a mistake. Desi wants a “new start” with Amy. Although she tries to make him pity her in order to manipulate him, the morning after she arrives at the lake house he already starts pressuring her into recovering her physical appearance prior to her escape. He claims: “Decent clothes. Hair dye. Makeup. Tweezers. There’s a gym overlooking the lake. The sooner you look like yourself, the sooner you’ll feel like yourself”. Desi’s attitude is the sort of patriarchal, oppressive behaviour that Amy repudiates. He pressures her into complying with the beauty myth. The same night after this conversation, Amy and Desi watch Nick’s interview on the television programme hosted by Sharon Schieber (Sela Ward). Amy’s obsession with Nick upsets Desi, who ends up telling her “I just want you to be you again” as he

touches her hair. This seems to make her realise that complying with his desires about her physical appearance and behaviour is the best way to manipulate him. From then on, we see again Amy's facet of a femme fatale that uses her sexuality as a weapon.

The next time we see Amy and Desi (21 days since she disappeared), she has already become "herself" again. As Desi told her, she has cut and died her hair and she is wearing sexy clothes (Fig. 13). The transformation of Amy's physical appearance conforms to the canon of "cool girl", or the beauty myth, that she disavows. Amy has realised that in order to survive in patriarchal society she needs to be either the "cool girl" that abides by the patriarchal ideas of femininity, or the femme fatale that is men's nightmare. Hence, she pretends to be the "cool girl" but, in fact, she has fully metamorphosed into a femme fatale. She uses her sexuality as a weapon to punish Desi for having the audacity to try to control her and also to return to Nick's side. The film shows the way in which she stages the rape and crime scene to present herself as Desi's victim and, finally, she kills him. This representation of a woman staging sexual abuse is detrimental to women's denunciations against patriarchal violence, because this seems to argue that even forensic evidence can be falsified, thus undermining women's credibility. Furthermore, the representation of Amy using sex to get rid of Desi makes the audience unlikely to focus on or support the denunciation of patriarchy lying behind her actions.



Figure 13: Amy's recovered "cool girl" physical appearance.

The film's characterisation of Amy "revamps gender stereotypes", as David Cox claims. It confers upon the female protagonist a whole set of negative, stereotypical traits typically associated to women. Apart from explicitly showing that she portrays herself as a victim through false accusations of gender abuse and rape, towards the end of the film the film resorts to the infamous cliché that women "use" children to "trap" men. With Nick's stolen semen, Amy gets pregnant and uses the pregnancy to force him to stay with her. When he says that he is going to leave her, she announces her pregnancy and tells him bluntly: "I won't have to teach your child to hate you. He'll do that all by himself". Amy's use of motherhood as a means of manipulation adds to the audience's hatred of her. This is part of the misogynistic ideological discourses that the film creates through the portrayal of Amy, who, by the end of the film, is depicted as a manipulative femme fatale.

From a feminist point-of-view, Amy could be interpreted as a feminist avenger. She manages to take advantage of patriarchal society by using the tradition of captivity narratives and their role in the construction of U.S. identity and gender roles. Susan Faludi explores this matter in *The Terror Dream*, and she explains: "at pivotal moments [...] when America was faced with a core crisis—we restored our faith in our own

invincibility through fables of female peril and the rescue of ‘just one young girl’” (260). Amy capitalises on the need of U.S. patriarchal institutions to bolster the confidence of men by portraying women as weak links in need of protection. She presents herself as a damsel-in-distress to be rescued and, until the film “unmasks” her, she succeeds in making everybody pity her, thus hiding successfully her femme fatale facet. Nonetheless, the film seems to be using this powerful, but evil female protagonist to warn spectators against female empowerment and, in doing so, Amy stops being a feminist heroine and becomes more of an embodiment of the misogynistic discourses of patriarchal society. In her book Faludi argues that the media and government “framed our [U.S.] suddenly vulnerable state as a problem between the sexes [...] the American man [...] sapped by female influence”. *Gone Girl* depicts the “problem between the sexes” and deals with it through the demonisation of its female protagonist and victimisation of Nick, thus blaming the problem on women.

The last scene of the film, which is also the first one, is the film’s final touch to the demonisation of Amy and victimisation of Nick. It creates a circularity and sense of entrapment that is likely to increase the spectator’s sympathy for Nick. This time Nick narrates: “What are you thinking? How are you feeling? What have we done to each other?”, omitting the part about “cracking” her wife’s “lovely skull”. In the first part of the narrative, Nick’s words raise doubts about his involvement in Amy’s disappearance, as the spectator is likely to wonder if he wants to literally crack his wife’s lovely skull. However, at the end the audience no longer judges Nick for wanting to hurt her, because he is seen now as the victim and spectators’ only source of identification. Once the film ends, the spectators are likely to feel naïve for believing Amy and regretful about having judged Nick, instead of reflecting on the underlying social and feminist criticism that the film makes at some points.

4. CONCLUSION

This essay has argued that the film's use of a "he-said-she-said" narrative structure followed by the exposure of Amy's true self results in the demonisation of the female protagonist and the victimisation of the male one. The analysis is structured in two parts that correspond to the two parts in which the film can be divided. The first part of this essay has proven that the use of two narrators providing spectators with opposite versions of events, together with Amy's diary entries and flashbacks, makes the audience trust Amy and distrust Nick. The second part has focused on Amy's unmasking and denunciation of patriarchy and, also, on the effect that the radical reversal of roles—Amy becomes the evil character and Nick her victim—has on the spectator. This second part concludes that this reversal of roles shocks the audience to such an extent that they are bound to hate the female protagonist, who is portrayed as a manipulative femme fatale. Furthermore, this shock prevents the spectator from taking seriously Amy's denunciation of the fact that women are pressured to comply with unrealistic and detrimental ideals of femininity.

The analysis of narration and the special articulation of the story by the plot through the use of flashbacks has proven that the film's ultimate goal is to depict Amy as Nick's tormentor. As a result, the feminist critique that Amy makes of patriarchal pressure and impositions on women regarding their physical appearance and behaviour is undermined. Indeed, instead of encouraging a feminist debate, the portrayal of Amy endorses misogynistic discourses that present women as manipulative beings who are capable of doing anything to get their aims. These discourses can be considered part of the backlash against independent women that Susan Faludi first explored in the 1980s and which, according to her, emerged in full force after 9/11, a phenomenon examined in *The Terror Dream*. The depiction of Amy as a powerful, but dangerous woman

exemplifies the kind of misrepresentations of empowered women presented in erotic thrillers and noir films in post-9/11 cinema.

The demonization of Amy in the film and the way in which the film portrays sexual abuse as one of the many strategies women can use to achieve their goals becomes especially jarring in the present sociohistorical context. *Gone Girl* was released in 2014, three years before the Harvey Weinstein scandal and the emergence of the Me Too and Time's Up movements and their denunciation of sexual abuse in the film industry. One cannot help but wonder whether a film like *Gone Girl* and its specific portrayal of women would be welcomed, or would even be green-lighted at all, in 2018.

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