Summer 2023

Flawed Feminism: An Exploration of Femininity in Contemporary Domestic Noir

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B.A., Governors State University, 2019

M.A., English, Governors State University, 2023

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts with a major in English

Governors State University

University Park, IL 60484

2023

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My journey through this degree was anything but easy. I started the program seven months pregnant knowing if I didn't start it then I probably never would. I couldn't have done it without my amazing and supportive professors throughout this time, and I wish saying "thank you" was enough. Not a single one of you told me that I couldn't do it, but instead encouraged me to dive in head first.

Dr. White, my decision to ask you to be my advisor was one of the best. You pushed me, encouraged me, and challenged me in the best ways. I wanted to write something you'd be proud of too, and I hope I did just that. Thank you for your support throughout this time, you know it wasn't easy for me and you've given me an immense amount of grace. I am forever grateful.

Carly and Emma - classmates turned lifelong friends. I know you know I couldn't have done it without your support, your listening ears, your warm hugs, and the infamous group chat. We've been through this together and I wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

Mom, there is not a single time I can remember that you didn't encourage me to strive to be the very best that I chose to be. You always left it up to me, but you were there every time I looked back. I can still hear you say "get it done" anytime I, in fact, did not feel like getting it done. You're the very best.

Oh, my sweetest pea, Leo. You were in my tummy when I started this program and now you're my amazing two year old watching me walk at graduation. I remember staring at you in your swing while you slept as I was writing a paper and dad was making dinner. You've brought so much love and light in this life, and I hope you grow up to be someone who is so dang proud of their mom who will support you in every step of your life no matter what you choose.

Tim, my sweet husband. You deserve all the praise and love for the support you've given me to get this done. Not once did you complain that it was too much. You graciously encouraged me to keep going, to get it done, and supported me through all of the late nights in the library or in class while working at the same time. Thank you for listening to my ideas for this thesis, for sitting silently as I worked through one hundred and one thoughts even though you didn't know what I was saying, for being the best dad ever while I had to write or work, and for holding my hand through all of life's incredibly unexpected moments. You are the true definition of what it means to be a partner in a partnership.

Lastly, there's me. Healing is not a linear journey, and I am working on it every single day. I am proud of myself that I got this done, produced something I am incredibly proud of despite it all, and I want this to remind myself down the road that I survived.

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Abstract

Crime fiction is a genre whose female characters are often misunderstood, weak, powerless victims. Domestic noir, a subgenre of crime fiction, does the opposite. Authors of domestic noir fiction dig into the female experiences, seeking to understand and write women characters who represent feminism and femininity despite any shortcomings they have. In *Big Little Lies* by Liane Moriarty, I argue that reading this novel through the Critical Feminist Theory changes the interpretation of the female experience. Instead of reading the book for entertainment, digging into the larger scale issues in this book sheds light on the women's experiences. *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn is another novel misunderstood through the female main character. I argue that Amy's villainy doesn't make her any less feminine even though she is a psychopath. Often compared to *Gone Girl, The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins is focused in this thesis as its own entity. In contrast to *Big Little Lies*' female main characters, Hawkins explores three female main characters who are not so privileged, who do not exude feminism, women who make mistakes in which there is no coming back from, and women who have loved too much or have been loved too little; all of whom emulate feminism in their individuality.

Introduction

In contemporary literature, gender roles are enacted in the pages of a good book. One such genre of contemporary literature that reflects these roles is crime fiction. Over the years, most crime fiction and psychological thriller novels have contained the same stigma against women in which women aren't even viewed as strong or intelligent enough to be the killer in most crime novels, though should not take away that murder is inherently wrong. However, crime fiction has been a genre loved by many readers throughout time, and it is yet another genre that conveys the gender roles among both men and women. Even so, this is a genre that truly reflects such gender roles without much analysis from the reader because of the nature of the crimes being committed. With that being said, most of the time, the man is the perpetrator and a woman the victim. It is typically a stronger man that exudes masculinity taking control over their female victim who is seen as feminine, weak and more docile which furthers the narrative that femininity equals weakness. Even further, the male perpetrator feels the need to take control over the situation with a female. This is exemplified even so in contemporary crime fiction. As seen in *A Flicker in the Dark* by Stacy Willingham, *The Arrangement* series by Kiersten Modglin, and Jennifer Hillier's *Jar of Hearts*, among many more, the male killers are described as strong, wicked, inherently evil, and overpowering of the women they've murdered. The victims are described as too trusting, feminine, and naive. It's almost as if you cannot have one without the other.

However, as time has gone on, there are modern crime fiction and psychological thriller authors that have changed the game of the dichotomy of perpetrator and victim. Jeneva Rose's *The Perfect Marriage* sets up a situation in which there is no possible way the suspect did not commit the murder, only for her to shock readers into the plot twist of the wife setting up her

own husband for the murder of his mistress. *The Mindf*ck Series* by S.T. Abby has a main character who takes justice in her own hands after she was done wrong by the justice system. Sara Pinborough's *Behind Her Eyes* reflects just how far someone would go for her marriage. Colleen Hoover tells a twisted story in *Verity* about a woman who would do anything as long as it is what is best for her, even if it means harming her husband and children in the process.

To even further narrow down the genre of crime fiction, there is a relatively new subgenre, coined by author Julia Crouch, called domestic noir. Domestic noir, as defined by The National Centre for Writing in the article "The Origins of Domestic Noir" is a "capacious, flexible category that encompasses realist writing about domestic violence, intersectional feminism, religion, mental illness, and women's rights" (para. 5). So, not only do domestic noir authors write thrilling crime fiction novels, they encompass worldly, social, and psychological issues in their plotlines. Domestic noir, commonly known as "marriage thrillers," allows writers to navigate through such rigid topics while still telling a compelling and thrilling story which isn't limited to fantastic or supernatural storylines. For example, Sarah Pinborough's *Behind Her Eyes* tells the story of a woman who completed treatment in a rehabilitation center for her lucid dreams. Such dreams gave her the ability to travel as an apparition through her dreams in order to spy on her husband. Though this novel's plot twist was one of fantastical elements, Pinborough still wrote a feminist novel about the woman's experience when dealing with an illness and an overbearing husband.

Moreover, domestic noir is a genre that contains specific ideas that regular crime fiction does not. Domestic noir is a much narrowed focus subgenre of crime fiction that Peters explains in *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction* that it has "control in all its forms is a central element of domestic noir; thwarted desire to escape the control of others while

conversely exerting one's own control over them" (14). Domestic noir gives voice to different kinds of expression of feminism, and that's what makes bringing these novels together interesting. Control is exhibited in the three novels that I seek to explore in this thesis: *Big Little Lie* by Liane Moriarty, *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn, and *Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins. Readers learn where the control in each of these novels lie within, specifically, the female characters.

However, before we dive in, I must ask: what makes a novel feminist? Is it the actions of the characters? Is it their own female perspectives? Is it their experiences? The answer to all of those questions is yes. There is and will never be one answer to what makes a novel feminist because of the fluidity of feminisms. I explore several characters in this thesis, none of whom have similar qualities. I attempt to unpuzzle the mind of a psychopath, the minds of the privileged, the weak and powerless minds, and the minds who are sure of who they are in the place that they are. All of these characters exert femininity in their own way, which is what makes the conversation surrounding the topic so fruitful and multidimensional.

While all three novels that will be explored are a part of the subgenre of domestic noir, there are arguments to be made for all three of them, which are presented at the beginning of each chapter. Moreover, though, each of these novels were chosen to reflect domestic noir's nature and impact on the crime fiction and psychological thriller world. As aforementioned, domestic noir is a relatively new subgenre, however, it has made its way globally in the hands of critically acclaimed authors Liane Moriarty, Gillian Flynn, and Paula Hawkins, among other well-known authors.

Geographically speaking, domestic noir does not discriminate. The themes explored in the genre, such as control, marriage, femininity, women's rights, religion, and mental illness, are

reflected all over the globe which reflects the importance of writing about such significant topics around the world. Moriarty's *Big Little Lies* is set in the fictional town of Pirriwee, Australia in which she explores three women's lives through marriage and femininity, among other themes. The women in this novel juggle certain battles in their lives which are relatable across the world to readers. *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn is set in America, specifically Missouri. Flynn takes readers on a ride through Nick and Amy Dunne's marriage filled with love, toxicity, and psychopathy. *The Girl on the Train* is set in London where Paula Hawkins constructed a clever and compelling storyline about three women who each have their different desires.

Though written with similarities in certain themes from all three books, the geographical components shouldn't be ignored. Domestic noir is a genre that readers can be entertained from whether it be a *whodunit* to an exploration of character development and theme, but it is also a genre that, no matter where readers are in the world, they can relate to the important topics that the authors navigate through in order to connect with readers, sometimes even including the gruesome nature of the genre they write in. Having a global perspective from the genre enables readers to gain a new and broader perspective on not only the world of domestic noir, but the world as a whole. Men and women across the globe are not as different as people seem to think.

To further narrow the concept of domestic noir, all of these authors, while writing twisted and terrifying murder novels, have exhibited what true femininity looks like even with the gruesome crimes they write about. While the plots of these novels are atypical and oftentimes unhinged, the plots do not and should not take away from the female characters' femininity. With that said, what I argue with *Big Little Lies* is that readers should read this domestic noir novel with the lens of the Critical Feminist Theory (CFT), which "...examines women's social roles, history, activities, experiences, perspectives, and interests in order to both value women's

lives and to expose gender inequality in society" (Wood 203). A critical feminist reading practice enables readers, including men, to adjust their perspectives on their social reality, identity, and relationships in order to view them differently. It changes the view of the patriarchal society, and it begs for readers to recognize their self-awareness in the way they view such a society. CFT in literature has readers view what is "standard" of men versus women in terms of societal and familial expectations; such expectations being put forth by society themselves. CFT engages readers in a different way, guiding a different perspective and understanding on how women should be treated as well as their own desires in life.

Moreover, Moriarty examines the social role of her three main characters, Madeline, Jane, and Celeste, by exposing gender inequality. She does this in a way in which she constructs likable and relatable characters, both men and women, and their everyday battles they face in a higher class society. As readers move through the lives of each of these women, there are the common themes of domestic noir thrillers of feminism, marriage, infidelity, violence, and victim identity. Moriarty writes intricately with this storytelling, constructing a plot that is engaging, interesting, riveting, and mysterious while simultaneously capturing the three women navigating through a male dominated society.

Moving forward, the revolutionary novel for domestic noir fiction is arguably *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn. Flynn digs into the themes of marriage, domestic violence, feminism, and mental health in this novel encompassing the components of domestic noir. Reader engagement is guaranteed with this book as Flynn seamlessly navigates a compelling story while unpacking some of the effects of a woman in a male dominated society, such as loss of identity, individuality, powerlessness, etc. Flynn unpacks these effects in Amy by exemplifying individual feminism even if it is through Amy's psychopathy. The argument I make for this novel, and this

thesis as a whole, is destroying the idea that feminism is a "one size fits all" for feminists everywhere. When people think of feminists, the connotation behind that is women are better than men, women deserve more, women want more, etc. However, I seek to debunk such assumptions by expressing how Flynn exhibits individual femininity in her writing through the character of Amy.

Feminism, as evidenced in *Gone Girl*, is the notion and belief that women deserve equal rights. Women deserve to be treated as equal to their counterparts in all capacities of life such as in marriage, the workforce, home life, etc., and Amy Elliott Dunne reflects such behavior. This is not to say that her behavior should be overlooked because her actions are inherently wrong. She is a narcissist, a psychopath, and she will stop at nothing to ensure she gets what she wants, however, Amy also exudes strength, independence, and self-awareness. Her actions in the novel are not of blind malice, but rather knowingly and selfishly putting others at risk in order to get what she wants. This isn't the "go girl" or "girl power" feminism that people are often used to, however, this form of feminism breaks the walls of such beliefs by contorting feminism to fit the individual feminist.

Following *Gone Girl*, in this thesis, is *The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins. Hawkins' novel is often compared to Flynn's. In fact, if someone has heard of *The Girl on the Train* then it is likely they have also read or heard of *Gone Girl.* While the two novels do share a lot of similarities in regard to the genre of domestic noir, theme, plot, character development and dynamic, and conflict, I work with this chapter to separate *The Girl on the Train* from *Gone Girl.* My goal with *The Girl on the Train* is to talk about it as its own separate entity rather than in comparison with another novel because not only does Hawkins deserve the recognition for her

excellent writing without being attached to someone else, the novel also contains a multitude of differences that deserve to be highlighted in the conversation.

My argument with *The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins is validating the woman's experience through their individual wants and needs regardless of expected gender roles in women. Giving women the validation of their experiences, particularly in this novel, allows readers to engage with what each character is going through while still recognizing the novel as feminist. The novel follows three main characters in their own points of view: Rachel, Megan, and Anna. The three women live separate lives, and because of particular decisions they have made to get what they want, their lives intertwine to create the thrilling and mysterious plot. While Rachel is the novel's main protagonist, all three of them get caught up and entangled in each other's lives in some way through their own desires inspired by the men in their lives.

Rachel Watson is a woman who reflects the desire to be in a stereotypical gender role relationship. Her desire is to be with Tom, her ex-husband, and to have a baby with him. However, Rachel cannot get pregnant, and because of this she develops a drinking problem. Her drinking problem then causes strife in her marriage which ultimately, as readers think in the beginning, is the main cause for their divorce. Rachel rides the train every day, though she doesn't have a job, to remain consistent in her schedule and routine so no one finds out she lost her job because she was drinking at work. She sees Megan and Scott from the train window almost every day who just so happen to be the neighbors of the home she lived in with Tom. Seeing Megan and Scott drives Rachel into creating a fictitious life for them that resembles what she wants with Tom, though this ultimately turns into an obsession with the neighbors. Moreover, Rachel also sees Anna from the train window. Anna is the woman that Tom cheated on Rachel with. Tom left Rachel for Anna, only to find out that Anna fell pregnant soon after

their affair started. Rachel sees the life she desires the most from Anna. Anna has the man Rachel wants, she has the house, and the child. So, Anna is living Rachel's real life dream, and Rachel creates that dream in Megan and Scott.

Rachel's messy nature from her alcoholism throughout the novel is chaotic and erratic, and because of this she gives the reader an unreliable narration forcing us to piece together the events that take place during her blackouts. Due to the chaotic nature of Rachel's character, however, mainstream reviewers have invalidated her womanhood and femininity. For Rachel, I argue the opposite and in fact, her womanhood and femininity should be validated because a woman can be very much broken and flawed while still exuding feminism.

This thesis works its way through the three novels in which I explore different arguments for each one while also diving into feminism into the books. While crime fiction is typically viewed as more so a contemporary genre, there is still much to consider and analyze beyond the entertainment these authors have provided for millions of readers across the globe. Writing and creating something that is entertaining enough to keep the readers on their toes is arguably the easy part in writing. However, constructing a relatable storyline through characters and character development that keeps the readers engaged in the commonality in themselves and the characters is something that only the best writers can do, and Moriarty, Flynn, and Hawkins have successfully done so.

Critical Feminist Theory: Liane Moriarty's *Big Little Lies*

Big Little Lies by Liane Moriarty is a novel set in Australia about an upper class town, Piriwee that focuses on three women, Madeline, Celeste, and Jane. These women are similar when considering what they feel they need in their lives. Whether it be money, a man, drama, a good life for their children, all three of these women hold secrets that the reader gets to know, though the other characters in the novel have yet to find out. While this crime fiction novel is one of great mystery, critics agree that this novel should be viewed in a bigger light through a feminist lens. This novel deserves more than this though, and taking it a step further by exploring it through the Critical Feminist Theory (CFT) would give readers a new lens by which to read it. CFT "...examines women's social roles, history, activities, experiences, perspectives, and interests in order to both value women's lives and to expose gender inequality in society" (Wood 203). Many readers and critics believe that *Big Little Lies* is a feminist novel, and while it is, it is important to examine the novel at a deeper level than just being a feminist novel, and that is through CFT. CFT is an intersectional theory explored by feminists and critical theorists that "identify, critique, and seek to change inequities and discrimination, particularly those that are based on sex and gender" (Wood 206). Exploring this novel under the Critical Feminist Theory will give readers an understanding of how this novel plays a much larger role in feminism beyond the mystery of the plot and character dynamics. When reading this novel through such a lens, readers are able to truly absorb just how a woman's role is affected in a patriarchal society. It is also important to engage with the themes of the novel as they correlate with the theory of critical feminism. I examine the themes of marriage, violence, and infidelity in the novel through each of the female main characters. Breaking down the themes through the characters and incorporating the conversation surrounding CFT gives readers a much narrowed focus of how it

truly changes the reading of this book. Analyzing this novel through a CFT lens allows us to examine each of their social roles within their community through their perspectives and experiences as they navigate their individual womanhood and interpersonal relationships while Moriarty simultaneously exposes gender inequality.

As readers move through the lives of each of these women there are the common themes of domestic noir thrillers. It is best for this novel to be examined through the themes of marriage, violence, and victim identity as the main themes to explore which contain attributes of the other aforementioned themes of infidelity all while of course being wrapped into the conversation of feminism in this book. It is through both of these themes that readers and critics can explore this novel through a CFT lens, examining not only as it is read as a larger scale feminist novel, but also exploring the bridge in genre from crime fiction to domestic noir. It is essential to understand the story's structure and main characters when looking at the novel in this dynamic.

Big Little Lies fits into the box of domestic noir in an abundance of ways, but mostly in exploring the female perspective, and in this case, the intersectionality of multiple female perspectives. By intersectionality, I do not mean their race, gender, class, or socioeconomic status; I mean that each woman has their own unique perspectives and experiences to add to the novel. While the three of these women are best friends, their individual experiences define who they are and some of these defining moments actually force the reader to question what they believe to be true to the bitter end of the novel. These experiences call to question the social truth within these womens' lives as well, indicating that some decisions being made are socially impaired due to peer pressure.

Readers get to know the most from Madeline in the third person limited point of view, though the novel is written from the perspectives of Celeste and Jane as well. Madeline is in her

second marriage with two children from different fathers, one of whom prefers to live with her father over her which is something that Madeline battles with throughout the novel. The point of view jumps from character to character where readers also get to know Celeste who has two twin boys and who is married to a man who travels more than he is home. There is also Jane who is new to town. She and her son got up and moved abruptly, though it takes the reader a bit to learn why. She is a single woman who struggles monetarily, though she would do anything to make it work for her son.

The story being told in a third person limited point of view is quite interesting. Readers still only know what the author wants them to know about each character without giving any extra information. Readers get to understand the plot on a much broader level due to the multiperspectivity of the novel, and because of this, readers are kept guessing on where to point their fingers on an event that has not even taken place yet. Moriarty sets the plot of this novel in an unusual way that works. How can a reader be left wondering about *something* that occurred at an event that did not even happen yet? This novel is heavily character focused, mostly on the three women, though with the help of the supporting characters, readers get to learn what it is about each of these women that *could* be their ultimate demise, or maybe not.

The plot structure of *Big Little Lies* is essential to understand due the mystery and character dynamic and development. What Moriarty does so well with *Big Little Lies* is that readers do not get to know what happened until the very end of the story, forcing readers to rely on character perspective, knowledge, and the admittance of certain secrets in their consciousness. The novel opens with a detective going around asking questions about the event, and he states that "'This is not a circus. This is a murder investigation'" (Moriarty 7). The opening of this immediately sets readers up to wonder what is going on and question where the novel is headed.

Moriarty continues to bounce back and forth between the dialogues from the detective to the perspectives of the main characters. In most psychological thriller or crime fiction novels, there is a tendency for readers to automatically assume that there is a male perpetrator involved as this is the norm. Along with this, in thrillers there is also typically a female victim. It is easy to guide readers' thoughts toward a man being able to overpower a woman in multiple capacities being more capable of committing an act of violence. It is statistically proven that men perpetrate acts of violence against women more often than the other way around. Moriarty does this to the point of both the perpetrator and victim being completely unknown until the end of the novel.

Moving forward, it is clear to readers that the people of the town are talking about something that happened at an event hosted by the school, but the reader has no idea what occurred, and it is also seemingly so that none of the characters know what happened either. "'It was all just a terrible misunderstanding. People's feelings got hurt, and then everything just spiraled out of control. The way it does. All conflict can be traced back to someone's feelings getting hurt, don't you think'" (Moriarity 5)? The novel then jumps backward, leaving the reader wondering what happened at the event that would alter the story in its entirety. This kind of story structure guides the reader into questioning the credibility of each character, however, this questioning is mostly directed toward the three main characters, Madeline, Celeste, and Jane, but focusing on one of the three women's lives and their different perspectives of the same experience. These women are the basis of the intersectionality of feminism in the novel while still being entertaining for the readers as a contemporary novel with larger scale themes.

Reading novels through the theory and lens of a critical feminist forces readers to view themselves and how they interact through their own relationships and social identity. By practicing reading through a critical feminist lens, readers learn to identify feminist novels

through the reconstruction of the typical patriarchy which is reflected in *Big Little Lies*. Such reconstruction comes from analyzing gender roles in the novel and the fight against what is viewed as typical for both women and men. Reading through this critical feminist lens enables readers to view themselves differently forcing us to reflect on how we identify on a sliding feminist scale. Wood also notes not all feminist theories are critical, and not all critical theories are feminist. There is an intersection between feminist theory and critical theory that result in "theories that identify, critique, and seek to change inequities and discrimination, particularly those that are based on sex and gender" (206). Such theorists look at cultural and structural practices in men and women as well as how men and women shape cultural and structural practices. In other words, "critical feminist theorists are particularly interested in understanding how women become empowered and, in some cases, how they change dominant practices and ideologies that constrain women's lives" (206). It is important to note that CFT does not encourage the eradication or literal deconstruction of the patriarchy, but instead, encourages people to view the patriarchy through a different lens that empowers readers to focus heavily on women's interpersonal relationships and the roles they contribute to their society. Gur-Ze'ev examines CFT and how readers should understand feminist literature, "A different force directs it to save some of the Enlightenment's ideas while criticizing central elements of present day's postmodern discourse and paying tribute to others" (55). In other words, when examining literature through CFT, it is still important to understand how women slowly started gaining power in society, and even now in this modern era where feminist literature is still striving for the attention it deserves. In *Big Little Lies,* the novel is focused on three female main characters that are stuck in a male dominated society.

Celeste is a prime example of a woman who loses her identity in her marriage. Celeste's character embodies what women in Pirriwee want to be. She is beautiful, she has a good looking husband, Perry, who is a great father, she does not have to work because her husband makes enough money, and she has two beautiful twin boys. On the outside, there really is nothing that Celeste does not have. The other women in the community envy her and what she has, but of course everything is not always what it seems to be.

Perry travels a lot for work, and when he is home, he is a big family man wanting to spend time with his boys and Celeste as much as possible. It is when he and Celeste finally have their alone time together that Perry enacts his true temper. He physically and mentally abuses Celeste every time he comes home from traveling, and because he has money, he feels that he has this kind of control over his wife. At first, though, Celeste would fight back, and even after that she knew which reaction to choose from to get Perry to react a certain way. "Sometimes she fought back. She punched and kicked him the way she'd once punched and kicked her older brother. For a few moments, he would let her, as if it were what he wanted, as if it were what he needed, before he grabbed her wrists" (Moriarty 143). It is with every abuse that Celeste loses a bit of herself in which her identity blurs between who she is and who she was. "'I will leave you if you ever do that again,' she said after the first time, and she was deadly serious, my God was she serious. She knew exactly how to behave in a situation like this" (143). While she thought she knew what she would do if something like this happened to her, she did not expect the reaction her husband would have. "He promised. He swore on his children's lives. He was heartbroken. He bought her the first piece of jewelry she would never wear" (143). It would be about two years later that he hit her again, though the narrator explains that Celeste found it menial compared to her sick child. She always made an excuse after that, "It could have been

much worse. He rarely hit her face. She'd never broken a limb or needed stitches…She'd read the articles about proper domestic violence victims. That was terrible. That was real. What Perry did didn't count" (145). It is here that she is losing sight of what it means to be in an abusive relationship by chalking domestic violence up to being "proper" whereas what she and Perry have is "so childish and trite" (145). She excuses the way she should be treated in a marriage because what Perry does to her is not considered textbook abuse, but rather, something she could deal with for her and her kids to live a good life.

Readers can see Celeste as a woman who gives in to gender inequality in the beginning of the novel. Celeste is a character that is easily misunderstood. It's easy to ask ourselves as readers, if she is getting hit then why doesn't she leave? However, CFT forces us to then ask ourselves, what is it about Celeste that is exposing gender inequality in the social world she lives in? How does her character give a new perspective to readers when thinking about valuing life? Celeste sees herself as a typical wife and mother while her husband works and pays the bills, though to readers, this is further from the truth even though Celeste doesn't view herself how readers see her. Celeste is massively wealthy, and she has a lot of power in the town because of her beauty and wealth. So for a while, she allows Perry to hit her while giving no reaction to him. She allows herself to be the woman everyone is envious of. At some point, however, Celeste decides to make moves for her and her children to leave Perry and his abuse behind. She thought to herself, "*I don't know why I stay. I don't know why I do this. I don't know why you do this, why we do this, why this keeps happening"* (144). The inequity in this marriage starts at the gender roles, but because Perry believes he has a right to treat his wife the way he wants to, it develops into something much more malicious.

As mentioned, Wood explains that one way to look at CFT is that it "seeks to change inequities and discrimination" (206). Moriarty does this with Celeste's character in comparison with Perry's, albeit in a slow burn kind of way. She writes Celeste's character in a more nuanced way than what a lot of domestic violence novels describe victims as. Celeste quietly plans a way out of her marriage that will keep everyone safe. She started by seeing a domestic abuse counselor, though the narrator explains that Celeste had every intention to cancel the appointment. "When she'd gotten up this morning Celeste had been sure wouldn't come. She intended to ring up and cancel as soon as she got the children to school, but then she'd found herself in the car…" (211). This is an intentional move for Celeste, though she thought she would not follow through with seeing the counselor, readers see that Celeste is making steps to break the walls of inequity. She no longer wants Perry to make her feel this way because she does not need to even if she had a hard time seeing that at first. She is in a position that she does not need to be married to an abusive man, and that makes her one step closer into taking back her identity that she lost in her marriage.

Moving forward, Jane is another example of a character who lost her identity. In her case, Perry is the same man who did to her as he did Celeste. Jane came to Pirriwee, as readers and other characters thought throughout the novel, to build a better life for her and her son, Ziggy. However, it is later learned that this is not the whole truth. When Jane is first introduced in the novel, Madeline notices a lot of Jane's habits such as constantly chewing gum, wearing her hair in a tight ponytail, and wearing the same type of shirt every day. Toward the middle of the novel, though, Madeline learns why Jane is the way she is and why she is a single mother. Jane tells her the story of her sexual assault with a man named Saxon Banks, who we later learn is Perry's alias when he goes out of town. What seemed to Jane as a casual hookup with an attractive, older

man at a bar, turned out to be the turning point in her self-esteem. When Perry started belittling Jane for the sake of his own sexual pleasure, she changed her mind about wanting to be with him for the night, though that did not stop him. He continued saying unkind things such as, “You’ve got to respect yourself a bit more. Lose that weight. Join a gym, for fuck’s sake. Stop the junk food. You’ll never be beautiful, but at least you won’t be fat” (201), and eventually, Jane lied there and let it happen because she didn’t have another choice, “She did not resist in any way. She stared at the downlight in the ceiling, blinking at her like a hateful eye, observing everything, seeing it all, agreeing with everything he said…It was as though her body didn’t belong to her anymore…” (201). The violence enacted on Jane that night altered her as a woman not only because that night was the conception of her son, but because she would alter her emotional and physical appearance afterwards.

Jane’s altered identity can be examined by readers through a CFT lens. Michael Flood and Bob Pease did a study on violence against women called *Factors Influencing Attitudes to Violence Against Women* where they state, “Women are more likely to blame themselves for the assault, less likely to report it to the police or other authorities, and more likely to experience long-term negative psychological and emotional effects" (126). With that said, it is possible to examine such violence through a CFT lens. As explained, CFT looks to change inequities based on sex and gender, and what this study looks at in terms of sexual violence against women,

> Attitudes to violence against women are inextricably grounded in and intertwined with attitudes toward women, gender, and sexuality. In other words, judgments of violence against women are shaped by wider norms of gender and sexuality. For example, perceptions of the legitimacy of men's violence to intimate partners are constituted through agreement with the notions that men should be dominant in households and

> intimate relationships and have the right to enforce their dominance through physical chastisement… (Flood and Pease)

In other words, because of these notions that women being intimate with men are constituted through agreement, there is no merit of what is considered sexual assault. Attitudes toward gender as a whole offer judgment when viewing two consenting partners, and that judgment becomes blurry because of that. So, when Jane decided to have a one night stand with Saxton Banks (who we later find out is Perry), she made excuses for his behavior toward her because technically, she did consent to sex with him. When Jane told Madeline the story, she made excuses for Perry's behavior because she had the intention of being intimate with him that night. "'Well. It's not like I got raped in an alleyway. I have to take responsibility. It wasn't that big a deal'" (205). She goes on to say, "'Lots of women have bad sexual experiences. That was mine. The lesson is: Don't go off with strange men you meet in bars" (204). She continues to make excuses, "'I was overweight,' said Jane. 'Some people would probably say I was fat, I was into food.'...An expression of mild awe crossed her face, as if she couldn't quite believe how she was describing herself" (205). Madeline and Jane continue to talk about Jane's experience with Perry (Saxon Banks) when she comes to a realization that there are expectations for women men just simply do not have, "'I mean a fat, ugly *man* can still be funny and lovable and successful,...But it's like it's the most shameful thing a for a woman to be" (205). This conversation with Madeline was a huge realization for Jane. It is the first time she admitted aloud what happened to her, who Ziggy's father really is, and why she has her certain quirks. Admitting this to another woman guided Jane into a different self-awareness that Saxon Banks embedded in her mind, and this scene was a turning point for her growth as a woman.

Madeline's input and Jane's self-realization are not the only insights readers get on Jane's victim blaming herself after her assault. Madeline confides in her husband, Ed, about what happened to Jane and why she is the way she is. Getting a man's perspective of the experience is critical in understanding the dichotomy of gender roles because CFT seeks to expose gender inequality, it also seeks to expose gender ideologies; such ideologies in this novel come from Jane's experience and Ed's perception of it as a man. He called Jane "a silly, silly girl" (223) which sparked an uproar in Madeline. "'Don't call her a silly girl!...That sounds like you're blaming her!'" (223), and it is after Madeline's reaction that readers get a bit of insight into Ed's thoughts when he argues with Madeline in which he describes himself as a "hostage negotiator dealing with a lunatic and a ticking bomb" (223). It is this very description of women when they are angry that drives the innate instinct for them to yell and be heard in the first place. It is when Madeline accuses Ed of victim blaming that she thinks of Jane and who she used to be before her attack, "Jane once wore bright colors! Jane once had cleavage! Now Jane dressed her bony body apologetically, humbly, like she wanted to disappear, like she was trying to be invisible, to make herself nothing. He did that to her" (223). This is a scenario that readers examining this novel in a CFT lens can really pinpoint the specifics of what it begs for: women's roles, their history, activities, and experiences while gaining a man's perspective on a situation that should have been avoided had Jane's role as an equal been accounted for. Madeline and Ed are exposing the difference in gender roles based simply on their actions and reactions to one another by talking about it. Madeline knows that her husband did not mean calling Jane a silly girl to be victim blaming, however, she believes he needs to be held accountable for what he said just as women must be held accountable for the roles they play in society. Madeline thinks to herself,

> She knew her husband was actually a better, nicer person than she was, and yet she couldn't forgive him for that "silly girl" comment. It somehow *represented* a terrible wrong. As a woman, Madeline was obliged to be angry with Ed on Jane's behalf, and for every other "silly girl," and for herself, because after all, it could have happened to her too, and even a soft little word like "silly" felt like a slap. (224)

Madeline calls Ed out on his sexist and biased response to Jane's assault. It is with that readers can really pull from the ideas that reading this novel through CFT gives as Madeline clearly values Jane's life and experiences, and it's easy for Ed to brush it off.

From that, Madeline is another one of the three main characters who strives to obtain an identity beyond motherhood and her wifely duties. Madeline was once married to Nathan whom she shares her oldest child with. While Madeline mostly internalizes her emotions about her ex-husband and his new family, she makes it seem to Nathan that this does not bother her. In this town, if something bothers Madeline, typically, everyone knows. So, in order to keep those who spread rumors at bay, Madeline must minimize her feelings. In " 'How Much Do You Want to Pay for This Beauty?': Domestic Noir and the Active Turn in Feminist Crime Fiction*,"* Emma V. Miller talks about the typical crime fiction genre in which readers view female protagonists. She writes, "Despite a history of female authors of crime fiction, female protagonists have been limited to certain roles…they are women struggling for professional respect within a patriarchal judiciary system, whilst also being threatened by the subject to verbal and physical abuse" (90). On the other hand, domestic noir focuses on just the opposite. Female protagonists are meant, if not expected to go against the norm, and this is evident as Madeline's daughter moves in with Nathan, and Madeline forces herself to internalize her struggles with this. She does not want Nathan and Bonnie to feel they have won, the prize being Abigail. In this case, Madeline is

avoiding that verbal and physical abuse not from Nathan or Ed, but from the other women in the town that are keen to turn on her if something seems out of place with Madeline. Perception is the key to remaining on top of the social pyramid, and Madeline will not let her daughter moving in with her ex-husband change the position she is in to avoid the verbal abuse that may come her way. Madeline's feelings about Abigail forming a new bond with a different woman who is not her daughter's mother is internalized, "Only Bonnie could think that you would want to hear that, and yet, you couldn't complain, could you? You couldn't even think, *Shut up bitch,* because Bonnie was not a bitch. So all Madeline could do was just stand there and nod and *take it,* while her mood snarled and snapped and strained at the leash" (111). Madeline is all about power, control, and never losing that composure, and she does not waiver as she loses her daughter to her ex-husband and his new fiancé.

Along with this, it is typical in regular crime fiction novels for female characters to carry on what could be viewed as the typical wifely and motherly duties while her husband works to provide for the family which is why *Big Little Lies* is the perfect novel to examine CFT through. This is not a typical crime fiction novel, and it goes beyond the scope of domestic noir being a genre that umbrellas crime fiction. Though this is an outdated idea of familial expectations, crime fiction continues to utilize this structure in order to set up the plot. This structure was not done with Madeline's marriage with Nathan after they had Abigail. She expected Nathan's help with their newborn daughter, she wanted to split the responsibilities, and this could be done because Nathan did not work a day-to-day job. Madeline's assertion that Nathan helped take care of their daughter was quickly diminished when Nathan realized that he could not fulfill his responsibilities as a father. At just three weeks old, Nathan left Abigail and Madeline explaining to his family that he just could not be the father he thought he could be. "'I'm so sorry, Maddie,

but I'm just not cut out for this.' …Madeline had yawned…she didn't think he meant *literally.* An hour later, she'd watched in stunned amazement as he'd packed his clothes…his eyes had rested briefly on the baby, as if she belonged to someone else, and he'd left" (111). Madeline was crushed, though it is evident in the novel that she had to do what was necessary in order to raise her baby as a single mother which reflects the strength of women. Domestic noir sheds light on the strength of the female character, and it does not make a mother seem weak, as in this case, the weakness is shown when Nathan leaves simply because he feels that he is not "cut out for this." Madeline then has to watch Nathan and Bonnie raise their daughter together from a distance, left wondering why she and Abigail were not enough for Nathan to stay; but because of the kind of character Madeline is, she simply watches her ex-husband raise a family that should have been with her.

On the flip side, Madeline's marriage with Ed is also one that goes against the social norm. Readers do not get to experience much of Ed as he is a background character, and the only information given about him is mostly through Madeline's chapters. However, Ed gave up his job at a bigger newspaper in order to give Madeline the opportunity to work more. While this goes against gender norms, Madeline still has a hard time finding her own identity within her marriage. In "The Subversion of the Male Tradition in Crime Fiction: Liane Moriarty's *Little Lies*," Elena Avanzas Alvarez examines Madeline's character by viewing her as not a victim to the plot, but sort of a victim to her own self and societal expectations as she is still trying to understand who she is as someone who is not a housewife, but is also not a full time working mother. This blurred line of understanding comes from the societal expectations exhibited in the novel in which they have a term for the working mothers versus the stay at home mothers. "'My understanding was that it all goes back to the stay-at-home mums battling it out with the career

mums. What do they call it? The Mummy Wars'" (Moriarty 7). One of the stay at home mothers comments, "You journalists are all just loving the French nanny angle…I have four children, and no staff to help out! Of course, I don't have a problem *per se* with working mothers, I just wonder why they bothered having children in the first place" (Moriarty 7). This is a woman criticizing other women for being working mothers which is one of the leading causes for the defined line between motherly expectations as if women should be seen as less of a mother if they decide to work.

While Ed made the sacrifice with his job in order to better suit Madeline, she still feels that she is not fulfilling any sort of duty that is expected of her whether it be housewife or working mother. Alvarez states, "By making this decision, both can share parenting duties, and establish a more egalitarian relationship. However, she does not define herself as a working mother either, as she confesses her resentment…" (187). While readers know that this is what Madeline thinks of herself, it is also evident that Madeline demonstrates the individuality that domestic noir is known for with its female characters, by paving her own way through her everyday life in the way she wants to, and not what is expected of her. This could be because Madeline is unsure of what her expectations are for herself, and yet, this still produces the rich, feminist qualities that domestic noir authors are known for giving their characters. "Contrary to her beliefs, Madeline inhabits a privileged state of in-between-ness and ambiguity that allows her to escape traditional gender roles. Her fluidity is openly portrayed in her feminine aesthetics and her refusal to perform the roles associated with that femininity " (Alvarez 187). Madeline's marriage with Ed is, by any standard, a good marriage. He supports her in a way that Nathan did not, he is the father of her other two kids, and he respects Madeline for who she is in all of her feminine and individual form.

The Critical Feminist Theory examines women in all of their forms, not just through their gender. Feminism intersects humans in all of their capacities in their gender, sex, race, and socioeconomic status, but it also parallels women of the same stature and background. Liane Moriarty wrote *Big Little Lies* in which she examines three very different women, in terms of perspective and experience, living and experiencing different parts of life through wifely hood, womanhood, and motherhood; all of which creates the intersectionality of CFT. CFT seeks to change inequities based on gender and Moriarty has done this. Before Perry's death, Celeste was ready to escape her abuser, Jane came through her assault and raised a son without a man's help, and Madeleine is a force that exerts individuality despite her husband's contempt. This is a feminist novel to its core and encompasses what women continue to endure and what they rise to be.

Both Feminist and Villainous: Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*

Feminism encompasses a strong sense of community, inclusivity, and the advocacy for women's rights. Women and men band together to fight for equality in women because viewing women as anything less than equal to their counterparts reeks of misogyny. A feminist woman believes in equal rights, she is strong and independent, and she advocates for these rights for other women. This seems to ring true for feminists everywhere, and this is the very broad sense of what feminism looks like. In *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn, there is an ongoing conversation between readers, critics, and authors that this is a feminist novel whereas on the other hand, there are people who do not believe this to be true. Amy Dunne, the novel's antagonist, is a woman who stages her own disappearance because of the actions of her husband, Nick. His actions led Amy to stage this intricate plan so he gets accused of it eventually to be charged with her murder. Readers see Amy as the novel's villain, and though this is true in a plethora of ways, her villainy overshadows how her character makes this a feminist novel. Despite the other women in the book that deserve their own analysis of feminism, I use and examine Amy Elliot Dunne's character alone to argue that *Gone Girl* is, in fact, a feminist novel.

An Anti-Feminist Novel

Critics and readers have accused author Gillian Flynn for having antifeminist and misogynistic traits which are reflected in both Nick and Amy Dunne. *Time Magazine* published an article called "Is *Gone Girl* Feminist or Misogynist?" in which the writer talks about Flynn's misogynistic writing, "Amy fakes a sexual assault, even though overwhelming evidence indicates that women don't lie about being raped. She manipulates men to an exaggerated and terrifying degree, saying reasonable things despite being a murderous madwoman" (Dockterman). Another article from *Unpublishedzine* called "*Gone Girl* Under a Feminist Lens"

talks about Amy as a feminist counterpart in which the author writes, “Displaying no sense of community, Amy takes companionship in other women only to put them down and reap the benefits, whether that be building Nick’s false motive, or using urine to fake a pregnancy” (Klisz). Here the author is using Amy’s strength as an individual to argue that she is anti-feminist as Flynn writes Amy as someone who survives solely on the reliability of others when it is convenient for her, only to drop those around her when she no longer benefits from them. An example of this is Amy befriending the pregnant neighbor, without Nick’s knowledge, only to steal her urine to fake a positive pregnancy test. Amy says, “I’m pregnant! Thank you Noelle Hawthorne, the world knows it now, you little idiot. In the day since she pulled her stunt at my vigil (I do wish she hadn’t upstaged my vigil, though– ugly girls can be such thunder stealers…)” (Flynn 258). Amy continues to tell readers how she laid out the plan of how and why she befriended a woman she had no interest being friends with, “I know I need a pliant friend for my plan, someone I could load up with awful stories about Nick, someone who would become overly attached to me, someone who’d be easy to manipulate…” (258-259). Amy’s friendship to Noelle, who announced Amy’s pregnancy at her vigil, was simply a one sided business transaction for Amy. Amy wanted something from her, she got it, and she did not really think twice about how she would hurt her pregnant friend in the process.

The opinions of Flynn’s novel being not merely anti-feminist, but rather misogynistic, are abundant. An unknown blogger from *The Guardian* wrote a piece on Flynn’s overuse of misogynistic behaviors implemented in the novel, describing it as “the crystallisation of a thousand misogynist myths and fears about female behaviour. If we strapped a bunch of men’s rights advocates to beds and downloaded their nightmares, I don’t think we’d come up with stuff half as ridiculous as this plot.” The writer even goes as far as calling those who believe this to be

a feminist novel as “mansplaining” such a proclamation. *Litcharts* has a theme analysis of *Gone Girl* titled “Misogyny” in which people are meant to read to understand this being one of the core themes of the novel. It states, “As Flynn unfolds the twisting plot of her novel, she ultimately argues that misogyny is so deeply ingrained in American society that its casual cruelty and poisonous rhetoric are inescapable parts of daily life—for women as well as for men” (LitCharts). This is stated as it being the core theme, and because of this, it cannot be a feminist novel due to Flynn’ revealing the ingrained misogyny of American society. It goes on to say,

> Amy is ultimately a mess of contradictions: a woman who loathes other women, a narcissist who hates herself on a level she can’t comprehend, and an individual who seeks to play into the tropes of femininity for her own gain while remaining blind to the possibility that other women all around her—just as affected or disaffected by misogyny as she is—are doing exactly the same thing. (LitCharts)

They view Amy as a misogynist at heart who attempts but fails to bear the burden of femininity in her actions throughout the novel.

There are plenty more instances in which people argue that this is not a feminist novel, especially in regards to Amy Elliott Dunne. However, according to The International Women’s Development Agency feminism is about “respecting diverse women's experiences, identities, knowledge and strengths, and striving to empower all women to realise their full rights.” Gillian Flynn does this with Amy’s character by respecting Amy wholly as herself, and not who she is expected to be as a woman confined to her marriage.

Domestic Noir

Gone Girl by Gillian Flynn is generically categorized as crime fiction. While this is true, there is much to be said about how it can also be narrowed down as domestic noir fiction. In fact,

this novel has been celebrated as one of the trail blazing domestic noir novels because of the complicated relationship of Nick and Amy Dunne, and how they take readers for a ride leading them through the intricacies of their marriage. Flynn's writing backs Nick Dunne into a corner at first, before Amy's present day narrative; readers can almost be certain that Nick is the one whodunit. The motive and opportunity were there for him to make Amy disappear, and Amy's diary entries confirm this. Her diary entries were admittedly, by Amy herself, a farce. She created the entries as if she had been writing in the diary for years to further Nick's involvement and motive in her disappearance. However, Amy's present day narrative correlates with one of many plot twists in which readers learn that she planned her own disappearance to blame Nick for it. Her present day entries are written as if Amy is talking to us readers, and it is truly easy to believe the things that she admits to us throughout this point of view. Some may ask if readers could even trust Amy in this regard since she is a manipulative psychopath, what is stopping her from even lying to us? What is stopping her from telling the truth? Questions like these are what makes crime fiction infuriatingly interesting, and it is up to us to believe what Amy is telling us is true.

Domestic noir is a much narrowed genre of crime fiction. Peters explains that "control in all its forms is a central element of domestic noir; thwarted desire to escape the control of others while conversely exerting one's own control over them" (14). Amy is an incredibly controlling character as she cunningly and sneakily controls several narratives that she constructed, and she is so successful at it that she chooses when readers get to find out the truth. She controls herself as a woman and wife, choosing to adjust herself to what she thinks her husband's expectations were of her in order to be a more likable spouse to Nick. When that stopped working and their marriage began failing, she regained control when she planned and enacted her disappearance,

reappearance, and finally trying to become the kind of spouses she wanted to be despite Nick wanting to leave her. Nick said, "We had spent years battling for control of our marriage, of our love story, our life story; I had been thoroughly, finally outplayed" (411). She is a game player, and if she is not controlling the game then she changes the narrative to do it. She says, "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" (223). Later on in the novel, Nick acknowledges this competitive side of Amy. He said, "So let everyone take sides. Team Nick, Team Amy. Turn it into even more of a game: Sell some fucking T-shirts" (410). It just so happens that Nick is in a losing game when it comes to his wife because of Amy's sheer need to control everyone around her, including herself when she needs to.

Gone Girl as a Feminist Novel

Amy encompasses womanhood despite the societal pressures and expectations and her childhood. Amy Elliott Dunne is complicated and interesting, beautiful and scary, and she had her whole life literally written for her before she could decide who she was as an individual. Her parents wrote the *Amazing Amy* stories in which they wrote about their daughter as a child growing up in varying stages and being "amazing." Amy explains she was different from Amazing Amy as Amazing Amy did what the real Amy could not or did not want to do. This narrative of Amy being written for her in these best-selling stories caused her own self-scrutiny. She says, "I was never a person, because I was always a product" (Flynn). She grew up in the public eye with expectations of who she should be as a woman stemming from her parents.

Understanding Amy in this way is essential to the interpretation of the novel as one of the many ironies is how Amy puts herself back in the public eye. Readers learn that Amy's diary

entries were faked, written with information that she wanted people to know or to think rather than the alternative of the truth; doing this to herself just as her parents did to her when she was a child with Amazing Amy. The difference being, however, Amy writing her own narrative was at her own volition. Elina Vahlne examines Amy in this way when talking about Flynn's choice by giving Amy a chance to tell readers the real story instead of her constructed one from her diary, "However, she also provides gripping social criticism and at times we are very willing to believe in her cause. Because of the fact that her narrative control spans half the novel, we are also provided with something that is not always given to "evil" women in literature: her side of the story" (2). This matters when viewing Amy through a feminist lens as the time she chose the narrative she wrote for herself in her diary entries while she wants Nick and detectives to believe this almost complete fictitious story. However, she tells the truth to readers. "I can tell you more about how I did everything but I'd like you to know me first. Not Diary Amy, who is a work of fiction…but me, Actual Amy" (220). At this point in the novel, Amy transitions herself from *Amazing Amy* to *Actual Amy*. She has finally taken her life into her own hands. She does not have her parents constructing her childhood for her anymore, and she no longer has to be this fickle wife to her husband. She is herself wholly when her present day chapters begin, introducing herself as her true self. She reminisced to readers about her past, "I was pretending, the way I often did, pretending to have a personality. I can't help it, it's what I've always done: The way women change fashion regularly, I change personalities" (222). At this point, readers learn that Amy has never been the person that she has always wanted to be. As mentioned, her life was written for her from childhood with her parents' *Amazing Amy* stories. She then creates her diary entries which contain both fact and fiction, and finally the present-day Amy writes her own, true narrative, who takes pride in her own psychopathy. For 31 years Amy lived this way,

and her experiences as a child and a woman have paved the way for her to implement such a life altering plan in order to gain any sort of control of her life back. She feels as though she has never had control over the way she has lived, though she can control when she gets to die, and that itself is a strength that people often mistake as a weakness. Amy decided to uphold herself to a standard that she finally set for her own self, not one that had been set for her.

Throughout the novel, she constantly goes against the grain of what is expected of her because she has always lived a demanding life. Amy recognizes that life doesn't have to be this way, and other people's expectations of her shouldn't matter. Laurie Penny explains, "Femininity itself has become a brand, a narrow and shrinking formula of commoditised identity which can be sold back to women who have become alienated from their own power as living, loving, laboring beings" (Penny). It's as if femininity has become this box with certain qualities within it that people have to meet in order to be considered feminist. Women have been subjected to this box and expected to have these qualities in order to be feminine which takes away from who these women truly are. This is such with Amy Elliott Dunne as she was alienated from her own power at such a young age forcing her to take back her life and implement the beliefs she carried for herself as an adult woman. She lets people define who she was her entire life, and when Nick becomes unappreciative of his wife which eventually leads him to his infidelity, Amy does not let him define her. Resti writes, "Raised by feminist parents, the real Amy is very much aware of offensive sexism represented in films and gender representation in commercials; thus, she often objects such representation. However, she is often criticized by her husband, Nick, when she appears to be more superior than him" (135). Nick viewing himself as superior to his wife was something Amy expected which is why she changed who she was to her core, though what she did not see coming was the way Nick reacted to Amy's adjustment in

herself. He saw Amy as this weak and nagging wife who would not hurt him, let alone stage her ultimate plan, he did not plan for Amy to take both of their lives into her own hands. The control Amy takes back in her life makes her the utmost feminist character in this novel despite her plan for Nick, and it is with her character alone that this book can be read through a feminist lens entirely. Amy's overall strength in the way she represents herself could actually be viewed as inspiring, for lack of a better word, though this is not to take away from what she did to hurt Nick, among other characters. Resti states, "She believes that a woman must be able to stand for herself and be bold whenever she disagrees with her husband's expectations and wrong behaviors" (136). This is exactly what Amy does; she stands up for herself in the boldest way possible in retaliation to how her husband has treated her throughout their marriage. The irony of this is, however, Amy's plan to hurt Nick results in her own wrong behaviors as she enacts a plan that hurts more than just her husband.

Nick's criticism over Amy and his expectations of her forces Amy to pretend she was someone she was not. By this I mean, Amy came from a wealthy family, inherited a trust fund, and graduated with a degree from Harvard. She funded Nick's failing career as she used her money to support them financially. Typically, gender roles define the man of the relationship bringing home the money while the woman takes care of the home and children. In the case of the Dunnes, these gender roles are not applicable. Amy is the primary breadwinner, and if it were not for her family and her trust fund then Nick would not be able to live a lavish life that he evidently cannot provide for him and his wife, let alone himself. Amy chooses to live a quiet life of the obedient wife so she does not take away from Nick's. Amy states, "Just like Nick, who destroyed and rejected the real me a piece at a time—you're too serious, Amy, you're too uptight, Amy, you overthink things, you analyze too much, you're no fun anymore, you make me

feel useless, Amy, you make me feel bad, Amy" (321). Amy rejected the feminist side of her throughout their marriage by complying with societal expectations of women, though it is fair to wonder if she were supported by Nick to be wholly herself if she would feel liberated as a woman. Sandra Widya Resti explains that being a successful independent woman does not automatically liberate women. She writes, "Her success does not altogether liberate her from the confinement of traditional gender roles and stereotypes. People around her assert that there is something wrong with her" (135). What this implies is that if Amy felt that she did not have to dumb herself down as Nick's wife then it is possible she would still be confined to societal expectations of gender roles. With that being said, Amy did not have the opportunity to even find this out within her marriage because of Nick's insecurities in which he felt emasculated leading to his infidelity to Amy. He was not the dominant spouse in this marriage, and because of the fragility of his masculinity and the strength of Amy's femininity, he did what he wanted to do in order to save his own sense of self instead of his partnership with his wife. It is because of this that Amy made her vengeful decisions.

Amy's strength in her womanhood is admirable as she completely takes control over her own life, though her behaviors could and should not be overlooked. *Gone Girl* as a feminist novel works because of Amy's strength, individuality, and who/what she identifies as, but a feminist cannot simply sweep her psychopathy under the rug. Amy is sadistic and violent, and it is evident that she is detached from reality throughout the novel. She even goes as far as admitting to readers that she was not the person that Nick married, and when she showed him her "real self" she knew that he did not like her. She says, "Can you imagine, finally showing your true self to your spouse, your soulmate, and having him *not like you*? So that's how the hating first began. I've thought about this a lot, and that's where it started, I think" (225). It is at this

point where readers understand the true hatred she feels against Nick for not loving her for who she is. For Amy, that hatred blooms into a fiery rage and need to exact revenge on the person who was supposed to love her despite her flaws. She goes from hating him to planning his murder, "I've always thought I could commit the perfect murder. People who get caught get caught because they don't have patience; they refuse to plan" (235). There is no in between for Amy and because of this, her actions against the people she feels are in her way should not be ignored. Not only does she plan her husband's murder as meticulously as possible, she battles between two options, one of which involves her committing suicide just to prove a point. "I have the discipline to kill myself, but can't stomach the injustice. It's not fair that I have to die. Not *really* die. I don't want to. I'm not the one who did anything wrong" (280). Amy's constant reconstruction of herself and changing her story muddles who she is, and because of that, she genuinely thinks the choices she makes are the right ones. Gillian Flynn, in an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter* talks about how Amy's character is one of value despite and in favor of her villainy,

> What I'm thrilled about is that it reminded people that, yes, there is a goddamn appetite for women who are not saints; who are bad, but deliciously so — but [also] you still can kind of believe in. People say, 'Amy goes so far beyond that.' It's like, yes, ultimately. Sure....Would we go to the extent she does? No, we would not. But she's a relatable, not as soapy, bitchy sort of villainess. You can't write her off.

It is obvious that Amy takes a lot of what happens in her life too far. She is quick to judge, quick to be judged, quick to react, and quick to blame, however, being a feminist does not have to mean purely good, it can be both one dimensional and multidimensional, and it can coexist with traits that are admirable.

Before her marriage to Nick, Amy talks about her feelings toward being a successful, single woman, and the way people view her as such. Amy talks about the workplace and her colleagues, “They knit their eyebrows and pretend to think of men they can set me up with, but we all know there’s no one left, no one good left, and I know that they secretly think there’s something wrong with me, something hidden away that makes me unsatisfiable, unsatisfying” (39). She implies that people think something is wrong with her because she cannot be a successful woman without a man by her side. Without one, she is seen as someone a man does not want to be with because there has to be a reason she is unmarried. Resti concludes the depiction of Amy by stating, “To be feminine means women have to obey their traditional gender roles, and to be independent and superior for women is definitely far from being feminine” (136). Amy, as someone who grew up in a feminist household and is a feminist herself, confines herself to this stereotype in her marriage with Nick which causes resentment and dissatisfaction in their marriage. This brings readers back around to Nick’s criticism of Amy being overtly feminist rather than feminine, or “making him feel bad” over being quiet and exhibiting her femininity. She chose being a feminist over being a feminine wife which exhibits her independence and superiority. Amy feels that she has to change her sense of self to belong in her marriage, and because this is not the kind of woman Amy wants to be, eventually the downfall of their marriage would be her strength, intelligence, and cunningness.

It is when readers find out about Amy having planned her own disappearance that she can really be seen as a feminist character. Up to this point, readers get a sense of who Amy is through Nick’s present day narration and Amy’s diary narration. She is seen as someone who is a victim in her failing marriage with an insecure husband having to comply with idyllic gender roles. Readers see what Amy wants them to see even through Nick’s perspective through her

expert use of mass manipulation. She formulated her own narrative and it was so believable that Nick started questioning what he knew. Redhead writes, “The feminist ethos resides in the author’s freedom to be able to construct the characters they want, including characters embodying non-feminist views and ‘bad’ character traits” (128). Flynn writes Amy’s cunning yet psychopathic character, and it is no question that she isn’t liked by many readers, however Flynn’s freedom to do this created such a complex and unforgettable character in Amy. Flynn did the same with Nick, creating a character that readers feel sorry for but is unlikable in a lot of ways. In addition to this, Nick is so easily questioned for Amy’s disappearance because he allows himself to be, which is what Redhead describes with these bad character traits. Nick is weak, confused, and generally unaware of what has gone on in his marriage with Amy. With that said, Amy’s strong feminist characteristics were balanced out on this larger level scale. The more that Flynn wrote Nick as the perpetrator rather than the victim, Amy looked innately stronger as a woman.

Amy relies on her strength and cunning in order to ensure her plan stays intact, and sometimes that means relying on other people. Readers are introduced to Desi Collings, Amy’s boyfriend from prep school who we learned earlier on in the story that he stalked Amy after she left him for being clingy and creepy toward her. However, what we learned earlier in the story about Desi is not entirely true as Amy explains her real relationship with Desi in her present day narrative. “I’ve called devoted Desi to my aid (and abet). Desi, with whom I’ve never entirely lost touch, and who– despite what I’ve told Nick, my parents– doesn’t unnerve me in the slightest (Flynn 324). Amy kept Desi at arm’s length after they broke because she “always knew he might come in handy” (324). Desi views women in a misogynistic way in that he goes for the weak and vulnerable women who need a man to take care of her. Desi feels that he is a good

man, he does the right thing by keeping women safe, however, he completely negates what women need versus what he thinks they want. Amy describes her relationship with Desi and how she truly views him,

> It's good to have one man you can use for everything. Desi is a white-knight type. He loves troubled women. Over the years, after Wickshire, when we'd talk, I'd ask after his latest girlfriend, and no matter the girl, he would always say: "Oh, she's not doing very well, unfortunately." But I know it is fortunate for Desi– the eating disorders, the painkiller addictions, the crippling depressions. HE is never happier than when he's at a beside. (324)

Desi's true intentions of his generosity toward women are not good. He targets weak women who need him to take care of them, and when Amy calls him for help after she is robbed, he does what he had been waiting for, he takes Amy in to take care of her. Flynn introduces Desi's character expertly as the "white-knight," a woman's protector, someone who cares for women when needed, though his character quickly shifts from caring to misogynist.

Amy's strongest, though arguably the scariest, moment as a woman comes to light when Desi rescues her. Her original plan had been ruined when she was robbed, and the quick formulation of plan b is maniacally and quickly conducted as she pulls her victim card for Desi. For a moment, we see Amy's true emotions when she sees Desi and begins to cry as she says, "The stress drips off me: the nerve of enacting the plan, the fear of being caught, the loss of my money, the betrayal, the manhandling, the pure wildness of being on my own for the first time in my life" (325). She allows herself a minute to grieve her almost perfectly constructed plan being lost as she is left on her own, but quickly comes to as she says, "I count as I cry on Desi's crisp shoulder…and I curb the tears at one minute and forty-eight seconds" (325). Amy can be seen

here as a fragile woman, having to succumb to calling a man for help, but quite the opposite happens here. Amy knew calling Desi would be the most beneficial thing for her when she lost everything because he is a caretaker, and that is not a fault of Amy's lack of femininity having to fall back on the gender role of the man taking care of the woman, it is actually a strength. Amy knows what benefits her, and she is not the kind of woman to rely on someone without ulterior motives, especially for someone who belittles her physical and emotional state. Desi sees Amy for the first time in years and says, "'You look *very*…different. So full in the face, especially. And your poor hair is–'" (325). Though most women would and should see this as manipulative language, Amy sees it as an opportunity to further her narrative as the battered and abused wife to get what she wants from Desi. She says,

> I tell a Gothic take of possessiveness and rage, of Midwest steak-and-potato brutality, barefoot pregnancy, animalistic dominance. Of rape and pills and liquor and fists…How I had to disappear for my own safety and the safety of my unborn child, and how I needed Desi's help. My savior. My story would satisfy Desi's craving for ruined women– I was now the most damaged of them all.

Amy's narrative changes, yet again, to better suit her situation with Desi, and while he thinks he has the power in this relationship he thinks they are forming, Amy truly holds the power that leads Desi to his demise.

Amy is a woman that constantly changes the narrative to suit her needs whether it be with Nick Dunne, Desi, her parents, or even us reading the novel. Her strength never wavers, and even when she shows the slightest bit of weakness in the trials and tribulations she comes across in the midst of her plan, she is always a step ahead of anyone finding out what she has done. No one ever truly knew Amy to her core, maybe not even her own self, though this is what makes

her powerful, unforgettable, villainous, and strong. She took the steps she needed to in order to gain the control and attention she constantly craved so she was not controlled by the men in her life who were so quick to morph Amy into the perfect woman for them. For Flynn, feminism is about equal rights and girl power. While people around the world advocate for feminism through equality and the strength of women, Amy celebrates and enacts her own femininity in a way that she knows best, which is by changing the narrative to reflect the way she wants to be seen. She knows who she is as a strong woman, what she is capable of, and she does not fear doing things that make her look like less of a woman in order for her to come out on top.

There are critics who believe the argument that *Gone Girl* is in fact, not a feminist novel. This is an interesting, yet narrow focused take when doing close reading of the novel. Redhead wrote, "...for a novel to be feminist, the main character is required to be a positive female role model…many people will assume a text is a failed 'feminist narrative' if the characters don't optimistically role model for views' (128). Not only is this a narrow minded take on what is required of feminist novels, it coincides with a narrow minded focus of expectations from female characters. This leaves absolutely no room for female characters to make any mistakes or judgment calls that are not for the better of themselves or other women. Feminism is not a "one size fits all" concept; in fact, it is a concept that deserves to be examined, adjusted, and studied in order to broaden the viewpoints it brings to literature. Flynn said in an interview, "To me, that [feminism being one size fits all] puts a very, very small window on what feminism is…it's the ability to have women who are bad characters…the one thing that really frustrates me is this idea that women are innately good, innately nurturing" (128). If men get this large window to be these physically strong, manly, romantic, hardworking individuals with room to be in touch with bettering themselves and improving who they are beyond just that of being a man, then the same

can be said for women. Ultimately, Amy Dunne is the antagonist of *Gone Girl,* however, Amy being the antagonist and carrying this book as a feminist novel is a fresh take on reading and interpreting. Flynn has paved the way for women characters, specifically Amy Dunne, allowing them the ability to have the room to be both feminist and villainous.

In the end, Amy still wants control over the narrative even after she had gotten everything she wanted out of her husband. She became pregnant, which Nick speculates is from the sperm freezing years earlier. As Amy and Nick laid in bed together the day before their due date, Amy thought about everything that she and Nick had gone through to get to that point. She said, "A year ago today, I was undoing my husband. Now I am almost done reassembling him…He is learning to love me unconditionally, under all my conditions. I think we are finally on our way to happiness. I have finally figured it out" (414). Amy has yet again put conditions on the unconditional love she strives for, and it is the control she wants over her marriage that truly encompasses and narrows the genre of this novel to domestic noir. Amy would not be Amy if she did not have the last word, so in Amy fashion, "I don't have anything else to add. I just wanted to make sure I had the last word. I think I've earned that" (415).

Breaking Expected Feminist Standards: Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train*

Amy Dunne is a feminist psychopath and she revels in it. So, what about the other side of that dichotomy? What about the women that haven't found their voice? Or the powerless, weak, and manipulated women? Madeline, Celeste, and Jane are women living in a privileged town reaping the consequences of a tight knit society while trying to maintain their self-perceptions for their own sakes. What about women who don't come from privilege? What about the women whose self-perception comes from what men think of them?

In today's world, people can especially define and identify themselves as pretty much anything without limitation. It is when people are challenged to be a kind of person that lives up to certain expectations that is confining and reflects older ideologies. Such confinement and ancient beliefs come from the expectations of gender roles, specifically in women. Even in the modern world, women must push beyond the conjectures set before them by a patriarchal society. This is true for the real world, and because of this commonality, it is also true for the world of fiction as well. *The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins is one such example in which three female characters are confined to a set of expected standards that they either cannot reach, want to break free from, or simply don't know how to be what they were supposedly meant to be. Hawkins highlights gender roles and the oppression against women in this novel, and much like Gillian Flynn in *Gone Girl*, Hawkins examines what lengths women would reach in order to have the life they want while being restricted in who they are as women in a man's world.

The argument from some book reviewers with this novel is that the women do not stand as individually strong women as their lives are all interconnected, relying on each other's story lines to further their narratives that are all centered around one man. Several mainstream readers

define the women as simple characters with no real depth to them because of this. One Goodreads (2016) reviewer wrote, "...the characters are pathetic and the opposite of complex. The women in this book are either defined by the men they are dating/married to, or by how they feel about being a mother." Another Goodreads reviewer (2017) wrote, "Rachel, the protagonist, is the most pathetic character you will ever meet…Anna was just an image obsessed idiot, Megan was irritating as she proceeded to continuously cheat." An Amazon reviewer wrote, "It's hard to be objective about a novel that strives so determinedly (and successfully) to make its characters as unlikable as those in Paula Hawkins' bestselling mystery, 'The Girl on the Train.' Another one wrote, "The problem with the story is that Rachel, Anna, and Megan all appear to have the same personality which confused me and I found myself going back several pages to see which woman was talking." These are a few of readers that have laid out the issues they have found within the novel, most of them pointing out the lack of character dynamic between the female main characters. On the surface, it may be easy to read this book and agree with some of these readers, however, analyzing the dynamic of each of their lives, and understanding how they got to where they ended up is truly the meat of the novel. Hawkins creates characters that seem unlikable, in fact, most would agree they are all unlikeable, however, there is no rule in crime fiction that says all of the characters have to be liked. Hawkins created three women who were defined by their circumstances, and understanding the depth behind them will lead to reader understanding of the aspects of the novel that truly make it feminist. There is a sense of reliability as women in some way between Rachel, Megan, and Anna even if Hawkins portrays them as each other's enemies, and they are far from simplistic. Each of these women should be viewed as separate entities as there is validity to their own experiences as individuals. While their stories support one another's, each woman gives something to their own narrative that

supports the novel's plot while simultaneously exhibiting the strengths that each of them bring to their story.

Moreover, it's important to remember that there are patterns in literature. Certain elements will appear across different texts, and while characters, setting, and the conflict may be original, readers may find themselves comparing plots to other novels they've read. Such happens with two of the novels discussed in this thesis. *The Girl on the Train* is a novel often compared to *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn as both novels embark on a journey through the female main characters as well as being categorized as domestic noir fiction. *The Girl on the Train* follows *Gone Girl's* trailblazing journey as domestic noir fiction by exploring the control the main characters, Rachel, Megan, and Anna, demand in their day-to-day lives. They do not go as far as Amy Dunne as she twisted her life to fit the narratives she constructed, but both novels end with a murder that all of these women deemed necessary in one way or another. *The Girl on the Train* explores three women in different points of life, showcasing their individual womanhood in varying stages. They want control, respect, and to live freely without any guilt, though one of them tragically gets caught up in her own intrepid lifestyle. The novel encompasses the intersection of feminisms that domestic noir calls for as Hawkins wrote a realistic approach to domestic violence and mental illness.

With that being said, however, my goal for this chapter is to deservingly analyze *The Girl on the Train* as its own novel without it being talked about next to *Gone Girl* as it is frequently categorized as the "next *Gone Girl.*" Emine Saner, a writer for "The Guardian" writes, "The Girl on the Train: how Paula Hawkins wrote 'the new Gone Girl. Paula Hawkins is leading the pack of female thriller authors emulating Gillian Flynn's success" (1). She also writes, "The Girl on the Train has had a dizzying rise, and among all the so-called domestic noir books that are now

excitedly talked about as the new Gone Girls, it may be the closest thing" (1). She goes on to say, "Hawkins joins a growing list of female psychological thriller writers being eagerly promoted by publishers hungry for the next Gillian Flynn" (1). Emine Saner continues on with the journal article as she says she doesn't know whether it's lazy marketing or a genuine trend for unhappy female main characters, Hawkins has been described as one of Flynn's successors. While many readers share this opinion, I want to detach the comparison of the two novels.

The topic of feminism is tricky as there is a connotation behind the word that seems to only mean women empowerment, strong women, girl power, etc. which leaves little room for any fault. However, feminism is not just this one dimensional approach to women's rights and equality, among other things, it means to allow women to be as they are without any limitations from a society that sees women as any less than their counterparts. Uma Narayan writes, "A fundamental thesis of feminist epistemology is that our location in the world as women makes it possible for us to perceive and understand different aspects of both the world and human activities in ways that challenge the male bias of existing perspectives" (213). Feminism has so much more to explore than just "girl power," but rather, contributing to the expansion of such limitations brought on from a patriarchal society. This sort of flawed feminism is exposed in *The Girl on the Train* as Hawkins wrote narratives for three incredibly strong yet flawed women who are seen trying to work through these large scale problems despite the men in the novel who do not allow them to just be.

Rachel Watson, the main character the novel follows the most, is an incredibly misunderstood woman who sets the tone for the novel right away. Rachel is recently divorced with a drinking problem, and she rides the 8:04 train every day to avoid the explanation of why she got fired from her job. Most days, the train stops at the same signal that happens to have a

clear view of the home she used to live in with her husband, and the home of Megan and Scott. She sees Megan and Scott out of the train window, creating what she feels is a picture perfect life. She tries her best not to look at her old house but to no avail, and she cannot help but notice the changes that Anna, her ex-husband's new wife, has made to the house that Rachel had once called home. Rachel spends her train rides thinking about the life that she was once so close to while sipping on hidden away drinks from her bag.

Megan is one of the other main characters in the novel. While Rachel pictures her from the train window having this picture perfect life, the exact opposite is true. Megan comes with an incredibly difficult past in which she was involved with drugs and the death of her baby, however, she thought getting married and starting a life that most women would want would solve her problems. It is later learned that it takes a lot more than marriage for Megan to truly get what she desires, and it is this desire that happens to be the cause of her ultimate demise.

Anna's narrative comes later in the novel, however, her point of view is still pertinent to the story. She is the mistress of Tom, Rachel's ex-husband, and readers find out that she enjoys the mistress' life; she prides herself in being the other woman. However, she becomes pregnant and she and Tom get married solidifying Anna's fate as a mother and wife.

The approach to feminism in this novel comes from understanding that each woman's individual experiences should be validated. Though Hawkins really hones in on each of their flaws, this should not take away that they are still women despite their shortcomings. Stanley and Wise wrote "Breaking Out: Feminist Consciousness and Feminist Research" exploring feminism and how it insists that, "personal experiences couldn't be invalidated or rejected, because if something was felt then it was, and if it was felt it was absolutely real for the woman feeling and

experiencing it" (53). Because there are many readers that feel this isn't a feminist novel, it's important to understand that feminism looks different and is different for each character. Rachel, Megan, and Anna want and need different things in their lives to be happy, however, those wants and needs shouldn't invalidate their feminism simply because they steer away from the traditional feminism of powerful women. Moreover, a blogger from Critics at Large wrote an article giving voice to the antifeminist approach to *The Girl on the Train* calling the narrative "convoluted" and "such a crock." He approaches this by first looking at Rachel because she still has not moved on from her husband even though he is remarried with a baby. He looks at Rachel as "romance-fiction fantasy" and she gives "the impression for a long time that she's just as pathetic as both Tom and Detective Riley say she is, but then she turns out to be merely the victim of male abuse, her entire self-perception based on some sociopathic man's manipulation of her" (para. 4). The blogger from this article invalidates Rachel's experience by calling her pathetic for not being able to move on from her husband. Readers get an early insight of Rachel's pain she felt as her husband quickly moved on to another woman who he gets pregnant,

> Every day I tell myself not to look, and every day I look. I can't help myself, even though there is nothing I want to see there, even though anything I do see will hurt me. Even though I remember so clearly how I felt that time I looked up and noticed the cream linen blind in the upstairs bedroom was gone, replaced by something in soft baby pink. (Hawkins 6-7)

Rachel admitting that she cannot help herself but to look at her old house in which Tom now shares with Anna and their new baby is anything but pathetic. She understands that looking at the home from the train window will only hurt her, as evidenced in her narrative above, but this

makes her aware, it makes her human, and it does not make her any less of a woman for feeling the legitimate expressions of humanity.

Moreover, Rachel's self-perception is psychologically skewed because of her alcoholism and her husband's treatment of her when they were married. The blogger's inaccurate description of Rachel being "merely the victim of male abuse" and her entire self-perception being completely based on "some sociopathic man's manipulation of her" is trivial, unfair, and invalidating. This is not to take away the seriousness of Rachel's alcohol addiction being a pertinent aspect of Rachel's character, but it is essential to understand that her addiction was fed by what she sees as a failure of her fertility in order to start a family. Martyn Hammersley wrote a journal article "On Feminist Methodology," and argues that "the validity of women's experience may be formulated as an appeal to women's double consciousness, their knowledge of the dominant culture and of their own, necessarily deviant, perceptions of experiences" (188). Rachel exhibits this sort of double consciousness with her self-perception as she understands that her alcoholism played an incredibly large role in the failure of her marriage which contributed to her blackouts, but also because Tom was not the man she thought he was. Being a victim of abuse should never be described as "merely" anything, and her self-perception was due to Tom's manipulation of her, but also because she felt that she failed as a wife because she physically could not become a mother; the woman she sees through the values of the constructed patriarchal society.

When speaking with the therapist, Kamal, who she begins seeing because he was Megan's therapist, she finally begins to validate her own experiences which helps her begin to understand Tom's abusive nature toward her. She recalls an experience in which she had a blackout the night before, and she could not remember what happened. Tom tells her she

attacked him with a golf club, though when thinking it through with Kamal, Rachel begins to remember,

> I was on the floor, my back to the wall, sobbing and sobbing, Tom standing over me, begging me to calm down, the golf club on the carpet next to my feet, and I felt it, I felt it. I was *terrified.* The memory doesn't fit with reality, because I don't remember anger, raging fury, I remember fear. (Hawkins 230)

Rachel is not any less of a feminist woman as she begins to grasp the true severity and repercussions of her blackouts. Tom's actions against her should not be the only thing that is given credit to Rachel's self-perception as she encompasses strength and pushes through the adversities that she has experienced. Rachel has begun to take ownership of her experiences, and though she has done things that question her character, she is a victim of circumstance at first and that should be acknowledged.

Rachel is not at all innocent in the story as she does some incredibly questionable things when she is in a drunken state, and while these things should not be overlooked, understanding the reasons for Rachel's behavior is essential when looking at her wholly. Rachel's self-esteem is almost entirely shot in the beginning of the novel, and it is so bad that she views Megan and Scott, who she named Jason and Jess until she learned their real names, as "what I lost, they're everything I want to be" (Hawkins 10). She describes herself as "not the girl I used to be. I am no longer desirable, I'm off putting in some way…it's as if people can see the damage written all over me" (11). It is easy to judge Rachel because of her drinking problem where she experiences her frequent blackouts, and because she does not know what happened during them, neither do we, so we have to ultimately put some semblance of faith into sober Rachel. When Rachel is

sober, however, she is an analytical thinker, and she is determined to understand the mystery behind Megan's disappearance even with her constant insertion into the investigation and piecing together the memories she has lost. We learn toward the end of the novel that Tom took advantage of Rachel's alcoholism and frequent blackouts to manipulate her.

Rachel is restricted from the life she has always desired because of the limitations she faces throughout the novel. Such restriction takes away from her strength and reliability; however, readers really get to piece together Rachel's character at the end of the book when she solves Megan's murder, figuring out it was Tom who killed her, the very person who took away her own self-esteem and self-worth. Tom's manipulation against her made Rachel feel as though she was weak, and he reminds her by asking "'What happened to you, Rachel? When did you become so weak'" (91)? She later learns that her weakness stemmed from when he started abusing her only to leave her for another woman who could satisfy Tom's needs in being a father with the woman he cheated on Rachel with. Tom's manipulation and projection of his gender role does not stop with Rachel, though, he continues with his manipulation with both Megan and Anna. Rachel is a character that is truly misunderstood because she misunderstands herself, but that is part of navigating how to be a woman on her own in a man's world.

Moving on, Megan Hipwell is another character whose experiences need to be validated as they define how she views the world, though she is a woman who readers may have to work backwards to understand. Since she's first introduced as "Jess," as Rachel names her from the train window, readers right away get a false perception of her. Rachel describes Megan as Jess, "with her bold prints and her Converse trainers and her beauty, her attitude, works in the fashion industry. Or perhaps in the music business, or in advertising– she might be a stylist or photographer" (Hawkins 9). While Rachel quickly admits that she does not actually know Jess

and her husband Jason, who is actually named Scott, there is still a sense of false identification when readers finally get to meet Megan for who she is. Even so, when Rachel makes up the life of "Jess and Jason," Megan is immediately attached to her husband without being spoken about as an individual. Rachel always imagines the two together, and this is not at the fault of her own as part of Rachel's perception of living a happy life is with a man at her side, which is part of Rachel's interiorized patriarchal views. She assumes,

> Jess just goes with Jason, and it [her made up name] goes with her. It fits her, pretty and carefree as she is. They're a match, they're a set. They're happy, I can tell. They're what I used to be, they're Tom and me five years ago. They're what I lost, they're everything I want to be. (Hawkins 10)

However, the opposite of this is true, and readers get a small sense of who the couple may be through Rachel, though the more readers learn about Megan, the more we realize she is not at all who Rachel imagines her to be. When Rachel gets to know the real Megan, she says, "I didn't know her, and [now] I'm not sure that I like her anymore" (Hawkins). This new opinion Rachel has of Megan is because Rachel did what many people do by creating expectations for someone who cannot meet them which is ironically what Tom did to Rachel. This false perception that Rachel has created of Megan inadvertently causes readers to form their own opinions about a character that they have not yet met. So, when we get Megan's point of view, we have to adjust our expectations because she is just as messy and unfulfilled as Rachel. This thought process can be compared to the expectations put on women by society. There are expectations of women, and when those expectations are not met, it is as if women can no longer be considered ideal, womanly, or whole.

Megan may not be seen as a feminist character in some of the most obvious ways, however it is important to look beyond her actions in order to truly see her humanity as a woman. She is cheating on her husband, she does not like children nor does she want any of her own, and she is really in touch with her sexuality. On the contrary, the standards for women in a patriarchal society are being a wife, housekeeper, and a mother, and none of those involve cheating on their husbands or being too in tune with their sexual side. Megan exhibits the opposite of such standards. When she describes her job as a nanny for Anna, it is evident that she does not want to be a mother even with Scott hoping it changes her mind, "He thinks spending time around babies will make me broody. In fact, it's doing exactly the opposite; when I leave their house I run home, can't wait to strip my clothes off and get into the shower and wash the baby smell off me" (19). She then goes on to speak about Anna as a woman and mother, "God, she's dull! You get the feeling that she probably had something to say for herself once upon a time, but now everything is about the child…" (19). Some readers may automatically assume that Megan is not a feminist character because she is a woman going against female standards in the way she views Anna as a mother, though reading her experiences in her point of view helps people realize the liberation that has been fighting for her entire life.

Like Rachel, taking away from Megan's experiences as a sexual being is invalidating her femininity. Megan is complex, and she is struggling with her own identity throughout the book as she juggles expectations placed on her by society. Hammersley states in "On Feminist Methodology, "Feminist consciousness constitutes a particular and unique way of going about making sense of the world" (133). Megan's view on children and motherhood stems from psychological factors that we do not learn until the middle of the novel in which such views become apparent. Kamal, Megan's therapist, legitimizes Megan's experience of being the

accidental cause of death of her child when she fell asleep in the bathtub with her daughter, something that Megan has tried to mentally push away. It is no secret that Megan is a sexual person who uses sex to feel powerful and womanly, and because of her abandonment issues, she uses sex to feel connected to people which is evidenced after her confession to Kamal about the loss of her baby, "In the moments when Kamal is saying these things, it doesn't sound so bad. As the words slip seductively off his tongue, warm and honeyed, I can almost believe them" (214). It may not be completely understood to those with higher expectations of women, but Megan's journey to find her full potential is different, confusing, and raw, for both her and readers. So, if readers categorize women becoming mothers reflecting feminist characteristics in such a broad scope then Megan technically fits the bill. The deep emotions stemming from Megan's loss is inherently the cause of her feelings towards motherhood when she speaks about Anna's actions for her child.

However, her self-awareness is admirable as she understands she is not a woman who needs a child, and though she has learned the hard way, she understands she does not need a husband to be happy as well, "I can't do this, I can't just be a wife. I don't understand how anyone does it– there is literally nothing to do but wait. Wait for a man to come home and love you" (23). There is strength and empowerment as she exhibits herself as an independent woman who recognizes is "not a model wife. I can't be. No matter how much I love him, it won't be enough" (46). All of this happening toward the beginning of the novel sets the intention of Megan's character as she lays out some of her flaws which include the infidelity against her husband in her past and admittedly the future. She is being forced to conform into a person she does not want to be and when she tries to challenge these expectations, it has consequential results which exemplifies the patriarchal standards of being a wife and mother. Revealing her

pregnancy to Tom proves such standards. It is expected for women to be homemakers and mothers, but when the opportunity presents itself for Megan, she decides to tell Tom the truth to which he says, "'Oh? Lucky me. So what– we're going to run away, the three of us? You, me and the baby?...Have an abortion'" (304). If this was not enough for Tom to destroy Megan's womanhood while simultaneously projecting his own standards of manipulation as a man, he says, "'And I'm sorry, but I don't think you're really motherhood material, are you, Megs?...You'd be a terrible mother, Megan. Just get rid of it.'" (304) as if the thought of her being a mother was not only ludicrous, but impossible for her. Tom invalidates Megan's ability to mother a child by digging into her deepest insecurities, and trying to destroy what confidence she had going into the admittance of the pregnancy. Though Megan stands up for herself in spite of Tom's reaction and harsh words, he kills her, taking away her life and the baby's in one foul swoop because she was threatening his home life.

Megan can still be an empowering feminist character without exhibiting all of the typical characteristics of feminism by showcasing her raw honesty and relatability as a victim of societal and patriarchal pressures. She exhibited atypical behaviors for a woman, in the sense of gender roles, but this should not take away the example that she had paved for women who defy such roles. Hawkins constructed a character opposite of Rachel to exhibit the well roundedness of femininity. Megan is a character who made mistakes, and she took the lessons from those mistakes to try and be better in the end of the novel even if her road to an ideal life for her was messy and imperfect.

Lastly, Anna's femininity is exhibited in a more nuanced approach from Megan and Rachel in which she exemplified more selfish and discouraging characteristics of a feminist character. This is not to say that she is not a large part of this novel being considered feminist,

however, it takes a bit more analyzing Anna's character to truly understand her motives, the reasons for such motives, and how they encompass feminism. Hawkins said in an interview with Popsugar about constructing Anna's character, "actually writing Anna was quite fun because Anna, well, she's kind of a bitch" (Popsugar 6). Though this description from Hawkins herself seems harsh, the exact opposite is true in which Hawkins also explains that writing Anna's character was "such a relief." This is because while Rachel and Megan are complex and ever changing, Anna, for the most part, remains who she is throughout the novel with her own identity that she is well aware of. In other words, what you see with Anna is what you get, there really is no guessing what she is going to do next. This matters because Anna is a great example when considering what feminism really means. As stated, feminism, in a lot of instances, reflects girl power, strength, empowerment, and acceptance. This is true, but in characters like Anna, it is essential to realize that those things do not align with her, and that does not make her any less of a feminist character. According to Gonick et al. in *Rethinking Age and Resistance*, "Though aspects of femininity are taken on as practices of self, they are still mutable, dynamic, immanent and open to transformation" (p. 6). When viewing feminism in this way as a well-rounded concept, that is when people can set aside the "girl power" of it all and really look at the individual person. In *The Girl on the Train,* Anna does not exemplify empowerment in other women; she is solely focused on herself, her marriage, and her child, and what it is going to take to get what she wants.

Anna's character comes later in the novel, and because readers are in the middle of the complexities of Rachel and Megan when she is introduced, Anna's stagnant character is almost eerie as we wait for the other shoe to drop with her. However, it never does. Her simplistic way about her gives readers a different view on feminist characters, allowing us to step away from the

intricacies of the plot, though giving an added flair to Rachel's and Tom's dynamic. Anna sees herself as the person who saved Tom from Rachel even if that meant that she was Tom's mistress. She has no qualms about breaking up their marriage as she admits that she got everything she wanted (110). She found Tom when she needed him and she said the same for him, "I thank God he found me, too, that I was there to rescue him from that woman [Rachel]. She'd have driven him mad in the end, I really think that– she'd have ground him down, she'd have made him into something he's not" (110). She is giving herself sort of a hero complex without thinking about the marriage she ruined because she saved Tom when really, unbeknownst to Anna and Rachel, she saved Rachel.

Anna is more like Rachel than she realizes, and that notion is what drives Anna forward as a feminist character. Even though Anna has never been, nor has she wanted to be, on Rachel's or Megan's side, the more she realizes Tom is not the person she married, the more she empathizes with Rachel's lack of happiness. This newfound empathy for Rachel gives Anna the autonomy to change her opinion of her based on her own opinion instead of Tom's. She has let Tom construct a narrative about Rachel that is easy for Anna to believe because that is all she knew. Tom has continued the same patterns with Anna as he did with Rachel, forcing Anna to face the man she married too quickly. When both she and Rachel find out what Tom did to Megan, Anna challenges the stereotype of women as passive victims who are unable to defend themselves as they both have a hand in killing Tom in self-defense.

The Girl on the Train by Paula Hawkins begs for the three female main characters to be validated in their womanhood. She created complex, strong, and multifaceted characters in this domestic noir novel when crime fiction typically contains passive female victims. Despite what some reviewers and critics may say, Hawkins navigated three women with different stories and

individual experiences to encompass the gender roles of women in a patriarchal society and what those roles look like for those who do not meet such expectations given by society. She did so by constructing a woman who wants to live up to such roles but cannot, one who could live up to them but does not want to, and one who has obtained them in a unique way. Rachel, Megan, and Anna give readers a perspective on womanhood, what feminism actually looks like, and what lengths women are willing to go to get what they want.

Conclusion

Feminism isn't a "one size fits all." It doesn't necessarily have to mean "girl power," "team girl," "go girl!" As evidenced in this thesis, both feminism and femininity look different for everyone. What is so different in domestic noir fiction from crime fiction is that readers can almost certainly count on the authors to explore womanhood in a new way, creating complex female characters that force us to think about what it means to truly be a woman. Women are not always soft, supple, and static characters that are often represented in crime fiction among many other genres. In domestic noir, women are fierce and flawed, maybe even weak and powerless, maybe strong and powerful. Regardless of their characteristics, that shouldn't take away from the feminism exhibited in the novels.

Domestic noir allows women to be flawed in a way that makes them empowering even if they are represented as weak. For example, Rachel in *The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins is described as fragile, though learning more about who she is and why she is that way, readers may realize Rachel is much more relatable to them than they think. Megan, who embraces sexuality which is typically seen as distasteful, empowers women to embrace their sexuality if they choose. Readers relate to this genre as there is no exact representation of how or who women should be individually, as wives, as mothers, as members in society. Women just are.

What I found so enticing about choosing these three novels in the genre was the women's experience. Every single female character of the seven that I focused on are all completely different. Amy is psychotic, Celeste is flawless, Rachel is fragile, Anna is uncaring, Megan is sexual, Madeline is headstrong, and Jane is recovering. While they're all different, these women represent feminism in their prospective novels in a way that people may not view feminism as being due to the narrow view most people have of it, to no fault of their own.

Big Little Lies by Liane Moriarty, I argue, would look a bit differently being read in a Critical Feminist Theory (CFT) perspective. It's easy to pick up this novel due to its popularity and focus on the mystery. My goal was to focus on the three female main characters in this thesis, in fact, I didn't mention the true mystery or perpetrator at all for a reason. Understanding and applying CFT goes beyond the plot. It's understanding who the characters are, what differentiates them, why they're so differentiated, and why does it matter? It is understanding the women's choices, perspectives, and reasoning behind those choices that drives the novel forward. CFT means looking at the novel through the characters and comprehending the intricacies of what drives this book to represent feminism. It forces readers to ask how women's roles are truly affected by a patriarchal society because of the way they act as a result of how they are treated.

In the novel *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn, Amy Dunne's character exudes femininity, and with her character alone the novel is a feminist novel. Again, not to take away from Amy's true nature, she will not stop for anything or anyone as long as she gets what she wants. While readers work through the intricate and downright confusing plot, Amy never lies to us. Her diary wasn't necessarily for readers, but to throw off detectives. Her true narrative is for us readers and us readers alone. We get the insight of her true nature, and that is something unique. Readers get a fresh perspective of Amy due to her narrative. While there are characters that realize Amy's true intentions, readers are the only ones who get to walk through her thought process with her. We learn of her resiliency, her willingness to do what is necessary to get what she wants, the actions she takes to survive her own web of destruction. Amy's keen sense of self is what makes her make this novel feminist despite her psychotic nature. This novel is a representation of flawed women embracing their feminism and projecting it to the world.

Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train* represents women who are seemingly the opposite of *Big Little Lies.* These characters are messy, complicated, untrustworthy, and unreliable. Readers must rely on the narrators, but we can't be sure what seems to be real until the very end. The messiness of each character is actually what compelled the research in this novel. Can women be messy and exude feminism? The answer is yes. Feminism is a term that coincides with an abundance of positive connotative words. Feminism certainly cannot equal flawed, right? Tell that to Rachel Watson who in this novel is a convoluted character that readers cannot trust. Her story, though, along with her desires, her goals, her personal shortcomings, are what draws readers into her character. Why is Rachel the way she is? And it turns out her story is much more complex than what we are introduced to in the beginning of the novel. Rachel's desires stem from motherhood and marriage. She wants to be a woman with a husband and child, but she can't be. Her inability to have children is what drives Rachel's entire character arc. But Rachel wanting children and to be married doesn't make her feminist. Though unconventional, it's her drive to survive in a world that no longer makes sense to her.

Anna is almost the exact opposite of Rachel. Her wants and needs don't come from having children or a husband, but more so a life she can live selfishly. This is reflected in her being a mistress, and hiring a nanny even if she doesn't work. Again, though, her character doesn't make this novel any less feminist. In fact, the dichotomy of Rachel and Anna are what hones in my point; meeting certain patriarchal standards means nothing in terms of what the definition of feminism looks like. Megan's character meets in the middle of the dichotomy of Rachel and Anna. She truly doesn't know what she wants until it's too late. Megan embracing who she is to her core while stumbling through decisions is another way in which this novel encompasses feminism.

Flawed feminism is feminism. Each of these novels display an accurate depiction of what feminism looks like in the 21st century. It is messy, unkempt, difficult, and confusing, and navigating the intricacies of feminism will always be a task as it continues to develop even more. So, again, feminism is not a "one size fits all" or even a "one size fits most." Feminism is multiple sizes fitting into the messiness of the people of the world, bending to the people who encompass it with necessary unending flexibility.

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