"*What Have We Done to Each Other?*" – The Politics of the Home in Contemporary Female Psychological Thriller

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Tarkastelen tutkielmassani kodin sisäistä dynamiikkaa naisten kirjoittamissa psykologisissa nykytrillereissä kodin ja naiseuden näkökulmasta, ja analysoin miten koti kuvataan pelon ja henkisen ja fyysisen väkivallan näyttämönä romaanien naishahmoille. Lisäksi tutkin sukupuoliroolien, yhteiskunnan luomien paineiden, sekä kodin ja avioliiton vaikutusta naisten sukupuoli-identiteetin rakentumiseen nyky-yhteiskunnassa.

Tutkimukseni keskiössä on kaksi romaania, jotka ajankohtaisilla teemoillaan johtivat tutkimuskysymyksen muodostumiseen – amerikkalaiskirjailija Gillian Flynnin *Kiltti tyttö* (2012), ja brittikirjailija Paula Hawkinsin *Nainen junassa* (2015). Molemmat ovat saavuttaneet suuren suosion, ja teoksia pidetäänkin laajalti naisten rikoskirjallisuuden uutena tulemisena. Molemmat teokset sovitettiin myös elokuviksi vuosina 2014 ja 2016, mutta tutkielmani rajallisen pituuden vuoksi käsittelen tutkimuksessani vain alkuperäisteoksia. Kumpikin teoksista käsittelee tarkastelemiani teemoja – naiseutta, kotia, avioliittoa, ja identiteettiä – lähes yksinomaan naisnäkökulmasta.

Tutkielman alussa esittelen naisten psykologisia trillereitä käsittelevän ilmiön tutkimukseni sydämessä, ja jatkan rakentamalla analyysini tueksi teoriapohjan, joka kattaa muun muassa postfeminismin tutkimuksen lieveilmiöineen, sekä genreteoriaa rikoskirjallisuudesta ja gotiikasta. Jo teoriaosuudessa korostuu tutkimukseni naiskeskeisyys – valitsemani teoreettiset näkökulmat lähestyvät tutkielmalleni oleellisia teemoja naiseuden ja naisten kokemusten kautta. Tämä sama pohjavire kantaa koko tutkielman läpi.

Analyysissani keskityn edellä mainittujen teemojen syventämiseen *Kiltti tyttö*- ja *Nainen junassa* -romaanien puitteissa. Romaanien lähiluku paljastaa yhteyksiä kodin, avioliiton, ulkomaailman paineiden ja naishahmojen sukupuoli-identiteetin rakentumisen välillä. Valtaosan tutkielman laajuudesta kattavassa analyyttisessa keskustelussa lajittelen primäärimateriaalini neljään temaattiseen alueeseen – avioliitto, koti, äitiys ja yhteiskunnan sukupuolittuneet paineet sekä naiseudelle asetetut erilaiset roolit.

Lopuksi esittelen päätelmäni kodin, yhteiskunnan ja naiseuden välisistä yhteyksistä. Tulosten mukaan suurin rooli on yhteiskunnalla, joka edelleen pyrkii ohjailemaan naisia ja naiseutta. Tämä aiheuttaa edellä kuvatun kaltaisia ongelmia naisten yksityiselämässä. Yksiselitteisten tulosten sijaan pyrinkin purkamaan tutkimustani tavalla, joka paitsi antaa teemoille päätöksen, myös herättää mielenkiintoa, kannustaa lisätutkimuksiin ja perustelee tutkimani ilmiön ajankohtaisuutta.

Avainsanat: nainen, koti, avioliitto, identiteetti, sukupuoli, perheväkivalta, postfeminismi, psykologinen trilleri, rikoskirjallisuus, *Kiltti tyttö*, Gillian Flynn, *Nainen junassa*, Paula Hawkins

Table of Contents

1. Introduction 1

2. Gendering Domesticity 6

2.1. Female Domesticity and Victimhood in the Postfeminist Era 7

2.2. Genre and the Gothic in the Modern Female Psychological Thriller 23

3. Tension and Violence in the Private Sphere 33

3.1. “This Man Might Kill Me” – Marital Tension and Domestic Abuse 33

3.2. “I’m Not the Girl I Used to Be” – Leaving Home and Losing Self 45

4. Norms and Expectations in a Postfeminist Society 57

4.1. “The Thing about Being Barren” – Gender Roles and Societal Expectations 57

4.2. “She’s a Cool Girl” – Female Identity and the Objectification of Women 71

5. Conclusion 82

Works Cited 87

1. Introduction

Crime fiction as a literary genre and the psychological thriller in particular have, in the 21st century, experienced an influx of female authors telling stories of crime, violence, and abuse from the female viewpoint. In so doing, they seem to have reclaimed female agency from the misconceptions so readily employed by the modern mainstream popular culture. Novels like *Gone Girl* (2012) by Gillian Flynn and *The Girl on the Train* (2015) by Paula Hawkins and their subsequent film adaptations[1] appeared in a cultural climate where the roles assigned for women in popular culture, their agency and victimization were quickly becoming hotly debated issues. The political backdrop against which the novels gained momentum struggled to make female voices heard, and the representations of women in popular culture had to fight against lack of diversity. Over the past few years, this has been evident in, for example, the 2016 US presidential election, where gender became a pawn in the game for votes, and a year later, the Time's Up movement, which began to dismantle decades of sexual harassment in the entertainment industry.

The above narratives have tapped into the zeitgeist with unforeseen gusto and created an entire phenomenon around the notion of the female psychological thriller. However, the scope of the occurrence goes far beyond modern crime literature; it seems to have captured something original in the all-too-common narrative of victimizing women. The two *Girl* novels show their female characters grappling for agency in the domestic realm, where crumbling marriages and constant emotional abuse have begun chipping away at their sense of self and home. By bringing the emotional tension and abuse into the home, the novels toy with the preconceptions associated with women, and, to an extent, men as well, and their role in the domestic sphere. The novels continue to show women experiencing oppression inside their own homes, in part by their husbands. However, they introduce female characters who are flawed, unlikable, lacking in morals,

[1] *Gone Girl* (2014), starring Rosamund Pike and Ben Affleck, was directed by David Fincher from a screenplay written by Gillian Flynn herself. *The Girl on the Train* (2016), starring Emily Blunt, Rebecca Ferguson, and Haley Bennett was directed by Tate Taylor and written by Erin Cressida Wilson. Due to the limited scope of this study, I have left these film adaptations, although, to my mind, well made and worthy as adaptations, out of my discussion.

and who do not always conform to the society's standards of female beauty, which challenges those preconceptions. Like Daphne du Maurier, Patricia Highsmith, P.D. James, Ruth Rendell, and Patricia Cornwell before Flynn and Hawkins, female authors of modern psychological thrillers are not merely creating crime fiction, but also giving a voice to their female characters and producing gender and femininity inside the subgenre and in the society surrounding it. Already in 1988, in her book *Sisters in Crime: Feminism and the Crime Novel*, Maureen T. Reddy noted that "the increasing diversity of female protagonists of crime novels reflects recent social changes, with perhaps the most important influence on the genre being feminism", with female writers exposing the "genre's fundamental conservatism" (2). Despite owing plenty to the aforementioned authors representing the crime fiction genre, Flynn's and Hawkins's novels are, with their Gothic undertones and feminist connotations, genre hybrids between crime fiction, psychological thriller, and Gothic fiction. Some contemporaries of Flynn and Hawkins include, for example, Sophie Hannah, Liane Moriarty, and Tana French, who also write crime fiction or psychological thrillers from a chiefly female perspective. These views on genre will also play a part in my thesis.

The *Girl* narratives offer a look into modern domestic tension and abuse, and practically became a phenomenon overnight. Between veering from she-monster territory to victims of circumstance, the characters usher in a new way of portraying women – multifaceted and dark, yet relentlessly human. "The idea that every portrait of a woman should be an ideal woman, meant to stand in for all of womanhood, is an enemy of art", states a New York Times op-ed column (Dowd 2014) about *Gone Girl*, released at the height of its success. The statement, although made around the time the film adaptation of Flynn's novel premiered, holds true for both novels. Although full of controversial and, yes, unlikable female characters, these two narratives portray 21st-century women and the tribulations they face in a society that still posits its archaic beliefs on what women should be and act like.

For this thesis, in which I examine the significance of the home and women's experiences with different domestic issues and expectations in female-driven psychological thrillers, I chose these two texts as my frame chiefly because of how strongly they have tapped into the zeitgeist. What is more, I personally found the novels highly enjoyable and thrilling, so much so that they managed to spark an academic interest in me. They also share striking thematic similarities, which provide an abundance of material for analysis. Not a great deal of previous research exists on these texts, but studying this particular occurrence at this time is important because of the effect it continues to have on popular culture[2].

Gone Girl, the magnum opus of the contemporary female psychological thriller trend, is about Amy, the dangerously perfect femme fatale, an *Amazing Amy*, the titular girl also in the series of children's books her parents co-authored about a perfect girl, always one step ahead of her real-life paragon. The narrative is set in motion when Amy goes missing under suspicious circumstances. As the crime scene shows signs of a violent struggle, the blame, by the gossip-hungry public and the police, is placed on her disconcerting husband, Nick. The narrative unfolds through Amy's painstaking diary entries and Nick's account of what happened. What comes undone is an account of a deteriorating marriage riddled with mind games, power struggles, and emotional abuse – only for the reader to discover that Amy herself, a cunning manipulator looking to "win" in her dysfunctional marriage by punishing her cheating husband, orchestrated her own disappearance with the intention of framing Nick for her murder. The novel ends with the couple reunited, but leaves the reader with an uncomfortable sense of dread, as the relationship has been forever altered by Amy and Nick finding common ground in their sick desire to *win* whatever game they are playing with, or against, each other.

The Girl on the Train introduces its titular girl, thirty something Rachel, after her marriage to abusive husband Tom has already ended. With a beautiful new wife, Anna, and their

[2] Other contemporary examples include *Sharp Objects* (novel by Flynn in 2006, TV series 2018), *Big Little Lies* (novel by Liane Moriarty in 2014, TV series 2017-), *The Affair* (2014-), *The Carrier* (2013) by Sophie Hannah, and Hawkins's *Into the Water* (2017).

child, Tom lives the dream life Rachel, now an unemployed alcoholic and living with a college friend, still feels entitled to. Despite having lost her job, Rachel still rides the commuter train back and forth daily as a means of some everyday escapism: she has become fascinated with Megan and Scott, an attractive young couple living down the road from the idyllic suburban house Rachel used to call home with Tom. Megan's youth, beauty, and seemingly happy marriage with her husband Scott are more than enough to lure Rachel in, so when Megan goes missing, Rachel's resentment for her own lost dream bolsters her to become involved in the disappearance, and the strange connections it seems to have with her ex husband. Eventually, Megan is found dead, and Rachel's involvement leads to a violent altercation that reveals Tom as the perpetrator, which finally frees Rachel from the vicious cycle of guilt and shame she felt over her perceived failures as a wife and woman.

Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* is largely credited as the novel that paved the way for writers like Paula Hawkins to explore womanhood on women's terms within the psychological thriller. These are stories characterized by women who may at times be victims, but refuse to be victimized. In both stories, the domestic sphere and personal relations inside the home set the stage for terror. Both also explore the darkness within the home from the woman's perspective through themes such as marriage, motherhood, and the societal expectations laid upon women. Due to this abundance of socially significant themes and aspects of womanhood and portraying women, a comprehensive study is called for to expand our understanding of this phenomenon and enable further research into the subject.

In these novels, home is not the traditional safe haven for the female characters, but rather a setting for tension and violence both in the emotional and physical sense. In this thesis, I will establish a connection between the domestic realm, the construction of female identity in the different types of female characters in the novels, and the gender roles imposed upon them by societal norms and the objectification of women by men. What is more, in my theoretical

framework I will also consider genre theory, female victimization, the home, and the Gothic, all from a chiefly postfeminist point of view. My main research question at the center of this study is how do these three facets interplay with each other, and how are they portrayed in the two novels. As the primary texts and the entire cultural climate surrounding them revolve around the notions of toxic marriages and women in peril at their own homes, I will identify how such themes are communicated in the texts. This includes taking a closer look into the politics of the home, such as marital tensions, female independence, oppression of women in the domestic realm, gender roles, and power relations in male-female relationships. I will then move beyond description and seek what might be the underlying links that piece together the emotional and physical violence going on in the home and its effects on the private realm as a whole, as well as the identity issues plaguing the female characters. These facets then form the core of the analysis section of the thesis, with a subchapter dedicated to marital tension, identity issues, societal expectations, and the objectification of women.

In this thesis, I aim to produce a thematical analysis on the politics of the home, while highlighting the female-led viewpoint through which the study will be conducted. The matters communicated in the two *Girl* novels bear cultural significance beyond their position as a literary craze. The novels, although extreme in their representations, have given a voice to the modern woman and the domestic issues that still oppress and antagonize women in their own homes. While the issue itself – domestic abuse targeting women – is not by any means new, the primary materials I employ in my thesis are. The themes portrayed in the two *Girl* novels are both traditional and topical at this time, so a need for studies like this one clearly exists. Thus, my objective in this thesis is to ignite further discussion on its theories and themes in the academia. The thesis could capture the momentum behind the phenomenon and its role in current popular culture and society.

2. Gendering Domesticity

Here I introduce the main theoretical frameworks and concepts applied in the thesis in two subchapters, each divided further into themes. First, in subchapter 2.1, I start by looking into the themes of postfeminism, the home, and victimhood. I continue in subchapter 2.2 with a discussion on genre – the psychological thriller, crime fiction, and the Gothic.

I begin subchapter 2.1 with postfeminism and its views on women's roles in the home and the oppressiveness of marriage and family. Due to their modern point of view, I utilize works such as *Feminism, Domesticity and Popular Culture* (2008), edited by Stacy Gillis and Joanne Hollows, and *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* (2009) by Stephanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon in the subsection on postfeminist theory. Due to the contemporary focus of this thesis, choosing postfeminism as the frame makes sense because it has, since its inception in the late 20th century, been a part of many different types of female narratives and, not unlike my primary material here, it is contradictory in nature. In the academia, it has been discussed in conjunction with the construction of gender identity. In addition to this, I will employ some examples from popular culture to support the theory and tie it further to the popular culture topic at hand. It should be noted that while the focus of the thesis is principally on women and the female experience of domestic tension, the male characters in the primary material serve a purpose in my analysis not only as catalyst for the women's narratives, but also as standalone representations of the modern man's domestic role within a postfeminist era. The men, much like the women, can be construed as both aggressors and victims in the home and in the marriage. Despite this and due to the limited scope of the thesis, the theory section examines postfeminism and the home chiefly from a female perspective.

The notion of home is an abstract concept that holds symbolic and societal meanings beyond being a concrete place. *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994) by Doreen Massey and *Home*

(2006) by Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling are among the works I discuss here – both examine the home and space as a concept beyond the concrete place, the house, that is often called home.

The aforementioned generalizations of women as victims and men as perpetrators in modern domesticity and violence therein call for a framework to be set for the culture of victimization, especially that of women, in 21st-century popular culture. It is significant also in the primary material, where victimhood is examined from the standpoint of both the victim and the victimizer. Due to their contemporary relevancy, articles from *Victimhood and Vulnerability in 21st Century Fiction* (2017), edited by Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega, are key works on theorizing victimhood.

I move on to genre in subchapter 2.2. Sally R. Munt's *Murder By the Book: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (1994), among others, anchors the topic down to a feminist viewpoint. Rounding out the discussion on genre is Gothic fiction, where the portrayal of women ranges from heroines to victims. The Gothic is also concerned with horror inside the home, female agency therein, and the idea of leaving home. Assisting with the issue of the Gothic is, among others, *Women and Domestic Space in Contemporary Gothic Narratives: The House as Subject* (2015) by A. Soon and Andrew Hock Soon Ng, which supports my study with its relevant ideas on the relationship between the terrors of the home and femininity. This brings the theory part back to where it began, the issue of women and the problems related to domesticity.

2.1. Female Domesticity and Victimhood in the Postfeminist Era

Postfeminism

As both a concept and a branch of feminism, postfeminism is contradictory in meaning and in legacy. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word as "an ethos of the period following . . . feminism (and improvement in women's status) . . . characterized by further development of or reaction against feminism, esp. in acceptance of masculine ideals or of aspects of the traditional

feminine role". As noted by Harzewski, the aforementioned definition allows postfeminism to be interpreted as both "an extension of second-wave feminism and a backlash" (151). There is no one way to define feminism, or rather, feminisms, since its variations depend on context, the issues at hand at any given time, and individual emphases, though all are connected through the universal aspiration to generate and sustain equality for women (Genz and Brabon 4). Despite this and the contemporary focus of the thesis, a temporal context should be set for the postfeminist ideas under consideration.

In the academia, postfeminism has seen varying characterizations, such as a "shift in the understanding and construction of identity and gender categories" (Genz and Brabon 1). However, the manner with which this shift has been met is equally fraught with contradiction, as the interpretations of postfeminism vary. It has been "identified or associated with an anti-feminist backlash, pro-feminist third wave, Girl Power dismissive of feminist politics, trendy me-first power feminism and academic postmodern feminism" (Genz and Brabon 10). Some scholars, according to Genz and Brabon, think of it as a retrogressive movement that completely eradicates the advantages gained by the original feminist movement, while some deem it a "frontier discourse" (5-8); not necessarily anything radical in and of itself, but a redistribution of the ideas already presented by feminism to better suit the social and cultural climate in which the modern woman goes about her daily life. In this sense, postfeminism is, quite literally, read as a progression of feminism having to do with an era *after* feminism, perhaps implying that the need for feminist agenda is now somewhat redundant. In this reading of the prefix 'post', the need for political and societal reinforcing of feminism is replaced with the choices and actions of individual women. The "posting" of feminism can alternatively be interpreted as evolutionary progression of the feminist agenda, stemming from the groundbreaking achievement of the so-called 'first wave' of feminism at the beginning of the 20th century (Genz and Brabon 10). However, because this thesis focuses exclusively on the 21st-century manifestation of a very particular popular culture phenomenon, I will restrict my theoretical

framework to cover only the past few decades. The postfeminist perspective through which I conduct my analysis leans more towards the latter definition, as I argue that the novels acting as my primary materials imply that a need for feminism continues to exist, and also that issues tackled already by the first and second waves of feminism might still also haunt the images of women and femininity.

According to Genz and Brabon, the emergence of postfeminism dates back to one of the first large-scale backlashes feminism has experienced (52). The years following the end of the second world war saw a backlash that forced women to "retreat from the public sphere" and retire back into the home, while men would continue to venture out into the workforce (Genz and Brabon 52). The mid-century resistance was significant enough to bolster the emergence of the so-called second wave[3] of feminism around the 1960s. The second wave helped enhance women's position, or lack thereof, in the society by combating the image of the housewife. In her book *The Feminine Mystique*, released at the peak of the second wave in 1963, esteemed feminist Betty Friedan characterized housewifery as the "epitome of female non-identity and passivity" that had a "dehumanizing effect on women" (quoted in Genz and Brabon 52). The second wave was crucial in encouraging women to question their status as passive bystanders in the patriarchal society, thus starting the rejection of female domesticity. However, in about twenty years' time, feminism was experiencing a backlash once again. As the second wave came to an end in the 1980s, issues that needed to be covered by feminism were tearing feminism down internally (Genz and Brabon 53). During that time, one of the issues was the conundrum of "having it all"– could a woman successfully combine family and career, thus have it all, at least in the eyes of the society, or were they still forced to choose between the home and the workforce? The setbacks of the 1980s caused feminism to come to a lull. Young women were increasingly identifying themselves as feminist, but the feminist movement that followed was declared the beginnings of postfeminism by the media –

[3] "'The 'first wave' of feminism having come to an end before the war and culminated with women's suffrage in the 1920s in the United States and the UK" (Genz and Brabon 52).

complete with “a younger ‘postfeminist generation’ that supposedly reviled the women’s movement” (Faludi 11). According to the same definition, postfeminism is not about a change in social contexts where women have reached absolute equality, but rather about a total lack of caring towards the matter, which may “deal the most devastating blow to women’s rights” (Faludi 86).

Along with the rise of postfeminism in the modern society, where women’s status had already made great improvements, came the idea extensively covered in current popular culture according to which a woman’s devotion to domestic life counteracts the gains feminism has worked so diligently to achieve (Gillis and Hollows 1). To that end, and to accommodate the topicality of the female psychological thriller phenomenon, I will discuss postfeminism from the point of view of popular culture over the course of the 1980’s all throughout to the present day. The forty-decade period saw the rise of many different “images of women”, which mostly portray traditional gender roles and domestic femininity that are now viewed as oppressive towards women (Gillis and Hollows 1, Genz and Brabon 21). I define domesticity here as researchers of women’s history define it – including but not limited to household chores, childcare, cooking, home management, and housekeeping (Blunt and Dowling 52). For the purposes of this thesis, domesticity is discussed through the feminine connotations it is traditionally given. These domestic ideals having to do with the roles assigned for women inside the home, such as being a devoted wife and mother are at the core of the two *Girl* novels, which is why the theory will concentrate on how domesticity and problems therein are represented in the postfeminism of the past few decades.

Indeed, the domestic realm along with its challenges regarding household chores, preparing dinner, caring for children, and keeping the marriage alive has often been portrayed by means of chick lit and romantic comedy, genres dealing with “feminine” issues, and associated with a mostly female consumership. In works such as *I Don’t Know How She Does It* (2002) by Allison Pearson, and *The Undomestic Goddess* (2006) by Sophie Kinsella, successful career-oriented women feel the pressure put on them as women, mothers, and wives to embrace domestic life, and

as such fulfill their duties as women. Both novels make use of the "fish out of water" narrative in showing the women venturing out of their comfort zones, finally favoring the feminine domestic. Somewhat conversely to the chick lit phenomenon, in the more recent wave of the female psychological thriller, exemplified by Flynn's and Hawkins's novels, the domestic is viewed not as a viable possibility for a modern, independent woman, but rather as a prison-like constraint. In fact, the novels epitomize the conflicted nature of postfeminism in the variety of female characters they feature, and what those characters contribute to the postfeminist discussion on what it means to be a woman in the 21st century. More on this will follow in the analysis section, but it should already be noted that the novels, while not taking sides, feature a discourse that rejects the idea of the female domestic, but also one that acknowledges the freedom of choice, and does not singlehandedly judge those who still choose to play into the role of the housewife, which continues to divide postfeminism internally.

According to Gillis and Hollows, the housewife, which stands as the best-known figure of the female domestic, is, in postfeminist discourse, sometimes seen as the feminist's "other" (1). This "othering" has been constantly present in female-centered popular culture narratives since the 1980s, where housewives are either pitied for their seemingly empty and meaningless lives, or socially shunned for their choice to dedicate themselves to the home. Stéphanie Genz even goes so far as to state that the housewife is seen as the "epitome of female non-identity and passivity", shaped "dependent and purposeless" by the patriarchy (51). As the backlash towards traditionally feminine domesticity and housewives began to brew over the course of the 1980s, and the discussion on women's right – or whether they had one – to choose between a career and a family was ramping up, the home in general started to be viewed as an antifeminist space. This stems from the postfeminist idea critical of the housewife, according to which the home is construed as a confinement that ultimately renders women powerless and lacking a singular identity by isolation (Gillis and Hollows 6).

What is more, the gendering of domesticity has, in fact, brought forth further inequalities between women and men even in modern society[4]. The strides taken by feminism to ensure equality between women and men are present also in the institution of marriage. The modern ideal of marriage between a woman and a man entails the presumption that the spouses are equals in every aspect. However, according to a 2014 study on gender inequality in the home conducted by Fetterolf and Rudman, this is still not a reality, showing that women might still be pressured to be just one or the other – a mother or a career woman. To continue the previously discussed notion that a woman's devotion to domestic life is deemed problematic by feminist standards, the study finds that in general, women do more domestic labor than their male spouses. This was the case also when the women held a steady employment outside of the home, and even when they had equally well-paying and time-consuming careers as their spouses (Fetterolf and Rudman 220). This is particularly concerning, because it is now claimed that "the biological idea of sex – i.e., being born male or female – does not predetermine one's gender – i.e., that one should be masculine or feminine" (Gates 13). Seminal feminist scholar Judith Butler also views gender as performative: "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender, that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (33).

The discrepancy in the distribution of domestic labor based on gender is so radical that the amount of extra work done by working wives and mothers on a regular basis has been dubbed the "second shift" (Hochschild 260). "The No. 1 impediment to women succeeding in the workforce is now in the home. Most people assume that women are responsible for households and childcare. Most couples operate that way – not all. That fundamental assumption holds women back", states Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer of a major company, and a mother of two (cited in Auletta 59). It is a notion that summarizes a great deal of the problems surrounding domesticity and the home from the female perspective, also in the context of my primary material.

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[4] Due to the topic and scope of this thesis, and the two novels studied here taking place in English-speaking regions of the Western world (*Gone Girl* in the US and *The Girl on the Train* in the UK), I will restrict this and all other cultural considerations that appear in the study to cover only the Western culture.

The aforementioned preconceptions about women's role as the only major contributor to the domestic realm inside a familial unit are further emphasized in the genres of popular culture aimed chiefly at a female audience. Gillis and Hollows discuss melodramas and soap operas in television and film as platforms that frequently showcase the home and the domestic as unilaterally feminine spaces. Serial dramas such as *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012), *Brothers & Sisters* (2006-2011), and *This Is Us* (2016-) as well as the profusion of female-centered reality shows about cooking, baking, and home decoration all underline the popular culture narrative that women, and women alone, are held responsible for domesticity. These modern examples from what some argue is still the postfeminist era go to show that positioning women in these overtly domestic settings continues to garner interest and audiences, while feminists show disdain over the lack of diversity in female representation in the media. To that end, postfeminism often plays with the idea that domesticity is something to be left behind in order for women to truly enter the modern age (Gillis and Hollows 1-2), where women have careers that they often choose to value higher than domestic responsibilities. Even during the 1980s, the approximate birth of postfeminism, the unilateral portrayals of the domestic realm and the "family values" with it created an atmosphere in popular culture and in society that concentrated on "the negative consequences of women's entry into the workplace and abandonment of the home" (Gillis and Hollows 2). As a result, narratives where single, childless, career-driven women were presented as "damaged and deranged" started to appear. In the same vein as the two novels discussed in this thesis, the 1987 film *Fatal Attraction*, released at the height of the postfeminist uproar, presents a cool career woman as a threat to the nuclear family and home. Narratives like *Fatal Attraction* "were used to legitimate the repudiation of feminism and the return of women to their true place in the home" (Gillis and Hollows 2). Referring to the manner in which these professional women concerned with career advancements rather than childcare were portrayed throughout the 20th century, and at times even today, Genz and Brabon state that "the unattached and childless professional woman is portrayed as a figure of evil

and a neurotic psychopath, designed to deter women from seeking public success and neglecting their feminine duties" (56). It caters to the way in which some of the more polarizing female characters are portrayed in the novels. This interplay between female identity, its perception in the public eye, and the representations of women who do not yield to the traditionally feminine sphere of the domestic will be discussed further later.

In addition to the postfeminist images already presented – the housewife and the career woman – one more has emerged during the era of postfeminism through modern narratives in literature, film, and television. In stark contrast to the previously discussed "images of women" that mostly display feminine domesticity, the new image of femininity, according to the more modern wave of postfeminism, is the "cool girl" covered in *Gone Girl* and addressed also in *The Girl on the Train*. Characterized as "young, hot, funny and/or smart, successful career woman" (De La Concha 84), the "cool girl" is not only another image of the modern woman, but also a postfeminist institution "wholeheartedly endorsing the ethics of freedom in a hyper culture of commercial sexuality and matching men in boldness and brazenness" (De La Concha 84). More on the "cool girl" phenomenon follows in the analysis section, but in terms of the discussion at hand here, it sides with the postfeminist desire to eradicate feminism as an unnecessary relic, and wipes out the stereotype of women as weak and vulnerable damsels in distress in favor of the new 21st-century woman.

While these postfeminist discussions and images of women within modern popular culture do include the feminist benchmarks of female emancipation and empowerment, they also adhere to the domestic goals traditionally set for women. Gillis and Hollows suggest that some images of the female domestic – such as that of the housewife, which is often viewed as a "negative" image of modern femininity – should be eradicated to steer women away from hearth and home, and instead encourage "achievement in the public sphere" (2).

Having laid groundwork to the concept of postfeminism and its inner workings on what it means to be a modern woman, I will next move on to a more intricate discussion on the topic of the home, and women's position inside it. The home is both an abstract concept and a concrete place, and will be theorized as such. Moreover, in keeping with the themes of the primary material, where women are often victimized and oppressed inside their own homes, theory on home is viewed chiefly from the perspective of what kind of an environment it is for women in the 21st century.

Home

The home, in simple terms, is a dwelling in which people live. From a traditional viewpoint, it is, or has at least been idealized and fantasized as a safe haven from society. However, for the purposes of this study, it is of use to examine the home as a concept of more depth. The home is a concrete place, but also an amalgamation of human relationships and power relations alike, forming and evolving over time and space. The all-important sense of home is affected by memories stemming from as early as childhood, as well as dreams of the future (Blunt and Dowling 1). To continue from the discussion on postfeminism on a similar note, I discuss here also the way home and femininity are often linked. To move beyond the simple idea of home as a place, it is evident that home exists also in the imagination, where feelings of belonging and attachment, but also of fear, violence, and alienation govern it. These feelings, according to Blunt and Dowling, "are intrinsically spatial. Home is thus a spatial imaginary: a set of intersecting and variable ideas and feelings" (2). Home is an imaginative concept of complex nature, where social relations and inhabitants' identity construction contribute to the interplay of home and the psyche of the people living inside it. As summarized by Blunt and Dowling, "understanding home . . . has three key, overlapping, components: home as material and imaginative, the nexus between home, power, and identity; and the multi-scalarity of home" (254). However, to concentrate on the female experience

of home, I approach the subject through feminist discussion and the role home has in connection to gender and identity construction.

This connection is evident also in popular culture, where the entertainment aimed at women seems to revolve around the intricacies of the home, such as the domestically oriented shows on cooking and homemaking mentioned in the postfeminism section. The female psychological thriller is no exception – it also consists of fiction written about women by women, to an audience that very possibly consists mostly of women, as women make up the majority of the readers of crime fiction (Whitney 2015). The image of home portrayed in these novels deals with the traditionally feminine issues of marriage, motherhood, and homemaking, but simultaneously acknowledges the problems associated with such a portrayal of femininity and home. In linking the domestic to the feminist discussion, it is important to note the distinction between public and private. The home and the entirety of the domestic realm – home, family, relationship, and house management – are private, and, as I demonstrated earlier, unilaterally feminine. Conversely, the public realm consists of life outside of the home – work, politics, economy, leisurely activities, practically the entire society in which the domestic is encased. The separation of the two distinct spheres has its roots in history, where the public has been constructed as a predominantly male space. In the 19th century, for men, the public was a space of spare time and freedom, whereas women would need a reason to leave the private sphere of the home and venture out into the public sphere of the street.

In fact, to paint a picture of those times, in their seminal work from 1979, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination,* Gilbert and Gubar make a claim that “almost all nineteenth-century women were in some sense imprisoned in men’s houses” (83). In terms of literature, the air of confinement seeped into the works of female writers, who often viewed the delimitation they experienced as domestic imprisonment (Gilbert and Gubar 85). Influential 19th-century works detailing the confinement

include, for example, *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Gilman's poem "In Duty Bound" (1884), which addresses the literal confinement to the house, and the figurative one to the feminine duties of the household (Gilbert and Gubar 84). Indeed, "anxieties about space" began to "dominate the literature of . . . nineteenth-century women" to the point where "spatial imagery of enclosure and escape, elaborated with what frequently becomes obsessive intensity, characterizes much of their writing" state Gilbert and Gubar (83), referring to female authors of that time. During the 19th century, women's identity was mostly based on the significance of their role in the domestic realm, as the public sphere remained a mostly masculine area. The presence of women was restricted to activities deemed fit for women, such as shopping (Wolff 34-35, 46). The cultural distinction between public and private was an attempt to "confine women to the domestic sphere" both spatially and socially (Massey 179). The confinement made its mark on the construction of identity, and strongly affiliated women's identity with the home, thus creating more of a rift between home and the society outside of the domestic. Massey discusses gender differences even further, noting that men were the ones "setting out to discover and change the world", while women were "assigned the role of personifying a place which did not change" (167). Circling back to contemporary society and literature, these general outlines still ring true in the study of women and home. In their 2006 book, Blunt and Dowling claim that women associate home with the feeling of isolation more often than men (24-25). This sense of isolation, according to Blunt and Dowling's studies, stems from the gendering of domesticity. As I discussed in the postfeminism section, this type of domestic gendering is predominantly about the distribution of domestic labor between spouses.

However, against the backdrop of the female psychological thriller, the problem of gendered spatiality in terms of home is a far more sinister one. To better meet the needs of the analysis on the two psychological thrillers at the center of this study, it is convenient to examine the strain put on those relations inside a domestic setting. Blunt and Dowling note that, for women,

"home is a space of violence, alienation and emotional turmoil. As a symbolic representation, home serves to remove women from the 'real' world of politics and business" (215). Inside that conclusion is the bottom line that the home is, or used to be, an entity separate from the public sphere, and due to the power relations between genders, home was "a key site in the oppression of women" (Blunt and Dowling 15). The alienation and oppression that take place in the home are at the center of the image of home in both *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*. The notion of home as a safe haven, a staple in the image of a homemaker dedicating her life to her family and home, is effectively shattered in the novels. The aforementioned strain put on the power relations between genders, or spouses to be more exact in the context of this thesis, stems from the "power geometry" (Massey, quoted in Blunt and Dowling 24-25), which, for Blunt and Dowling, represents the "idea of how people relate to each other in a domestic environment" (1). According to Blunt and Dowling, "ideal homes embody familial-based gender relations", meaning that "imaginings of suburban homes and home-making practices within them position women as mothers and as primarily responsible for the domestic sphere" (110). This idea is at the core of the problems regarding the expectations the married couples in the novels have towards the home and the division of domestic labor. It is also where the male expectations towards women within the home and the marriage are encapsulated. The extent of those male expectations and the consequences they have on female identity, construction of home, and the eventual disintegration of the marriage are discussed in more detail later in the analysis chapters.

In addition to the previously discussed "images of women" in media and how domestic they all seem, another theme entwining femininity and home is the idea of leaving home. A significant portion of recent popular women-centric narratives are, at least to some extent, about either yearning to return home after having to forsake it (Gillis and Hollows 3), or leaving one

behind on their own terms[5]. *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* are no exception – both feature a main character, a woman, constantly motivated by, or pining for, the home they once had, but somehow ended up losing. In this context in both novels, home, and in particular the sense of feeling at home are vital in the women's construction of identity. The novels present the diversity of female domesticity by showcasing female characters that either embrace their roles as housewives or despise other women for making such a choice. In between these two extremes fits a range of women, for whom home is an integral part of identity construction one way or another.

Fundamental in the notion of leaving home is the division of home into homely and unhomely homes. According to Blunt and Dowling, homely homes are comprised of idealized dwelling structures and the social relations within them. They consist of a house-as-home structure, where feelings of attachment and intimacy govern domestic life, typically in safe and comfortable surroundings both in and out the home itself (100-101). Conversely, unhomely homes, more often than homely ones, generate feelings of loneliness and powerlessness. Often linked to the discussion on homely and unhomely are the outer perimeters of the home, namely its setting in either the city or the suburbs. The debate between the two is vastly discussed in the two novels, where the topic is tied to the question of identity and the sense of feeling at home.

Despite this division into homely and unhomely homes, there is plenty of overlap between the two groups. The line is not clear-cut in the discussion on femininity and home, either. In the subject matter of this thesis, the unhomely is present in seemingly perfect domestic environments – picture-perfect marriages are crumbling inside beautiful suburban houses in affluent neighborhoods. The emotional turmoil and domestic violence that take place behind closed doors and convincing facades is a factor in the idea of women leaving their homes. As Blunt and Dowling

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[5] Such narratives include *Eat Pray Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* (2006) by Elizabeth Gilbert, and *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (2012) by Cheryl Strayed, both of which, as nonfiction memoirs about women's search for home and identity, became a literary phenomenon that revolves around the personal stories of women and their agency, not unlike the two novels studied here. Furthermore, both became so popular that they were also adapted into films, in 2010 and 2014, respectively, further supporting their status as a female genre phenomenon.

note, “the vast majority of incidents of violence against women take place in the home” (125). To expand on that idea, it is important to note that while domestic violence is so called because it mostly happens inside the home, its classification stems from the personal relationship between the parties involved, rather than the home as a location (125). Despite keeping the main focus of this thesis on the female experience of both emotional and physical abuse caused by toxic marriages and gender expectations within the home, it is imperative to acknowledge the women’s role as the aggressor, as well. The two novels examine domestic violence through male and female voices, with wives and husbands alternating roles, often even willingly placing themselves in the victim’s position. Continuing from this sinister side of home, I will next discuss female victimhood.

Victimhood

Gone Girl and *The Girl on the Train* offer their own perspectives on the matter of victimhood and especially on the gender-coded power dynamics associated with it. As I have attested, women often become, or are conditioned to become, victims. Men are left with the equally contradicted part of the aggressor and the victimizer, or, conversely, the part of the savior or authority figure. However, the spectrum of female victimhood is hardly that straightforward in practice. The two novels I have chosen as the center for this thesis have faced criticism for their portrayal of victims and victimization in general. For example, vital for the plot in Flynn’s *Gone Girl* are the false rape accusations made by Amy, the titular girl. Some critics perceived the plot device, used to exemplify the erratic behavior of a deranged individual, as a cruel play on what is known about “the behavior of abused women and undermining the credibility of victims” (Smith 2014). Hawkins’s *The Girl on the Train* features several female characters that blame themselves for the abusive way their spouses treat them, and thus accept the role of the victim carved out for them by the power relations within the home. These, then, make up the aspects of victimhood that are of interest to my study of

the two novels. How does the domestic victimize women? Can women use their position as a victim to their advantage and abuse others with it?

In light of the link between domesticity and the female victimhood, it is useful to consider the ways in which victimhood and victims are perceived in our culture that keeps pitting the two together. Fassin and Rechtmann (quoted in Onega and Ganteau 1) talk about the trauma paradigm, which has been employed in the Western world to examine the culture's way of placing individuals and groups susceptible to wounding. Fassin and Rechtmann argue that the trauma paradigm is about a paradigm shift, which addresses "the ways in which the attitude of the authorities and the common citizens towards trauma victims has changed from one of suspicion to one of sympathy over the last century" (quoted in Onega and Ganteau 1). The trauma paradigm has also been affected by other fields of theory, most notably that of feminism. Feminism's interest in the concept of victimhood has brought welcome changes to the ways in which victimhood has been perceived and constructed, for example granting the victims a safe environment to tell their stories and find solace after a traumatic event (Onega and Ganteau 6-7). However, despite the positive contributions feminism has made in the discussion on female victimhood, feminists have raised concerns about some of the attributes often associated with the vulnerability inherent to not only victims, but to the human nature in general, such as weakness and vulnerability. The feminists unhappy with those connotations feel that the helplessness experienced by victims might harbor harmful stereotypes about women, and as such about the entire feminist agenda (De La Concha 84). Some even go as far as to talk about women's "belief in their own victimization", which they view as an "important obstacle to overcome", if women are to ever gain agency from men and embrace it (Genz and Brabon 68). According to such critics of what they have dubbed "victim feminism", some women are "impervious to the power actually available to them", and because of that, seek power "through an identity of powerlessness" (Genz and Brabon 68). According to Genz and Brabon's ideas on "victim feminism" (68), the most notable hindrance towards the unraveling of the

female victimization discourse seems to be the fact that some feminists still adhere to the belief that women are to benefit from the position of the victim. In Flynn's and Hawkins's novels, the position of the victim is at times viewed as a pawn the women play at their convenience, calculating exactly what can be gained by playing into the fragile victimization of women.

Furthermore, De La Concha discusses an individual victim's "status of social usefulness" (71). For women, the so-called social usefulness is still interlinked to their role in the domestic realm, where nurture and care for the wellbeing of others is a priority over their own personal growth and achievements (De La Concha 71). This concept is relevant to the primary materials, because they present a range of female characters with varying degrees of "social usefulness". In *Gone Girl* in particular, "social usefulness" becomes a tool the lead character uses in constructing her profile as a victim, exploiting it to deliberately wreak havoc on others. The idea can then be applied in deciphering the social ordering of the women, and how each of their experiences in finding validation differs, which then ties the notion back to the idea of the trauma paradigm discussed earlier. For example, *Gone Girl*'s leading lady uses pregnancy to gain "social usefulness" by way of making herself more vulnerable and likable, thus ensuring that her story of an abusive husband would be met with the validation she is looking to achieve.

The increasingly individualistic thinking within the discussion on victimhood mirrors the ideas currently revolving in postfeminism, which laments feminism a thing of the past, rendered unnecessary because "female achievement is now predicated not on feminism but on female individualism" (De La Concha 84). For the women experiencing victimization within their own homes, this individualistic approach may leave them even more alone in their feelings of isolation and domestic oppression. This holds true for several characters particularly in Hawkins's novel, where women are victimized more in the hands of abusive men. However, although in a sense more of a legitimate victim than the lead character in *Gone Girl*, Hawkins's main female character in *The*

Girl on the Train struggles to find validation as an alcoholic with seemingly few redeeming qualities.

Victimhood, especially when relegated to femininity and feminism, is much too diverse a topic to condense within the scope of this thesis. Although the notion of female victimhood in the two *Girl* novels revolves chiefly around the victimizing nature of the domestic, it plays into a more significant social context. De La Concha discusses *Gone Girl* as a postfeminist work "finely attuned to the new cultural sensibility" (85) that upends the notions of victimhood and agency. Indeed, while I have discussed victimhood from a chiefly female perspective, both *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* interfere with the traditional casting of the roles of the victim and the victimizer, particularly in the domestic setting. As for the former, De La Concha simplifies it as "a postfeminist refashioning of the old story of the danger of smart, beautiful, powerful women entrapping innocent men" (85). However, according to De La Concha, feminist theorists are not ready to denounce the effect of feminism in spurring societal conversations about victimhood just yet, as they state that "feminism will go on fighting to make female victimhood visible and, by doing so, to prevent it" (87).

This discussion on victimhood and femininity concludes subchapter 2.1. In the following subchapter, which makes up the second half of the theory, I take into consideration the genre conventions of the two novels.

2.2. Genre and the Gothic in the Modern Female Psychological Thriller

Genre

While thematically similar to each other, *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* are genre hybrids, mixing and matching traits from different literary genres and creating their own distinct narratives about the cultural and social climate around them. Both works draw heavily from crime and detective fiction, as well as the psychological thriller and the Gothic. It should be noted that each

literary style mentioned here is in and of itself an amalgamation of various genres. Because the two novels are stylistically and thematically comprised of such hybrids, making any clear-cut genre analyses is neither possible nor sensible. A good example of this, I argue, is the characterization of the novels as chick noir, an amalgamation of female-centric narratives written by women, and a more straightforward, "traditionally male-occupied genre" (Kennedy 21) of the psychological thriller. The subgenre is also known as domestic noir, because it "takes place primarily in homes . . . concerns itself . . . with the female experience, is based around relationships and takes as its base a broadly feminist view that the domestic sphere is a challenging and sometimes dangerous prospect for its inhabitants" (Crouch). This definition by author Julia Crouch is very well suited for both *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*, kindred spirits to Crouch's works.

In his aptly titled book *The Crime Fiction Handbook* (2012), Messent dates the beginning of crime fiction back to the mid-19th century. However, to connect the discussion on genre to the feminist frame of reference, I turn to Sally R. Munt and her seminal work on feminist readings of crime fiction, *Murder by the Book* (1994). Although older than Messent's genre study, Munt's readings are better suited for a female-centered study on the significance of gender in crime fiction. Munt states that, at the very beginning of the genre's history, "women, if appearing at all, do not act, they *react* to primary characters – men" (4). According to Munt, female characters were included in the crime fiction of at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, as "part of the general response to the changing position of women, and a strained one at that" (4). However, Munt also refers to the "Golden Age" of female crime writers, which is "a period commonly conceived as being from the first novel of Agatha Christie to the last novel by Dorothy L. Sayers" (7), thus placing it roughly between 1920 and 1940.

Since then, gender has become one of the centerpieces within the genre. As a generalization of the genre, Messent states that "its ways of thinking and its structures" are "rooted in male/female difference" (85). Within a genre where gender differences are so clear-cut, male

characters communicate their masculinity through a set of gender traits usually attributed to men, such as reason, strength, and domination. Conversely, Messent notes that "feminine" traits like intuition and emotion are a hindrance in positions of authority and power, to which he credits the lack of female detectives and other figures of authority and control in the genre (86).

This demarcation of genders and the traits associated with them circles back to the idea of the different "roles" or "images" of women I already discussed in the subsection on postfeminism (Gillis and Hollows 1; Genz and Brabon 21). Messent outlines two of what he calls "archetypes" of women within crime fiction – the femme fatale, which originates in the hardboiled[6] variety of crime fiction, and the victim (86). Both roles appear in the works of Flynn and Hawkins. The femme fatale differs from the rest of the images of women mentioned so far – the housewife, the single career woman, the cool girl, and the victim – in that it is the one character perceived as a "dangerous villain" (Messent 87), a label rarely put on women within the genre. These femme fatales, dangerous women, are impervious to the standards society lays upon women. It is an aspect of femininity to which fervent sexuality is often linked – a femme fatale is someone who uses her seductive prowess to create an air of otherness around her, especially among women. As seen in several popular culture examples, the femme fatale is often a cunning manipulator, "the dangerous other that must be contained and controlled" (Messent 87). Contemporary examples include the quintessential modern madwoman in the attic in the aforementioned *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Basic Instinct* (1992), and *To Die For* (1992) by Joyce Maynard.

The victimization of women was already discussed in its own right, but in terms of crime fiction, the notion of the female victim is a significant one. Thriller novelist Patricia Highsmith argues, in the vein of "victim feminism" (Genz and Brabon 68), that women's role as victims of murder or violence originates in the way they are often "presented as having deserved punishment for being too available or unavailable sexually, too domineering or insufficiently

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[6] *Hardboiled* refers to a distinct style of crime fiction "pioneered by Carol John Daly in the mid-1920s", and "popularized by Dashiell Hammett . . . and . . . Raymond Chandler". It is characterized by a stripped use of language, dangerous urban settings, organized crime, and a tough detective, often male, at its center. (Manoah 1-3)

independent, too loving or too hateful. Inasmuch as women are easy victims, violence and crimes against them are easily justified and rationalized" (quoted in Munt 19). This is in line with what Messent notes about the corporeal significance of the female body within crime fiction, and its portrayal of victimization (77). Stripped of identity, the nameless and faceless female bodies, the women pigeonholed to play the victim, are a blank canvas for inflicting horrendous physical harm (Messent 75). This emanates from the generally male attitudes towards women that see women and their bodies interlinked (Messent 77). This happens to an extent where it is not merely about the overt sexualization of female bodies, but also evokes the need to reduce women to their corporeal forms, essentially victimizing them.

In this sense, the role of women as victims is connected to the male gaze and the various meanings it bestows upon femininity and the purposes women and femininity serve. The male gaze, as characterized by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her seminal 1975 essay on the very meaning of the term, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", is about the way the patriarchal society conditions women to "identify with a passive object to be looked at", while men adopt the role of the active spectator (cited in Oliver 451). This relationship between the passive female object and agentive male spectators is marked with desire – namely male desire towards the female object. Behind the power structures of the male gaze is also the traditional pairing of masculinity with activity and, conversely, femininity with passivity (Oliver 451). This is evident in the history of the crime genre, "as women were increasingly confined to the role of wife and mother during the 1950s due to the 'returning heroes' of World War II, crime fiction by women returned to the home" (Munt 17). For the purposes of this genre study on crime fiction, these gender-marked pairings are crucial in understanding the roles assigned for men and women, and how the male gaze guides and reinforces those roles within the conventions of the genre. Is it essentially the objectifying nature of the male gaze that assigns the role of the victim upon women? Encapsulated in that gaze and the power relations between genders is the problematic male-female dynamic in the two *Girl* novels.

As for the current state of the genre, the more recent developments within thrillers beginning in the late 20th century, women have begun to be more readily positioned in roles of agency and authority usually reserved for men (Messent 90-91). “Recent women’s crime writing looks, then, to write back against a male-coded tradition, redirecting the crime novel . . . to represent a feminist ideology and reconceive it with a woman hero at its centre”, Messent argues (90). According to Munt, the genre and women’s role within it experienced a shift once its previously mentioned Golden Age began to die down. The decades following it brought forth modern feminism, and with it the “Second Wave of ‘Queens of Crime’”, signifying “another era of female achievement”, turning women into “dominant figures in the field” once more (Munt 19). Munt also insists that the “influence of women writers” was so “pervasive” that it forever changed the genre (14). Feminism continued to permeate female crime writing, and novelist Ruth Rendell “is held to be a mainstream crime writer sympathetic to feminism” as “her novels contain single mothers, lesbians, feminists, and major issues such as rape” (Munt 20). All issues are of concern and interest to women, and as such ones that are often tackled by feminism.

Similarly, the works of Flynn and Hawkins, which have been regarded as speaking to or about the feminist agenda (Dockterman 2014), diverge from their male-centered counterparts not only in their female-led viewpoints, but also in their setting and manner in which crime is approached. Within the novels, crime is not something that happens *out there to other people*. The two female authors have brought crime and violence into the home, which is what makes it so terrifying. Home, as I discussed earlier, does not appear to be the safe haven, or the fantasy of one, it once was. Crime and terror are constantly present within the family unit through the domestic violence stemming from once perfect relationships that have now overstayed their welcome. Thus, in essence, the two novels use the conventions and settings of crime fiction to their advantage, but toy with the various female roles to an extent that upends the focus often held in the genre by bringing the questions of gender and the politics of the home to the forefront. Less conventional

crime novels and more contemporary domestic noir, the novels make use of crime fiction, but do so with an increased focus on the emotional distress between spouses. Despite women sometimes appearing as victims in more traditional works of crime fiction, the concept of victimhood and victimization is not clear-cut in the new wave of female-led thrillers. The notion of being, or becoming, a victim is central also in Gothic fiction, which will be discussed in the next and final section of the theoretical framework of this thesis.

The Gothic

Gothic fiction, in its most traditional sense since it originated in the 18th century, is often construed as having to do with something supernatural or non-human, anything and everything fear inducing, uncanny, or ambiguous. Additionally, these Gothic ideas often bring to mind gloomy Victorian settings such as castles, cemeteries, or forests. However, science fiction narratives like *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley, ghost stories like *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) by Henry James, although very Gothic in the traditional sense of the genre, represent only two ways in which to approach the realm of Gothic fiction. Even during its heyday in the 1800s, the Gothic was noted for its explorations of femininity and the domestic. Charlotte Brönte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) gave rise to the original madwoman in the attic, and addressed domesticity from a female perspective. Now, in the 21st century, the Gothic is experiencing a renaissance of sorts. It has taken on many forms – ghost stories like *The Others* (2001), Gothic romances like the lesbian feminist commentary *Fingersmith* (2002) by Sarah Waters, and southern Gothic narratives like *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* series (2001-2013) by Charlaine Harris.

However, the narratives mentioned above are still somewhat traditional examples of Gothic fiction. *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* are both drenched in Gothic symbolism and themes, but with a modern twist. As in Gothic fiction, the horror in these stories is not restricted to any particular place or thing, but rather seeps into every aspect of everyday life. The women in both

novels experience, for example, domestic confinement, abuse from family members, the past coming back to "haunt" them, and a sense of dread and uneasiness in seemingly normal situations. Again, the focus is on the female perspective, due to what femininity means to the Gothic, and the different roles given to women within the genre. Brabon and Genz talk about the Gothic in conjunction with postfeminism as it stands in the 21st century, because "like the Gothic, postfeminism is both peculiarly full and empty at the same time, reflecting what is most active, developing and changing in the literary, social and cultural developments of our times" (1). In that vein, "postfeminism and Gothic both act as frontier discourses that bring us to the edge of what we know and encourage us to go beyond" (Brabon and Genz 1), which is to say that the two are both still very much works in progress that evolve along with the times. In her 2007 article, subtitled "Gothic Continuities, Feminism and Postfeminism in the Neo-Gothic Film", Helen Hanson engages in a dialogue with what she dubs "the neo-gothic" – modern examples of narratives that fit the description of the genre, but do so within the confinements of the contemporary world, and, more specifically, "revisit and dramatize key issues for women, such as the politics of domestic space, contemporary gender relations and feminine identity via their use of the gothic" (20-21).

The Gothic brings together several aspects already discussed. Many of the themes explored through the Gothic essentially make up a mirror for postfeminism to reflect its most persistent issues on. The Gothic has, since its inception in the 18th and 19th century, featured prominent female characters, but posited them in peril, usually within the supposed safety of their own homes and among people they had deemed trustworthy. Perhaps the most renowned example of how domesticity and overall roles allotted to women in the society were represented is the aforementioned *Jane Eyre*. In it, the titular governess uncovers the dark truth not only about the man she was to marry, but also about the fundamental problems within the position of women and their seemingly inherent conjunction to the domestic. Indeed, as one of the principal tropes in the Gothic, the house, in addition to the obvious connotations to haunted house narratives and ghost

stories alike, acts, from the feminist perspective, as a constraining and even dangerous domestic space that "has the power to unnerve its inhabitants" (Soon 1, 18). The same thematic framework is now, in the 21st century, at play in the contemporary novels by Flynn and Hawkins. Through Gothic fiction, I return also to the duality of home, which sees the home as fluctuating between a safe haven and a hostile space (Soon 2), a theme heavily employed in the primary material. In Freudian terms, the refuge, comfort, and the overall familiarity of the home correspond to the previously mentioned heimlich, or homely, nature of the home (Soon 2). Its opposite, the unheimlich, unhomely, is brought on by a shift in the relationship between the house and its inhabitants, turning the home into a playing field for the uncanny[7] (Soon 2). Such a shift can be provoked by a conflict or a crime within the domestic unit. In the neo-gothic landscape of *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*, the shift may be induced by having to leave home, being forced to aid for a terminally ill family member, or coping with infertility issues or alcoholism, but these specific issues will be expanded on in the analysis.

As I have established over the course of the theory sections, femininity and domesticity seem to often come connected to one another. They are fused together to an extent where the link "between 'house' and 'home' is ruptured" (Soon 13). In terms of the Gothic and its female protagonists, "the house is sometimes not a home but a prison", creating a "sinister link between domestication and entrapment" (Soon 13). Upon the theory on the home, I noted that, in the contemporary society, the oppressing nature of the domestic sphere stems mostly from the uneven distribution of domestic labor, and the labeling of women solely into wives, mothers, and homemakers, which, in effect, confines women strictly in the home. The Gothic concerns itself more with the limitation of female freedom and agency that occurs in the process (Soon 4). From the postfeminist point of view, linking women and the home reads like a means to simplify and

[7] "Gothic criticism's investigation into unhomely houses is largely informed by Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny, which describes how a familiar, intimate space becomes defamiliarized, thereafter precipitating horror" (Soon 13). This idea is at the crux of what makes the domestic environments in *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* so entrenched in the Gothic.

control the feminine. According to Soon's book on women and domestic spaces in the Gothic, the connection reduces femininity to the point where the home begins to dominate it by fulfilling the anti-feminist adage of "putting a woman in her place". Further problems arise due to the presupposition that "the house is simple, and that domesticity is simple – that it is nothing more than 'place'" (10-11). However, domesticity has the power to shape the identities of the women confined to it, and bend them until they break, because the house is not only a setting for the unspeakable – it also welcomes it (Soon 1).

As I have stated, women often adopt, or are forced to adopt, the role of the victim in popular culture. Gothic fiction is no exception. However, the woman in the Gothic is often portrayed as both a victim and a hero (Hanson 22). The main concern regarding the victim status of women within the Gothic, according to Hanson, is the way female spectators, or, in this case, readers, are conditioned to identify with "female characters narratively positioned as sexual objects, or, in the case of genres like the gothic, as victimized" (22), which she feels reads as "antithetical to feminist concerns, rather than speaking to them" (22). In their introduction to Hanson's article, Brabon and Genz argue that "the neo-gothic . . . rearticulates women's domestic concerns . . . for the postfeminist audience", while placing the aforementioned "domestic concerns" temporally to the mid to late 20th century and the second wave of feminism (3). Despite the prefix *neo-*, meaning 'new', the subgenre taps into the feminine fears that have been circulating in feminist discussions for a long time: domestic violence, sexual abuse, and domestic containment (Hanson 30). Thus, the profile of the female victim in the Gothic does not radically differ from its portrayal in female narratives across genre lines; the victim profile makes the traditional connection between women and the domestic space. The threats women are susceptible to stem from the fact that women spend more time in the home than men, or, more precisely, their male spouses (Soon 10).

In addition to the role the domestic plays in the construction of female identity, temporality is another focal point in the female Gothic. During the 21st century, the neo-gothic

movement and its postfeminist connotations have brought forth a re-emergence of the traditional Gothic issues on women and femininity. As Hanson points out, this is of special interest because "the gothic has to do with temporality and the past, especially fear of the past coming back to the present" (24). Within this female frame of reference, the fear of the past is realized in the primary material as, for example, secrets from the past come back to haunt the present and the sense of timeless terror lurk everywhere, even post mortem. As the literary landscapes of the two *Girl* novels feature an abundance of Gothic themes, this neo-gothic point of view in their interpretation provides another angle into the female domestic, and the power play of genders, female identity construction, women's roles, and temporal considerations inside it.

This look into the Gothic, and how it relates to the modern context in the center of this thesis concludes subchapter 2.1, and the theory section of the thesis. The analysis section employs the themes and concepts introduced here, and further differentiates them within the context of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* and Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train*.

3. Tension and Violence in the Private Sphere

In this chapter, I move on to employ the themes established in the theory chapter in an analytical discussion about *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*. The analysis portion of the thesis is divided into two main chapters, both then divided further into two subchapters. I begin in subchapter 3.1 with an analysis on how the novels portray modern marriage and its downfalls, and the notion of familial relations gone bad. The focus in subchapter 3.2 is on the domestic sphere as a whole, leaving home, and the role the home plays in the construction of female identity among the characters of the two novels. The aim of this chapter is to reflect on the inner workings of the male-female dynamics within the familial unit portrayed in the novels, how they essentially become the catalyst for domestic tension and abuse, how the female characters' identity is entangled with the politics of the home, and what happens to it once they are forced to leave that home behind.

3.1. "This Man Might Kill Me" – Marital Tension and Domestic Abuse

In *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*, the idea of toxic marriages positing women in peril at their own homes forms the core of the narratives. Together the two novels feature multiple portrayals of modern marriage, all superficially different from one another, but the common thread running through them all, to my mind, is the female experience of entrapment within the relationship and the confines of the home. As I already alluded in the theory section, the main causes of marital tension, even in today's society where gender equality has taken strides to accommodate women, are often all things domestic. The distribution of household chores and childcare, and the gender-coded, differing expectations all contribute to marital problems, as do the more sinister issues of infidelity, alcoholism, and difficulty to conceive children.

In *Gone Girl*, the marriage under inspection is that of Amy Elliot Dunne and Nick Dunne, a couple whose relationship, by the time of their fifth wedding anniversary, has gone from satisfying and loving to spiteful and vengeful. Although this progression is not new to narratives

about marriage, it holds relevance in *Gone Girl*'s case. Already through the way the story is constructed, the novel makes it clear that it is very aware of both the societal culture surrounding it and the heterosexual roles in and narratives of male-female relationships. The story begins with "Boy Loses Girl" (1-244), a tug of war between Amy and Nick as their respective accounts duel for the sympathy of friends, family, law enforcement, and the general public. Part two, "Boy Meets Girl" (245-408), shifts the story to the present, where the true nature of the events is revealed to the reader. Finally, in "Boy Gets Girl Back (Or Vice Versa)" (409-466), Amy returns home after changing her plans and discarding the idea of framing her husband for her murder. Although presented in a non-chronological order, the parts, whose titles mimic the tropes of romantic heterosexual narratives, make up a story that is aware of the culture it depicts, but upends the constraints usually found in it. Contrarily to *The Girl on the Train*, Flynn's novel takes into account the male point of view by including entire chapters written from the husband's perspective. In Hawkins's novel, the accounts of the problem-riddled marriages are solely those of the women, alternating the viewpoint from chapter to chapter between the three central female characters.

Whereas *Gone Girl* creates its discourse on the state of the modern marriage chiefly through the one couple, *The Girl on the Train* features several couples at different stages of their relationships. At the core of its portrayals of modern marriage are its protagonist Rachel, and her emotional codependency on her former husband, Tom. While Rachel is still reeling from the aftermath of the issues that contributed to the demise of the marriage – failure to conceive a child, her alcoholism, and the constant threat of domestic violence – Tom is now living the dream life he once envisioned for him and Rachel with Anna, the woman with whom he cheated on Rachel. As a means of coping, Rachel lives out her unfulfilled fantasies through Megan and Scott, two strangers with a picture-perfect relationship she overlooks from the train going back and forth to London. "There's something comforting about the sight of strangers safe at home" (16), she notes, foreshadowing the bigger theme at play in the novel as a whole. Only to Rachel, they are not Megan

and Scott – they are “Jess” and “Jason”, figments of Rachel’s imagination, fictive characters she created over real people. Within their life and demeanor they embody everything that Rachel ever wanted from life, everything she once had but since lost – “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”, Rachel describes (26). It is this longing that Rachel experiences that encapsulates the problem at the core of domestic tension – people, women and men, have expectations about life, love, and marriage, and when reality falls short of those expectations, it is easy to become bitter and eager to pinpoint what exactly went wrong. However, the strength of Rachel’s resentment towards seeing others live the dream she lost speaks to the societal norms built around heterosexual ideology that is present in every aspect of the two novels. In essence, these ideologies are what Rachel projects on Megan and Scott, turning them into “Jess” and ”Jason”, the epitomes of those expectations when they have come true. What is more, I argue that Rachel’s sense of failure and shame over her inability to get pregnant is coded in the same set of norms as well. In *Gone Girl*, it is Nick, the husband, who longs to live up to the norm of the heterosexual nuclear family, while Amy, the wife, is content with deviating from the norm which, in her mind, imprisons women within the home and the patriarchal constraints of society and marriage.

These, then, are the couples (Amy and Nick from *Gone Girl*, and Rachel and Tom, Tom and Anna, and Megan/”Jess” and Scott/”Jason” from *The Girl on the Train*) under examination in this chapter, and throughout the rest of the thesis. As the main (female) characters in their respective narratives, Amy and Rachel will remain the most notable subjects of analysis, followed by their relationships with their spouses, and finally Anna and Megan, each of whom brings to the narratives aspects of modern womanhood that are crucial to the analysis. As I have noted throughout the thesis, I have chosen to make the female experience of marital tension and domestic abuse the focal point of this study. Despite the voice given to the male perspective in *Gone Girl*, the novels prioritize the female experience. While occasionally showcasing the male

point of view as well, I now turn to analyzing what it is that causes these marriages to disintegrate – what are the causes of domestic tension, and how do they contribute to the female experience of modern marriage, home and identity?

Moving on to how the novels portray the demise of the marriages, it is relevant to first look at the way they began, and how the women positioned themselves within them. When *The Girl on the Train*'s Rachel reminisces the beginning of her marriage to Tom, she does so through rose-colored glasses. When they got married, they were "carefree", "drenched in bliss", and making plans for the future (77). During that time, Rachel felt "happy, solvent" and "successful" (77). In the beginning of *Gone Girl*, Amy describes the first year of marriage, and the person she has grown to become in it, in similar terms: "I am fat with love! Husky with ardor! Morbidly obese with devotion! A happy, busy bumblebee of marital enthusiasm. I positively hum around him, fussing and fixing. I have become a strange thing. I have become a wife, I have become a bore, I have been asked to forfeit my Independent Young Feminist card. I don't care" (43). In the passage above, Amy discusses marriage and her role as a wife in terms that supersede the personal level and reveal the institutional nature of marriage as a vehicle that posits men and women to act in a certain way, both in the structures of society and in relation to each other. Amy refers to herself as "a wife", as if the term entailed a set of certain behavioral markers, thus feeling like she should give up her right to identify as a latter-day feminist – both, as I have demonstrated, are ideas that adhere to the female image of the housewife, marked by its close connection to home and family. A similar notion is true for *The Girl on the Train*'s Rachel, whose dreams, as I will discuss later, revolve mostly around the traditional domestic and marital setting, where the husband ventures out and works, while the wife stays at the marital home to care for home and children.

While Amy and Rachel are fundamentally two very different characters in terms of what they expect marriage and femininity to entail, they present similarities in their commitment to making a marriage work, and both take their roles as wives seriously. However, as it becomes clear

over the course of the two novels, Rachel's desire for the heteronormatively traditional family life is authentic, whereas Amy's is not. Amy's diary entries within the novel show, once more, how acutely aware the narrative is about the gender roles constructed within romantic heterosexual relationships. Amy expertly creates diary Amy in the image of a loving wife, "fussing and fixing" (43) over her husband's every whim. Using phrases like "marital enthusiasm", "fussing and fixing", simultaneously becoming "a wife" and "a bore", and even talking about acting against the progress of feminism (43), Amy, all too aware of the conventions of being a woman in a heterosexual marriage, plays into such expectations with gusto. Later, of course, her true intentions are revealed. She calls the diary entries "ludicrous", and "pure, dumb Cool Girl bullshit" (253).

This is where, I claim, it becomes apparent that Amy's stance on marital life and her identity as a married woman are the very reasons why the marriage begins to go awry. This is something that Amy herself also starts to acknowledge before she set her plan into motion. For Amy, marriage is not a building block in the construction of a familial unit, nor a tradition to cherish, but rather a status marker to differentiate her from other women, those who she deems less lucky and successful than her. For her, marriage, just like everything else in life, is a competition, an arena in which to strive for absolute perfection and settle for nothing less. "I have many friends who are married – not many who are happily married, but many married friends" (32), she writes in one of her fake diary entries in the beginning of the novel. This outlook leads Amy to question her compatibility with Nick as a couple through their contrasting expectations on marriage and family: "I worry that Nick and I were not meant to be matched. That he would be happier with a woman who thrills at husband care and homemaking" (159), she ponders. To my mind, this concern most likely stems from the fact that she and Nick come from very different familial backgrounds, and were thus presented with contrasting models of marriage. Amy's parents still continue to have a happy marriage, while Nick's never did: "His dad did his own thing, always, and his mom put up with it. Until she divorced him" (178-179).

Conversely, Amy has very strict, idealistic thoughts on what type of a wife she herself would become. At the beginning of the marriage, she scoffs at the cliché of marriage being all about hard work and compromise: "people kept telling and telling us that the first year was going to be so hard, as if we were naïve children marching off to war. It wasn't hard. We are meant to be married" (45). Additionally, she takes pride in being the kind of woman she presumed her husband, and men in general, would want their wife to be like: "I have never been a nag. I have always been rather proud of my un-nagginess . . . I am willing to live with a certain amount of sloppiness, of laziness, of the lackadaisical life" (95), she notes. This type of behavior is often associated with the "cool girl", which I discuss more extensively in subchapter 4.2. "You don't want to be the shrew with the hair curlers and the rolling pin" (178), Amy reminds. She shares the trait with *The Girl on the Train*'s Rachel. "I didn't want to be one of those awful suspicious wives who go through their husband's pockets" (50), Rachel swears.

While Amy and Rachel make a priority out of being laid-back and respectful as wives, *The Girl on the Train*'s Megan, the youngest of the main female characters, is more critical of the institution of marriage and her role in it as a woman: "I can't just be a wife", she bemoans, because "there is literally nothing to do but wait. Wait for a man to come home and love you" (42). "I am not a model wife. I can't be. No matter how much I love him, it won't be enough" (72), she adds. Unlike Amy and Rachel, Megan never talks about feeling happy in her marriage, but rather conveys feelings of trust issues, and even fear towards her husband. To exemplify, Megan rejects the idea of writing a diary for her therapist, because she can't trust her husband not to read it (71). What the women discussed here have in common is, however, the need to be a dutiful wife, to keep things on an even keel. For some, this is about respecting the husband's masculinity by steering clear of the trope of the "nagging wife", and as such being the best version of themselves as wives and women as they can. For others, it is out of fear for what might otherwise happen. This underscores another theme within the marriages in these novels, namely that of women feeling unsafe in their respective

domestic environments. It was constantly real for Rachel and Megan, while Amy played into it by acknowledging the pattern of male violence against women and working it into her narrative of the perfect wife and woman trapped in perilous circumstances in the marital home – a home her husband made her move in to. This idea, again, owes to the Gothic inheritance influencing the psychological thriller genre. The notion of a woman trapped is, as I discussed in the theory section, an aspect often found in Gothic tales, as well as 19th-century female literature, where the female characters attributed their feelings of being trapped to living under the patriarchal rule of either a father or a husband. Here, in these two modern novels, the women again credit the entrapment to a man, with the main issue again being loss of agency.

This brings the analysis to what causes the tension in these marriages, most of which started out as perfectly happy. The men in the narratives credit the beginnings of the downfall to the changed behavior of their wives. "Over just a few years, the old Amy, the girl of the big laugh and the easy ways, literally shed herself, a pile of skin and soul on the floor, and out stepped this new, brittle, bitter Amy" (55), Nick recalls. "My wife was no longer my wife but a razor-wire knot daring me to unloop her, and I was not up to the job with my thick, numb, nervous fingers. Country fingers. Flyover fingers untrained in the intricate, dangerous work of *solving Amy*" (55), he describes, further underscoring the differences in their demeanor and upbringing. Nick describes the change in his wife's demeanor as an "awful fairy-tale reverse transformation" (55), but what are the reasons behind it, and who or what is to blame for it? In *The Girl on the Train*, it is Rachel's spiraling into the throes of alcoholism that Tom credits the divorce to. Nick's reference to a "fairy-tale" is yet another nod that reveals the narrative's inherent awareness of traditionalism in gender roles, as fairytales often portray girls and women in search for a male savior. Nick's complaints also play into the idea of gendering emotions to the extent where women are expected to behave a certain way even under emotional distress, which I will return to in subchapter 4.2.

According to Dawn H. Currie's article in *Issues in Intimate Violence*, a 1998 book on domestic abuse, "women use physical violence as frequently as men, if not more" (97). This is particularly resonant in *The Girl on the Train*, and even more so in *Gone Girl*, where women resort to violence, both physical and emotional, in instances outside the realm of self-defense. This escalates to the point where Nick, Amy's husband, starts fearing for his life in the marital home: "I am very afraid she may kill me" (452), he states towards the very end of the novel, where he becomes trapped under the pretenses of a happy reunion with his once missing but now miraculously found wife. The final act of *Gone Girl* in its entirety further exemplifies the gendered nature of domestic violence by upending the roles within it completely. By falsely recounting years' worth of abuse in her fake diary entries, Amy establishes a pattern of violence on Nick's part, while simultaneously undermining her own tendency for domestic abuse. In *The Girl on the Train*, a similar setup puts Rachel on the receiving end of the whims of an unstable partner. Rachel's husband Tom takes advantage of Rachel's alcohol-induced amnesia and turns the blame for his own violent outbursts on Rachel, playing the part of the domestic abuse victim himself. Thus, the sense of feeling unsafe at home is, for Amy, mostly a creation of her imagination, while Rachel and Megan often fall victims to their controlling spouses. The division of violence follows what was discussed about crime and thriller literature in the theory section, where I mentioned that the traits that are seen as inherent to masculinity, such as decisiveness and great physical strength, would in practice translate to either the role of the aggressor or the savior. In the case of Flynn's and Hawkins's novels, such stereotypes are not foolproof. Both women and men adopt the role of the abuser and the abused, as the gender coded traits have more of a foothold elsewhere in the dynamics of the relationship.

Circling back to *Gone Girl*, out of the mindset of a smart, entitled, wealthy, beautiful, and idolized woman comes then the ploy to make her husband pay for what he did to her, how he in his averageness dared to cheat on her, the *Amazing Amy*, with an unremarkable Missouri woman. "I

was Average Dumb Woman Married to Average Shitty Man. He had single-handedly de-amazed Amazing Amy" (263), she writes, recounting all the ways he had wronged her in the not-so-distant past, and how that story would be told after her: "how Amazing Amy, the girl who never did wrong, let herself be dragged, penniless, to the middle of the country, where her husband threw her over for a younger woman" (263). It was not a story that suited the Amazing Amy franchise, so she decided to actively change it: "So I began to think of a different story, a better story, that would destroy Nick for doing this to me. A story that would restore my perfection. It would make me the hero, flawless and adored. Because everyone loves the Dead Girl" (263). Again, Amy uses tropes of gendered behavior in heterosexual romances, and even the rhetoric of a story or a narrative to signal her awareness about the cultural context that even she cannot escape. Appearing in part two of the novel, where Amy's diary entries shift from before her staging the disappearance to what at that time is construed as the present, that is the very first time she vocalizes her plan to take Nick down, and as such asserts her role as the one intentionally victimizing Nick. However, Amy feels completely entitled to her actions. "It's rather extreme, framing your husband for your murder. I want you to know I know that" (263), she writes, as casually as one might tell about a trip to the supermarket. For her, marriage is a game, and she refuses to lose.

How much of the blame, then, can, or should, be put on the husbands? Or, in other words, how much of the blame do the female characters *want* to put on their (former) husbands, thus ridding themselves of it? How much does the cultural and societal phenomenon around these novels and the themes within them actually victimize men? Who, in truth, is the victimizer, and who the victim? As I exemplified above, the novels portray the men as oppressive, controlling, and at times violent, but the same can be said of the women. What, then, is the cause, and what constitutes as the effect? A reading where the women are seen as cunning manipulators who plant themselves in the position of the victim, and as such are unfit for marital cohabitation could be justified, but so could another where the men antagonize and abuse their wives to the point where

the women feel like they have no choice but to lash out in equally violent terms. A third possible way of interpreting the question of blame would be to distribute it evenly, or even erase it altogether. All readings, however different in the manner in which they place blame, arrive at the same outcome, which is the fallout of the marriage. I argue that the centermost view is supported not only by my chosen female-centric approach for this study, but also by the manner in which the novels underline the notion of women feeling unsafe in their homes and being afraid of their own husbands. In *The Girl on the Train*, Megan's therapist Kamal Abdic, a man, asks his visibly startled patient whether or not she might actually be afraid of her husband. Kamal is left surprised by Megan's vehement denial, reminding her that "there are many women who are afraid of their husbands" (87).

At one point in the story, Kamal himself becomes a suspect in Megan's disappearance, once it is revealed that the two were intimate in a way that is inappropriate in a doctor-patient relationship. Obviously, Kamal is cleared of all charges when Tom is finally revealed as the perpetrator. The affair does, however, create an added sense of tension to Megan's discussions with Kamal. She is a vulnerable young woman, seeking resolve in her life after a series of traumatic events – she lost a brother and a daughter in horrific accidents, was jilted in her adolescence by an erratic lover, and is now trapped inside an abusive marriage, and he is an older man in a position of authority. Also, Megan admits, if only to herself, that she was surprised at her protectiveness towards her husband Scott (87), who constantly antagonizes her by, for example, limiting her right to her privacy. However, in terms of the subject matter of the novel, the fact that Kamal starts a relationship with one of his patients, an abused woman, speaks volumes about the themes under examination here, and the subsequent phenomenon that evolved around them – as a therapist caring for yet another abused woman, he as well contributes to the problem by taking advantage of a young woman in a dire situation in her marriage and her home. The fact that domestic abuse, specifically one that targets women, seems to be a common occurrence among his

patients, and that he himself exploits the epidemic also testifies to the magnitude of the problem. The male characters in *The Girl on the Train* seem to exhibit a pattern of abuse, whereas *Gone Girl*, despite featuring men of less than ideal stature, is more focused on the dynamics of a dysfunctional male-female relationship, and the impulses of one unstable woman.

In Megan's case, her profile as a victim, as seen earlier in the chapter, has become clear. However, Megan continues to assert that profile herself, laughing in the face of Kamal's concerns, brushing them off as "melodramatic", since to her, "it isn't abuse . . . Not if you don't mind. And I don't. I don't mind" (88). The admission of carelessness that Megan delivers with ease seems to be her new normal, which begs the question: has Megan's husband stripped her of any remaining sense of self worth, or have the dysfunctional relationship patterns she experienced in the past left her with harmful preconceptions about what constitutes as "healthy" male-female dynamics? Conversely, *Gone Girl*'s Amy has no qualms in passing the blame over to her husband Nick in her matter-of-fact diary entries, where she repeatedly makes remarks incriminating her husband for his allegedly violent behavior: "He shoved me" (220), "I am a battered wife" (221), and "this man might kill me" (231). These statements are reminiscent of the way the subsections of the novel are titled to mirror the cultural narratives around heterosexual relationships. Domestic abuse targeting women forms a pattern in its own right, detailing the problems in abusive relationships. To my mind, Amy is aware of this pattern and the societal discussion around it, and uses these statements in her own narrative. I chose to include the latter statement in the title of this subchapter, because it, although not an entirely factual statement but a product of Amy's plan to not let Nick "win", captures what having to be afraid in one's own home and marriage can, at its very worst, be like. Had Amy decided to see a therapist in her quest to frame Nick for her own murder, she would have done so to leave behind a trail of witnesses, all ready to point the finger at Nick, the self-proclaimed "good guy" (399). After all, how could anyone do anything to harm Amy, the beautiful, smart, *Amazing Amy*?

Furthermore, in *Gone Girl*, the entire question of blame is even more complex. The state in which Amy and Nick have driven their marriage over the years is obviously a dire one, yet the marriage, although having dilapidated in a relatively short time period, is not the sole cause of distress and violence between the spouses. In their case, the search for blame must delve even deeper into the characters' past. As I have alluded before, the narrative portrays Amy as mentally unstable, ever since she was a little girl, always angling to manipulate those around her for no other reason than for her own amusement. As an adult woman, she continues to have delusions about her own sense of self and about how others perceive her, and takes all of that out primarily on men, and what better target for her endless mind games than her own husband? "My wife loved games, mostly mind games" (20), her husband affirms when she has been gone for less than twenty-four hours. Amy's idea of marriage, just like everything else in life, as a game, is a major contributor to domestic tension and abuse ultimately leading to the dissolution of the relationship. Amy's delusions of grandeur combined with her competitive nature flesh out a profile of a woman so determined to come out on top that she would rather turn herself, her husband, his mistress, and everyone around them into pawns in the game that is her and Nick's marriage than to become one of those women who is cheated on but does nothing about it – who "loses".

In this subchapter, I introduced the central couples in *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*, detailed the tension in their marriages, and alluded to some of the themes to be discussed in forthcoming subchapters. Although the central focus of this thesis as a whole is on the female experience of abuse, alienation, and identity loss, one of the main things to retain from here is the constant push and pull within male-female dynamics, causing the gender roles of the abuser and the abused to shift, never really sharpening completely into focus.

3.2. "I'm Not the Girl I Used to Be" – Leaving Home and Losing Self

In both *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*, home and the domestic sphere in its entirety are, together with femininity and the female experience, at the core of the narrative. As I already discussed in the theory section, within the context of these two 21st-century female-centered psychological thrillers, home is not a safe haven, or the idealized dream of one, for the women in the novels. Instead, it is a breeding ground for gender inequality, marital tension, domestic violence, and gender-coded identity issues – not unlike in the seminal works of 19th-century female authors, where domestic confinement under patriarchal rule was a prominent theme. For the female characters in the two novels, home initially represents, for example, love, marriage, self-expression, contentment, safety, and control, but as their stories progress, it dilapidates into loss, trauma, abuse, confinement, rootlessness, and insecurity. Across both novels, the disturbances in the home under perfect pretenses lead to problems in all aspects of the women's lives and marriages, such as the dissolution of identity, marital abuse of both physical and emotional variety, and substance abuse. In conjunction with the myriad ways the home is presented as a sinister space for the female characters, the notion of leaving home is an aspect of the women's narratives in both novels. As the home gains momentum as the catalyst for the disintegration of marriages and female identity, I dedicate this subchapter to analyzing the ways the novels establish this. I conduct the analysis through the symbolic meanings the home and the objects within it hold in the novels, without forgetting the ways the novels incorporate the concrete spatiality of the home as a place within the narratives about marriage, identity, and control.

I begin the analysis from the connection between home and marriage, as well as marital tension caused by, or associated with, the politics of the home. In both novels, marriage seems to be entwined with the home – both the concept amalgamated from the relationship and power geometry between its inhabitants as well as the concrete place. This is evident in an abundance of examples throughout the novels, where the female characters talk about their

marriages in conjunction with the home – they have attributed feelings and memories to concrete things, such as rooms or pieces of furniture, around the home. This creates an air around the notion of home that makes it a place loaded with meaning, instead of just a place the couple inhabits. To echo the notion presented in the theory section, "home is a place, a site in which we live. But, more than this, home is also an idea and an imaginary that is imbued with feelings", Blunt and Dowling remind (2). This is apparent all over the two novels. For example, in one of the many instances where *The Girl on the Train*'s Rachel reminisces about the house she shared with Tom, the only place she ever considered home, she does so by attributing very specific meaning to the spaces and objects of that particular house: "I want to call her back and ask her, what does it feel like, Anna, to live in *my house*, surrounded by the *furniture I bought*, to sleep in *the bed that I shared with him* for years, to feed your child at the *kitchen table he fucked me on*?" (56, my emphases). Although a product of Rachel's drunken rage, the quotation exemplifies the extent of the meanings given to various things in the home. "I still find it extraordinary that they chose to stay in there, in that house, in my house" (56), she reiterates.

The sentiment behind Rachel's drunken confessions seems to be that it is not just a house, but a home filled with memories and feelings, ideas Rachel still thinks are earmarked as hers, and sees Anna as an intruder: "Fucking bitch. She's a cuckoo, laying her egg in my nest. She has taken everything from me" (55), Rachel claims. This reinforces the claim made by Blunt and Dowling that home is also where people express their sense of self (9). Similarly, I contend that the concrete things inside the home have ceased to be just things, but rather feelings and concrete memories from different points of the marriage condensed to a spatial entity, now saturated with meaning. Rachel's resentment is echoed by Anna's distaste towards the house – the house she, the "other woman", moved into after Rachel and Tom's divorce. "It could be perfect", she ponders, "it could be, if you weren't able to hear the screeching brakes of the trains" (150). What is more, Anna talks about the "paranoia" (258) that set in when she moved into a house weighed down by the

baggage of history before her. Mentioning the trains going past the house, she notes the feeling "of being watched . . . All those faceless bodies staring out of the windows, staring right across at us, it gave me the creeps. It was one of the many reasons why I didn't want to move here in the first place, but Tom wouldn't leave" (258). Anna, bothered by the past and Rachel's role in it, could not stand people like Rachel, the have-nots, looking in on her life. The way Anna feels as though she does not have full control over her living arrangements through the "paranoia" she experiences is yet again a notion familiar from female Gothic imagery, where the history of a space was even more of an issue than it is now. For Anna, the weight of the past permeates into her life, reminding her that there was once another woman living in the house she now struggles to call home. What is more, in addition to (female) Gothic fiction, the "paranoia" and unidentified danger looming in the background in the home characterize "domestic noir", which, as a genre deals with terror in the domestic realm. This notion of female paranoia in conjunction with the home brings to mind Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), a classic within the female psychological thriller genre. In the novel, a woman must move to a house where her widowed husband once lived with his late wife. *Rebecca* and its impact on the genre make up yet another example of how the works of Flynn and Hawkins are modern continuations to the tradition of the genre.

Moreover, the idea of trains holds further relevance in the discussion on spatiality, the issue of female mobility, and temporality. In the novel, trains become an issue further polarizing Anna and Rachel, who finds trains relaxing and comforting. "I just want to lean back in the soft, sagging velour seat . . . feel the carriage rock back and forth, the comforting rhythm of wheels on track" (18), Rachel reveals, again attributing feelings and meaning to a spatial construction, this time the public space of a train. In terms of mobility, the train signifies a departure from the historical division between private and public, particularly for women. As I noted in the theory chapter, that division, and the attempts to confine women within the former, were about spatial and social control over women and their mobility (Massey 179). For Rachel specifically, the mobility

trains provide her is less about control and her autonomy as a woman, and has more to do with the aimlessness she now experiences in life in general. This is evident in the way she looks in on Anna, who, at least from Rachel's perspective, appears stable in her life. Conversely, Anna is bothered by the trains, the noise they make, the passengers, the have-nots she feels are leering on her life, and the idea of being constantly on the move. I contend that, at the core of the issue, as a stay-at-home mother, the idea of mobility bothers Anna, while for Rachel, it signals the lack of direction and stability in her life.

The way Rachel attaches meaning to inanimate objects that she attributes to her happiness and the home she shared with Tom is evident also in the manner in which she romanticizes her descriptions of the home. One piece of furniture in particular, a leather armchair, holds special meaning for Rachel: "It was the first piece of furniture we got as a married couple: soft tan buttery leather, expensive, luxurious. I remember how excited I was when it was delivered. I remember curling up in it, feeling safe and happy, thinking, *This is what marriage is – safe, warm, comfortable*" (388), she reminisces. Her word choices reflect the socially produced connection between marriage and home. Both in their ideal states generate safety, happiness and warmth, which for Rachel at the beginning of her marriage to Tom became symbolized in an armchair. In addition, she talks about "feeling the warmth of wooden floorboards underfoot", "relishing the space, the emptiness of all those rooms waiting to be filled", "what we'd plant in the garden, what we'd hang on the walls, what colour to paint the spare room – already, even then, in my head, the baby's room" (77). As if the house, her home, with Tom, was synonymous with the future – a future that held happiness, warmth, love, and the promise of the family she dreamed of. Rachel's memories of the home are very future-oriented in the way she speaks about it, constantly referring to the future and what it might hold for her and her family, none of which ever materialized. Even after having lost it all, Rachel refuses to let go of the idea of what once was. "It feels like coming home . . . it's the familiarity of walking up stairs and knowing exactly which one is going to creak.

The familiarity isn't just in my head, it's in my bones; it's muscle memory" (95), Rachel claims in a moment of bittersweet optimism that is customary to her. It also ties into her need of control, something she as an unemployed, divorced alcoholic is lacking in every aspect of her life, which I will return to later. This is yet another example of how spatiality, particularly that of the home, governs the women's plans for the future, as well as how they perceive themselves and how it shapes their identities, their position in the relationship, and their continuum of happiness.

The future-oriented thinking introduces the aspect of temporality to the analysis of home and spatiality and their effect on female identity. In *The Girl on the Train*, the narratives constantly zigzag between past and present through the experiences and memories of the women recounting them. In *Gone Girl*, Amy's disappearance marks the tipping point between past and present, truth and fabrication, dream and nightmare. The temporal aspect is part and parcel of the Gothic viewpoint that, as I already discussed in the theory section, often comes conjoined with the topic of female domesticity. While in the more traditional sense the Gothic has concerned itself with women trapped inside their homes, the neo-gothic of the 21st century sees its female characters struggling with the relationship between past and present, which, particularly with these two novels, ties into the domesticity of women, both in the concrete sense of the home, and the more abstract constructions circling it. In terms of home, women, and identity, temporality comes into play in the ways the women in the novels talk about their homes, both those in the past, and the ones they inhabit in the present. *The Girl on the Train*'s Megan taps into the junction of spatiotemporality in a moment that also underscores the emotional confinement she feels in her marital home: "At night when I lie awake I can hear it, quiet but unrelenting, undeniable: a whisper in my head, slip away. When I close my eyes, my head is filled with images of past and future lives, the things I dreamed I wanted, the things I had and threw away" (217). To my mind, the quote exemplifies the way the novels toy with the relationship between past and present and how they, in keeping with the novels' neo-gothic nature, intertwine and buoy the characters' secrets in and out of focus. In addition to this

sense of temporality mirroring the novels' narrative frames, the focus on temporal matters also ties the discussion on home, women, and identity to the emotional and physical abuse that in both novels happens behind closed doors, under the pretenses of a happy marriage, when the secrets of the past continue to haunt the present, and, perhaps because of it, visions of the future of the marriage seem grim. Thus, I argue, the weight of past secrets and troubles of an unclear future create an atmosphere of uneasiness upon the marriage and the home, which in turn contribute to further problems in the home.

In *Gone Girl*, the descriptions of the homes as concrete dwellings bear meaning with significance reaching beyond the symbolism attached to singular objects. Here, both Amy and Nick identify with a place each calls home, and both attribute some of the blame for the demise of their marriage to the shift between the two spaces. For Amy, home means the Brooklyn brownstone she owes to the success of her parents' *Amazing Amy* book franchise. "It's extravagant, it makes me feel guilty, but it's perfect. I battle the spoiled-rich-girl vibe where I can" (44), she writes of the home. What follows is a loving description of her dream home, an apartment suitable for *Amazing Amy*. She describes her and Nick sitting on an "old Persian rug, drinking wine and listening to the vinyl scratches as the sky went dark and Manhattan switched on", "cheerful floorboards", and the great stories behind "the ancient floor lamp, or the misshapen clay mug that sits near our coffeepot, never holding anything but a single paper clip" (45). The way Amy makes sense of the space of the home is about ideas, and about how she perceives herself and how she wants others to perceive her, as well. For Amy, her home is yet another aspect in her quest to create a certain way for others, and for herself as well, to perceive her and her personality. It is a piece in the *Amazing Amy* puzzle rather than in her marriage with Nick. As these quotes can attest, for Amy, home is a means of self-expression and putting up the type of appearances she feels are appropriate and expected of her. However, home also represents the state of Amy's marriage to Nick. Gently reminiscing about their apartment in New York, the one she deemed home, Amy is equating the home to her and Nick's

relationship as well. The move to Missouri, then, reflects not only a shift in Amy's identity, but also the beginning of the end of the marriage. Much like Rachel, Amy also discusses home in romanticized terms, in a way that feels content and happy. All of that is upended when the couple, after getting laid off from their writing jobs in New York City, is forced to make the move to Missouri to aid for Nick's terminally ill mother. There, in the town Nick grew up in, their feelings on the new house are filtered through Nick's point of view.

However, Amy is again at the center of the action. Nick notes that the Missouri house is "the kind of house that is immediately familiar: a generically grand, unchallenging, new, new, new house that my wife would – and did – detest" (4). He was not wrong. Not only does Amy resent the house and Nick for moving them there, the move also delivers the final blow to their relationship as it was. "It was a compromise, but Amy didn't see it that way, not in the least. To Amy, it was a punishing whim on my part, a nasty, selfish twist of the knife" (4), Nick recounts. Later, he admits that "I suppose it's not a compromise if only one of you considers it as such" (4), but acknowledges that "that was what our compromises tended to look like. One of us was always angry. Amy, usually" (4). For Amy, the move from New York City, her home, from the apartment she shared with Nick and considered their home, an environment she had full control over, to Missouri meant a complete loss of control – control over the changes in her identity and public perception, the evolution of her marriage, and the space she used to call home. For her, I argue that it was not only a move in the sense of relocating, but an identity-shaping wound that never quite healed, as she was forced to abandon an entire life she had claimed as her own, all on Nick's account, as it was about his hometown, his ailing mother, and his sense of duty to drop everything and leave.

With Rachel adrift following the divorce, Anna growing increasingly uncomfortable with living in a house filled with history, Megan feeling like a fraud behind the pretenses of normality while the weight of past secrets continue to haunt her, and Amy forced out of an

environment over which she held meticulous command, the lack of control is something the women in both novels share. As became evident from the examples above, home and the domestic are conjoined with control. The female characters in the two novels seek it through, for example, the demand for familiarity they exhibit in the way they attribute feelings to different spaces, and how they mourn for the familiarity they lost when forced to leave home. For *The Girl on the Train*'s Rachel in particular, home is in many ways about control. For her, the house she shared with Tom was the first one she ever considered her own home – "I lived at number twenty-three Blenheim Road for five years, blissfully happy and utterly wretched. I can't look at it now. That was my first home. Not my parents' place, not a flatshare with other students, *my* first home" (22), Rachel affirms. After being forced out of it due to the divorce, that sense of purpose began to crumble again. Now flatmates with her friend from university, Rachel feels she has lost all control. In spatial terms, Rachel admits that "the only space which feels like mine is my tiny bedroom" (24). "It's comfortable enough, but it isn't a place you want to *be*, so instead I linger in the living room or at the kitchen table, ill at ease and powerless. I have lost control over everything, even the places in my head" (24), she continues. Is control, then, what Rachel is fighting for throughout the novel? In several instances in the novel, Rachel is shown recovering from a drunken stupor, struggling to remember what happened the night before, when she was inebriated. "I wait for the memory to come. Sometimes it takes a while. Sometimes it's there in front of my eyes in seconds. Sometimes it doesn't come at all" (61), she describes. Having lost everything – her husband, home, job, financial independence, dreams of marriage and family, and her mental health declining with her alcoholism – grappling for agency through her memories is a way to regain what little control is still hers to reclaim. To my mind, she does not want to remember just for the sake of remembering, but rather to own her own memories and actions, so that they belong to her and she can take responsibility for them.

The sense of insecurity and lack of agency Rachel exhibits in her pursuit to find control wherever she can, if only over her own memories, drive the domestic narrative in both novels. They are attributed to the dissolution of identity through a core event in the women's lives – leaving home. In both novels, as I have detailed in this subchapter, the female characters, Amy, Rachel, and, to an extent Megan as well, are forced by factors beyond their control to leave the domiciles they each considered home in both the concrete and symbolic meanings of the term. Amy adheres to her idea of what it means to be a wife and follows her husband to Missouri to take care of her sick mother-in-law, Rachel is left with nothing in the divorce, and Megan escapes the death of her daughter by building a new life to better suit the societal expectations laid on her as a woman. These catalysts, I argue, brought forth a series of events in each woman's life that set in motion the narrative trajectory seen in the novels – for Amy, her trauma of leaving home planted the seed for her plan to frame her husband for her murder, Rachel experienced an unraveling of her psyche, and Megan felt forced to create a new identity.

In each woman's narrative, the event of leaving home is adjacent to the notion of female identity. All women across the two novels experience a shift in how they themselves experience their identities, as well as how others perceive them once a traumatic event of some kind has forced them out of their homes, but perhaps none more poignantly than *Gone Girl*'s Amy. As I have attested earlier, Amy's identity as a woman has, in the course of the events depicted in the novel, steered far away from the traditional identity markers allocated for women within the domestic sphere and society as a whole, such as being a wife, a mother, and a homemaker. Because of this conscious choice to append her identity on other factors, abandoning her home in New York in favor of her new, increasingly domestic life in Missouri sent her female identity into a tailspin. Suddenly, New York Amy's "decorative and insubstantial" (60) existence of "silly, trendy things" (60) with "flashy little frocks" (60), and "book clubs and . . . cocktail hours" (62) are replaced by Missouri Amy's "twenty-four jars of sweet pickles" (134), and "Ziploc carpool" (135). Her wrath

towards her newfound domesticity only gains momentum once she learns about her husband's infidelity, which, in turn, launches her desire for justice. However, it is not only Amy's role and identity as a woman in the home that changes in the move from New York to Missouri, but she also experiences a shift in social class. Having received a new-money, yet decidedly wealthy upbringing, Amy had grown accustomed to a certain standard of living before the move to Missouri. The dilapidation of financial security is one of the factors at the apex of the connection between the deterioration of identity and home. *The Girl on the Train*'s Rachel is in a similar situation following her divorce from Tom. This ties the women's predicaments to the issue of financial independence, which in and of itself is crucial in their experience of autonomy and control past the point of marriage and home.

A close reading of Amy's case in *Gone Girl* reveals the extent to which the event of leaving home has affected her sense of self as a woman and as a wife. The same is true for the women in *The Girl on the Train*, particularly Rachel, whose identity began to unravel together with the demise of her marriage, which was the sole reason she was forced to leave home. For Rachel, the event of leaving home resulted in a culmination of her loss of control, deterioration of her identity, and her sense of "otherness" among people who have what she too once had. "I was trespassing" (94), Rachel recounts on one of her many trips to see her old home, "because it's their territory now, it's Tom and Anna's and Scott and Megan's" (94). In Rachel's memories, as I have discussed throughout this subchapter, the notion of home continues to resonate with her, as she makes sense of it in romanticized and bittersweet terms. However, in moments like the one exemplified here, Rachel discusses how alienated she now feels from the life she also once lived, not unlike the fantasy her resentment built around Tom and Anna, and Scott and Megan. Here, she forgoes terms like *home* and even *house*, and instead talks about *trespassing* and *territories*, creating a sense of "otherness" between her and what the two couples represent to her. The "territory" she mentions used to be her territory, her home, as well, but the detachment she now

feels towards it has made her think in terms of *me* and *them*, a scenario in which she is the "other", the abject among people living the life she can now only dream of achieving again. However, it also bears mentioning that Rachel's sense of alienation began *before* the demise of her marriage forced her out of the marital home. I argue that her failure to conceive resulting in alcoholism was what made her the "other" in relation to her own husband, at least to her mind. She did not feel "worthy" of Tom, the man she once so strongly equated with the feelings of belonging and home.

Megan from *The Girl on the Train* also experienced a shift in her female identity upon leaving home, but in contrast to *Gone Girl*'s Amy and Rachel from *The Girl on the Train*, Megan moved on from an unhomely home to a seemingly homely one, instead of the other way around. The way Megan describes the home she shared with her past lover and their infant daughter before her new life with her husband Scott is a mixture of bittersweet longing and resentment towards having to forsake it: "The wind in the grass, the big slate sky over the dunes, the house infested with mice and falling down, full of candles and dirt and music. It's like a dream to me now" (35). Megan's relationship with domesticity and home demonstrates the issue I argued already in the theory section, according to which the objective homeliness of the domicile does not necessarily correlate with the subjective experience of its inhabitants towards it.

The notion of homely versus unhomely homes is evident throughout the women's narratives in these novels, where the domestic settings these women inhabit seem homely in the traditional sense. The women across the two novels appear to inhabit safe and beautiful houses of at times extravagant proportions, yet the politics inside the home cause them to feel alienated, stripped of identity, and even afraid for their own mental and physical wellbeing in the hands of their husbands. To summarize, Amy and Rachel begin to feel trapped in the change of domestic settings due to the lack of control – having lost all control, in addition to the tension brewing in the marriage and in the women's personal lives, turned home not only into a volatile space, but also a factor in the changes in female identity. Additionally, Anna, who feels like she is being watched in her own

home from the outside, experiences (the neo-gothic properties of) home through a lack of privacy. For Megan, a young woman without steady employment still looking for what it is exactly that makes her happy, home is a prison-like constraint, and her husband is the gatekeeper, controlling her by keeping track of her every move, and limiting her right to privacy. This, I argue, is again the Gothic making its way to the modern psychological thriller. The sense of entrapment and loss of privacy also come connected to the issue of control the women in these novels struggle with. Additionally, control is a trait women are often perceived to be lacking within the genre conventions of crime and thriller literature. The fact that the female characters in Flynn's and Hawkins's novels actively yearn for it, and eventually gain it, could, I suggest, be construed as a female rebuttal against the genre, or, similarly, a genre trait characteristic of "domestic noir", a subgenre yet to find any clear-cut lines. However, female agency is also a feminist cornerstone beyond crime and thriller, thus making such genre connections to it alternative readings to consider.

It is only fitting, then, that the idea of leaving home becomes a pivot point in the narrative trajectories on home, female domesticity and the (disintegration of) female identity. Much like in Gothic fiction before the era of the female psychological thriller, domestic noir, and neo-gothic, home is once again the setting of gendered power play, confinement, and terror. In these novels, leaving home unlocks various turning points for each of the women in the narratives, but also leads to further problems during and after marriage, such as alcoholism, and emotional and physical abuse. The "otherness" and alienation stemming from the involuntary change in domestic settings, and the difficulties they present for the women's female identity are not solely about the relationship between femininity and home and the domestic, but they are also connected to the expectations women still meet at home and in the society on a regular basis. In the next chapter, I deal with those expectations, and attempt to establish further dialogue on the way the two genders, considering how their differences are underscored in the society and in these novels, experience marriage, domesticity, and societal expectations.

4. Norms and Expectations in a Postfeminist Society

Continuing with the analysis on the two novels, chapter four moves on from the tension and delimitations of the private sphere out into the society, where women are met with myriad expectations regarding their identity as women, their personal choices, and their looks, especially as they age. A great deal of such expectations have to do with how men perceive and value women, due to which this chapter includes the male perspective to a bit more substantial degree. I begin unraveling those expectations first in subchapter 4.1, which deals with the expectations imposed on women in different structures of society on a general level, the different roles assigned for women, and how the female characters in the two novels cope with such expectations in a gender-coded world both inside and outside the domestic sphere. The final analysis chapter, 4.2, examines the roles specified in 4.1 even further, mostly through the male objectification of women. One role in specific, that of the "cool girl" is discussed more extensively, and how that role and the expectations within it affect and shape female identity, often to the point where little of it remains left.

4.1. "The Thing about Being Barren" – Gender Roles and Societal Expectations

One of the aspects the theory section concentrated on was how women are pigeonholed into various "roles" or "images" in the society and in the domestic sphere. The two *Girl* novels examine gender roles and societal expectations by tapping into the issues from multiple different points of view. For example, the question of motherhood – whether to pursue it at all, when to do it, who to do it with, and what if, for some reason, it cannot be done despite will and effort – is a part of both narratives. Through feminism and the influence of media and popular culture, women are offered ready-made molds on which to model their identities, which, in turn, define their "social usefulness" (De La Concha 71) discussed earlier in the theory section. The main female characters in the two novels, all of whom are relatively young, most of them in their thirties, one in her twenties, have in their lives

as women, wives, and mothers experienced first hand the confinements of such roles, and what happens when they are unwilling or unable to adhere to them. The novels, although complex in the way they balance between the variety of interpretations and perspectives of feminism (Dockterman, 2014), practically build their entire narratives on such roles. Having been released a full three years before *The Girl on the Train*, Flynn's story and its equally high-profile film adaptation in particular have been lauded as "the most feminist" "mainstream" narrative "in years" (VanDerWerff). The narrative is a "forthright depiction of the ways that society controls women and forces them into certain roles" (VanDerWerff). Indeed, both Flynn's and Hawkins's novels bring forth a roster of the kinds of female roles and stereotypes introduced in the theory section – the housewife, the career woman, the mother, and the cool girl. These roles are pivotal to the primary material, because so many of them have to do with the domestic realm, and limiting the woman inside it, and, as I discussed in chapter 3.2, the home and the female identity do still come conjoined to one another in the modern society. Here, I turn the focus on how such images of, for example, feminine domestic ideals are forced on the characters from the outside by a society that still thinks of female domestication as the norm, and how their male spouses play into it.

As I already pointed out in the theory section, many of the images of women have been connected to the conventions of the home. Such domestic conventions are often conservative in nature, as they adhere to the ideal of a nuclear family built upon heterosexual marriage. Even if they are young women of the 21st century, the female characters still face expectations on how they should lead their lives. Here, I consider the notion of parenthood, the gender coding of the expectations towards it, as well as the problems experienced by the characters within it. The feelings *Gone Girl*'s Amy has towards motherhood range from indifferent to downright hostile, whereas the inability to conceive is a tragedy for *The Girl on the Train*'s Rachel. In between these two extremes fits Anna, a woman who seemingly relishes being a stay-at-home mother, and Megan, whose relationship with motherhood is strained at best due to a past incident that led to the death of

her infant daughter. What all of these accounts have in common is the manner in which they have been socially conditioned to perceive motherhood in a certain way – they just choose to react to it differently. Amy, Rachel, Anna, and Megan all acknowledge the societal pressure put on them as young, presumably fertile, married women to make motherhood a priority in their lives, but not all of them conform to such pressure. The male perspective, too, is mentioned, but both novels make it clear that the men do not face expectations of similar magnitude, nor do they even perceive the concept of parenthood in the same terms as women.

Perhaps the most fundamental of the stories on motherhood is Rachel's. Hers is a case that encapsulates both the societal expectations on women and the common male stance on the subject. In a monologue spanning three pages, Rachel details her misgivings in attempting to conceive. "It didn't happen. No doctor has been able to explain to me why I can't get pregnant. I'm young enough, fit enough, I wasn't drinking heavily when we were trying. My husband's sperm was active and plentiful. It just didn't happen. I didn't suffer the agony of miscarriage, I just didn't get pregnant" (110-111), she states, before adding "nobody warned me it would break us. But it did. Or rather, it broke me, and then I broke us" (111), in reference to her marriage to Tom, which could not survive the pressure of failing and the effect it had on Rachel. What is more, Rachel's failure to conceive opened the conversation from between two spouses to an arena for societal expectations. "The thing about being barren is that you're not allowed to get away from it. Not when you're in your thirties" (111), Rachel recollects. The statement, although succinct, speaks volumes about the amalgamation of problems women face on the topic of reproduction. For a married woman in good health and of presumably fertile age, it goes from a private matter to a socially acceptable topic of conversation. It is as if a woman's life were constructed of a series of prerequisites that must be checked off in the appropriate order: first a woman must be attractive and personable enough to find a relationship, then that relationship must evolve into a marriage, then the natural continuum is fulfilling the feminine and marital duty of having children. Surrounded by friends and friends of

friends who were having children, the topic of Rachel's infertility became fair game: "I was asked about it, all the time. My mother, our friends, colleagues at work. When was it going to be my turn? At some point our childlessness became an acceptable topic of Sunday-lunch conversations" (111)" Rachel reveals.

Although already feeling like a failure as a woman and a wife for not being able to get pregnant, the expectations of others began to weigh on Rachel and as such the whole marriage. The pummeling of societal expectations led Rachel to believe that "women are still only really valued for two things – their looks and their role as mothers. I am not beautiful, and I can't have kids, so what does that make me? Worthless" (112). It is yet another instance that summarizes the female condition that, according to Rachel and the other female characters in the novels is still relevant in modern society. It is also where the gender coding of such expectations becomes apparent. Men, according to Rachel, do not seem to experience the same pressure that is put on women. While all the external blame for their failure to conceive was put on Rachel – "do you really think you should be having a second glass of wine?" (111), which led her to "resent the fact that it was always seen as my fault" (111), Tom remained unscathed when it came to the issue of children. Not only was Rachel left feeling like "it wasn't his failure" (112), but she also maintains that "he didn't *need* a child" (112) – not like she did, anyway.

On the opposite side on the question of motherhood to Rachel stands *Gone Girl*'s Amy. She had decided she did not want children, even though her husband did. Nick recounts a memory about his mother telling them that there would be "plenty of time for babies" (102), which had made Amy cry. "Amy had decided she didn't want kids, and she'd reiterated this fact several times, but the tears gave me a perverse wedge of hope that maybe she was changing her mind. Because there wasn't really plenty of time . . . She'd be thirty-nine in October" (103), Nick recalls. However negative her own feelings towards motherhood, Amy does not shy away from taking advantage of the societal expectations towards motherly women. In her attempts to create the most

enthralling public narrative around her own disappearance as she possibly can, she uses the false promise of impending motherhood to lure sympathy towards her case. “Amazing Amy is tempting as is. Amazing Amy knocked up is irresistible. Americans like what is easy, and it’s easy to like pregnant women” (290), she ponders, right before revealing her reasoning behind it: “They’re like ducklings or bunnies or dogs. Still, it baffles me that these self-righteous, self-enthralled waddlers get such special treatment. As if it’s so hard to spread your legs and let a man ejaculate between them. You know what *is* hard? Faking a pregnancy” (290).

In light of the revelation, one of her fake diary entries from the year before provides yet another perspective into the discussion on motherly women. In the entry, she lays groundwork for the woman she knows she must become in order to seem likable, or “normal” – a woman fulfilling society’s expectations and her female duties by expressing her maternal, nurturing side. “I’ve been indulging in toddler therapy” (211), she reveals. “I walk over to Noelle’s every day and let her triplets paw at me . . . Although watching her three children toddle to her, sleep-stained from their nap, rubbing their eyes while they make their way to Mama, little hand touching her knee or arms as if she were home base, as if they know they were safe . . . it hurts me sometimes to watch” (211-212), Amy writes, despite the fact that it has in retrospect become obvious that it is all an act. Here we see that Amy as well, despite her own personal stance on the matter, is aware of the societal attitude towards pregnant mothers. It is a societal prerogative that women who comply with their socially assigned roles indulge in, while those, for example women like Amy who choose to ignore the pressure put on them, are pestered for making such an unorthodox choice, much like Amy was by her mother-in-law and husband throughout her marriage. Of course, the extent to which Amy takes her rebellion is an extreme one, but I argue that the novel goes to such absolutes not only to create an entertaining narrative, but also to further underscore the position in which the society puts women who deviate from the norms (of procreation), as well as the extent to which Amy is aware of such norms and willing to exploit them.

Furthermore, it is a moment where Amy not only renounces the virtues of motherhood, but also addresses the postfeminist conundrum of home and hearth set against a woman's own individual skills and knowhow. To exemplify, I consider the moment Amy begins to ponder the possibility of a faked pregnancy: "Pay attention, because this is impressive. It started with my vacant-brained friend Noelle. The Midwest is full of those types of people: the nice-enoughs. Nice enough but with a soul of plastic – easy to mold, easy to wipe down" (290). It becomes apparent that Amy's views are in keeping with those of the past, when feminism appeared torn by the suggestion that a "true" feminist would renounce housewifery as antifeminist. Amy openly ridicules women for taking a path different from hers by labeling procreation as nothing more than biology and comparing pregnant women to farm animals, while simultaneously holding intellectual achievements to a higher regard. She does this despite the fact that the advances feminism has gained have made it possible for women to be both a mother and a professional – and many more things in between. The freedom of choice, which is what postfeminism also has worked towards, is now more of a reality than ever before, yet Amy's views, contradictorily enough, seem old-fashioned by comparison.

As for the two novels' portrayal of the male perspective on the subject of parenthood as a whole, the approach is somewhat similar between the men. The novels portray the three central male characters, Rachel's former husband Tom and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Megan's husband Scott in *The Girl on the Train* and Amy's husband Nick in *Gone Girl* as men and husbands who favor traditional family values – marriage with their conventionally attractive wives, children, and the notion of the man providing for the family while the wife stays at home. As I already mentioned, Rachel's husband Tom wanted to have a child, but their troubles in conceiving did not derail him the way they did Rachel. "Tom didn't feel the way I did . . . He wanted to be a dad, he really did – I'm sure he daydreamed about kicking a football around in the garden with his son, or carrying his daughter on his shoulders in the park" (112), Rachel ponders, before continuing on to

the main issue differentiating her from her husband: “But he thought our lives could be great without children, too. We’re happy, he used to say to me, why can’t we just go on being happy? He became frustrated with me. He never understood that it’s possible to miss what you’ve never had, to mourn for it” (112).

To my mind, the case of Rachel and Tom on the issue of family is among the cornerstones of the analysis, because it exemplifies how vehement the gender coding of societal expectations is on the subject of family as well. It also showcases how deeply rooted the traditional perception of women being desperate for a child is, while men remain either indifferent to the idea, or oblivious to the amount of work a child would entail for both parents, not only the mother. What is more, Tom’s views on fatherhood are mostly communicated through Rachel, who due to her alcoholism and emotional instability is not an entirely reliable narrator. However, I argue that a close reading of Tom’s comments, those the reader is given via Rachel, come from a place of indifference. For Tom, the *idea* of a child seemed more important than the reality of one. The notion is similar to how *Gone Girl*’s Amy feels about marriage – it is all about appearances. This leads to the questioning of the relationship between the cause and effect here. Do society and other women torment Rachel for *her* problems to conceive because motherhood and the desire towards it are still perceived as innate qualities of femininity? Most likely yes – the lack of implications for Tom from the outside only serves to underscore the gendered structure of society, and how that permeates an individual’s sense of identity through the gender roles it emits. Has Rachel let the guilt and the shame define her as a person and as a woman, because she is conditioned to perceive herself as a failure? This too seems likely, since, as I noted above, she deems herself “worthless” (112) as a woman. Or, could it be that her desire for motherhood is free from the societal discourse of what is appropriate and encouraged behavior for her as a woman? Throughout the novel, readers witness Rachel’s descriptions of the dream she once had but lost. She discusses the idea of a loving marriage, an idyllic, homely home, and children to round out the nuclear family. In every one of

them she posits herself as the doting wife and mother, while her husband seems to exist also outside of the domestic. For example, in one instance Rachel pictures Tom "working at his laptop in our sunny kitchen", while his wife would be "somewhere, in the background, making tea or feeding the little girl" (54) – is this Rachel talking about a memory, or is it how she pictures her dream life, her as a housewife, him working, even when at home? Or, is it, as the image becomes "spoilt by the encroachments from his new life" (54), how she pictures Anna, as nothing but a housewife? In another example, talking to Anna on the phone, Rachel notes that "she's talking to me and doing something else, multi-tasking, the way busy wives and mothers do, tidying up, loading the washing machine" (55) – again, is this envy? Is this the life Rachel lost and wants for herself? To my mind, this wish-fulfilling habit of Rachel's combined with her longing for motherhood, Tom's indifference and the lack of public criticism towards him showcase the pervasiveness of the societal discourse and its impact on gender roles in male-female relationships, even in modern society.

However, in *Gone Girl*, it is Nick who is adamant about starting a family. Following the revelation of his missing wife's pregnancy, Nick contemplates whether or not it might be true, or just a ruse Amy concocted to keep herself relevant: "I was thinking about all of Amy's lies and whether the pregnancy was one of them. I'd done the math. Amy and I had sex sporadically enough it was possible. But then she knew I'd do the math. Truth or lie? If it was a lie, it was designed to gut me" (327-328). Then, in a scene spanning three pages, he, not unlike Rachel, recollects the points in their marriage saturated by the issue of children. "I'd always assumed that Amy and I would have children. It was one of the reasons I knew I would marry Amy, because I pictured us having kids together" (328), he admits and, much like Tom, reveals the preconceived images he has about parenthood – "Our kid, sprawled on the floor with an old encyclopedia, just like I'd done, but our kid wouldn't be alone, I'd be sprawled next to him. Aiding him in his budding vexillology . . . I pictured Amy joining us on the floor, flat on her stomach, her feet kicked up in the air" (328). However, Nick resembles Rachel more than Tom in his quest for parenthood, which he felt would

be "inevitable" (328). "I suffered from regular, insistent paternal aches" (328), Nick confesses, and, in a moment of juxtaposition with *The Girl on the Train*'s Rachel, Nick recollects telling his wife that he "didn't just *want* a child", but he "*needed*" one (330). This puts Nick in an atypical position in the marriage, and in the gender roles society still casts on modern families. Similarly, in *The Girl on the Train*, Scott is the one pressuring his spouse towards having children. "The second the subject of children comes up, I can hear an edge in his voice" (74), Megan confesses about her husband. For men like Nick and Scott, the issue of children distances them from their wives, pitting the spouses against one another in a matter where compromises do not exist. It is thus a key issue in this study on gender roles in a domestic setting.

Gone Girl's Amy is more aware of the gender roles affecting childrearing, and refuses to grant Nick his hopes of children by noting how it would be her that would "be stuck doing all the hard stuff . . . All the diapers and doctors' appointments and discipline, and you'd just breeze in and be Fun Daddy. I'd do all the work to make them good people, and you'd undo it anyway, and they'd love you and hate me" (330). This is where, I argue, the differences between the two become apparent. Amy, a high-strung Manhattanite, and Nick, an easy-going southerner, seem to have completely opposing values. "I had to know I could love a person unconditionally, that I could make a little creature feel constantly welcome and wanted no matter what. That I could be a different kind of father than my dad was. That I could raise a boy who wasn't like me. I begged her. Amy remained unmoved" (330), Nick describes, but to no avail – Amy operates based on her heightened acknowledgment of what the society expects from men and women within a marriage. As I mentioned earlier, Amy's stance towards motherhood is lukewarm at best, but the question remains, are her views on the male-female dynamics and the idea of family justified? In Hawkins's novel, Rachel admits defeat by expressing how "worthless" societal scrutiny on women has made her feel for her shortcomings. Amy, acknowledging the criticism she would face if she presented her true self to the public, combats that scrutiny by rebranding herself as a long-suffering wife

desperate to have a baby. In terms of the analysis on female identity in this study, Amy's choice to exploit the myth of motherhood, although the myth goes against her values, is particularly resonating, because in faking a pregnancy, Amy feels like her worth as a female victim multiplies in the eyes of the general public. This is of great concern not only because it devalues women, much like Amy and Rachel themselves, who are unwilling or unable to procreate, but also because, judging by its prevalence in two popular modern female narratives here, it is still in modern society a conundrum that increases inequality between women for their individual choices.

I argue that in a societal, marital, and domestic space that still subjects women to conform to the role of the mother or the housewife, the feelings and actions of these two women seem understandable, and the motivation behind them becomes clear. Rachel suffers from debilitating self-esteem issues due to her supposed "failure" as a woman, while Amy taps into the pressure towards women and uses it to her own advantage. Amy has everything to gain from playing into the system that categorizes women in such a way – her plan to frame her husband for her murder, her status as a socially useful female victim, and, in the end, her marriage, which she eventually decides to try to salvage. As a woman who values career, marriage, looks, and autonomy in all parts of her life over the restrictiveness of motherhood, Amy embodies more the image of the cool career woman than a woman stuck in an abusive marriage with suppressed maternal instincts. In this sense, she is the complete opposite to Rachel, whose identity is dependent on her role as a mother. Rachel's infertility is rendered socially acceptable by the sorrow she feels because of it, as if her regret towards it signaled acknowledgement that she indeed has somehow failed her purpose in life as a woman. Her desperation leads to self-pity: "On the train, the tears come, and I don't care if people are watching me; for all they know, my dog might have been run over. I might have been diagnosed with a terminal illness. I might be a barren, divorced, soon-to-be-homeless alcoholic" (77).

Within the roster of different female characters, the one most compliant to the gender roles imposed on women by the society is *The Girl on the Train*'s Anna. At first, she appears to be the epitome of the "perfect" woman and housewife: she left her job as a real estate agent in order to be a full-time stay-at-home mother for her daughter, and is happy to take care of domestic chores, such as cleaning, cooking, and child-minding. "We *are* happy . . . I think about what's going on down the road and I think about how lucky I am, how I got everything that I wanted" (152), Anna thinks of her new life as a wife and mother. She does, however, acknowledge the shift in her attitude by mentioning that "it's funny, because a few years go I would have hated the idea of staying in and cooking on my birthday, but now it's perfect, it's the way it should be. Just the three of us" (152). Not only does she feel that the role of the domestic goddess is out of character for her, she also displays the occasional trace of regret or disappointment towards her newfound domesticity. Towards the end of the novel, when Hawkins has already portrayed her through the eyes of the other female characters as the embodiment of the society's ideal woman, the woman who manages to be a dutiful wife and mother all at once, Anna's façade begins to crack. "I watched Tom getting ready for work this morning . . . I felt jealous. For the first time ever, I actually envied him the luxury of getting dressed up and leaving the house and rushing around all day, with purpose, all in the service of a pay cheque" (301), she admits. It is a sentiment echoed by Megan, Anna's opposite in terms of motherhood and the female roles they occupy: "I long for my days at the gallery, prettied up, hair done, talking to adults about art or films or nothing at all" (38), Megan confesses. However different the two women might be, both eventually express a need to maintain a life outside of the domestic bubble; for Anna, it is about feeling worthwhile and attractive once more in a position valued in the public realm, while for Megan it would be a welcome getaway from the constraints of her past that remind her of her failure as a mother.

With Megan working as a child-minder for Anna and Tom's daughter, Anna's complacency with her domestic bliss is adjacent to the disdain Megan feels towards it. Megan

reflects the indiscretions in her own past, namely the accidental death of her infant daughter, on Anna and the idea of being a mother and a housewife as a whole. “When I leave their house I run home, I can’t wait to strip my clothes off and get into the shower to wash the baby smell off me” (38), Megan admits. These two characters rounding out the central female narratives in the novels cater to the notion of “having it all” – Anna admits to missing other aspects of herself, parts she gave up in order to become a mother, such as how her career and attention from men made her feel, while Megan attempts to distance herself from the domestic sphere and rebuild her personality after a tragic event.

After having examined not only the societal expectations women face, but also the female characters in the two novels as individuals and in relation to each other through comparison and contrast, it has become evident in my analysis that women, and, to an extent, postfeminism as well have internalized the pressure and wield it to pass judgment on other women. The women in these novels are sometimes so consumed by the standards set for them by society that they are even quicker to pass blame on others for violating them than the societal climate around them, even on matters such as motherhood and traditional family values. This is evident in an abundance of examples throughout the novels. Earlier I discussed Amy’s ploy to present herself as a maternal figure eager to start a family despite her abusive husband. In addition to it making her status as a female victim all the more sympathetic in the eyes of the society, the maneuver also shielded Amy from facing the judgment she knew would otherwise come. However, in keeping with the postfeminist upheaval towards women who, despite the freedom granted to them by the modern advances in gender equality, choose to remain housebound with domestic chores and child-minding, Amy’s own judgment is directed towards those who cherish their role as mothers. Thus Amy, although at times a character taken to the extreme, represents the side of postfeminism that believes taking full advantage of the freedom feminism grants modern women is the only acceptable way to experience womanhood. Through her quotes on the impact she believes

motherhood has on women, Amy, in effect, renounces the strides postfeminism has taken to accommodate the female freedom of choice, and subscribes exclusively to her own truth on what it means to be a woman.

Motherhood continues to be a dividing force among women also in *The Girl on the Train*, where the internalized pressure escalates into a blame game between Anna and Megan, two women on the opposite ends on the spectrum of female domesticity. For Megan, who at twenty-nine is the youngest of the four central female characters between the two novels, Anna represents the worst case scenario of what can happen to a woman upon becoming a mother: “You get the feeling she probably had something to say for herself once upon a time, but now everything is about the child” (38), Megan suggests. While Megan’s distaste for all things maternal stems from the accident that killed her daughter, she takes umbrage also in Anna forgoing a career and other meaningful adult relationships in order to stay at home with her daughter. This results in a juxtaposition between the two extremes – Anna’s success in the domestic realm serves as a mirror that reflects Megan her guilt over the death of her daughter and her subsequent seclusion from all things maternal.

Conversely, even Anna, who in the eyes of the society is doing everything right – married to a man who is willing and able to provide for the family, and caring for the family home as a stay-at-home mother – cannot escape vilification from other women. “They were all being terribly concerned, saying how awful it must be for me, but I could see it on their faces: thinly disguised disapproval. How could you entrust your child to that monster? You must be the worst mother in the world” (257), Anna reveals when discussing the judgment she faced from her group of friends, who themselves are mothers as well, when they learned of Megan’s past as a “child killer”. Even her friends cannot help but pass judgment veiled thinly as concern, which, again, speaks so loudly about how womanhood has internalized the built-in pressures put on femininity. It is also a blow to Anna’s self esteem as a wife and a mother, because she herself is certain that she is

the envy of others: “I love it when we’re out like this, the three of us. I can see the way people look at us; I can see them thinking, *What a beautiful family*. It makes me proud – prouder than I’ve been of anything in my life” (187). The judgment derails her identity as a woman, wife, and mother, despite the fact that she did not know the truth about Megan, nor was Megan ever a threat towards her child. She might be content with herself, but her self-righteousness does not shield her from outside criticism. However, much like *Gone Girl*’s Amy, Anna also acknowledges the behavioral patterns that benefit her, and passes judgment on others for not adhering to her personal views on what modern femininity entails. “I miss work, but I also miss what work meant to me, in my last year of gainful employment, when I met Tom. I miss being a mistress” (302), Anna reveals, continuing on how she “never felt guilty”, but pretended to have “felt terrible about it” to her “married girlfriends” (302-303). Like Amy, Anna adjusts her behavior to suit societal norms and avoids the backlash she knows would otherwise come. It also reveals how the discussion of a woman’s worth has permeated the way women treat other women – Anna acknowledges that women are given value in the society through marriage, children, and adhering to the unspoken code of what is considered appropriate behavior, and what is not. Infidelity, being the “other woman”, is deemed unacceptable, so Anna pretends to feel guilty in order to avoid blame. However, Anna herself harnesses her own personal image of the ideal woman to wield judgment on those she deems lesser than her: women without a maternal instinct, unable to conceive, suffering from alcoholism, or unfeminine or unladylike in one way or another. To my mind, this makes Anna stand on the opposite side of *Gone Girl*’s Amy on the postfeminist conundrum. Anna chose not only motherhood, but also the life of a stay-at-home mother, an idea Amy recoils from. For Anna, as I show above, this is the superior choice – the choice that, in her mind, makes her the envy of all other women, because she exercised her freedom of choice in favor of the traditional nuclear family route, and she seems to think that she is doing it exceptionally well.

The two novels, while mirror images to one another in their representations of female identity, loss of home, and the dynamics of male-female relationships, approach the subject of parenthood from the two opposing sides of the argument. Within that argument, as I have shown here, fits an abundance of intricacies on female identity and its evolution within the gender roles sustained by the society. From here I move on to discussing various female roles and the behavioral traits within them, and their interplay with the construction of female identity.

4.2. "She's a Cool Girl" – Female Identity and the Objectification of Women

Female identity and all the complexities that go into its construction have been a focal point of the thesis. I have examined it from the point of view of marital relations, the home, and the gender roles in the domestic realm and in the society as a whole. Here, it is the subject of discussion once more, only this time more exclusively from the perspective of the male objectification of women. As the final chapter of analysis in the thesis, this section also acts as a summary, bringing together the issues that play a part in the construction of female identity. The male gaze, or, to put it in simpler terms, the objectification of women by men, is a crucial aspect in the two novels, as well as a factor in the construction of female identity. *Gone Girl*, the novel considered to be the launching pad for the contemporary female psychological thriller movement, features an account of the "cool girl" – a fantastical representation of the ideal woman as constructed through the lens of male objectification, designed to meet every requirement set for her within the patriarchal fabric of society, culture, and media. Indeed, the "cool girl" follows no preordained set of characteristics, but rather shifts shapes to fit whatever fantasy bestowed upon her by the man she attempts to emulate.

Although having originated from the now-famous, nearly four-page passage in Flynn's novel (250-254), I argue that due to its social significance and success in popular culture, "cool girl" should, now that *Gone Girl* has cemented its position as one of the seminal female novels of the 21st century, be discussed in canon with the rest of the female roles, such as the

housewife and the single career woman, to name a few that have circulated in this study. Despite having become a phenomenon in its own right within *Gone Girl*, the ramifications the "cool girl" image set forth are present also in *The Girl on the Train*, where the female characters are under scrutiny for their appeal, or lack thereof, in the eyes of men. This is how Amy, Flynn's acerbic misanthrope, defines the essence of the "cool girl":

> Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she's hosting the world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. *Go ahead, shit on me, I don't mind, I'm the Cool Girl*. (250-251)

I maintain that the significance the passage and the terminology it coined bears on the construction of female identity as well as the issue of men objectifying women warrants a closer examination. In this subchapter, I use the passage itself as a mirror on which to reflect the issues of identity and objectification in both novels. In light of this perspective on identity issues, it should be noted that the passage is preceded by Amy's admission that like "some women change fashion regularly", she "changes personalities. What persona feels good, what's coveted, what's *au courant*?" (250). Talking about the night she met Nick, Amy recalls "playing the girl who was in style . . . the Cool Girl" (250). Thus, in essence, Amy is criticizing the phenomenon that is plaguing young women for the ways in which it forces them to take on whatever role they feel they need in order to gain the attention of a man. "Men actually think this girl exists. Maybe they're fooled because so many women are willing to pretend to be this girl" (251), she notes, placing blame on

both men *and* women for perpetuating the myth of the “cool girl” – “the girl who likes every fucking thing he likes and doesn’t ever complain” (251). In light of this, the above definition of the “cool girl”, although meant to shock in its foulness, is merely the baseline on which the girl of the wildest male dreams is founded on. As Amy expertly demonstrates, “there are variations to the window dressing” – “maybe he’s a vegetarian, so Cool Girl loves seitan and is great with dogs; or maybe he’s a hipster artist, so Cool Girl is a tattooed, bespectacled nerd who loves comics” (251). What never changes, however, is the male desire for the “cool girl”, as if it was an inherent part of masculinity. Furthermore, the images popular culture continues to provide seem to help sustain this desire, through “*movies written by socially awkward men who’d like to believe that this kind of woman exists and might kiss them*” (251), Amy explains. According to her, the system has reached the point where women unwilling to play into the fantasy might as well give up now: “if you’re *not* a Cool Girl, I beg you not to believe your man doesn’t want the Cool Girl” (251).

In Flynn’s novel, the entire idea of the “cool girl” is presented as a patriarchal construction, a male creation dreamed up to objectify and control women. It is also used as a reward system for women who adhere to it: “Men always say that as *the* defining compliment, don’t they? *She’s a cool girl*” (250), Amy rhetorically asks. Later, she returns with the answer herself, calling the “cool girl” persona “a figment of the imagination of a million masturbatory men” (253), who, according to Amy, are “calling you a Cool Girl to fool you! That’s what men do: They try to make it sound like you are the cool girl so you will bow to their wishes” (253-254). Here *Gone Girl*’s Amy arrives at the crux of the gender dynamics inside the “cool girl” concept. The entire idea of the “cool girl” seems to exist off of the male need to objectify women and shape femininity to suit whatever aesthetic, sexual, or egoistic expectation men direct towards their own personal dreamgirl. Thus, the concept as a whole appears rigidly gender-coded. According to Amy, who herself readily admits to playing the part of the proverbial Cool Girl for her husband, there is no gender-swapping in the world of “cool girls”. “I waited patiently . . . for the pendulum to swing the other way . . . and

then we'd say, *Yeah, he's a Cool Guy*. But it never happened" (251), Amy explains. This is an important distinction to make in the context of this study, which focuses on the female experience of abuse and objectification in romantic and domestic relationships. This is not to say that objectification of a gendered and sexual nature does not occur with the gender roles reversed, but it is the experience detailed by the women in these novels. It is what the "cool girl" idea is based on. It is also, as is apparent from the passage at the beginning of this subchapter describing the essence of the "cool girl", a satire of the "dreamgirl" created to suit whatever male fantasy the surrounding culture conditions men to sustain. The "cool girl", the one constant in a cultural climate that keeps changing its outlook on what the dreamgirl should be like at any given time, is always there, flexible to meet the ever-changing criteria, but always hot – "hot and understanding", "because Cool Girls are above all hot" (251).

In terms of postfeminism, the "cool girl" is a divisive matter. On one hand, both postfeminism and the idea behind the "cool girl" celebrate the freedom of choice women now enjoy. But, on the other hand, the "cool girl" could be seen as a scourge inflicting itself on the postfeminist movement of the 21st century, taking women and femininity back under the confinements of the more patriarchal society of 19th and 20th century. Herein, again, lies the predicament with postfeminism today – why is the "cool girl" becoming so pervasive not only as a modern "female image", but also as a symbol within male-female relationships? Have heterosexual romances become so complicated that women feel the need to tailor themselves to suit the image and personality of whatever man they set their sights on, and men believe it is their right to expect such behavior from women? I claim that the two novels discussed here, *Gone Girl* in particular, seem to answer that question with a resounding *yes*. In terms of the narrative on heterosexual romance, the image of the "cool girl" creates a bleak outlook on modern courtship and marriage, according to which appearances are what matter the most. After all, even the "cool girl" image is just that, an *image* – not real, certainly not a basis for a sustainable relationship. *Gone Girl*'s Amy

learns this the hard way: "being happy with Nick made me realize that there was a Real Amy in there, and she was so much better, more interesting and complicated and challenging, than Cool Amy" (254), she recounts. "Nick wanted Cool Amy anyway. Can you imagine, finally showing your true self to your spouse, your soul mate, and having him *not like you*? So that's how the hating first began" (254), she notes in the concluding remarks of the "cool girl" passage in the novel.

To further exemplify the concept beyond the idea of the "cool girl", I consider a moment *The Girl on the Train*'s Rachel experiences on the train involving a male passenger: "his glance travels over me . . . he looks away. There's something about the set of his mouth which suggests distaste. He finds me distasteful. I am not the girl I used to be. I am no longer desirable, I'm off-putting in some way" (27). It is as if in addition to acknowledging the way copious drinking and trauma caused by a tumultuous divorce has affected her appearance, Rachel also mourns the woman she has become. Every glance from strangers laced with pity and disgust only serve to remind her of the person she once was, and now she cannot even recognize herself anymore. What is more, Rachel projects those feelings of self-loathing and disappointment on her obsession with "Jess", who in her mind epitomizes the "cool girl". "Jess, with her bold prints and 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 a photographer. She's a good painter, too, plenty of artistic flair" (25), Rachel ruminates. Only in Rachel's vision of the "cool girl", she does these things on her own terms, instead of garnishing herself with window dressing to suit the profile of her man. In Rachel's dream, "Jess" and "Jason" are equals – equally beautiful and talented, and a perfect match for each other. It is the mirror image of what Rachel once envisioned for herself with Tom.

Rachel's obsession with "Jess", a character born out of her own insecurities, goes to show that the image of the "cool girl" is not merely a product of the male gaze. I assert that it is also an image of women often projected on them by other women. In Rachel's case, the "coolness" she imposes on "Jess" represents the sorrow and bitterness Rachel still feels towards the dream life she

had, but ended up losing. Similarly, Rachel idolizes "Jess" for her looks, because her own confidence used to be dependent on her looks. The essence of the idea of the "cool girl", as it is presented in the passage from *Gone Girl*, is chiefly about women and femininity through the male perspective. It is a perspective marked with desire, control, and objectification of women by the men in their lives and in the society. Conversely, as is exemplified in the two novels, women who continue to perpetuate the "cool girl" idea often do so out of fear, envy, sorrow, or insecurity – feelings that are, however, in part brought on by the women's realization that they are no longer "worthy" of male desire. I have already discussed much of Rachel's motivation behind her quest to mystify Megan into "Jess", the epitome of the "hot, brilliant, funny woman" (Flynn 250) – essentially, the "cool girl". Rachel, plagued by the feeling of having been replaced by women more successful and beautiful, in essence, "cooler" than her, channels her sadness to the creation of "Jess", and her equally attractive and cool husband, "Jason", to cope with her own shortcomings. What is more, Rachel is continuously hostile towards Anna, the woman who, at least in her mind, replaced her in the perfect life Rachel had built for herself with Tom. Furthermore, Rachel is open about her disdain towards infidelity and cheaters in more general terms that surpass her animosity for Anna: "it is pure egotism, a selfishness to conquer all. Hatred floods me. If I saw that woman now . . . I would spit in her face. I would scratch her eyes out" (51), she admits, "that woman" this time denoting Megan, who she catches cheating from the train. Indeed, I argue that Rachel's self-loathing obsession with Megan/"Jess" does not let up before she alerts to the realization that Megan was never the picture of perfection Rachel had made her out to be. She was actually a monster of the worst kind – a child killer. "Megan isn't what I thought she was . . . she wasn't that beautiful, carefree girl . . . she wasn't a loving wife. She wasn't even a good person. She was a liar, a cheat. She was a killer" (272-273). Rachel, in her intense self-loathing and tendency to punish herself, finds pleasure in the realization – she may be far from perfect, but so is Megan.

These types of female perspectives on the concept of the "cool girl" do not objectify its targets to the extent male perspective does, where women are often sexualized and valued through their physical and sexual worth. Considering this analysis on how the "cool girl" image can also by female-driven, it becomes apparent that the "cool girl" of Hawkins's novel differs from that of Flynn's. *The Girl on the Train* and Rachel in particular create an image of an effortlessly beautiful woman devoted to her husband, but unlike in *Gone Girl*, the dream relationship is equal in terms of love, affection, and domestic standing of the two partners. Rachel's version of the "cool girl" is hot, outgoing, and artistic, yes, but what makes her truly "cool" is her priority to stay faithful and committed in a marriage that somehow seems effortlessly equal, loving, and stable. Much like the "window dressing" that varies from man to man (Flynn 251), the core features of the "cool girl" seem to shift in the female perspective, as well. For Rachel, the "cool girl" is someone she, in theory, could be, but is not, somebody she desperately wants to become. Similarly, for Amy, the "cool girl" is somebody she once was, or pretended to be, but now resents, because she could never actually live up to the perfection of the "cool girl".

Before Rachel in Hawkins's novel, *Gone Girl*'s Amy, the modern female protagonist behind the "cool girl" issue, also exhibits similar behavior towards women younger and thus supposedly more attractive than her. A great deal of Amy's trajectory as a woman in her home and marriage revolves around her need to not be like other, in her mind more unremarkable women, who constantly strive to control their husbands. In Nick's mind, Amy changes – the woman she married, the carefree Amy turns into a high-strung shrew, who is more concentrated in shutting herself off emotionally than catering to her husband's every need. It is something Nick picks up on throughout the novel: "she was not the thing she became, the thing I feared most: an angry woman" (55), he recalls, before adding "I was not good with angry women. They brought something out in me that was unsavory" (55). It is an admission that matches the casting of gender roles within the "cool girl" act. To generalize, men expect women to stay happy and content: these are two feelings

often associated with women and femininity through the gender coding of emotions where women are perceived as calm and mild-mannered, while the right to express negative emotions, such as anger and rage, is reserved for men only. Whenever Amy "nags", or points out problems in male-female dynamics, Nick feels somehow betrayed and disappointed because he, a man, a "good guy", does not know how to react anymore. The idea is well accounted for in feminist literature throughout history, for example in the previously mentioned "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, where the female protagonist, due to her "behavioral issues" deemed unsuitable for a woman, is shut off from the surrounding society. In modern postfeminist literature, exemplified here by *Gone Girl*, the same view appears again in the form of the "cool girl" – the "dreamgirl one in a million" (252), who exists solely for the purpose of pleasing a man by "pretending to be the woman a man wants them to be" (251). As is clear from the above Nick quote on angry women, deviating from this gendering of emotions results in a backlash from men.

When Amy fails to keep up the appearances of an appropriately satisfied and feminine woman, her husband is taken aback in disbelief – *this is not the woman I married*. Her "cool girl" façade wears off, and she blames it all on Nick and his inability to perceive her as a human being rather than the "cool girl" she was, or pretended to be, in the beginning of their marriage. Amy even complains about Nick "destroying and rejecting the real me one 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*" (268). Through all of this, Nick attempts to maintain his "good guy" act: "I'd tried all my life to be a decent guy, a man who loved and respected women, a guy without hangs-ups" (399), he swears, before admitting to "thinking nasty thoughts . . . I was imagining bashing in my wife's skull" (399). Is this "good guy" act an archetypal expectation for men in the same vein as that of the "cool girl" is for women? Does Nick aspire to be a "good guy" merely because he knows – or thinks he knows – that it appeals to women? Towards the end of the novel, when Amy and Nick are reunited, Amy talks about "the man

he was pretending to be", and how "women love that guy – I love that guy . . . that's the man *I signed up for*. That's the man *I deserve*" (439, emphases mine). Amy's word choices here are telling – as if she thinks that she *deserves* Nick, the "good guy", because of what he brought out in her? "I found him perversely exotic, a good ole Missouri boy. He was so damn nice to be around. He teased things out in me I didn't know existed: a lightness, a humor, an ease . . . He helped me be Cool Girl – I couldn't have been Cool Girl with anyone else. I wouldn't have wanted to" (252), she recalls. For Amy, it seems like the "good guy" and the "cool girl" make the match both of them deserve, the dream couple she had fantasized being a part of.

However, in the novel, the push and pull between the couple leads to infidelity on Nick's part, with a conventionally attractive woman nearly half his age. This causes Amy's front to crumble as well, as she reveals a side of herself rarely seen through her confident façade. She begins to exhibit rage and resentment towards young, attractive women desirable by male standards – the type of woman she herself once represented as well, before succumbing to the role of the wife, a process in which she lost an integral part of her female identity due to having to leave the place she considered home against her will, all in favor of Nick. She directs this rage mostly towards Andie, Nick's young and attractive mistress. "I do wonder about the little slut" (278), Amy admits in reference to Andie, calling her a "hapless puppy", a "little girl", and a "good girl" (278-279). By doing this, Amy, arguably as an act of defense, initially diminishes Andie into a dim-witted young girl, almost like a child – not salacious enough to play the part of the evil "homewrecker" (279) Amy so desperately needs her to be. This brings the analysis back to the notion of the "cool girl". Amy, in a similar vein to *The Girl on the Train*'s Rachel, admits that "it's tempting to be Cool Girl", and she continues, "for someone like me, who likes to win, it's tempting to want to be the girl every guy wants" (252). Here, she is referring to the girl she used to be: "when I met Nick . . . I was willing to try. I will accept my portion of the blame" (252), Amy notes about her quest to fit into the "cool girl" mold for a man she was desperate to please.

In keeping with the moment Rachel experiences in the train with a male passenger I discussed earlier in this subchapter, Amy also goes through something similar in the process of "de-cooling" herself. Having altered her looks in her quest to make herself disappear, Amy now feels like "the opposite of Amy" (281). The makeover marks a tipping point not only in Amy's plan to disappear, but also in the way she constructs her identity, since her looks are a crucial aspect of it: "all this could have been avoided if I were less pretty" (266), she claims. In contrast to "pale, thin Amy" with a "beautiful body" in "perfect economy, every feature calibrated, everything in balance" (281), Amy now describes herself – or rather, the version of the institution that is *Amy* she now inhabits – in terms of "dark skin", "mouse-colored helmet cut", "smart-girl glasses", and having "gained twelve pounds" (280). Much like Rachel in that moment in the train, Amy also notices how she no longer attracts male attention to herself. "I don't miss men looking at me" (281), she claims. "Now no one is rude to me, but no one is nice to me either . . . not really, not the way they used to" (281), she continues. Her experience echoes Rachel's in the sense that both prove how dependent the male gaze is on the female appearance. Rachel and Amy have both disrupted the male gaze by venturing outside the beauty standards set by modern society, thus forfeiting their status as the "cool girl". However, it bears reminding that Amy's makeover is deliberate, yet another pawn in her plan that surpasses any societal – or patriarchal – label put on her.

The main thing to consider about Amy is that in her mind, she is not just anyone, but an *Amy*, unique in every way. In the chapters written from her perspective, she never refers to herself as, for example, "the old me", or "diary me", but rather always "the old Amy", and "diary Amy", as if she were playing a character the entire time, and also "real Amy", the version of herself she believes to be the real one, the one not trying to appeal to anyone or anything, but the one she is at her core. Amy, the only child of parents who before her suffered multiple miscarriages (249), is not merely a person, a woman, but an institution, a set of parental expectations come to life. "I've never been more to them than a symbol anyway, the walking ideal. Amazing Amy in the flesh"

(291), she writes about her parents. It is as if *Amy* is yet another role for her to play, saving her the trouble of finding out who she actually is, underneath every single façade she has tried on for size.

Her parents suffered "five miscarriages and two stillbirths . . . one a year, in the fall, as if it were a seasonal duty, like crop rotation" (249), before she came along and remained alive against all odds. They named her *Amy*, "a regular girl's name" (249), in a bid to save her from the extraordinary fate of all the others before her. This, together with her entitled upbringing provides at least a partial explanation for her issues with self-image, mental stability, and competitiveness. "I grew up feeling special, proud" (249), she admits, and adds, "I was the girl who battled oblivion and won" (249), using the rhetoric of war, battle, games, anything and everything she could posit as something she could *win* – all things that foreshadow her behavior and outlook on life as an adult woman as well. Although Amy got "vibrant pleasure" (249) out of being the only child, she now admits to having been quite jealous of the "seven dead dancing princesses" (250) that came before her, because "they get to be perfect without even trying, without even facing one moment of existence" (250). Amy's past as a miracle baby born to desperate parents and her subsequent strive for perfection foreshadow her need later in life to not only be accepted, but also loved and respected.

In this discussion on the "cool girl" – the concluding subchapter of the analysis portion of this thesis – I have made connections between the male gaze and the worth of a woman, and how the expectations and standards of society, as well as familial relationships from parents to spouses all have an effect on the construction of female identity. Another factor to take away here, I argue, is the conclusion that labels like the "cool girl" are not always a decidedly objectifying product of the male gaze, but sometimes also brought on by female experiences of insecurity and fear. A more comprehensive conclusion on all matters I have discussed throughout this study follows in the next chapter, the final one of this thesis.

5. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have focused on the matters of female domesticity, the female experience of marital abuse, and societal pressure in 21st-century domestic noir literature. As my frame of reference, I used two hugely successful psychological thrillers, both by female authors – *Gone Girl* (2012) by Gillian Flynn, and *The Girl on the Train* (2015) by Paula Hawkins. I employed them in a discussion on how the aforementioned matters are portrayed in the context of modern female crime and thriller literature. More specifically, I analyzed the gendered phenomena of domestic tension, identity construction, and outside expectations on the theoretical basis of home and genre from a postfeminist point of view. Now, in the final chapter of the thesis, I conclude the study by drawing up a summary of the issues I have discussed.

My main research problem at the beginning of this thesis was to formulate a connection between the domestic sphere, the construction of female identity, and the multitude of expectations modern women face from men and the surrounding society as a whole, and to study the interplay these aspects might have with one another in the two novels. The starting point for all of this was the marital home, so my analysis started from the relationships of the respective couples. There, the analysis began the uncovering for an answer to the question posed in the title of this thesis, and at the very beginning of Flynn's novel – "*what have we done to each other*?". In the novel, it is preceded by "*what are you thinking? How are you feeling? Who are you?*", and followed by an even more sinister "*what will we do?*" (3). Essentially, it is this set of questions – seemingly simple, yet terrifying in the power they have to either dismantle a marriage, or help sustain it – that became the bottom line for my analysis as well.

Dividing the analysis into two chapters and four subchapters within them according to their thematic content proved to be challenging, since there is so much overlap between the different themes and characters of the two novels. This, however, further supported my hypothesis about the interplay between home, marriage, female identity, and societal pressure, in the sense that

a connection between these aspects clearly exists. My analysis showed that in the two novels, the female experiences of domestic abuse, home confinement, and outside pressure directed at womanhood are similar to one another, but also that the culprits behind them are not always men, which appears to be a common misconception not only in the culture in which narratives like these are born, but also among the female characters in the novels. The experiences are also not all that different from those by women in the past – making comparisons to 19th- and 20th-century women and female characters showcased a link between the works of Flynn and Hawkins and the traditions of female writing and Gothic fiction.

Thus, despite there being a historical relevancy to the study I have conducted, as well as to the primary materials I employed in it, the connections between the aforementioned issues in the two novels are now wired to accommodate the tribulations modern women face in today's society and domestic realm. On that note, one of the most notable things seeping into every aspect of the female domestic experience is the extent to which societal expectations govern the behavior of both women and men, which in turn shapes the way the domestic experience plays out for women while they balance between what is expected of them, and what they themselves want. The expectations towards traditionally feminine aspirations such as motherhood and how a woman should look and act like, according to my analysis, are at the core of the rest of the matters I have included in this study. This is visible in the women's behavior within their marriages, and as such one of the things causing problems in the relationships, as the societal expectations are so deeply ingrained within the male imagination. This is also, to my mind, one of the junctions where the interplay between the domestic sphere and female identity is most evident.

Basically everything the female characters – Amy in *Gone Girl* and Rachel, Anna, and Megan in *The Girl on the Train* – do is a *reaction* to the way they as women are treated chiefly by the surrounding society, but also by their own husbands. This, I argue, is where all the aspects of my study come together. As I already noted above, the expectations and pressure society puts on the

characters as women are what dictate their behavior and choices in the novels. Everything can be argued to be *reactions* towards, or at times against, the *system* – the societal scheme founded on decades of traditions that gender-code women inside the passivity of the home, and men out in the public sphere of the workforce and decision-making. The same system, in these novels exemplifying the politics of the home for 21st-century women, is what continually attacks the women with its outdated ideas of what it means to be a woman. These ideas include, as I have indicated throughout the thesis, heterosexual marriage, devotion to home and hearth, and the desire and ability to have children, not to mention the pressure to look desirable for men, and fulfill the elusive role of the "cool girl", always ready to succumb to any male whim. Similarly, as I discussed in the chapters on motherhood and the "cool girl", the severity of the judgment women pass on other women was a finding I did not include in my research question, nor did I make any hypotheses on it, but it should nevertheless be mentioned along with my other conclusions. Throughout the thesis, the examples I have drawn from the two *Girl* novels show their female characters in many situations where they must react to the aforementioned ideas. It is also where many of the women's own personal problems stem from.

To recap some of such dilemmas, the one issue at the core of Rachel's problems is, throughout the novel, her inability to conceive a baby. Anna, who had no trouble whatsoever in conceiving a child with Rachel's former husband, making it obvious that the "fault" was solely Rachel's, feels the enormous pressure not only from the patriarchal structures of society, but also from other women, to remain somehow "worthy" of the heteronormative dream that has come true for her. Conversely, Amy is open in her disdain towards such expectations, and only uses them for her own advantage.

Thus, the direction towards them as women piercing through from the public perimeter of society has an effect on each and every one of the novels' female characters. How they react to it, and what they choose to do with it is what sets them apart. The chief characteristic of

Rachel, Anna, and Megan in the narrative flow of *The Girl on the Train* is their stance on motherhood and other familial relations often associated with women and femininity. The opposite is true for *Gone Girl*'s Amy, who, as I have indicated, is acutely aware of such associations to both womanhood in general and to her personally in the private sphere. Despite this, Amy never loses sight on what *she wants* and does not succumb to what is expected of her. However, Amy's behavior does not remain unscathed by all of this, either. She orchestrates an entire revenge scheme on her husband using not much else than the traditional female roles the bulk of this thesis has discussed. Hence, on the basis of my finished study, I maintain that the vicious circle of societal expectations, stereotypical images of women, home as an abusive space, and women's identity issues originates from the manner in which the characters continue to play into – or at the very least take into consideration – the societal discourses regarding gender and the socially constructed roles within it.

This is not to pass blame on the female characters, or the authors who created them, but rather to criticize society for the way it still seems to use its discourses to control women, and to shed light on the reappearance of the female psychological thriller and its perhaps more realistic tendency to portray modern women, which does not shy away from the unlikable, unfeminine, or downright seedy. As such, the novels themselves contribute to the commentary on women's stance in contemporary society. The novels show women who are desperate for marriage and starting a family, women who take pride in their endeavors as a wife and mother, yet the same women also display signs of cracking under the pressure, expressing a desire, or even a need, for something else life has to offer.

I founded my choice of study material – *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*, two successful and popular novels that practically revived a literary subgenre by bringing it to the forefront once again with their mass appeal – on their multifaceted and complex portrayal of women in modern times, which, before embarking on my study, I felt would provide an abundance

of themes for analysis, and as such also some concrete conclusions on my chosen subject matter. Reflecting on the finished study, this, however, was not the case. While there was never a shortage on material for analysis, no tangible outcome on the causality between the issues of the private and the public sphere could be construed. Both novels revolve around the notion of modern marriage, and the gender-coded behavioral traits that chiefly stem from the society, and continue to have an effect on the dynamics of romantic male-female relationships. However, as I have discussed here in the final chapter of this thesis, what proved to be the most fruitful for my analysis was my concluding observation on just how pervasive the gaze of the society is, especially in its attempts to shame and govern women to adhere to a certain type of life and fulfill the idea of a nurturing, warm, thoroughly feminine woman.

I wish to conclude my study by acknowledging that while no clear-cut conclusion could be made on such a wide-ranging topic over the course of a single thesis, my study emphasizes the interplay between societal pressure, its division into male and female oriented facets, and how the female protagonists in the modern psychological thriller react to them in an environment that has proved itself hazardous for women. I can think of no way more suitable to end my study with than a particularly resonating quote from Amy at the very end of *Gone Girl*, where she compares her marriage with Nick to a deadly disease, summarizing the conundrum of love and domestic abuse extensively discussed in this thesis: “you can’t be as in love as we were and not have it invade your bone marrow. Our kind of love can go into remission, but it’s always waiting to return. Like the world’s sweetest cancer” (439).

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