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Feminism in Gillian Flynn's Novels: Violence, Malice and Amorality as the Basis of a Post-Feminist Agenda

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1. Introduction

1985. Henderson County, Texas. The Sheriff's Department issues a search warrant for a house and finds two male corpses on the property. The pistol they find matches the pistol that was used to shoot two bullets into the first and three bullets into the second corpse. It seems that the woman living in the house murdered two of her five husbands for money and property. She has a history of attempted murders, financial problems and physical disabilities. Furthermore, she experienced her father's and other men's alcohol-induced sexual and emotional abuse, and attempted suicide. Fifteen years later, she has been found guilty of capital murder and is executed by lethal injection (Montaldo on "Betty Lou Beets").

1989. Alamance County, North Carolina. An ordained minister has to be taken to the hospital after suddenly becoming sick. The doctors, who recognize the suspicious symptoms, order toxic testing and find large amounts of arsenic in his system. It comes to light that the minister's wife tried to poison him with toxic milkshakes over the course of a week (Hines et al., 2013: 189-190). In her teenage years, she was forced by her father into prostitution. Still her lawyer claims that "she is not a man-hater. [...] Her response was very normal [...] and in no way suggestive of some psychological change that could explain a person turning into a murderer" (Struck, 1989). However, the minister survives and the police exhume her first husband, another boyfriend, and at least two other persons in order to determine that they have died from the same poisoning. The woman is convicted of quadruple murder as well as attempted murder and is on death row to face her execution through lethal injection (Hines et al., 2013: 189-190).

Although these stories sound like a summary of a novel or a play, they are nonfictional. In fact, these stories are about real-life crimes committed by Blanche Taylor Moore and Betty Lou Beets. In the past, there have been many female murderers, especially the so-called "*Black Widows*," who killed their husbands or lovers.¹ Such merciless murders were also committed by

¹ Olga Rutterschmidt and Helen Golay, the infamous "Black Widow murderers," befriended two homeless men in California, took out life-insurance policies on them,

Belle Gunness, Vera Renczi, Nannie Doss, and Dorothea Puenteto to name but a few. These “Black Widows,” named after the venomous spiders that poison and eat their male mates, “claim a variety of motives, including love and jealousy, a majority murder for money, collecting life insurance or inheritances from their victims” (Newton, 2008: 44). Although most of these women have not experienced what Blanche Taylor Moore and Betty Lou Beets have been through, these killers experienced the pressure of male domination, sexual oppression, and physical as well as psychological violence, which ultimately resulted in an incentive to break free and offer resistance. Although their criminal actions are neither ethical nor excusable, and most probably linked to a mental insanity, one must consider that it was the oppression of a patriarchal society that brought pressure to bear on Moore and Beets and led to their determination to fight back.²

Social oppression of women occurs throughout the world, and it is not uncommon for women to snap at last and seek freedom and autonomy through violence. Regarding the struggles that result from gender dynamics in society, a recent novel comes to mind: *Gone Girl*. Gillian Flynn’s critically acclaimed novel is about a marriage dangerously infected with paranoia, antipathy, suspicion, and oppression. Husband and wife seem to be constant liars, who do not just betray each other but also the reader by pretending to be other people and by expecting their partners to adjust to socially prescribed roles. They create a world of illusions and deceptions to gain power over one another. Their interpersonal relationship goes so far as to question their sexuality, femininity, masculinity, and their social roles in particular. It is not unreasonable that this toxic marriage results in malicious falsehood, mutual manipulation, and even in a violent and bloody death. That is why I want to

and staged hit-and-run accidents to collect the money from their policies (Pelisek, 2017.). In 2008, both women were convicted of murder.

² John Gray argues that conflicts between men and women are based on both parties not being aware of their differences. In *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (1992), Gray claims that “men mistakenly expect women to think, communicate and react the way men do; women mistakenly expect women to think, communicate and react the way women do” (1992: 10). To stop conflicts between men and women, Gray proposes the idea that both should accept the other and acknowledge biological differences (Gray, 1992).

focus on the gender roles in Gillian Flynn's novels in detail and analyze the feminist approaches and statements with regard to the urge to leave the system and take vengeance. Amy Dunne is central in this study, as she is one of the main characters who talks about and commits considerable gender-based acts of violence. Due to the fact that these acts in literature have become quite famous in recent years, I want to unravel the essential idea of gender-based oppression in relationships and violent retaliation that women in particular find justified. The concept of the punishment Amy thinks of for her husband, Nick, a feminist paradigm of literature, has made many female readers feel vindicated. The following quotation may best introduce her feminist and aggressive personality:

The bad guy wins? Fuck him! [...] I've listened to his lies, lies, lies—from simplistic child's fibs to elaborate Rube Goldbergian³ contraptions. [...] I've suffered betrayal with all five senses. For over a year. So I may have gone a bit mad. [...] But it's so very *necessary*. Nick must be taught a lesson. He's *never* been taught a lesson. He glides through life with that charming-Nicky grin, his beloved-child entitlement, his fibs and shirking, his shortcomings and selfishness, and no one calls him on *anything*. I think this experience will make him a better person. Or at least a sorrier one. Fucker. [...] He killed my soul, which should be a crime. Actually, it is a crime. According to me, at least (Flynn, 2012: 316-317, 321).

This quote shows that Amy's excessive sense of justice in combination with her competitive behavior results in a well-thought-out scheme driven by a desire for revenge. She becomes an avenging angel whose objective is to seek justice in her own marriage and punish her husband for his abusiveness. She wants to teach Nick before she makes him pay for his misconduct. In fact, she remedies her marriage by calling into existence a new kind of feminism. For this reason, the use of violence, maliciousness, and amorality is of fundamental importance to determine social, historical, and cultural circumstances that can have an effect on a woman's behavior.

³ The adjective "Rube Goldberg" designates a complicated invention or a machine laboriously contrived to perform a seemingly simple operation. The expression is named after US cartoonist Rube Goldberg who drew such inventions and machines (Wolfe, 2000: 10-11).

Gillian Flynn “was born in 1971 in Kansas, Missouri—not to be confused with Kansas City in Kansas” (Burkeman, 2013). She received her undergraduate degrees in English and journalism from the University of Kansas and her master’s degree in journalism from Northwestern University in Chicago, intending to become a crime reporter (Pallardy, 2019). After she rejected this plan, she moved to New York City and joined *Entertainment Weekly* for ten years, where she became the chief television critic, before she started writing mystery thrillers (Flynn, 2010: 326).⁴ “Austerity cuts in 2008 led to the termination of her position, however, and she turned to fiction writing full-time” (Pallardy, 2019).⁵

Flynn’s 2012 thriller novel *Gone Girl* has been quite popular with critics, particularly after the movie adaptation (2014) became a box office hit. Not only *Gone Girl*, but *Dark Places* (2009) and *Sharp Objects* (2006) depict frustrated and violent women.⁶ These novels are not only about gender-based frustration but also about the social factors that negatively affect women and make them intentionally malicious, resorting to violent crimes in order to overcome their frustration of being unequal to men. As the women characters cannot live up to their gender roles, they have to face an identity crisis and try to break free by adopting violence and sexism as a feminist tool to claim complete gender equality. Flynn herself stated that it was her intention to write about violent women because she dislikes the lack of amoral female characters in literature (Flynn, 2015). Thus, Flynn’s female protagonists

⁴ In an interview with Noah Charney (2012), Gillian Flynn said that Dennis Lehane’s *Mystic River* (2001) inspired her to write *Sharp Objects*. *Mystic River* is a mystery thriller about three men from Boston, one of whom has been molested and traumatized as a child. Twenty-five years later, the friends have to come back to Boston because the daughter of one of them has been murdered.

⁵ There are similarities between elements of *Gone Girl* and Gillian Flynn’s personal life. The protagonist Nick also loses his job as a journalist, as Flynn herself did, and has to move from New York City to his hometown in Missouri. Flynn explained that she “certainly wove that experience, that sense of having something that you were going to do for the rest of your life and seeing that possibility taken away” (Rousseau, 2012). Flynn also said that, by the time she was writing the novel, she was newly married and questioned many concepts of marriage by asking “What is marriage? What should it be? What should it not be?” (Burkeman, 2013).

⁶ While *Dark Places* was made into a movie in 2015, *Sharp Objects* was released as a TV miniseries for HBO in 2018.

become feminist and anti-feminist at the same time, not because feminism is not needed any longer, but rather because, in her post-feminist approach, her female characters demand to be free of any culturally prescribed gender roles and their corresponding gender performances.

In times of the #MeToo movement, Flynn's agenda does not seem to arouse much attention although her post-feminist approach is rather unique in literature. Besides articles and reviews there has been little scholarly engagement with Flynn's work; there is no monograph on her to date. Potential reasons for this lack include that her success only started in 2012 after publishing *Gone Girl* (Flynn, 2012). Then there are many feminist books that were and are still dealing with feminism, such as Roxane Gay's *Bad Feminist* (2014), Mallory Farrugia's *The Future Is Feminist* (2019) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014), all of which demonstrate that feminism is still omnipresent. Because of this abundance, Gillian Flynn's approach could be perceived as one out of many feminist modes.

To many feminists, the goals of feminism have already been achieved, which is why they believe that the new post-feminist woman is an anti-feminist backlasher (Ilief-Martinescu, 2016). Ann Brooks (1997) argues, however, that post-feminism is not a backlash against feminism but rather a modern instance of it (Brooks, 1997: 66).⁷ Ilief-Martinescu (2016) expands on this view, arguing that

the postfeminist woman owns a non-dualistic space that holds together conflicts between her feminist values and her feminine body, between individual and collective accomplishment, and between professional career and personal relationship, and she therefore provides multiple opportunities for female identification. The postfeminist woman is independent, since she refuses to subdivide herself or to choose between her public and private, feminist and feminine identities. (Ilief-Martinescu, 2016: 4)

⁷ Faludi (1991) discusses the idea that post-feminism is a backlash and claims that "its triumph lies in its ability to define itself as an ironic, pseudo-intellectual critique on the feminist movement, rather than an overtly hostile response to it" (Gamble, 1998: 38). In media culture, women are persuaded that feminism is "unfashionable, passé, and therefore not worthy of serious consideration" (Gamble, 1998: 38).

In terms of post-feminism, Flynn's approach is to write women who in fact strive for individuality and independence. Her characters try to be post-feminist by being independent, feminist, and feminine. Moreover, Flynn provides her protagonists with new opportunities for female identification by claiming the artistic freedom to write amoral, malicious and violent women. Accordingly, Flynn's women characters are a tool of a post-feminist approach, as they do not choose a feminist or feminine path in life, but instead choose any path they want (Ilief-Martinescu, 2016: 6). In the novels, these paths usually lead to the social struggles that are reflected by characters who have not yet achieved gender equality, according to post-feminism.

However, some authors and critics claim that post-feminist identification is "the luxury of Western, middle-class white women who have attained a degree of success within metropolitan settings. As such, these women can 'afford' to reclaim [...] early performances of prefeminist femininity because their affluence and socio-economic success permits this" (see Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009; Negra 2009) (Richardson et al., 2014: 34). Although Flynn's narratives are popular by Western, middle-class, white women, Flynn's agenda shows that a reclaiming is neither wanted nor necessary in terms of post-feminism. Her novels deal with both the inability to reclaim early performances of femininity and, even more importantly, directly reject them. She rather proposes the idea that gender equality needs to incorporate amorality, violence, and malice, regardless of concepts of femininity and masculinity. Because of this idea of gender equality, I believe that a critical analysis of this agenda is needed.

It is striking that Flynn herself has never used the term "post-feminism," although in interviews she quite often talked about her novels, which are usually considered feminist fiction and feminism in general. In secondary literature, however, her novels are occasionally analyzed against the backdrop of post-feminism. In her essay "Just What Kind of Mother Are You?": Neoliberal Guilt and Privatised Maternal Responsibility in Recent Domestic Crime Fiction" in *We Need to Talk about Family: Essays on*

Neoliberalism, the Family and Popular Culture (2016),⁸ Ruth Cain claims that Flynn's *Gone Girl* satirizes the conventions of mainstream crime and horror and the idea that the woman is the traditional victim by presenting an anti-heroine who is criminal, morally ambivalent, and grim (Cain, 2016: 294-94). To Cain (2016), "the problematization of neoliberalism's contradictory demands, hypocritical moralizing and empty values implicates women perhaps even more than men in duplicity, manipulation and even violence, particularly when this involves mimicry of stereotypical feminine behaviors, such as emotional appeal and the victim pose" (Cain, 2016: 294-94).⁹ Ganteau and Onega (2017) focus on the reversal of victim and victimizer, and the artful subversion of victimhood in literature. They argue that *Gone Girl* is a "post-feminist refashioning of the old story of the danger of smart, beautiful, powerful women entrapping innocent men" and, "in this sense, it clearly colludes in obscuring the atrocious reality of the overwhelming number of women whose experience and fate are the opposite" (Ganteau and Onega, 2017). Ganteau and Onega refer to Angela McRobbie (2008) and state that these kinds of female characters allow "men to feel they might find themselves wronged by women [and] defend themselves against a kind of violent sexual exploitation by women" (McRobbie, 2008: 36; Ganteau and Onega, 2017). In fact, Flynn uses her female characters to propose a post-feminist agenda, which I believe is what makes her novels relevant in terms of gender in contemporary society. Thus her post-feminist agenda will be the focus of this dissertation. It is necessary to analyze this mode not only to unravel modern gender dynamics that are reflected in the novels but also to

⁸ According to Bloom (2017), neoliberalism can be defined as an economic phenomenon that "symbolizes a general trend toward greater marketization and the upward transfer of wealth as well as power to the financial elite" (Bloom, 2017: 4-6). It prescribes "cure-all" capitalist solutions to all socio-economic problems and is said to be utopian in its theoretical foundations and social aims (Bloom, 2017).

⁹ Gill argues that "there is a powerful resonance between post-feminism and neoliberalism which operates at at least three levels" (Gill, 2011): Both are structured by the idea of individualism, excluding influence and constraints from outside themselves; they are about "the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject"; and they are both related to gender (Gill, 2011). According to Gill, these parallels shows that post-feminism is at least partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberalism (Gill, 2011).

emphasize that Flynn's post-feminist approach is an innovative and relevant next step that includes elements of the previous waves of feminism and uses them to show that gender equality requires the artistic freedom to treat violence, malice, and amorality as non-gendered when moving beyond the constructedness of gender.

In literature, many *femme fatales* such as Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (1896) have already been depicted and discussed.¹⁰ So, the main focus on female amorality, malice, and violence is actually not unprecedented in literature. However, Flynn's approach to writing amoral, malicious, and violent women is different. Although her post-feminist mode is not really conspicuous as there are many narratives about amoral and violent women, Flynn is the first author who writes female characters with these attributes in terms of gender constructedness, gender inequality, and non-gendered amorality. It is also striking that all of these women have to face the effects of media in one way or another. By writing such female characters, Flynn becomes the first author to include violence in a post-feminist mode in literature. As she does so, she unravels gender inequality and comments on gender constructedness in contemporary America, which, according to her post-feminist agenda, is a media culture that is not only based on male-oriented structures but uses patriarchal oppression against American women. Accordingly, this media-based society supports concepts of masculinity, culturally affects and predetermines gender roles, and condemns female violence in contemporary American literature. To Flynn, this is gender inequality, which is why her narratives are visionary in terms of post-feminism and deserve further analysis.

¹⁰ As a reward for her dance, Salomé, the stepdaughter of Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch of Judea, and his wife Herodias, requests the head of the prophet Jokanaan on a silver platter (Wilde, 1896). Rowden claims that Wilde's female character Salomé is "the unconsciously sinful maiden of the Gospel [who] degenerates into a promiscuous harlot and killer for the sake of sexual excitement" (Rowden, 2016).

1.1 Gillian Flynn's Novels as Contemporary Vehicles for Post-Feminist Perspectives

Gone Girl, Gillian Flynn's breakthrough novel, portrays the dysfunctional marriage of Amy and Nick Dunne. On the morning of their fifth anniversary, Nick's attractive, intelligent wife, Amy, disappears and is believed to have been abducted and murdered. Her diary reveals several marital struggles, financial problems, and a strong fear of her husband. Soon Nick becomes the main suspect in the criminal case and has to deal with biased police investigations, public defamation through media, and society turning against him. The conditions and evidence are against Nick. Very soon he realizes that there is something very wrong with the disappearance of his wife. The secrets of an irretrievably broken marriage might solve the inconsistencies and reveal whether Nick killed his wife or whether he is innocent. *Gone Girl* leads the reader through this whodunit crime story and reveals that guilt and innocence are a complex conception by unraveling the depicted gender-based deceptions in the Dunne's marriage.¹¹

Gillian Flynn is not just famous for her breakthrough *Gone Girl*. Even before she wrote the story about Nick and Amy, she published the novels *Sharp Objects* in 2006 and *Dark Places* in 2009. According to Stephen King, *Sharp Objects* is "a terrific debut novel [that] is really too mild." He claims that he has not read "such a relentlessly creepy family saga since John Farris's *All Heads Turn as the Hunt Goes By*, and that was thirty years ago, give or take. *Sharp Objects* isn't one of those scare-and-retreat books; its effect is cumulative. [...] An admirably nasty piece of work, elevated by sharp writing and sharper insights" (King qtd. in Flynn).

Sharp Objects, Gillian Flynn's debut novel, follows the investigations of *Chicago Daily Post* reporter Camille Preaker, who, after a commitment to

¹¹ According to Peacock (2013), the double narrative is a main feature of the whodunit. This double narrative consists of "*sjuzhet*" that is hidden and gradually opened, and "*fabula*" that is ostensible (Peacock, 2013: 44). In a whodunit, the *sjuzhet* usually begins by relating or alluding to the discovery of a body, while *fabula* "began at a point in (fictional) time before the *sjuzhet* starts, and is not fully reconstructed, revealed, and therefore concluded, until the very end of the [...] whodunit narrative" (Peacock, 2013: 44).

a mental hospital in bygone days, is sent back to her hometown Wind Gap in Missouri to collect information about two disappeared little girls. Camille has to move in with her family, which Flynn herself says is not “[...] nuclear. It’s toxic” (Flynn, 2010). Thus, she has to face her psychologically aggressive, violent, and distant mother, Adora Crellin, and her precocious thirteen-year-old half-sister, Amma, a greatly feared bully and self-appointed darling of Wind Gap. As she tries to solve the criminal cases in Wind Gap, Camille must deal with the traumas of her own past while she comes to grips with Amma and finds out that both her mother and sister are delirious murderers who deliberately kill to get emotional attention. In the process of unraveling these secrets, she finds herself in adverse situations in which she has casual sex with Detective Richard Willis, who is assigned to the investigations of the murders, and with John Nash, the eighteen-year-old brother of one of the killed girls and, more importantly, the prime suspect of the police. In *Sharp Objects*, women are susceptible to emotional and sexual manipulation, physical and psychological violence, and interpersonal dependence.¹²

Regarding this novel depicting female brutality, Flynn herself claimed that she “[...] wrote a dark, dark book. A book with a narrator who drinks too much, screws too much, and has a long history of slicing words into herself. With a mother who’s the definition of toxic, and a thirteen-year-old half-sister with a finely honed bartering system for drugs, sex, control. In a small, disturbed town, in which two little girls are murdered. It’s not a particularly flattering portrait of women, which is fine by me. Isn’t it time to acknowledge the ugly side?” (Flynn).

This ugly side is also depicted in Flynn’s second novel, in which she focuses on another kind of violence that influences the people on a farm in Kinnakee, Kansas. The thriller *Dark Places* focuses on emotional violence by telling the story about the investigation of Libby, whose brother, Ben, is charged with multiple murder. He is accused of having killed his mother,

¹² In her essay “I Was Not a Nice Little Girl . . .” (2015), Flynn states that the inspiration for writing *Sharp Objects* is Frederick Sommer’s photograph “Livia” (1948), which is the name of a murderous Roman empress (Flynn). It is a shot of a young blonde girl with braids and a bright dress, which are considered to be features of innocence. Flynn claims that she looks intelligent, stubborn and mischievous nonetheless, a reminder that women can be pragmatically bad (Flynn).

Patty Day, and his younger sisters, Michelle and Debby, in a satanic ritual in 1985. After suffering from emotional and mental problems for years, Libby meets Lyle Wirth, a member of the “Kill Club,” which is a private union that tries to solve crime mysteries, such as the murders of Ben Day, whom the Club believes to be innocent.¹³ This underground society tries to change Libby’s mind, since she testified against Ben twenty-five years before and might be the key to her brother’s freedom. For want of money, Libby agrees to investigate some inconsistencies and interview possible suspects the Kill Club believes to be guilty. Both past and present are connected, so that Libby must face her psychological issues in order to solve the criminal case. Several flashbacks to the day before the murders unravel complex power struggles regarding emasculation, poverty, and abuse. The characters’ craving for power and recognition again leads to violence and oppression but ultimately results in emotional pain, social isolation, and a strong need for affirmation.

A similar kind of psychological issue also appears in *The Grownup*, Flynn’s most recent story, published in 2014. It originally appeared as “What Do You Do?” in George R. R. Martin’s *Rogues* anthology (Flynn, 2014). This short story about a young woman who lies about being a psychic also provides a feminist perspective on certain gender-based themes. In *The Grownup*, Nerdy has to deal with the manipulative and toxic relationship of Susan Burke and her stepson, Miles. What seems to be a horror story about a haunted house at first quickly turns into a typical Gillian Flynn narrative about a woman who struggles with her role in society and who is susceptible to violence, mainly exercised by men. Although this short story does not give the same detailed insight as her novels, specific themes with regard to sexism and feminism stand out.

This briefly summarizes the plot of the novels and the short story that will be analyzed in the following, but it does not answer why Gillian Flynn’s novels in particular are discussed in this dissertation. Feminism is a topic of concern, not only because of the current *#MeToo* movement or the sex crimes committed by, for instance, Harvey Weinstein and Bill Cosby, but also due to

¹³ Like Hitchcock in most of his films, Flynn has a short cameo appearance in the movie adaptation, in which she is a member of the Kill Club. She wears a black vintage dress and sits in a chair holding an axe (*Dark Places*, 2015).

recent films, such as *The Girl on the Train*, Disney's *Frozen* and also *Gone Girl* (Khomami, 2017, Vineberg, 2016; Rudloff, 2016; Flynn, 2014).¹⁴ While #MeToo highlights the constant harassment of women and represents the modern feminist pushback against the sexist oppression “[that has] happened to pretty much every woman you know [...],” modern literature and cinema also participate in certain notions of this feminist movement (Khomami, 2017). With regard to this concern being present in literature, Steve Vineberg (2016), for example, criticizes both *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* as “fake-feminist thrillers” that appear to be feminist but are in fact quite sexist. He claims that in *Gone Girl*

Flynn tries to play it both ways—to make Amy the villain the narrative requires while rigging a pitiful portrait of her childhood, when her parents, co-authors of a beloved series of children's books, used her as the model for their implausibly perfect heroine. Flynn pretends to be commenting on the damage to the psyche of a little girl who's stuck competing with her own flawless image, just as she pretends to be exposing the gritty reality of a disintegrating modern-American relationship (Vineberg, 2016).

Furthermore, Vineberg states that “Amy's monstrousness [...] is so clearly predicated on male terror of aggressive, outsmarting women that the idea of *Gone Girl* as feminist would be a bad joke if it weren't so offensive” and that it is difficult “[...] to take *The Girl on the Train* seriously as a feminist examination of anything when [Tate] Taylor shoots Haley Bennett's scenes to incorporate as much gratuitous nudity as possible [...]” (Vineberg, 2016). While Vineberg, on the one hand, mainly focuses on the “phony feminism” that has been created by men with a specific patriarchal idea of feminism, be it in order to sell it to feminists or to really fight for gender equality, Rudloff (2016: 17), on the other hand, analyzes the paradoxical representation of gender in *Frozen*, which “on the surface [...] promotes a narrative of feminist ideals of equality, empowerment and female agency but

¹⁴ In 2006, Tarana Burke used the phrase “Me Too” first in a “campaign to promote healing among women of color who had experienced sexual violence or exploitation” (Hillstrom, 2019: 105). In 2017, the phrase went viral when Alyssa Milano and further female celebrities used it to refer to the allegations of sexual misconduct against Harvey Weinstein (Hillstrom, 2019: 105).

reduces them to postfeminist ideals of looks, self-discipline and strongly gendered notions in how the characters look and act” (Rudloff, 2016: 17).¹⁵ Vineberg would probably argue that the reduction to these post-feminist ideals is visible in Flynn’s novels as well, for this reduction seems to be another patriarchal method of dealing with strong feminist women. However, this predication and the reduction are important literary tools of Flynn that merit further discussion, as she intentionally uses these concepts to emphasize the effects of consumerism and media on predetermined gender roles. In her novels, she portrays many representations of gender that are based on predications, predictions, and expectations of a patriarchal consumer society to make her characters intentionally use their relationships and gender roles as a false front. This is of peculiar interest because the characters, both male and female, act out presupposed roles of gender that are created, enhanced, and distributed through media. Thus, I will show that Flynn’s texts are not phony but instead post-feminist, especially on a cynical level as they mock the influence of culture, society, and particularly media. While, for example, in *Gone Girl* Nick is defamed on the Internet and on TV for not being a faithful husband, in *Dark Places* Ben is found guilty of being a satanic murderer in the newspapers and on TV before even going to trial. This innovative depiction of media influencing social perceptions of gender and sex is not only connected to the patriarchal oppression of women.

At Stanford’s fourth Cardinal Conversations event on May 23, 2018, Christina Sommers, “a philosopher and resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute,” argued that “for a gender feminist, it’s not enough to have gradual reform, you need to radically reconstitute the society and overthrow the patriarchy [...]. I don’t believe the United States is a patriarchy. And to say so is absurd. Do I believe in male privilege? Yes. But there is also female privilege. And it’s a complicated mix of burdens and benefits” (Shashkevich, 2018). Apart from the fact that this idea about female

¹⁵ Disney’s *Frozen* (2013) is said to be an “updated, feminist spin on a traditional fairy tale” that focuses on “feminist qualities of sisterhood, strong female protagonists, and the relegation of romantic love” (Macaluso, 2016). Regarding its displacement of feminist ideals and entanglement with anti-feminist sentiments, Macaluso argues that *Frozen* advances post-feminist characteristics and sensibilities (Macaluso, 2016).

privilege is worthy of discussion and obviously denied by Flynn, the claim that in American society both women and men are equally affected by and responsible for gender is indeed reflected in novels by Gillian Flynn, who portrays American characters that use the burdens and benefits that come with gender, although they mainly suffer in their gender-based relationships in a media-oriented society. The influence of media on the gender-based perception of happiness has been discussed in many other books before. Not only are gender and media connected in the above-mentioned #MeToo movement and sexist controversies, such as the vast number of examples of sexual harassment in the Hollywood film industry,¹⁶ but in the social interplay of, for example, body image disturbance, homophobia or misogyny (Scharer, 2013; Moskowitz et al., 2010). Misogyny, in particular, seems to be a controversial concept that reflects modern-day conflicts regarding sexism and feminism all over the world. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, the driving ban on women is now lifted, whereas at the same time prominent women's rights campaigners are said to be detained (Hincks, 2019). Gender-based discussions are prominent in media, which is another reason why men seem to be terrified. While women strive for equality and, consequently, become increasingly dangerous to men, gender-based oppression is gradually unraveled but also fades in this process. Although patriarchal power is endangered in this pursuit of complete gender equality, the ongoing occurrence of discrimination and sexual assault proves that this equality has not yet been achieved. An approach aimed to achieve this kind of equality has been proposed by Rosalind Gill, who defined post-feminism as a sensibility, which can be defined as a consciousness that is based on ethical values, an *ethos* (Gill, 2007: 4).¹⁷ According to Gill (2007), post-feminism is aimed to be used to “analyze contemporary cultural products. It seeks to argue that post-feminism is best thought of as a sensibility that characterizes increasing

¹⁶ Bill Cosby, “America’s Dad,” has been accused by 60 women of sexual misconduct and rape (Kimball, 2017). They claimed that Cosby assaulted them after drugging them (Kimball, 2017; Hall, 2018). In 2018, a jury found Cosby guilty of felony sexual assault and has been sentenced to ten years imprisonment (Hall, 2018).

¹⁷ “Postmodernism’s emphasis on ‘deconstruction’ and ‘difference’, and its challenge to the idea of a single epistemological truth, added to the voices of those who had been marginalized by feminism’s modernist heritage” (Brooks, 1997: 92).

numbers of films, television shows, adverts and other media products” (Gill, 2007: 4). She claims that “post-feminism is best understood not as an epistemological perspective nor as an historical shift, and not (simply) as a backlash, in which its meanings are pre-specified. Rather, post-feminism should be conceived of as a sensibility. [...] This new notion emphasizes the contradictory nature of post-feminist discourses and the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them” (Gill, 2007: 5). Furthermore, she claims that “it is women who are called on to self-manage, self-discipline. To a much greater extent than men women are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen” (Gill, 2007: 26-27). According to this definition, post-feminism as a sensibility makes possible an interpretation of Gillian Flynn’s novels, in which the female characters in particular try to achieve complete gender equality by being malicious, immoral, and violent. This post-feminist approach emphasizes that in order to be equal to men women have to be equally malicious. They have to be both feminist and anti-feminist to achieve complete gender equality. From this perspective, Gillian Flynn’s novels propose the idea that gender equality has to include malice and amorality. This means that in literature and society women should not be excluded from these character traits, which are usually ascribed to men. Instead, malice and amorality should simply be considered wrong.

In her article “A Howl” (2017), Gillian Flynn refers to the recent exposure of the vast number of sex crimes and makes clear that not gender inequality but rather gender-based ignorance and male indifference are the fundamental reasons for writing feminist novels. She refers to “the outrages and allegations [that] flash through [her] brain like a nasty, ludicrous slide show of twisted male power. Harvey Weinstein and his potted plant. Charlie Rose and his flapping bathrobe. Roy Moore and the cowboy-booted mall trolling he denies. Louis CK and his humid phone. Matt Lauer and his Bond-villain door bolting. Al Franken and his giddy grabs.”¹⁸ In naming these men,

¹⁸ In recent years, allegations of sexual improprieties became a scandal and ended or had at least an impact on many careers of powerful American men, including Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, Louis C.K., Matt Lauer, Charlie Rose, Al Franken, Roy Moore, Roger Ailes and Bill O’Reilly (Chang, 2018: 9). “During the 2016

she, on the one hand, emphasizes her support of the exposure of sex crimes during the #MeToo movement but, on the other hand, goes further by saying that she does not feel triumphant. Instead she claims to be humiliated and angry, as she writes that “[they] hate [women]. That’s my immediate thought, with each new revelation: They hate us. And then, a more sick-making suspicion: They don’t care about us enough to hate us. We are simply a form of livestock” (Flynn, 2017). This statement underlines Flynn’s motive for writing characters that are both feminist and sexist at the same time. It makes clear that, although the #MeToo movement seems to be successful right now, gender equality is still a problem in America. “It all boils down to this: America values women less than men” she claims, and identifies the Internet as one of the men’s main tools to discriminate against women. “[It] is toxic with slut-shaming and body-shaming, rape culture and revenge porn” (Flynn, 2017).¹⁹ Next to the dangers of media, which is a recurring element in her novels, she addresses gender-based discrimination in general by stating that “we [i.e. women] are under-represented everywhere, underpaid by everyone and underestimated all over. We are not the People; we are subjects of the Patriarchy” (Flynn, 2017). Being “subjects of the Patriarchy” is, according to Charlotte Barnes (2016), only one part of the “idea that women are inherently maternal, loving and in no way violent. [...] Feminism has to take some of the responsibility.” According to Barnes, in her research regarding female violence, she could only find a total of two feminist discussions that “comfortably acknowledge that the violent woman even exists” (Barnes, 2016). According to her research, past feminist theories did not aim to achieve equality on every level, since violence, amorality, and obsessiveness

presidential election, an *Access Hollywood* tape revealed Donald Trump bragging about grabbing women “by the pussy” (Chang, 2018: 9).

¹⁹ Brinkman (2015) defines “*slut shaming*” as the process of calling a girl a slut and/or teasing and harassing about her real or rumored engagement in sexual activity” (Ringrose, 2013 qtd. in Brinkman, 2015). “*Body shaming* involves making someone feel bad about the way he or she looks” (Green, 2017: 31).

According to Citron and Franks (2014), “*revenge porn*” is “the distribution of sexually graphic images of individuals without consent [...] as well as images originally obtained with consent, usually within the context of a private or confidential relationship” (Citron and Frank, 2014: in Scheinbaum, 2018).

“have traditionally been the province of the male” (Barnes, 2016). According to Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett (2014), Flynn’s aversion to the idea of a “psycho bitch,” who is “just crazy, [...] has no motive, and so she’s a dismissible person because of her psycho-bitchiness,” emphasizes that “true equality is admitting that women can be evil arseholes too.” She claims that Flynn is not misogynist or anti-feminist, because she actually writes “unhinged, complex, flawed villain[s] who [have] repeatedly been cast as one by others. And what could be more feminist than that?” (Cosslett, 2014).²⁰

In Denise Thompson’s definition of feminism, “[it] has a universal relevance because it addresses itself to the human condition. It is an ethical insistence on the human rights and dignity of women” (Thompson, 2001: 122). This universality and ethical insistence must not exclude female violence as a human condition or exclusively identify it as masculine. Barnes refers to Cosslett, who claims that “[...] feminists cannot have it both ways—[they] cannot kick back against the portrayal of women as emotional, empathic creatures and as victims, yet fall back on that same cliché when confronted with a cold-eyed psychopathic female character that [they] do not like” (Cosslett, 2014 qtd. in Barnes, 2016). This is why Flynn as an author and post-feminist works “inside a niche that makes the world uncomfortable—so uncomfortable, in fact, that no one has thought to properly investigate it. [...] There is a hesitance in academia to join the debate, despite mainstream publications at last joining the discussion on violent women. For every one publication that supports the possibility of this woman, this character, there is another that brands her as unwomanly and there the debate ends [...]” (Barnes, 2016). According to Barnes (2016), after four years of discussing the matter, feminists behave like the men Flynn criticizes, because they simply “[...] don’t care anymore.”²¹ But as the discussed novels are about female

²⁰ *Antifeminism* is a movement based on the belief that God created men and women to fulfill distinct roles, which is why gender equality runs counter to nature (Ford, 2008: 35). Regarding this belief, men are created to occupy the public sphere of work and politics, whereas women are created to bear and nurture their offspring in the private sphere of the home (Ford, 2008: 36).

²¹ Snyder-Hall (2010) rather believes that “women today often see feminism as narrow-minded and judgmental, which contributes to the ‘*I’m not a feminist but...*’ phenomenon” (Snyder-Hall, 2010: 258).

characters whose behaviors are “an extreme form of rebellion” and “an interesting meditation on society’s expectations of women,” it is necessary to further analyze the literary representation of present-day gender struggles and feminist approaches (Dockterman, 2014 qtd. in Barnes, 2016). In doing so, one has to “forgive the misogynistic undertones” in Flynn’s novels (Barnes, 2016). Women’s roles in a patriarchal society and feminism in general change constantly, so, according to these authors, the acknowledgement of female violence is important, regardless of moral superiority (Barnes, 2016).

In view of this, Flynn’s novels take up the notion of a consumer society that creates interpersonal relationships aimed to achieve happiness and turns the concept upside down by portraying violent women who are a complex reinvention of different female characters from the past, being both feminist and sexist to a certain extent. This duality of feminist and anti-feminist character traits determines post-feminism as an approach to further analyze gender roles and gender dynamics. So, it is not to be used as in “after-feminism” but rather as the “next step,” a cultural approach that makes possible an analysis of contemporary gender roles, inequality, and the contradictions of media culture (Gill, 2016: 619-622).²² The postfeminist reconstruction of the concept “woman” neither refers to a typical femme fatale, such as Catherine Tramell in *Basic Instinct*, nor to a female fighter like *Wonder Woman*, but instead to a new kind of woman that combines the fundamental ideas without being successful in achieving both gender roles (*Basic Instinct*, 1992; *Wonder Woman*, 2017).²³ At first it seems that the pursuit of gender equality based on the struggle against sexual harassment, the oppression of women and the constant presence of media in Flynn’s novels makes her a post-feminist, who, in her works, also includes elements of the third and, to some extent, the fourth wave of feminism, but one must consider that the characters portrayed do not solely refer to these distinct

²² Genz and Brabon (2009) agree, as to them “the prefix is understood as part of a process of ongoing transformation” (Genz and Brabon, 2009: 4).

²³ To Spicer (2010), Catherine Tramell is a post-feminist female character who is both strong and attractive and, thus, feminine and feminist (Spicer, 2010: 174). Because of this duality, she unites “what were previously incompatible qualities in a way that is particularly appealing to young women as well as powerfully erotic for males” (Spicer, 2010: 174).

movements. They are not even exclusively feminist in a traditional way, because Amy, for instance, is immensely abusive, sexist, and extremely violent. But not only Amy but all the female characters depicted by Flynn are feminist and sexist at the same time. One could argue that this sexism is an extension of adopting derogatory terms and, therefore, makes Flynn a third-wave feminist. Still, this form of sexism goes beyond linguistics as it is not only used as a tool of feminism to pursue complete gender equality but is also seen as a basic prerequisite to eradicating culturally preconceived gender roles. This phenomenon, a duality of feminism and sexism, makes Flynn's novels exceptional and progressive in terms of feminist literature.²⁴ Her texts reflect a modern society in which individuality becomes increasingly important, which is why the characters feel that predetermined gender roles must be rejected. Still, this society is also defined by a sexist culture and media, which is why the idea of happiness through gender roles and the perception of individuality constantly collide. This concept is also innovative and progressive as it emphasizes individuality and intertwines gender roles by showing that women can be feminists, who are aware of gender inequality and fight for their rights as women, and are, at the same time, amoral psychopaths, misogynists, or criminals. Furthermore, these novels show that men can be inferior and unable to find happiness in gender and sex as well, as they are also feminists and sexists at the same time. Eliana Dockterman (2014) refers to this phenomenon in *Gone Girl* by saying that "[...] nobody can agree if it's a sexist portrayal of a crazy woman or a feminist manifesto. The answer is it's both, and that's what makes it so interesting" (Dockterman, 2014). This is true of *Sharp Objects* and *Dark Places* as well. Several

²⁴ In her 2010 book *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism*, Susan Douglas argues that, since post-feminist media "has been selling women the lie that their (and feminism's) battles have been won, men and women only seem to have the same sexual freedom, which is why women prefer to be "sex objects" because to them it seems liberating (Douglas, 2010: 12 qtd. in Griffin, 2015: 155). Douglas argues that this "enlightened sexism" seems to make women choose between feminism and antifeminism, although it is in fact a *tacit* kind of antifeminism, because it "is an outright repudiation of feminism, the kind of 'good, old-fashioned, grade-A sexism that reinforces good, old-fashioned, A-grade patriarchy', but with a slightly better disguise (Manolo Blahniks and an Ipex bra)" (Douglas, 2010: 10 qtd. in Griffin, 2015: 155).

dysfunctional behavior patterns are relatable to a dualism that is present in every novel by Flynn, which is why it is essential to analyze whether this concept is a modern form of gender equality in literature and thus part of a post-feminist agenda. Moreover, the present dualism of sexism and feminism not only justifies but also makes it necessary to focus on the history and the theoretical claims of the three waves of feminism. Certain notions of these developments in feminism are crucial as Flynn takes part in a new feminist movement that is indeed based on approaches of the past but includes feminist characters who try to find happiness in gender equality by being sexist, violent and amoral.

In her novels, her progressive depictions of gender roles emphasize the linkage between conventional femininity and masculinity as well as the transition and unraveling of gender, which is why I believe that her novels mark a post-feminist approach. According to Fien Adriaens (2009), post-feminism can be defined as “one of the most fundamental, yet contested notions in the lexicon of feminist media studies and cultural studies because of its different interpretations among scholars.” She claims that it has no fixed meaning, as it is a “contradictory, pluralistic discourse that is mainly located in the academic context of television and cultural studies, in the media context of popular culture and within consumer culture. [...] It is a new, critical way of understanding the changed relations between feminism, popular culture and femininity. Media discourses play a crucial role in the representation, evolution and development of this new feminism” (Adriaens, 2009). So, post-feminism is not to be understood as a new movement after the end of feminism but instead as a further step in the evolution of feminism.²⁵ Post-feminism is a diverse and vague notion without any fixed meaning, which is why not only the theoretical approaches and goals of the general idea

²⁵ In his essay “Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Post-race Aesthetics in Contemporary American Fiction,” Ramón Saldívar uses the prefix “*post-*” in the term “post-race” equally. To Saldívar, the prefix does not mean the chronological “posteriority” but rather “a conceptual shift to the question of what meaning the idea of “race” carries in our own times” (Saldívar, 2011). So it is not to be used as in the term “post-structuralism” but rather as in “postcolonial.” Saldívar uses the prefix “post-” as a “conceptual frame [...] that refers to the logic of something having been “shaped as a consequence of” imperialism and racism” (Saldívar, 2011).

of post-feminism but also previous theories are significant in understanding Flynn's feminist ideas. Margaret Fuller, Betty Friedan, and Judith Butler are representative of each feminist movement and supply the necessary background for dealing with Flynn's post-feminist agenda as they provide the basis for an analysis of the above-mentioned dualism in her novels. These feminists provide fundamental theories that relate to and, thus, will be used to unravel the influences and consequences of media, culture, and sexism in relationships that are based on the perceptions of a consumer society. Moreover, they will be used to analyze the gender-based elements in the novels to answer the question of whether Gillian Flynn really achieves a post-feminist agenda. To answer this question, I have to refer to Douglas and Michaels' explanation of the notion first (2005: 24). They define post-feminism as follows:

Ever since October 1982, when *The New York Times Magazine* featured an article titled "Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation," a term was coined, and the women of America have heard, ceaselessly, that we are, and will be forever more, in a post-feminist age. What the hell is post-feminism, anyway? You would think it would refer to a time when complete gender equality has been achieved (you know, like we'd already achieved a feminist state and now we're "post" that). That hasn't happened, of course, but we (and especially young women) are supposed to think it has. Post-feminism, as a term, suggests that women have made plenty of progress because of feminism, but that feminism is now irrelevant and even undesirable because it supposedly made millions of women unhappy, unfeminine, childless, hairy, lonely, bitter, and prompted them to fill their closets with combat boots and really bad India print skirts. Supposedly women have gotten all they could out of feminism, are now "equal," and so can, by choice, embrace things we used to see as sexist, like a TV show in which some self-satisfied lunk samples the wares of twenty-five women before rejecting twenty-four and keeping the one he likes best, or like the notion that mothers should have primary responsibility for raising the kids. Post-feminism means that you can now work outside the home even in jobs previously restricted to men, go to graduate school, pump iron, and pump your own gas, as long as you remain fashion conscious, slim, nurturing, deferential to men, and become a doting, selfless mother. According to post-feminism, women now have a choice

between feminism and antifeminism and they just naturally and happily choose the latter. (Douglas and Michaels, 2005: 24)²⁶

Although Douglas and Michaels explain post-feminism in a rather sarcastic way by stating that it is not achieved due to the imperceptible influence of the patriarchal media and consumer society as well as the subordination to antifeminism, this explanation still encompasses the main goal of post-feminism, i.e., complete gender equality that is based on feminist approaches and that makes feminism irrelevant, as a notion that allows women to choose to be feminist or antifeminist. Whether women choose to be antifeminist is in fact relevant in this approach, as the mere choice does not reflect that gender equality on this level is achieved as the execution is still patriarchal and thus unequal. In fact, the idea of a post-feminist gender equality does not ask women to choose between these two concepts for they can instead decide to be both at the same time. Although one has to consider that this choice is still affected by patriarchal media and culture, the basic idea, detached from Douglas and Michaels' subjective judging of post-feminism, shows that Gillian Flynn's novels can in fact be read as post-feminist texts, as they not only allow both men and women to choose to be equally sexist and / or feminist but also violent and amoral to the same extent. In her post-feminist novels, Flynn shows that gender inequality caused by the influence of a patriarchal society and a media-based culture goes beyond ethical values.²⁷ To do so, she uses female characters that do not feel equal to

²⁶ In this context, "antifeminism" does not refer to the traditional belief that God created men and women who are different and thus unequal. Here, antifeminism can be considered a theoretical approach that denies the three general principles of feminism: "First, the social arrangements among men and women are neither natural nor divinely determined. Second, the social arrangements among men and women favor men. And third, there are collective actions that can and should be taken in order to transform these arrangements into more just or equitable arrangements" (Clatterbaugh, 2007: 21).

²⁷ The *European Commission* provides the following definition of gender equality in a guide to gender impact assessment: "By gender equality we mean that all human beings be free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without limitations set by strict gender roles; that the different behavior, aspirations and needs of women and men are equally valued and favored. Formal (*de jure*) equality is only a first step towards material (*de facto*) equality. Unequal treatment and

men, particularly regarding violence, which is a necessary condition of gender equality, and she demonstrates that such equality must include moral reprehensibility, madness, and malice.

1.2 Gillian Flynn's New Kind of Gender Trouble

“Feminism” and “misogyny” are often key terms that are connected to discussions about Gillian Flynn’s novels. Although she has been accused “of peddling “misogynist caricatures,” and of “a deep animosity towards women,” Flynn identifies herself as a feminist (Burkeman, 2013). She herself explains that, to her, feminism is “also the ability to have women who are bad characters” (Burkeman, 2013). She emphasizes that “in literature, they can be dismissably bad—trampy, vampy, bitchy types—but there’s still a big pushback against the idea that women can be just pragmatically evil, bad and selfish [...]. The psycho bitch is just crazy—she has no motive, and so she’s a dismissible person because of her psycho-bitchiness” (Burkeman, 2013).²⁸ So, on the one hand, she dismisses the stereotypical femme fatale in literature, because this woman, the “psycho bitch,” is not pragmatically evil as she does not have any motives. On the other hand, she implies that it is still sexist to have the dismissible vamp, this simple femme fatale, in literature. The intention to write female characters that are equal to men because they are not simply crazy but rather have a lack of morals and are pragmatically violent makes an analysis regarding feminism necessary, particularly to prove that Flynn’s novels are post-feminist regarding the unraveling of culturally determined gender roles, such as the *Cool Girl*. As all her novels portray different versions of this new femme fatale, i.e., a female villain that is completely equal to men also regarding wicked character traits and pure maliciousness, it is important to analyze *Gone Girl*, *Sharp Objects*, and *Dark*

incentive measures (positive action) may be necessary to compensate for past and present discrimination” (European Commission, 3 qtd. in Perrons et al., 2006: 261).

²⁸ *Gone Girl* is said to have “birthed the new genre called ‘chick noir,’” which “refers to novels that feature psychologically complex and threatening stories featuring central female characters in a maddeningly hungry multimedia age” (De Vera, 2014).

Places. To Robert Palmer, “the lack of female villains is indicative of a larger cultural problem that has little to do with feminism; instead, it has everything to do with a society that strongly circumscribes roles for women” (Palmer, 2012). Flynn’s texts not only depict new versions of gender-affected characters but also the influences of modern media, consumerism, and traditional conceptions of gender and sex in our present-day culture. So, they represent recent cultural conflicts, e.g. the constant sexual harassments or the social oppression of women, and so these novels are in need of a historical and cultural assignment regarding feminism that makes this post-feminist agenda possible in the first place. Moreover, these three novels are aimed to unravel gender according to post-feminism, meaning that Flynn not only claims that the idea of a woman, who must obey moral superiority, hinders feminism, but she also unravels media-based gender roles in a consumer society to show that, although culture and society still affect presupposed gender roles, male and female characters have to have the chance and the free choice to be equally amoral and violent to finally achieve complete gender equality. In doing so, Flynn implements Judith Butler’s gender trouble to eradicate preconceived notions of gender caused by a modern consumer society and media. This approach is innovative and, thus, allows the possibility of achieving post-feminist gender equality. So, Flynn’s unprecedented approach allows post-feminism in literature, as she unravels, criticizes, and vitiates current gender-based social and cultural conflicts that are ever-present nowadays. Due to the fact that there are no extensive analyses of both the criticism and the innovative idea of gender equality that might prove the present-day attainment of post-feminism, this dissertation will mainly show that Gillian Flynn is one of the first authors of fictional texts that approach complete gender equality, as claimed by Judith Butler, in order to emphasize that consumerism and culture are still aimed to keep both men and women from breaking free from predetermined gender roles. This post-feminist approach in literature, also considering and reflecting recent feminist movements, emphasizes that post-feminism in society and culture is possible although not yet completely achieved as, for instance, the #MeToo

movement is still present and most certainly a necessary step in achieving post-feminism in the future.²⁹

As mentioned above, to analyze Gillian Flynn's novels in view of the fact that they are post-feminist, it is necessary to have a look at the history and the theories of feminism first. Therefore, this study will start with a short introduction to the so-called "waves of feminism."³⁰ In this section, the historical and social contexts that led to a fundamental consciousness and pivotal principles in the whole field of feminism are focused on and later used to analyze the cultural and social elements that approve of Flynn's post-feminist texts. Since Gillian Flynn uses but moves beyond these waves that were innovative, significant, and influential in the history of feminism, it is necessary to examine the basic concepts to accurately refer Flynn's novels to the feminist movement but still show that they differ to the point that one can ascribe to them a post-feminist approach according to the definition of Douglas and Michaels (2005: 24). While there are many feminist texts, three books are said to have a great significance in the feminist movement: Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. These texts will be used to show that Gillian Flynn's novels include elements of each wave, for example Fuller's idea of legal equality, Friedan's theoretical disentanglement of the concepts of femininity and masculinity, but particularly Butler's idea of complete equality through the elimination of predetermined gender roles caused by culture. This analysis is aimed to prove that Flynn uses elements of each wave to show that ultimately female violence and moral reprehensibility are unconsciously deprived and, therefore, the key to achieving complete

²⁹ Lotti Davidson (2017) claims that "the elites who suffered sexual harassment may have overshadowed the already-underserved sexual assault victims that inspired the original MeToo campaign" and that #TimesUp has been inspired by it (Davidson, 2017). This movement includes "a legal fund for use of women to combat unequal and unsafe work environments" (Davidson, 2017). To Davidson (2017), #MeToo is "personal and anecdotal," whereas #TimesUp is "objective and political".

³⁰ The metaphor of a *wave* is used "for the displacement and movement of theories, methods, and ways of knowing that flow within a given generational cohort as well as across time and space" (Aikau et al., 2007: 6). These waves appear as sets and rhythmical distinct entities to the one before and the one after (Aikau et al., 2007: 6).

gender equality according to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. Butler is usually said to be a third-wave feminist; in this context, I will use *Gender Trouble* as a book of both third-wave and post-feminism, as it is about cultural and psychological solutions to gender-based problems caused by culture and, thus, ascribable to both approaches. Still, it is necessary to show that Flynn's novels are post- and not third-wave feminist, as they include and are based on various notions of each previous movement. Considering the idea that complete gender equality must include character traits with a negative connotation as well, resulting in characters that are both feminist and sexist, and ultimately violent and amoral, shows that Flynn achieves an innovative kind of feminism by challenging in particular the "second wave's binary thinking, essentialism, ideas on sexuality, vision on the relationship between femininity and feminism and body politics" (Adriaens, 2009).

Woman in the Nineteenth Century, *The Feminine Mystique* and *Gender Trouble* each focus on unraveling and eradicating changing forms of sexist oppression and provide relevant theoretical approaches that make possible a clearer assignment of specific post-feminist notions in Flynn's novels, which reflect on and attack an amorphous patriarchy in modern society and media culture.

After examining the feminist ideas propagated in these works, I will characterize Gillian Flynn as a post-feminist author regarding her past, her career, and her works in general to understand her perspective on cultural and social issues. This characterization aims to emphasize that her novels are "[...] indicative of a post-feminist mindset, wherein the problems of misogyny become somehow the fault of feminism" (Palmer, 2012). That is why it is important to examine her personal intentions regarding this movement. In "A Howl" (Flynn, 2017),³¹ Gillian Flynn claims that she does not feel that gender equality has been achieved yet, since she believes that in America women are hated by men, which can be seen in the cases of Harvey Weinstein, Charlie Rose, Roy Moore, Louis CK, Matt Lauer and Al Franken. Apart from expressing her disgust for these alleged sex offenders, she tells a

³¹ "A Howl" has been published in terms of *Time's Person of the Year* issue, which awarded the "Silence Breakers", i.e., women (and men) that spoke out against sexism, the "2017 Person of the Year" (Flynn, 2017).

story about her son, who “recently asked [her], ““Why aren’t there shirts that say BOY POWER?”” (Flynn, 2017). She explains that he now has one of these shirts, because “[she] could have talked male entitlement and the male gaze, the wage gap and Weinstein. But [she] thought: If the myriad GIRL POWER shirts are meant to encourage female strength and confidence, a BOY POWER shirt might make male empathy and respect dynamic. There were no BOY POWER shirts, so [she] had to DIY [do it yourself] an iron-on. Now, there’s at least one” (Flynn, 2017).³²

Aside from “A Howl” (Flynn, 2017), Flynn herself posted the essay “I Was Not a Nice Little Girl...” (2015) on her homepage to present a part of her life to her readers, who often asked whether her childhood was abusive or tragic in any way. In this essay, she tries to explain that her childhood was neither abusive nor tragic; in fact, she says that her childhood was loving and good. What is of importance is that she names the main intention for writing post-feminist novels, such as *Sharp Objects* or *Gone Girl*, which is not a personal tragedy but rather “the lack of female violence” in literature (Flynn). It seems to annoy her that women and their anger in particular are reduced in relative importance, which is why she, as a post-feminist author, portrays strong, violent, and mentally stricken female characters, like Amy Dunne or Camille Preaker.

In this dissertation, the focus lies on unraveling the gender dynamics portrayed in Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl*, *Sharp Objects*, *Dark Places*, and *The Grownup* to analyze whether her portrayals of women, men, marriage, and gender oppression can be categorized as post-feminist. Therefore, this dissertation discusses a number of feminist notions in an initial theoretical section about gender studies. In the subsequent section, all three novels will be analyzed and reflected upon with a focus on the depicted gender roles as well as the influences of media, consumerism, cultural expectations, and society. This serves the purpose of illustrating the centrality of questioning

³² The slogan “girl power” as a political statement, “mixing a girlish aesthetic with some more threatening aspects of adult female,” has been coined by the American punk band Bikini Kill who published a fanzine called *Girl Power* (Coscarelli, 2016; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 2008: 311).

gender attributes in Flynn's works and ascribing certain elements of them to post-feminism. Thereafter, it is important to have a more detailed look at the characters and their social roles in order to analyze their personality and their interpersonal behaviors. Their conscious and unconscious attitudes towards the opposite sex, an oppressive society, and compulsive gender ideas in general will be of prime importance. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider the setting, culturally presupposed expectations, and the effect of media on male and female characters. Since the plot, the characters, and their interactions will be important for the subsequent analysis, there will be a description and a gender-related analysis of these elements regarding Flynn's post-feminist perspective. In addition, since in recent years her novels were made into films or series, specific elements of these adaptations with respect to the cinematic realization of feminist themes will be similarly analyzed to examine whether these differ in using post-feminist elements as an agenda to achieve gender equality.

In this context, Rosalind Gill's 2007 article "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility" for the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* examines the problem that comes with defining post-feminism as an academic and social concept. In her essay, Gill claims that "[...] there is little agreement about what post-feminism is, and the term is used variously (and frequently contradictorily) to signal an epistemological break with (second wave) feminism, an historical shift (to a third wave), or a regressive political stance (backlash). The problem with these conceptualizations of post-feminism is the difficulty in specifying with any rigor what features constitute post-feminism" (Gill, 2007: 3). What makes this article particularly important in the analysis of Gillian Flynn's texts as part of a novel form of post-feminist literature is that Gill emphasizes that it is unclear what makes "a media text, and audience reaction, a set of production values" post-feminist as it "lacks an analytic purchase" (Gill, 2007: 3). Because of that, Gill "argues that post-feminism is best understood as a distinctive *sensibility*, made up of a number of interrelated themes. These include the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a

resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference” (Gill, 2007: 3). These themes are explored by her in her article by using examples from contemporary Anglo-American media. “It is precisely the patterned articulation of these ideas that constitutes a postfeminist sensibility” (Gill, 2007: 3). In this study, I will follow Gill’s characterization of post-feminism. Flynn’s novels as part of Anglo-American media culture will thus be analyzed in view of post-feminism as a distinctive sensibility that encompasses the above-mentioned themes and issues. To this end, this dissertation aims to prove that Gillian Flynn, considering that Rosalind Gill’s new understanding of post-feminism enables a scholarly analysis regarding cultural and social influences on gender, develops a novel form of post-feminist literature that focuses further on complete gender equality than previous (post-) feminist texts. It does so especially through the integration of female violence.³³

As one specific part of *Gone Girl* mainly reflects the basic idea of feminism and forms of violence caused by it, an analysis of Amy’s notorious “Cool Girl” speech is important to include. This speech is delivered not only to reveal and convey her vicious plan to the readers, but also, more importantly to reflect on the current social situation regarding preconceptions of gender and media. According to Jennifer Vineyard, it is “kind of the heart of the book” (2014). It is necessary to analyze to what extent this speech interrelates with social expectations, sexual oppression, and female revolt. The “Cool Girl” speech not only depicts the current norm of an ideal woman according to men, but also deconstructs the sociocultural elements that have historically led to a patriarchy, which is able to force women into a patriarchal mold. Women have to be easy, sexy, promiscuous, and, most importantly, never angry at their men. They basically have to like what men like, which means that they must have the mind of a cool male friend in the body of a sexy girlfriend without having freedom of expression. In *Gone Girl*,

³³ Budgeon (2011) argues that post-feminism produces a “misguided understanding of feminist achievements, namely that particular advancements made by some women are taken as being representative of success writ large” which is said to result in a contradictory dynamic by which “feminism erases ‘itself out of existence by its very success’” (Kavka, 2001: xi qtd. in Budgeon, 2011: 24).

this expectation is fiercely contested. Amy has had enough of the pressure that a male-dominated society puts onto her and breaks out of the system. But she particularly has had enough of being a “Cool Girl” (Flynn, 2012: 299). That is why she turns the concept upside down and simply takes advantage of its omnipresence and its circle of influence. Her profound hatred and her vicious plan can be tied to this explicit monologue. In this post-feminist rant, she emphasizes that she wants other women to break free as well. To do so, she breaks through the fourth wall to some extent and appeals especially to female readers. It is not difficult to understand why this speech is of such importance to the characters’ development, the novel’s progress, and the feminist movement in particular. Shelby Baker relates Amy’s Cool Girl speech to post-feminism too, saying that “[a] theme of postfeminist discourse is this idea of the ‘cool girl.’ [...] The trouble with this ‘cool girl’ mentality is that it is positioned in this postfeminist discourse where women are not straight-forwardly objectified but are portrayed as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so, it’s cool” (Baker, 2017). Baker also refers to Rosalind Gill and Angela McRobbie, saying that “Gill thinks that a further exploration between postfeminist media culture and contemporary neoliberal social relation needs to be done to understand what to do next. McRobbie says that women are being disempowered through the very discourses of empowerment they are being offered as substitutes for feminism” (Baker, 2017).

As the frustration and violence, which result from specific gender-based elements, cannot be ascribed to one feminist movement in particular, it is important to unravel these elements in order to attribute parts of Flynn’s novels to the overall concept of feminism. Moreover, it is important to analyze the implied dualism of feminist and sexist character traits as well as the equal availability of violence, malice, and amorality as prerequisites of complete gender equality.³⁴ Therefore, the key question of this study is: *How*

³⁴ Although malice, amorality, and violence will be treated as equally relevant in this analysis in terms of post-feminism, the women’s violent thoughts and actions are of

does Gillian Flynn use but move beyond the various waves of feminism in order to suggest a post-feminist agenda in which violence, malice, and amorality are necessary for achieving complete gender equality?

To answer this key question to the greatest extent, it is important that, after reviewing the historical context of the whole movement, i.e., the waves of feminism, examining the basic ideas of selected influential texts and analyzing Flynn's post-feminist approaches with regard to malice, violence, and amorality, it is necessary to consider the presupposed roles and the gender dynamics in the novels that suggest an attainment of post-feminism in literature. To do so, it is also important to examine the influence of certain social circumstances, such as the recent allegations of sexual harassment and the #MeToo movement.

Before finishing this study with a discussion and a conclusion, I will also analyze the post-feminist approaches in *The Grownup* (Flynn, 2014). Since this is Flynn's shortest fictional text, it does not provide as many and as strong examples of gender-based conflicts and indications of a post-feminist agenda. Nevertheless, the whole plot is based on the typical need to adjust to the roles ascribed by a male-dominated society and portrays the above-mentioned dualism of sexism and feminism as a basic prerequisite of gender equality regarding amorality and violence. Therefore, this brief analysis of the novella is aimed to complete the picture of Gillian Flynn's post-feminist stance.

In my final discussion, I will relate certain elements of Flynn's novels to the historical and theoretical movements of feminism analyzed and discussed to prove that Flynn's approaches, i.e., using specific notions of the previous waves to criticize, unravel, and ultimately achieve gender equality, indeed account for the fact that her texts are representative of a post-feminist agenda. Each wave of feminism will be related to the novels in order to explain why the portrayed characters exercise certain forms of violence, amorality, and malice, and to what extent the mere existence of these features

prime importance as they make the characters inevitably malicious, and also visualize their urge to break free from gender constructedness in a sometimes extreme and exaggerated way.

makes gender equality possible in terms of post-feminism. This study will present Gillian Flynn's fiction as a new step in post-/feminist writing that relies on earlier feminist work as well as the femme fatale tradition in envisaging a new kind of gender dynamics that requires not only a questioning of traditional gender attributes or of the constructedness of gender but also a media-saturated culture that holds a place for violent, amoral, and malicious women characters. Flynn moves beyond the "good wife" paradigm in a number of waves and thus suggests a new social agenda.

2. Historical and Theoretical Parameters of the Feminist Movements

In order to analyze Gillian Flynn's novels with regard to a post-feminist stance, it is necessary to have a look at the history of feminism first to be able to figure out how Flynn uses gender, amorality, and violence as features to move beyond the feminist waves. Although many countries, e.g. France and England, play a major role in the development of feminism, this study will not include these theoretical and historical approaches to a gender-based equality.³⁵ Particularly because Flynn's article uses examples from contemporary Anglo-American media and as her stories take place in the Midwest, I will mainly focus on the historical and social factors of feminism in the USA.³⁶ That being said, many elements are congruent with European theories of feminism as well. As mentioned above, I will refer to post-feminism as defined by Rosalind Gill in her cultural studies article "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility." In this article, Gill "aims to propose a new understanding of post-feminism that can be used to analyze contemporary cultural products" and she "argues that post-feminism

³⁵ *The French Revolution* (1789 – 1799) caused general acceptance of the need for women's rights and representation (Caine, 1997: 11). In the early years, French and English women demanded citizenship and involvement in politics. Because these rights were granted to men but not to women, feminism arose out of its tensions (Caine, 1997: 11).

³⁶ In the *World Economic Forum's 2017 Gender Gap index* measurement, the USA is ranked 49th on gender equality (Johnson, 2017).

is best understood as a distinctive sensibility, made up of a number of interrelated themes” (Gill, 2007: 3, 4). In my dissertation, this “new understanding” will then be used to analyze Gillian Flynn’s novels to show that these are part of a post-feminist turn, both in literature and in society.

2.1 The First Wave: Claiming Equal Rights

The word *feminism* is a term first used in 1895 in the English language.³⁷ It is about the theory of the equality of sexes and the “organized activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests” (“Feminism”). Feminism can be divided into three contiguous major movements, the so-called *feminist waves*. Due to particular historical circumstances, these waves were aimed at specific elements of social and cultural equality and freedom. According to the author of *A History of U.S. Feminisms*, Rory C. Dicker (2008: 21), *first-wave feminism* was mainly about fighting for the right to vote. Two hundred years ago, white men were considered to conform to the norm, whereas women, particularly white middle-class wives, were considered insufficient (Dicker, 2008: 21). Women had to adjust to the social role of wife and mother, thus they were usually not educated. Even if they were interested in education, then the patriarchal society immediately labeled them “*bluestocking*,” which was a derisive word for libertarian women who “wanted freedoms beyond those her role as wife and mother permitted” them (Dicker, 2008: 21).³⁸ In her definition, Dicker refers to historian Barbara Welter, who claims that women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had to live up to four tenets of the

³⁷ The utopian socialist Charles Fourier coined the French word “*féminisme*” as a pejorative term in 1837, to “indicate ‘the illness of womanly qualities appearing in men’” (Delap, 2007: 11).

³⁸ The first mention of the term “bluestockings” was coined by Elizabeth Montagu in 1756 and is related to the botanist Benjamin Stillingfleet (Eger, 2013: 15). Stillingfleet “preferred to wear the blue worsted stockings of the working-class man to Montagu’s elegant gatherings, rather than the more formal, fashionable white silk hose worn by tradesmen and the gentry” (Eger, 2013: 15). By using the term “bluestockings,” Montagu soon referred to herself and her friends as the “bluestocking Lodge” of female philosophers. By 1779, the term was used by men to mock women instead (Eger, 2013: 15).

“Cult of True Womanhood”, i.e., piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. In other words, women had to be religious and sexually pure housewives and maidservants for their husbands. Financial, work-related, and sexual desires were only reserved for men. Women who did not obey or were not able to adjust to this role lived under the threat of becoming outcasts (Dicker, 2008: 21-22). Moreover, women were supposed to be quiet about this oppression, for they had to obey their husbands’ rules and divorces were difficult to handle, both legally and socially. According to Dicker (2008: 24), many women felt empowered in their role of a housewife and mother as they thought of themselves as caretakers and “domestic managers,” while others disliked the fact that they could not participate in the world of men. Thus, it is no wonder that women like Mary Wollstonecraft and Margaret Fuller rebelled against these standards. Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women* and Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* “advocated women’s access to education and jobs” (Dicker, 2008: 24-25).

First-wave feminism is often connected to “the temperance and abolitionist movements and gave voice to now-famous activists like the African-American Sojourner Truth [...], who demanded: ‘*Ain’t I a woman?*’” (Rampton, 2015).³⁹ This was the first time the social differences between men and women, particularly regarding sex and gender, were socially and politically addressed. Though women demanded the right to vote and to participate in politics, the main goal of the first wave was to enable opportunities, if only because of suffrage (Rampton, 2015). The first-wave movement ended in 1920, when the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution was passed. This Amendment granted women the right to vote and was therefore considered a major victory at that time and is still considered a significant step forward in the USA (Allen, 2017: 574; “America’s Historical Documents”, *National Archives*).

³⁹ Truth is considered to be one of the most legendary US reformers as an advocate for abolition and women’s rights during the nineteenth century (Brezina, 2005: 4). On May 29, 1851, she attended a women’s rights convention in Akron, Ohio and gave her famous “Ain’t I a woman?” speech to state the radical idea that women are equals of men (Brezina, 2005: 5).

Later, the feminist ideal of the “New Woman” emerged.⁴⁰ According to Louise Benner (2004), significant changes for women took place in society, particularly in politics, the home, the workplace, and in education. She claims that “some were the results of laws passed, many resulted from newly developed technologies, and all had to do with changing attitudes toward the place of women in society” (Benner, 2004). Suffrage led to political changes, which according to Benner, were the most far-reaching because many women believed that it was their right and duty to take part in politics and that their decisions affected their daily lives (Benner, 2004). Soon, “women were represented on local, state, and national political committees and were influencing the political agenda of the federal government. More emphasis began to be put on social improvement, such as protective laws for child labor and prison reform. Women active in politics in 1929 still had little power, but they had begun the journey to actual political equality. [...] Society now accepted that women could be independent and make choices for themselves in education, jobs, marital status, and careers. Women’s spheres had broadened to include public as well as home life. The ‘new woman’ was on her way” (Benner, 2004).

2.2 The Second Wave: Claiming Freedom from Gender-Based Role Models

In the 1960s, the second wave came into being and continued into the 1990s (Rampton, 2015). This movement was about seeking liberation and equality (Dicker, 2008: 57). As the anti-war and civil rights movement was unfolding and a variety of groups of minorities around the world experienced a growing self-consciousness, the second wave of feminism also saw a boost (Rampton,

⁴⁰ The term “New Woman” was coined by Maria Louisa Ramée under the pseudonym “Ouida” in 1894, who “extrapolated the now famous – and then infamous – phrase” from Sarah Grand’s essay “The New Aspect of the Woman Question” (Ledger, 1997: 9). In fiction, the New Woman as a cultural icon of the twentieth century had many faces, “the ‘wild woman’, the ‘glorified spinster’, the ‘advanced woman’, the ‘odd woman’, the ‘modern woman’, ‘Novissima’, the ‘shrieking sisterhood’ [and] the ‘revolting daughters’” (Ledger, 1997: 2-3).

2015). In the aftermath, it became increasingly radical, particularly with its focus on sexuality and reproductive rights as well as social equality regardless of sex (Rampton, 2015).

At that time, feminists revolted against male-dominated concepts that forced women to be housewives, work in bad jobs, and conform to beauty ideals. In a way, they fought against the objectification of women since they were treated like male property. To do so, these feminists were more radical than those who fought in the first wave. They, for example, formed women-only organizations, such as the National Organization for Women, often abbreviated as NOW (Rampton, 2015).⁴¹ This form of feminism soon became discriminatory because of the common idea that the oppression of women was based on the requirements forced upon society by capitalism, patriarchy, and role models. Thus, sex and gender became differentiated concepts. While sex is about the biological difference between men and women, gender defines the social component that is affected by culture, history, and education. As opposed to the first wave, the second was not only about white middle-class women but rather about “sisterhood and solidarity claiming ‘*Women’s struggle is class struggle*’” (Rampton, 2015).⁴² The concept of *women* was seen as a social class reflecting that ethnicity, gender, and class were interrelated. Therefore, women were supposed to work together to achieve certain goals, like changing the world for the better. Still, the main goal of feminism remained, which is to eliminate sexism in every part of society (Rampton, 2015).

In 1963, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* was published, exploring the unhappiness that comes with the position of women in society after WWII (Evans, 1995: 13, 33). This text proposed one of the major approaches that was unraveling sexism. It demands equality between men and

⁴¹ In *The Myth of Male Power* (1994), Warren Farrell, a pro-feminist and the only man to have been elected three times on the New York council of *NOW*, argues that the equality agenda has now become the inequality agenda (Farrell, 1994 qtd. in Wilkinson, 1995: 42, 85)

⁴² The slogan “No women’s struggle without class struggle, and no class struggle without women’s struggle” derived from a leftist viewpoint and “was something the Redstockings brought with them from the critique of the capitalist society set out by the rest of the political left wing” (Andersen and Siim, 2004: 87).

women while it tries to unmask the “*mystique*” that results in gender inequality. It mainly focuses on the deeply held social circumstances that trick women into adjusting to the roles of housewife and mother.

During the second wave, phrases like “sisterhood is powerful” emerged; however, the term “sisterhood” has to be contextualized as the feminist movement at that time did not include black, minority, and migrant women neither in society nor in “literature on women’s or feminist studies” (Anthias, 1983).⁴³ So, the ethnic context of feminist struggles were systematically ignored, which is why the “black feminist movement has grown partly as a response to the invisibility of black women and to the racism of the white feminist movement” (Anthias, 1983). As the term “woman” meant “white woman” and “blacks” meant “black men,” the most dominant approach defined black women as “suffering from the ‘triple oppression’ of race, gender and class” (Anthias, 1983). In her article “Ethnicity and Feminism: Two Solitudes?” from 1990, Sheva Medjuck claimed that “the women’s movement must understand the nature of racism and class exploitation and its interdependencies with sexism,” as “sexism, racism and class exploitation constitute interlocking systems of domination, all of which share an ideological foundation” (Medjuck, 1990: 1). Medjuck believed that, at a general level, sexism and racism causes women to share the experience of oppression (1990: 8). In 1981, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* was published and dealt with individual struggles of women of color and criticized the idea of white feminists based on homogenous sisterhood (Bradley, 1996: 9). In 1983, Alice Walker published *In Search of our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose*, in which she has introduced the term “womanist” / “womanism” in order to emphasize the “lexical and cultural difference between black and white feminists who cannot seem to unify on issues of race, class and gender” (Bhagyathara, 2015: 6).

⁴³ The slogan “*sisterhood is powerful*” became a call to women’s activism due to the phrase “*the personal is political*” and “was coined by Kathie Sarachild in the 1960s (Redstockings 2001). It was also the title of Robin Morgan’s anthology of defining second-wave feminist writings (Morgan 1970)” (Bromley, 2012: 80). These phrases link together feminist theory and practice and still resonate with feminism (Bromley, 2012: 80).

Bhagyathara claims that the terms “womanism” and “black feminism” both deal with the struggle against racism and sexism by black women, who try to achieve equality and liberty, which is why both terms are said to be interchangeable (Bhagyathara, 2015: 6).⁴⁴

According to Epstein (2002: 118), the women’s movement was the most successful movement of the 1960s and 1970s, although it was possibly one of the most radical concepts demanding equality. In the present, women think and feel that they are equal to men, which is, according to Epstein, based on the fact that this movement was a success thirty years ago. Furthermore, it is said that this movement improved social situations for women, such as working conditions. Issues like “child care, violence against women, and reproductive rights have been placed on the public agenda as legitimate issues” (Epstein, 2002: 118). Due to the second wave of feminism, women’s equality has been socially accepted although not completely implemented. Still, women’s equality became a goal that made the opportunity for changing the status quo and an implementation of the collective power of women possible (Epstein, 2002: 118-119).

2.3 The Third Wave: The Construction of Gender

After Rebecca Walker, an American author and activist, had published her famous *Ms. magazine* article “Becoming the Third Wave,” this wave of feminism soon followed. In this article, Walker reflects her anger about the 1991 Senate Judiciary Committee hearings dealing with Anita Hill’s sexual harassment allegations against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas. She criticizes that Clarence Thomas, an African American U.S. Supreme Court nominee, was accused of sexual assault and found not guilty because the accusation was soon connected to racism. The case brought sexual harassment to the national spotlight, not only because the allegations were never proven but also because they were said to have a racist origin

⁴⁴ Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “*intersectionality*” in 1989. Crenshaw argued that women of color were located between racism and sexism and thus had to face both spheres as an intersection (Grabham et al., 2008). “Their experiences were thus the product of both and equivalence of neither” (Grabham et al., 2008).

(Weinraub, 1999; Kurtis, 2016). According to Walker (1992: 39), the hearings “were about checking and redefining the extent of women’s credibility and power.” Therefore, her article is seen as a plea to all women, in which she claims “that the fight is far from over” and that the consequential outrage should be turned into political power in order to distance themselves from those persons who undermine female freedom by claiming that it is socially subordinate to other political priorities, such as racism (Walker, 1992: 41). She ends her plea by writing, “Do not vote for them unless they work for us. Do not have sex with them, do not break bread with them, do not nurture them if they don’t prioritize our freedom to control our bodies and our lives. I am not a post-feminism feminist. I am the *Third Wave*” (Walker, 1992: 41).⁴⁵ This statement introduced the term “Third Wave” and thereby set it in motion (Snyder, 2008: 176). This movement has been analyzed by various theorists, such as Martha Rampton, R. Claire Snyder and Kathleen P. Iannello (Rampton 2015; Snyder 1999: 183). According to Snyder (2008: 175), *third-wave feminism* resembles the second wave since it is also rebellious, personal, and individualistic. Nonetheless, Snyder claims that the third wave includes a more tactical approach that mainly focuses on the intersectional and multi-perspectival level in response to the collapse of the category “women.” That means that it is in fact focused on a personal level and individual perspectives, taking into account that every woman and every idea of gender is different (Snyder, 2008: 175-176).

This movement became less radical, as feminists readopted “lip-stick, high-heels, and cleavage proudly exposed by low cut necklines that the first two phases of the movement identified with male oppression” (Rampton,

⁴⁵ Third-wave feminism must not be confused with the “Third Wave” experiment of history teacher Ron Jones in 1967, who taught Fascism in his classes, making his students believe the Third Wave is a national movement that would eliminate democracy (Klink, 1967). In this experiment, the students were classified and had to conduct several exercises that were aimed at explaining how the German population accepted the Nazi regime during WWII. When the Third Wave movement began to grow outside his classes, Jones invited his students to the announcement of a Third Wave presidential candidate to resolve the experiment and show the students a short film about the Nazi regime (Klink, 1967). The experiment has been made into movies such as *Die Welle* (2008).

2015).⁴⁶ So, the third wave of feminism is still about strong and rebellious women. However, as opposed to the first two waves, they defined their feminine beauty as a part of their subjective identity and not as an outcome of the sexual objectification of a male-dominated society. This allows a sense of individualism, which also means that not every third wave feminist sees, for instance, pornography and prostitution as promoting violence against women. Accordingly, as long as women who work in these businesses endorse their occupations, they are not subjected to a sexist patriarchy. Due to that, the third-wave movement is often also called “power feminism” as it refuses the role of women as victims (Iannello 2010: 72).⁴⁷

The perceptions of gender and subjective identities became the core of third-wave feminism, as it “sought to question, reclaim, and redefine the ideas, words, and media that have transmitted ideas about womanhood, gender, beauty, sexuality, femininity, and masculinity, among other things” (Brunnell, 2016). Thus, “woman” and “man” are perceptions of gender constructions that constitute characteristics that are strictly male and strictly female (Brunnell, 2016). “From this perspective each person is seen as possessing, expressing, and suppressing the full range of traits that had previously been associated with one gender or the other. For third-wave feminists, therefore, “sexual liberation” [...] was expanded to mean a process of first becoming conscious of the ways one’s gender identity and sexuality have been shaped by society and then intentionally constructing (and becoming free to express) one’s authentic gender identity” (Brunnell, 2016).

Before continuing with the fourth wave, Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* needs to be mentioned regarding its impact during the third wave. This book depicts a feminist theory that can be used and related to Gillian Flynn’s novels in order to examine her idea of feminism later on. *Gender Trouble* was published in 1990 and is considered and “acknowledged as a

⁴⁶ The term “lipstick feminism” is used to describe a form of the third-wave movement that is aimed to combine the traditional ideals of femininity and feminist values (Lankford Jr., 2010: 98).

⁴⁷ Naomi Wolf (1993) used the term “power feminism” to contrast “victim feminism” that casts women as “beleaguered, fragile, intuitive angels” and encourages them to “seek power through an identity of powerlessness” (Cole, 2007: 50).

groundbreaking study that facilitated a paradigm shift in the understanding of gender” (“Judith Butler”, 2013). Due to her work and her contributions to feminism, queer theory, and ethics, Butler has become one of the leading philosophers, theorists of gender and sexuality, and public intellectuals of our time (“Judith Butler”, 2013). Her work will be focused on because Flynn’s novels, with their focus on unraveling gender and eradicating inequality, represent the concepts of fourth-wave feminism associated with Butler’s theory.

2.4 “The Fourth Wave”: Hashtag Activism

In her article “Is There a Fourth Wave? Does It Matter?” (2011), Jennifer Baumgardner approaches an explanation of the *fourth wave of feminism* based on certain elements of the previous movements. She refers to the history of these movements and underlines that not everyone agrees on the concept of waves, since chronological and personal assignments do not always correlate. Baumgardner adds that one should not focus too much on the criteria for each wave, as they do not have clear boundaries but rather blend into each other.⁴⁸

Hashtag activism started around 2008 and continues to the present; it runs parallel to the third wave (Baumgardner, 2011). “The *fourth wave of feminism* is emerging because (mostly) young women and men realize that the third wave is either overly optimistic or hampered by blinders” (Rampton, 2015). Although the fourth wave is not officially acknowledged as a feminist movement, it includes innovations that are worth mentioning when analyzing Flynn’s texts. According to Samantha Keville (2016: 2), activists of this modern form of feminism “utilize technology to enhance the globalization of contemporary feminist ideologies.” It is said that these feminists are “tech-

⁴⁸ Baumgardner argues that there is even a *Wave Zero* that occurred in the fourteenth century when Iroquois and Cherokee clan mothers contributed to important decisions, like the choice of the chief and war strategies (Baumgardner, 2011). Before Christopher Columbus’s arrival would obliterate the egalitarian society of many of the nearly five hundred Native American tribes, equal education and women’s control over their fertility and children were common (Baumgardner, 2011).

savvy and gender-sophisticated” because of being influenced by the 1980s backlash, 9/11, and the lifelong experiences that came with the constant presence of the online universe (Baumgardner, 2011). Furthermore, blogs, Twitter campaigns, online media, trans-health initiatives and trans-inclusive organizations made it possible for everyone to have access to and to take up feminine and masculine attributes regardless of their sex. Social media transformed politics and feminism. According to Baumgardner (2011), the fourth wave exists due to these changes caused by media advances and globalization. She also claims that, in a way, each wave is part of the overall concept of feminism and, therefore, “combine[d] to become a powerful and distinct force.” Out of this, fourth-wave feminists involve both second wave and third wave perspectives as they see feminism as a part of a consciousness of oppression and still emphasize the importance of inclusion and acceptance. They try to use the Internet for gender-bending and -leveling hierarchies (Rampton, 2015).

On the downside, Alex Guardado argues that the fourth wave, due to its Internet dependency, leads to an awareness but not to the willingness to change problems. In his Newuniversity.org article, “Hashtag Activism: The Benefits and Limitations of #Activism,” he writes that social media is a new foundation that can be used to change politics and society, but hashtagging and reposting are not enough as they do not contribute to the change. Because of that, he demands creators instead of re-bloggers (Guardado, 2015). For this project, I will acknowledge the fourth wave of feminism as part of the third and representative of the whole movement, as it refers to modern themes, such as media manipulation and public defamation, which are important literary devices in Gillian Flynn’s novels.

In *Four Waves of Feminism* (2015), Martha Rampton claims that it is not clear how feminism will change or be implemented in the next years. As there are many co-existing feminist interpretations with different ideologies, tensions, points, and counter-points, it is not possible to predict the movement’s future. Rampton merely hopes for it to stay chaotic,

multivalenced, and disconcerting, since this is a sign of the feminists' thriving (Rampton, 2015).⁴⁹

2.5 Each Movement's Influential Feminist Literature

In her article for *The Guardian*, Rachel Holmes lists feminist books that address the “the greatest global injustice” (2014). In doing so, she defines the quality of feminist texts first. According to Holmes (2014), the right values, sufficient wit, wisdom, energy, and eloquence are important in this definition. These characteristics are aimed to inspire change in a society that struggles with gender-based inequality. It gets to a point where this inequality is said to be the greatest global injustice spanning millennia and continents (Holmes, 2014). Due to that, feminism is said to have been ever-present, which is why it does not have to be re-invented. The number of the waves is not important as it is a global concept with one main goal (Holmes, 2014). This requires a “space where we can move past feminism, where feminism no longer holds appeal to women and where it can even be harmful to women” (Quangel, 2013). This idea of complete gender equality based on the concept of eradicating sexism and thereby making feminism irrelevant is post-feminist for it is claimed that it is “[...] a desire for control over one's destiny [and] the hope that someday, no one will call you any names or discriminate against you based on your sex” (Quangel, 2013). According to Quangel (2013), this means that “[a] single female's experiences are just as valid as any other female's experience. A wealthy white woman who “makes the choice” to become a prostitute—her choice is equally valid as that of poor woman of color who ‘makes the choice’ to become a prostitute. [...] These individuals are fighting against ‘patriarchy’, a concept that is not individualized or even rooted in material manifestations” (Quangel, 2013). Although post-feminism proposes the idea that individual choices are part of gender equality, to Quangel (2013), patriarchy is still present as an amorphous concept that

⁴⁹ It is important to emphasize that post-feminism must not be confused with the above-mentioned waves, as I will use it as an analytic approach, according to Rosalind Gill (2007).

includes both perceived and non-perceived sexism against women in general. Because of that, I will have to take into consideration various forms of sexist oppression in gender- and media-based culture that are indeed present and influential in Gillian Flynn's way of using and reinventing certain feminist notions in the process of identifying, unraveling, and criticizing the amorphous patriarchy. This examination makes a profound theoretical assignment of Flynn's novel approach regarding gender equality necessary. For that and the above-mentioned reasons, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, *The Feminine Mystique*, and *Gender Trouble*, each focusing on unraveling and eradicating changing forms of sexist oppression, provide relevant theoretical approaches that make possible a clearer assignment and analysis of specific post-feminist notions in Flynn's novels that reflect on and attack the amorphous patriarchy in modern society and media culture.

2.5.1 Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*

In view of the first wave of feminism, Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* is "widely regarded as the founding text of the women's rights movement in the USA" (Fuller, 1845).⁵⁰ It is an essay that was reproduced, modified and expanded of an article published in "The Dial, Boston, July, 1843" under the title of "*The Great Lawsuit. Man versus Men: Woman versus Women*" (Fuller, 1845: 5). In *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Fuller uses many allusions and comparisons to various works and genres, such as literature, poetry, religion, philosophy, and history. This essay is addressed to "*Man*," meaning both man and woman as twin exponents of a divine thought. According to that thought, the development and the

⁵⁰ Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is another major treatise of the first wave movement. It is considered to be the first European monograph of feminist philosophy. Although it is fifty-three years older and usually considered equally relevant in terms of feminism, I will focus on Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) instead, for Wollstonecraft was relevant to the British feminist movement and mainly advocated for the educational rights of women.

conditions of life and freedom should be recognized as the same for both men and women (Fuller, 1845: 5). Due to that, equality should be strived for since everybody has the right to claim the liberty of law. A backward glance might have saved us the deep disappointment of Hillary Clinton's 2016 loss in the U.S. presidential elections. African American men won the vote in 1870; the U.S. elected the first black male President a hundred and thirty-eight years later. By that logic, we'll have to wait until 2060 for a woman to shatter what Clinton has repeatedly called the "highest and hardest" glass ceiling" (Marshall, 2016).⁵¹ Apart from being impossible to reach, this glass ceiling, "an intangible barrier within a hierarchy that prevents women or minorities from obtaining upper-level positions," is still a major social problem because "[...] even today [...] not enough women and people of color are reaching leadership ranks, and some workplaces still don't take sexual harassment and predatory behavior seriously" ("Glass Ceiling"; Vargas, 2018). According to a survey of the Pew Research Center (Parker and Funk, 2017), about 42% of working women in the United States say they have faced gender-related discrimination on the job.

In her essay, Fuller compares the discrimination of women to the slave-dealing and slave-keeping in America, telling men that "[they] are not the head of [their] [wives]. God has given [them] a mind of [their] own" (Fuller, 1845: 13; 15-16). At that time, certain questions were asked by both women, who were considering what they needed and did not have and what they could have if they found what they needed, and men, who were considering whether women were capable of being more than they were and having more than they had. Moreover, women in particular were asking themselves whether being and having more would really improve their

⁵¹ In 2019, *The Economist* published its annual *glass ceiling index (GCI)*, which measures combined data "associated with equal treatment at work, including pay, seniority and the decision to enter the workforce" of 29 OECD countries, "a club of mostly rich countries" ("Daily chart: The glass-ceiling index", 2019; Rotter, 2019). The figures suggest that progress for women at work has stalled. According to the 2019 GCI, the Nordic countries seem to provide the best working conditions for women and the best chances to obtain a university degree (*The Economist*, 2019; Rotter, 2019). Still, the figures also suggest that more women are active in political positions. During the 2018 midterm elections in the USA, for instance, more women than ever were voted into Congress (*The Economist*, 2019; Rotter, 2019).

condition (Fuller, 1845: 16). These key questions show the uncertainty that came with the gender roles of the past. Women, just like African slaves, were, in a way, the property of their husbands/masters. In connection to this, Fuller names male-dominated circumstances, such as the legal inability to hold property on equal terms or the right to have sole custody, which, as mentioned above, was later remedied by, for example, the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution (Fuller, 1845: 17-18).⁵² This essay contributed to the improvement of women's rights in the nineteenth century. Considering that today there is a more indirect, more imperceptible patriarchy that requires another improvement of women's rights, the glass ceiling needs to be broken, so to speak. While many women try to obtain such upper-level positions, say Hillary Clinton who ran for U.S. president, others claim that "breaking the glass ceiling" needs to stop, because it is a construct of patriarchy in a male-centric world (Faw, 2018). "It may seem overly simplified, but the workforce was first designed around men. Visit Wikipedia for a complete and thorough history of the Industrial Revolution. The basic takeaway is that women only entered the picture after this framework was established and set in stone. This means everything that is just assumed as the status quo - like starting work at 9 am or the supervisory network - was developed with only men in mind" (Faw, 2018). So instead of becoming, as Larissa Faw puts it, a "#BossLady," they should create a new system for women, designed, led, and controlled by women (Dangelmaier: in Faw, 2018).

To bring it back to the comparison to slavery, Fuller says that, in their minds, white men, although "all [of them] are privately influenced by women" as each of them has a wife, sister, or female friends, felt towards women as towards slaves.⁵³ According to this essay, their main fear is the

⁵² Amendment XIX (1920): "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation" (Mann and Roberts, 2015: 1143).

⁵³ Emmeline Pankhurst's statement "I would rather be a rebel than a slave" was used in the promotion of the movie *Suffragettes* (2015), where the actresses wore T-shirts with this sentence, including Meryl Streep. This caused controversies and led to

destruction of the beauty of home, the violation of the delicacy of the sex, and the degradation of the halls of legislation (Fuller, 1845: 18). This problem is still present, as “American men are afraid. They’re fretting over their ability to give a colleague a well-meaning hug without it being interpreted as lecherous, worried that the scores of powerful men being fired is a sign of a full-blown ‘sex panic’, and that the era of #MeToo is ‘criminalizing courtship’” (Valenti, 2017). In fact, the main fear that has been described by Fuller became more tangible in recent years, for now females are even a danger to famous men’s reputations, jobs, and freedom. “Harvey Weinstein [for example] is accused of decades of abuse, including rape, which he denies, and he jetted to Europe. [Matt] Lauer, accused of sexual assault, was making \$20m a year. Louis CK exposed himself to women, yet no criminal charges have been brought against him” (Valenti, 2017). As fear still seems to be an ever-present emotion of men, Jessica Valenti focuses on a more radical way of dealing with it. Instead of stilling their fears, she claims that “perhaps the problem is that powerful white men have not been afraid enough. Maybe the incredible sense of entitlement that’s allowed men to treat women so horribly without consequence is something that can be killed—or at least hobbled—with a nice dose of fear” (Valenti, 2017). Just like Gillian Flynn, Valenti demands a feminist approach, in which fear is used as a tool of strong women to achieve equality.

Fuller rather focuses on religion and logics, and claims that it is necessary to rise above the belief that woman was made *for* man by acknowledging that equal freedom is a right, not a concession. This right is God-given, as shown in the following statement: “If the negro be a soul, if the woman be a soul, appared in flesh, to one Master only are they accountable. [...] he must come not as man, or son of man, but son of God” (Fuller, 1845: 20). In order to achieve this equality, man has to overcome a psychological issue, which is that man is vain and fond of power as well as development. This affects him morally in a way that “prevents his intellectually discerning the destiny of woman” (Fuller, 1845: 24). However, Fuller demands that the sexes should “correspond to and appreciate” one another, empowering each

“accusations of insensitivity and proof that ‘white feminists’ had still to come to terms with their racism” (Matos, 2017: 76).

other to strive for a better future instead of being discouraging. This, to her, is only possible if man himself stops being ungenerous. This unwilling behavior is due to the fact that man is not yet an elevated human being who wants faith and love (Fuller, 1845: 24, 25). Present-day sexual harassment cases may imply that this is still a problem.

In the nineteenth century, women craved for what is said to be every human being's birthright, freedom of religion and intellect as well as freedom of learning with God alone being their guide and judge (Fuller, 1845: 36). With regard to God, Fuller also examines the concept of marriage as a union. Although the "union of one with one is believed to be the only pure form of marriage, a great majority of societies and individuals are still doubtful whether the earthly bond must be a meeting of souls, or only supposes a contract of convenience and utility" (Fuller, 1845: 41). To convince themselves of the meeting of souls, men need to show more respect to women, e.g. in not being fathers who give away their daughters or forcing them into marriage. Besides, men would have to accept women as friends and take marriage more seriously as it is said to be an eternal relationship with another soul that is aimed to affect his growth (Fuller, 1845: 41-42). This is also true of parenthood, in which man should not look upon his wife as an inferior being, like an adopted child he must care for, and place her next to the other children instead of looking at her as an equal parent. Father and mother should be responsible for the education of their children equally as parents.⁵⁴ Thus, they should assist one another to learn and teach moral and mental education. Here Fuller names and explains four types of marriages in which the different interpretations of equality are implemented, and which can be used to analyze the gender-related, interpersonal dependencies of Flynn's characters. The first is the *household partnership*, which is about the mutual dependence of a man, who furnishes the house, and a woman, who regulates it. In this relationship, the woman looks for a "smart but kind" husband, whereas the man looks for a "capable, sweet-tempered" wife. The second is *mutual idolatry*, in which both parties exclude themselves from the

⁵⁴ Regarding this argument, Wollstonecraft uses a quote by Rousseau, whose claim it is to "educate women like men [...] and the more they resemble our sex the less power will they [men] have over us [women]" (Wollstonecraft, 1792: 134).

glories of the universe. In this, “to men, the woman seems an unlovely siren; to women, the man an effeminate boy.” The third relationship is called *intellectual companionship*. Here, men and women are friends and lovers at the same time, so to say. The intellectual development of woman has spread, both parties often have the same employment and enjoy “unsullied dignity.” It is referred to as “one of the best instances of marriage.” The fourth and highest ranked marriage is the *religious union*. In this “pilgrimage towards a common shrine,” the first three forms are included, which is why home sympathies and household wisdoms as well as intellectual communion lead to the knowledge of how to assist one another “along the dusty way” and to the communication about thoughts and aspirations (Fuller, 1845: 42-48). Although today it seems that there is gender equality in a marriage because equal power relationships are perceived by both wives and husbands, there are still some old, unwittingly sexist traditions that remain. According to Kate Harveston,

[...] there’s no denying that the antiquated customs and views from bygone eras are still very much prevalent in our society’s view of marriage today. [For instance,] dads giving away brides is still a totally common practice in weddings today that way too few people seem to see as odd. [...] As heartwarming as that picture seems, nothing changes the fact that the fundamental concept of the custom is weird and dates back to a completely sexist era nobody should want to go back to. Women aren’t property. Their father or husband doesn’t own them—and neither does anyone else. (Harveston, 2017).

In examining gender, Fuller highlights the differences between femininity and masculinity, which are also represented in Flynn’s fiction. It is said that, due to the order of nature, men and women have masculine and feminine energies while representing “two sides of the great radical dualism. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman” (Fuller, 1845: 68-69). This means that men and women have characteristics that are attributable to the opposite sex, which is why pure masculinity as well as pure femininity are not possible. Gender is an intergradient and interlocking concept that shows that every

person is an individual. According to Marshall (2016), “Fuller argued that if each human being were permitted to achieve “fullness of being,” if our unique combination of male and female qualities were allowed free play, then finally there would be an end to the “discordant collision” that she saw as the inevitable result of the polarization of the sexes.” This is an antecedent of gender concepts and theories that followed in the second and third wave of feminism and are explored and unraveled by Gillian Flynn in her novels.

According to Fuller, many women were frustrated in the nineteenth century, as they were constituted to expect and need a form of happiness, which was based on the belief that women were born for men (Fuller, 1845: 93-94). Harveston (2017) claims that today in the USA “stay-at-home moms often feel responsible for having the house ready when their husband comes home from work” (Harveston, 2017). Although this is not true of all households, it happens on a global level. “Studies show married women are at a double disadvantage. Instead of having the reputation for being stable and responsible like men, married women are at a disadvantage with employers. Many companies assume a married woman is going to start having children, which means maternity leave, followed by them putting their children above their career” (Harveston, 2017).

To avoid a more blatant version of the same inequality, Fuller’s appeal is to make both men and women be “wise and not impede the soul” (Fuller, 1845: 69, 71). To do so, women shall work as they want to and both men and women should have one creative energy instead of repeating the discriminations of the past. This means that being a union is only possible to those who strive for being units (Fuller, 1845: 69, 71). Just like many modern-day feminists, Fuller was sure that men would not help in making equality work, which is why her appeal was mainly focused on women who are supposed to “retire within themselves” and strive for life’s secrets by exploring the groundwork on their own (Fuller, 1845: 71-72, 99). They should have a greater range of occupations and be free to choose whichever they want regardless of social conventions and regulations, regardless of what is supposed to be feminine and masculine. Moreover, Fuller demands women to be independent of men, because the consequential excessive devotion has “cooled love, degraded marriage, and prevented either sex from being what it

should be to itself or the other.” She demands individualism and social freedom (for the love of God), saying that their husbands should not be worshipped, because, if women “belong” to them, gender equality is not to be achieved (Fuller, 1845: 102-103).⁵⁵ Although this has been criticized in 1845, the idea that women belong to men is still striking. People still ask the question whether women are property or individual persons. In an article for the *Huffington Post* (2012), Kathlyn and Gay Hendricks discussed this question and its omnipresence in history. In most parts of the world, women were considered as property for thousands of years; today, in some parts of the world, they still are. Regarding what they describe as “The Republican War on Women,” Kathlyn and Gay Hendricks criticized that all Republican candidates still think that women are their property, for instance when it comes to abortion. They say that

not a single one of the male candidates had the courage or the principles to stand up and say, “Nobody owns women’s bodies but the women that live in them. What women do in their bodies is absolutely none of our business. I’m ashamed of the despicable, calculated and heartless way my party has politicized abortion and caused women to hate each other instead of feeling compassion for each other. By teaching every woman with a uterus how to hate each other, you have deliberately fostered an unnatural attitude among women. If we’re looking for something to shame, we Republicans should stop shaming women about abortion and start shaming ourselves for fostering such a monstrous assault on women’s natural dignity” (Hendricks, 2012).

2.5.2 Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*

Due to *The Feminine Mystique* from 1963, Betty Friedan is hailed by historians as a seminal figure in second-wave feminism (Friedan, 2010). She saw that “many women shared the same frustrations as she did in the role of

⁵⁵ Fuller’s feminist notion resembles Wollstonecraft’s claim in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, who argues that “This is the very point I aim at. I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves” (Wollstonecraft, 1792: 134).

housewife and mother” and thus analyzed the issues and published her findings in this book (Friedan, 2010).⁵⁶ *The Feminine Mystique* is about “The Problem that Has No Name” and basically deals with the silent question, asking “Is this all?” The problem that has no name is about the widespread unhappiness of women in the middle of the twentieth century, mainly the ‘50s and ‘60s (Friedan, 1963: 5). In her text, Friedan states that women were told by experts that their role was to seek fulfillment as a wife and mother. Instead of pursuing the independence, opportunities, and happiness that come with a career, higher education, and political rights, they were manipulated into condemning unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted more than just being housewives and mothers (Friedan, 1963: 5). “[...] Revisiting the book to understand what Friedan was saying [...] reveals a logical and passionate argument that’s still relevant today: All people, including women with children, deserve to pursue work that helps fulfill their human potential” (Fondas, 2013). According to Janet Maslin (2013), *The Feminine Mystique* is a mixture of abolished and unchanged attitudes towards femininity and gender. To Melanie Forrest, it is important to consider *The Feminine Mystique*’s utility in current feminist theory, particularly because feminists continue to read and reflect upon it (Forrest, 2016: 2). Regarding its topicality, Forrest claims that “the keystone of progress is looking at old things in new ways, ways that are often critical” (Forrest, 2016: 2).⁵⁷

In her theoretical feminist approach, Friedan states that the average marriage age of women in the USA dropped and was still dropping in 1963. Although there are changes regarding the average marriage age of women,

⁵⁶ Friedan intended to publish an article based on the fact that she realized that, while working on a survey of her Smith College classmates for their 15-year reunion, “the highly educated and talented housewives in their mid-30s were dissatisfied and distraught, drugged by tranquilizers, misled by psychoanalysis and ignored by society” (Sullivan, 2006). As no magazine published her article, she published *The Feminine Mystique* five years later as a book.

⁵⁷ After publishing *The Fountain of Age* in 1993, Friedan declared herself past feminism and decided to work on ageism (Sullivan, 2006). In *The Fountain of Age*, she focuses on the “Age Mystique” that is basically the denial and the “problem” of age and, what is interesting in terms of her feminist background, on the masculinity of youth, claiming that the concept of youth is as dominant as the concept of masculinity (Friedan, 1993).

new figures have revealed that over the past 15 years (i.e., 2002-2017) more than 200,000 children were married in the USA. “Three 10-year-old girls and an 11-year-old boy were among the youngest to wed, under legal loopholes which allow minors to marry in certain circumstances. The minimum age for marriage across most of the US is 18, but every state has exemptions—such as parental consent or pregnancy—which allow younger children to tie the knot” (Baynes, 2017). These figures not only make clear that sexist oppression is still present but that examining Flynn’s novels against the backdrop of proposing a post-feminist agenda is crucial because, on the one hand, they relate to and include Friedan’s approaches and claims regarding marriage and femininity in the USA but, on the other hand, they differ in the interpretation and execution of unraveling the feminine mystique.

In the 1950s and 60s, the suburban housewife was supposed to find true feminine fulfillment by being a healthy, beautiful, educated housewife and mother, who was only concerned about her husband, her children, and her home. Only in this role, here described as “*occupation: housewife,*” were women respected as full and equal *partners* to men in his world (Friedan, 1963: 5-7, 34). Yet, the idea of a woman’s place in the home has changed in the USA. Today, 70.6% of American mothers have jobs and are on average married at twenty-seven, while, in the 1950s, 75% of American women were married by twenty-four and 47% of them were already married by nineteen (Grimard, 2013). In her article for the *Journal of the Witherspoon Institute*, Leslie Grimard writes that “we live in a society where the majority of households run on the two-working-parent model. This has completely transformed how Americans marry and have kids. [...] The changes have affected education and the workforce. According to Christina Hoff Sommers, women account for nearly 60 percent of associate’s, bachelor’s, and master’s degrees. They also have surpassed men in PhD programs” (Grimard, 2013).

In 1960, television commercials even went so far as to claim that female desperation was based on the fact that more women were educated, which made them unhappy in their role as housewives. A male humorist even joked that the problem could be solved by taking away their right to vote

(Friedan, 1963: 11-12).⁵⁸ In modern media culture, various commercials also depict women in a sexist way, e.g. the *Axe* television advertisements which featured “[...] hot women running after men who probably didn’t deserve them” (Wischhover, 2017). After a survey in 2014, *Unilever* seemed to have realized that “toxic masculinity not being cool is a good thing for everyone” and, hence, changed their advertisements for *Axe* products aiming to sell a deodorant that supports individuality and gender equality instead of attracting sexy women (Wischhover, 2017). From a feminist’s perspective, this shows a major success regarding gender equality in modern society and media culture. Rik Strubel, the global vice president for *Axe*, commented on the new concept and claimed that he is proud of including females as an active part in commercials that were considered vastly sexist and womanizing. He argued that “we [i.e. *Axe*] found this notion of ‘I am not the guy that my father used to be. I want to express myself in more fluid ways of masculinity today’” and therefore “partnered with a research company that primarily focuses on men’s issues, *Promundo*, as well as the *United States Institutes of Peace* [...]. The research revealed that a majority of men in the US, the UK, and Mexico felt pressure to act strong even when they were scared, to be the primary breadwinners, and to not ask for help with personal problems, among other things. The consequence is that these men are more likely to have perpetrated bullying and sexual harassment” (Wischhover, 2017). Regarding present-day gender equality, the mere analysis of the perception of masculinity and femininity and changes in a patriarchal consumer society is a major achievement; still, gender equality is not achieved only when commercial companies become aware of their past sexism. In fact, one commercial is a first step but not a progressive reinvention of a brand, as discussed in *Blaque* magazine’s online article “From Sexism to Exclusion–The *Axe* Problem” (2015): “[I]f *Axe* is really committed to shifting the narrative around gender stereotypes, they need to be more critical of themselves. [...] *Axe* needs to

⁵⁸ *Harper’s Bazaar*, July, 1960: “In the pre-19th Amendment era, the American woman was placid, sheltered and sure of her role in American society. She left all the political decisions to her husband and he, in turn, left all the family decisions to her. Today a woman has to make both the family and the political decisions, and it’s too much for her” (Friedan, 1963: 12).

take a closer look at what is going on in society, listen to the conversations around gender and engage earnestly.” This requires that patriarchal structures change for good in order to find happiness in complete gender equality one day. This also requires changing the perception of roles of femininity and masculinity, also including the idea of gender roles created by men in the past. Regarding this patriarchal and sexist oppression, Friedan mainly refuses to accept a presupposed role of femininity, saying that “We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: ‘I want something more than my husband and my children and my home’” (Friedan, 1963: 15-16, 19, 20).

What is of importance for the purpose of this study is Betty Friedan’s analysis of media’s influence on women as her criticism is still relevant today and transferred to modern settings in Flynn’s fiction. What the past and current images of the suburban housewives with an “up-and-coming husband and a station wagon full of children” mainly have in common is that, according to Friedan, they are “created by the women’s magazines, by advertisements, television, movies, novels, columns and books by experts on marriage” (Friedan, 1963: 21). So male-dominated media dictate women’s roles with regard to the bedroom, the kitchen, sex, children, home, food, clothing, cosmetics, furniture, physical appearances, without taking into account women’s thoughts, ideas, their mind and spirit (Friedan, 1963: 21, 23).⁵⁹ In *The Feminine Mystique*, it is stated that the *New Women*, the heroines of women’s magazines up to 1939, were different. They created “with a gay determined spirit a new identity for women—a life of their own” (Friedan, 1963: 25). They were happy, proud, adventurous, attractive career

⁵⁹ In her 2004 article for *The Guardian*, Jeanette Winterson discussed both movie adaptations of Ira Levin’s novel *The Stepford Wives* (1972) in terms of these gender-related social circumstances. While in 1975, *The Stepford Wives* was produced as a horror film, the 2004 remake is a comedy, in which “the Hitchcockian malevolence has gone; male violence has been replaced by charm and a microchip” (Winterson, 2004). To Winterson (2004), Levin’s novel is not only “one of the most disturbing stories written out of the burgeoning women’s liberation movement” but the movie adaptations show that society changed and is changing. The plots are similar: “the American dream suburb of Stepford, Connecticut, has perfect houses, perfect lives, and perfect wives. But the wives turn out to be robots, manufactured by the big brains down at the Men’s Association. Why live with a dowdy, nagging ball-breaking bitch, when you could have a Barbie in a baby-doll nightie?” (Winterson, 2004).

women who loved and were loved by men. They were courageous, independent, and determined while marching towards their goals or visions (Friedan, 1963: 25)⁶⁰. More to the point, they mostly never were housewives. Then, the term “*career woman*” slowly became a dirty word in the USA. By 1949, the women’s magazine heroines were renouncing their careers and soon wanted to be housewives again. These former New Woman heroines were transformed into “new happy housewife heroines” with a childlike kind of dependence (Friedan, 1963: 29). In addition, these women were made to be not interested in the community, politics, and ideas in general any longer (Friedan, 1963: 31, 35). Ultimately, this led to the *Feminine Mystique*, originally meaning “that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity” (Friedan, 1963: 28). The greatest mistake, according to this mystique, is the undervaluation of their femininity, which, to Friedan, is not inferior to the nature of man but rather superior in certain respects (Friedan, 1963: 28). However, due to the fact that women tried to be like men, instead of accepting their own nature and femininity, the belief that fulfillment was only possible in “sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love” was established and, with this, the idea that being housewives and mothers was the only way to achieve this fulfillment (Friedan, 1963: 28-29). The role of women as housewives and mothers is, according to Friedan (1963), said to be mainly influenced by men and male oppression, whereas the old image of the heroines was created by women. Thus, the new image soon became the ideal, the way women should be. Today, it seems that various forms of this perception still fuel debates, for

⁶⁰ At the same time, the “New Woman,” a feminine archetype in literature and society emerged. These were “middle-class women, feared and satirized by men, who vindicated their emotional, sexual, financial or professional emancipation from patriarchal institutions” (Cortés Vieco, 2017: 67). In the 1920s, Dorothy Parker, one of the most relevant feminist poets, used poetry and “parody as a literary device to detect and denounce gender inequalities and sexist prejudices in New York” (Cortés Vieco, 2017). During World War II, “Rosie the Riveter,” an icon associated with female defense workers, emerged and “has stood as a symbol for women in the workforce and for women’s independence” (Cokely, 2018). This icon became famous due to J. Howard Miller’s WWII labor management poster, saying “*We Can Do It!*,” and is connected to “feminist affiliations in mainstream media discourses, activist ephemera and commercial cultures” (Chidgey, 2018: 143).

example regarding the 2016 film *Wonder Woman*.⁶¹ To Lina Abirafeh, *Wonder Woman* as “[...] the fictional feminist icon has long been a representative of strong, liberated women, her Western appearance, sexualised image and unrealistic beauty don’t resonate with millions of young women around the world. They’re actually alienating. [...] Its failures to challenge the status quo are too important to ignore, because a feminism rooted in oppression is no feminism at all” (Abirafeh, 2017). According to Friedan, the paradox is the real mystery, since “many American women, with the ability and education to discover and create, go back home again, to look for ‘something more’ in housework and rearing children” (Friedan, 1963: 49). The feminine mystique affects women so far as they do not know that they have desires and capacities forbidden by the mystique itself (Friedan, 1963: 43, 49-50).

In her book, Friedan also discusses her own decisions in view of the question: “Is this really what I want to be?” (Friedan, 1963: 51). Always having this question in mind, she gave up a career in psychology to become a housewife herself (Friedan, 1963: 51-52). She claims that the feminine mystique permits and encourages women to ignore the above-asked question and, with it, the personal identity that they should strive for. Social expectations and perceptions, e.g. every woman’s mother being a housewife, made young women in that period also give up their careers to also become housewives (Friedan, 1963: 54-56). Often these expectations led to a terror, a fear that young women had to adjust to femininity by marrying at eighteen, “losing themselves in having babies and the details of housekeeping” (Friedan, 1963: 57). At that time, it was said that otherwise they would not be able to attract men any longer. This problem of identity was in fact reserved for men, who were supposed to have to learn and define who they wanted to be; Friedan points out that the women’s problem of identity is ignored,

⁶¹ The American comic book character *Wonder Woman* was created for DC Comics by psychologist William Moulton Marston and Harry G. Peter (Mangels, 2018). This heroine first appeared in *All Star Comics no. 8* in December 1941, *Sensation Comics no. 1* in January 1942, and *Wonder Woman no. 1* in June 1942 (Mangels, 2018). “She perennially ranked as one of DC’s most-recognizable characters and a feminist icon” and was recently played by Gal Gadot in Patty Jenkins’s 2017 film *Wonder Woman* (Mangels, 2018).

because women are not expected to “choose their human identity” (Friedan, 1963: 59). Instead, biological sex becomes their destiny, meaning that their identity is determined by being female. According to Friedan, women, to overcome this Freudian belief, should suffer the crisis of identity, “simply to become fully human” (Friedan, 1963: 58-59). She criticizes Sigmund Freud, because the feminine mystique is a concept that derived from a Freudian theory that made women misinterpret their mothers’ frustrations, men’s resentments and inadequacies, and their own emotions and possible choices in life (Friedan, 1963: 79). Freud’s theory prevents women from being emancipated, just as a child is prevented from becoming an adult. According to that theory, Freud believed that women are like children. In fact, he saw women as “childlike dolls” that were created to be loved by men, to love and serve men. Friedan states that his theory paralyzes and is a major cause of “the problem that has no name” (Friedan, 1963: 80, 84). “Even Freud himself admitted that his understanding of women was limited. ‘That is all I have to say to you about femininity,’ he wrote in 1933. ‘It is certainly incomplete and fragmentary and does not always sound friendly. . . . If you want to know more about femininity, enquire of your own experiences of life, or turn to poets, or wait until science can give you deeper and more coherent information’” (qtd. in Cherry, 2018).⁶² Still, due to the Freudian theory, the feminine mystique was elevated into a “scientific religion, sounded a single, overprotective, life-restricting, future-denying note for women” (Friedan, 1963: 98). This means that girls and women, who were almost emancipated and independent enough, were told to go back to their lives as oppressed

⁶² Freud (1905) made the term “*hysteria*” relevant in his psychoanalytic theories. Hysteria was considered a mainly female psychopathological disorder that is now considered obsolete and stigmatizing, which is why it has been replaced in the ICD- and DSM-diagnosis codes (Längle, 2002: 7). Today these psychopathological symptoms are called “dissociate disorders,” “other neurotic disorders,” and “histrionic personality disorders” (Längle, 2002: 7). The terms “hysteria” and “hysterical” are negatively connoted in linguistics nowadays. In *Fragments of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* [*Bruchstück einer Hysterie-Analyse*] (1905), Freud tells about his case study “Dora,” a pseudonym of his patient Ida Bauer, whom he diagnosed with hysteria. According to Freud, Bauer repressed incestuous feelings which resulted in her hysteria, because her family was rather dysfunctional (Gruber and Preusser, 2005: 80-81).

housewives and mothers. On top of that, they did not question the feminine mystique any longer, since they respected and were awed by the authority of science (Friedan, 1963: 98). “Today, many analysts suggest that rather than reject Freud’s theories outright, we should instead focus on developing new views on his original ideas” (Cherry, 2018).

The Feminine Mystique further takes into consideration the influence of the school system and education aimed to make women want the “real life,” meaning being married and living in a suburban house with a husband and children (Friedan, 1963: 119-122). In the 1960s, it was their professors’ duty to keep them away from temptations that could come with higher education. Thus, education became “the prime target of the new mystique” (Friedan, 1963: 125). Moreover, females were impeded if they wanted to become more or have more, e.g. female college presidents or professors. Here their authority “–as teachers and as women–” was questioned and, if they did not adapt to the traditional role of a housewife and mother, they were “forbidden by the mystique to speak as women” (Friedan, 1963: 126). Friedan speaks of “*feminine education*” that prohibits women from being “open to new experiences, independent and disciplined in thinking.” She states that “in a very real sense, these girls were arrested in their mental growth, at age fourteen or fifteen, by conformity to the feminine image” (Friedan, 1963: 139).

In a recently conducted six-year study “aimed at dissecting the media’s coverage of the so-called alpha girl,” interviews with a group of 57 girls between the ages of 12 and 18 in schools in Southern Ontario were conducted by Shauna Pomerantz and Rebecca Raby (Krischer, 2017). Their research unveiled that, as only a few girls pushed back against the sexist statements of the boys in school, more girls were reluctant to call out their sexist behavior. In fact, they did not want to look like a feminist, a “potentially damaging label” (Krischer, 2017). Being a “cool girl,” as criticized in Flynn’s *Gone Girl*, i.e., saying nothing or laughing sexism off, was considered by these girls to be a strategy for fitting in. Further exposing the influence of what Friedan calls “feminine education,” many girls did not always consider the boys’ behavior to be sexist. “This is where the problem

swells. Despite cultural messages and alpha girl reports indicating that females are advanced or the smarter gender, sexism still persists in politics, in Hollywood, and in the general workforce. It also rears its head at the most rudimentary, primal levels—in schools, among children” (Krischer, 2017). According to Pomerantz and Raby, girls in the 2010s are influenced by a “post-feminist” perception of gender inequality as they are manipulated into believing that sexism towards females does not exist any longer and complete gender equality has been achieved (Krischer, 2017). The reality, however, is that they face gender inequality all the time. Krischer (2017) states that “[in 2017], a study by researchers at the University of Illinois, New York University, and Princeton found that girls as young as 6 years old believe that “brilliance” is reserved for men. The girls in the study also believed that, unlike boys, they don’t have the innate abilities to get good grades at school” (Krischer, 2017). As already mentioned above, this inequality is also present in the glass ceiling that prevents women from equal payment and upper-level positions in the workforce.

In many cases, a current “post-feminist” perception based on sexism in media and pop culture is not post-feminist at all but uses post-feminism to further oppress women. In fact, it became another tool to make them obey the patriarchy again. “Girls have been so inundated with messages in popular culture about girl empowerment [...] that it’s hard for them not to believe that they’re living in a post-feminist society. Girls are certainly exposed to conspicuously sexist tropes in video games and on mainstream TV, but the sexism on television isn’t so in-your-face. It’s far more difficult to recognize than the “jokes” the middle school girls in Southern Ontario have dealt with” (Krischer, 2017). Considering this, the feminine mystique in schools, as described by Friedan in 1963, transformed into the mere perception that post-feminism has been achieved in the twenty-first century although it is used to disempower. So instead of encouraging women to be housewives, modern-day patriarchy tricked them into believing that they are “cool girls” in a world where gender inequality does not exist any longer. This grants that, in most cases of sexist behavior towards women, men will not have to face a desire for women’s emancipation.

In the 1960s, advertising businesses seemed to have recognized that an increased desire for emancipation could be solved by encouraging women to be modern housewives.⁶³ This *modern housewife* was considered to run her household by doing it herself, by “running [it like] a factory in which you have all the latest machinery” (Friedan, 1963: 169-170). Women were manipulated into believing that they were professionals, “an expert in determining which cleaning tools to use for specific jobs” (Friedan, 1963:173). Thus, they believed their existence had meaning, which comes close to the feeling of fulfillment. Today, although women gain political, economic, and social freedoms, there is what Anna Petherick calls “the paradox of declining female happiness” (2016). This has been pointed out by economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, who analyzed happiness trends of US citizens between 1970 and 2005. According to Petherick (2016), “Stevenson and Wolfers discovered that American women rated their overall life satisfaction higher than men in the 1970s. Thereafter, women’s happiness scores decreased while men’s scores stayed roughly stable. By the 1990s, women were less happy than men. This relative unhappiness softened after the turn of the century, but men continue to enjoy a higher sense of subjective wellbeing that is at least as high—if not higher—than women’s.” Petherick does not name it but claims that, although women’s rights have improved, the feminine mystique’s influence on gender roles in the home is still there. She states that “evidence supports the idea that women’s rights and roles in the home in the US and Europe have not moved in step with changes in the workplace. Therefore, because women with jobs often do most of the chores and childcare, they shoulder a dual burden that cuts into their sleep and fun. Long commutes are thought to make British women more miserable than British men because of the greater pressure on women to meet responsibilities at home as well as work” (Petherick, 2016). Now, instead of merely

⁶³ In the 1960s, sexist commercials prevailed nonetheless. For example, the television advertising campaigns for the Folgers Coffee Company reinforced the sexist images for both women and men (Trobits, 2019). In one of these advertisements, a woman hands coffee to her husband, who shaves in front of a mirror. After drinking it, he just asks “how can such a pretty wife make such bad coffee?”

conforming to the “occupation: housewife” role, women additionally are forced into being successful in their jobs as well.

Considering this phenomenon, the concept “Work Expands to Fill the Time Available”⁶⁴ by C. Northcote Parkinson is used in *The Feminine Mystique* to emphasize that women spend too much time on their housework (Friedan, 1963: 196). According to this concept, women were subconsciously filling their time in order not to feel useless or “empty,” since, due to indoctrination, they believed that they had a purpose as a housewife (Friedan, 1963: 196-200). Now it seems they fill their time with work that requires them to be even more responsible. Moreover, Friedan states that, because women were considered experts and “know-it-alls, whose unshakeable superiority at home, a domain they both occupied, was impossible to compete with, and very hard to live with,” their husbands soon became “part-time servants” (Friedan, 1963: 209). According to Friedan, people need to overcome the concept of biology and the role in their homes to finally shape their own future, which is still true regarding gender inequality. Betty Friedan emphasizes that there are no easy answers to the above-discussed problems, saying that each woman must find her own answer, although this individualistic approach is both difficult and often painful (Friedan, 1963: 277). Moreover, Friedan claims that women do not have to choose between marriage and career. In fact, they just need a new life plan in terms of combining marriage and motherhood with a lifelong personal purpose (Friedan, 1963: 277). To achieve this, women need to rebel against the oppression that comes with the idea of a typical American housewife and mother.⁶⁵ Furthermore, they must see marriage as it is and not as the “overglorification imposed by the feminine mystique” (Friedan, 1963: 277-278). Each woman must find a purpose, such as a job that offers her the opportunity to “grow as a part of society” (Friedan, 1963: 280). With regard to the women

⁶⁴ This concept is also called “Parkinson’s Law” (Hess and Hess Orthmann, 2012: 203).

⁶⁵ In March 1971, 4.000 women, men, and children rebelled against patriarchal oppression by participating in the “Women’s Lib” march by the women’s liberation movement. This demonstration for equal pay and equal rights was the first march for women’s liberation (Ferguson, 2018).

whom she interviewed, Friedan says that education was the key to the problem that has no name but only when it was included in their new life plan (Friedan, 1963: 295). This means that both education and significant work can help women to break free from the feminine mystique. According to Friedan, “it took, and still takes, extraordinary strength of purpose for women to pursue their own life plans when society does not expect it of them. However, unlike the trapped housewives whose problems multiply with the years, these women solved their problems and moved on. And they know quite surely now who they are” (Friedan, 1963: 308). Still, this does not solve the identity crisis at a moment’s notice. The feminine mystique must be faced continuously to achieve emancipation and emerge both men and women from their biology to realize their “human selves”. Thus, they could come close to what is the “greatest fulfillment” by overcoming the concept of femininity and instead create themselves in determining who they are and what they want to be. This self-determination also included what is called the sexual revolution in the 1960s and was aimed to transform the ideas “of the presumed different nature of men and women, [which caused] sexual subjectivity [to] often [remain] denied to the latter” (Hekma and Giami, 2015: 20).⁶⁶ This movement “sparked a cultural revolution in the sense that many domains of existence were transformed. Some people applauded the sexual

⁶⁶ Luce Irigaray claims that female subjectivity is possible when it relies on “the conditions for the emergence of a female speaking subject in language, culture, politics and religion through the acknowledgement of sexual difference” (Skof and Holmes, 2013: 2). Because this idea is constructive, many critics argued that Irigaray introduces an “idealized and romanticized, if not downright conservative, vision of ‘woman’ as having a distinct essence that is both grounded in the specificity of the female body, and yet, seemingly more spiritual than man” (Skof and Holmes, 2013: 2). Irigaray claimed a space for women’s subjectivity by reconnecting nature with spirits and culture, without determining what it means to be “woman” (here “woman” and “female” are used as synonyms). Her claim of the primacy of sexual difference over other differences has become a challenge to feminist theory, as it reinforces heteronormativity and dismisses race, class, sexuality and ability in the constitution of women’s subjectivity. Irigaray also claims that the acknowledgment of the differences in a heterosexual couple, i.e., “the ontology and culture of being-two,” results in the establishment of an ethical relationship (Skof and Holmes, 2013: 2). Accordingly, sexual difference provides both limits for gender and the possibility of achieving a sensible transcendence through ethical love and divine becoming (Skof and Holmes, 2013: 2).

openness, the freedom of speech or the emancipation of female and gay sexuality; others decried the loss of traditional values, continuing sexism, growing consumerism, extreme individualism or unabated Puritanism” (Hekma and Giami, 2015: 2).⁶⁷

To conclude this chapter, I will refer to Sophie Edelhart who in her 2014 article “‘The Problem That Has No Name,’ Then and Now” for *Jewish Women, Amplified* writes that there is a new feminine mystique today. “I see a feminine mystique of the kind defined by Gillian Flynn in her novel *Gone Girl* as the “cool girl,” that girl that can stuff her face with food and like football but still be hot” (Edelhart, 2014). To Edelhart, the new feminine mystique does not affect middle-aged housewives but instead young women who are pressured into being “unconventional and unique” and who are not worthy of being taken seriously (Edelhart, 2014). This “post-feminine mystique” emphasizes that post-feminism has not yet been achieved, and Gillian Flynn brings forward proof of it. While media and consumerism perpetuate this form of oppression of women, patriarchy is still affecting and pushing them into gender roles, new roles of femininity. Against this backdrop, it is crucial to examine Gillian Flynn’s novels and analyze her proposed post-feminist agenda to determine whether it is a useful and progressive method of criticizing and maybe even destabilizing gender inequality that comes with the post-feminine mystique in modern-day society.

2.5.3 Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*

In an interview published in *l’Humanité*, Judith Butler emphasizes that there is a problem that comes with the idea of post-feminists believing that gender equality has been achieved and hence feminism is not needed any longer (Chaillan, 2018). Regarding this problem, Butler explains that gender-based

⁶⁷ In the 1960s, Dr. Ruth Westheimer, a sex therapist who was famous for her television talk show in which she discussed multiple discourses about sex and sexuality, represented this notion. “Her role as a mediator of the contemporary sexual climate makes the phenomenon of Dr. Ruth Westheimer [...] important” (Banks and Zimmermann, 1993: 60). Her books, tapes, games, and shows have made her very famous and successful as a celebrity (Banks and Zimmermann, 1993: 60).

discrimination is not always the same as discrimination against women, as, to her, people who do not conform to gender norms, masculine or feminine, suffer from discrimination and violence. She states: “[...] that form of gender discrimination cannot be explained by the framework of masculine domination. And discrimination on the basis of race, immigrant status, religion, and sexuality, all have to be understood as part of the present climate of reactionary politics. For me, the task is not to find a single or synthetic framework, but to find a way of thinking in alliance. The alliance is broad, and it is expanding, and it is a struggle for a more radical democracy” (Chaillan, 2018). As I believe that Gillian Flynn strives for this radical democracy, in giving women the power to be as equally amoral, violent, and malicious as men, it is crucial to relate her novels to Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* to prove that Flynn, on the one hand, does not represent the achievement of gender equality but instead criticizes the delusion of post-feminism that is aimed at discriminating against women, and, on the other hand, proposes a progressive post-feminist agenda in doing so.

Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* is considered “perhaps the essential work of contemporary feminist thought” (Butler, 1990),⁶⁸ in which she socially questions and criticizes the category “woman” regarding its constituents and its decision makers, and, thus, claims that “the feminine” and “the masculine” are culturally presupposed and “performed” rather than biologically fixed concepts. In her online blog, Dahlia Schweitzer (2014) relates Flynn’s *Gone Girl* to Butler’s theory and emphasizes that what the novel “[...] tackles so emphatically is that, these days, almost everything is performed, but most especially and most oppressively, femininity. It is not merely that modern day women are expected to look good, but that they are expected to be cupcake-baking, soccer-game-cheering mothers while also

⁶⁸ After Butler published *Gender Trouble* in 1991, “one fanzine has turned [her] own persona into a celebrity image available for the fantastic fabrications of its apparently lesbian graduate student readership. Simply titled *Judy!*, the first issue proudly proclaims that all of its texts are anticopyright: ‘Copy this whole thing if you want; send it to your friends, that’s cool – saves me money. Isn’t this whole copyright thing out of hand? Go ahead, copy it at Kinko’s’” (Coombe, 1998: 123). Because it was difficult to find pictures of Judith Butler, the fanzine ironically featured two pictures of Judy Garland (Coombe, 1998: 123).

being suit-wearing, boardroom-leading businesswomen. Women are expected to do everything and look good doing it—and, worst of all, they are supposed to make it look easy” (Schweitzer, 2014). While Schweitzer criticizes modern-day feminism and with it the fact that so far Butler’s theory has only been partly implemented, because “[...] despite the superficial freedoms available to women today, post-feminism has also contributed to creating a culture in which women are pressured to be and do it all—power moms and power CEOs!—while being subject to intense scrutiny and judgment by other men and women for the ways in which they do (or do not) perform,” Rajlakshmi Kanjilal rather claims that male-dominated oppression of women is still as present as in the past (Schweitzer, 2014; Kanjilal, 2016). She says, with regard to *Gone Girl*, that “the story of Amy does not belong to a particular country or society. There are thousands of Amazing Amy’s in every strata of society quietly toiling away at the workplace, coming back home to toil in the kitchen, finishing up a deluge of household chores, while her husband watches TV or socializes with drinking buddies” (Kanjilal, 2016). What all these feminists agree on is that gender is performed and ultimately leads to frustration. The female characters written by Flynn demonstrate this phenomenon as they perform certain gender roles.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler first discusses the “controversial terms” *politics* and *representation*, since feminism focuses on an existing identity, i.e., “the category of woman,” initiating “feminist interests and goals within discourse” as well as constituting the subject for whom *political representation* is sought (Butler, 1990: 2). Butler claims that “*representation* serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects” and as “the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women” (Butler, 1990: 2). She says that the development of a language that “adequately represents women” has seemed necessary to make women politically visible because, due to the cultural conditions, women’s lives were misrepresented or not represented at all (Butler, 1990: 2). Butler claims that the term “women,” i.e., the representation of the category, cannot denote a common identity, as it is not “exhaustive,” which is based on the fact that gender is, on the one hand,

not “always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts” and, on the other hand, connected to discursively constituted identities that intersect with “racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities” (Butler, 1990: 4).⁶⁹ Consequently, “gender” is impossible separate from the political and cultural circumstances in which it is produced and maintained. Considering these circumstances, in her publication about post-feminism in culture, Fien Adriaens (2009) refers to Stephanie Genz (2006: 337) and emphasizes that post-feminism deals with this conception. Adriaens claims that second-wave thought uses binary categorizations, a fixed unitary identity, meaning the female, and “employs a monolithic conception of ‘woman.’” She states that post-feminists have articulated a critique focusing on difference, anti-essentialism, and hybridism “where fixed binary categories are pierced and multiple identities are promoted. This multiplex of identities operates through the generation of contradictions in someone’s concept of self-feeling (Featherstone, 1996). Post-feminism argues that every woman must recognize her own personal mix of identities” (Adriaens, 2009). According to Maria Trumpler, director of Yale’s Office of LGBTQ Resources and senior lecturer in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, “the last four years in particular have seen an enormous growth of student interest in identities ‘beyond the binary,’ [...] like agender, bigender, genderqueer”, while, according to Molly Fischer, “we find ourselves poised someplace between gender mattering tremendously and mattering not very much at all” (qtd. in Fischer, 2016).⁷⁰

Considering the interest in post-feminist progressions in modern-day society regarding identities “beyond the binary,” it is important to know that,

⁶⁹ Candace West and Don Zimmer coined the term “doing gender” in their 1987 article for *Gender and Society* and argued that an individual’s gender performance can be used by others to claim that it is a naturally gendered behavior (West and Zimmer, 1987).

⁷⁰ Richards, Bouman and Barker (2017) define non-binary and genderqueer people as those who are not male or female. Rather than referring to people’s sex, this definition refers to people’s identities, including intersex and diversity/disorder of sexual development, rather than their sex. This means that a person can identify as a “single fixed gender position other than male or female,” “have a fluid gender,” “have no gender,” or disagree with the idea of gender (Richards et al., 2017: 5).

to Butler, there cannot be a “universal basis for feminism” and an “oppression of women [that] has some singular form” (Butler, 1990: 4-5). To her, the subject of feminism, particularly its universality and unity, is effectively undermined by the restrictions of the representational discourse in which it functions (Butler, 1990: 6). While feminism seeks wider representation for a constructed subject, it ironically results in the consequence that feminist goals risk failure by not taking into account the constitutive powers of their own representational claims. Moreover, this problem is not solved by creating a stable subject, because this feminism, on the contrary, “opens itself to charges of gross misrepresentation” (Butler, 1990: 6-7). Thus, a new sort of feminist politics is desirable, which does not mainly focus on the category of women as the subject of feminism but rather the variable construction of identity as a “methodological and normative prerequisite” instead of a political goal. Those who fail to conform to “unspoken normative requirements of the subject” should not be excluded by extending the representation (Butler, 1990: 7-8). Because of that, Butler suggests that “representation” will make sense for feminism when the subject of “women” is not presumed any longer. Current examples of this idea include the termination of the male/female dichotomy on Facebook and Tinder (Greider, 2018). While in 2014 Facebook expanded their list of available genders to 51 different options, Tinder introduced a feature called “More Genders” (Greider, 2018). “The update sought to acknowledge the existence of more than two genders, as well as mitigate the effects of gender identity discrimination that was rampant on the platform. Some non-binary individuals using Tinder before the update expressed frustration at having to conform to a gendered category that they did not fully subscribe to [...]” (Greider, 2018). So, although identities “beyond the binary” are acknowledged in some parts of modern-day society and culture, post-feminism, as demanded by Butler, has not yet been achieved since binary categories are still present in most parts.⁷¹

⁷¹ In an interview with *The TransAdvocate*'s Cristan Williams, a trans historian and journalist, Judith Butler said that both women and men “as bodies, are in the active position of figuring out how to live with and against the constructions – or norms – that help to form [them]” (Williams, 2014). To Butler, gender assignment is a “construction” (Williams, 2014). As many genderqueer and trans people refuse an

What is also important is that Judith Butler distinguishes between *sex* and *gender* according to the traditional perspectives, in which sex is connoted with biology and gender is constructed by culture. She claims that gender can neither be the result of sex nor a multiple interpretation of it. In fact, she questions the binary system of gender, as it “implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex.” She also questions the distinction of “given” sex and “given” gender without inquiring through which means this concept is given, and that the binary system of sex might be constructed by scientific discourse to serve other political and social interests (Butler, 1990: 8-9). Butler argues that sex might be a cultural construct of gender, which means that the distinction between sex and gender would be redundant, whereas gender is not connected to culture the same way sex is connected to biology. “Gender is [...] the discursive / cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or ‘a natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive,’ prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts” (Butler, 1990: 10). Thus, the production of sex should be understood as an effect of “the apparatus of cultural construction designated by gender” (Butler, 1990: 9-10). Therefore, according to Butler, gender must be reformulated first to understand the power relations producing prediscursive sex.

The *constructedness* of gender is also examined, which suggests a “determinism of gender meanings inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law” (Butler, 1990: 11). This means that gender is in a way enforced upon people due to cultural circumstances. When gender is constructed by culture in terms of laws and sets of laws, then gender would be determined and fixed. In that case, culture replaces biology in influencing sex. Here Judith Butler refers to Simone de Beauvoir, for whom gender is

assignment, a more radical form of self-determination that happens in solidarity with others who face similar struggles can be opened (Williams, 2014). In this interview, she also states that social constructedness “suggests that what trans people feel about what their gender is, and should be, is itself ‘constructed’ and, therefore, not real. And then the feminist police come along to expose the construction and dispute a trans person’s sense of their lived reality. I oppose this use of social construction absolutely, and consider it to be a false, misleading, and oppressive use of the theory” (Williams, 2014).

constructed and, thus, volitional and variable: One “becomes” a woman with respect to a specific cultural determination (Butler, 1990: 11). Considering this, Butler argues that the “one” who becomes a woman does not necessarily have to be female, at least according to this definition. Moreover, she says that

the locus of intractability, whether in ‘sex’ or ‘gender’ or in the very meaning of ‘construction,’ provides a clue to what cultural possibilities can and cannot become mobilized through any further analysis. The limits of the discursive analysis of gender presuppose and preempt the possibilities of imaginable and realizable gender configurations within culture. This is not to say that any and all gendered possibilities are open, but that the boundaries of analysis suggest the limits of a discursively conditioned experience. These limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality. Constraint is thus built into what that language constitutes as the imaginable domain of gender (Butler, 1990: 12).

From this point of view, gender is to be understood as a “*signification*” that exists in relation to another, opposing signification (Butler, 1990: 13). Having said that, Butler refers to some feminist theorists who claim that gender is a “*relation*” or “a set of relations” and not an individual attribute.⁷² Beauvoir would rather argue that the masculine gender and the concept of a universal person are coalesced, meaning that men become “bearers of a body-transcendent universal personhood,” whereas the feminine gender is marked and, therefore, defined in terms of sex (Butler, 1990: 13).

It is argued that gender is a complexity that is constantly deferred, which is why an “open coalition” would lead to identities that are created and dissolved, converging and diverging, by multiple factors that constitute them without having a definitional closure (Butler, 1990: 21-22). “Identity” and

⁷² Simone de Beauvoir argues in her book *The Second Sex* (1949) that “women are designated as the Other, [...] the negative of men, the lack against which masculine identity differentiates itself” (Butler, 1990: 13). For Luce Irigaray, “that particular dialectic constitutes a system that excludes an entirely different economy of signification” because it is based on a phallogentric language (Butler, 1990: 13).

“gender identity” are different. They do not interrelate since the category “persons” becomes gendered in interrelation with “recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (Butler, 1990: 22). Thus, the definitional structure of personhood is externally related to the social context. Internal features establish self-identity through time (Butler, 1990: 22-23). The “coherence” and “continuity” of “the person” are not logical or analytic features of personhood but socially influenced. To Butler, it is important to mention that “identity,” which seems to be assured through stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, brings along a cultural emergence of “incoherent” and “discontinuous” gendered persons and their failure to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined in the first place (Butler, 1990: 23). She argues that this “incoherence” and “discontinuity,” which are only thinkable in relation to coherence and continuity, are both produced and prohibited by the laws that “seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted genders, and the “expression” or “effect” of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice” (Butler, 1990: 23).

According to different theoretical approaches, sex can be viewed as a “*substance*” in the hegemonic language. Therefore, it is a “self-identical being,” which is “achieved through the performative twist of language and / or discourse that conceals the fact that “being” a sex or a gender is fundamentally impossible” (Butler, 1990: 25). This means that the act of speaking contributes to the emergence of the concept of sex that people are designated to and, thus, cannot *be* (Butler, 1990: 30). Stating that “one is one’s gender to the extent that one is not the other gender” emphasizes that the restriction of gender is implied and implemented in this binary pair. The concept of gender is characterized by a unity of experience, sex, gender, and desire. Hence, *sex* is used to necessitate gender, *gender* is a “psychic and/or cultural designation of the self,” and *desire* is heterosexual, which means that it is differentiated in an oppositional relation to the other desired gender (Butler, 1990: 30). Heterosexuality is therefore required in the unity of either gender. Subsequently, Butler argues that if the substances are just the coherences that are created through the regulation of attributes, the ontology of substances is not “only an artificial effect, but essentially superfluous”

(Butler, 1990: 34). So, gender is performative and “always a doing,”⁷³ because it constitutes the identity it is intended to be and the act of speaking in order to categorize. She claims that “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (Butler, 1990: 34). Thus, it becomes a circular process in which culture creates the concept of binary gender, i.e., a culturally influenced behavior pattern according to how men and women ought to be, which in turn results in the concept of distinguishing between “feminine” and “masculine.” Therefore, the concept of binary sex is a result of gender and constantly affected by it (Butler, 1990: 46).

In his publication “Layers of Textual Femininity in Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl*” for Ohio University, Dr. Richard Leahy quotes Judith Butler, who suggests that gender has become a “stylized repetition of acts” (Leahy, 2016). With that, he says that “the convergence of an acted gender identity, materiality, and consumption encapsulate the repressive alienation of a power-driven patriarchal society. The patriarchal society promotes buying, selling, and ownership, yet one that denies these things to many” (Leahy, 2016). To Leahy, this patriarchal society promoting gender as performative acts is particularly visible in Flynn’s *Gone Girl*. There, it affects the characters on many levels that are often not even perceived by them. So, for instance, Amy Dunne performs an identity of femininity “[...] she despised due to it providing renewed interest in the ‘real’ Amy. She is trapped in her many fictitious personas, restricted by her belief in the necessity of stories to be read. [...] Yet it is still not a true self, but one that is still being performed. She simply takes on another layer, which makes the true Amy difficult to discern. [...] She no longer wants, and potentially is not capable of having, an identity—instead she is just a story to be read and consumed” (Leahy, 2016). Being consumed by society not only fits Amy’s fictitious personas but also all characters written by Flynn who struggle with their identities because they perform culturally presupposed roles of gender.

⁷³ This idea resembles Paula Moya and Hazel R. Markus’s concept of “doing race.” Based on the idea that society is not “post-race,” Moya and Markus believe that race is performative, which means that it is not biologically determined but rather exists as results of human actions that can be changed (Moya and Markus, 2010).

In 2018, FiveThirtyEight, WNYC and SurveyMonkey interviewed 1,615 adults who identify as men for a nationwide survey in the US, because as Koeze and Barry-Jester put it, “[...] an ongoing national reckoning over gender disparities in the workplace, the patriarchal social system and the role of masculinity in society are calling into question long-standing gender norms” (Koeze and Barry-Jester, 2018). These men were asked to reflect on their ideas of masculinity, workplace culture and intimacy. “The results: A majority of men in the workplace say they haven’t rethought their on-the-job behavior in the wake of #MeToo; a little more than half of men feel it’s at least somewhat important that others see them as masculine; and nearly half of all men say they sometimes or often feel lonely or isolated” (Koeze and Barry-Jester, 2018). While 83 percent of the interviewees said they felt “very” or “somewhat” masculine, only 53 percent said it was important that others perceive them that way. Their ideas about what it means to be a good man were mainly ascribed to the influences of their father (and also their mother) figures. “Sixty percent of men agreed that society puts pressure on men in a way that is unhealthy or bad. And the younger a man was, the more likely he was to believe that. [...] In all, the survey suggests that American men are still fractured about their role in society. A year’s worth of headlines about sexual misconduct has led many to declare that a “reckoning” is upon us. But a reckoning does not necessarily make for a revolution” (Koeze and Barry-Jester, 2018.). What is striking in my research is that more people, including men, are currently aware of gender issues and identity problems but do not yet know how these affect them or how to change the urge to perform gender socially and culturally. Whether this phenomenon is connected to #MeToo and further gender-related disclosures requires further reflection.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler proposes a solution demanding an effort to think through the possibility of subverting and displacing the “notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power” (Butler, 1990: 46). To achieve “gender trouble,” she wants to mobilize and subvert confusion and proliferation of the constitutive categories that aim to maintain the concept of gender “by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity” (Butler, 1990: 46). Thus, she concludes with the following definition of gender that is essential in examining whether Gillian Flynn

proposes a post-feminist agenda that uses and moves beyond the waves of feminism:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender. To expose the contingent acts that create the appearance of a naturalistic necessity, a move which has been a part of cultural critique at least since Marx, is a task that now takes on the added burden of showing how the very notion of the subject, intelligible only through its appearance as gendered, admits of possibilities that have been forcibly foreclosed by the various reifications of gender that have constituted its contingent ontologies (Butler, 1990: 45-46).

So, culture creates gender and aligns it to an alleged biological difference. According to Judith Butler, gender identity is said to be performative, i.e., created in the act of performing it, which ultimately means that, if people stopped or refused performative acts according to gender, the concept of binary gender would cease to exist (Butler, 1990: 34).⁷⁴ The eradication of this concept would in fact lead to post-feminism and gender-related oppression would stop, since exercising power based on the distinction between male and female would no longer be possible.

3. Gender, Sex, Identity and Equality in Gillian Flynn's Novels

In her 2016 article for *Feminist Media Studies*, "Post-postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times," Rosalind Gill addresses questions regarding post-feminism, like "What place does the notion of post-

⁷⁴ By arguing that the body is a part of gender, Susan Bordo (1998) criticized that Butler reduces gender as a culturally prescribed concept to language only (Hekman, 1998).

feminism have at a moment in which feminism has seemingly become hip? Is post-feminism irrelevant in these new times? Are we now post-post-feminism?” (Gill, 2016: 611).⁷⁵ To answer these questions, Rosalind Gill interrogates post-feminism against the backdrop of her 2007 article “Post-feminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility,” defining post-feminism as a contested and multi-faceted approach, “as a backlash against feminism, to refer to an historical shift—a time ‘after’ (second wave) feminism; to capture a sense of an epistemological break within feminism, suggesting an alignment with other ‘post’ movements (poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcoloniality); and to propose connections to the Third Wave” (Gill, 2016: 612). Gill not only refers to her own article from 2007 but also cites Laura Thompson, Ngaire Donghue (2014), Elisabeth Kelan (2009), Angela McRobbie (2009), Ana Elias (2016) and Christina Scharff (2013, 2016) as she defines post-feminism as a

critical analytical term that refers to empirical regularities or patterns in contemporary cultural life, which include the emphasis on individualism, choice, and agency as dominant modes of accounting [...]; the disappearance—or at least muting—of vocabularies for talking about both structural inequalities and cultural influence [...]; the ‘deterritorialisation’ of patriarchal power and its ‘reterritorialisation’ [...] in women’s bodies and the beauty-industrial complex [...]; the intensification and extensification of forms of surveillance, monitoring, and disciplining of women’s bodies (Gill 2007b); and the influence of a “makeover paradigm” that extends beyond the body to constitute a remaking of subjectivity [...]. Crucially, as McRobbie (2009) among others has argued, post-feminism is involved in the *undoing* of feminism (Gill, 2016: 613).

To examine whether and how Gillian Flynn takes part in undoing feminism, it is important to have a closer look at what feminism is to her, how she perceives certain patriarchal forms of modern-day sexism, and how she uses the feminist waves in her novels and moves beyond them to propose her version of a post-feminist agenda.

⁷⁵ The term “post-post-feminism” means “after post-feminism,” relating to the previously discussed idea that the goals of (post-) feminism are achieved, making (post-) feminism redundant.

According to Oliver Burkeman (2013), Gillian Flynn identifies as a feminist, to whom feminism is more than just “girl power, and you-go-girl, and empower yourself, and be the best you can be” because, to her, feminism must contain the equal possibility of being able to be amoral, malicious, and violent. According to Flynn herself, this feminist agenda is based on frustration about the general idea that women are innately nurturing and naturally good, whereas she believes that, “in literature, they can be dismissably bad—trampy, vampy, bitchy types—but there’s still a big pushback against the idea that women can be just pragmatically evil, bad and selfish” (Burkeman, 2013). Acknowledging the ugly side, as she describes it in her autobiographical essay “I Was Not a Nice Little Girl . . . ,” (2015) is part of that proposed post-feminist concept in literature (Flynn). To criticize the lack of “real” and “pragmatically evil” female villains, she writes post-feminist femmes fatales who are not only dangerous, rebellious, or malicious, but also extremely sexist while believing in feminism at the same time.⁷⁶ In fact, this post-feminist portrayal of women shows an innovative and progressive approach to gender equality in literature since equal possibilities on every level, also including spite, have not been fully considered yet.

In a conversation with Megan Abbott for *Vanity Fair* (2018), Gillian Flynn discussed the “female rage” in her novels and its presence in Hollywood.⁷⁷ In it, Abbott (2018) states that “looking back at [*Gone Girl*’s] success, and its tables-turning, sociopathic protagonist Amy Dunne, it’s hard not to see the seeds of deep female rage that have come to full bloom in our

⁷⁶ Kilday (2014) argues that violence and violent activity have been studied by scholars for generations without addressing violent female behavior. Women’s involvement in violence has been marginalized by historians who argued that it was uncharacteristic and uncommon. “As Pieter Spierenburg has argued, violence was a male culture in which women did not participate. Instead, more attention has been paid to women’s role as victims, and to male offenders, who were believed to dominate criminal indictments as far as aggressive behavior was concerned” (Kilday, 2014). Kilday claims that women “never strayed from the boundaries of acceptable behavior, that females relished their role as the ‘gentler sex,’ and that as a result they steadfastly remained within familiar and fixed ideological limits” (Kilday, 2014).

⁷⁷ Megan Abbott, the author of *The End of Everything* (2011), *Dare Me* (2012) and *The Fever* (2014), is, according to Clea Simon and Kevin Nguyen (2014), “the queen of the mean girls” as she, like Flynn, writes about the social dynamics of teenage girls and their relationships in contemporary crime fiction (Abbott, 2014).

current #MeToo, Time's Up moment." Regarding the #MeToo movement, Flynn then referred to *Sharp Objects*' series adaptation and stated that "it's about what happens to women when they have to swallow down their stories—and what happens to that rage. And it feels like a cautionary tale at this moment when women are finally telling their stories, but we still have a president who's a pussy-grabber. Despite a lot of brave, strong women, it's still a strong current in America" (Abbott, 2018). So, having said that complete gender equality has not yet been achieved in America, *Sharp Objects* is about a matriarchy focusing on power that can be bloody and "as ugly as a patriarchy" although it looks different (Abbott, 2018).

Except for the men who feel impotent, angry, and afraid, and, therefore, act sexist, Flynn is also concerned about women in patriarchy who advise that feminists should not be approaching #MeToo with anger but with care and gentleness. Considering her post-feminist agenda aimed at achieving complete gender equality through acknowledging female maliciousness, violence, and amorality, Gillian Flynn justifies female anger because many women have been violated in one way or another in their lives. To her, constructive anger is a useful feminist tool that needs to be expressed, which is why she believes that it is misogynist to tell her not to write about malicious or amoral women, "because that's saying women must be a certain type of person. That puts us back to the Stone Age—like women are saints and therefore not human and if we stray beyond that model, we'll be severely punished. It denies us any humanity" (Abbott, 2018). To her, it is a ridiculous notion to claim that her novels are misogynist because she does not write "the kind of women [society and culture] want" (Abbott, 2018). Instead, she writes women who are human beings and capable of anger and violence, and, because of that, they are equal to men on every level.

To examine and explain her perspective on feminism further, Flynn also reflects on her childhood and her motives for writing about feminism in an online essay. "I Was Not a Nice Little Girl . . ." (2015) provides insight into her motivations and incentives as a post-feminist author. At the beginning of this essay, she describes odd patterns of behavior in her childhood, e.g. stunning ants and feeding them to spiders or watching soft-core porn (Flynn). Flynn's point is that these behavior patterns are rather

thought to be typically male than female, at least according to socially and culturally preconceived gender roles and thus are an evidence of gender inequality. Although it seems that girls and women too might experiment with sexuality, power, and aggression, these features do not make it into the oral history of women. However, boys and men do not have a social boundary for conversations about such features. Flynn argues that talking about sexuality and aggression might be socially preconditioned as she states that “[men] have a vocabulary for sex and violence that women just don’t. Even as adults. I don’t recall any women talking with real pleasure about masturbating or orgasms until *Sex and the City* offered its clever, cutie-pie spin, presenting the phrases to us in a pre-approved package with a polka-dot bow” (Flynn).⁷⁸ And while *Sex and the City* proposed one of the first post-feminist agendas, in which “[...] relationships [of female friends] are more lasting and trustworthy than those with men or potential husbands” and “their conversations are as intimate as the sex with men they enjoy,” female amorality and pragmatic violence were not yet considered as a prerequisite for complete gender equality (Gerhard, 2005: 43).⁷⁹

To Gillian Flynn, what is more important than sexuality is the absence of discussions about female violence. By violence she refers to female anger or darker emotions, which are kept in check (Parsi, 2013). Society and media try to give reason to female violence, such as mental illness or “The Man Who Made Her Do It” to defuse and invalidate it (Flynn). Giving it reason is a patriarchal tool to disempower women and make violence a male attribute

⁷⁸ *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones’s Diary* are considered to be “Chick Lit” movies (Peitz, 2009: 13-14). Chick Lit is a film genre that is aimed at young women, focuses mainly on female characters, and usually includes a humorous plot (Peitz, 2009: 13-14). Due to the fact that the latter is not applicable to Flynn’s novels and films, these do not belong to the Chick Lit genre but rather mystery and psychological suspense (McArdle, 2015).

⁷⁹ Gerhard (2005) argues that the plot of *Sex and the City* is not innovative in terms of post-feminism but rather that Carrie Bradshaw is an author of a sex column and is friends with three other women with whom she can talk about “everything” (Gerhard, 2005). Gerhard claims that “in its combination of frank sex talk and best girlfriends, *Sex and the City* became one of the most watched and discussed television series in recent memory” (Gerhard, 2005: 37), which is why its similarities to and, more importantly, its differences from other television series makes it relevant for post-feminism.

only. However, Flynn considers female violence long-acting, aggressive, and ferocious, especially on a psychological level. What is more important, she considers it a human condition and thus is not limited to men. So, she tries to acknowledge their “ugly side” to emphasize that pragmatic maliciousness and amorality can also be ascribed to women. This post-feminist approach is important when striving for complete gender equality, as amorality, maliciousness, and violence are human character traits that should not only be reserved for men, and therefore need to be “nurtured like nasty black orchids” (Flynn).

Considering Rosalind Gill’s article “Post-postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times” and the above-examined feminist perspectives of Gillian Flynn, one can say that the novels and the proposed agenda in them indeed relate to the idea of post-feminism as an intersectional concept (Gill, 2016: 619). To Gill, post-feminism as a scientific approach should be in prolific use, “deployed to analyze a multiplicity of media texts” while it remains a “productive irritant” (Fuller and Driscoll, 2015 qtd. in Gill, 2016: 620). More importantly, Gill claims that post-feminism is an “object of analysis,” not a position or a perspective, which means that it should be used as an analytical category “to capture empirical regularities in the world” (Gill, 2016: 621). So, post-feminism, not to be used as in “after-feminism” but rather to analyze “how we understand and make sense of cultural change,” is supposed to be used in engaging with the contradictions of media culture (Gill, 2016: 619-622). While Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega (2017) consider, for example, Flynn’s *Gone Girl* a “post-feminist refashioning of the old story of the danger of smart, beautiful, powerful women entrapping innocent men,” the novel needs to be analyzed in terms of the contradictions of media culture. This analysis is aimed to both examine and evaluate the post-feminist agenda regarding gender roles and inequality that are caused by media culture.

4. *Gone Girl*: Gender-Based Identity Conflicts in a Typical American Marriage

Flynn's novel *Gone Girl* addresses love, betrayal, murder, and power. At the beginning of the narrative, Nick Dunne's beautiful and intelligent wife, Amy, disappears under suspicious circumstances on the morning of their fifth wedding anniversary.⁸⁰ The investigations of the police, who find Amy's diary, lead to the suspicion of domestic abuse, abduction, and murder. Because of gender-based suspicions, Nick becomes the main suspect in this cold case and an invidious victim of media at the same time. While he has to figure out various clues to find out what happened to his wife, it becomes clear that Amy faked her disappearance to frame Nick with false evidence in revenge for having an affair with his student Andie. As it turns out, Amy plays with the expectations that come with gender stereotypes and comes up with a plan to punish Nick, who expected her to constantly perform her culturally prescribed role of femininity, for breaking their marriage vows.⁸¹

Amy becomes a post-feminist manifestation of a woman who does not want to conform to prescribed femininity and instead uses malice and violence to express her anger. For example, she not only fakes her death by leaving the house devastated and fabricating evidence for the investigators to find, but she also leaves clues for Nick to ensure that the public believes that he is an adulterous murderer. Amy also wants Nick to know that she is framing him but that he will be incapable of saving himself. As a result, he

⁸⁰ A five-year wedding anniversary is often celebrated with wooden gifts that symbolize the solidity of the marriage (Kring, 2000: 32). In *Gone Girl*, this anniversary date is used ironically as it tests the solidity of the Dunne's marriage and makes it inextricable in consequence.

⁸¹ Zoë Heller's *Notes on a Scandal* (2003) is about a similar story in which Barbara Covett, a history teacher and spinster in London, meets her colleague Sheba Hart and tries to be friends with her. She soon finds out that Sheba is frustrated in her role as a wife and mother and has an affair with a minor student. Because she wants to be deeply involved in Sheba's life, Barbara tries to blackmail her into being friends and seeks revenge after it does not work out by revealing the affair to the public. Although Sheba figures out that it was Barbara by reading her diary, her marriage is about to end due to the affair and her upcoming imprisonment.

Both *Gone Girl* and *Notes on a Scandal* deal with gender expectations, frustrations in a marriage, having an affair, and a diary that is connected to a plan of revenge.

has to engage in public and media conflicts to defend himself and maintain his gender performances predetermined by masculinity.⁸² With the help of his sister Margo, whom the characters simply call “Go,” and top lawyer Tanner Bolt, Nick succeeds in performing and manipulating his gender roles to ingratiate himself and reach out to Amy, who went into hiding in the house of her ex-boyfriend, Desi Collings. As she is confident that Nick learned his lesson and changed for the better, Amy murders Desi and uses the stereotypical gender role of a woman as a victim to pretend to have been abducted and raped.⁸³ After her return home, the Dunne’s marriage degenerates into a psychological and strategic chess match in which both characters use gender expectations to fight each other: Nick tries to reveal the truth to expose his wife’s lies to the public, whereas Amy tries to prevent him from doing so. Her ultimate goal, i.e., forcing him to stay married to her and perform the role of a husband according to cultural expectations, is achieved when Amy becomes pregnant through artificial insemination. Due to the negative experiences of his own childhood, Nick does not want his child to be harmed, which is why he agrees to performing his role properly and keeping up the illusion of a happy marriage at the end of the novel.⁸⁴

⁸² To save his life and manipulate Amy into believing that he changed for the better, Nick agrees to be interviewed by newswoman Sharon Schieber, who is played by Sela Ward in the movie. Schieber resembles Helen Kimble in *The Fugitive* (1993), who was played by Ward as well. In this film, her husband Richard is under sentence of death for the murder of his wife and therefore has to run away from the police to prove his innocence. Thus, Sharon Schieber resembles Helen Kimble and becomes a cinematic allusion to *The Fugitive*.

⁸³ According to Genz (2009), “sex is often depicted as painful, most commonly exercised by men upon women and, as such, symptomatic of male supremacy that trades in power and violence” (Genz, 2009: 253). Amy changes this masculine ideal of sex and uses her violence to gain power by killing Desi after sex and by fabricating a rape story.

⁸⁴ This ending is reminiscent of Ira Levin’s horror novel *Rosemary’s Baby* (1967) in which the female protagonist has to face permanent suspicion and fear, as she does not know how to cope with the fact that she gave birth to the Anti-Christ. In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*’s Stephan Lee, Flynn herself said that “*Rosemary’s Baby* is one of [her] all-time favorite books. [She loves] that it just ends with, you know, ‘Hey, the devil’s in the world, and guess what? Mom kind of likes him!’ And that’s the end” (Lee, 2012).

The narrative perspective of *Gone Girl* alternates. The plot is presented through the eyes of Nick and Amy, seizing the underlying idea that there are two sides to every story. This idea is of prime importance in the novel. The social and psychological dynamics between Nick and Amy, who both use their inner monologues in order to convince the reader of their individual truths and the maliciousness of the other, are a foundation of the novel's post-feminist mode. "It is a two-sided contest in which Nick and Amy tell conflicting stories. Each addresses the reader: Nick in the present tense, and Amy by way of an italics-filled, giddily emotional diary about the marriage" (Maslin, 2012). This narrative style makes it possible to only have limited insight into the thoughts of the characters. It is a device that leaves room for doubt, since both narrators are unreliable, which means that their subjective perspectives do not correspond to an objective reality but rather convey their individualized truths. To a certain extent, this makes it difficult to be aware of the protagonists' intentions.

Gone Girl is about a patriarchal culture realizing but not acknowledging that female maliciousness and violence are real and a prerequisite for gender equality. For the purpose of criticizing these cultural circumstances and proposing a post-feminist approach, Gillian Flynn tells about a modern American couple that struggles with culturally predetermined gender roles and marital obligations that are affected by society and media. Although there are various approaches in *Gone Girl* that are typical of thrillers, this novel contains an innovative post-feminist notion that is, for example, visible in Amy's "cool girl" rant. This notion is mainly aimed at unravelling and reflecting on undetected gender inequality, which is still present in modern American marriages, media culture and male-dominated society. More importantly, *Gone Girl* comments on post-feminism as a tool of patriarchy aimed to imperceptibly oppress women. In convincing women that gender equality is achieved in modern-day society, feminism becomes a disabled movement, a tool of male domination, as both men and women no longer strive for it.⁸⁵ This tool makes it possible for marriage to be affected

⁸⁵ "The necessity of feminist critique, at a time when women face significant challenges to their economic well-being, hard-won reproductive rights, and even the

by patriarchy and media as well as affecting men and women in their relationships. In the course of this domination, presupposed gender roles and, with these, gender inequality and power struggles are created and lead to frustration and violence. Regarding these gender-based elements of oppression, the post-feminist claim of *Gone Girl* is that the male-dominated society and media culture should acknowledge and accept amorality and violence not as purely male but human traits in order to achieve complete gender equality. Aside from legality and moral values, the claim is that women should not be excluded from any character traits for that ultimately leads to gender inequality, even if this inequality is not always perceptible.

As part of Flynn's post-feminist agenda, *Gone Girl* focuses on cycles of psychological violence and female anger, and explores their effects on interpersonal relationships and marriages. Flynn differentiates between male and female darkness that lies within. In an interview, she said that "It's usually not the same; [female violence] is outright, it's more psychological. But I think it's much more damaging ultimately" (Paul, 2012). As they cannot work around their relationship problems and identify the gender-related issues that come with performing gender roles, the characters project their anger and despair on their spouses.

4.1 The Perception of the Characters' Delusions in *Gone Girl*

In *Gone Girl*, the perception of the characters is essential for the facades that are presented. The characters pretend, delude, and deceive each other. Their interpersonal relationship depends on their personalities, their current situations, their backgrounds, and their mental statuses. That is why it is important to analyze the intentions and personality traits of the main characters in detail to be able to go into the proposed feminist notion of this novel afterwards. This preliminary analysis is the basis for the subsequent examination of Flynn's post-feminist approach.

authority to speak, while popular culture blithely assumes that gender equality is a given, seems [...] self-evident" (Tasker and Negra: 12).

According to Laura Miller (2012), Flynn’s specialty is to write “unlikable” narrators, who are portrayed as “ordinarily selfish, resentful or sarcastic types” instead of socially dysfunctional killers. This antipathy is attributable to the readers’ recognition of their everyday deficiencies and failures (Miller, 2012).⁸⁶ This “reflection” not only makes readers feel uncomfortable about themselves and their failures but also raises awareness of gender troubles in society that are still present although difficult to detect. These “unlikable” narrators become reflections of the modern gender-based oppression of women, which is disguised as a post-feminist achievement of gender equality. As opposed to more traditional crime-novel heroes, who also have deficiencies, “but only noble ones, like caring too much about the case [...]” (Miller, 2012), the characters of *Gone Girl* have shortcomings that are all too human and therefore mostly ignoble.

4.1.1 Nick Dunne, the Failing American Husband

According to his wife, Nick Dunne would describe himself as “[...] the kind of guy you can drink beer with, the kind of guy who doesn’t mind if you puke in his car. Nick!” (Flynn, 2012: 17). Although Amy says that he “looks like the rich-boy villain in an ‘80s teen movie,” she falls in love and later marries him (Flynn, 2012: 17). Nick is a calm, stoic man, whom Detective Rhonda Boney later describes as an “unemotional, flippant” person (Flynn, 2012: 462). He is unable to handle emotions like sadness or guilt, which is why, when his wife disappears, he becomes the main suspect in this criminal case.

Both his wife’s and his own behavior patterns are interdependent and, with that, ascribable to each wave of feminism. Amy wants to have a say in their relationship, e.g. in their finances, which is similar to the social and cultural conflicts women faced during the first wave of feminism (Dicker,

⁸⁶ Gay (2014) claims that “unlikable female characters” have been analyzed and commented on in critical conversations by professionals and amateur critics, which, to her, is sexist as unlikable men are often billed as dark, tormented antiheroes. Gay argues that “unlikable characters, the ones who are the most human,” need to be used more often to make people feel uncomfortable about themselves and thereby aim at achieving gender equality (Gay, 2014).

2008: 21). Her frustration and sadness in their marriage is related to her dependency on and inferiority to Nick because, as she acts out her role as the Cool Girl, she feels like a slave, like a property of a male-dominated world (Fuller, 1845: 15-16, 93-94). With regard to the second wave, Nick's unwitting misogyny and indirect oppression of his wife cause Amy to be misandrist and discriminatory in return (Dicker, 2008: 57). She fights back against male domination and objectification after having to live up to the feminine mystique. Because the fulfillment of her own femininity, particularly as the Cool Girl, does not bring happiness, she takes over control (Friedan, 1963: 29).⁸⁷ Just as Betty Friedan (1963: 229-235) demanded, Amy finds herself a new life plan to free herself from the feminine mystique in order to be freed from the prescribed gender roles both characters cannot live up to. This unconscious will to perform acts of gender is, according to Judith Butler (1990: 18-19), culturally predetermined and biologically fixed. Instead of refusing their presupposed performative acts of gender, both characters try to live up to them as they were conditioned to do by society, culture, parents, jobs, and social expectations, or simply by a lack of identity (Butler, 1990: 4,

⁸⁷ As demanded by Friedan (1963: 29), Wonder Woman also takes over control. In the 2017 movie adaptation, Wonder Woman as a superheroine arrives in London and "instinctively obeys a handsome meathead who has no skills apart from moderate decisiveness and pretty eyes. This is a patriarchal figment. Then, naturally, you begin to wonder why does she have to fight in knickers that look like a fancy letterbox made of leather? Does her appearance and its effect on the men around her really have to play such a big part in all her fight scenes?" (Williams, 2017). *The Guardian's* Zoe Williams argues that, although Wonder Woman is half-naked most of the time, the character is representative of many feminist acts, such as the "whole Diana myth, women safeguarding the world from male violence not with nurture but with better violence" and "a female German chemist trying to destroy humans" (Williams, 2017). Williams argues that Wonder Woman is both feminist and anti-feminist as she is a woman who fulfills her own femininity in a patriarchal system but has found herself a life plan as a heroine who is superior to men. Thus, she is part of male domination and objectification but still fights it by adopting elements of masculinity. In doing so, becomes a post-feminism heroine. Although Betty Friedan (1963) wanted women to refuse the feminine mystique, Wonder Woman still performs a certain role of femininity. She is, in fact, a Cool Girl who "has been untouched by patriarchy, misogyny and rape due to a complete absence of men on her island, she does not know that there is an ideology that calls for gender equality" (Rawat, 2018). Unlike the Cool Girl in *Gone Girl*, Wonder Woman is not dependent on men. Instead, she saves them, although she is created according to the mystique, i.e., male desires. So, she moves beyond being a Cool Girl and a liberated woman.

15, 23). Since acting out their gender roles did not bring happiness in their marriage, they, on the one hand, seem to look for more compatible partners or, on the other hand, try to make their marriage according to their presupposed roles work on all accounts. Needless to say, both ways of dealing with their gender-related identity conflicts lead to even more frustration and violence, which is true of all novels by Flynn. So, in her post-feminist approach, the gender performances of Nick and Amy mask their frustration. When Amy rejects her performance of femininity, she expects Nick to accept what she perceives as her true identity. As he is unable to do this, she uses violence and malice against him, which shocks the characters as well as the readers. From a post-feminist perspective, this shock is a consequence of gender inequality that Flynn depicts in an interesting way, as Nick's thoughts and emotions on Amy's violence represent the readers' feelings. So, Flynn shocks the readers first to emphasize that gender equality on every level has not yet been achieved. As Amy violently forces Nick to stay married to her, she makes him accept her amorality, violence, and malice, which is why the readers have to acknowledge these attributes as well, although they cause malaise. While legality and morality become irrelevant in this agenda, Flynn holds up a mirror to the readers who, just like Nick, struggle with female violence but have to acknowledge it as non-gendered in the end.

Four days after their fifth anniversary, around the time when Amy disappears, the reader learns about the twenty-three-year-old student, Andie, Nick's "pretty, very young mistress" (Flynn, 2012: 8, 193). They met at one of Nick's junior college classes in North Carthage, Missouri. Although they mostly meet secretly to have sex, he claims he is in love with her. "It was more than an ego boost," he tells the reader. "I really love Andie. I do" (Flynn, 2012: 197). She makes him happy at a time when he is unhappy for the above-mentioned reasons, like being unable to perform his gender role. Thus, it is an irony of fate that Amy knows about the affair from the beginning after watching Nick press Andie up against a tree and kiss her for the first time. She even watches them go to her house to have sex for the first

time (Flynn, 2012: 203, 314).⁸⁸ Although this is where Amy's plan of revenge is set into motion, the marital struggles had started earlier. After they reveal their true faces to each other, they start to feel unhappy in their marriage and hate their relationship. Nick is not only deluded into believing that Amy is easy, sexy, and never angry, he unconsciously anticipates these traits due to patriarchal beliefs, his misogyny, and the present-day social oppression of women to which he has been accustomed. He expects her to be a modern version of the woman who acts out the role of a housewife and mother that was criticized by Fuller, Friedan, and Butler. That is why he is disappointed after Amy's false front disappears. Simply put: She stops being a "Cool Girl," so Nick looks for another one (Flynn, 2012: 299). Ultimately, his anticipations make him betray his wife because he can neither live up to his own gender role nor live without his wife obeying culturally presupposed male domination and objectification. The following quote shows that Nick struggles with Amy not being a "Cool Girl": "*Women are fucking crazy. No qualifier: Not some women, not many women. Women are crazy*" (Flynn, 2012: 179). Instead of accepting her true face, i.e., what she believes is a life without performing a presupposed role of femininity, he claims that women who do not behave in accordance with presupposed social rules must simply be crazy. He denies individuality, as he only assumes the blanket category "woman" and does not want to get used to women who try to free themselves from the feminine mystique. Moreover, he articulates what is probably the most misogynistic generalization, which is that all women are crazy. This statement not only shows his sexist beliefs but also that he is subconsciously aware of the fact that all women are unhappy while acting out their gender roles and in fact pursue happiness that only comes with complete gender equality, which goes hand in hand with getting rid of the feminine mystique and culturally presupposed roles of masculinity and femininity. That all women are crazy seems to be a common belief among men. In his 2010

⁸⁸ In the novel, Andie bites Nick after he breaks up with her, which emphasizes that she can be violent too (Flynn, 2012: 327). This plot element makes every woman in the novel violent to a certain extent and is unfortunately missing in the movie, as it is an important statement to make every female character use violence in terms of the proposed post-feminist mode.

country song “All Women Are Crazy,” Aurelio Voltaire sings that “all women are crazy; all men are dumb; ‘cause though we know they’re crazy, we still want some” (Voltaire, 2010).⁸⁹ In his 2017 online article about the Dorothy Syndrome,⁹⁰ Charlie Accetta writes

let’s get it out of the way—all women are crazy. And all men are assholes, but that’s a subject for another time. We’re focusing on the female of the species here. In my six decades on this planet, I have closely observed, both individually and collectively, the madness of women. Both my mother and her sister, my godmother, were extreme enough examples to get my attention at an early age and keep a lookout for signs in other females whom I might run into. I soon came to the conclusion that this was an epidemic (Accetta, 2017).

While these examples reflect the ongoing patriarchal oppression of women, Harris O’Malley (2014) wants men to stop calling women crazy. He claims that the term “crazy” is typically held in stock for women’s behavior, while men usually are not labeled “crazy”, even if they behave in a certain way (O’Malley, 2014).⁹¹ O’Malley even goes as far as to claim that ““crazy” is one of the five deadly words guys use to shame women into compliance.

⁸⁹ Contrary to Voltaire’s song in which all women are just crazy, Leann Rimes’s *Crazy Women* (2011) is rather about the idea that women are crazy because of crazy men, meaning that the violence of some women depends on the previous actions of their husbands or boyfriends. Moreover, Rimes claims that “crazy women, ex-wives and old girlfriends keep their crazy hidden till they’re pushed off the deep end,” which means that, to her, all women are crazy as well, but show their madness or violence only when men make them angry (Rimes, 2011).

⁹⁰ Ian Ransom (2006) defines the “Dorothy Syndrome” as follows: “No child can automatically gravitate toward a person they have yet to meet or toward someone they don’t know to exist. Not until some form of introduction has been made. The first introduction any child of my generation experienced concerning Judy Garland invariably took place in front of the TV set during the annual showing of *The Wizard of Oz*” (Ransom, 2006: 62).

⁹¹ This started in Ancient Egypt 2000 B.C., where “crazy” women’s behavior was first diagnosed. Many nineteenth-century psychologists and doctors, including Freud (1905), would relate this behavior to a disorder called *female hysteria* that was once a common medical diagnosis for women with a varying set of symptoms due to a lack of sufficient sexual intercourse and/or deficiency of sexual gratification (Maines, 1999: 23).

The others: Fat. Ugly. Slutty. Bitchy. They sum up the supposedly worst things a woman can be” (O’Malley, 2014).

Showing that you can inherit and learn sexism, the relationship to Bill Dunne, Nick’s father, and the symbolic meaning of his sudden appearances can be connected to his misogynist characteristics. He, for example, expresses his hatred towards all women he knows by saying, “Andie had screwed me over, Marybeth had turned against me, Go had lost a crucial measure of faith. Boney had trapped me. Amy had destroyed me. [...] Rage in all five senses. *Those fucking bitches*. I’d tried all my life to be a decent guy, a man who loved and respected women, a guy without hang-ups. And here I was, thinking nasty thoughts about my twin, about my mother-in-law, about my mistress. I was imagining bashing in my wife’s skull” (Flynn, 2012: 478). Although it seems that Nick’s misogyny is based on women disappointing him on various levels by not being able to live up to their gender roles, it is later revealed that he believes that he has inherited his father’s misogyny and thus is aware of his oppressing behavior. So, as he fails to perform his own gender role, he finds himself in an identity crisis, unable to face a life away from his mother and, more importantly, unable to face a life after having unmasked the feminine mystique that affects all the women he knows as it affects himself as well (Friedan, 1963: 151).

Flynn has Nick declare that Bill did not have a problem with his mother in particular but with women in general. “He thought they were stupid, inconsequential, irritating. *That dumb bitch*. It was his favorite phrase for any woman who annoyed him” (Flynn, 2012: 81).⁹² After being divorced, Nick’s mother transformed into a happy person again, which implies that her husband could have been the reason for her sadness and malaise. She finds happiness after breaking free from an exemplary representative of male

⁹² Nick often behaves in a misogynist way and calls female characters he does not like “bitches,” which resembles his father’s attitude towards women, who, for example, calls Amy an “ugly bitch” and wants everybody to know that he believes that she is not better than him. He claims, “[...] You tell her. She’s not too good for me. She doesn’t get to have a say. That ugly bitch will have to learn – [...]” (Flynn 2012: 479-480). Bill’s rants are not only used as a foreshadowing of Amy’s malice and violence but also emphasize that Nick seems to have learned misogyny by watching his father.

chauvinism, a man, who used to oppress and insult her. The happiness she found after being divorced fits with Betty Friedan's demand for women to want more, to break free, and to find a new life plan (Friedan, 1963: 20). In *Gone Girl*, Maureen is the only example of a woman who unravels the feminine mystique. She realizes that her marriage does not bring the happiness she wants from it, so she finds herself a new life plan.

Regarding the idea of breaking free from the feminine mystique, Margo is of peculiar interest in the analysis of gender. When talking about his twin sister, Nick says, "I doubt my sister will ever marry: If she's sad or upset or angry, she needs to be alone—she fears a man dismissing her womanly tears" (Flynn, 2012: 83). On the one hand, one could argue that she is psychologically disturbed due to her upbringing and will therefore never marry. On the other hand, one could say that she is already a strong and independent woman who does not want to submit to patriarchy and, thus, seeks happiness away from the concept of marriage.

Nick as a character reflects a male-dominated society in which men want women to be their "property" and who are afraid of the destruction of their home, sex, and legislation (Fuller, 1845: 18). Not only has this been criticized by second-wave feminists, but, as Nick performs a socially and culturally presupposed gender role of masculinity, he, according to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, becomes a victim of sexism himself. In *Gone Girl*, this gender role is called the "Cool Guy," a parallel to the Cool Girl.⁹³ Regarding this role, Nick explains that he dislikes acting out masculinity according to the gender role of a husband, which is also a social performance Butler describes in *Gender Trouble*. With regard to this performance, Nick says "Love makes you want to be a better man—right, right. But maybe love, real love, also gives you permission to just be the man you are" (Flynn, 2012:

⁹³ In her book *Goodbye Tarzan* (1984), Helen Franks defines that cool guy as a man "who never shows emotions but smokes a cigar instead... the superman, fast-living, risk-taking, getting admiring gasps from lesser mortals... the James Bond smoothie who's quick on the draw... the beer-swilling hero who know how to live rough, no frills, no fuss. Heroes all, and all guaranteed to get the girl (even though in real life terms they display potentially reckless or violent behavior, considerable repression and give every indication of becoming unrewarding lovers and companions)" (Franks, 1984: 10).

204). It is striking that he not only wants to be himself when he is with Andie, but that he is also aware of his performance of a presupposed gender role. He emphasizes that he does not want to act out his role anymore, although paradoxically he does exactly what patriarchy expects him to do, which is to find a Cool Girl, a modern version of what Fuller, Friedan and Butler criticize as it is a sexist construct of what men want women to be like and what is considered to be feminine. According to Nick, Andie is a Cool Girl and that is what he wants, or that is what society wants him to want. One could understand that a man who is unhappy in his marriage and finds a woman he is able to love would want to be with this woman.

To bring it back to Margo who, in a way, is also a Cool Girl, it is necessary to examine both the reasons for her character traits and her relationship to Nick. Throughout the story, Margo is on hand with help and advice for him. To Nick, “Go is truly the one person in the entire world [he is] totally [himself] with” (Flynn, 2012: 21). In the novel, she often talks and behaves like a male friend of Nick, swearing and talking about sex. She seems to have adopted masculine patterns of behavior, which is why it seems that Nick likes his sister because she adapts to certain parts of the modern gender role by always being “cool” (Flynn 2012: 21). What is striking is that, according to Nick, his twin sister is not only unable to perform the traditional role of femininity, i.e., being a housewife and mother, but she has also traits of what he himself expects from a Cool Girl. Furthermore, Margo seems to be Nick’s moral counterpart.⁹⁴ Being both a Cool Girl and a moral compass to her brother, there is reason to believe that she is what both Betty Friedan and Judith Butler demand in *The Feminine Mystique* and *Gender Trouble*, respectively. In fact, it is likely that Margo is really “cool.” If she truly behaves according to these theories, she does not perform the role of a Cool Girl but really is one. This means that the character traits that one would ascribe to men are what she can identify with and be happy. Of course, it is difficult to determine whether Margo as a secondary character performs the role of the Cool Girl according to patriarchy or simply is “cool” because this

⁹⁴ In a scene in the movie, Margo wears a T-shirt with a squirrel that says “protect your nuts” as an ironic allusion to Nick’s emasculation and inability to perform prescribed acts of masculinity (2014).

is part of her identity, meaning that she achieves complete gender equality on an individual level by breaking free from the concept of gender roles. When following the train of thought on this matter, it can be concluded that she is a result of an individual collapse of the concept “woman” because she is neither a housewife and mother nor does she have a boyfriend (Rampton, 2005). Instead, she refuses to adapt to performative acts of femininity, for instance, by cursing, and creates an individualized identity apart from the cultural concepts of “gender” and “sex.” From this, it most certainly can be gathered that she is affected by presupposed acts of gender according to cultural expectations but breaks free from these and appears to be “cool” as she finds an identity and, with it, happiness.

4.1.2 Amy Elliott Dunne’s Feminist Perspective on Marriage and Power

Flawed female characters are the key to modern novels of the Domestic Noir genre.⁹⁵ Still, this is not an entirely new concept in literature. In the last twenty years many authors, e.g. Zoe Heller, Lionel Shriver, Kate Atkinson, Louise Doughty and Sophie Hannah, wrote many flawed female characters (Whitney, 2015). In contrast to the traditional women, new feminist characters like Amy Dunne seem to have more control and power over their fate. In their damaged relationships, they explore their own darkness and the darkness that has invaded their homes (Whitney, 2015). Furthermore, they accept their own darkness and fight back using it. In *Gone Girl*, Amy breaks out of the traditional concept in which she is a victim of a patriarchal society and media culture.

Not uncommonly, evil female movie characters are depicted in various films, especially in film noir where these characters are called *femmes fatales*. A *femme fatale*, literally meaning “disastrous woman,” is by

⁹⁵ Contemporary domestic noir is a literary and cinematic subgenre that is categorized under two umbrella terms, crime fiction and thriller. It takes place in the home and/or workplace and “concerns itself largely (but not exclusively) with the female experience, is based around relationships and takes as its base a broadly feminist view” (Peters, 2018: 12).

definition “a seductive woman who lures men into dangerous or compromising situations” and “a woman who attracts men by an aura of charm and mystery” (“Femme fatale”). According to Rothfeld (2014), the definition of the femme fatale is as follows: “Flawlessly coiffed, impeccably dressed, she floats onto the screen in the dim half-light of a smoky nightclub or a foggy back alley. As she moves across the frame, we catch a glimpse of her reflection in a mirror or a shop window. She is, of course, the femme fatale—a recurring fixture of 1940s film noir and its offshoots.” Femmes fatales are attractive, clever, dangerous and coldhearted. Take, for example, Billy Wilder’s 1944 *Double Indemnity*, in which Phyllis Dietrichson, one of the first femmes fatales in cinematic history and probably the most famous, convinces her lover, Walter Neff, to murder her husband for money (Rothfeld, 2014; *Double Indemnity*, 1944).⁹⁶

Next to the hardboiled detective, the femme fatale is a character who seems to be a change from the stereotypical gender role of a housewife and mother at first. For the first time, women wielded their power over the male characters who dared to invade and attack their dignity, autonomy, and independence. Still, when considering second- and third-wave feminism, a femme fatale is a gender role which is supposed to make women believe they can be more than being a housewife and mother. However, it is forced upon them by a male-dominated industry and therefore presupposes the performance of this gender role. What makes Flynn’s novels extraordinary is that this concept is turned upside down in, for instance, *Gone Girl*. In this novel, Amy realizes that she is unhappy being a housewife and, more importantly, performing the role of the “Cool Girl.” She tries to break free from the patriarchal oppression that to her is manifested in that role but believes that, at the end of the novel, she can find happiness in the role of a housewife and mother. To achieve this transformation in her role, she “punishes” Nick by making him stay in their marriage and believes she is keeping her dignity by maintaining a presupposed role of femininity. So, Amy is forced by patriarchy and media culture to perform a gender role she

⁹⁶ In his *Film Noir Guide* (2003), Keaney claims that “film historians disagree on whether *Double Indemnity* should have the honor of being labeled the first film noir” (Keaney, 2003: 139).

cannot live up to, which is why she breaks free from it. And although she is happy after that, she searches for more. While struggling with what Betty Friedan called the problem that has no name, asking herself “Is this all?,” she returns to her initial role of a housewife and mother (Friedan, 1963: 5). For that, she needs her husband and thus forces him to live up to presupposed masculinity by performing his gender role of a husband and father in a delusion of a marriage that later becomes real to both characters. This shows that whatever Amy does, she is constantly affected and frustrated by a male-dominated culture that expects and makes her behave in presupposed ways, both as housewife and femme fatale. According to Butler (1990), only eradicating these performative acts of gender would free her from the constant influence of a sexist media culture. Butler claims that there are various modalities in the development of a gender identity, which is emphasized in the roles that Amy tries to perform but fails in living up to any of them (Butler, 1990: 4, 13). Obviously, she struggles with gender roles and tries to apply a form of violent feminism. The mere existence of this feminist strife emphasizes that Amy as a female character does not attain a post-feminist sensibility. Still, as mentioned above, this character’s violence and incentive to break free is a proposal of post-feminism by Gillian Flynn, to whom violence is part of gender equality. To examine this post-feminist agenda, the Cool Girl must be focused on first. According to Rothfeld (2014), the difference between the traditional version of a femme fatale and the Cool Girl is the use of female sex appeal. Whereas the traditional femmes fatales only availed themselves of lasciviousness, the Cool Girl is “a reaction to a new kind of patriarchy” (Rothfeld, 2014). After seventy years, the obvious sexism transformed into a discreet and subliminal shrewdness. “Rather than a smitten bride who waits at home impatiently, dreaming desperately of hubby’s return, the new sexism wants a woman who doesn’t care too much, a woman who gracefully bows out as soon as she’s no longer wanted, who makes no demands and puts up no resistance” (Rothfeld, 2014). This is reminiscent of the feminist approach of Betty Friedan, in which she criticized particularly the fulfillment of the feminine mystique without any resistance (Friedan, 1963: 29, 229-235). The main difference from the role that Friedan described is that the traditional femme fatale reacts against male oppression

by using her culturally presupposed gender role as a weapon against her oppressors, whereas the Cool Girl adopts the presupposed gender role without knowing it and, more importantly, without realizing that feminism is still needed (Rothfeld, 2014). What is progressive in *Gone Girl* is that Amy uses cultural anticipation as a weapon to break free from these presuppositions although, at the end, she still adapts to the concept of femininity by seeking happiness in the feminine mystique. As mentioned above, it is irrelevant whether Amy succeeds in breaking free from her gender role. What is important is that, in *Gone Girl*, post-feminism is used to analyze both a modern male-oriented form of femininity, the Cool Girl, that is used by patriarchal society and media culture, and a lack of female violence as a prerequisite of gender equality.

At the end of the novel, Amy needs to prompt feelings of love to gain power while performing presupposed gender in a traditional marriage. To remain in and maintain the roles that come with masculinity and femininity, she needs Nick to believe to be in love with her again (Flynn, 2012: 536, 537). Out of fear of each other, they create a renewed common basis for their relationship, in which they then pretend to be better people. At the end, Nick thinks of himself as a match for his wife; he accepts his fate and embraces it with approval. His wife's pregnancy not only defeats his will to resist but also makes him want to perform a culturally presupposed gender role, that of a loving husband and caring father, which makes him, just like Amy, believe he has found happiness in his marriage (Flynn, 2012: 553).⁹⁷ Both characters' stories start and end with being victims of male domination, patriarchy, objectification, and presupposed gender roles. They refuse to accept that their ideas of dual femininity and masculinity will not lead to a feeling of fulfillment. In this interdependent relationship, they pretend to be happy as they again perform acts of gender that lead to frustration and violence. As they adapt to binary notions of gender and perform the presupposed roles of housewife and mother or, respectively, husband and father, these characters

⁹⁷ In the novel, Amy writes in her diary that Nick might be poisoning her with anti-freeze, which is why she puts some of it in her vomit and hides it "in the back of the freezer in a jar, inside a box of Brussels sprouts" (Flynn, 2012: 545). This plot element is left out in the movie.

return to a life similar to what has been criticized and refused by feminists during the first three waves (Fuller, 1845: 68-69; Friedan, 1963: 229-235; Butler, 1990: 13).

Although both characters return to live a life according to presupposed roles, unable to achieve happiness, fulfillment, or identity, their relationship helps in examining the post-feminist agenda proposed by Flynn. The post-feminist agenda in *Gone Girl* is less about the failures of Nick and Amy but instead about realizing that there is male domination in society and culture and that frustration can be caused not only by depriving women of basic character traits such as amorality or maliciousness but also by manipulating them into believing that being “cool” is what they want. Both Amy and Nick realize that they are not happy with Amy being a Cool Girl, so they break free from their gender roles: he, as a husband, betrays his wife, while she pretends to have been murdered by him. Moreover, they are so immensely affected by patriarchal culture and presuppositions of media images that they seek identities in a relationship that is based on traditional gender roles, not yet realizing that these will also prevent them from finding fulfillment. In *Gone Girl*, amorality, violence, and maliciousness exercised by women are culturally not accepted, although, to Flynn, they are what is needed to achieve complete gender equality. Take, for example, gender differences in violent crime: According to Nigel Barber, “as a rule of thumb, men are responsible for over 90 percent of serious violent crimes, such as assaults, homicides, and violent robberies” (Barber, 2015). To explain the gender gap, Barber refers to Arriaga and Oskamp (1999), marriage researchers, who figured out that “women are more likely to pick fights with their husbands, they are quicker to escalate verbal aggression, and are as likely to use physical aggression as men” (Barber, 2015). Aside from sports that affect this behavior, in modern society women’s risk-taking and aggression has increased. According to Barber (2015), modern women driving cars are almost as dangerous, reckless, and aggressive as young men.

As women have begun to take leadership positions in large corporations, they have also acted as leaders in criminal enterprises. One of the most successful Latin American drug kingpins was a Colombian woman, Griselda

Blanco,⁹⁸ known as La Madrina, who ran an extensive U.S. operation from Miami. She is not the only woman to rise to the top in organized crime. That there are female equivalents of Pablo Escobar is intriguing from the perspective of gender differences in violence. Yet, there have always been female sociopaths, just fewer of them than males. Such figures certainly challenge gender stereotypes (Barber, 2015).

Although he understands that there is gender inequality due to a lack of female violence, figures showing an increase in violent crimes committed by women intrigue Barber, who does not seem to realize that being surprised about an increase is as sexist as media culture depriving women of the capability of violence. Taking leadership positions in large companies and being drug kingpins empowers women in the same way and breaks the glass ceiling. Of course, according to *Gone Girl*, it is more important to break the glass ceiling in a patriarchal media culture and reject the roles of housewife and mother, but what makes Gillian Flynn's post-feminist agenda necessary for achieving complete gender equality is that realizing that some women can be amoral and violent is as relevant as acknowledging that it is their right to be as violent as men.

4.2 The Setting as a Main Factor of the Characters' Frustrations in *Gone Girl*

The setting of *Gone Girl* is affecting and symbolic of the marital status of Nick and Amy, which is why it is important to examine its effect on the characters' presupposed and performed gender roles. Just like in the film *American Beauty* (1999), Nick and Amy believe that they are living the American Dream at first, while their marriage and emotional conditions are

⁹⁸ Blanco is said to be "the true kingpin" and the "Queen of Cocaine," as she and her husband helped Escobar in Medellin, Colombia, and taught him how to gather, paste, produce, and sell cocaine. She was shot by a pair of gunmen on motorcycles in 2012 in Bogota at the age of sixty-nine (McBride, 2015: 82).

corrupted by cultural presuppositions.⁹⁹ Both characters then lose their New York City jobs, Nick's mother develops cancer, his father has Alzheimer's, they have no more money, and they are ultimately overcome with feelings of grief and an emotional void. From there, *Gone Girl* takes place in North Carthage, Missouri, which is not only reminiscent of the ancient city of Carthage but also of New Carthage in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*¹⁰⁰ The latter becomes the setting in a play in which the characters are unable to live up to their gender and end up in a devastating marriage and a failed American Dream. Just like in Albee's play, in *Gone Girl*, the characters fail to live up to their gender roles. In North Carthage, Nick and Amy live in their "new house," a rented "Suburban Nouveau Riche" McMansion along the Mississippi River (Flynn, 2012: 4). According to Nick, Amy hates the house and the new location in the Midwest. "I simply assumed I would bundle up my New York wife with her New York interests, her New York pride, and remove her from her New York parents—leave the frantic, thrilling futureland of Manhattan behind—and transplant her to a little town on the river in Missouri and all would be fine," he tells the reader (Flynn 2012: 7). She is a typical New York girl, who seems out of place in Missouri. North Carthage reveals their inability to perform their gender roles according to culture and society and thus enhances the feeling of being unhappy, unfulfilled, and frustrated. In the novel, North Carthage is a city that is in recession, just like Nick and Amy's marriage when they appear in this new setting. The novel portrays a city that reflects the economy's bad situation

⁹⁹ The movie *The Joneses* (2009) also deals with the performance and perception of the American Dream. Here, Steve and Kate Jones are stealth marketers who play the roles of husband and wife, with two fabricated children, to make the neighbors believe that they are successful according to the American Dream and thus buy products that they advertise. Later it is revealed that this American Dream fails as, for example, their neighbor commits suicide over the debts that he ran into in order to live a life like Steve.

¹⁰⁰ Amy's further plan to frame Nick of her murder is to drown herself, her "pockets full of Virginia Woolf rocks" (Flynn, 2012: 332). Virginia Woolf, whom many consider a feminist pioneer who at the times of women's liberation wanted women to be as creative as men, also "drowned, by suicide, on 28 March 1941" (Black, 2004: 155; Nadel, 2016). In a way, Amy's plan is a post-feminist manifestation as it becomes symbolic of killing traditional values and also the feminism that led to the Cool Girl concept.

because it is a hotbed of unemployment, homelessness, poverty, and financial hardship. Just like this city, the marriage of the main characters of *Gone Girl* is devastated. The economic status is not just symbolic of their relationship, but it actually affects their lives, which leads to personal conditions similar to the city's condition: They feel dejected, angry, and vengeful. While Nick more or less unconsciously oppresses his wife by indirectly wanting her to be a Cool Girl, being unfaithful, and, as part of patriarchal misconceptions, by believing that he can be a good husband and father, both characters fall victim to the male-dominated media-driven society and try to perform culturally presupposed gender roles. Considering the patriarchal influence of both the setting and media, Nick tells the reader that Amy feels like he would drag her, "caveman-style, to a town she had aggressively avoided, and make her live in the kind of house she used to mock. [...] Do not blame me for this particular grievance, Amy," he adds. "The Missouri Grievance. Blame the economy, blame bad luck, blame my parents, blame your parents, blame the Internet, blame people who use the Internet" (Flynn, 2012: 4-5).¹⁰¹ Amy's feeling of being dragged by a caveman into his hometown emphasizes not only both characters' perception of the sexist interactions in their relationship but also her will to rebel against the patriarchal elements that she feels she must break free from.¹⁰² What is striking is that Nick also seems to realize that there are

¹⁰¹ Twentieth Century Fox made the *Amazing Amy* stories by Rand and Marybeth Elliott into a real children's book in 2014. In *Amazing Amy: Tattle Tale* (2014), Amy is a young schoolgirl and wants to win a "Perfect Attendance" award for her parents. On her way to the school bus, she breaks a vase, does not tell her parents about it and has a bad conscience when Doris, the housekeeper, is blamed for breaking it. In *Gone Girl*, Amy criticizes her parents for turning her childhood into children's books in order to make money. Thus, I assume that this book is used to depict one of Amy's childhood experiences. To my mind, it is unlikely that she went back to help Doris.

¹⁰² Martha McCaughey (2008) claims that men in society are affected by a concept she calls "the caveman mystique," which "robs men of the rewards of the democratization of personal life" (McCaughy, 2008). McCaughey compares the caveman mystique to the feminine mystique, arguing that the latter "crushed women's spirits by keeping them dependent on men," whereas the caveman mystique "crushes men's potential by defining them as moral and physical drifters, who supposedly find fulfillment in chance encounter" (McCaughy, 2008). Her claim is that, to break out of the cave, men must stop obeying evolutionary theory to

gender-related power struggles in their marriage that affect their emotional well-being to a certain degree. To exculpate himself, he explains to the reader that it is not his fault, which, on the one hand, is true because, as explained by Fuller, Friedan, and Butler, male domination and culturally presupposed gender roles are a cultural phenomenon and Nick is also negatively affected by them. On the other hand, as a male person who decided to perform the role of a husband, he is responsible for his wife's frustration as he executes male domination and does not allow gender equality and feminism, as he, for instance, wants Amy to be a Cool Girl. Nick rather blames the economy, luck, their parents, and the Internet, which is indeed used as a weapon in *Gone Girl* to inform, defame, and manipulate, and which, ironically, is the main tool of the fourth wave of feminism, used to globalize feminist ideologies through blogs, media, and online comments. To the characters, it seems that the Internet is the reason for their unemployment but, in fact, it makes them unmask their "feminine mystique" and realize their frustration. Although it is not used as intended by fourth-wave feminists, the Internet becomes a tool of gender and thus plays a major role in *Gone Girl*, whereas North Carthage symbolizes the new face of the Dunne's failing marriage based on economic devastation, unemployment, gender oppression, violence, and mutual recrimination. These social and cultural elements are associated with and embedded in the setting but not caused by it. As all these elements influence the presupposed gender roles and the perception of their performance, *Gone Girl* presents a world in which patriarchal structures are omnipresent and difficult to work around.

According to Charlotte Higgins (2018), the use of the term "patriarchy" has grown with the #MeToo campaign. She notes that

it has burst its way out of the attic of half-discarded concepts to greet a moment—one of fourth-wave feminist ferment—in which there is a newly urgent need to name what women are still struggling against. The resurgence of the term is all the more surprising when one considers the forces ranged against it. Many people would question the existence of something called "patriarchy" to begin with—pointing to the strides made in gender equality

drive their self-definitions and use their imaginations to create a new masculinity (McCaughy, 2008).

over the past century, and insisting that instances of sexism are individual and isolated, destined to fade further over time, rather than evidence of a persistent structure of inequality (Higgins, 2018).

Higgins (2018) further explains that, for much of human history, male domination was so incorporated in society and culture, for example in laws, poems, philosophy, and history, that it was not possible to identify patriarchy as something unnatural. In 1970, Kate Millett claimed that “patriarchy” is “society’s most fundamental concept of power” (Higgins, 2018). “For her, patriarchy was everywhere; it was “the most pervasive ideology of our culture” (Higgins, 2018). Even ordinary, apparently harmless social norms were in fact tools of oppression, according to her analysis: romantic love, for example, was simply a means of the male emotionally manipulating the female, tricking her into subservience. Female compliance was also ensured by force—by rape. Women were socialized into pleasing, flattering, entertaining, and gratifying men. Millett called the assumed birthright of male dominance “a most ingenious form of ‘interior colonization,’” which was “sturdier than any form of segregation, and more rigorous than class stratification, more uniform, and certainly more enduring” (Higgins, 2018). Today, the term is still in use to emphasize “the subtle depth of the forces that keep oppression in place” (Higgins, 2018). To Higgins (2018), it will be harder to unravel the effect of patriarchy as a cultural inheritance than it was to gain the right to vote, because the eradication of patriarchy, not only of presupposed gender roles of femininity and masculinity, is a task of enormous complexity because it is intertwined with most social and cultural elements. North Carthage becomes a setting in which this idea is highlighted and, therefore, used as a literary tool to raise awareness of subtle sexism in culture, such as the presupposition of the category “woman” as representing individuals who are incapable of being amoral and violent.

4.3 Media Influence on Preconceived Gender Roles

In *Gone Girl*, media is an important element that affects the characters’ lives both in favor of and at the expense of their reputation. When, for instance,

Amy disappears, media not only becomes the jury in the case, but also a weapon in her and Nick's marriage. Televised press conferences, talk shows, social media, paparazzi, and national syndication decide on Nick's performance as a loving husband (Harwood, 2012). Take, for example, various TV shows that leap to the conclusion that Nick is a murderer, because "the husband is always the No 1 suspect" (Burkeman, 2013). In the novel, Nick comments on this media influence, represented by "the Ellen Abbott effect": *"I think what's happening here is what I've been calling [...] in my mind the Ellen Abbott effect. This embarrassing, irresponsible brand of journalism. We are so used to seeing these murders of women packaged as entertainment, which is disgusting, and in these shows, who is guilty? It's always the husband. So I think the public and, to an extent, even the police have been hammered into believing that's always the case. From the beginning, it was practically assumed I had killed my wife—because that's the story we are told time after time—and that's wrong, that's morally wrong"* (Flynn, 2012: 445). Nick is aware of the fact that the influence of media is grave for he even believes that its effect on the investigations might influence the outcome of his forthcoming trial. This quote emphasizes that making a judgment about moral principles might seem easy, but, due to different individual matters of opinion, *Gone Girl* shows that morality (respectively amorality) is a complex concept that must be considered in gender studies as it is integrated into it. Instead of striving for equality, the characters in *Gone Girl* participate in Nick's public humiliation as he is unable to live up to the role of a loving and caring husband. Flynn comments on the influence of current media by depicting the impact it has on perceptions of gender discrepancies. Media uses and is used to maintain patriarchal standards aimed to dominate women.¹⁰³ Nick already struggles with certain acts of performing

¹⁰³ Bogt, Engels, Bogers, and Kloosterman (2010) agree that unrealistic and skewed forms of human romance and sexuality are present in media culture and affect particularly young recipients. Accordingly, this media influence raises concerns because the "formulaic portrayal of gender roles and sexuality, is developing and sustaining stereotypical gender-role schemas; for example, ideas that, for women, looks and sexiness are all important and, for men, sexual obsession is normal, and sexual prowess an asset (e.g., Ward 2002). Negative correlates and consequences of (sexualized) gender stereotyping have been shown to range from confining females

his role of a husband, although he tries to conform to the presuppositions of masculinity. As part of her plan, Amy, who knows about his conflicts regarding the performance of his gender role, then sets him up and manipulates media representatives into focusing on these failures to condemn and punish him. In this process, Nick is incriminated before he is even convicted and faces the death sentence. Therefore, he must reinsert himself into the system and use its reach of influence for his own purposes, like going viral and playing the role of the regretting and caring husband on talk shows or in YouTube interviews (Harwood, 2012). *Gone Girl* is a comment on the current generation of Facebook, YouTube and Twitter addicts, who pretend to be their online personas and who live up to social images that they create themselves and magnify, “keen to present a manipulated and buffed-up doppelganger to the world when underneath everything is far from OK” (Whitney, 2015). The novel criticizes the “collective obsession with social media and reality TV” (Harwood, 2012). Here, the feminine mystique comes into force and affects many people, both on the Internet and in real-life. So, on a literary level, post-feminism is far from being achieved as there is still gender inequality that can be used by various forms of media to incriminate people. But perhaps more relevant to the effect of gender inequality, the characters unravel their presupposed gender roles, realize that something is very wrong in their performance, and then use media to exercise control and violence over each other. Therefore, post-feminism can be used to analyze how media becomes a devious weapon in the characters’ struggles, in which the most skillful at navigating public opinion wins. When, for instance, Nick makes a misstep such as instinctively smiling into the cameras while his wife is missing, Ellen Abbott, hostess of the fictional TV show *Ellen Abbott Live*, forejudges Nick on her show and even demands the death penalty before legal proceedings are initiated. As Nick struggles with his gender role as a husband, radical feminist Abbott uses these flaws against him and derives

and males into traditional work roles (e.g., Gadassi and Gati 2009); self-objectification among girls and women, resulting in lower self-esteem and higher depression (e.g., Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Aubrey 2006); and acceptance of violence against women and perpetuation of the rape myth (e.g., Murnen et al. 2002; Mundorf et al. 2006)” (qtd. in Bogt et al., 2010: 844).

benefits from his misery. She puts a new complexion on media and becomes its executive leader, who manipulates the people and therefore even the judicial system into railroading Nick as well. Concerning this matter, Flynn reveals that “The assumption is that he’s not mourning correctly, so he must be a sociopath—when in reality, in that intense situation, you’d almost have to be a sociopath in order to give the media the playacting they want” (Burkeman, 2013). She claims that she wants to explore what happens to the husband when his wife goes missing, and how quickly people can become heroes or villains (Tauber, 2014). Here, the influence of media is presented through Ellen Abbott, whom Sherryl Connelly, an author of *New York Daily News*, compares to the real-life TV host Nancy Grace, who discusses high-profile crime stories on HLN (Connelly, 2012; Yahr, 2014). In modern media society, in which people like, for example, Nancy Grace, inform and assess, the husband of a female victim is often made out to be the criminal. This stigmatization is based on both radical feminism and investigative statistics. In the novel, Amy never shows up dead, but still Ellen Abbott manages to infuriate society and enrage the multitude against Nick. As Connelly (2012) eloquently points out, “There’s no need for a body to arrive at a verdict.”

Emily Yahr from *The Washington Post* points out that Ellen Abbott is based on Nancy Grace, recalling a crime case in which Casey Anthony was accused of killing her child. “Grace was furious when Anthony, [whom she contemptuously called “Tot Mom”], was found not guilty of killing her toddler daughter, Caylee. ‘*In the end, Tot Mom’s lies seemed to have worked,*’ Grace ranted to her viewers after the verdict [...]” (Yahr, 2014). Abbott behaves in a similar way. As a self-appointed vox populi, she does not agree to the verdict, but rather denigrates it. Notwithstanding the criminal case, she fans fear and stirs up hatred in order to increase the number of viewers and make vast sums of money from the Dunnes’ dilemma. In this, media and justice become complexly interrelated and internecine. Being a vox populi, Abbott punishes the husband for not obeying the implicit rules of a marriage that, to her, are culturally presupposed standards, while she indirectly punishes him for not having correctly performed his role of masculinity.

According to Jeff Giles (2015), over time the expression “The butler did it” has morphed into “The husband did it.” In the novel, both Nick and Amy know about this media phenomenon.¹⁰⁴ While Nick is sure that everybody thinks that “it’s always the husband [...]. Everyone knows it’s always the husband, so why can’t they just say it: We suspect you because you are the husband, and it’s always the husband. Just watch *Dateline*” (Flynn, 2012: 58), Amy, who knows the truth, manipulates her story to adjust to this media expectation. She is aware of a feminist era in media and therefore she knows how to play her cards. Abbott in particular plays an important role in Amy’s defamation of Nick. She tells the reader, “I adore Ellen Abbott, I love how protective and maternal she gets about all the missing women on her show, and how rabid-dog vicious she is once she seizes on a suspect, usually the husband,” she says. “She is America’s voice of female righteousness” (Flynn 2012: 329). There is obviously an incisive tone in this statement, but, apart from criticizing it, Flynn also depicts the social function of Abbott as a powerful voice of an influential medium, which decides what its audience ought to think about certain matters. That is why part of Amy’s plan includes the social defamation of her husband, who always tries to be perceived as the “good guy.” Amy punishes Nick by confronting him with the fact that he is not the “good guy,” but an adulterer and presumably a wife-killer, a man who cannot live up to the role of simply being a good husband. In making both his will to fulfill this role and his failure in doing so public, she frustrates him even more. Even if he turns out not to be a murderer, his reputation will be defiled forever because people will remember him as the man who had an affair while his wife was abducted. When Nick is interviewed by the police, he tells the reader that his need to be perceived as the “good guy” is based on his father’s reprehensible behavior in his childhood. “It had turned me into a knee-jerk suckup to authority,” he tells. “I craved a constant stream of approval. ‘You’d literally lie, cheat, and steal—hell, kill—to convince people you are a good guy,’ Go once said” (Flynn

¹⁰⁴ The producers of the adaptation used this phenomenon in the promotion of the movie, for example, in the trailers and posters. They applied the widespread idea of “the husband did it” to scenes and images to lure viewers into suspecting Nick, who, for instance, cuddles with Amy’s corpse on the cover of *Entertainment Weekly*.

2012: 59). This is why Amy wants everybody to hate Nick. She wants to win in the struggle for power by showing that her husband is a bad and deceptive man who not only refuses to but who is also not even able to fulfill his role. As she points out, “The Public must turn against Nick. It’s as much a part of his punishment as prison, for darling Nick—who spends so much time worrying about people liking him—to know he is universally hated” (Flynn 2012: 329). She pulls him out of the male-dominated system, in which he thinks he has found happiness by adjusting to his gender role, in which he seeks affirmation from other people. Although Amy unmask his version of the feminine mystique, she keeps Nick in a state of frustration because she also makes clear to him that he is entrapped in the mystique because of her, which is why he eventually must perform culturally presupposed acts of his gender role again, trying to be the “good guy.” This masculine role goes hand in hand with the idea of morality, another patriarchal concept due to which men, although they are part of the male oppression of women, believe they are morally good and right in oppressing women by making them perform a role of femininity according to the feminine mystique. The roles of the “cool girl” and the “good guy” are therefore concepts of patriarchy designed to make both parties believe that they are happy with their gender roles and, more importantly, that feminism is no any longer needed because they have achieved fulfillment in their identities (according to which women must not be violent and amoral). So, these roles are used to delude both women and men into believing that mankind has achieved post-feminism. The mere existence of the #MeToo campaign proves the opposite. In fact, it emphasizes the relevance of the post-feminist agenda proposed by Flynn and its notion that female violence and amorality should be acknowledged just as one would acknowledge male violence and amorality. Not until then, can one speak of having achieved post-feminism.

4.4 The Cool Girl as a Modern Concept of Phallogentrism and Male Domination

Judith Butler stated that gender is a performance that is based on cultural predeterminations (Butler, 1990). With regard to this concept, the character Amy Dunne performs a variety of the female gender. Apart from “Amazing Amy,” there are various other personas of the character Amy. There is “Madeleine Elster,” her fake Facebook persona, whom she uses to spy on Andie;¹⁰⁵ there is “Ozark Amy,” the hiding and observing persona; then there is Nancy and / or Lydia, who is a persona to delude Jeff and Greta; another persona is called “Diary Amy,” who is meant to mislead the police; and there is “Avenging Amy.” Since there are many personas of one character, it is nearly impossible for the reader to identify Real Amy, who is indeed named in the novel, but probably never shown. One does not know whether a particular persona that Amy presents at certain times is a lie, an illusion, or the truth. Up to this point, Amy has taken advantage of the characters’ and the reader’s sympathy; thus, her unreliability proves that one cannot trust her. Her personality is metaphorically torn apart as she tries to fulfill the role of an attractive woman, a faithful wife, a successful writer, an innocent daughter, and a caring mother. All of these personas are based on the inability to accomplish the role imposed by society, media, and ultimately by the concepts of gender.

Gillian Flynn presents a microcosm in which the characters try to live up to the expectations of society by becoming a reflection of what others, especially their spouses and partners, want them to be in interpersonal relationships. *Gone Girl* shows the “dangers of confusing persona with personality, about tying our sense of who we are to how others perceive us” (Gutman, 2012). The dissatisfaction that comes with this social expectation and the need to fit in is expressed by Amy Dunne in her famous “Cool Girl” speech, in which she declares her intentions to break out of a system that forces her to defer to male oppression. The Cool Girl speech is part of Amy’s

¹⁰⁵ In Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958), the female character Judy Barton plays the fictive role of “Madeleine Elster” as part of a murder plot. For the male protagonist Scottie, Madeleine is a Cool Girl and the object of his obsession.

first monologue in Part Two of *Gone Girl*. It is delivered after Nick realizes that Amy frames him. In fact, it is the first monologue of Amy that is not given as a diary entry, as she directly speaks to the reader. This change in the narrative is aimed to shock the reader who, just as Nick, believed Amy's lies in Part One of the novel. Although Amy is still manipulative and deceptive, her true face not only makes her more unlikable but also gives her words more substance. This narrative is used to challenge gender-based expectations, because readers perceive Amy as the "psycho bitch" although she is written to be perceived as evil (Cosslett, 2014). The perception of the "psycho bitch" challenges gender expectations due to which a woman can be crazy but cannot be as amoral and malicious as men. There are parallels to the Woman's Liberation Movement of the 1960s, '70s and '80s, in which racially and culturally diverse women aimed to achieve economic, psychological, and social freedom in order to break free from being second-class citizens (Bullock and Trombley, 1999: 314). In a similar way, the Cool Girl speech aims to achieve the social freedom of ungendered malice, amorality and violence.¹⁰⁶

Anne Helen Peterson (2014) states that the "Cool Girl" speech reflects a certain mode of femininity that the current culture valorizes and celebrates. David Haglund even goes so far as to say that this speech might be the current cultural legacy of the novel (Haglund, 2014). According to Amy's "Cool Girl" speech, her psychological struggles are based on gender differences that are created by a male-dominated society. Amy is constrained by the social anticipation of a "Cool Girl." She not only expresses her anger

¹⁰⁶ There are also parallels to the "consciousness-raising" of the 1970s. The Cool Girl speech becomes a rhetorical strategy of feminism, aimed to share women's experiences to create a critical awareness of culture (Sowards and Renegar, 2004: 535). Consciousness-raising has been used "to enable women to share personal experiences of gender discrimination [...] through personal testimony in order to relate to one another and generalize experiences [...] so that they could understand that their individual experiences were not isolated events and to eliminate self-blame." (Sowards and Renegar, 2004: 535-536). In *Gone Girl*, the Cool Girl speech is also based on Amy's experiences of gender discrimination that she generalizes to apply to every woman in modern society. Moreover, the speech is used to eliminate self-blame by holding concepts of femininity and masculinity responsible for creating gender-based frustration.

and the reasons for her actions but also gives an excuse for trying to be the Cool Girl. The basic idea here is “how do I become the woman he likes?” (Meyers, 2014). In an interview with *Vulture Entertainment*, a digital expansion of *New York Magazine* (2006), Flynn describes the Cool Girl as “putting up with machismo bullshit, and smiling and nodding when you know better” (“About us”, *New York Magazine*, 2015; Vineyard, 2014). The key theme of the Cool Girl speech is the fear of showing one’s true face, which, if the feminine mystique is not abolished and a post-feminist notion achieved, results in a lack of happiness and a desire for cultural and social autonomy, individuality, and justice. The Cool Girl speech emphasizes that post-feminism, with “post” meaning “after,” is not yet achieved. In fact, the concept has been altered. When Amy says, “That night at the Brooklyn party, I was playing the girl who was in style, the girl a man like Nick wants: the Cool Girl. Men always say that as *the* defining compliment, don’t they? *She’s a cool girl!*” (Flynn 2012: 299), she makes clear that she was only playing the role to impress and attract a certain kind of desirable man, implying that both parties knew that after a while it would change. Since every man (according to Amy’s definition) wants the Cool Girl, who is “a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she’s hosting the world’s biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2” (Flynn 2012: 299, 300), Amy is willing to play this role further and keep up a façade to keep Nick as a husband, silently agreeing that this is her investment in the relationship. Amy’s definition of the Cool Girl implies that every man is indirectly and unconsciously programmed by patriarchy to prefer a girl who not only behaves like a male friend but also brings the physical and straightforward advantages of a sexy girlfriend, i.e., unorthodox but desired sex and no problems or conflicts at all. The most important factor is that the Cool Girl must be above all sexually attractive and understanding. This means that in modern media culture every woman has to live up to these patriarchal standards to meet the requirements of the male-dominated society. This includes that Cool Girls never get angry and let their men do whatever they want (Flynn 2012: 300). By saying “Go ahead, shit on me, I don’t mind, I’m

the Cool Girl” (Flynn 2012: 300), Amy shows her resentment of male arbitrariness in a sarcastic way to point out that being the *Cool Girl*, which sounds like a nice term, is a corrupted concept to subject women and bring them under control. In an interview, Flynn expressed her anger about the fact that men often describe women as “shrill,” “crazy,” or “strident” when they are simply angry¹⁰⁷ (Vineyard, 2014). In this respect, Flynn claims that this is a dismissive thing because it is “a way for people with power to tell people with less power, ‘Be a good girl and shut up’” (Vineyard, 2014).

According to Amy, the idea of a Cool Girl is an illusionary concept created and believed by men and supported by many women, who are willing to adjust to these demands and pretend to be a Cool Girl in order to impress and attract men (Flynn 2012: 300). Amy claims that this concept offended her for a long time, since men believed that Cool Girls are real women who are not just pretending to be cool but who actually like this lifestyle. According to Haglund (2014), this is the key of the speech. Men, who are the essential targets of the speech, still believe in a very old attitude that was common sixty years ago, the feminine mystique. In fact, the Cool Girl fantasy is a traditional concept that lives on in modern culture and, thus, shows that complete gender equality has not yet been achieved as the #MeToo movement proves. It is striking that women according to this concept are expected to like what their life companion wants them to like. What seems to be a pre-second-wave image of a woman shows in this case that the goals of feminism have not yet been achieved but are instead masked and corrupted by patriarchy. In fact, the Cool Girl concept emphasizes that the first wave is the only period of feminism that was successful because women were actually given the right to vote, while the demands of the second wave seem to have

¹⁰⁷ In the 1970s, feminists reclaimed the term “hysteria” as a symbol of oppression of women in the name of feminism. “Throughout its history [...] hysteria has always been constructed as a ‘woman’s disease,’ a feminine disorder, or a disturbance of femininity, but this construction has usually been hostile. Hysteria has been linked with women in a number of unflattering ways” (Gilman et al, 1993: 286). Flynn’s anger about being called “crazy” can be related to the French physician Auguste Fabre, who wrote in 1883 that “as a general rule all women are hysterical and [...] every woman carries with her the seeds of hysteria. Hysteria, before being an illness, is a temperament, and what constitutes the temperament of a woman is rudimentary hysteria” (Gilman et al, 1993: 287).

been achieved at first but, as feminism has been corrupted to the extent that both men and women believe they have achieved gender equality, both parties still feel frustrated regarding their performed identity (Epstein, 2002: 118-119). So, the concept of the Cool Girl reveals that the feminine mystique is still not completely unmasked but instead hidden behind a new façade while male domination and objectification are still present, which is why Amy revolts against sexism the same way second-wave feminist did in the 1960s. In doing so, she expresses her frustration about the new face of the feminine mystique as follows:

For a long time Cool Girl offended me. I used to see men—friends, coworkers, strangers—giddy over these awful pretender women, and I’d want to sit these men down and calmly say: You are not dating a woman, you are dating a woman who has watched too many movies written by socially awkward men who’d like to believe that this kind of woman exists and might kiss them. I’d want to grab the poor guy by his lapels or messenger bag and say: The bitch doesn’t really love chili dogs that much—no one loves chili dogs that much! (Flynn 2012: 300)¹⁰⁸

Her statement makes clear that, in this patriarchal media culture, men need to stop believing that Cool Girls are real but should rather acknowledge that women purport to be a deliberate misrepresentation of themselves. The acceptance and adoption of this idea is even more pathetic to Amy, because these women do not pretend to be something they want to be but what men unwittingly expect from them (Flynn 2012: 300). They become gender representations of male fantasies by bowing to the oppression of women, male domination and peer-group pressure, which is why Amy as a radical second-wave feminist despises them and tries to unmask the modern version

¹⁰⁸ The Cool Girl can be seen as an iteration of the Stepford wife (Argintar, 2015). With regard to the movie adaptation of *Gone Girl* (2014), Mary Stringer claims that the Cool Girl speech is essentially about “a 21st century Stepford wife, who exists simply to please her husband” (Stringer, 2014). Beth McDonough also takes up this idea and argues that in the movie adaptation Amy is “painted as the narcissistic Stepford wife that creates a fake miserable and abusive relationship rather than a woman who goes to unrealistic lengths to be the Cool Girl that constantly puts on an act to keep the fire burning in a relationship that is never quite enough for the shallow, selfish Nick Dunne” (McDonough, 2015).

of the feminine mystique (Haglund, 2014). Moreover, Amy addresses women who do not perform the gender role “Cool Girl” by saying, “Oh, and if you’re not a Cool Girl, I beg you not to believe that your man doesn’t want the Cool Girl. It may be a slightly different version—maybe he’s a vegetarian, so Cool Girl loves seitan and is great with dogs; or maybe he’s a hipster artist, so Cool Girl is a tattooed, bespectacled nerd who loves comics. There are variations to the window dressing, but believe me, he wants Cool Girl, who is basically the girl who likes every fucking thing he likes and doesn’t ever complain” (Flynn 2012: 300). In emphasizing this, she explains that even those men who are in a relationship with a woman who is not a Cool Girl, indirectly want one, and men who are in a relationship with Cool Girls want an individualized adaptation of this concept to their needs. So, she implies that every man is affected by this concept, ergo by patriarchy, and therefore takes part in the oppression of women, regardless of whether they are conscious of it. At this point, Amy explains that there are different versions of Cool Girls that correspond with different preferences of men. Therefore, they indirectly demand an adjustment of their preferential partners, which means that the oppression of women takes place by men looking for relationships with individualized Cool Girls, who adapt to their needs, instead of individual human beings with minds of their own. In *Gone Girl*, both male antagonists of Amy demand different versions of her as a Cool Girl: Nick, on the one hand, wants an easy and carefree version of a Cool Girl. Therefore, “[he] abandons her, taking advantage of his position of authority to seduce a student who will validate him in all the unquestioning ways Amy won’t” (Rothfeld, 2014). He is unapproachable, delusive, and distant. Desi, on the other hand, wants Amy to be her “old self,” which becomes clear as he says, “I think you will feel better about yourself when you start looking more like yourself, sweetheart” (Flynn 2012: 483). He wants Amy 1987 as her ungainly appearance not only seems to challenge his idea of a Cool Girl but also disgusts him, so he urges Amy to dye her hair, go to the gym, and eat less. He seems to want a thin and attractive version of a Cool Girl. Later, at the police interrogation, Amy tells the detectives that Desi starved and shaved her, which is true to some degree, since he indirectly made her perform an individualized gender role according to his idea of a Cool Girl, who has to be

neat and tidy as well as thin and fresh-faced (Rothfeld, 2014).¹⁰⁹ Unfortunately for him, Amy uses her regained appearance and reclaimed sex appeal to brutally slit his throat. From a second-wave feminist perspective, both male characters objectify this woman: Nick does so indirectly and unconsciously, and Desi forces her into the feminine mystique more actively and incessantly. From Judith Butler's third-wave perspective, Nick and Desi, as executives of a male-dominated media culture, force Amy into presupposed acts of femininity that cause frustration and make her use violence, both physically and psychologically. Regarding post-feminism, one can say that she achieves emancipation from the patriarchy that has been criticized by the second and third wave of feminism. Not only does she revolt against the role of a housewife and mother as well as the performative acts of a feminine person, but she is also a representation of Flynn's post-feminist agenda according to which women's violence is a prerequisite of complete gender equality. Although Amy goes back to perform the traditional role of a housewife and mother at the end of the novel, she is written by Flynn to propose an innovative and progressive approach regarding feminism.

To further examine the Cool Girl speech, Amy's self-imposed oppression needs to be examined. She concludes that the concept of the Cool Girl is partly self-inflicted, because women in the past bowed and allowed degradation, so that, out of this situation, standardization and stagnation arose. Amy claims that "pretty soon Cool Girl became the standard girl. Men believed she existed - she wasn't just a dream girl one in a million. Every girl was supposed to this girl, and if you weren't, then there was something wrong with *you*" (Flynn 2012: 301). This standardization of "Cool Girl" results in the belief that they exist and that every man should *have* one. It also leads to the rejection and conviction of women who are not Cool Girls, so that this concept develops a social pressure that forces women to adjust to its

¹⁰⁹ Desi Collings is played by Neil Patrick Harris, who is famous for his roles as Doogie Howser in the same-titled series (1989 – 1993) and Barney Stinson in *How I Met Your Mother* (2005–2014). Interestingly, the latter character is extremely sexist, misogynist, and promiscuous. Casting Harris for the role of Desi Collings might be a comment on his previous role, as Amy cuts his throat in the movie and makes him bleed to death. By killing Desi, she, in a way, kills Barney and, with him, sexism and misogyny.

presupposed acts. To Amy, “[...] it’s tempting to be Cool Girl. For someone like me, who likes to win, it’s tempting to want to be the girl every guy wants. When I met Nick, I knew immediately that was what he wanted, and for him, I guess I was willing to try. I will accept my portion of blame” (Flynn 2012: 301). Not only does this part of her speech show the vast influence of patriarchal domination, which affects women’s minds and makes them like their role as a Cool Girl, but she also adds that not everything about this arbitrary patriarchal social construct is bad.

According to Olivia Nguyen (2014), it is common that men also pretend to be a more understanding, more interesting, and more appealing individuals, an alpha male and “Prince Charming” at the same time, who would satisfy the physical and psychological needs of their women. It is quite possible that Amy’s hatred starts when she realizes that Nick truly believes in the idea of the Cool Girl and expects Amy to adopt her gender role for good. The unforeseeable end of his Cool Girl surprises him. He stops communicating with her by not responding to messages or not even answering when she calls for him in their house (Nguyen, 2014). Here, the striving for equality and freedom from social oppression is confronted with sexism, which “wants a woman who [does not] care too much, a woman who gracefully bows out as soon as [she is] no longer wanted” (Rothfeld, 2014).

What is striking is that when Cool Amy disappears, she realizes that there is a “Real Amy” (Flynn 2012: 303). This version of herself appeals more to her as she realizes that it is a better version, one that is more interesting, complicated, and challenging. It goes without saying that Nick, a person who likes simplicity, convenience, and calm, does not sit well with this new version of Amy, who wants more in their marriage, which is why he later decides to find himself a new Cool Girl who adjusts better to his presuppositions. When Real Amy realizes that Nick does not like the gender identity she finds suitable or at least close to being real, she starts to hate him to the core. Due to the constant delusions caused by cultural presuppositions, her hatred is rather a valve that releases the frustration that comes with the inability to live up to gender roles.

According to Lauren Bans (2014), Amy's actions make her likeable as they are "fueled by an all-consuming egomania and complete lack of empathy" (Bans, 2014). I rather believe that the viewer's sympathy for her grows out of a feminist desire for gender equality and individuality. *Gone Girl* shows and criticizes the common belief that masculinity and violence are just as inseparable as marriage and victimhood (Rothman, 2014).

In the movie adaptation of *Gone Girl* (2014), the "Cool Girl" speech is delivered by Amy's voiceover as she tells the spectators about her intentions and plans for the first time. In the film, the speech is slightly different as it is reduced to the essential message. During the voiceover, various scenes of Amy's disappearance are presented to the audience. This scene begins with Amy sitting in her car driving away. While she defines the term "Cool Girl" in this scene, Amy looks at other women passing in their cars. This scene suggests the assumption that, for instance, the first woman wearing hipster glasses and ear tunnels must have a relationship with a man who must be into this kind of physical appearances and therefore makes her perform a gender role according to it (Bans, 2014). In the second car, two women are simply laughing, so there is nothing really "special" about them. Still, Amy implies that even these women have to be "Cool Girls" who pretend to like football and buffalo-wings to adjust to their partners' idea of a relationship (*Gone Girl*, 2014). Their "average" or "normal" looks are, as defined here, part of their presupposed gender acts. This realization is part of Flynn's post-feminist approach aiming to break free from these preconceptions and achieve gender equality.

Because of this car scene, director David Fincher met with criticism.¹¹⁰ To many readers of the novel, it seemed that Fincher missed the point (Bans, 2014). According to Bans, showing a female hipster or two women having fun does not represent the idea of Cool Girl because there are no men in this scene who make them adjust to the role of a "Cool Girl".

¹¹⁰ Fincher directed *Fight Club* in 1999. This movie adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk's novel (1996) also comments on media culture and predetermined roles of toxic masculinity. The male characters, who seem themselves as "a generation of men raised by women," also use amorality and violence to break free from their gender roles as prescribed by media culture (*Fight Club*, 1999).

Assuming that being a hipster is connected to the intention to be attractive to a man seems to be hypothetical in the movie. Critics said that this adaptation treats women, who are not Cool Girls but still live according to this lifestyle, unfairly. Besides, the fact that these women might be single, homosexual, or voluntarily living alone is completely ignored in Amy's cinematic speech (Bans, 2014). Bans claims that this cinematic depiction is imprecise (compared to the novel) and does not live up to the purpose of the original speech. According to Haglund (2014), the missing visual corollary is the reason that this scene does not represent the idea of Cool Girls. Nevertheless, Gillian Flynn is also responsible for the screenplay and the script of the film, which means that Fincher alone should not take the blame for this scene. Bans presents the assumption that Flynn "made this change to distance herself even more from the ravings of Amy: to show that this much-cited rant contains more crazed disdain for womankind than sociological insight" (Bans, 2014.). What all these critics did not consider is that no men are needed in the scene because patriarchy is omnipresent. In both novel and movie adaptation, the post-feminist claim is that the mere existence of the "Cool Girl" is patriarchally motivated and male dominated, as it suggests a presupposed role of femininity designed to attract and satisfy men which is, although unconsciously exercised, extremely sexist. Even if women seem to like this role, they are not treated unfairly by the novel or the film but instead they are presented as oppressed. Flynn proposes the idea that liking this role is part of patriarchy making women believe they like performing culturally presupposed acts of femininity. This also includes the belief that women cannot and shall not be amoral or violent.

In the cinematic speech, Amy states that Cool Girl "[...] only smiles in a chagrin, 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" (*Gone Girl*, 2014). The cinematic version of Amy is most certainly more vulgar than the one in the novel. In the movie adaptation, this feature seems to deprive her of her original high-class behavior and her above-average intelligence at first. It appears that Amy's coarse language is a cinematic device, which is used to intensify the sudden

change of her personality to shock the audience even more, while, in fact, it depicts a break and transition of presupposed gender roles. It reminds the readers and viewers of the radical revolution of second-wave feminists and the adaptation of derogatory terms of third wave feminists, showing that Amy tries to unmask the feminine mystique by adopting masculine character traits that are part of a presupposed gender performance. Particularly in this scene, Flynn's post-feminist approach becomes clear as Amy not only acts violently and amorally but also speaks like a man. Still she does not blend femininity and masculinity but rather denies the gender concept to break free from its cultural presuppositions. Unlike in the novel, the movie also does not explicitly show that Cool Girls and women who try to adapt to gender roles created by a patriarchal system are interchangeable. In fact, both terms define the performative act of presupposed roles, according to Judith Butler, and the consequential frustration described by Margaret Fuller and Betty Friedan.

As the death penalty is the utmost punishment in the U.S., Amy has to fake her own death and frame Nick for her murder. This results in a social defamation of Nick, which, on the one hand, is part of his social suffering and, on the other hand, leads to his death. To avoid attention and identification while she is on the run, Amy changes her appearance to look different. She tans, uses "smart-girl glasses" and cuts her hair (Flynn, 2012: 336). Furthermore, she gains weight, fourteen pounds, before and after she disappears, but makes sure that other people do not notice these physical changes, for instance, by wearing roomy dresses and not allowing photos to be taken of her. This answers her purpose, because she will be known and remembered as a thin and beautiful woman, thus living up to the presuppositions of femininity. What is striking here is that this trick is not aimed to emphasize the enormous psychological pressure of culturally presupposed acts and a need to adjust to the gender role of the category "woman"; instead it is used to demonstrate that society can be tricked into believing the husband is the murderer only because his wife seems to perform her femininity correctly. As Amy describes her new identity, she says:

I am definitely not that anymore. [...] My body was a beautiful, perfect economy, every feature calibrated, everything in balance. I don't miss it. I don't miss men looking at me. It's a relief to walk into a convenience store

and walk right back out without some hangabout in sleeveless flannel leering as I leave, some muttered bit of misogyny slipping from him like a nacho-cheese burp. Now no one is rude to me, but no one is nice to me either. No one goes out of their way, not overly, not really, not the way they used to. I am the opposite of Amy (Flynn, 2012: 336).

As she describes a new persona which she believes is her true self, she appears to feel fulfilled and happy. Not being Amy, i.e., not performing her role of femininity, she believes she leaves a system of oppression and enjoys that people are neither nice nor rude to her. As she leaves patriarchy, she enjoys the fact that she does not have to perform presupposed acts and roles and, therefore, is not only unacknowledged but even ignored by society. The feeling of being fulfilled with an identity that is free of presuppositions shows that women who do not look and behave according to patriarchal prerequisites are excluded from and isolated by society. So, on the one hand, Amy breaks free from patriarchy and the presupposed acts of gender; however, on the other hand, she becomes a woman, who is ignored and excluded from the feeling of being particularly attractive. One must keep in mind that this social isolation is one of the major factors that, at the end of the novel, makes Amy return to her former life, to the predetermined role of a housewife and mother. She believes she has found fulfillment in the traditional gender role, for the performance of the Cool Girl did not bring happiness as it is often presented in movies by, for example, Cameron Diaz in *There's Something About Mary*, Mila Kunis in *Friends with Benefits*, Olivia Wilde in *Drinking Buddies* or Natalie Portman in *No Strings Attached* (Donnelly, 2014; Vineyard, 2014). These actresses portray a certain kind of Cool Girl that Gillian Flynn commented on in an interview with *Vulture*. Here, Flynn names Diaz's Mary as one of her main inspirations, saying, "I remember seeing *There's Something About Mary* in the theaters when I was in my 20s, and there's Cameron Diaz, who looks like Cameron Diaz, but she's also a doctor, and she also looves hamburgers, and she starts out playing golf in the morning, and all she wants from a man is a guy who wants to take her to a football game, and she wants to eat hot dogs and drink real beer. Real beer! And I thought, Wow, that's a cool girl! And then I thought,

Oh, right. She’s been invented by guys” (Vineyard, 2014). So, while Flynn’s “Cool Girl” is based on Mary, a fictional attractive, successful, single woman who wants to do all the things men like, in more recent movies, there are other Cool Girls that fit Amy’s definition better. For example, Mila Kunis in *Friends with Benefits* (2011) and Natalie Portman in *No Strings Attached* (2011) are strong and promiscuous women who behave like the best pals of the main characters and satisfy their physical needs in purely sexual relationships. In these movies, male-dominated Hollywood creates extremes of gender roles, basically giving women all the masculine attributes men like about their male friends and the additional benefit of regular sex. This is also true of Olivia Wilde in *Drinking Buddies* (2013), whose character also seems to be the best friend of a man, with whom she drinks, swears, and fools around while she is sexually attracted to him. All these women are easygoing, attractive, and promiscuous. In this time of #MeToo, this is not overly surprising. What is striking, however, is that more “feminist” movies are produced. While Patty Jenkins, director of *Wonder Woman*, is the first woman to shoot a Hollywood superhero movie and Charlize Theron’s Imperator Furiosa is to many viewers the real hero in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, Hollywood remains male-dominated (Salmon, 2018; Parramore, 2015).¹¹¹ Although gender-related oppression and sexual harassment have been revealed to the public and influenced the production of Hollywood movies as an attempt to be feminist, many women are still negatively affected by and dependent on a patriarchal culture. Take, for instance, the case of “Grace,” a 23-year-old anonymous writer for Babe.net, who published an account about a date night with Hollywood comedian Aziz Ansari. While she never accuses

¹¹¹ Aaron Clarey criticizes *Mad Max: Fury Road* as, to him, it “was not going to be a movie made for men. It was going to be a feminist piece of propaganda posing as a guy flick” (Clarey, 2015). Clarey argues that *Mad Max: Fury Road* is the “Trojan Horse feminists and Hollywood leftists will use to (vainly) insist on the trope women are equal to men in all things, including physique, strength, and logic” (Clarey, 2015).

However, Jessica Valenti argues that “it’s not feminist because Theron’s character gets to engage in as much violence as any other action lead, but because the world director and writer George Miller has created shows the horror of sexism and the necessity of freedom from patriarchy. That is what’s truly terrifying to some men – not that Theron has more lines than actor Tom Hardy” (Valenti, 2015).

him of rape, she states that “Ansari repeatedly ignored her growing discomfort and the concern she voiced and tried to pressure her into sex. At one point, Grace recounts that she voiced that she didn’t “want to feel forced.” Grace said that Ansari seemed to understand, until he suggested they “chill on the couch,” where he “sat back and pointed to his penis and motioned for me to go down on him.” Grace says she felt pressured to go along with it, not knowing how to extricate herself from the situation, and eventually left his apartment in tears” (Framke, 2018). In his article for *Zeit*, Tomasz Kurianowicz (2018) claims that this case is extraordinary in the #MeToo debate because it questions why women do not say “no” in similar situations: Is patriarchal violence causing female obsequiousness? Is a sexual encounter part of structural oppression as it was previously intended but no longer wanted in the end? Is a man who does not see, who ignores, or deliberately or unconsciously provokes a woman’s malaise, a beneficiary of sexism? Is he implicitly a sex offender in the spirit of patriarchy (Kurianowicz, 2018.)? Considering Flynn’s post-feminist proposed agenda in *Gone Girl*, the Cool Girl as a gender performance of culturally presupposed acts designed and controlled by individualized aspirations of patriarchal oppression is proof that each of these questions must be answered in the affirmative. The concept “Cool Girl” shows what has been revealed by the #MeToo campaign: Modern patriarchal manipulation and oppression are deeply embedded and veiled in media culture and, therefore, still omnipresent. Acknowledging that situation, female amorality, maliciousness, and violence as an individual option, not as a generalization, are a prerequisite for achieving gender equality, according to post-feminism.

5. *Sharp Objects*: Identity Conflicts due to Morbid Mother-Daughter Relationships

According to *WCF Courier*’s Amie Steffen, *Sharp Objects* feels like going down a rabbit hole and getting stuck, scared, and lonely. “And then giving up and building your new house in that nightmare. Which is to say the book, a stomach-wrenching thriller / mystery that’s more psychological warfare than

actual mystery, is a terrifying place that Flynn convinces you is normal” (Steffen, 2012). Indeed, this statement encompasses the psychological struggles that are based on gender.

In *Sharp Objects*, the protagonist and first-person narrator is Camille Preaker, a female reporter for the *Chicago Daily Post*, who has to go to her hometown of Wind Gap, Illinois, because her editor Frank Curry sends her there as an involuntary insider to gather information on the criminal cases about a strangled girl and another girl who has gone missing. After being gone for eight years, Camille moves back in with her mother Adora, her stepfather Alan, and her half-sister Amma, who perform stereotypical gender roles.¹¹² Her little sister Marian died twenty years earlier. From here on, Camille experiences and struggles with predetermined gender expectations as she starts to investigate and soon discovers the corpse of the missing girl, Natalie Keene, strangled and toothless. Ann Nash, the girl who had been murdered earlier, had been strangled as well, whereupon her teeth had also been pulled out post-mortem. To solve the murder cases, Camille pairs up with Detective Richard Willis, who is a manifestation of a stereotypical masculine detective.¹¹³ As the investigations go further, it turns out that Camille has been psychologically affected by her mother’s gender-based expectations, which is why she is an alcoholic and a cutter, i.e., someone who feels the psychological need to cut into her own skin with sharp objects in order to feel pleasure. Based on what she associates with femininity, she cuts incoherent words like “*cook, cupcake, kitty, curls*” all over her skin, except for an untouched circle on her back (Flynn, 2010: 76). When she feels various

¹¹² “Adora” is used as a telling name of a character who constantly seeks adoration and stops at nothing to achieve this goal.

The name “Amma” is also used as a telling name. According to *Oxford Dictionaries* (“Amma”), “Amma” means “one’s mother” and “probably derived from a child’s word, perhaps influenced by “amah” or “mama.” Moreover, it is pronounced as “Emma” and, therefore, reminds of “emancipated.”

¹¹³ Carroll John Daly’s Race Williams is one of the first hard-boiled detectives, probably the first one. Daly’s most popular character was introduced in *Knights of the Palm* (1923) but became famous for his characterization in the novel *The Snarl of the Beast* (1927). Race Williams has a strong moral code that transcends the conventions of the law and justifies his use of violence (Powell, 2012: 97). These stories have had a particular influence on future detective characters.

emotions, especially negative ones, she associates with concepts of femininity, corresponding words seem to become hot and throbbing on her skin. Amma also tries to perform a predetermined role of femininity which cause psychological problems, as she is extremely aggressive and dependent on her mother's attention. Besides faking the gender performance of an innocent girl, she is sexually precocious, needy, and hateful towards other people. Their mother Adora tries to fake another gender role and has mental issues herself, such as excessively controlling and manipulating her children in order to appear as a caring mother. Camille remembers, for example, that her mother, who tries to fake the gender role of a loving mother, bit a baby when she was little so that it would cry and need her calming. Both Adora and Amma use a gender-based form of emotional violence in order to gain power, attention, and, ultimately, the perception of love.

In conjunction with the murders, Camille ultimately unravels the gender-based struggles of her own past and realizes that her family, which does not adopt the predetermined roles of femininity, is responsible for the Wind Gap killings. This becomes clear after Camille takes ecstasy with Amma. Both have a hangover and are cared for by Adora, who gives her daughters several pills and suddenly performs the role of an increasingly overprotective mother. At this point, Camille realizes that Marian was killed by the same pills and it is revealed that Adora has Munchausen by proxy, a psychological condition that makes her drug her children to make them sick and then caring for them in order to pretend to properly perform the role of a mother.¹¹⁴ Traces of poisoning later help convict Adora of the murder of Marian and abuse of her other daughters (Flynn, 2010: 318). Because Amma later kills one of her new friends, because she thinks Camille likes her better, the murder cases of Ann Nash and Natalie Keene are solved as well. As it turns out, Amma killed the girls in Wind Gap out of jealousy and for the attention of her mother for whom she tried to perform the role of the perfect

¹¹⁴ In both *IT* (1986) and *Misery* (1987) by Stephen King, there are characters who seem to suffer from Munchausen by proxy. In *IT*, the overprotective mother of Eddie Kaspbrak constantly gives him pills for his breathing problems; these turn out to be placebos. In *Misery*, Annie Wilkes drugs and hurts the famous author Paul Sheldon in order to care for him.

daughter. When Amma is arrested, Camille has a mental breakdown and is taken to the Curry's home to stay with them.¹¹⁵ One year later, Camille still lives with the Currys and is cared for like a child in order to learn to be parented in a healthy way. She seems to be on the road to recovery, although she fears that she has her mother's disease, i.e., the compulsive need to perform a culturally prescribed role of femininity (Flynn, 2010: 321).

In *Sharp Objects*, particularly Camille Preaker's attempt to explain Amma Crellin's bloodlust shows a feminist perspective on gender, sex, and female violence in Flynn's novels. She tells the readers, "you can come up with four thousand other guesses, of course, about why Amma did it. In the end, the fact remains: Amma enjoyed hurting. *I like violence*, she'd shrieked at me. I blame my mother. A child weaned on poison considers harm a comfort" (Flynn, 2010: 320). In the following chapters, I will mainly focus on this "harm" because it stands to reason that the perception, the performance, and the enjoyment of violence is a psychological consequence of the frustration and mental aberration that come with the inability to live up to femininity and its presuppositions, which have been criticized by feminists in the past. Therefore, I will again refer to Fuller, Friedan, and Butler's theoretical approaches in order to analyze the effects of the feminine mystique in *Sharp Objects*. This analysis is then aimed to provide more detailed insights into why there are differences in the culturally presupposed gender roles and the acts of violence committed in *Gone Girl* and *Sharp Objects*. Moreover, I will try to examine if and how these support Flynn's post-feminist notions regarding amorality, violence, and gender equality.

¹¹⁵ The series of *Sharp Objects* ends with Camille discovering the girls' teeth in Amma's dollhouse, whereupon she says "*don't tell mama*" (Sharp Objects, 2018). In the end credits, scenes of Amma, killing the girls and enjoying the murders, is shown. Her imprisonment and Camille's breakdown are left out.

5.1 Camille Preaker's Self-Destruction as a Consequence of the Inability to Perform a Prescribed Femininity

Sharp Objects includes various themes that can be ascribed to certain gender-based conflicts. Therefore, Camille Preaker displays specific characteristics of feminism, since she is both influenced by and representing male-dominated sexism and feminist attempts to achieve emancipation. As she fails in doing so, self-destruction becomes both a consequence of her attempt to live up to the feminine mystique and a tool of feminism. To her, breaking free from the concept of gender is connected to a masochistic idea of violence which is ironic as it is usually considered a male attribute. Here again, Flynn does not use violence as a patriarchal tool of masculinity but rather as a prerequisite of gender equality. In *Sharp Objects*, she deals with gender on a literary and cultural level mainly to state that violence is not part of masculinity and, therefore, should not be considered masculine only. In this novel, she shows that female amorality and violence are human rather than exclusively male attributes and need to be acknowledged as such.¹¹⁶

Camille, the main character and first-person narrator of *Sharp Objects*, was born and raised in Wind Gap, a small town in Missouri, but lives in Chicago, where she works as a newspaper reporter for the *Chicago Daily Post* (Flynn, 2010: 11). With regard to her job, Camille tells the reader about a newspaper story she is working on, a story about “a limp sort of evil” (Flynn, 2010: 1). It is about four children who were locked for three days in a room with little to eat. Their crack-addicted mother left and forgot about them. She says that “sometimes that’s what happens. No cigarette burns, no bone snaps. Just an irretrievable slipping” (Flynn, 2010: 1). This line is a hint of what is to be revealed in the novel and what has already happened to

¹¹⁶ “Bem [...] characterized masculine persons as: ‘aggressive,’ ‘ambitious,’ ‘assertive,’ ‘analytical,’ ‘forceful,’ ‘self-reliant,’ and ‘willing to take a stand.’ Bem’s feminine scale included: ‘cheerful,’ ‘childlike,’ ‘flatterable,’ ‘gentle,’ ‘gullible,’ ‘shy,’ ‘sympathetic,’ ‘warm,’ and ‘yielding.’ Clearly, feminine attributes qualify one for secondary expressive and cooperative social roles, while masculine characteristics train one for primary instrumental and dominant social roles in a patriarchal and capitalistic social structure” (Devor, 1989: 32).

Camille. It emphasizes that violence does not necessarily have to happen on a physical level. In both cases, the emotional violence seems to be worse than the physical abuse. The violence Camille suffered from is one in which her mother kept her distant and constantly punished and injured her on a psychological level due to both characters' attempts and inability to live up to the performed acts of gender, particularly of femininity.

Camille's very first statement in the novel is about her new sweater, which is "[...] stinging red and ugly" (Flynn, 2010: 1). As this is the first line, "stinging red and ugly" becomes a characteristic quality that symbolizes violence, anger, and pain that lies behind the façade of gender roles and is yet to be revealed throughout the story. "[S]tinging red and ugly" is also something that comes to one's mind when thinking of Camille's scars. Inflicting self-harm is an abnormal approach to dealing with her psychological struggles and presuppositions of femininity in the first place.¹¹⁷ The first time the reader gets to know about Camille's self-inflicted scars is when Amma has one of her tantrums in front of the whole family. In this setting, Camille's scars feel hot and physically reflect her emotions, usually negative ones. She claims that her scars have a mind of their own (Flynn, 2010: 75). As mentioned above, she is a cutter, who carves words into her skin (Flynn, 2010: 76). In certain situations, these words are said to be screaming in her mind, i.e., the words reflect her momentary emotional state. When this happens, the scars feel extremely hot or pulsing to her. Sometimes, positive words scream in her mind as well, such as "*laugh*" (Flynn, 2010: 76). Relevant scars being recurring keywords in the novel are "*baby-doll*" on her leg, "*harmful*" on her wrist, "*wicked*" above her hipbone, and "*vanish*" on the back of her neck.

It is said that Camille prefers feminine and flat-out negative words, which were crucial for her to see and feel at a certain time in her life (Flynn, 2010: 76). From a post-feminist perspective, cutting both feminine and

¹¹⁷ After research led to inconsistent results about the gender prevalence of non-suicidal self-injury, Bresin and Schoenleber (2019) found in their studies that "women were significantly more likely to report a history of non-suicidal self-harm than men" and that "women were more likely to use some methods of NSSI (e.g., cutting) compared to men, but for other methods there was no significant difference (e.g., punching)" (Bresin and Schoenleber, 2019).

negative words shows that Camille breaks free from femininity by using violence and destroying her physical beauty. She connects femininity to negativity, which emphasizes her dislike for gender. Moreover, she breaks free from stereotypical femininity by using violence against a woman, even though it is herself. In this context, “feminine” means “in a Dick and Jane, pink vs. puppy dog tails sort of way,” so the scars are usually connected to feminine stereotypes in one way or another (Flynn, 2010: 76).¹¹⁸ Capturing these words seems to be important in dealing with her anxiety that these emotions or character traits might fade and disappear and, thus, be non-existent. The fear of not being able to feel certain emotions and traits explains why she carves these words into her skin. The fear of the inability to feel certain emotions also emphasizes why she uses mainly feminine and negative keywords. The novel presents a protagonist who struggled with her gender role her whole life and still suffers from the inability to perform the culturally presupposed acts of a feminine daughter and future housewife, while her own mother tries to force her into this role by using psychological and physical violence. Both feminine and negative keywords are interrelated, which is why Camille’s scars not only refer to the struggles that come with the need to live up to the feminine mystique, but also the need to adjust to its presuppositions as she has been told that femininity is her main goal in life.¹¹⁹ *Sharp Objects* deals with violence, amorality, and malice in a specific way, as it depicts three women who struggle with adopting a different kind of gender role. In her post-feminist approach, Flynn makes the women characters adopt traditional roles of femininity to show that they are discriminated against in a gender-based system and that including their negative characteristics is

¹¹⁸ *Dick and Jane* are the main characters in children’s books from the 1930s to the 1960s in the USA. These books are considered problematic because they depict characters who live according to traditional gender roles and thus promote sexism in schools (McBride, 1997: 190).

¹¹⁹ In the TV series, the words on Camille’s skin appear in objects or in the environment, so, for instance, the word “punish” appears on a license plate, whereas the word “hope” on a church banner suddenly changes to “hurt.” According to Flynn (2018), this cinematic device is used to integrate the words into the show “rather than rendered as [...] superimposed text that floats up over the screen” (Robinson, 2018).

relevant in achieving gender equality. So, Adora tries to properly perform the role of a housewife and mother, Amma focuses on the role of the feminine daughter, and Camille struggles with concepts of femininity and masculinity in general, and tries to break free from gender roles. It is interesting that the woman who tries to break free from gender is the only one who does not go to jail. All of the women have emotional problems caused by gender-based expectations, which ultimately lead to frustration and violence. Still, they do not have a problem with using violence, be it emotional or physical, although they do not like it. That they can be equally or even more violent than men is beyond debate. Nevertheless, the other characters and the readers are uncomfortable with this character trait. In Flynn's post-feminist agenda, the violence, amorality, and malice as non-gendered conditions become relevant in equating women and men. With *Sharp Objects*, Flynn proposes the post-feminist idea that violence, in particular, must not be reserved for men as this causes gender inequality.

When on her thirteenth birthday, her sister Marian dies and Camille reaches puberty and turns into a beautiful girl, she suddenly becomes popular and simultaneously starts to cut words into her skin. Being both beautiful and scarred at the same time is the female condition that post-feminism rebels against. This condition emphasizes that her psychological maladjustments become worse after she develops beauty according to feminine ideals. The closer she gets to the feminine mystique by looking "beautiful," i.e., attractive to men, the more she struggles with the idea of femininity. Since, to her, it is a corrupted concept of gender, she experiences frustration due to the cultural and sexist ideals she is supposed to fulfill. Her emotional state worsens when she is not able to live up to these standards of femininity, particularly in her role as a daughter. This inability to be feminine and daughterly correlates with the absence of maternal love. Unlike Amma, Camille does not try to perform the culturally presupposed gender role of a feminine daughter any longer after returning to Wind Gap, which is why she is emotionally excluded from the delusions of maternal love by Adora, who tries to perform the role of a caring mother. Although she yearns for love, both her disturbed childhood and the absence of maternal nurturing cause Camille's inability to perform her gender role and then result in mental disorders such as self-harm.

Therefore, the scars are of great importance in the analysis of gender and sex. On the one hand, they symbolize the sadness and frustration that come with the attempt to perform acts of femininity. On the other hand, they underline the emotional pain and confusion caused by failing to live a life according to the feminine mystique, e.g. being a beautiful and loving daughter of a caring mother.

Camille is aware of the fact that she destroyed her physical beauty (at least according to the cultural concept of femininity and female beauty). In retrospect, she remembers that the cutting made her feel safe because it was proof of truth and reality, that is to say, of being or feeling existent. As it turns out, Camille suffers from depression and other emotional disturbances, which explains the mental need to cut herself. She tells the reader that she went to a mental institution before because she wanted to overcome her disorders, the cutting in particular.¹²⁰ There, the nurses treated her with medicine and psychotherapy, e.g. by allowing her to take silky baths and massages. It is said that this is supposed to teach the patients to learn and accept the goodness of touch. On the road to recovery, Adora visits Camille once and serves as a telling example of the psychological pressure she puts onto her daughter. When they are alone, Adora only talks about insignificant things, but as soon as the doctors join, she pretends to be a caring mother, who loves her daughter and cares for her. Due to her Munchausen syndrome by proxy, Adora manages to gain center stage by presenting her own misery in order to arouse compassion and feel important at Camille's expense. Her

¹²⁰ Sigmund Freud analyzed the female feeling of not being equally significant and the concept of "castration anxiety and penis envy" in his essay "infantile sexuality" [*Die infantile Sexualforschung*] (1905). Freud argues that the development of perversions is based on the psychological fact that infantile girls envy the penis of boys. Accordingly, anatomical sex differences make the girls unconsciously feel castrated, which leads to the feeling of being inferior and the desire to be a boy instead (Freud, 1905).

In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir argues that the adolescent girl at puberty cannot become "a grown-up" without accepting her femininity, which is discovered and perceived "in the form of an impure illness and an obscure crime. Her inferiority was at first understood as a privation: the absence of a penis was converted to a stain and fault" (de Beauvoir, 1949: 351). Because of this, the adolescent girl grows up to be "wounded, shamed, worried and guilty" (de Beauvoir, 1949: 351).

daughter's injuries and mental disorders are not relevant to Adora as long as she cannot use them to gain attention. This is also why she always focuses on Marian and nurtures the idea of her as a lovely but deceased little girl, who loved her mother. The depiction of Marian becomes a tool of self-display. In fact, Adora pretends to perform the role of a nurturing mother according to the feminine mystique, exercises violence towards her daughters and, in doing so, transfers the urge and inability to perform culturally prescribed femininity. With regard to Margaret Fuller and Betty Friedan, Adora tries to live up to the 1950s ideal of a housewife and mother. Nevertheless, she fails and therefore pretends to fulfill her role, whereas she in fact becomes submissive to society and dominant towards her family. According to Friedan, these can be considered aftereffects of the feminine mystique itself.

The gender-related interaction between mother and daughter leads to physical violence and psychological resentment towards each other. In Flynn's novels, femininity as a prerequisite of successfully performing gender is usually not fulfilled according to cultural presuppositions. Every female character portrayed in these stories cannot live up to the feminine mystique and find individual happiness and fulfillment in an identity. So, they pretend to fulfill these presuppositions to persuade themselves to be happy instead. Due to the fact that they only pretend to live a life according to femininity, male-dominated social pressure results in frustration instead of emotional fulfillment and happiness. To claim that these women are not likable or even to say that their amoral and violent behavior caused by an omnipresent, imperceptible patriarchy makes them less feminine is, to Flynn, extremely sexist, because it deprives them of the ability to be evil and obliges them to perform a culturally prescribed gender role in which amorality and violence are exclusively masculine (Flynn). In this criticism, *Sharp Objects* becomes part of Gillian Flynn's post-feminist approach as she proposes the notion that amorality, violence, and maliciousness need to be acknowledged as feminine traits as well to achieve gender equality. Roberto Refinetti (2018) refers to this basic idea and Flynn's *Time* magazine essay from 2017, and claims that

throughout my young life never did I wonder whether men and women were substantially different in anything but their sexual anatomy, sexual physiology, and sexual behavior, and I saw no justification for sexism. My

experience since then has shown me that some women are very sexist, and Professor Daphne Patai even wrote a book about women's sexism in academia (Patai 1998). These women may claim to be fighting a war against the patriarchy, but, as Martin Luther King warned us, 'Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that' (King 1963). In other words, sexism will not drive out sexism—and this was the central message conveyed by the 100 French women' [who 'published an open letter in the newspaper *Le Monde* criticizing the late-2017 surge of accusations of sexual misconduct against powerful men in the television and film business (Chiche et al. 2018).'] (Refinetti, 2018).

To Refinetti, female sexism and violence are morally wrong and #MeToo should not lead to misandry, although culture itself is misogynist. In saying this, he does not consider that Flynn does not want women to be sexist and violent but demands a cultural acknowledging of these attributes, and, in her essay, asks herself whether American men hate women. As examined above, there is an omnipresent patriarchy all over the world. Take, for instance, the “glass ceiling” or the “Weinstein Effect” that fuel the #MeToo movement by revealing that this patriarchy is indeed gender-based and sexist.

As distinguished from Amy in *Gone Girl*, Camille ultimately destroys any chance of being able to live up to this social role after completely scarring her skin. Amy's resistance is aimed at the unconscious oppression by her husband; still she manages to manipulate society, media, and the public to acquire an adapted gender role in which she thinks she might have found happiness. On the contrary, Camille, who is deeply affected by gender and struggles with her identity regarding femininity, will most certainly not be able to find fulfillment and happiness after destroying her physical beauty and, therefore, her attractiveness, which could have made her a desirable housewife and mother.¹²¹ Self-inflicted injuries are used here as a graphic parallel to the social pressure of male dominance and sexism.

¹²¹ The movie *Fight Club* (1999) deals with a similar approach, considering physical beauty that defines the success of one's gender performance as obstructive. Here, Tyler Durden tells his companions that “You are not special! You are not a beautiful

Since, at the end of the novel, Camille has stopped drinking alcohol and allows Eileen to run her bath and sometimes brush her hair, which does not give her chills anymore, it appears that she is on the road to recovery. Instead of focusing on meaningless sex, self-harm, and huge amounts of alcohol, Camille seems to have found a way to achieve happiness and love as she does not have to try to live up to her mother's idea of a good daughter and society's gender expectations any longer.

In *Gone Girl*, Amy performs gender and fails to find happiness in doing so, whereas in *Sharp Objects*, Camille refuses to perform cultural and domestic presuppositions of femininity as she knows that she is unable to live up to its standards. As a result, she feels excluded from the social concept of happiness that comes with inheriting a gender identity, whereas her frustration is actually based on the other characters' hostility caused by them performing gender and not accepting her refusal in order to be free.

In the novel, Camille often tries to explain her gender-related problems in her inner monologues, which makes the readers feel more connected to her and to adopt her opinion on these problems. For instance, Camille states that her sexual behavior started at the age of twelve, when she was in grammar school, and relates it to masculinity. Here, she tells about a neighbor boy's hunting shed, in which she masturbated for the first time while looking at pornographic photographs of naked women that were covering the walls (Flynn, 2010: 18). She tells the reader that some of these women were spreading their legs and others were being held down and penetrated (Flynn, 2010: 18).¹²² "One woman was tied up, her eyes glazed,

or unique snowflake! You are the same decaying organic matter as everything else! We are the all singing, all dancing crap of the world! We are all part of the same compost heap" (*Fight Club*, 1999). Later, the nameless protagonist, Durden's alter ego, fights one of them, but does not act by the rules of the Fight Club and beats him up, saying "I felt like destroying something beautiful" (*Fight Club*, 1999). Considering this approach, Flynn makes her female characters use violence in a similar way, as the women destroy physical beauty to break free from predeterminations of femininity.

¹²² Snyder-Hall (2010) argues that self-determination not only depends on economic freedom but on a more open attitude towards women's decisions in their sex lives, which split particularly second-wave feminism "into so-called 'pro-sex' and 'anti-sex' camps" (Snyder-Hall, 2010: 258). The anti-sex second-wave group perceived

breasts stretched and veined like grapes, as a man took her from behind. I could smell them all in the thick, gory air” (Flynn, 2010: 18). One could argue that Camille who masturbates to photographs of mostly women represses her homosexuality and is therefore frustrated with her gender identity.¹²³ However, the fact that she masturbates to photographs of women being humiliated is more relevant than the fact that she could be homosexual, as she not only breaks free from gender, femininity, and the norms of heterosexuality, but also adopts pleasure from masculine violence. This kind of sexual behavior one would more readily ascribe to boys; attributing it to Camille emphasizes that this character does not behave according to femininity and gender expectations. Instead she develops both feminine and masculine characteristics which again emphasize that she struggles with the concept “woman,” as she is in between two culturally presupposed gender roles, and is thus not able to be purely “feminine.” This basic idea also becomes evident in Flynn’s above-mentioned 2017 *Time* magazine essay, in which she claims that to her women and men are only different in anatomy, physiology and sexual behavior (Refinetti, 2018). So, Camille’s masturbation is not only used to show that it would be sexist to say that such behavior is abnormal, but also to attack the concept “woman.” Writing a female character with masculine sexual behavior patterns emphasizes that Flynn aims at achieving complete gender equality, also regarding sexual behavior. Considering this, Margaret Fuller claims that gender dualism is not possible, i.e., one person can neither be purely feminine or purely masculine (Fuller, 1845: 68-69).¹²⁴ Still, gender roles are presupposed by society and culture

heterosexual sex as male dominated, including the idea of penetration and certain sex positions. Due to that, this group “seemed to reinforce or mimic patriarchal power relations” (Snyder-Hall, 2010: 258).

¹²³ Kristin Anderson (2015) argues that, due to the fact that recent psychology studies on feminism and feminists include heterosexual women but do not take into consideration lesbians, bisexual, or transgender women, further studies in terms of the impact of feminist consciousness on sexual minority women are relevant. To her, the role of being a feminist who is a sexual minority might have an impact on her well-being, “the role that feminist consciousness plays in lesbian relationships” must be further studied and examined (Anderson, 2015: 153).

¹²⁴ C. G. Jung (1933) proposed the psychoanalytic concept of “*animus*” and “*anima*,” two primary archetypes of the unconscious mind, which are personifications of

and, therefore, often lead to frustration and identity conflicts, as can be seen with Camille. Sexual encounters depicted in *Sharp Objects* show that even the stranger's caring and closeness emotionally affect Camille and arouse her to a certain degree. For example, Camille sleeps with Detective Richard Willis or John Keene in order to gather information on the crimes she wants to report on. Hence, she uses sex as a means to an end, which could be considered violence in form of the use of feminine wiles as a tool in order to "feel alive" (Friedan, 1963: 210). She turns the concept of gender upside down and uses femininity as a psychological tool against others and in favor of her own position. A similar form of violence is also used in Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, in which Martha uses her femininity and sexuality in order to harm George, whereas Honey uses her feminine wiles in order to trick Nick into a marriage.¹²⁵ So, Camille and Martha behave as has been demanded by second-wave feminists, who wanted an adoption of discriminatory, misandrist, radical, and dominant behavior in their revolution against male domination and objectification (Rampton, 2015).

To make this clear at this point, this withdrawal of affection and the inability to love her daughter are based on Adora's inability to be a good mother, which leads to Camille's inability to be a good daughter. This, in turn, makes her mother's inability to love her even worse. So, gender becomes the foundation of the inability to love, which worsens as the characters cannot meet the expectations of gender. In this manner, Gillian

unconscious femininity in a man and personifications of unconscious masculinity in a woman. Both *animus* and *anima* transcend the psyche and are the reason why in every man's mind there is an unconscious image of a woman and vice versa. Thus, they are projected in attraction and love (Jung, 1933: in Jaffé, 1993: 408-409).

¹²⁵ In *Gone Girl* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, both characters named Nick can be considered fake alpha males who struggle with masculinity, marriage, and power. Albee (1962) named Nick after Nikita Khrushchev (Bottoms, 2000: 12). In this play, Nick, a young biology professor with a wife reminiscent of a "cool girl," becomes a danger to the marriage of George and Martha, who are named after George and Martha Washington (Bottoms, 2000: 12). He humiliates George and almost has sex with Martha. These telling names emphasize the imminent danger to the traditional American marriage, just as the Soviet Union was an imminent danger to the USA during the Cold War. In *Gone Girl*, Nick also expects his wife to be a cool girl, has sex with another woman and, hence, becomes a danger to his marriage.

Flynn makes the violence of women a subject of discussion. For instance, Camille says that she does not remember ever telling Adora anything personal at all. “I don’t think she ever knew my favorite dish, and I certainly never padded down to her room in the early-morning hours, teary from nightmares,” she claims (Flynn, 2010: 123). As this lack of closeness in their bond was present all along, Camille knows that Adora does not love her at all. Instead, she has been “tended” and “administrated” so that she could be kept under control in order to be used for her mother’s self-display caused by the need to persuade society that she lives up to her role as a mother (Flynn, 2010: 123). This form of control includes the above-mentioned psychological violence and distance that is beyond doubt emotionally unhealthy for both parties. Because of this, one can say that the concept of being a “victim of gender expectations” is Flynn’s feminist standpoint.¹²⁶

When Camille starts to suspect her mother, she says “Sometimes I think illness sits inside every woman, waiting for the right moment to bloom” (Flynn, 2010: 262). This quote reflects Flynn’s main intention in writing gender-centered novels, which is to discuss female violence that she claims needs to be considered and examined as an attribute that is equal to men’s violence. Camille refers to this violence as an illness that is inside every woman, meaning that every woman inherits the potential to be violent. Every woman she got to know in *Wind Gap* has this illness, her mother, both of her sisters, her grandmother, and her mother’s friends. Although their “mental illnesses”¹²⁷ differ, all the female characters in *Sharp Object* exhibit a kind of

¹²⁶ *Standpoint feminism* assumes that relationships of dominance and subordination are created and masked by patriarchal patterns in society to make the subordinated accept the dominant arrangements (Buzzanell, 2000: 59). “Standpoint feminism advocates the achievement of standpoints as oppositional, politically conscious understandings with the hope that such understandings provide resources for a critique of domination as well as change” (Buzzanell, 2000: 59).

¹²⁷ According to Boyd and Bray (2005), men still call women “crazy” when they do not approve of their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Boyd and Bray relate the derogatory use of the word to the above-mentioned mental disorder “hysteria,” which nowadays is not considered an illness any longer (Boyd and Bray, 2005). They claim that even now women are considered unreasonable because “historically a lot of people have thought (and still do think) that women are crazy because they

violence they exercise against other people while hiding behind false facades. For instance, Adora tortures and also murders her children with her exaggerated and morbid caring; Amma likes to verbally, physically, or sexually hurt other people and kills out of her jealousy; similar to Amma and her friends, Jackie and her acquaintances slander and defame people they do not like; the murdered girls were spoiled, aggressive, and unpredictable children; and Camille cuts herself deliberately and uses sex as a means to an end (Flynn, 2010: 109, 258, 279-280). The violence of these characters merely differs in its manifestation and propensity. Claiming that it is an illness inside every woman makes clear that in fact every woman is depressed and frustrated due to her role in society. And since every woman inherits this illness, culturally presupposed roles affect every woman. Still, sooner or later it will lead to “the right moment to bloom,” meaning that at one point in the life of a woman she will feel frustrated and turn violent (Flynn, 2010: 262). According to Adam Lankford, a criminal justice professor, women are generally less homicidal than men. They commit only about 10% to 13% of homicides in the USA and only 8% of perpetrators of firearm homicides are female. “In comparison, 40 percent of poisonings and 20 percent of deaths by fire are linked to female perps” (Pappas, 2018). In her online article about female mass killers, Stephanie Pappas (2018) quotes James Garbarino, a psychologist, researcher of human development and violence, and author of *See Jane Hit: Why Girls Are Growing More Violent And What We Can Do About It* (2006), who said that

the gap in aggression between girls and boys has narrowed, though, [...]. More popular media show girls and women acting in violent ways, which provides role models for female aggression [...]. Still, the gender gap in lethal violence hasn't shrunk like the gap in general violence [...]. It's a mystery as to why. Men may be biologically vulnerable: Variations in a gene called MAOA combined with early developmental stressors like abuse or drug use can raise a man's risk of criminality. Men are also more likely than women to base moral decisions on abstract principles rather than on empathy

have wombs. The word ‘hysteria’ comes from the Greek *husterikos*, meaning ‘from the womb’” (Boyd and Bray, 2005).

[...]. Whatever the culture offers in the way of justification of righteous violence, males are more likely to implement that (Pappas, 2018).

There is a contrast between physical and mental illness in *Sharp Objects*, which leads to the question whether the psychological struggles of the above-mentioned characters are inherent or learned and, most of all, remediable. With regard to finding a remedy for these struggles, Fuller wanted legal equality, Friedan demanded breaking free from the feminine mystique, and Butler assumed that the whole cultural concept that leads to the duality of the idea of gender, sex, and presupposed acts has to be changed first in order to make both men and women live a life that is without frustration. In *Sharp Objects*, Camille's sickness is based on and developed by gender. When keeping this in mind, her optimism in combination with the fear of having a sickness might be a hint that she is morally superior to her mother. It also makes clear that she tries to be free from the presuppositions of gender acts, whereas her mother tries to perform these acts. It is important to mention that, although both chose different ways in coping with their gender roles, they both seek happiness for their lives. The conflicts that emerge due to these different approaches towards their cultural presuppositions are probably the main reason why Camille and Adora were not and are not close to each other. When, for instance, Detective Willis asks for the reason for this troubled relationship, Camille says, "I just think some women aren't made to be mothers. And some women aren't made to be daughters" (Flynn, 2010: 143). This statement makes clear that both Adora and Camille are put into social roles that do not suit them. As shown in *Gone Girl* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, this kind of oppression leads to violence, anger, and desperation, which is why the female characters seem to be unhappy and abusive in many ways. In *Sharp Objects*, Camille knows that her mother's violence is attributable to her mental disorders. The vast amount of drugs and medicines in her body, for example, makes clear that Adora's need for attention and the need to be needed lead to a ruthless and wicked way of thinking and acting. This behavior demonstrates that she would stop at nothing, not even her daughters' deaths, to ultimately perform her cultural role as a mother. As she fails in doing so, she pretends to perform her role

accurately instead. These delusions are similar to the concept of lies given in *Gone Girl*, in which Amy and Nick pretend to live up to their gender roles, although they are unable to perform the acts according to the norms of culture. Their frustration and abusive behavior that results from it are comparable to Adora's frustration. As she is unable to be a good mother, she lies about it. She manipulates the circumstances by poisoning the characters in order to have the perfect setting for her delusions. Like Amy, Adora uses both physical and psychological violence to come closer to what she believes is happiness. Moreover, Amy also plays with the life of a child to manipulate. As discussed above, she enslaves her husband and forces him to play a role that she thinks will bring happiness to both their lives. This concept seems to work out well, but is doomed to failure in the long run. In *Sharp Objects*, the same concept is used, although the idea of happiness in the long run is destroyed by the end of the novel. The characters relinquish all hope, when their crimes are unveiled. As they are not as smart as Amy, they make mistakes that reveal their secrets and ultimately the emotional struggles they have due to the lack of love and happiness that comes with their wish to have lives that conform to socially presupposed roles. Furthermore, the women in *Sharp Objects* use violence in order to satisfy their elementary needs, which is similar to *Gone Girl*, in which violence is used to take revenge, but, as a matter of fact, serves as a means to an end. Taking revenge is based on the frustration that comes with the betrayal of femininity and the inability to live up to the feminine mystique.

Whether the increasing number of violent crimes committed by women is post-feminist or even a preferable development is anyone's guess; however, the demand for gender equality regarding amorality, violence, and maliciousness is a claim of a post-feminist notion that is innovative and progressive. In *Sharp Objects*, Camille as the female main character, who suffers from violence but exercises it in equal measure, shows that Gillian Flynn's proposed post-feminist agenda uses elements of the three waves of feminism to enable and justify amorality in terms of violence as a prerequisite of gender equality. In response to the recent adaptation of *Sharp Objects* into a TV series, many critics commented on Flynn's progressive feminism. *Washington Post's* A. J. Finn (2018) explained that her novels are feminist

precisely because they aim a megawatt beam, bright as prison lights, into the dark corners of women’s minds and lives. (Compare her approach with that of novelists who claim to confront misogyny even as they fetishize violence against female characters.) [...] Flynn forces us to review (and reject) our biases about women in literature, an entire sex routinely taxonomized, infantilized and reduced to cliché. The female of the species, Flynn shows us, can be deadlier than the male. [...] “*Sharp Objects*” does not expose and explode our own prejudices about how women should—or even can—think, behave, dress, live (Finn, 2018).

5.2 Identity Conflicts Caused by the Violence of a Psychopathic Mother in *Sharp Objects*

Since Adora’s gender-based features are different from her daughters’ abusive behaviors, the perceived frustration and exercised violence are indicators of the emotional struggles that come with the inability to perform gender, with a particular focus on cultural presuppositions, meaning the social perception of the performance of a role.

Adora, born and raised in Wind Gap, is said to look young for a person in her late forties, emphasizing that she looks like the patriarchal, objectified idea of a woman in her forties. In living up to this ideal, she tries to perform gender according to the feminine mystique, for instance, in becoming a Freudian “child-like doll” whose purpose is to be loved, as well as to love and serve men (Friedan, 1963: 79). As a teenager, she had to go to church, was not allowed to drink, smoke, or curse, and still, at the age of seventeen, a so-called “Kentucky boy” impregnated her with Camille and left her (Flynn, 2010: 95). According to Jackie O’Neill and Annabelle Gasser, her mother Joya “was a piece of work” and a “scary, scary woman” to whom Adora never had time to develop an adult relationship since she died early (Flynn, 2010: 106)¹²⁸. In *Sharp Objects*, Adora’s psychopathological behavior can be ascribed to a dysfunctional childhood, but most likely to her

¹²⁸ “Joya” is used as a telling name that is reminiscent of joy and contradicts this character’s description.

culturally presupposed roles of housewife and young mother. Flynn portrays a matriarch who is affected by patriarchy to the fullest. In this case, post-feminism as a sensibility allows an analysis of the patriarchal influences and the psychopathological effects of gender performances that Gillian Flynn criticizes in *Sharp Objects*. So, for example, after marrying her husband Alan, Adora gave birth to Marian, who was consistently poisoned by Adora and died a few years later. In the end, it is revealed that Adora has Munchausen by proxy, a disease that makes caregivers sicken their children to get attention. Camille tells the reader that “people whispered comfort about Marian being called back to heaven, but [her] mother would not be distracted from her grief. To this day it remains a hobby” (Flynn, 2010: 97). Instead of letting go, Adora seems to have found a way to attract attention constantly, since her permanent mourning is not only a device of recognition as a sad mother but also a form of emotional abuse and punishment. Constant grief distracts her from her maternal and domestic duties as well as from actually loving her children, meaning that she actually neglects her presupposed role as a mother as she tries to keep up an authentic performance. Munchausen by proxy is of course a plot element that is used both to make Adora’s socio- and psychopathy more explainable and tangible to the readers and, what is more interesting from a post-feminist analytic perspective, to give the effects of gender performances an emotional and psychological manifestation.¹²⁹ Omnipresent patriarchy and gender are here transformed into a disease that causes amoral and violent behavior.

When, in the novel, Camille returns to her mother’s home after years away, Adora is distant and not interested at all. She does not hug her or ask questions about Camille’s job that brought her back to Wind Gap (Flynn,

¹²⁹ In 2014, *HuffPost Entertainment* spoke to Dr. Paul Puri who made a hypothetical diagnosis for Amy’s behavior and concluded that she most certainly has a factitious disorder, Munchausen syndrome (Duca, 2014). Puri said that “In the medical world, you see these people pop into hospitals for the purpose of getting taken care of. The textbook one is a nurse or a nurse assistant who injects herself with insulin and comes in with mysteriously low blood sugar. In the real world, people will do this to the degree that they get fake surgeries. I’ve also seen people lying about the death of loved ones for the purpose of getting attention. So, for Amy, she might be trying to construct this picture where people look up to her and feel sorry for her or whatever the goal is with that” (Duce, 2014).

2010: 29). Later, in their first conversation, tensions flare as Camille tells her mother about the dead girls. At first, it seems that Adora, who personally knew these girls, mourns them and, therefore, verbally attacks Camille (Flynn, 2010: 32-33). As the reader gets to know later on, however, she mainly pretends to mourn in order to attract attention. She pretends to fulfill her role as a caring mother, as she even goes so far as to mourn for other mothers' daughters. Camille points out that grief is a hobby and a recurring device of her psychopathological mother in order to achieve an illusion of happiness. The need to feel happy causes this form of violence based on the idea of attention. In her identity crisis, she confuses attention and love because she tries to adjust to the feminine mystique, obeying the functionalist idea that "anatomy is destiny" (Friedan, 1963: 99). The confusion of attention and love is also projected onto her daughters. As pointed out by Friedan (1963: 156-160), psychological maladjustments of children are often caused by overprotective dominating mothers, who sacrifice individuality for security by becoming professionals as housewives and mothers. Not only does Adora try to take over her mother's role as a professional, but she actually tries to make her daughters take over her own role as well. Although she wants to perform the gender role of a culturally functioning mother who is needed by her children, Adora transfers her own mother's coldness onto Camille. Her excessive desire for social acceptance can be ascribed to her own mother's distance. In fact, some of her character traits are also ascribable to the *Cult of Domesticity* (Dicker, 2008: 21). Adora wants to take over the role of a pious, pure, domestic and submissive woman although she is the complete opposite. As a teenager, she already had sex with an anonymous man and she is most certainly not pure at all, neither physically nor mentally. Furthermore, she adapts the concept "woman," as criticized by Butler (1990: 4). Her lack of identity and the gender-based frustration are due to her performative acts of prescribed gender roles, meaning that she looks for happiness in society and ultimately in the binary idea of gender and sex (Butler, 1990: 13, 15, 23). She is indeed unable to correctly perform the role of a mother and housewife, and, moreover, she is unable to refuse the performative acts of gender, which leads to even more frustration and violence.

Because she is so fixated on appearances, both physically and socially, she knows how to present herself to correspond to the role of good wife and loving mother. Just to stay in this social position, she drugs her children to sicken and care for them. As a result, she creates a distorted picture of reality, a delusion in which she looks like a strong and caring mother who loves her children more than anything and tries everything possible to bring them back to health. As explained earlier, the reader gets to know that she is quite the opposite of what she portrays in society. So, one can say that the mother-daughter relationship depicted in *Sharp Objects* is again based on a struggle for dominance. Just like the power struggles in *Gone Girl*, the female characters of *Sharp Objects* try to take over control in using violence, both physical and psychological. With regard to the above-mentioned confusion of love and attention, power is again presented in the form of an interrelating concept of these two emotional needs. When Adora recognizes that Marian is an easy and unresisting patient, she loses interest in Camille and becomes cold towards her. Moreover, she uses disinterest to make Camille feel guilty. Causing guilt is another device used in order to take over and exercise power, meaning that either her daughter becomes a submissive patient or is punished with emotional distance. In the novel, this punishment becomes apparent when Camille interviews Bob Nash, whereupon Adora appears and wants Camille gone as soon as possible by saying “[...] I think you should leave. [...] I’m here on a social visit and it’s difficult for me to relax around you these days” (Flynn, 2010: 120). This control of conduct and the emotional displacement is a form of punishment for not behaving in the way Adora expects from Camille. As a matter of fact, her “social visit” emphasizes that performing a socially presupposed role is most important to her. This performance then leads to a distance that is perceived as a punishment by Camille, which becomes a repetitive concept of abuse and violence. It becomes clear that Camille is conscious of this concept, for she claims that “A word suddenly flashed on my lower hip: *punish*. I could feel it getting hot” (Flynn, 2010: 120). She ascribes this toxic mother-daughter relationship to the fact that Adora secretly hates children. But as she feels the need to fulfill the feminine mystique, here by becoming Wind Gap’s most adored person, she pretends or rather has to pretend to love children. As in *Gone*

Girl, social delusions lead to frustrations, which then lead to (deadly) violence.

In a discussion with Camille, it becomes clear that Adora is not capable of accepting criticism; whenever her perfect appearance seems to fade, she becomes aggressive towards anybody who might be a threat to her delusions. As soon as Adora feels an upcoming danger to her performance of the presupposed gender role of the category “woman,” she turns aggressive and / or defensive in order to maintain the gender delusions she tries to keep up, her false front, so to speak. Especially Camille, who is a danger to Adora’s fake performance of housewife and mother and often the reason for her inability to adjust to the role, is then blamed for causing agitation and frustration, which, in fact, is a result of the exposure of Adora’s facade and her inability to fulfill the feminine mystique. Not only does she look for happiness in performing gender acts, she also seems to fear that this exposure could lead to disinterest and, thus, to social exclusion, which is why she turns extremely spiteful. In terms of post-feminism in *Sharp Objects*, Adora’s spite and violence are based on the feminine mystique’s new facade. Due to the fact that she tries to perform the role of a mother at any cost, she struggles with her identity as a woman. Not only is she dependent on expectations of culturally prescribed gender roles, but she also emphasizes the effects of the traditional expectations of patriarchal gender constructions. It is also striking that Adora is used to shock readers who expect a mother to be kind and caring. So, she is not only anti-feminist but contradicts the prescribed expectations of a mother. With regard to the achievements of feminism, Adora as a female character struggles with breaking free from the concepts of femininity and instead returns to the traditional gender roles of housewife and mother. Whether her malice and amorality are a cause or an effect of prescribed femininity is irrelevant in the post-feminist analysis of this character’s function, which makes her a gender manifestation that is rejected by traditional feminism. Considering Flynn’s post-feminist mode, Adora’s attributes are used to propose the idea of non-gendered malice and violence, although they also secure her performance of a housewife and mother. So, Flynn does not claim that amorality, malice, and violence are obligatory consequences of patriarchal oppression but, what is more important, that

Adora as an anti-feminist character serves the purpose of a post-feminist cause, i.e., emphasizing that one must acknowledge her anti-feminist characteristics in terms of feminism. This means that violence must not be considered obstructive in the definition of the role of “mother,” as Flynn’s post-feminist claim is that violence has to be treated as a non-gendered attribute.

5.3 The Emotional and Psychological Effects of Identity Conflicts on Amma Crellin

Amma Crellin, Camille’s thirteen-year-old half-sister and Adora’s youngest daughter, is a physically mature young girl, attractive and sexually precocious, which is why she is said to be arrogant, boastful, lofty, and aggressive towards other people.

Just like her mother, Amma wants to be the town’s most famous and beloved girl. So, there is again a transfer of a mother’s role onto her child, which, if we apply Betty Friedan’s theory, can be seen as one of the reasons Amma has gender-related maladjustments (Friedan, 1963: 229-235). She constantly wants to be the center of her mother’s attention, which is why she performs the gender role of an innocent girl who likes to play with dolls and needs excessive care when she is “sick,” which is why, most of the time, she gets what she wants at home. Since she seems to be aware of her mother’s psychological condition, she uses Adora’s need to be needed to get attention and affection. Whether this kind of attention from a mother is psychologically dangerous does not occur to her at all, which is why she has a pathological mother fixation that is transferred to Camille when Adora is imprisoned at the end of *Sharp Objects*. Whenever the attention or the sympathy of her caregiver is focused onto another girl, Amma cannot stand it and decides to eliminate the distracting girls that might pose a threat to her. Moreover, she takes the teeth and tufts of hair of the dead girl to repurpose them as dollhouse furniture. In this regard, the idea of a dollhouse as a toy for little girls is corrupted with remnants of violence. Hence the dollhouse in *Sharp Objects* symbolizes Amma’s lost innocence and the urge to be her mother’s

center of attention. The fixation on the perfection of the dollhouse also emphasizes that Amma wants to perform the culturally presupposed role of the perfect little girl who is the most innocent and loveable creature as compared to the other girls. She already struggles with the development of an identity, which causes unhappiness and frustration in this early stage of her life (Butler, 1990: 4, 15-19, 23). To perform acts of gender according to the role of an innocent little girl and the Cult of True Womanhood, she stops at nothing. Moreover, she is aware of the fact that she is an evil, violent, and manipulative person whenever her mother is not around. This alternating behavior highlights that she only performs acts of gender in order to come close to what she believes is maternal affection, which here is corrupted by patriarchal manipulation, meaning that Adora becomes an executive force of patriarchy oppressing her daughters to adequately perform their cultural gender roles. This affects all women in *Sharp Objects* by making them culturally perform prescribed acts of femininity for each other. No matter how hard they try to pretend to live up to the category “woman” according to social expectations, they all fail in performing gender and ultimately in finding fulfillment, an identity, and happiness (Rampton, 2005; Iannello, 2010: 72).

According to Camille, the prettiest girl among her friends is Amma. When Camille later recognizes her on the front porch of their home, Amma plays with a doll house that is based on Adora’s real house. For the first time, she looks like a thirteen-year-old girl, while otherwise she seems to have a sexually precocious appearance and a vicious personality. As she struggles with her identity due to several male-dominated elements of culture affecting her life, she constantly switches between the role of an innocent girl and the role of a sexually attractive woman.¹³⁰ The first time the reader gets to

¹³⁰ Vladimir Nabokov’s Humbert in *Lolita* (1955) finds such girls, so-called “nymphets,” sexually attractive as well (Nabokov, 1955: 15). These nymphets have to be between nine to fourteen years old and have characteristics such as “the fey grace, the elusive, shifty, soul-shattering, insidious charm” (Nabokov, 1955: 15-16). Moreover, Humbert claims that there must be a gap of many years, “never less than ten [...], generally thirty or forty, and as many as ninety in a few known cases, between maiden and man to enable the latter to come under a nymphet’s spell” (Nabokov, 1955: 16-17).

experience a sign of the pathological mother-daughter relationship between Adora and Amma is when the girl comments on her dollish clothes. “I wear this for Adora,” she says to Camille in that scene. “When I’m home, I’m her little doll. [...] You’re Camille. You’re my half-sister. Adora’s first daughter, before *Marian*. You’re Pre and I’m Post” (Flynn, 2010: 53-54). Amma adjusts to the dysfunctional idea of the presupposed role of a daughter that her mother forces her into. This role is another manifestation of the concept “woman” and the feminine mystique. In order to fulfill the mystique, she wears dollish clothes and pretends to be an innocent person in need of care and help. Thus, she becomes dependent on Adora, who takes advantage of this dependency by poisoning and subsequently caring for Amma. Furthermore, the dependency of her mother’s love to the point that she sees Camille and Marian as potential competition is shown here as well. In saying that Camille is *Pre* and she herself is *Post*, Amma indirectly makes clear that her older sister is already a past character in Adora’s life, a bad memory of the inability to adjust to her social role. On a literary level, this seems like a warning not to interfere in their newly developed and vastly disturbed relationship, since Amma already struggles to measure up to Marian. To her, Marian is the unattainable image of a girl who adequately and correctly performed her role of a feminine daughter. Because of her death, she is not able to cause any damage to Adora’s need for prestige and social attention; instead, Adora’s memories and the grief that comes with them are used as devices to keep up false appearances and delusions. The idea of a dead daughter becomes the perfect tool to maintain the fake performance of the role of a mother according to the feminine mystique. In order to live up to this idea and be loved equally by her mother, Amma indirectly agrees to play along although she struggles with the inability to live up to the presupposed role. Again, this frustration about not being happy despite playing along makes her a creature of violence and pretense.

This disturbed relationship to her mother in combination with her propensity for violence made Amma commit malevolent and gory felonies. With regard to the feminist waves, she is enslaved by gender-related fear, influenced by the rules and social concepts of the feminine mystique, and entrapped in male domination as she tries to perform a culturally prescribed

gender role. The gender role of an innocent girl and the dependency on maternal love collide with her radical and often quite misandrist behavior (Dicker, 2008: 57; Rampton, 2015). Many gender-related concepts that have been criticized by feminists, particularly Margaret Fuller, Betty Friedan, and Judith Butler, are reflected upon in *Sharp Objects*. All the female characters suffer from the social pressure placed on them and therefore develop different psychological dysfunctions which, according to the proposed post-feminist approach, are based on identity conflicts that come with the patriarchal oppression of women. The social pressure becomes a consequence of gender constructedness that women obey, although it causes frustration as it does not even allow non-gendered malice. In this post-feminist mode, psychological dysfunction is the proof of the dominance of masculinity and shows that non-gendered individuality might be the key to gender equality and happiness. Because every condition and attribute becomes gendered in the performance of femininity, the frustration of the women characters in *Sharp Objects* gets to a point where these women not only seriously harm others and themselves, but are also institutionalized or even killed, which indeed emphasizes the great influence of patriarchy and objectification. In the novel, these female characters are punished for their early sexual encounters, their hateful behavior towards other people, their interpersonal manipulations, and their social and emotional deceptions. Especially regarding violence, one has to emphasize that it becomes both a consequence of sadness and a malfunctioning tool to deal with perceived frustrations. Adora, for instance, uses emotional dependency, poison, and verbal abuse to get her way. While Adora tries to convince the public of her delusions in exercising physical and psychological violence, Camille rather uses sex, drugs, and self-destruction to solve the crimes and eventually reveal the delusions of her family. These delusions include the violence and psychopathology of Amma as well. On the one hand, she manipulates, hurts, and kills, and, on the other hand, she plays with toys and demands love and affection.

In *Sharp Objects*, not only patriarchy and objectification affect the characters' frustration and violence, but also the women's interrelations and dependencies cause social problems and the failure to achieve happiness. In order to overcome a perceived lack of identity, they try to live up to the

presupposed roles of society and culture. Moreover, they directly and indirectly force their relatives to do the same. So, ultimately every character lacks an identity, feels frustrated, and tries to compensate for unhappiness with violence, which is usually considered an attribute of masculinity. With this post-feminist agenda, Flynn shows that women want their feelings, thoughts, and actions to be non-gendered and, more importantly, that post-feminism is needed to extend the gender concepts in literature. She shows both that the performance of traditional gender roles does not lead to fulfillment and that the previous waves of feminism do not aim at complete gender equality, which includes amorality and malice as well. Because, of this, post-feminism as an analytical approach is used to determine the causes of the identity conflicts, which in *Sharp Objects* are the gender performances and the prescribed gender roles in a family, and proposes the idea that, instead of holding on to these, both the women themselves and society need to acknowledge each of their attributes as gender neutral, regardless of how malicious the characters become in this process.

5.4 Feminist Symbols and Allusions in *Sharp Objects*

In *Sharp Objects*, feminism and female violence are key elements that form, affect, and cause gender-related struggles. These can be ascribed to the above-examined feminists and their theoretical concepts in view of male domination or patriarchal oppression. For example, in her childhood, Camille did not display any posters of pop stars or favorite movies in her room, but instead there was a portrait of human rights activist and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt on her wall, about whom she claims not to have known much. For Camille, it was enough that Eleanor Roosevelt was generally considered a good woman. She also claims that, in the present, she would prefer “Warren Harding’s wife, “The Duchess,” who recorded the smallest offenses in a little red notebook and avenged herself accordingly” (Flynn, 2010: 51).¹³¹ Not only are both women wives of former US presidents, but they also reflect

¹³¹ In the 1920 presidential election, Florence Harding was the first First Lady to vote for president, presumably her husband (Hendricks, 2015: 241).

Camille's personal development from an innocent child to a rebellious woman who struggles with her gender role and fights back. This fight is not about the frustration that comes with the traditional role of a good mother and housewife, but rather about the idea that women can take care of themselves, that they can be happy and, when the need arises, be violent, aggressive, or avenging in order to free themselves from male domination.

This striving to be free from gender presuppositions and indirect oppression becomes obvious in a discussion between Camille and Detective Willis. Here, it is revealed that an old school friend of hers was sexually abused by some boys in her class. The teacher later made her apologize to the whole class, because "young ladies must be in control of their bodies because boys are not" (Flynn, 2010: 139).¹³² This story hints at the idea of biological oppression that Betty Friedan has criticized, stating that the claim "anatomy is destiny" is wrong. Not only did the girl not agree to have sex, she also had to apologize to the class. This inequality and unfairness emphasize, on the one hand, that the boys were privileged only because of their gender and, on the other hand, that the girl was punished by a male teacher for something she did not even want. This conversation then leads to a story about Camille's first sexual encounter and focuses on another form of gender oppression. She had her first sexual experience with four or five football players, which, to Willis, comes close to rape. A very heated discussion about outright violence arises, in which Camille wants him to tell her his criteria for violence. According to her, he not only seems to believe but rather insists that her first sexual encounter was involuntary. Due to this, she claims that he is sexist, a "liberal lefty [man] practicing sexual discrimination under the guise of protecting women against sexual discrimination" (Flynn, 2010: 140). With regard to the feminine mystique, the unwittingly sexist behavior of Willis includes a concept of oppression, as he indirectly wants to deprive her of the ability to

¹³² "Blaming the victim" is a process first described and analyzed by William Ryan in his book of that title (Ryan, 1972). In the 1970s, feminists adopted this term as a slogan for their work on behalf of rape victims who are blamed by the abusers for being raped because they "consented, [...] wanted [or] deserved it" to avoid legal persecution (Golden et al., 2010: 8). Feminists argue that patriarchal systems socialize men to be sexually aggressive and women to be potential victims (Cole, 2007: 118).

exert violence. Moreover, he becomes an executive of the oppressing concepts that were criticized by first-, second-, and third-wave feminists. Willis indirectly wants Camille to act out the Cult of True Womanhood, i.e., the role of a pure and innocent woman. He also exercises violence against her by degrading her to fit that role and he unwittingly acts out his presupposed role of a protective sexist who wants her to behave according to the feminine mystique. As she obviously does not subscribe to femininity and the Cult of True Womanhood, he seems to struggle with the idea that she might be promiscuous. Instead of accepting her resistance, Willis seeks to blame someone, in this case the football players, to deprive Camille of sexual power and to understand the fact that she does not consent to her role. To Camille, that is clearly sexist because she does not want to live up to the gender role of the innocent and weak little girl. Instead, she claims that she wanted the boys to have sex with her in order to show that she is in charge of her body and fate. This form of control is a means to break free from her gender role and thereby become post-feminist as to Camille the group sex is what she chose as a non-gendered individual and what she believes is representative of her independent identity (Ilief-Martinescu, 2016: 6). With regard to this unwitting oppression, she also states that a guy in her office suggested she should sue for discrimination after she did not get a promotion. Instead of looking at the fact that she was a mediocre reporter who did not earn a promotion, that colleague suggested that she claim sexual discrimination in the form of special treatment simply because she is a woman. Camille finds it offensive to say that women need to be looked after only because they are women who cannot look after themselves and who are supposed to be unable to do so. One could also argue that this discrimination is a result of the roles imposed onto men, who are forced to be strong and protective individuals, since they also have to obey their gender roles and the idea of the feminine mystique. This idea then leads to the conclusion that these gender roles are not only unequal but also self-adjusting because the discriminatory characteristic anticipates the counterpart to live up to society's expectations.

Camille as a feminist likes the idea of women who take care of themselves, who are violent, aggressive, and avenging, like Florence Harding. The standard image of a woman who needs protection is offending to her

because it reflects the traditional role of a woman. She loses her temper because this traditional idea suggests that women can find happiness in piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness (Dicker, 2008: 21). According to traditional gender roles, men want female partners who cannot protect themselves or who let a man take care of their problems and protection. Similar to the approach proposed by Betty Friedan, Camille claims that this special treatment is a modern form of sexism because, to her, women should not need any special treatment based on gender or sex. Well-intended protective behavior can become sexist in this regard, for it reduces women to defenseless creatures and is intended to make them perform the proper gender role. This also emphasizes that patriarchal sexism even makes men believe that to protect women, who are weak because they are women, is masculine and therefore every men's task.¹³³ Like *Gone Girl's* Amy, Camille becomes a character who rebels against this social image of women, who does not accept former presupposed gender roles and the oppression that comes with them. In *Sharp Objects*, this form of discrimination is taken as an example of imposed oppression and claims that even well-intended behavior patterns that lead to an inequality between men and women are not acceptable, especially because it deprives women of the ability to be violent, avenging, and promiscuous.

Sexist discrimination as a psychological concept is again turned upside down later in the novel. Its social influences and imperceptible manipulations are discussed quite often in *Sharp Objects*, for example, in a

¹³³ Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) has often been considered in discussions questioning gender roles and feminism. The female character Jo March, for instance, who is the most masculine of the March sisters, adopts the role of a housewife and mother in her later life after she rejected gender expectations in her youth. Concepts of masculinity and male oppression are also shown through the character Mr. Laurence, who, for example, "fears that his grandson [Laurie] may want to be a musician" because his musical skills remind him of Laurie's mother, a woman Mr. Laurence did not like in the past (Alcott, 1868: 74). Later he wants his grandson to go to college and become an India merchant, as he was, and although Laurie dislikes his grandfather's idea, he agrees on going to college (Alcott, 1868: 186-187). Furthermore, Mr. Laurence's oppressive male behavior becomes evident when he rewards the Marches' generosity with a feast because they helped a poor and hungry neighborhood family earlier (Alcott, 1868: 22-24, 30-31). As he takes care of the Marches, he becomes a gender stereotype, according to which a man has to take care of women.

scene in which several characters talk at a party about what the meaning of life is to them. To vent her frustration, one of the women sadly claims that she must go back to work. ““With Tyler in preschool, I thought I wanted to,’ [she says] between sobs. ‘Like I needed a purpose’” (Flynn: 2010: 168). The other women encourage her not to listen to what society, especially feminists, tell them to do. They claim that a woman should not have to raise her family and feel guilty about it, only because feminists cannot have a family of their own. It seems that they do not understand the main goal of feminists, i.e., to allow women freedom and happiness in whatever they find suitable. In fact, this main goal is even explained by them: “Feminism means allowing women to make whatever kind of choices they want” (Flynn, 2010: 168). In this discussion, the idea of feminism is turned upside down because misunderstandings and the indiscernibility of patriarchy are emphasized and mocked. These women believe that they find true happiness in adjusting to traditional gender roles in which they only need to conform to the “occupation: housewife and mother” (Friedan, 1963: 5-7). Although it seems that they are only lazy and not willing to work, their idea of self-realization appears to be influenced by society to a vast degree. To them, feminism includes free choices and, thus, justifies their desire to be a housewife. Therefore, they are unhappy about the fact that their husbands force them into a job they do not like. In fact, feminism is exactly against this kind of oppression. Due to the husband’s inability to fulfill his role, he actually oppresses his wife. In the past, women were unhappy with their gender roles as housewives and mothers, which is why they wanted feminism to change the image of a woman’s role in society. In *Sharp Objects*, it seems that the message of this feminism has been well received by men, who now want their wives to work. Still, this does not represent the general idea of feminism because these men do not want their wives to work in order to find happiness and an identity, but rather because they cannot live up to their own role as sole breadwinners and need more money to make ends meet. Here, *Sharp Objects* shows that male domination can even lead to contradictory perceptions of which choice might lead to happiness. While the wives want to adjust to the feminine mystique in order to find fulfillment as housewives and mothers, their husbands want them to work in order to get by financially. It

seems that two versions of the feminine mystique collide because both parties cannot live up to their gender roles. The women even discuss why their husbands do not want further children and that they are frustrated. One of them says, “I miss my babies...I’ve always dreamed of a big houseful of kids, that’s all I’ve ever wanted...what’s so wrong with just being a mommy?” (Flynn, 2010: 169). It is obvious that their husbands do not want more children due in order to use the available money for other purposes. Friedan’s feminine mystique again becomes obvious since individuality is not wanted. The portrayed female characters would rather become professionals as housewives, both to find fulfillment in their own femininity and to have more control at home. This control might include power over their children and their husbands, who then become “part-time servants” (Friedan, 1963: 156-170). Although one should not disregard these base motives, it is likely that men and women try to adjust to their gender roles, which end up creating a lack of identity.

The frustration caused by this concept is shown in the novel as Katie Brucker indirectly attacks Camille by remarking that Amma is an awful girl. Furthermore, the women attack Camille for not having children of her own. “I don’t think she can feel that hurt the way we do,” one of them says in order to socially exclude her. “[...] It seems like part of your heart can never work if you don’t have kids. Like it will always be shut off,” says another. “I didn’t really become a woman until I felt Mackenzie inside me. I mean, there’s all this talk these days of God versus science, but it seems like, with babies, both sides agree. The Bible says be fruitful and multiply, and science, well, when it all boils down, that’s what women were made for, right? To bear children” (Flynn, 2010: 172). Besides showing male domination creating a need to live up to the role of a mother, this verbal attack expresses the underlying hostility and aggressiveness of women. One could say that attacking a woman who does not have any children of her own could be considered sexist. Moreover, the hostility towards women who may not want any children, emphasizes that the social need to fulfill the presupposed role of femininity is imposed by males and females in equal measure. Camille is not only socially excluded by this attack but also reduced to her unwillingness to obey the feminine mystique. Due to the fact that she refuses to adjust to the role of a wife and

mother, she is turned into an object of ridicule. This dialogue not only includes the belief that women can only be happy if they have children, but it further contains a theme that Friedan claims to be part of the feminine mystique: religion and science.¹³⁴ These have been made a subject of discussion in other literary texts. Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, for instance, is about the fear that in the future sterility will be a major problem (Albee, 2000). Just like George and Martha, the women in *Sharp Objects* also want children at any cost. Still, the novel disagrees with the idea of future sterility, as it is claimed that religion and science agree on the importance of children. Especially in this part of *Sharp Objects*, it becomes clear that the imposed gender roles are not only a social but also a religious and scientific concept of the feminine mystique. According to Friedan, these are used to force women into being housewives and mothers. She states that, due to the identity crisis of women, science, including functionalism, sex, education, and Freudian psychology, manipulated the overall idea of femininity (Friedan, 1963: 79, 99, 151, 156-160, 210). Hence, the importance of procreation is used to create a desire to breed and ultimately to maintain the role of a mother. In *Sharp Objects*, the feminine mystique, which implies that women merely need the ability and the will to reproduce, is not always the ideal path of life in order to find happiness.

Happiness is the key to understanding gender-related identity conflicts, frustration, and violence in *Sharp Objects*. Various elements of first-, second-, and third-wave feminism are referred to, such as social inequality, sex-based discrimination, and psychological individualism. Just as Margaret Fuller, Betty Friedan and Judith Butler demanded, the female characters try to fight sexism, misogyny, and unhappiness. They search for a new life plan in order to free themselves from social slavery, to unmask the

¹³⁴ In the chapter "The Virgin and the Dynamo" from his autobiography *The Education of Henry Adams* (1900), Adams relates faith to energy as he speculates about Christianity's relation to the twentieth-century dynamos that, to him, generate physical energy but are still mysterious. He claims that the people in medieval times lived according to Christianity, which is why he associates this past time to "The Virgin" [Mary], whereas "The Dynamo" represents modern technological progress. With this, Adams compares the traditional and modern "forces" in order to explain how they affect men and women (Adams, 1900: 130-134).

feminine mystique, and to eradicate the performative acts of gender (Dicker, 2008: 21; Fuller, 1845: 15-16; Friedan, 1963: 229-235; Butler, 1990: 34). In doing so, they face various manifestations of gender-based oppression and its influence on both men and women. *Sharp Objects* takes up these issues and turns them upside down in order to unmask the reasons for the frustration and violence that all of the characters exercise against each other in their own ways. It emphasizes that, although many conflicts do not seem to be based on male domination or objectification, unhappiness is the consequence of the need to live up to the gender roles of a patriarchal society.

In an interview with *Refinery29*'s Leah Carroll, Gillian Flynn talked about the *Sharp Objects* television series. Regarding Alice Bolin's recently published essay collection, *Dead Girls: Essays on Surviving an American Obsession*, Flynn comments on "the dead girl plot," in which a woman's murder becomes a catalyst for the actions of a male detective¹³⁵ (Carroll, 2018). To Flynn, "The "dead girl" [who] is a main character, but [...] also voiceless, virginal, and pure [and therefore] not usually a real person" (Carroll, 2018), is a concept that is present in *Sharp Objects* because Camille identifies with the dead girls. According to Flynn, "[...] The question is not 'why did this happen to them,' but 'why does this happen to us?' [...] Why is so much violence always directed toward girls, and why do we direct so much violence toward ourselves, physically and psychologically?" (Carroll, 2018). In this interview, she also commented on the current situation regarding sexism and feminism, for instance #MeToo, stating that women are fascinated with true crime stories because they enable a vocabulary to talk about the violence that is directed at women every day in many ways (Carroll, 2018). She claimed that a woman's day-to-day life is infested with constant fear because of patriarchal violence. Due to the mere fact that a woman must be

¹³⁵ The "dead girl plot" has been used in the television series *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) as well, where the murder of the fictional character Laura Palmer becomes a catalyst for the actions of FBI agent Dale Cooper (*Twin Peaks*, 1990-1991). As Jennifer Lynch even published *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer* (1997), Palmer can be considered a main character in *Twin Peaks*. This diary aims at making the murder of Palmer easier to understand and gives insight into diary entries from the time she was twelve until she was murdered years after (Lynch, 1997: 1, 184).

constantly conscious of, for example, the possibility of being raped, there is gender inequality. To Flynn,

all women—half our population—have to be conscious of that idea. I was at a hotel the other night, and I thought, ‘God I’d love to go for a run, but gosh, I probably shouldn’t.’ I’m peeking out of the hotel window and thinking, if I do that and I get raped, no one’s gonna feel sorry for me. It’s not well-lit, and they’re gonna go, ‘What was she doing out there anyway?’ [...] It would be like, ‘Why did she put herself in that situation anyway? She knew that was a possibility. That’s no well-lit running path.’ No man has to think about that. I do think that there is a true crime element that we, as women, are interested in, because it gives us a way to discuss that strange underlying fear that is constantly there (Carroll, 2018),

The focus on women’s constant fear of meeting a potential male rapist who believes he is superior by all accounts says a lot about Flynn’s perception of patriarchy, male domination, and the superiority of masculinity. Because of this perception, Flynn uses her post-feminist agenda to write female characters who are equal if not superior in using violence. Here it is necessary to mention that the concept of staged reality applies to each of Flynn’s works of fiction.¹³⁶ According to Giles Gunn (1979), “literature [...] tends to employ the symbolic materials of culture heuristically, to test the validity traditionally ascribed to them and to explore their range of governance over the always changing terrain of human experience” (Gunn, 1979: 6). Accordingly, Flynn’s texts comment on cultural elements based on a social reality, such as the above-mentioned sexual dominance of men. To her, social reality is still extremely gendered although there have been three waves of feminism. Because of this, Flynn uses a post-feminist approach by focusing on particular elements of reality, for instance, the constant fear of being raped. By staging such elements in her fictional works, she critically

¹³⁶ Winfried Fluck (1992) claims that reality and fiction are not oppositional spheres. Instead, realistic novels are forms of fiction that, as any other form of communication, are strategies in solving a problematic world of experiences (Fluck, 1992: 11-12). In this form, fiction is conceptual and always aimed at symbolically transforming its experiential context in a target- and action-oriented way (Fluck, 1992: 12).

comments on and proposes a change in thinking in order to achieve the artistic freedom of having women characters who are equal to men on every level. This includes the still-present effects of female hysteria which is nowadays used to stigmatize women as “crazy” when they do not properly perform acts of femininity. To criticize this stigmatization, Flynn focuses on female malice, violence, and amorality that, according to her, are gendered and therefore proof of gender inequality of men and women.

While Flynn wrote a mother who seeks constant adoration and hurts her children in order to adopt the proper gender performance of a mother in *Sharp Objects*, she investigates another kind of mother who is the opposite of Adora in her only comic short story. This mother avoids attention, keeps very much in the background, and hurts other children in order to protect her own. For the *British Library*'s exhibition of British comics, Flynn wrote the story for her comic debut “Masks,” working with graphic artist Dave Gibbons (“Novelists do comics”, 2014).¹³⁷ It has been published in the 200th issue of the anthology series *Dark Horse Presents* (Gustines, 2014). In this comic story, the protagonist Ms. Cartwright becomes a masked vigilante with a knife to fight gender-based oppression by scaring her son's bully. A few weeks later, many other mothers join her in order to scare and hurt their children's bullies and eradicate “cruelty, bullying and injustice” and, consequently, superiority of masculinity (Flynn, 2014: 1-3). When they kill an innocent boy by mistake, the founder of the vigilantes' group faces an immediate punishment by her masked group members (Flynn, 2014: 4-5). In an interview for *The Guardian*, Flynn said that she “find[s] people's different levels of parenting and how much one tends to hover over a child and worry really interesting” (Flynn, 2014). Because of this, her intention was to investigate what happens when a mother's instinct of “do not mess with my child” goes bad (Flynn, 2014).¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Gibbons is known for drawing Alan Moore's *Watchmen* comic series (*The Guardian*, 2014).

¹³⁸ Graham-Bertolini (2011) argues that violence and vigilantism are not interchangeable although they are often connected. “Female vigilantism is most often a recuperative act that addresses systematic flaws in the American system of

In “Masks” (2014), Flynn and Gibbons include many gender-based images that are important to examine, such as the mothers’ costumes, who wear black hoodies and masks of a “happy homemaker,” i.e., the face of a mother (Flynn, 2014: 1-5). This costume of the concept “mother” is a comment on gender roles, as the mothers give up their individuality to simply become the manifestation of the gender role of a mother who protects her child. Although the mask is ironically named “happy homemaker,” the manifestation of the concept “mother” uses violence and, with that, becomes as amoral and malicious as the bullies and all of Flynn’s other women characters. It is striking that the vigilante mothers “call all moms” to join their cause and ironically fight for morality and decency. This is why the cover image of the comic story shows the happy homemaker mask wearing a blindfold like Lady Justice. In a way, the mothers become blind vigilantes by trying to eradicate bullying and prevent violence.

Although the story about mothers who become bullies themselves after they try to stop their children’s bullies is quite simple, “Masks” offers an interesting view on a mother’s role. In terms of gender, Ms. Cartwright’s sensitive son is not protected by his teachers and principals because his bully is an athlete, a masculine boy, so to speak.¹³⁹ With regard to the belief that a sensitive boy is considered feminine, “Masks” emphasizes that femininity has to accept a subordinate role to the superior concept of masculinity. This belief also becomes evident when another mother tells Ms. Cartwright that her daughter is bullied because she is shy (Flynn, 2014: 2). The superiority of

justice. Contemporary heroines commit illegal, extralegal, and, at times, deadly acts in their quest for justice, including the destruction of property, banditry, robbery, armed combat, and/or even murder” (Graham-Bertolini, 2011). According to Graham-Bertolini, the actions of female vigilantes, who become violent for ethical reasons and the right to full personhood, “assume a significance that manifests as an equitable view of individuality” (Graham-Bertolini, 2011).

¹³⁹ In 1777, Mrs. Cartwright was an author who published her book *Letters on Female Education, addressed to a Married Lady* with advice on how to educate girls (Cartwright, 2010).

Moreover, in the television series *Bonanza* (1959-1973) the Cartwright family has been famous for refusing violence. There is no Mrs. Cartwright, as Ben, the father, has been married to three different women who all died and left him one son each (*Bonanza*, 1959-1973).

masculinity is what frustrates Ms. Cartwright and makes her become a vigilante who punishes masculine bullies to fight gender discrimination. She also punishes skeptics who “doubt” her. One television reporter, for instance, says “the masked mum’s crusade—is it female empowerment on steroids... or helicopter parenting gone too far?” (Flynn, 2014: 3). This question is not about doubt only, but actually represents gender-based discrimination, according to which a woman who becomes violent is criticized based on gender because to the reporter she is either a masculine second-wave feminist or an extremely overprotective helicopter mother. Instead of questioning psychological or social factors, such as the schools or the police, society queries the performance of this woman’s gender role as a mother.

From a post-feminist perspective, the women depicted in “Masks” break free from concepts of gender and become post-feminist vigilantes.¹⁴⁰ They punish all of the bullies and skeptics, regardless of their sex (Flynn, 2014: 3). This becomes clear when they punish the second bully, who is a girl herself (Flynn, 2014: 2). Flynn’s post-feminist approach is to create a vigilante who manifests the concept “mother.” Instead of writing a non-gendered person, she explicitly makes the women become the gendered stereotype of a “happy homemaker,” a woman who is traditionally considered to be inferior, and uses violence to fight gender discrimination, i.e., the belief of superior masculinity. Due to this, violence becomes a non-gendered tool of justice that is used regardless of legality and ethics.

6. Gender-Based Expectations and Verbal Misunderstandings in *Dark Places*

In *Dark Places*, again both the women and the men are violent, despicable, and corrupt, which is based on specific presupposed cultural gender performances and the effects of gender-based social conflicts on both sexes.

¹⁴⁰ The masks resemble the Guy Fawkes masks from the movie *V for Vendetta* (2005), in which the protagonist wears a mask and uses violence against a totalitarian government in England. This mask, he claims, depersonalizes him to make him represent an idea of freedom, which is similar to the rather feminist kind of idea the mothers have in Flynn’s “Masks.”

Dark Places consists of two storylines that take place in 1985 and 2010. The “present-day” plot, meaning 2010, is told by Libby Day as a first-person narrator, whereas the past is about her brother Ben and her mother Patty. The chapters alternate between Libby’s narration and Ben and Patty’s story of the events that led to this crime. The 1985 plot is not narrated by Libby but by an omnipresent and omniscient third-person narrator. The novel’s storylines are constituted to make both past and present follow a parallel structure revealing certain aspects of the investigative story in sequence to focus on the main characters’ emotional developments and give insight into their thoughts, particularly about not being able to adopt culturally prescribed gender roles.

In 1985, Ben Day struggles with culturally predetermined masculinity which is why he is believed to be a Satanist who allegedly strangled the oldest of his younger sisters, Michelle, then stabbed Debby and shot his mother Patty in the head (Flynn, 2009). Seven-year-old Libby, the youngest of the family, runs away and survives the massacre, not seeing what actually happens. Because Ben seems strange as he cannot perform his gender role, his sister’s testimony becomes the reason why he is imprisoned. Thereafter, Libby becomes an impoverished orphan who struggles with her gender role herself and therefore develops a negative attitude towards life and people (Flynn, 2009: 2). To avoid gender-based psychological conflicts, Libby suppresses certain memories of her family and the massacre into a so-called “*darkplace*,” an emotional state of mind, in which she isolates frustrating, depressing, or saddening thoughts (Flynn, 2009: 16). Instead of dealing with her problems, she represses them. Moreover, she becomes a compulsive liar and pathological kleptomaniac to deal with her gender-based frustration (Flynn, 2009: 82).

In 2010, Libby agrees to meet Lyle Wirth, a member of the so-called “Kill Club,” whose goal is to investigate unsolved criminal cases (Flynn, 2009: 24). For instance, the members of this club believe they have identified a contract killer, “the angel of debt,” who is a manifestation of a male stereotype, a masculine hero who cares for the weak, as he kills people with “bad credit and good life insurance” in order to help their families financially (Flynn, 2009: 52). Because the club members do not believe that Ben is

guilty, Libby agrees to investigate and interviews Ben in prison, her father, Runner Day, and Krissi Cates, who in 1985 was a young girl whom Ben had to supervise in school. It turns out that he kissed Krissi because she did not make him feel emasculated. Thereafter, she spreads the rumors that Ben molested her.

Later, when Libby finds Michelle's diaries and one of Diondra Wertzner's letters addressed to Ben, she ultimately figures out that her brother must have had a girlfriend in high school, whom he impregnated and who disappeared after his arrest because both were unable to perform their gender roles properly (Flynn, 2009: 249). Libby quickly finds Diondra's home, and, contrary to expectations, is welcomed until she finds out that she has a daughter, Crystal, who performs the role of a psychologically dependent daughter. She is told that Ben's secrets were intended to protect their family (Flynn, 2009: 486). After Libby secretly steals personal belongings from both characters, Crystal accidentally quotes Michelle's diary, which is why Libby realizes that their performances are pretended because Diondra must have stolen one of the diaries to conceal her trail and Crystal must be aware of the fact that her mother was present when the Days were killed (Flynn, 2009: 515). As soon as they realize this mistake, they cast off their performances of femininity and become violent against Libby, who manages to escape and call for help. In order to conceal their trail and perform their gender roles again, Diondra and Crystal burn down their house and run away, while, in his car, Lyle tells Libby that the police have caught a man named Calvin Diehl, who admits to being the above-mentioned "angel of debt" and confesses to have killed the Days. As a consequence, Ben is set free. Moreover, the belongings that Libby took contain DNA evidence, so the police manage to arrest Diondra despite her performance (Flynn, 2009: 530).¹⁴¹ Although this is how

¹⁴¹ While in the novel Libby steals a lipstick and a thermometer, in the movie adaptation she finds the necklace of Patty's grandmother (Flynn, 2009: 515; *Dark Places*, 2015). It is the first object the spectator gets to see when Patty is introduced in the movie. Libby finds it in Diondra's bathroom instead of catching Crystal quoting from Michelle's diary. Thus, it is the final clue that reveals that Diondra killed Michelle and stole the necklace afterwards. When the crime is solved and Libby gets the family's necklace back, it symbolizes the bond that is rebuilt and the end of the emotional struggles the Days had to overcome. Still, there is more to this

the main plot ends, the storyline about the events in 1985 helps to understand the gender-based causes of the killings that are based on coincidences and misunderstanding.

The storyline of 1985 is mainly about Patty and Ben. From his mother's perspective, Ben does not live up to the gender expectation of a young man as he is a difficult boy who is lazy, aggressive, and overly secretive (Flynn, 2009: 26-27). The reader gets to know about Ben's discontent with the family's poverty, his "rich but sleazy" girlfriend, the hatred for his father, his implicit need for a father figure and the constant feeling of being unmanly (Flynn, 2009: 73-75). Later, his behavior and the rumors about his pedophilia throw Patty into a state of panic and the compulsion to properly perform the role of a mother, so she leaves to search for Ben to put things straight (Flynn, 2009: 238-239). At the same time, Ben goes to Diondra who confronts him with the rumors. Diondra who is in the late stages of pregnancy, hides her baby bump because she is extremely afraid of her father, who expects her to properly perform the role of a daughter. To support her and properly perform the role of a husband and father, Ben not only buys children's clothing, but also thinks about dropping out of school and looking for a job as soon as he turns sixteen.

While Ben is confronted with the rumors, Patty finds the children's clothing underneath Ben's bed and panics, because she does not know how to handle his emotional conflicts with the concept of masculinity. Because of this, she is convinced they will need money they do not have for good lawyers to defend Ben in court. So, she obeys the patriarchy and hires the angel of debt who offers to kill her for a fee in order to financially secure her children's futures (Flynn, 2009: 422-423). In the meantime, Ben and Diondra get to know that he might be arrested soon since the police are looking for him. Coincidences and misunderstandings start to converge, so they plan to run away after taking the Day's savings to perform the gender roles of

cinematic device. Since the pendant of this necklace is a cross, it serves as a religious symbol of good and guidance in times of Satanism. Even in situations that seem hopeless, Patty and Libby can relate to the necklace and the good it represents as it is always present when they need it. In a way, the cross is the correspondent part to Satanism. These religions represent counterparts, comparable to the concepts of femininity and masculinity in the novels.

husband and wife somewhere else. All of a sudden, Michelle comes in and sees that Ben has impregnated his girlfriend. So, as their future gender performances are at risk, Diondra chokes Michelle to death. Because Ben has been emasculated by Michelle before, continues to struggle with masculinity, and also fears a future in which he cannot perform the role of Diondra's husband, he simply watches his sister being murdered. In the hallway next to the girls' room, Patty is stabbed by Diehl at the same time (Flynn, 2009: 502). As Debby tries to run away, Diehl kills her with an axe, grabs a shotgun, and ultimately shoots Patty, which is why he later feels frustrated because for the first time he does not feel like the masculine hero who comes to help and care for weak women, but instead realizes that he brought terror into their lives. The murders make Libby an orphan and lead to Ben's arrest, while Diondra runs away.

When *Dark Places* was made into a movie in 2015, Gillian Flynn and Charlize Theron, who plays Libby Day, said in an interview that men usually can play "[...] dark screwed-up roles and they're called anti-heroes, and when women do it they are [called bitches]" (Lowman, 2015). This idea of gender inequality in Hollywood movie productions is visible in both *Gone Girl* and *Dark Places*, in which "messed-up childhoods" affect adult lives (Lowman, 2015). Regarding feminism, "for Flynn, one of her pet peeves is when a man comes up to her and says, "I normally don't read books by a woman, but I really liked *Gone Girl*" (Lowman, 2015). Just like in *Gone Girl* and *Sharp Objects*, Flynn's main character in *Dark Places* is a woman undergoing emotional and psychological struggles. Still, Libby's gender-related conflicts are different. While, for instance, Amy and Adora want to conform to media culture and perform presupposed acts of gender by all available means, Libby is a sociopath who struggles with the performance of femininity. In a 2015 interview about the movie adaptation of *Dark Places* with *Entertainment Weekly*'s Jeff Labrecque, Gillian Flynn said that Libby's nastiness and meanness were thoroughly respected by writer / director Gilles Paquet-Brenner, so that the movie producers did not try to make her more consumable (Labrecque, 2015). It becomes clear that the concept of perceived femininity and the idea of psychological likability in a consumer / media culture is connected and therefore criticized by Flynn. Considering Libby's

non-feminine character traits and her struggles with gender, Flynn claimed, “that’s what makes this special, that’s what makes this interesting: that you’re asked to go on this adventure with someone that you might not actually really want to spend any time with in real life, because she would completely scam you. You might not like her, but she’s certainly going to keep your interest” (Labrecque, 2015). Just like Lisbeth Salander from Stieg Larsson’s *Millennium* series (2005-2017) or Lorraine Broughton from *Atomic Blonde* (2017), Libby Day takes part in a modern post-feminist approach to make women equal to men in movies, particularly in making moral ambiguity, violence, and maliciousness accessible to them. To Flynn, in modern literature there is more flexibility in the female characters considering that they have a “full range of good to evil” and that women “should be allowed the same range that men and male characters have” (Labrecque, 2015). This post-feminist notion is apparent in all her novels. Moreover, in this interview, Flynn claimed that she believes that the concept of new women, such as Libby Day for example, who have the same range as male characters and the same options as male actors, who play anti-heroes and “bad guys,” are good for Hollywood actresses and women in general, as there is “[...] a dearth of interesting characters for actresses to play, and I think most actresses are really sick of being the wife or the girlfriend or the mom or the understanding pal or the woman who comes in and explains things because she’s smart and wears glasses and then leaves immediately. I think they want to play meatier roles” (Labrecque, 2015).

In *Dark Places*, Flynn not only comments on femininity and gender but also on media culture that uses this social concept. The case of Lisette Stephens presents a recurring theme, a social criticism. In *Gone Girl*, the media was obsessed with Amy, the beautiful and intelligent woman who went missing; in *Sharp Objects*, pretty, young Camille gets a vast amount of attention after Marian is killed; and in *Dark Places*, media again continually focuses on the prettiest missing girls. One of the discussion questions proposed on Flynn’s homepage actually leads to this criticism as well. It says, “In considering the case of the missing girl Lisette Stephens, Libby thinks to herself, ‘There was nothing to solve. . . . She just vanished for no reason anyone could think of, except she was pretty.’ Do you think it’s strange that

Libby considers this an uninteresting case? What does her attitude toward Lisette say about her view of her own family's murder?" (gillian-flynn.com, 2015). In order to answer this question, it is necessary to say that the case of Lisette Stephens creates a sick form of love and jealousy in Libby. She says that Lisette's case is only media-hyped because she is pretty, which is the main reason she finds this case boring. Libby describes Lisette as "the kind of girl people noticed. The kind of girl the media bothered to cover when she disappeared" (Flynn, 2009: 48). This implicit jealousy is not only based on the need for attention, but also on a childlike competitive spirit. To emphasize this behavior, Libby says, "Out of all these murders, I wanted the Day booth to be the biggest. It was a blush of love: my dead people were the best" (Flynn, 2009: 48). This competitive spirit includes another reason why Libby is bored by the Stephens case, as she says that the motive for murder is not as complex as the motive for the Day massacre (Flynn, 2009: 48). Hence, it can be said that her disinterest is ultimately based on her jealousy. After thinking about this, she immediately remembers her mother warming up her toes in her childhood. This memory not only underscores Libby's childlike jealousy but also shows that not every memory of the past is moved to her darkplace. Shortly before Libby has to face her fears in her final catharsis, Lisette is found dead in a ravine (Flynn, 2009: 455). Thus, this problem of Libby's is solved immediately, since she does not have to care about attention any longer. Thus, Lisette's death is used to criticize the social perception of missing girls. As soon as Libby gets to know that her competitor has been dead for months, this story is finished. From there, the reader does not get to read anything else about Lisette or the crime. This is similar to the media-hype that is often created as long as such crimes are interesting. As soon as they are solved, the public interest in them vanishes immediately so the victims often only serve the purpose of making money for the media.

Libby's behavior does not reflect the basic idea of feminism, i.e., to overcome gender struggles. Instead she is a result of gender oppression and a depiction of how to deal with the feminine mystique in order to come close to the concept of happiness. Having said that, Libby herself unmasks the feminine mystique. According to Friedan (1963), the problem that has no name is influenced by media, education, social anticipation, identity crises,

science, and the transfer of domestic roles. Libby is aware of these elements of the feminine mystique and the consequential character traits that are influenced by these. Still, she is affected by this concept and submits to it because she does not have a family, a career, education, or money, and yet she wants these things by, for instance, becoming the focus of media attention. She is not even pretty according to the standards created by male domination and objectification (Dicker, 2008: 57). Her sense of lack according to the feminine mystique and the inability to fulfill her own femininity lead to an identity crisis. According to Friedan (1963: 156-160), Patty's overprotective motherhood is partly to blame, keeping in mind that she died when Libby was seven. Although it is unlikely that Patty's upbringing might have influenced Libby that much, it is also the sudden absence of a mother that leads to dysfunctional behaviors. With regard to the third wave of feminism, it is interesting to examine Libby's performative role of gender, as she does not really adapt to the culturally predetermined performance of femininity. Instead, she is a sociopath who struggles because she refuses to perform a role of gender. Therefore, she turns violent, aggressive, and offensive quite often. As it does not seem to help to eradicate the presupposed acts of gender that are expected from her, she still manages to find a new life plan. At the end of the novel, she frees herself from the feminine mystique, as she sets her brother free and reconciles with her aunt. She defeats her fears and her guilt, which is how an individual notion of happiness becomes possible for her. This is interesting, because happiness becomes an option as soon as the criminal cases are solved and, just like in the gender theories of Friedan and Butler, the misunderstandings are eventually cleared up. In all of her texts, Flynn uses the concept of misunderstandings as a part of her post-feminist agenda to scrutinize the given gender-based conditions that make non-gendered amorality, violence, and malice necessary. In doing so, she joins the ranks of a feminist tradition and aims at eradicating misunderstandings based on gender.

In *Dark Places*, this "Missing White Woman Syndrome" is criticized as a sexist media culture concept that, aside from the obvious racism and income-related discrimination, victimizes women because of their gender.

CNN correspondent Tom Foreman, for instance, commented on this phenomenon

invoked by Sheri Parks, a professor of American studies at the University of Maryland, College Park, during [an] interview [in 2006]”, saying, “Natalee Holloway, Lori Hacking, Laci Peterson. The list goes on and on and on. When pretty, young women—especially white ones—are killed or disappear, media storms often follow. There is no polite way to say it, and it is a fact of television news. Media and social critics call the wall-to-wall coverage that seems to swirl around these events, “Missing White Woman Syndrome.” [...] The phenomenon is characterized by critics as a short and cynical equation: Pretty, white damsels in distress draw viewers; missing women who are black, Latino, Asian, old, fat, or ugly do not (Foreman, 2006).

Of course, this is sexist as media culture focuses on women who adjust to their gender roles, particularly on women who are physically able to perform roles of femininity. Flynn’s critical comment is interesting as it shows that media culture is oriented, dominated, and controlled by concepts of masculinity, including what is considered to be “sexy” and therefore interesting in media reports. Due to the fact that not all women but only those who perform the gender role of an attractive white woman attract the attention of a patriarchal and racist society, all other women are socially sanctioned by exclusion as they are not able to perform this role properly.¹⁴² So, this criticism of patriarchal media becomes part of Flynn’s post-feminist

¹⁴² In terms of racialized post-feminism, one has to consider that Flynn’s female women are all white. “As Springer (2007) insists, black women have never been fully included in the post-feminist ‘having it all’ discourse, positioned as something to be desired and achieved” (Lewis et al., 2018). A reason for this could be the “angry black woman” myth, which has been used to stigmatize African American women as “sassy, ill-mannered, [...] tampered [and] aggressive” (Fundu, 2018: 1). It is difficult to argue whether Flynn’s novels are based on racialized post-feminism, as ethnicity is not really considered in her texts. One has to consider that, in the cinematic adaptations, the characters Tanner Bolt and Eileen Curry are played by Tyler Perry (2014) and Barbara Eve Harris (2018). Although these actors represent two important characters and make them African American, Flynn does not include one black woman in her texts who is extremely violent, malicious, or amoral. Whether this fact shows that her post-feminist approach excludes and marginalizes women of color needs further extensive analysis in terms of racialized post-feminism.

approach, according to which all women must be equally considered in media reports. Moreover, men and women should be considered equally as well, as to Flynn media reports should be gender neutral, which is why the patriarchal structures in media have to be eradicated. In terms of her post-feminist agenda, this critical comment shows that the physical appearances of women must not be the reason for social exclusion, so they have to be equally non-gendered regarding the negative attributes of women as well. Flynn aims at making gender equality possible by acknowledging every thought, feeling, action, and look as a human attribute that is non-gendered.

6.1 The Emotional Struggles of Libby Day

Libby is a female character who has been influenced by patriarchy and male domination since childhood, as she experienced sexism and male violence when she saw her father constantly oppress and humiliate her mother and allegedly witnessed her brother kill every female member in the family. In fact, her brother, representing patriarchy, takes what she loves most and ruins her future. Consequently, she is vastly dependent on donations and the generosity of a mainly male society. Thus, a very young, innocent girl is turned into an angry woman willing to resort to violence after being oppressed and left alone. Considering the post-feminist agenda behind Flynn's novel, Libby as a female character with these attributes becomes, on the one hand, unlikable but, on the other hand, an anti-heroine who is part of a post-feminist approach, a novel idea regarding gender equality.¹⁴³ The novel demonstrates that being good is a matter of definition. As the reader later learns, Patty abandoned the Days when she paid Calvin Diehl, a hitman, to kill her and was willing to leave her children without a mother. One could argue that she did so out of love and necessity, but there is more to it as patriarchy makes her act this way. As her husband takes away her money and her son's upcoming trial would incur expenses for her, she accepts Diehl's

¹⁴³ According to Tasker and Negra (2007), Libby fits their definition of both the post-feminist heroine, who is "vital, youthful, and playful [and her] opposite number, the "bad" female professional, [who] is repressive, deceptive, and deadly" (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 9).

offer. So, in her social life there are only men who are in charge. Due to financial problems, she even has sex with “Len the Letchy Lender,” a loan shark (Flynn, 2009: 102). In these male-dominated situations, Patty, who tries to fulfill her role as a mother and, moreover, performs the culturally prescribed acts of a father, fails in adequately performing both gender roles. Because of that, she loses to sexism and gender-based oppression when she cannot achieve happiness in culturally presupposed roles, which becomes the reason why the murders happen that make Libby turn into a violent woman who does not know how to fight patriarchal oppression and, therefore, uses both physical and psychological violence. The social concept of gender is omnipresent although not transparent in this novel.

Quite contrary to Patty, her sister Diane is both physically and mentally stronger, which is why she is referred to as “*Diane, the doer*,” who, for instance, was not afraid to pierce her sister’s earlobes when they were children (Flynn, 2009: 95). Diane is a supporting character, who acts as both a cheerful helper and a valve for venting Patty’s negative emotions. Throughout the novel, she becomes her sister’s bastion of calm and seems to be what second-wave feminists wanted women to be, i.e., strong, independent women who fight against all odds and do not need a husband at all. Patty, on the contrary, tries to be a stereotypical housewife and mother but fails at that effort, so she becomes a representation of what feminists try to change. She might have the right to vote, i.e., legal equality, but she tries to be submissive, domestic, and pure (Dicker, 2008: 21). Yet, Patty is not only a representation of a single woman who is oppressed by the concept of femininity and male-dominated assumptions about gender; throughout the plot of *Dark Places*, she develops a feminist resistance as she sacrifices herself for the future of her children. Of course, it is arguable that she fails as a feminist when she agrees to be killed, which is indeed a result of gender inequality and sexism. Still, she no longer obeys the feminine mystique’s idea of happiness that comes with the fulfillment of one’s own femininity, but instead becomes autonomous and true to her values as a woman (Friedan, 1963: 29). Moreover, Patty eradicates the performative acts of gender and breaks free from the binary concept that causes a lack of identity (Butler, 1990: 4, 13, 15, 23). Aside from Flynn’s post-feminist agenda, which deeply criticizes the

traditional gender roles, she also provides an example of a woman who represents a feminist notion by being independent, strong, and resolute. In contrast to Patty's gendered behavior, Diane initiates a catastrophe when she tells her sister about the rumors. In response, Patty panics and wants to speak to her son immediately, whereas her sister tells her to calm down and wait for him (Flynn, 2009: 165-168). In this chapter, Diane is the stronger counterpart of Patty, who performs the role of masculinity by becoming the compensatory husband and father who cares for the children but is strict with them, emotionally supporting Patty and providing the family with food (Flynn, 2009: 167). Her function as a feminist counterpart is emphasized when Patty realizes that her son might be in danger and she asks Diane to tell everyone else that Ben is not a pervert (Flynn, 2009: 171). She transfers her responsibility to protect her son to her sister because she is not strong enough to handle the situation. It is also Diane who takes over the aggressive, quick-witted role in discussions with other characters, for example Detective Collins, while Patty is mentally absent and not able to protect her daughter (Flynn, 2009: 359). In this situation, she is unable to fulfill the role of the good mother as her fears and worries start to control her actions. It becomes clear that these struggles are gender-based when Patty reflects on her family problems, saying "people think I'm a bad mother, that's why this is happening. [...] I'm not a *good* mother" (Flynn, 2009: 235). She persuades herself that her culturally prescribed performance is insufficient and therefore concludes that she is a bad mother who cannot take care of four children. Moreover, Patty's obsequiousness to gender performances and patriarchy becomes apparent a few hours later when she plans to go to the Cates's house and puts on better clothes and an expensive-looking pair of earrings to keep up appearances (Flynn, 2009: 291). As she tries to look nice and wealthy, she maintains a deceptive performance of gender. In fact, she tries to cover up her inability to be both mother and father by pretending that she lives up to society's presuppositions. An adjustment to this idea becomes part of a belief that capitulating to gender can solve cultural problems and prevent the family from becoming outcasts. Therefore, she does not come clear about the misunderstandings about her innocent son but rather apologizes to the Cateses and assumes the role of the guilty mother (just like Adora Crellin). "[...] I've

been trying to find him. I'm trying to straighten this out. Please," she says and further thinks to herself, "Please help me, please forgive me, please stop screaming" (Flynn, 2009: 299). She assumes a social role in which she feels guilty and blamed from the start although her family is innocent. This behavior can be related to a study about guilt proneness, empathy, and gender, conducted by Linda Torstveit, Stefan Sütterlin, and Ricardo Gregorio Lugob (2016). After the study confirmed their hypothesis that gender differences in guilt proneness contribute to the explanation of prosocial behavior, they intended to explain their findings by referring to Carol Gilligan (1982), who claims that

women are brought up to care for and be morally responsible for others, while men are raised to follow an ethic of righteousness and justice. This upbringing for men creates autonomy and some sort of separation of one's moral judgment of others. On other hand ethics of care emerges from a sense of responsibility. Gilligan (1982) suggests that boys are more likely to experience guilt for violating rules, while girls experience more guilt if their transgression is damaging their relation to others (Torstveit et al. 2016).

In their study, they also uncovered that "even though the findings indicate a gender difference that is consistent with earlier findings, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of individual differences, meaning that the gender differences should not be generalized. Cognitions, emotions and behavior of men and women overlap in many ways" (Katchadourian, 2010) (Torstveit et al. 2016). Considering this realization, *Dark Places* is obviously aimed to present gender extremes on a literary level to reveal an often not perceived guilt and blaming of women, particularly mothers, that constantly creates fear and makes women behave in certain gender-based ways. Just like the Cool Girl, a mother is oppressed by patriarchal fear to perform her gender role adequately. Otherwise, social exclusion is within the bounds of possibility. *Dark Places* as a staged reality is used to show that, due to patriarchal domination in society, women are not only oppressed but even blamed for the men's mistakes. In terms of post-feminism, *Dark Places* aims at increasing social awareness of this mostly unconscious blaming which is proof of gender inequality.

From a post-feminist perspective, Patty is probably one of the most important characters in Flynn's novels, as she permits a form of self-referred violence in the end and rebels against an oppressing system. Although this shows that she fails to perform her gender role and is punished for it, she achieves equality according to Flynn's post-feminist agenda. In *Dark Places*, Patty's failure does not lead to psychological punishment as in the other novels, but to one that immediately causes the downfall of a family. A combination of ambiguous misunderstandings, unfortunate situations, and a reprobate society lead to bad decisions that ultimately claim the lives of three female characters. Prior to this, however, the reader gets to see a gender-related transformation of Patty. She starts her day as a victim of those elements of patriarchy that were mainly opposed by first- and second-wave feminists. Before her life ends, she then transforms into a self-reliant and, most importantly, independent woman who takes over control and opposes the feminine mystique and the culturally prescribed acts of performative gender. In terms of post-feminism, she breaks free from the predeterminations of gender constructions by using violence and, although she dies immediately after doing so, she comes close to complete gender equality. In this approach, Patty is used for two post-feminist purposes, i.e., proposing a woman character that becomes brave and strong, thus equal to men, and killing her off to imply that in reality this kind of woman has to face certain struggles in society that still comprise unequal gender constructions.

6.2 Diondra Wertzner as the Female Perpetrator in *Dark Places*

Diondra Wertzner is vastly affected by gender and sex and, therefore, she exhibits behavior patterns that are like those of Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl* and Amma Crellin in *Sharp Objects*, i.e., she lies, has sex, and murders to get her way. In *Dark Places*, Diondra is probably the most violent woman character; however, she is, just like the above-mentioned women, oppressed by society, patriarchy, and gender roles. In one of her letters to Ben, Diondra shows her gender-based wickedness most strongly. She writes,

“11/5/84

Dear Stud,

I'm in biology and I'm fingering myself under the desk I am so hot for you. Can you picture my pussy? It's still nice and red from you. Come over to my house after school today, K? I want to jump your bones!!! I'm so horny, even now. I wish you'd just live with me whenever my parents are gone. Your mom won't know, she's so spacy! Why would you stay at home when you could be with me?! Get some balls and tell your mom to go to hell. I'd hate for you to come for a visit one day and find me getting some action somewhere else. JK! Oh I want to cum so much. Meet me at my car after school, I'll park over on Passel St.

See ya soon,

Diondra” (Flynn, 2009: 247-248).¹⁴⁴

This letter seems to be a sexy message at first sight, but it is actually also an insight into Diondra’s psychology. What seems to be a teenager’s letter expressing sexual desires and lust, is actually a sexist form of humiliation and a warning as well, when on the surface Diondra lures Ben with sex, but is in fact afraid of losing him and being alone. Aside from the fact that Diondra is not able to perform culturally presupposed gender acts, as described by Judith Butler, her sexual dominance is reminiscent of Betty Friedan’s theory about women who struggle with the feminine mystique and, therefore, have a lot of sex in order to feel alive (Friedan, 1963: 210). Diondra does not hesitate to exercise this power against Ben. Again, this relationship is portrayed as a typical dysfunctional partnership created by Flynn, in which the inequality of power leads to a feeling of inferiority and frustration and ultimately results in violence. Hence, Diondra is not different from Amma, Adora, or Amy, since she also craves love but is unable to adjust to her gender role.

She is a manipulative character who makes other people dependent in order to feel superior. Nevertheless, she is probably the most dependent

¹⁴⁴ Abbreviations, such as “K” (okay) and “JK” (just kidding), are considered teenage slang.

character in the novel. Apart from her emotional and sexual attachment to Ben, Diondra is also physically addicted. She is described as a person who smokes so much that she even smells of cigarettes after taking a shower (Flynn, 2009: 78). Both her emotional and physical attachments are emphasized in this, which means that she does not have as much power as she would like to. This craving for power is also what contaminates her relationship with Ben. Because she is two years older, she often patronizes and looks down on him in order to feel in control. She humiliates and emasculates her own boyfriend without really being aware of it. Furthermore, she often points out that he is poor to either demonstrate superiority or to manipulate Ben into doing something that she wants him to do. In this humiliation, she deprives him of his power and emasculates him to feel superior. Furthermore, Ben's emasculation by Diondra becomes clear in situations in which she makes him compliment her new clothes. In the novel, her socks, in particular, are emphasized. Since she only wears \$20 Ralph Lauren socks, she has approximately \$400 worth of socks in one drawer. According to Ben, these socks are worth probably half what his mother makes in a month (Flynn, 2009: 125-126). It quickly becomes apparent what kind of rich girl Diondra is. She is not preppy but rather flashy and wild and, therefore, is described as a rebel girl with rich parents and a rich people's attitude towards shopping (Flynn, 2009: 126). According to Ben, everyone knows her but does not really know her because she is the "New Girl" from Texas who justifies everything she does or wears by saying, "That's how they do it in Texas" (Flynn, 2009: 126). This is not just a method of justifying what she does differently from most people in Kinnakee; it is also a way of claiming and showing that she comes from a different place, a big city, which carries more prestige. According to this, the implied message is that Diondra is from a more modern and better place, and thus she wants to convince people that she is more modern and better than everybody else in Kinnakee. This behavior becomes part of her gender performance, as she justifies her non-feminine behavior and her inability to live up to traditional femininity by saying that she is the *New Girl* from a place where her gender performance is indeed appropriate. This strategy is of course supposed to disarm all those who criticize her gender performance because criticizing something "new"

makes the critics look old-fashioned. Diondra tries to be a rich and sleazy version of a *New Girl*, which is also why she wants to be superior to Ben, a poor farm boy. So, to have power and be the dominant partner in their relationship, she takes advantage of this social inequality and turns it into a gender inequality by making Ben feel inferior and ultimately emasculated. Thus, Diondra as a fictional character is used by Flynn to show that the performance of culturally prescribed gender roles, also as a *New Girl*, can lead to frustration that lasts over two decades. Although Diondra's case is exaggerated fiction, it represents Flynn's belief that gender performances affect the offspring of the performers as well. Moreover, Diondra as a violent and amoral woman, who seeks individuality by constantly switching between acts of femininity and masculinity, is used to emphasize a post-feminist claim. Instead of focusing on different gender performances, Flynn's claim is that one should rather focus on individuality, as demanded by post-feminism. Thus, her approach aims to show that gender performances have long-standing consequences and individuality could lead to happiness. In terms of post-feminism, this means that not only eradicating gender constructedness becomes relevant in Flynn's agenda but also that individuality, whether gendered or non-gendered, takes priority, even if it comprises amorality, violence, and malice.

Later, it is revealed that Diondra's parents do not care much about her, so that the lack of love and parental discipline as well as the feeling of loneliness and the constant absence of her parents explain their daughter's misbehavior and mendacity (Flynn, 2009: 136). In fact, it seems that Diondra tries to find love in performing the role of the *New Girl*. What is also striking is that Diondra is pregnant and will be a teenage mother. Since she is afraid to tell her parents about the pregnancy, it is obvious that social appearances and culturally prescribed roles in their family are of importance. In their article for *Obstetrics, Gynaecology & Reproductive Medicine*, Sinead M.C. Cook and Sharon T. Cameron explained social issues of teenage pregnancies, including "being more likely to live in poverty, being unemployed or having lower salaries and educational achievements than their peers. Furthermore, children of teenage mothers are more likely to become teenage parents themselves" (Cook et al. 2015). So, Diondra's parents are afraid that their daughter's

teenage pregnancy reveals to their social environment that, on the one hand, they are less special than they claim to be and that, on the other hand, they are bad parents. According to Cook and Cameron's article (2015), a mother paves the way. Having a daughter that is going to be a teenage mother is a threat to social appearances. Bringing up a child and passing on socially and culturally rooted issues is deeply connected in *Dark Places*, which can be seen in the relationship of Diondra and Crystal, showing that social struggles are cross-generational. This is striking because Diondra's failure in performing the role of a housewife and mother starts even before she is a biological mother—for example, her substance abuse during her pregnancy—and is representative of modern culture. According to a study conducted at the University of Texas at Austin in which “data from a large, nationally representative study (National Survey on Drug Use and Health) of youths in the United States between 2002 and 2012” were used, including reports from 97,850 adolescent girls between the ages of 12 and 17 of which a total of 810 said that they were pregnant, almost 60% of pregnant teenagers used one or more substances, “a rate that is nearly two times as great as that of nonpregnant teens” (American Statesman-Staff). Moreover, in this study, the researchers found “that the odds of substance use were roughly 50 percent lower among pregnant teens reporting consistent parental support and limit-setting, as well as those who expressed strong positive feelings about going to school [...]” (American Statesman-Staff). Still, Flynn's position is not to blame the mothers, because, on the one hand, violence makes them equal to men, and, on the other hand, their violent misbehavior stems from patriarchal oppression.

As the storyline continues, Diondra uses psychological violence towards Ben more and more frequently by verbally attacking him. This power struggle often results in dysfunctional behavior patterns on both sides. Just as in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Ben and Diondra's mutual craving for power over each other shows that both characters want to be superior and control their relationship. Again, two characters, who believe they are in love, lack happiness due to their identity crises. Their gender-based inability to perform gender-free identities leads to frustration, which, again, causes violence. Ben and Diondra struggle with their roles of masculinity and

femininity. Instead of figuring out and coping with the reason for this frustration, they instead seek a happy future based on a child, just like Albee's George and Martha. Their psychological dependency on this conceptual idea of gender roles then brings about the catastrophe of the novel. Regarding Fuller, Friedan, and Butler's feminist approaches, Diondra is not only affected by the male-dominated social concept that motherhood would lead to happiness but is also pushed into performing this role by all means (Fuller, 1845; Friedan, 1963; Butler, 1999).

6.3 Constant Emasculation and the Inability to be Manly Enough

Though this thesis is mainly about female violence caused by social oppression and gender roles in Gillian Flynn's oeuvre, men also suffer and carry out physical and psychological assaults.

Just like Nick from *Gone Girl*, Ben deals with his social appearance due to the public question about whether he did or did not commit the murders. Both characters feel emasculated and inferior to their female partners, which is why both have aggressive thoughts. Like Nick, Ben wants to be a good father, which is why he obeys the dominance of his girlfriend and most certainly would not leave her. While Nick is guilty of being a stereotypical macho and sexist without realizing that he has been programmed by patriarchy to want a Cool Girl, Ben is guilty of not being able to live up to the prescribed concept of masculinity. The common factor seems to be the gender-related inequality and shift of power in both their relationships. Hence, they fail to settle the balance of power and, therefore, cannot adjust to their gender roles, which brings about frustration and unhappiness.

The only person Ben really seems to care about is Libby. For instance, at the breakfast table Libby and Ben share an inside joke, in which Ben calls Libby "dirty bugger," whereupon she responds that he is a "mother hugger" and stages a laugh that is designed to please her brother (Flynn, 2009: 32-33). This good relationship is also the reason why Ben protects Libby. She is the

only female character to which he can relate. Diondra, on the other hand, is a character who is responsible for Ben's physical and emotional changes. These changes are depicted in discussions throughout the novel, such as at the breakfast table at the beginning. Ben's inferiority and his feeling of being emasculated and controlled by women become apparent at the table for the first time. As Patty demands that he has to have breakfast with his family, Ben refuses at first, saying that he has to get a few things done, but gives in and sits down after his mother stares him down (Flynn, 2009: 30). This again can be ascribed to Betty Friedan's theory about gender-related maladjustments caused by overprotective, dominating mothers and children who take over their mothers' roles and problems (Friedan, 1963: 156-160; 229-235).

The struggle for power, especially of the female characters in *Dark Places*, is a continuous theme throughout the novel. That is why Ben feels slightly happy when Libby claims that "Ben needs eggs cause he's a boy. A man" (Flynn, 2009: 32). It is his youngest sister who gives him the feeling of being masculine without intending to emasculate him. This rare event of happiness ends suddenly when Michelle tattles that Ben needs to take off his hat and reveal his black hair. The reader gets to know that Ben hated his red hair as a kid because he has been teased for it, but Patty worries that he hates his mother because she gave it to him and, thus, he obliterated it (Flynn, 2009: 34). Later it becomes clear that, although he hates his "fucked up faggoty black hair" and the feeling of being manipulated by his girlfriend into doing something he actually does not want to, he dyes it for Diondra (Flynn, 2009: 133, 255).

Ben gets a similar kind of affection from Krissi Cates. He enjoys that she is nice to him and cute. He likes that she is not like Diondra, "but sweet the way a girl should be" (Flynn, 2009: 140). In the whole novel, Ben never seems to get angry at Krissi, although she spreads the rumor about having had a sexual encounter with him. This public humiliation by Krissi is similar to the constant emasculation Ben has to face with his girlfriend. This time, he has to face the ultimate vilification because his reputation is destroyed by Krissi, who accuses him of being a child molester. In the eyes of many

people, pedophiles are not real men but rather social scum. Thus, he is publicly defamed to the greatest extent possible.

As mentioned above, Ben sees himself as a weak and useless boy, who wants to be a masculine man. This insecure person is useful to Diondra, who needs a submissive partner to exercise her superiority and violence. In the novel, Ben wants to be a useful man but is afraid because he does not know how to perform this role. He recalls that he could not learn anything “manly” from Runner. Regarding this, Ben believes that his father repaired the agricultural machinery and did not invite him to watch, but the reader later gets to know from Patty that Runner was incompetent (Flynn, 2009: 100-101).¹⁴⁵ He often did not finish what he started, which is why he probably never invited Ben to watch. “That’s men’s work,” is one of Runner’s phrases, of which Patty claims it is a method of her husband to include Ben as a male, whereas Ben believes that it is a way of his father to tell him to stay out of his way because he thinks of him as a “pussy” (Flynn, 2009: 74). Since emasculation is the key topic in this chapter, the misunderstanding of this phrase emphasizes that patriarchal influences also manipulate the self-perception regarding gender and masculinity. Runner as a character fits many sexist concepts of the past. He is a misogynist and thinks of himself as a superior man whose wife and children are his property. In fact, he wants this thought to be real and he even seems to try to adjust to this role, but, as his incompetence demonstrates, he cannot fulfill his role of masculinity, which is why he is frustrated as well. This frustration results in the fact that he cannot include his son in manly activities; he is a bad husband and father, and he financially ruins his family. So, like many men, he resorts to violence, alcoholism, and aggression. According to Richard O. De Visser and Jonathan A. Smith (2006: 598), “research reveals that men may use ‘masculine’ behaviors such as sexual violence or economic crime to assert their masculine identities when such identities are challenged or questioned (Willott and Griffin, 1999; Messerschmidt, 2000). This suggests that if alcohol consumption is seen to be a masculine behavior, then men who are

¹⁴⁵ “Runner” is a telling name: As this man is constantly unable to perform the gender role of a father, he runs away from the responsibilities that come with a family, only to return and run away again.

insecure in their masculine identities may use alcohol consumption to demonstrate masculine competence” (De Visser et al. 2006: 598).

In her post-feminist mode, Flynn uses Ben as a male character to comment on the fact that patriarchal oppression also affects men. Throughout the novel, he is constantly emasculated and, consequently, feels frustrated and also becomes slightly violent. It is interesting that he and Nick from *Gone Girl* never really become physically violent towards other people. While Nick becomes a part of the patriarchal oppression, Ben struggles to perform the prescribed acts of masculinity, which is why he is sanctioned by society. As he is not masculine enough according to culturally predetermined gender constructedness, he goes to prison for the crimes committed by two women. Moreover, he is accused of being a women’s killer. So, although he struggles with masculinity and is actually innocent, he is punished by women for killing women. In terms of post-feminism, Ben is sensitive, thoughtful and affectionate, which are character traits that many would ascribe to femininity. Because of these attributes, he is humiliated by the men and women characters in the story. While Trey and Runner mock him for being weak and inferior, the women claim that he is strange, creepy, or even a pedophile.¹⁴⁶ With regard to post-feminism, Ben is a young man whose character traits transcend the concept of masculinity and femininity. His attempt to be masculine by performing the role of a husband and father shows that the pursuit of gender predeterminations causes frustration. Instead of seeking individuality by embracing both feminine and masculine traits according to post-feminism, this male character becomes exemplary for many young men in America.

¹⁴⁶ “Several studies have found that masculinity and social adaptability, dominance, or high self-esteem tend to be found together in individuals regardless of their sex or gender identity: Masculine males tend to have the greatest self-confidence, self-esteem, and flexibility; feminine females tend to exhibit these qualities the least; while all others fall between the two extremes” (Devor, 1989: 32-33).

7. The Need to Live up to Gender Roles in *The Grownup*

In 2014, Flynn's short story *The Grownup* was originally published in George R. R. Martin's *Rogues* anthology under the title *What Do You Do?* and released as a book on its own in 2015 (Flynn, 2014). *The Grownup* seems to be a horror story at first but is rather another feminist thriller. This short story is about a female main character named Nerdy and the beginning of a relationship that is infested with lies, delusions, and power imbalance. Nerdy is a sex-worker, as she is paid to give men "handjobs," i.e., she stimulates men manually. The emphasis on sexuality, prostitution, and degradation becomes clear in the first line of the short story when Nerdy tells the reader, "I didn't stop giving handjobs because I wasn't good at it. I stopped giving handjobs because I was the best at it" (Flynn, 2014: 1). She works in an illegal shop that offers fortune-telling in the front and soft-core sex work in the back, which is why her "job" assumes a post-feminist position (Flynn, 2014: 6). Although the idea that her sex work is based on free choice makes this an element of third-wave feminism, the post-feminist claim here is that to Nerdy sex work is not sexist but should instead be considered non-gendered.¹⁴⁷ She simply does it for a living and is "the best at it." From a post-feminist perspective, she pursues individuality in doing what she is good at, although many would argue that sex work is in fact sexist oppression of women. Due to her talent in pleasing men manually, her hand is affected with carpal tunnel syndrome after three years, which is the only reason she becomes a fortune-teller later on. While Nerdy works at "Spiritual Palms" (pun intended), Susan Burke, a new customer, comes in and asks for her help. She struggles with her stepson's behavior, which she ascribes to the haunted house they live in (Flynn, 2014: 6, 15, 19-20). Because she offers her \$2,000 for twelve visits, Nerdy accepts and promises a cleansing of the house (Flynn, 2014: 25). Later, in the house, she gets to know Miles, the fifteen-year-old

¹⁴⁷ Snyder-Hall (2010) argues that sex workers who refused "the label of 'victim,' [...] offered an alternative view of feminism that emphasized their right to pursue their own desires". To her, "feminism [...] is about 'personal empowerment', and 'the choice to be a stripper [...] is personally empowering' (qtd. in Snyder-Hall, 2010: 257)".

stepson, who obviously has emotional problems. For example, he vomits into Nerdy's purse and is said to have cut off the cat's tail (Flynn, 2014: 39, 46).¹⁴⁸ As the situation in the "haunted house" seems to escalate, Susan's alleged plan is revealed to Nerdy. Miles tells her that his stepmother found out that Nerdy was her husband's sex worker for over two years, meaning that she gave him handjobs on a permanent basis. Because of that, Susan plans to murder Nerdy and also Miles, whom she does not like at all, in order to kill two birds with one stone. Out of fear, Nerdy runs away with Miles, who suddenly wants to go to a supernatural convention in Chattanooga, Tennessee and admits that it was not his stepmother's plan to murder them (Flynn, 2014: 58). He claims that he manipulated Nerdy into taking him to the convention. In fact, he also says that both characters' disappearances would be in Susan's favor. As Nerdy does not know whether Susan's plan is to kill them or whether Miles is a master manipulator, she takes him to the convention and thinks about pretending to be his mother henceforth in order to have a sharp partner in life and to offer him a grownup's way of living (Flynn, 2014: 65).

The story seems quite simple: a vengeful wife lures her husband's young "mistress" into her house to kill her until it is revealed that the whole plan is a scam of the stepson in order to run away and live his own life. Still, there is more to it, since *The Grownup* offers another perspective on gender-based frustration and violence. The emotional struggle that comes with adjusting to culturally presupposed roles is also one of the main problems presented in this short story. When Nerdy tells the reader about her occupation, she immediately refers to her mother, who, according to society and culture, was unable to be a good mother. It is said that she was not a nice lady, although she did not have a drug or alcohol problem. Instead, she had a working problem, i.e., she was very lazy. According to Nerdy, they begged twice a week, because her mother tried to make as much money in as little

¹⁴⁸ As in *Scooby Doo*, there is a rational explanation for the fabricated haunted house story in *The Grownup*: While the cat is a manx, which does not have a tail at all, Miles claims that he wrote and published a horror story about the former residents on a home page in order to manipulate his mother to get Nerdy into the house so that he could use her to run away with her to attend a supernatural convention (Flynn, 2014: 55).

time possible (Flynn, 2014: 2). As an aside, Nerdy states that stains are what she remembers most about her childhood: “I couldn’t tell you the color of my mom’s eye, but I could tell you the stain on the shag carpet was a deep, soupy brown, and the stains on the ceiling were burnt orange and the stains on the wall were a vibrant hungover-piss yellow” (Flynn, 2014: 3). This not only reflects the inability of her mother to live up to her role as a caregiver and home manager, but it also emphasizes the emotional distance caused by this failure. Instead of providing a clean home for her daughter, she took her to beg for money. In doing so, they followed a pattern, which again reflects a social conflict: Their first choice was out-of-town church people, since they usually feel they have to help poor people. Then they were looking for women in sets of two and single women, who have an open look one could sympathize with (Flynn, 2014: 3-4). They also asked young men with beards or guitars for money, but never stopped men in suits or those wearing thumb rings. This pattern highlights a typical view of gender-based characteristics and stereotypes, such as the will to help. It is implied that, while women, particularly singles, and young hippie/hipster-men are willing to help, successful alpha-men refuse to do so. Flynn takes up sexist clichés with respect to typical behavior patterns and makes her characters manipulate these people’s psyches into making them work in their favor. In a way, Nerdy and her mother are able to take advantage of these stereotypes and the cultural and psychological concept of gender clichés.

The above-mentioned emotional distance again becomes clear when Nerdy says that her mother “was one of them. The needy. She was not proud . . .” (Flynn, 2014: 5). She claims that her mother was sly although she was immensely lazy (Flynn, 2014: 6). Furthermore, she explains that, although there are differences, she is quite similar to her mother. She says of herself that she has no pride but is much more ambitious, which is why she was a better beggar and left her mother at the age of sixteen. In keeping with the motto “*You made someone feel good and they gave you money,*” she soon became a soft-core sex worker (Flynn, 2014: 6). At this point, one has to consider that her mother’s choices and her background of poverty forced her into living a life in which she has to prostitute herself.

The Grownup is narrated by Nerdy who uses her inner monologues to tell the readers about the events in the story. As similar to the monologues used in Flynn's novels, this narrative technique makes possible an insight into the protagonist's emotions and thoughts and also creates sympathy, although the storytelling becomes unreliable. In terms of post-feminism, this makes the readers extremely dependent on her view. Whether she tells the truth or lies about the story is up to her, which means that Flynn proposes the idea that gender must not affect the narration, which empowers Nerdy as a female narrator, regardless of the truth or what the other characters, particularly the male counterpart, might have to say about her.

As her monologue continues, Nerdy explains the difference between customers who come in for manual stimulation and those who pay for sexual intercourse. It is said that "He's unique, the man who comes in for a handjob. [...] A handjob guy is a very different creature from a guy who wants a blow job or a guy who wants sex" (Flynn, 2014: 7-8). According to Nerdy, her customers never want more than masturbation, because they do not consider this sexual act cheating or they are not courageous enough to ask for sex. She claims that these "nervous married men" have midlevel, powerless jobs and are tense due to the risk they take. "They want you friendly and pleasant but not weak. They don't want to feel like predators. They want this transactional. Service-oriented" (Flynn, 2014: 8-9). The male clients are depicted as weak and anxious persons, who do not have power either in their marriages or in their jobs. On the one hand, they betray their wives on a sexual level in order to feel superior; on the other hand, they simply crave an equal sexual relationship, meaning that they do not want superiority over the sex workers but a power balance. It becomes obvious that these men are also not able to live up to their roles as superior husbands and manly breadwinners. The situation is similar to the marriage of Amy and Nick, who also struggle with their roles. While there is an imbalance of power, Nick also cheats on Amy in order to feel superior again. As the reader later learns, Susan Burke's husband is one of Nerdy's customers, which is why the situation gets out of control. To a certain degree, the feeling of being emasculated leads to an emotional impotency, a form of frustration that the men answer inappropriately as they cheat as a form of vengeance. The

constant coming and going of the feeling of being empowered is amplified in this aspiration for superiority. Thus, both *Gone Girl* and *The Grownup* depict marriages that are invaded by power imbalance, betrayal, and emotional impotency. Flynn uses these elements to show that men are equally frustrated in such marriages and do not approve of gender inequality and patriarchy because they are unable to properly perform their roles of a husband. So, they emotionally reject these performances and, therefore, the superiority of masculinity. This is interesting in terms of post-feminism because it leads to the conclusion that men reject a position of power due to gender-based frustration. Thus, Flynn proposes the idea that they also dislike gender inequality based on performances of masculinity and femininity and would like the predeterminations that come with the mere existence of gender and its constructedness to be eradicated. The post-feminist claim of individuality becomes relevant in this case because, by presenting Nerdy's clients this way, Flynn proposes the idea that complete gender equality requires every possible human condition to be non-gendered.

In the subsequent part of Nerdy's monologue, she tells the reader that she became a fortune-teller because of the pain that comes with her carpal tunnel syndrome. According to her experiences, her clients are almost all women who either come in to have fun or want to believe in her divination due to personal despair (Flynn, 2014: 12-13). As in *Gone Girl*, the characters seem to have emotional and, most certainly, marital problems: Because their husbands deal with their own struggles by having a sexual encounter with a "Cool Girl," the housewives want to be lied to and repress the pain that comes with reality. In terms of gender, this represents a society in which women are dependent on fake realities and gendered identities that lead to frustration because they adopt and perpetuate stereotypes of femininity, which they use to perform their gender roles. They would rather believe the lies of a fortune-teller instead of knowing what really causes their emotional problems. Nerdy concludes that they look for a cheap therapist, which she is often not able to play since she does not have any sympathy for them. She explains her antipathy or rather her lack of interest as follows:

It was hard to feel sorry for them. I tried to because you don't want your mystic, the keeper of your future, to roll her eyes at you. But I mean, come

on. Big house in the city, husbands who didn't beat them and helped with the kids, sometimes with careers but always with book clubs. And still they felt sad. That's what they always ended up saying: "But I'm just sad." Feeling sad means having too much time on your hands, usually. Really. I'm not a licensed therapist but usually it means too much time (Flynn, 2014: 13).

According to this quote, the women, who come in for a fortune-teller's advice, feel sad due to unidentifiable reasons, which is why Nerdy claims that they simply have too much time. Again, there is more to it, as the female characters in *Gone Girl*, *Sharp Objects*, *Dark Places* and also in *The Grownup* cannot live up to their culturally and socially presupposed gender roles, which, sometimes unconsciously, leads to frustration and ultimately to violence. This quote is essential in depicting this social conflict because most of the women who employ a fortune-teller's services live in big houses and have non-violent, supportive husbands. Still, they are sad, which is attributable to the inability to be a good mother and wife or to the inability to be someone else, to be free, so to speak. They struggle with their lives due to the identity crises caused by the feminine mystique described by Betty Friedan and the gender trouble examined by Judith Butler. All of these female characters want more; whether "more" refers to being a career woman, housewife or mother is unknown to the reader (Friedan, 1963: 20). The fact that their husbands betray them, emotionally and also sexually, emphasizes what Butler explained regarding the concepts of binary gender and sex. The concept of "man" and "woman" is said to lead to unhappiness because it causes a lack of identity and is therefore, in *The Grownup* as well, questioned as both male and female customers seek affirmation and happiness in going to a fortune-teller.

Before introducing Susan Burke to the reader, Nerdy tells about one of her regular guests, Mike Audley, who is referred to as a "sweet dorky rich guy" (Flynn, 2014: 15). It is later revealed that Susan and Mike are married and as they cannot live up to their marriage, they get a divorce, which later is attributed to Nerdy's service as well. As she wants to be Miles's compensatory mother at the end of the short story, one can conclude that she feels lonely too and tries to compensate by pretending to be able to live up to

a culturally presupposed role of femininity, i.e., the role of a mother. All the female characters who come to see a fortune-teller in *The Grownup* feel lonely, neglected, and, therefore, frustrated in their marriages. As opposed to these women, Susan Burke is said to be different. Nerdy claims that she seems smarter (Flynn, 2014: 15-17). After talking to her for the first time, Nerdy gets to know that Susan has problems with both her stepson and the house she lives in. “Miles was never a sweet boy” she says to emphasize that he is aggressive, angry, and threatening, while it is also said that he had to move to the city where he does not have any friends (Flynn, 2014: 22-23). Again, his violent behavior is attributed to the feeling of being emasculated, as he had to leave familiar surroundings. Just like Ben from *Dark Places*, Miles answers the perceived emasculation that comes with the lack of a father figure and the inability of his stepmother to adjust to the role of a good mother with violence on both physical and psychological levels. As similar to the setting in *Gone Girl*, an old historic house becomes the site of a struggle that is related to gender-based social conflicts. This Victorian house also becomes a place of deceptions and illusions that lures both the characters and the reader into scrutinizing the semblance (Flynn, 2014: 27).¹⁴⁹ Instead of providing for a well-functioning marriage, the house in *The Grownup* is used to tell a horror story, which both Nerdy and the reader are tricked into believing. At the end of the short story, it is unclear whether Susan lured Nerdy into her house in order to kill her out of revenge or whether this story is actually Miles’s manipulative way of getting out of the house. Indeed, this open ending is irrelevant since the focus of the short story is rather on the characters’ emotional developments based on culture and society, their decisions regarding their futures, and their ways of manipulating one another into believing their self-involved lies and delusions. In deciding which path to take for the future, the characters lay the foundation for a gender-based catastrophe. As I will explain later, the inability to live up to their decisions will result in frustration and sadness (and, most certainly, in violence). *The*

¹⁴⁹ In Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), the setting is also a Victorian house. On a hill, the Bates house serves the purpose of confusing, as it becomes a murder scene and makes the protagonists and the viewers question how Norman Bates and his mother are implicated in the murder of Marion Crane.

Grownup, then, differs from Gillian Flynn's previous novels since it depicts the beginning, a prequel of the social conflicts that could escalate in the future. While *Gone Girl*, *Sharp Objects* and *Dark Places* focus on the outcome of the problems the characters cannot deal with, *The Grownup* provides a story that may lead to a similar situation in the future.

All the delusions, regardless of whether they are true or false, are built upon concepts that are based on stereotypes, which is why Miles is able to use certain notions in order to make his opponents behave just the way he wants and predicts them to. When, for example, Nerdy asks him whether he really threatened to kill his brother, Miles answers, "It says more about her that she believed me than it does about me that I said it" (Flynn, 2014: 60-61). He indirectly says that Susan cannot just be manipulated but that she is also a bad mother, since she was tricked into believing that her stepson is able to hurt his brother. Regardless of whether he really did so, the basic belief that he is able to hurt another person emphasizes the morbid interdependence of mother and son. Miles also explains that he is not violent at all and that, for instance, his babysitter fell down the stairs without him pushing her. His violence is open to dispute. Although he does not really use physical violence, he is indeed violent on a psychological level. Vomiting in Nerdy's purse and manipulating other people into being scared and acting out in a dangerous way are clearly forms of emotional violence. In a way, he terrorizes those around him. This psychological terror is used in the discussion with Nerdy too. Instead of telling the truth, he keeps her guessing about the cat's tail, saying, "Ha! Good point. So someone's lying to you. I guess you'll have to decide which story to believe. Do you want to believe Susan is a nutjob or that I'm a nutjob? Which would make you feel more comfortable?" (Flynn, 2014: 62-63). He continues this form of terror by saying that at first he thought that they should become friends, "Road-trip buddies," so to speak, but then changed his mind in order to make Nerdy understand that he is the one in charge. This statement is most certainly the plainest reference to male domination, sexism, and power imbalance. Miles, who seems to have suffered under the indirect oppression and emasculation of his parents, makes clear that he wants total control, meaning that he wants power. As opposed to his father, who visits Nerdy to talk about books and to

have a feeling of power balance, his son seizes power in order to compensate. Both ways lead to frustration, since the root of all evil is neither the delusion of equality nor being superior. Instead the problem is raised by the initial inequality that ultimately creates frustration, which, in turn, leads to violence.

In *The Grownup*, the correlation of frustration and violence is examined in its early stages. For instance, to answer what he is going to say to his father, Miles tells Nerdy, “Let’s just remember that when you have two parents who hate each other and are always working or traveling and would like you out of their lives anyway, you can say a lot of things. You have a lot of room to work with” (Flynn, 2014: 65). Here, Miles not only demonstrates his abilities and the power he has by manipulating other people, but he also implies that, due to the hatred and constant absence of his parents, he was influenced in a negative way. This is possibly the most important factor affecting his gender perception and his violent behavior. He comes from a broken home, his parents are divorced, his father gets handjobs from a sex worker, his step-mother is emotionally oppressing and, in all probability, loves her own son more than him. It is beyond dispute that a young boy would feel frustrated living under such conditions. One could even argue that he looks for a compensatory mother in Nerdy, one that is lonely and desperate enough to play this role although she is in fact forced into playing it. In a way, Miles’s personality is a mixture of certain traits of Amy Dunne and Ben Day. He is a likable character, both manipulative and smart as well as suffering from emasculation and impotence with regard to power and maturity.

Before deciding to become a “*sweet little mom*,” Nerdy vindicates herself by saying that Miles is possibly a sociopath but still very likable (Flynn, 2014: 66). She has a good feeling about him, which emphasizes that she is also manipulated by Miles and by society and culture. She believes she has found a partner who is smart and who behaves manipulatively, just like she did in the past. She compensates for her own childhood by teaming up with a child in order to delude everyone else and not to be lonely anymore. With regard to Friedan’s theory (1963: 229-235), Nerdy takes over her own mother’s role instead of looking for a new life plan in order to be free from the feminine mystique. Furthermore, Friedan’s theory about mothers being

the reason for their children's maladjustments is applicable to this short story, for both Nerdy and Miles have mental issues they cannot cope with (Friedan, 1963: 156-160). This is relatable to both Freud and functionalism as Miles makes Nerdy act according to the idea that "anatomy is destiny." He uses her gender-related identity crisis to make her take over the role of his compensatory mother and, regarding Freud, he wants her to be "a child-like doll" who lives to be loved by patriarchy, respectively by Miles (Friedan, 1963: 58-59, 79, 99).

Ultimately, this desire created by male domination and objectification brings about a catastrophe in the future. At the end of *The Grownup*, Nerdy and Miles run away together. While this is Miles's opportunity to leave his step-mother and go to the convention in Chattanooga, Nerdy thinks of this new situation as a chance to leave behind her loneliness and to start over. She thinks about pretending to be Miles's mother in the future (Flynn, 2014: 58, 65-67). According to this, she will lie about her whole existence, which in each instance is going to fail because there is more to being a mother than simply driving around an adolescent boy. This idea will ultimately lead to frustration and violence and is a recurring element of Flynn's stories that results in a catastrophe in the end, which is why it is highly probable that Nerdy and Miles will have to deal with the social conflicts that come with the delusions they will try to live up to. Due to the impossibility of adjusting to these lies, they will face despair and sadness. The form and extent of the catastrophe is left to the reader's imagination. So, how is this short story part of a post-feminist agenda proposed by Flynn when she writes about a young man who makes a woman perform the presupposed role of a mother? *The Grownup* is relevant in this agenda because it shows the initial situation and the gender-related motives instead of a conclusion to patriarchal oppression in a relationship that is based on imperceptible concepts of femininity and masculinity. Regarding her post-feminist notion, the morbid mother-son relationship of Nerdy and Miles highlights the enormous influence of gender on two extreme performative roles resulting in extreme violence and submissiveness. While, in her novels, the male characters usually oppress women without realizing that they have become executives of patriarchy and the female characters usually become violent and malicious in one way or

another, in *The Grownup* Miles is the one who seems to be in total control. He exercises psychological violence over a female character who is as submissive as she is susceptible to being oppressed.

In terms of feminism, an autonomous woman is transformed into a heteronomous one by making herself dependent on a male character. In fact, she starts to obey patriarchy and its predetermined gender roles, for she was socially excluded before. Although the post-feminism is quite obvious here, it is important to mention that Nerdy is not a character who is beyond feminism at all. Flynn's approach is to make a woman, who is actually post-feminist to a certain extent, adopt the prescribed role of femininity. From a post-feminist perspective, this seems to make no sense at first, as one could ask why a woman, who is "free" without being susceptible to amorality, violence, and malice, would intentionally obey sexist structures of male dominance. As I mentioned above, she is frustrated because she is socially sanctioned for not being able to perform her gender role although she represents the post-feminist notion of being independent and individual. This frustration is based on two factors: constant patriarchal oppression and the experiences that come with the failures of other people's gender performances. So, instead of using her initial situation to achieve post-feminist goals, she agrees to perform the prescribed role of a mother, which, according to Flynn's mode, is condemned to failure. Because Nerdy fails to focus on breaking free from gender constructedness, she ultimately surrenders to cultural predeterminations of femininity. Here Flynn's post-feminist agenda becomes clear as she uses this woman character's surrender to demonstrate that, on the one hand, breaking free is not definite and needs constant awareness, and, on the other hand, that culturally prescribed acts of other people have an effect on women as well. *The Grownup* as part of Flynn's oeuvre demonstrates that an individualistic life according to post-feminism needs permanent analysis and awareness.

8. The Duality of Sexism and Feminism: Female Violence as a Consequence of a Consumer Society's Preconceived Gender Roles

After having focused on the three waves of feminism, representative feminist texts, and Flynn's engagement with gender-based problems and social conflicts in her novels, I will now relate these approaches to each other to answer the initial key question how Gillian Flynn uses but moves beyond the various waves of feminism in order to suggest a post-feminist agenda in which violence, malice, and amorality are necessary conditions of complete gender equality. In doing so, the core statement of my dissertation differs from Ganteau and Onega's assessment, who argue that these conditions allow "men to feel they might find themselves wronged by women [and] defend themselves against a kind of violent sexual exploitation by women" (McRobbie, 2008: 36; Ganteau and Onega, 2017), and, hence, dismiss the idea that writing amoral, malicious, and violent women is post-feminist. Due to the fact that the above-mentioned conditions cannot be ascribed to a feminist wave in particular, I will try to examine progressive feminist suggestions in Flynn's novels against the backdrop of the influence of imperceptible presuppositions of gender and feminist violence. To do so, I will ascribe the social conflicts portrayed in Gillian Flynn's novels to the feminist waves and particularly to the theoretical gender approaches of Margaret Fuller, Betty Friedan and Judith Butler. Furthermore, I will analyze the causes, the effects, and the outcome of each conflict against the backdrop of gender, sex, and power-related oppressions. Although each novel depicts social conflicts and cultural problems in a different way, they have in common that the outcome of the conflicts, i.e., the frustration and violence, is always based on the basic idea of presupposed gender.

Feminism is a mode that is present in all of Gillian Flynn's novels. All her fictional characters struggle with certain social conflicts based on some kind of gender-based inequality. While both male and female characters often suffer because they cannot adjust to their roles, the novels are not just about men conforming to the norm and women being deemed insufficient and inferior. Specific elements of the first wave of feminism and Margaret

Fuller's perspective on inequality are present and reflected on in Flynn's texts, such as the conflicts that come with social expectations (Dicker, 2008: 21-25; Fuller, 1845). Women had to adjust to the roles of housewife and mother, they were considered to be physically and intellectually inferior and weak, and they were supposed to obey their husbands' rules (Fuller, 1845: 24, 100). As mentioned above, the female characters written by Flynn often suffer due to the presupposed role of a housewife and mother. Moreover, education and the concept of power, which is connected to it, are discussed, reflected upon, and turned upside down. For instance, Amy Dunne, who marries Nick after pretending to be a "Cool Girl," is confronted with the inability to live up to her role and faces patriarchal oppression. Her husband, who makes her perform the role of a Cool Girl, then betrays her and wants to leave afterwards (Flynn, 2012: 299). In order to seize power, Amy uses her intellect and education to plan both revenge and the capture of Nick. Here, her frustration and violent behavior patterns turn the phallogocentric concept and the male-dominated presuppositions regarding marriage and gender upside down (Dicker, 2008: 21). Amy seizes power by making her husband adopt the presupposed, traditional roles of husband and a father. In doing so, she pretends to live up to the corresponding gender role of a housewife and mother to acquire an identity and, consequently, happiness and fulfillment. By pretending to perform traditional gender roles according to the feminine mystique, *Gone Girl* shows and criticizes a method of dealing with gender-related struggles (Flynn, 2012). Then there are Amma Crellin, Patty Day, and Diondra Wertzner, characters who are frustrated in their present situation and the perceived inequality that is a result of what Barbara Welter called the "Cult of True Womanhood." So, they become physically or psychologically violent, e.g. by hiring a contract killer, by constantly emasculating weaker characters, and by using sex in order to get their way, instead of breaking free from having to be pious, pure, domestic, and submissive (Dicker, 2008: 21-22). There is not one single character in Gillian Flynn's novels (and in the short story), who adapts to the "Cult of True Womanhood" and patriarchal presuppositions, although they are usually required to perform culturally presupposed acts of gender. Moreover, not a single female is able to deal with the consequences of the inability to perform these acts. In the novels,

fulfilling these social norms is culturally expected, which is why the failure of performance is sanctioned. Still, it emphasizes that women are complex, particularly regarding their morals, although or precisely because they cannot perform acts of predetermined femininity. In this post-feminist agenda, morally complex women characters become an important step in the feminist claim of gender equality, as it shows that this goal is obstructed by the above-mentioned social sanctions. According to this post-feminist approach, women want and need behavioral complexity that is non-gendered in order to be equal to men.

While the first wave of feminism fought against the idea that money, work, and sexual desires were reserved for men, neither of the “men” in the novels comes close to living up to this idea, which is why none of them would be regarded as masculine in the traditional sense (Dicker, 2008: 22). Nick, for instance, fails at being a good husband and breadwinner, Ben is permanently emasculated for not being manly and strong enough, and Miles becomes a violent sociopath as he comes from a broken home and constantly feels the need to perform the gender role of a grownup. Not only do they fail in adequately performing the role of a “man,” they also fail to break free from the concept of “masculinity.” As none of the characters, women or men, adjust to their gender-based roles, they become social or emotional outcasts (Dicker, 2008: 22). In *Dark Places* (2009), Patty becomes an outcast because she cannot live up to the role of both mother and father, so she is culturally stigmatized as a bad mother (Flynn, 2009: 102). Even after she is killed, people spread rumors about her, for example, that she used to be a prostitute (Flynn, 2009: 110). As a consequence, Libby, who is traumatized and socially incompetent, lives alone and cannot handle the company of other people. She permanently steals and hurts to cope with her gender-related psychological struggles (Flynn, 2009: 82-83). Thus, she has neither a husband and children nor conforms happily to the “*occupation: housewife*” (Friedan: 1963: 7). In *Sharp Objects* (2010), Camille is not only a social outcast but also one who has been marked due to her scars, stigmatized, so to speak.¹⁵⁰ What all the

¹⁵⁰ The episode titles of the television series of *Sharp Objects* are words that Camille cut into her skin (2018).

mentioned characters have in common is that they keep quiet about their oppression and frustration. Instead, they rebel in psychologically morbid, maladjusted ways in order to overcome the feeling of not having power. While many women in the nineteenth century felt empowered in their roles of housewife and mother, being caretakers and “domestic managers,” not every character in Flynn’s novels feels the same way (Dicker, 2008: 24). Adora, Camille, and Diondra try to adjust to this role, whereas Amy, Camille, and Libby try to break free from this classical idea of a woman’s role in order not to be subject to these culturally presupposed standards (Dicker, 2008: 21-25).

The main goal of the first wave, i.e., opening up opportunities such as suffrage, fits every intention and decision of Flynn’s characters, particularly the women (Rampton, 2015). Advancing the feminist notion that women shall be equal by allowing them to be as evil and violent as men, Flynn reflects the first wave’s goal to grant women more rights as her novels deal with a similar form of male-dominated reign claiming that women are their husbands’ property. Margaret Fuller’s comparison to slavery seemed to be far-fetched and inappropriate although it emphasized the role of women at that time quite properly (Fuller, 1845: 13). It represents the strife for the development and the conditions of life and freedom (Fuller, 1845: 5). While Fuller demanded the same rights for both men and women in the nineteenth century, Amy uses violence in order to attain power and thereby equality in their relationships (Fuller, 1845: 5; Flynn, 2012). From this perspective, every character discussed so far is frustrated due to the gender inequality described by Fuller and, therefore, confuses power with equality and becomes physically or psychologically violent towards other characters in order to feel superior and happy.

In *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Fuller also refers to the ancient mythology of *Orpheus and Eurydice*, which reflects men’s lack of faith in women and the hope that the improvement of the women’s situation will also improve the men’s situation (Fuller, 1845: 11-12; Haralson, 1998: 165). Flynn’s novels refer to this idea, as her characters do not really trust each other and hope that improving their own situation will also be the best for their partners. Amy, for instance, forces Nick, who does not trust his wife at all, into having a baby and staying with her, while Ben does not trust

Diondra's competence as a wife and mother but tries to be as masculine as possible to make the best of it. Fuller's statement "You are not the head of your wife. God has given her a mind of her own" becomes the incentive in the need for freedom and equality in Flynn's novels (Fuller, 1845: 15-16). Being and having more is aimed to improve their conditions and, due to the fact that they do not really know what to *be* and *have* as well as how to improve what is wrong in their relationships, this uncertainty in the need for freedom and equality ultimately leads to inequality, frustration, and violence. Before the first wave of feminism was successful, the main fear, particularly of men, was that gender equality might cause the destruction of the beauty of the home, the violation of the delicacy of the sex, and the degradation of the halls of legislation (Fuller, 1845: 18). This main fear is taken up by Flynn, who portrays interpersonal relations that are in fact aimed to destroy the beauty of home, violate the delicacy of the sex, and degrade the halls of legislation. All of her stories end in an emotional catastrophe and violation of law in one way or another. In fact, these dysfunctional relationships are used to unravel the delusions of domestic peace by showing that, although they seem equal, the perceived inequality and power imbalance do not correspond to Fuller's concept of marriage as a union (Fuller, 1845: 41). According to this union, men need to show more respect for their wives, accept women as friends, take marriage more seriously, and stop looking upon women as inferior beings (Fuller, 1845: 41-42). These claims do not fit any of the family circumstances of the Dunnes, the Days or the Crellins. In *Gone Girl* (2012), Amy and Nick are not friends at all; in *Sharp Objects* (2010), women become inferior and self-destroying beings in society and media culture; and in *Dark Places* (2009), Runner takes neither his ex-wife nor his children seriously, far less respecting them

Margaret Fuller highlights the differences between femininity and masculinity, emphasizing that both men and women can have characteristics that are attributable to the opposite sex. Pure femininity and pure masculinity are said to be impossible (Fuller, 1845: 68-69). This could be a solution to the characters' conflicts because Nick and Ben, for instance, struggle with the concept of masculinity, whereas Camille, Amma, and Libby cannot live up to the feminine roles demanded by society (Flynn, 2009; 2010 and 2012). Thus,

these characters share the same sadness of the women in the nineteenth century, who were said to be born for men and, therefore, are supposed to be weak, soft, and frivolous (Fuller, 1845: 93-94). In distinction from this concept, Flynn's women are neither physically weak nor frivolous. In fact, they are strong females willing to resort to violence in order to get their way, which emphasizes their need to break free from the women's ideal of the nineteenth century.

While Margaret Fuller demanded individualism and social freedom for the love of God, Betty Friedan offered further possible solutions during the second wave of feminism (Fuller, 1845: 102-103). In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan claims that women have to revolt against the roles of American housewives and mothers.

At first, the second wave of feminism seems to fit Gillian Flynn's characters quite well. It is a radical movement that focused on sexuality, reproductive rights, and social equality regardless of sex (Rampton, 2015). At that time, feminists revolted against male-dominated concepts. Patriarchy pretended that women could find fulfillment and happiness in the roles of housewife and mother. So, they were forced to adjust to this role, work in bad jobs, and conform to beauty ideals (Rampton, 2015). Due to this objectification and sexualization, women found themselves in a male-dominated world again. This concept is also present in Flynn's novels, since the female main characters rebel against similar structures. In *Gone Girl*, Amy rebels against her husband, who forces her into the role of a Cool Girl without realizing it and, when she does not succeed in performing this role constantly, tries to leave her. Amy turns the concept upside down by defaming Nick and making him adequately perform the gender role of a responsible husband and father. Amy fights against her objectification, as she stops being a "Cool Girl," which makes her a possession and a status symbol of Nick (Flynn, 2012: 299). She does not want to have to pretend to be pretty, lustful, and witty only to serve as an accessory for a man. She also resists her parents' idea of "Amazing Amy," who is supposed to be a perfect daughter, wife and mother (Flynn, 2012: 13). Being misandrist and discriminatory in order to achieve this goal seems to be an inevitable evil. This attempt to break free from being inferior to men is also visible in *Sharp Objects*, *Dark Places*

and *The Grownup*, take, for instance, Camille and Amma who are sexually open and extremely destructive, both physically and emotionally, whereas Patty suffers due to the fact that she has to be mother and father in one person. These characters are affected by an omnipresent sexism that feminists tried to eliminate during the second wave (Rampton, 2015). Although the movement was successful in the 1960s and 1970s, Gillian Flynn's novels, which are literature as staged reality, are used to claim that gender equality of men and women has not been completely achieved yet, as, for example, female characters are still stigmatized as "crazy" or "hysterical" when they are malicious, violent, or amoral.

The feminine mystique is omnipresent and influential in the above-discussed novels. In writing characters that have to face the effects of the feminine mystique constantly, Flynn examines gender, sexist oppression, dysfunctional maternal love and the impossibility of living up to one's desires and capacities. Both Amy and Nick feel inferior in their marriage, Patty and Adora are overly attached to their children (whereas the latter is a more destructive and psychopathic maternal attachment), and Miles and Nerdy need each other in order to fulfill personal desires that are doomed to fail. Due to the feminine mystique, all of these characters feel frustrated and unhappy as their morbid relations to their attachment figures have negative effects goading each other. These negative effects are attributable to the identity crises described by Friedan, i.e., not knowing who they really are and what they want to be. Instead, these characters pretend to live up to a social role in order to delude others and persuade themselves to be happy.

Although Friedan claims that the same "old image" of the first wave made women rebel during the second wave again, joy, a sense of excitement, and individuality are still to be achieved (Friedan, 1963: 61, 76, 78). According to Friedan, one problem that is connected to this still-missing achievement is *Freudian theory*. Due to this theory, the mystique became a "scientific religion," which was used to purport what is best for women. They were told not to question the mystique any longer and instead respect the authorities that claimed that women have to be housewives and mothers (Friedan, 1963: 98). Moreover, the concepts of *functionalism* and "sex-directed educators" suggested that it is a woman's "structure" and "function"

to be a housewife, who must focus on “domesticity,” “glamour,” and “good companionship” (Friedan, 1963: 103, 108, 111).¹⁵¹ Simply put, scientists made women perform the role they constructed for them instead of educating and offering them opportunities to decide how to construct their own identity. Those who tried to break free were shamed and labeled “guilty” instead (Friedan, 1963: 126, 132).

In the discussed novels, the protagonists constantly have to deal with this concept and its struggles. These women not only adjust to the role of housewives and often mothers, but they are also willing to conform to it due to cultural and social indoctrination. In *Dark Places*, Patty does her best to save her children’s future, partly because she does not want to be seen as a bad mother (Flynn, 2009: 106, 235). She is not educated but instead is supposed to conform to the ideals of femininity. In the past, Patty tried to live up to these. Thus, she married, had children, inherited her parents’ farm and ultimately failed in adjusting to the roles of housewife and mother. Due to this inability, the marriage fails, her children are maladjusted, and the family is financially ruined. Death and mental disorders are a result of the inability to conform to the ideals. In *Sharp Objects*, Adora even intoxicates her children in order to be needed by them and to remain in her role as a caring mother (Flynn, 2010: 97). In fact, she wants to be perceived as a good and loving mother by her environment, which is why she risks the consequences. This is also true of Amy in *Gone Girl*. Although it is said that she is extremely intelligent and educated, not even Amy is able to withstand the feminine mystique. Instead, she fights to live in a version of the mystique that she thinks is optimal for her and her partner. Despite her intelligence and education, she is also manipulated into believing that living up to the presupposed roles of femininity will ultimately bring fulfillment.

Further approaches to an explanation with regard to the second wave are given by Friedan. She claims, for instance, that dominating mothers and submissive fathers are responsible for maladjusted children although in the past mainly the mothers were blamed, who were said to have created children

¹⁵¹ Until the 1960s, so called “*finishing schools*” were famous institutions for teaching young women upper-class social values, etiquette, and cultural rites, mainly to be suitable for a husband (Simonian, 2010).

that could not face a life away from their “moms.” Furthermore, Friedan states that, due to the fact that women traded individuality for security and comfort, both husband and wife isolated themselves and started to believe the lies of the feminine mystique (Friedan, 1963: 156-160). The concept “mother” is a recurring element in Flynn’s novels: Not only do the female characters trade their individuality for the dysfunctional roles of wife and mother, but they also delude themselves and their husbands or partners into believing that their individual version of the feminine mystique is true. They are not able to live a life away from the women who perform the roles of the “mother” and blame them for their own frustration at the same time.

According to Friedan’s basic idea of this concept, sexual objectification and the lack of identity ultimately lead to gender-related frustration and sadness. What is more, it results in aggressions and violence. Friedan claims that a “progressive dehumanization” created by a “symbiosis” that is a result of the feminine mystique causes maladjustments. Although it is said that due to this dehumanization children in particular act out their “mothers’ unconscious wishes or conflicts,” the lack of identity and the incapability of handling freedom is also often transferred to the partners, creating an interdependent relation of two or more persons (Friedan, 1963: 229-234). This symbiosis often results in dysfunctional behavior patterns of two interdependent partners, meaning that they become abnormally dependent on one another, as for instance Adora, Amma, and Camille, Nick and Amy, and Miles and Susan.

Betty Friedan not only analyzed the reasons for the widespread unhappiness of women in the 1950s and 1960s, but she also offered solutions to the feminine mystique. She refers to Prof. Abraham Maslow, who found that the dominance of women relates to sexual enjoyment (Friedan, 1963: 256).¹⁵² He claimed that dominance correlated with altruism, strength, free choice, and not being “anxious, distorted, symbolized and concealed” (Friedan, 1963: 258-259). Thus, Friedan’s claim is not to be dominant, but to be dominant enough to be strong, altruistic, and free. This is what most of the

¹⁵² Maslow is famous for his paper *A Theory of Human Motivation*, in which he presented his hierarchy of needs to describe the pattern that human motivations generally move through (Maslow, 1943).

characters in the novels confuse. Instead of caring about others and being free individuals, they care about what others think of them and, therefore, become egoistic persons performing a role in order to subject themselves to the feminine mystique. As this does not lead to happiness, the feeling of being frustrated remains, which is why the dominance in the depicted relationships worsens and ultimately causes violence, be it emotional, psychological or physical.

In her conclusion, Friedan claims that women have to overcome the social role in their homes and the concept of biology that states that a woman's identity is determined by her sex and femininity. Instead, they need to shape their own futures (Friedan, 1963: 273). According to Friedan, there are no easy answers, meaning that each woman must find her own individual life plan (Friedan, 1963: 277). In Flynn's novels, each woman chooses an individual answer to handling the feminine mystique but ignores the terms to successfully overcome it. Needless to say, these female characters shape their own future by rebelling against patriarchy and sexism. Still, they do not overcome the concept of biology and their social role as they adapt to these concepts. For instance, Nerdy decides to become Miles's surrogate parent because she likes the idea of being a mother, i.e., she adjusts to this socially prescribed gender role. Then there is Camille, who rebels against the concept of biology by scarring her own body and, due to that mere fact, does not find a husband and cannot get pregnant.

In her novels, Flynn shows that adjusting to the roles of the feminine mystique as well as rebelling against the concept by adjusting to the roles does not lead to happiness. According to Friedan, the feminine mystique must be faced constantly in order to solve the identity crises that come with it. Women shall realize their "human selves" in order to become complete (Friedan, 1963: 308-309). This means that they do not have to decide whether to marry or pursue a career. Instead every woman needs a new life plan by challenging the oppression and the idea of a typical American housewife and mother. Therefore, marriage shall not be seen as an "over-glorification imposed by the feminine mystique" (Friedan, 1963: 277-278). These identity conflicts are present in the relationships and the decisions of both the female and male characters. They often do not realize that they are stuck in the

feminine mystique although they try to rebel against it. Instead of realizing their “human selves” and seeking a new life plan that leads to happiness, they instead change the appearance of the concept, not knowing that it is still oppressing as they stay in the role of a typical American housewife and mother.

Gender inequality is still considered an issue in media culture and, as it is obviously criticized in Flynn’s novels, the idea of eradicating gender as a performative act in order to have complete gender equality must be taken into consideration. The individualistic approach of the third- and fourth-wave movement is visible, for example in *Gone Girl*, in which Amy wants to be acknowledged for who she really is and not for being a Cool Girl (Flynn 2012: 299). Just like the other women, Amy becomes violent in order to be acknowledged. To name a single example, her Cool Girl rant includes statements that are not necessarily considered ladylike, such as “The *bitch* doesn’t really love chili dogs that much [...],” “[...] believe me, he wants Cool Girl, who is basically the girl who likes every *fucking* thing he likes and doesn’t ever complain,” and “The bad guy wins? *Fuck* him!” (Flynn 2012: 300, 316-317, 321). One could say that female characters in the novels respond to sexism and patriarchy in a stereotypically male manner. Instead of including the opposite sex and working together as demanded in the modern movements, such as #MeToo, they rather fight each other in order to gain superiority. This superiority is usually ascribed to patriarchy and concepts of masculinity. Regarding post-feminism as an analytic notion that aims to consider both feminist and anti-feminist concepts, Flynn’s proposed approach is to transcend masculinity and femininity in order to achieve individuality in which every human attribute is non-gendered, regardless of amorality. Thus, Flynn uses approaches of second-, third-, and fourth-wave feminism in her fiction to propose a post-feminist agenda, according to which power structures and superiority of masculinity cause gender-related frustration and thus need to be eradicated. To achieve this, Flynn proposes the idea that gender equality requires a sharper focus on individuals as well as the artistic freedom of non-gendered characteristics.

According to Judith Butler (1990), the identity that feminists often ascribe to the concept “woman” with all of its constituents has to be

questioned, since the concepts of “the feminine” and “the masculine” are claimed to be culturally constructed and biologically determined. This subject of feminism, originally intended to achieve emancipation, is said to be produced and restrained by performative acts and structures of power (Butler, 1990: 2, 4). As discussed above, similar concepts of culture and biology are present in Gillian Flynn’s novels, such as the constant patriarchal structures of power affecting and oppressing the main characters of each novel, e.g. Nick and Amy. While certain forms of media, such as *Ellen Abbott Live*, and concepts of “the feminine” and “the masculine” lead to an identity crisis that has been described by Betty Friedan already, Butler claims that culture-based power structures cause the lack of fulfillment due to a lack of identity and emancipation (Butler, 1990; Flynn 2012: 329). She says that culture is characterized by heteronormativity and phallocentrism because the male-dominated society and culture are said to create a binary system of gender and sex in order to have power over women. These power structures are what Amy criticizes in her “Cool Girl” rant. In addition, power causes Patty’s struggles with her role as a single mother, and it is the reason why Miles wants to live in a grownup world. One can say that Butler’s theory of heteronormativity and phallocentrism explains that there are different cultural and psychological factors that lead to different forms of identity crises in Flynn’s novel. Because of this, the characters are confronted with bipolar gender constructions in an oppressing patriarchy. This confrontation appears in the narratives as one of the main causes of the characters’ frustration and eventual violence.

In order to analyze the identity crises portrayed by Flynn, Butler’s deconstruction of the category “woman” has to be applied to the characters’ conflicts. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler states that the category “woman” cannot denote a common identity because it is not always constituted coherently and connected to discursively constituted identities that are intersected with modalities of race, class, ethnicity, sex, and region (Butler, 1990: 4).¹⁵³ In her

¹⁵³ With regard to the above-mentioned “angry black woman” stereotype, Maya Rupert transferred the concept of the “Cool Girl” to African American women. In her essay “This ‘Cool Black Girl’ is Gone,” she defines African American “Cool Girls” as “urban but not hood. She’s down enough to use slang her white friends will

analysis of the concept “gender,” Butler distinguishes between sex and gender, saying that sex is usually connoted with biology whereas gender is constructed by culture. So, this concept is said to be constructed by scientific discourse to serve political and social interests (Butler, 1990: 8-9). The binary concept of sex is a cultural creation of gender, which, in turn, is a concept of culture and society (Butler, 1990: 9-10). With regard to the discussed novels, this means that culture and society create gender-based roles that not only fit but rather create frustration due to their very existence. All female and male characters written by Flynn suffer due to their gender-based roles in the novels. The women are frustrated because they are not able to live up to the stereotypical roles of housewife and mother, whereas the men are emasculated because they cannot adjust to the presuppositions of masculinity. For example, Runner in *Dark Places* and Alan in *Sharp Objects* are weak and obsequious male characters who either run away from the responsibilities of their social role or subject themselves to their wives’ control, whereas Ben is often angry, afraid, and insecure as he cannot stand the constant emasculation emanating from Diondra and the inability to live up to her expectations. While Fuller and Friedan would claim that these inabilities and frustrations are based on the fact that there is something wrong with either the social role or the negatively affecting conception of gender, to Butler the very existence of binary gender and binary sex is the reason for being frustrated, unhappy, and not feeling fulfilled in one’s performed identity.

want to poach, but won’t embarrass them by sounding too black. She’s willing to date white men, but is unbothered when they don’t want to date her. She’s unflinchingly patient and endlessly supportive of the white women around her. And above all else, she never—ever—makes a white person feel uncomfortable about race” (Rupert, 2017). Although Flynn did not write female characters of color who use violence, malice, and amorality at all, she wrote the screenplay for the 2018 movie *Widows* in which Viola Davis, Cynthia Erivo, Michelle Rodriguez and Elizabeth Debicki play the main characters (2018). In *Widows*, when Davis’s character emphasizes the importance of being who they are because “no one thinks [they] have the balls to pull this [robbery] off,” Flynn’s post-feminist agenda becomes evident. In this approach, these women, whose husbands died and left them massive debts, become violent and amoral criminals who try to rob a bank. These female characters, including two African Americans, one Caucasian, and one Latin woman, not only represent Flynn’s post-feminist mode, but expand it by including racial equality. It is unlikely that this includes every characteristic in claiming complete gender equality but it emphasizes a next step in feminism.

In *Gender Trouble*, the concept *gender* is said to be a “signification” that only exists in relation to an opposing signification (Butler, 1990: 13). This means that the novels’ characters not only feel frustrated because they cannot live up to their roles but because culturally prescribed roles exist without variation and because they exist in relation to an opposing sex. Thus, these roles lead to a “problematic circularity.” According to this theory, gender itself is a masculinist construction that excludes the feminine gender (Butler, 1990: 15). This concept is similar to the idea of the Cool Girl, which is a masculinist construction as well. Although this idea is created as a result of culture creating gender and sex in order to serve the personal desires of a man, it oppresses women as it excludes the feminine gender. In *Gone Girl*, for instance, Nick desires a woman that adjusts to the role of the Cool Girl. Since this role is a creation of gender and sex and, ultimately, of culture, one can conclude that Nick’s desires are male-dominated and a result of gender creating sex, taking into account that Fuller and Friedan claim that culture and society are male-dominated and that Butler claims that sex is based on gender. While men and women act out performative gender roles, they create the concept of sex, meaning that they create the concept of “femininity” and “masculinity.” Accordingly, Nick and Amy are frustrated in their marriage because of cultural concepts they unconsciously create and adjust to themselves. So, patriarchy creates a binary system with ideals that cannot be realized and imposes these onto men and women, whereby men and women act out this binary system and therefore create the distinction between feminine and masculine.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler demands that feminism should investigate the totalizing claims of a “masculinist signifying economy” and remain self-critical in order not to mimic the oppressors’ oppression (Butler, 1990: 18-19). Since the female characters in Flynn’s novels become both emotionally and / or physically violent due to their frustration, one can say that they are not self-critical at all. Instead, they mimic their oppressors’ oppression, which becomes the key element of Flynn’s post-feminist agenda, due to which both men and women are supposed to transcend concepts of masculinity and femininity and, thus, adopt characteristics that fit them as individuals, not as male or female performers of gender concepts. With regard to this post-

feminist transition, Butler claims that women shall not exclude men and masculinity in their feminist rebellion. Still, in the novels, not being self-critical leads to violent behavior, which is usually said to be a male characteristic that is often aimed to show dominance. Thus, these women become even more violent than men in order to find fulfillment in their individual identity and femininity. In that context, Butler remarks that the concept “identity” results in a cultural emergence of “incoherent” and “discontinuous” gendered persons and their failure to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined in the first place (Butler, 1990: 23). Hence, this emphasizes what has been mentioned above: The concept “identity” creates a problematic circularity by which “gendered persons” emerge from culture and fail to conform to the norms that define them and their gender in the first place. This means that gender-based frustration and violence are based on a simple social concept: *culturally prescribed gender identities*. In a way, this also means that the characters, both men and women, are equally responsible and unaccountable for their unhappiness as they both seek an identity in becoming “gendered persons” and fail to conform to the norms that define their gender. One could even argue that the feeling of being unhappy is increased in the problematic circularity due to the fact that, in the novels, violence as a result of frustration does not lead to happiness or satisfaction at all (Butler, 1990: 15). The more the characters try to adjust to their gender roles in terms of masculinity and femininity, the more frustrated they become.

Butler deduces that not only gender and sex have an interdependent relationship, but that heterosexual desire is also required because it opposes the other gender (Butler, 1990: 30). This leads to an interdependent relation between “the feminine” and “the masculine,” which in turn leads to “masculine hegemony and heterosexist power” (Butler, 1990:46). This heterosexist power and the desire to adjust to gender roles result in a compulsion to seek fulfillment in an identity that is created by performative acts. The heterosexist powers portrayed in Flynn’s novels also lead to frustration, such as in the partnership of Amy and Nick, the relationship of Ben and Diondra, and the failed marriage of Patty and Runner. The very existence of heterosexuality as a result of the unity of gender, sex, and desire

makes the characters initially seek fulfillment in a non-suitable identity and later break free from culturally prescribed gender roles by using violence and malice.

Butler suggests that the refusal of performative acts, which create binary gender roles and heterosexist power relations, would make the discursive concept of sex and gender-based oppressions cease to exist (Butler, 1990: 34). As a consequence, this would lead to the cessation of gender-based frustration, violence, and discrimination. This is, as a matter of course, a philosophical theory, but Gillian Flynn does not only portray the negative effects of gender and sex. In fact, she portrays various effects, each having a different outcome, and solutions to the characters' conflicts, which either lead to happiness or more frustration.

Fuller, Friedan, and Butler's theories are, as I have examined above, representative of the feminist waves that Flynn uses to a certain degree in her post-feminist agenda. While I will not refer to post-feminism as the idea that gender equality is achieved but rather as an analytical notion as proposed by Rosalind Gill (2007), the previous waves of feminism serve as a basis for the analysis of Gillian Flynn's novels. In these, she uses elements of all three movements and makes her characters perform gender acts that represent both the successes and failures of each wave. The applied elements of the three movements become tools to criticize the lack of diversity of female characters, which is associated with patriarchal oppression in a post-feminist media culture. Furthermore, it shows the necessity of female amorality and violence as prerequisites to gender equality and diversity. Hence, female amorality and violence become representative of every attribute that women should not be excluded from, which then ultimately is aimed at achieving equality. In this post-feminist approach, Flynn picks up on certain ideas of the three waves to emphasize the necessity of diversity. The right to vote as a success of the first wave is obviously a first step to equality. In Flynn's novels and, for instance, Gill's studies of post-feminism, this concept is claimed to be corrupted by post-feminist media culture to oppress women. Thus, it becomes a form of the feminine mystique, which is nearly always addressed in Flynn's novels. It becomes clear that amorality is not yet considered a prerequisite to gender equality. This approach is based on the

concept of performative acts of presupposed gender roles that are in fact affected by post-feminist media culture as well. It is striking that Flynn's approach causes gender trouble and extends the given gender roles to propose a post-feminist notion in her novels.

9. Gillian Flynn's Post-Feminism: Amoralism as a Prerequisite of Female Diversity

In this chapter, I will relate Flynn's feminist approach to the concept of "post-feminism" as defined by Rosalind Gill (2007; 2017), who claims that it is a sensibility that includes a number of interrelated themes, such as "the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference" (Gill, 2007: 3-5). Being a sensibility, post-feminism aims to make postfeminist media culture the critical object rather than an analytic perspective. According to Gill (2007), "this approach does not require a static notion of one single authentic feminism as a comparison point, but instead is informed by postmodernist and constructionist perspectives and seeks to examine what is distinctive about contemporary articulations of gender in the media" (Gill, 2007).¹⁵⁴

When Rosalind Gill (2007: 6-7) refers to femininity as a bodily property, the term is defined by a "sexy body," which is made the key source of female identity. This idea is somehow present in all of Flynn's novels but particularly in the Cool Girl concept in *Gone Girl*. Having a sexy body is probably the foundation of being a Cool Girl as described by Amy (Flynn,

¹⁵⁴ Julia T. Wood (1994) argues that three elements of media represent gender and, with it, gender inequality. She claims that in media "women are underrepresented which falsely implies that men are the cultural standard and women are unimportant or invisible. Second, men and women are portrayed in stereotypical ways that reflect and sustain socially endorsed views of gender. Third, depictions of relationships between men and women emphasize traditional roles and normalize violence against women" (Wood, 1994: 31).

2012), which makes sense when one considers that physical attractiveness is usually presented as the foundation of sexual appeal (as implied by gender-based media culture). When Flynn criticizes that the need for a “sexy body” as femininity is defined to men, she goes beyond physical attractiveness and claims that being willing to perform certain forms of sex is also considered to be a part of the Cool Girl and femininity. These different forms of sexualization are, according to Gill (2007: 8), quite common in media culture, e.g. in popular magazines. In what she calls “lads mags,” sex is discussed “through a vocabulary of youthful, unselfconscious pleasure-seeking,” while, in girls and young women’s magazines, sex becomes “something requiring constant attention, discipline, self-surveillance and emotional labor” which is aimed to make girls and women monitor themselves to make them “responsible for producing themselves as desirable heterosexual subjects, as well as for pleasing men sexually, protecting against pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, defending their own sexual reputations, and taking care of men’s self-esteem” (Gill, 2007: 8). While forms of sexualization define the Cool Girl, Flynn turns this concept upside down by making her female characters exercise violence to a certain extent. Take, for instance, Amy again, who at the end of *Gone Girl* makes Nick perform a traditional role of masculinity in a marriage she forces him to continue by ultimately becoming pregnant (Flynn, 2012). She rejects the role of the Cool Girl to perform the traditional roles of housewife and mother, which has been criticized in the second wave of feminism. In doing so, Amy becomes a feminist who is aware of the sexualization of culture, according to Gill (2007), but she does not realize the additional forms of gender-related oppressions in culture, so she returns to a traditional gender identity, which she believes will make her happy. Betty Friedan (1963) discussed this identity and defined it as a result of the feminine mystique, so it is highly improbable that performing the “occupation: housewife” will bring fulfillment. Still, Amy’s realization of and aversion to the various forms of sexualization are what makes *Gone Girl* post-feminist.

In her paper, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility,” Rosalind Gill (2007: 12) also examines the individualist, sexist notion of media culture. While women are affected by male domination to believe all

their practices are freely chosen and autonomous, gender inequalities and power imbalances become invisible. In this patriarchal manipulation, the first wave's suffragette success, e.g. having the right to vote, becomes part of the individualist notion as it is used to empower women and make them believe they should be "sexy" for themselves and not for men. This notion is present in every novel by Flynn, who criticizes that women are supposed to transform themselves to fit the norm although all female characters are knowingly or unknowingly affected by patriarchal gender concepts of media culture. To Rosalind Gill (2007: 16), society is also affected by a "makeover paradigm" that emanates from post-feminist media culture. "This requires people (predominantly women) to believe first that they or their life is lacking or flawed in some way, and second that it is amenable to reinvention or transformation by following the advice of relationship, design or lifestyle experts, and practicing appropriately modified consumption habits" (Gill, 2007: 16). While the makeover paradigm is recognizably addressed, for example, in *Fargo*'s season 2, in which Peggy Blomquist (played by Kirsten Dunst) makes the paradigm the center of her life by pursuing "self-actualization" (*Fargo*, 2016), in Gillian Flynn's novels, the gender-related transformation of women is not as obvious although its presence is openly criticized by Amy. Here, the makeover paradigm constitutes the Cool Girl. Gill (2007: 18) also criticizes that self-transformation, according to this paradigm, is not related to men at all. In the romcom movie *Hitch* (2005), "being oneself (un-made-over) is all that is required to win the woman's heart, and 'authentic masculinity' wins the day." The concept of masculinity is another subject of discussion in Flynn's novels, for example, when Ben is not able to live up to its norms, whereas all other males are affected by patriarchal presuppositions of what constitutes masculinity. Flynn takes up this gender concept and presents its social corruption.

In her post-feminist approach, Flynn also uses the basic idea of the dualism of feminism and anti-feminism, which is part of the post-feminist sensibility as defined by Rosalind Gill (2007: 23). This notion is of prime importance when considering that the female characters written by Flynn usually are feminist and anti-feminist, respectively sexist, at the same time. Gill explains that media did not become feminist or adopt a feminist

perspective but instead offers “contradictory, but nevertheless patterned, constructions” in which feminist ideas are incorporated and attacked at the same time (Gill, 2007: 23). As I have examined above, Flynn’s written characters are extremely sexist feminists who represent this post-feminist notion in which feminist and anti-feminist ideas are present in equal measure. This dualism is used in the novels to emphasize the progressive idea that women should be equal on every level, also including amorality. The “entanglement” of feminist and anti-feminist ideas is what makes media culture “distinctively post-feminist” (Gill, 2007: 23). Flynn takes part in this post-feminist notion by writing women who are feminist and anti-feminist at the same time and extends the idea of gender equality by incorporating female amorality, violence, and malice. Gill (2007: 24) claims that in 1970s and 1980s media culture, post-feminist heroines become more active than their counterparts by valuing autonomy, bodily integrity, and the freedom of individual choices, while they “use their empowered postfeminist position to make choices that would be regarded by many feminists as problematic, located as they are in normative notions of femininity,” for instance by choosing white weddings or taking their husband’s name upon marriage (McRobbie, 2004 in: Gill, 2007: 24). What is of prime importance here is that Gill (2007: 24) writes that “One reading of this may highlight the exclusions of second wave feminism and suggest that it represents the ‘return of the repressed’ e.g. the pleasures of domesticity or traditional femininity” (Hollows, 2003). Flynn’s novels criticize in particular the pleasures of domesticity and traditional femininity. Not only *Gone Girl*, in which Amy returns to the traditional gender role of housewife and mother, but also *Sharp Objects*, *Dark Places*, and *The Grownup* deal with the contradictory “return of the repressed.”

In “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility” (2007: 27), Gill concludes that women are supposed to be self-disciplined and, to a greater extent than men, “are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen.” Furthermore, she discusses that it is possible that neoliberalism is always already gendered and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects (Gill: 2007: 27). This makes further exploration necessary, which is

attempted by Flynn in her novels, particularly *Gone Girl*, which examines the post-feminist demand that women must be self-disciplined, transform themselves, and present their actions as freely chosen. By claiming this, I am not saying that the written female characters in the novels are successful in doing so. In fact, they simply represent the necessity of this demand as they fail in performing presupposed gender roles. However, they are successful in presenting their violence as freely chosen and, by that, Flynn makes gender equality possible in literature in terms of her women characters' amorality. This is, as I have pointed out above, an innovative approach to equality. While the basic idea is clearly post-feminist, Flynn uses elements of the previous feminist waves to highlight the ongoing presence and the transformation of patriarchal manipulation in society, on the one hand, and to criticize these, on the other hand. The #MeToo movement, for example, emphasizes this presence and transformation, showing that gender inequality is not only present in debates about the glass ceiling but also in cases of oppression and sexual harassment in everyday life. Flynn does not ascribe her characters to a specific movement but uses them to illustrate that both their fights and their successes are probably not over yet. It is beyond dispute that the first wave gave women legal rights in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Still, having the legal rights is irrelevant if there is a patriarchy that manipulates women into obeying the feminine mystique for this concept makes them go back to what second-wave feminists criticized. In doing so, it curtails women's free will and, as hoped for, leads to a misuse of their legal rights. So, Flynn's characters often seem to be representative of the third and fourth wave. According to these movements, gender oppression is caused by patriarchy and media culture alone, which are concepts that are quite often criticized in Flynn's novels. Nevertheless, these waves focused on gender equality by emphasizing that women are victims in society. Although she agrees with the previous waves of feminism and criticizes many patriarchal circumstances causing gender inequality, Flynn's approach is different, as in her novels women are victimized but also become sexist perpetrators.¹⁵⁵ In

¹⁵⁵ Genz and Brabon (2007) argue that the post-feminist man who relies on his performance of male gender identity also victimizes and is victimized due to a

this post-feminist notion, the idea of equality makes this given condition a necessity because it includes women in the concept of “malice” and therefore makes them equally diverse.

In her article for *The Guardian*, Rebecca Nicholson claims that Flynn should continue to create “bad women” because they are saving TV (Nicholson, 2018). She claims that Flynn’s amoral characters make television “[...] more inventive, as the ‘difficult woman’ evolves into something more nuanced. [...] the door has been opened to odd, gripping stories that ask more of the viewer than we have been used to providing. Some of the most original shows of recent years have done exactly what Flynn does, which has been long overdue anyway—they have thrown the notion that a female protagonist must be likable up into the air and shot it to pieces” (Nicholson, 2018). Flynn herself commented on this in a recent interview with BBC’s Lauren Turner (2018). Referring to violent and amoral men, Flynn claims that “those male characters were everywhere you looked—and have been for hundreds of years in literature. That’s just been the archetype” (Turner, 2018). In this interview, it becomes clear that the gender-related idea of having violent and amoral women in literature is connected to having the same range of diverse female characters. While to her this diversity in literature is important regarding gender equality, she also answers the accusations of misogyny addressed in much criticism by saying that “[...] it’s misogynist to say it’s misogynist to write about bad women. [...] Anytime you tell a woman what she can and can’t write about, that’s misogyny. I mostly ignore it. It’s such an insane thing to say, as if you’re too delicate to bear the idea of a negative portrayal of a woman” (Turner, 2018).

Regarding the present-day #MeToo movement, Flynn noted in a *Chicago Magazine* interview that it is indeed extremely important to her although she does not want to “[...] get to a point where men and women can’t have a conversation because the men are so frightened about offending the women that we all have to have Mother Pence with us to make sure everything is OK” (Thomas, 2018). As I have examined above, Flynn also

heteronormative “subjectivation,” meaning the “construction of the individual subject,” that “develops into a series of irreconcilable binaries” (Genz and Brabon, 2007: 66).

stated in her article “A Howl” that she feels like America values women, i.e., “subjects of the Patriarchy,” less than men (Flynn, 2017). According to Gill’s positions on post-feminism, patriarchal media culture is not only omnipresent nowadays but also makes women obey male dominance without even realizing, e.g. due to the makeover paradigm (Gill, 2007: 3-5). Considering this, Flynn proposes an approach to overcoming the sexualization addressed in the #MeToo movement, saying that keeping allegedly abusive men in power will most certainly not work because this is already the status quo and it is discriminatory. Instead, she claims that thinking about how America raises its “men-to-be” might work regarding gender equality (Flynn, 2017). In this approach, writing female characters who are diverse and, more importantly, equal because they are amoral, violent, and malicious becomes a post-feminist instance of progress that is aimed to lead to a future status quo both in literature and society in which women-to-be will be respected by America’s men-to-be (Flynn, 2017).

One year after #MeToo became a widespread Internet movement, Tarana Burke, the so-called “architect of #MeToo,” says that it lost its way (Rowley, 2018). “Burke says that in the year since the movement began, she’s observed an unwavering obsession with the perpetrators—a cyclical circus of accusations, culpability, and indiscretions. In part, Burke blames the media for latching onto every salacious detail in stories from #MeToo survivors. She also blames a culture that’s prone to fixate on high drama” (Rowley, 2018). In fact, Burke blames media and media culture as Gillian Flynn does in her novels, for instance in the Cool Girl speech. Still, she claims that #MeToo must shift “the narrative that it’s a gender war, that it’s anti-male, that it’s men against women, that it’s only for a certain type of person—that it’s for white, cisgender, heterosexual, famous women” (Rowley, 2018). She also says that #MeToo will make a difference in the number of sexual assaults and in how people will respond to “survivors of sexual violence” (Rowley, 2018). While the demand for a shift is also a present in Flynn’s novels, she rather uses the contemporary idea of a gender war and the anti-male attitude that often come along with gender-related debates about #MeToo. This means that Flynn ultimately demands gender equality that makes the diversity of women and female characters the normal

condition rather than a peculiarity or an anomaly. To achieve this feminist goal, however, she shows that women should be able to act beyond the bounds of gender, sex, legality and, most importantly, morality.

10. Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have examined Gillian Flynn's post-feminist approach in her novels to criticize the gender-related influences of post-feminist media culture. Moreover, I have focused on Flynn's notion in which she considers female violence, amorality, and malice a necessity and prerequisite in order to write diverse female characters and achieve gender equality on every level. What makes Gillian Flynn's novels extraordinary is the progressive way she deals with gender equality in terms of diverse women. While, in 2018, Flynn claimed that it is "incredibly misogynist to tell [her she] can only write a certain type of woman [because] women must be a certain type of person" (Abbott, 2018), gender equality can only be achieved by breaking free from prescribed notions of gender in literature first. As she refuses to write women according to stereotypical gender roles, her female characters exercise culturally presupposed acts of masculinity in extreme forms of violence as an answer to gender-related frustration caused by patriarchal oppression. To conclude this dissertation, I return to the key question: *How does Gillian Flynn use but move beyond the various waves of feminism in order to suggest a post-feminist agenda in which violence, malice and amorality are necessary conditions of complete gender equality?*

In order to answer my key question as precisely as possible, I not only took into consideration Gillian Flynn's novels but also her interviews and public statements on patriarchy, oppression, and gender in general. I related her notion to representative theories of the three waves of feminism as well post-feminism and post-feminist media culture. This idea as examined in my dissertation, is not about having achieved complete gender equality in society and culture and thus not needing feminism any longer but instead it includes an analytic approach, making post-feminism a sensibility (Gill, 2007). According to Gill (2007). In post-feminist media culture, various elements of

binary gender and binary sex are used to persuade both women and men of having achieved equality. In this view, the idea that feminism is not needed any longer becomes part of a patriarchal oppression of women (Gill, 2007; 2017). Flynn, who criticizes this hidden manipulation, for example in her Cool Girl rant, makes use of female amorality and violence to unravel and break free from these rather modern cultural presuppositions of gender.

In doing so, she creates diverse female characters that are usually not considered very common, and certainly not popular in literature. This innovative and progressive notion has rarely been taken into consideration and thus becomes part of her proposed post-feminist agenda, which is more topical than ever, given the #MeToo movement and the recent exposure of various sex crimes that ultimately go along with presupposed gender concepts of masculinity, femininity, and power. What *Gone Girl*, *Sharp Objects*, *Dark Places* and *The Grownup* have in common is the constant frustration over the presupposed gender roles that the characters try to fulfil. They fail to adjust to their roles and therefore face a lack of power, inferiority, or the need for love and affection. Since the characters, particularly the women, cannot find fulfillment in their roles, their feeling of being humiliated and the frustrations increase, which in turn leads to more violence. All these elements and social conflicts are ascribable to the main waves of feminism and can be explained by these to a certain extent. In fact, Fuller, Friedan, and Butler's theories and approaches can be used to analyze and discuss Flynn's disentanglement of a modern post-feminist media culture, which creates a variety of gender-based conflicts that cause frustration and violence. In this culture, the characters must deal with frustration based on gender-based inequality that is often imperceptible. Their main conflict is always based on the inability to perform and subject oneself to binary gender roles dictated by patriarchy. What men and women in the novels are manipulated to believe is that, for instance, women are considered to be inferior, weak, and uneducated housewives and mothers (Fuller, 1845: 24, 100). Moreover, this concept is adapted by making women Cool Girls. In *Gone Girl*, Amy is not only confronted with an indirect form of sexist oppression and the inability to live up to her role, but also with the constant feeling of being inferior to Nick's performed gender role (Flynn, 2012: 299). Her frustration becomes the incentive to use violence in order to

gain power and turn the phallogocentric concept and the male-dominated presuppositions upside down (Dicker, 2008: 21-25).

In Flynn's post-feminist agenda, the frustration due to perceived inequality, which is a result of the "Cult of True Womanhood," is criticized (Dicker, 2008: 21-22). She writes women who rebel against this cult by using violence, for instance metaphoric emasculation and sexual humiliation. There is not a single female or male character that is able to deal with gender-based inequality. While the men cannot live up to the idea that money, work, and sexual desires are reserved for men, the women become extremely lonely or even social outcasts (Dicker, 2008: 24). So, both male and female characters struggle with what Friedan called the "*occupation: housewife*" and keep quiet about their oppression and frustration, but ultimately revolt in emotionally and psychologically morbid ways to overcome the feeling of being and feeling powerless (Friedan: 1963: 7). The intention of each character discussed is to have opportunities comparable to the right to vote in the nineteenth century (Rampton, 2015). The novels deal with a similar male-dominated reign that enslaves the women in their roles as wives. In modern post-feminist media culture, the first wave's demand for legal equality of men and women (nineteenth century) is transformed by Flynn into a modern demand for gender equality on all levels (Fuller, 1845: 5).

With respect to the first wave, the inequality described by Fuller becomes a resurgent factor in literature, which frustrates Flynn's characters without their realizing it; they then confuse superiority and power with equality and therefore become violent as a consequence. In *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Fuller claims that the binary ideas of pure femininity and pure masculinity are not possible, so certain merging characteristics of men and women need to be acknowledged as a prerequisite for equality (Fuller, 1845: 68-69). Flynn shows that these binary concepts are still common in media culture when she writes characters that either struggle with the concept of gender or cannot live up to the self-contained ideas of masculinity or femininity presupposed by culture. So Flynn criticizes a modernized version of an outdated gender inequality based on permanently and strictly separated

concepts of masculinity and femininity¹⁵⁶ while she, on the one hand, implies that gender-related oppression is still present although often imperceptible in media culture and, on the other hand, shows that her characters struggle with conflicts that result from these concepts (Flynn, 2009; 2010; 2012; Fuller, 1845: 93-94). In criticizing this modernized gender inequality, Flynn also states that the male-dominated system is influential on many levels and still imperceptible because the recipients of this inequality try to rebel but fail to break free from gender presuppositions, not knowing that these concepts are caused and manipulated by post-feminist media culture (Fuller, 1845: 102-103).

The feminist approaches of the second wave are taken up, reflected, and criticized in Flynn's novels as well. Second-wave feminists are considered to fight the idea that women were forced to adjust to the role of housewife and mother, work in bad jobs, and conform to beauty ideals (Rampton, 2015). Not only does Flynn discuss the modernized gender inequality that was unraveled in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* but she shows that the effects of the feminine mystique are currently even more imperceptible than they were in the 1960s and that the endeavors of second wave feminists still must be considered topical and necessary due to, for example, #MeToo in post-feminist media culture. So, for instance, in *Gone Girl*, Amy revolts against male oppression by turning the concept of gender-related presuppositions upside down and, at the end of the novel, believes she has found happiness in becoming a wife and mother and forcing Nick into the

¹⁵⁶ The "Separate Spheres Doctrine" refers to the social phenomenon in the nineteenth century in which men were supposed to go out and work while women remained at home. The woman's role within the home was glorified and paid labor as teaching or charitable duties were acknowledged as an extension of their domestic duties (Kuersten, 2003: 16). This concept gave women a source of strength and identity in a separate world in which the male sphere was public, "concerned with the regulated world of government, trade, business, and law," and the female sphere was private, "encompassing the unregulated realm of home, family, and child rearing" (Kuersten, 2003: 16). This belief was the foundation of the dependent and subservient roles of housewife and mother, and the rationalized women's exclusion from political and economic self-rule. Even after getting the right to vote, the spheres doctrine remained, for example, by excluding women from serving on juries in the 1960s and still limiting women to non-combat positions in the military (Kuersten, 2003: 17-18).

role of a husband and father. She fights against the objectification of women in post-feminist media culture as she stops performing the role of a “Cool Girl” (Flynn, 2012: 299). Apart from this new face of the feminine mystique criticized in *Gone Girl*, in all her novels, Flynn relates the cultural causes of the characters’ frustrations to the traditional feminine mystique (Friedan, 1963: 5). Due to this concept, the female characters struggle with a gender-related unhappiness that is a result of seeking fulfillment either as a wife and mother or in performing presupposed acts of femininity, which ultimately prevents them from striving for independence and opportunities (Friedan, 1963: 5). While this has been unraveled and discussed by Friedan, Flynn shows that in modern post-feminist media culture, women return to new, imperceptible forms of this role to find fulfillment in it. According to Friedan, the problem that has no name is based on male-dominated media, patriarchy in general, undervaluation of femininity and the fundamental conviction of being inferior to men, which, according to Rosalind Gill, are still underlying elements of gender inequality in post-feminist media culture, where women are taught that feminism is irrelevant today (Friedan, 1963: 21, 23, 28-29; Gill, 2007). Flynn takes this notion up by making it a crucial element in the novels and stating that the post-feminist feminine mystique leads to an identity crisis.¹⁵⁷ This crisis is what makes the characters pretend to live up to a social role in order to delude others and persuade themselves that they are happy. As they ignore the terms to successfully overcome the feminine mystique, they cannot find fulfillment in their identity although they rebel against post-feminist patriarchy and sexism. From a literary perspective, post-feminist media culture creates sexual objectification, a lack of identity, and a power imbalance, leading to frustration, sadness, aggression, and violence in the fictional relationships. The characters are not able to handle their lack of identity and become dependent and manipulative, which is why the relationships in the novels become toxic for all participants. From a feminist

¹⁵⁷ Munford and Waters (2014) argue that “If, according to Friedan, the ‘feminine mystique’ arises from the corpse of feminism, the postfeminist mystique reveals – inadvertently perhaps – that feminism is not ‘dead history’ (88), but *undead* history: its unremitting recrudescence suggests that it is not so much a ghost from the past as a revenant that keeps coming back. Feminism refuses to leave because its business remains unfinished” (Munford and Water, 2014: 171).

perspective, this toxicity in literature is important and needed to achieve gender equality. Flynn's post-feminist agenda proposes the idea that female malice in literature must be acknowledged on equal terms with male malice. Regardless of morality and legality, she claims that violence, malice, and amorality must not be called into question against the backdrop of gender. Both in literature and culture, female violence must not be condemned because it is exercised by women and therefore feels strange but because it is morally wrong and illegal.

After having examined Flynn's approach considering the objectives of first and second wave feminists, I also considered the idea of eradicating gender as a performative act in order to achieve gender equality, both in society and in the novels. In Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, it is said that eradicating the performative acts of gender presuppositions should be used to achieve a gender trouble and ultimately solve the cultural conflicts that the women in the novels struggle with. Butler says that to do so, the concept "woman" must be questioned, because gender identity is culturally presupposed and biologically fixed (Butler, 1990). According to Butler, the category "woman" cannot denote one identity, for it is not always constituted coherently and connected to discursively constituted identities that include various characteristics (Butler, 1990: 4). With regard to that, the female characters struggle with the lack of an identity or with identities that contain improper attributes. Culture and society produce gender-based roles that create frustration as they are produced and forced upon the characters. This frustration is based on the fact that women cannot live up to the roles of housewife and mother, whereas the men are not manly enough and therefore constantly emasculated. Butler claims that the very existence of binary gender and binary sex are the reason for unhappiness (Butler, 1990: 13). This means that the novels' characters feel frustrated for the reason that they cannot live up to their roles, that these roles exist, and that there is a relation of two opposing sexes. As a result of cultural presuppositions, men and women act out performative gender roles and create the concept of sex. Accordingly, culture makes, for instance, Nick and Amy act out roles they unconsciously create and fail to adopt, which is why they are frustrated in their marriage (Butler, 1990: 18-19).

In *Gender Trouble*, it is also said that the concept “identity” creates a problematic circularity, by which “gendered persons” are created by culture and fail to conform to the defining norms (Butler, 1990: 23). Therefore, Butler argues that gender-based frustration and violence are merely based on a simple social conflict: the lack of identity. That implies that both the female and male characters are, on the one hand, equally responsible for being unhappy, because they seek fulfillment in their gendered identity, and, on the other hand, equally unaccountable because they are indirectly forced to seek this fulfillment and fail to conform to the norms that define their gender (Butler, 1990: 15). Moreover, Butler claims that the very existence of heterosexuality as a result of the unity of gender, sex, and desire creates the need to seek fulfillment in a wrong identity, which means that Flynn portrays a society in which heterosexist powers are created and used due to the concepts of gender and sex. In the end, this frustrates the characters, who are unable to adjust to these roles and to adopt an identity with which they are comfortable (Butler, 1990: 46). In post-feminist media culture, the culturally presupposed acts of gender still influence the binary performances of femininity and masculinity and in fact affect the social disapproval and gender-related examination of women’s violence.¹⁵⁸ In her novels, Flynn breaks with this concept and proposes a form of gender trouble that is similar to Judith Butler’s demand: culturally presupposed acts of gender performances must be eradicated to achieve gender equality. To Flynn, this includes the ability to have amoral and violent female characters in literature.

With regard to the sexual harassment complaints and sex crimes that have been exposed recently, Flynn answers the gender inequality caused and

¹⁵⁸ Devor argues that such “masculine qualities are instrumental ones which are more likely to lead to behaviors that qualify one for success in a patriarchal and capitalist society. A comparison of masculine qualities with those of femininity clarifies why femininity is not highly valued and rewarded in patriarchal societies. Some of the terms used in the Broverman study to characterize masculinity were: ‘very aggressive,’ ‘very logical,’ ‘very self-confident,’ ‘very ambitious,’ ‘can make decisions easily,’ ‘knows the ways of the world,’ ‘easily able to separate feeling from ideas,’ and ‘likes math and science’. Feminine characteristics in the same study included: ‘very talkative,’ ‘very gentle,’ ‘very aware of the feelings of others,’ ‘very interested in own appearance,’ and ‘a very strong need for security’” (Devor, 1989: 32).

used by post-feminist media culture that is revealed to the public on a global level. Because male domination and patriarchal oppression that are often said to be imperceptible but nevertheless omnipresent have been exposed, discussed, and criticized by advocates of the #MeToo movement, Flynn's criticism of gender-related oppression becomes even more important. The exposure of gender inequality in America as a media culture was not Flynn's main reason for writing amoral and violent women but emphasizes the importance of the diversity of female characters in literature as to Flynn women are "under-represented subjects of the Patriarchy" (Flynn, 2017).¹⁵⁹

The post-feminist agenda proposed by Flynn never claims to be a solution to gender inequality and will not work as such. But as this dissertation has demonstrated, Flynn's feminist approach could lead the way toward achieving a consciousness of the necessity of diversity as a prerequisite of gender equality. Although much work remains to be done, making amoral, malicious, and violent women the norm instead of an exception may become a new approach guiding toward a better understanding of gender and achieving post-feminism that will make feminism redundant in the future. Genuine emancipation and genuinely moving beyond the social constructedness of gender, according to Flynn, include the artistic freedom to treat violence, malice, and amorality in her oeuvre as non-gendered.

¹⁵⁹ While women are still underrepresented, marginalized, and stigmatized in literature and particularly in cinema, Black women as "double minorities face even greater disadvantages in film directing, so much that they are endangered and teetering on the brink of nonexistence. Thus far, Black women constitute less than 1 percent of directors of contemporary Hollywood movies, and no Black woman has sustained a successful career primarily through directing Hollywood movies" (Erigha, 2019: 109).

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