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**ROLES AND AGENCY**  
EXPLORING THE FEMININITY AND CRIMINALITY OF  
CHELSEA CAIN'S GRETCHEN LOWELL

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## 1. Introduction

Chelsea Cain's Gretchen Lowell crime series focuses on a detective, Archie Sheridan, and a female serial killer called Gretchen Lowell. The book series contains six novels of which I have chosen two to be analysed in this thesis: *Kill You Twice* (2013) and *Let Me Go* (2014). These books were chosen from the series because they end the series and they provide more relevant descriptions of Gretchen, the character of interest in this thesis, than the first four novels.

The beginning of *Kill You Twice*, the penultimate book in the series, finds Gretchen in the Oregon State Hospital psych ward heavily medicated and a shadow of her previous lethal persona. Archie is controlling Gretchen's medication and care in the hospital, and happy to see her weak and vulnerable but is not able to completely break free from their past together. He remembers when Gretchen infiltrated the police investigation on her, kidnapped and tortured him, and after surrendering to the police, escaped from prison. When Gretchen informs him that she knows something about the killer that Archie and his team are now trying to catch, Archie drives to the hospital to meet Gretchen who manages to confuse him even when he thinks he knows everything about her. In the end Gretchen escapes and leaves behind two bodies after a new, naïve doctor reduces her medication. The murder investigation reveals that Gretchen had a child and she knows the killer whom she later murders.

In the last novel of the series, *Let Me Go*, Gretchen is still missing and the media is covered with news about her. Archie, who spent ten years as the head of the "Beauty Killer" task force (the group of police officers and investigators searching for Gretchen), is trying to forget about Gretchen while working on another case. But it is evident that he cannot forget her when the book's flashbacks portray the beginning of Gretchen and Archie's relationship. The police force thinks that Gretchen has left the country when in reality she has not even left Portland. She manages to move around the city without being caught and has a close encounter with Archie without him

knowing. In the end, she again helps Archie catch the killer he is looking for, saves his life and escapes.

In this thesis, I will explore how Gretchen Lowell deviates from the traditional model of femininity in the areas of female roles and agency and how her femininity helps her as a serial murderer. These aspects of femininity were chosen for analysis because they are prominent in the novels and they are central issues of feminist theories. As for the structure of the thesis, I will first provide theoretical background to my analysis by briefly explaining relevant feminist theories and introducing some previous studies conducted on female criminality in literature. Second, there will be two chapters containing analysis on Gretchen as a woman and as a murderer. The first analysis chapter explores the roles that Gretchen adopts, how they deviate from traditional feminine roles and how these roles support her criminality. In the second analysis chapter, Gretchen's agency and its significance to her criminal persona will be explored.

I chose Chelsea Cain's Gretchen Lowell series and this topic because Cain's work has not been studied before and the series is relatively new but it has been left in the margins of the crime fiction genre. Thus, I wanted to provide something new to the study of crime fiction; I wanted to study a less known series that features a unique, strong female antagonist that is worth examining. Previous studies on women in crime fiction have focused on female detectives and female killers who follow "the victim-turned-avenger narrative" (Mäntymäki, "Women" 441). Gretchen's character does not fit in to this narrative which makes her a different type of killer compared to some of the other female killers studied. The study of female criminals in literature is gradually starting to emerge from the shadow of female protagonists and it needs variety in order to provide a full description of female antagonists. While, the study of female characters in literature has been more recognized in the last decades with the emergence of the feminist movement and literary criticism, the topics of agency and gender roles are still relevant and worth examining today.

## **2. Feminism and female criminality**

In this chapter, I will first present theoretical background on gender and what is considered feminine by utilising a feminist theory framework. In the other half of this chapter I will introduce some of the previous research done on female criminals in literature. I chose to explore feminist theories because an understanding of the key issues of gender and feminism and what is traditionally feminine are needed to be able to analyse the femininity and deviousness of Gretchen. Previous research on female criminals in crime narratives is important because it provides a framework for what has been studied before and for the analysis of Gretchen's femininity in the context of criminality.

### **2.1 Feminist theory**

Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth propose that "Feminist theory is a vibrant intellectual practice that raises new questions, brings new evidence, and poses significant challenges to academic disciplines spanning humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences" (1). They continue to note that feminist theories offer means to study the gendered structures of society and "the limitations of popular assumptions about sex, race, sexuality, and gender" (2).

First, as my thesis explores Gretchen's agency, the concept of agency will have to be introduced. There is no one clear and universally accepted description of what agency might mean, but the simplest definition of agency is that an individual has the ability to have an effect or impact on the world (McNay 39). Lois McNay further argues that agency is dependent on context and the status of the individual: for example, women have been denied "the status of autonomous social actors" (39). In this thesis agency will be understood as the ability to have an impact on the world and as the ability to make autonomous decisions. One of the aims of the feminist study of agency is to recognize and recover invisible and forgotten forms of female agency (39). Feminist theories of

agency are especially concerned with power structures because “until relatively recently, patriarchy has construed women as being largely incapable of autonomous action and, by implication, of full personhood in virtue of the inherently fragile, volatile and generally ‘inferior’ condition of female embodiment” (McNay 41).

As for gender, the term originally developed outside of feminist theory but Margaret Mead and Simone de Beauvoir are said to have first introduced it to feminist theory by noting that masculinity and femininity and their roles are not biologically constructed and that instead they are socially, historically and culturally constructed (Viveros Vigoya 852). Gender is nowadays mostly understood as socially constructed and thus different from biological sex (Viveros Vigoya 852). Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity understands “gender as not given but as performatively constructed through an incessant reiteration of culturally pre-gendered acts” (Mäntymäki “Women” 444).

Third, social norms and their effect on women will be discussed. Norms and normalization are key issues in feminism and feminist theories try to expose and transform harmful and culturally constructed norms associated with gender, sexuality, bodies, family structures and work roles (Spade and Willse 551). The norms inflicted by society control people and create the lines between what is normal and what is deviant or bad. They also create inequality between genders because norms are different for men and women. Dean Spade and Graig Willse (552) quote Butler when they explain how norms affect gender and its construction: “Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment.” Women are usually the more normed gender and there are several roles and characteristics that women have traditionally been expected to adopt: the role of a mother, caregiver (Stone 885) and being gentle, nurturing and warm (Mäntymäki, “Women” 442). Spade and Willse note that the existence of normalizing and categorizing types of women, for example “the good mother”, “relies on the constant reproduction and enforcement of

racialized gender norms that govern sexual behaviour, speaking styles, diet, emotional range, punctuality, manners, dress and much more” (554). These norms are created and maintained to control women and to create fear of being labelled as improper or not fitting the ideal of women, worker, parent or any other role (Spade and Willse 554).

## **2.2 Previous research on female criminality in literature**

Previous research on female criminality has mostly focused on real-life female criminals and on “the victim-turned-avenger narrative” (Mäntymäki, “Women” 441) in literature. For example, Tiina Mäntymäki has studied Swedish crime fiction novels that feature female murderers who have been victims of violence and have developed into murderers. In her study of three Swedish crime novels, Mäntymäki employs Butler’s theory of gender performativity and the concepts of irony and parody to study the novels’ female antagonists. Mäntymäki interprets the women’s ironic and parodic performances of murder and gender as criticism of masculinity and patriarchal society.

In another study Mäntymäki focuses on Stieg Larsson’s Millennium trilogy’s female lead Lisbeth Salander. She claims that Salander is “an archetypal trickster and violator of social and cultural boundaries” (“Carnavalesque” 93). The trickster figure is someone or something that can take different forms, questions values and norms and plays tricks on power and authority figures. The trickster character is also usually someone who exposes and challenges power structures and violates social boundaries. Tricksters also “tell stories of the others: those of the culture who are marginalised, hidden and deviant” (“Carnavalesque” 93). Tricksters usually represent and “tell stories of others: those of the culture who are marginalised, hidden and deviant (93).

In general, female murderers and female violence have appeared in popular crime fiction and Hollywood films for a long time (Holmlund 127; Mäntymäki “Women” 441). Mäntymäki (“Women” 442) introduces some problematic aspects in the representation of female violence, noting that “killing can hardly be regarded as a sustainable way to construct a positive

female identity independently of the underlying social circumstances” and “part of the difficulty of seizing the question of violent women is the inherent incompatibility of femininity and violence”. In the earliest representations female murderers were “depicted as evil monsters or scheming and overtly sexualized femme fatales”, but in the 1970s began the increase of more diverse representations of female violence (Mäntymäki “Women” 441). However, most of the female murderers in the films of this era were forced to kill as self-defence or killed to achieve revenge (Holmlund 127). Hollywood perceived female violence as more interesting and dramatic than traditional male violence (Birch 2).

In real life, the question of female violence struggles partly with same problems as fictional representation of female violence. Both real and fictional women who have killed have traditionally been denied recognition of their agency (Mäntymäki “Women” 442): Birch explains that when women kill or use violence it is often perceived as something that she could not control whether it is because of hormones or emotions. This introduces the problem of “diminished responsibility, a kind of temporary madness induced by anything from PMT to the experience of systematic abuse, can be shown to account for her actions, the issue of a woman’s moral agency, her responsibility disappears” (4). In other words, women cannot be held accountable for their violent actions because they are not inherently violent – they just lost control due to emotional or hormonal exhaustion and this is a problem when women are trying to receive recognition and agency (Birch 4). Also, violent women are often categorized into two groups: they are either mad, deviant from the ordinary women, or bad, inhuman or wicked (Birch 5). Women who kill are denied moral responsibility and moral agency because of the traditional view of women as gentle, passive and life-givers rather than takers (Birch 1, 4).



### 3. Traditional roles and characteristics expected of women

The feminine roles accepted and challenged by Gretchen were chosen for analysis because they are major parts of her persona as a criminal. There are many dichotomies that divide masculinity and femininity: “mind/body, culture/nature, reason/emotion, reality/appearance, truth/deception, good/evil, active/passive and order/chaos” (Stone 881). Some of these dichotomies will be occupied as basis for analysing Gretchen’s fit to traditional female roles.

As noted earlier, one of the most traditional roles for women is the role of a mother and responsibility for childcare (Stone 885). The ending of *Kill You Twice* reveals that Gretchen gave birth to a daughter, Pearl, when she was a teenager. The fact that Gretchen has a child would argue that she has taken the role of a mother. However, she gave her daughter away when the child was two years old because she did not love her: ““And I couldn’t love her. So I gave her away.”” (353). Giving her daughter away is a clear indication that Gretchen has rejected the traditional role of a mother and caregiver, but the novel does not explain why she kept her baby for two years. Maybe she thought that she could learn to love her child and after two years realized that it was not possible or the baby was in the way when she started murdering people.

Although Gretchen kills Colin, the man who killed Pearl, there is no evidence that she feels anything for her daughter. Killing Colin might have just been a necessity for her to do because he started killing people to get her attention. Gretchen gave Archie information about her old friend Colin in order for the police to catch him but when they failed she had to do the job herself and her daughter dying in the crossfire was just collateral damage, as seen when Archie says to Gretchen: ““You sent me digging into Beaton’s past, knowing what carnage would follow, knowing how Melissa would react. Pearl’s fate was incidental. You needed Melissa to get you out. You used the rest of us to drive her to it.”” She also had the alternative motive of escaping the psych ward she was in. In contrast, Archie argues that she had been looking out for Pearl: ““You must feel

something,' Archie said. He wanted her to feel something. 'I saw what you did to him in that motel room. You cared for him, but you slaughtered him for what he did to her.'" ("Kill" 350).

In summary Gretchen is a mother but she has not taken the roles of a mother and care giver. And even though she does, in her own way, revenge her daughter's death, she does not kill Colin just for her daughter and she does not seem to particularly care about her daughter's death. I would argue that instead of accepting the traditional role of a mother and "life-giver" (Birch, 4) she adopts the role of a "life-taker" (4) with her murderer persona.

Women have traditionally been expected to be passive (Birch 1), gentle, nurturing and warm (Mäntymäki, "Women" 442). But Gretchen challenges this traditional role of the passive and nurturing woman by murdering around two hundred people. She is quite literally a "life-taker". However, it is also mentioned in the previous novels of the series that she attended medical school and became an emergency nurse for a while. A nurse is a traditionally feminine occupation, but the way Gretchen uses the skills that she learned as a nurse is anything but traditional. She uses these skills when she kills her victims in ways that are designed to inflict pain; this is contradictory with the role of a nurse who is supposed to lessen pain and help people when they are injured and sick. Sometimes Gretchen injures her victims without killing them to study what happens or simply to watch them suffer. This is evident when Archie explains one of the murders to Gretchen in a Flashback in *Let Me Go*: "We found a half-empty bottle of drain cleaner and a spoon on the bedside table. And she was cut. All over. With a scalpel, it looks like. Superficial. Just enough to hurt and to make her bleed a little, but not enough to kill her.'" (Cain 84).

In addition, and connected to women's expected passiveness and the role of the nurturing mother, domesticity is also something that is traditionally feminine. The division of the public sphere as masculine and the domestic sphere as feminine could be added to the list of dichotomies in the first paragraph of this chapter (Viveros Vigoya 853). Gretchen is far from an ideal domestic housewife who waits at home for her husband taking care of the children and

cooking. Her face is on every newspaper, she has a steady fan base and the “Beauty Killer” industry counts on her to make money. There is also a more subtle refusal of domesticity in her. In *Let Me Go* Gretchen walks into a party held on a private island filled with security without anyone noticing that the most wanted person in the city is there. She has a mask on since it is a masquerade party, but otherwise she has not bothered to change her appearance. Most people in her situation would hide or flee the country, but she stays in Portland and continues to make appearances after breaking out of the mental hospital in *Kill You Twice*.

#### **4. Moral, trickster and sexual agency**

The second aspect of Gretchen’s femininity that this thesis discusses is agency. Agency was chosen as a topic of interest because as Gretchen is a strong and independent female character, she possesses some kind of agency. Traditionally women have had less agency than men and women’s agency is usually denied recognition (McNay 39; Mäntymäki 442)

The analysis of Gretchen’s agency and whether she has agency will first focus on moral agency. Moral agency is understood here as the ability to distinguish between right and wrong and to make autonomous decisions. As mentioned earlier, violent or murderous women have traditionally been denied of moral agency with the concept of “diminished responsibility”. From the over two hundred murders that Gretchen has committed only a few are fully portrayed in the novels. Many of the murders and what she did to her victims are described after she has already committed the crimes, but her feelings and attitude during the murders are rarely present. The strongest argument the novels present on Gretchen morality, or rather against it, is when she is called a psychopath, which would mean that she has a mental illness that reduces her moral responsibility, and also when she is convicted to a psych ward. Both of these evaluations of her mental stability are invalid because she was called psychopath by people who are not professional in mental health and without a mental assessment. In addition she was admitted to a mental hospital so that she could be

controlled with medicine and the first time she was caught and tried she was convicted to a normal prison.

When Gretchen's murders are portrayed in the novels it is almost like murder is a mundane task for her: "Gretchen wiped her scalpel on her skirt. 'Do I have to do everything myself?' she asked wearily" ("Let" 340). Nevertheless, she enjoys inflicting pain "Her eyes were spirited. Her nostrils flared with anticipation. She liked to cause people pain" ("Let" 330). In addition, Gretchen speaks calmly and dismissively of the murders that she has committed when Susan, a reporter, is interviewing her in *Kill You Twice*: "'I didn't even notice the exact moment when he died. I was too busy.' ... 'It's funny, once I realized he was gone I lost interest in him. I folded the plastic around him, dragged him to the bathtub, and I dismembered him at the joints. It wasn't any fun. Just work.'" (79).

In fact, all of the depictions of Gretchen as a murderer indicate that she has moral agency or at least her moral agency cannot be denied from her on the traditional grounds. She is not overtaken by emotions or hormones when she murders people which were the two common excuses for women who murder because women are not supposed to be capable of murder (Birch 4-5). Also, the number of victims – allegedly more than two hundred – presents the problem if she even could have been morally incapable of knowing right from wrong every single time. The calmness when she kills, the way she discusses her victims and how she killed them indicate that she knows what she has done and that she does not regret anything. In other words, she knew what she was doing and that it was wrong but she did not care. All of this clearly indicates that Gretchen does have moral agency.

Having moral agency would also explain why Gretchen is such a successful serial killer. The brutality of her murders and the time she spends on each victim would not be possible if she was overridden by emotions, because emotional or hormonal killings are mostly done in a moment of desperation. Gretchen's patience, rationality and calmness when killing someone and

her skill to manipulate people and maintain control are key characteristics that make her a better killer. If she did not have moral agency she would not have these characteristics and she would not be as good of a killer.

Second, this discussion on agency will explore the concept of trickster agency.

Mäntymäki introduces the concept of trickster agency in her study of Lisbeth Salander. Trickster agency is something that is unconventional not only because of women's overall lack of agency but also because it questions patriarchal power structures. One feature of tricksters that Mäntymäki mentions is that they "play tricks on the representatives of power and authority" ("Carnavalesque" 93). This particular trickster characteristic is prominent in the novels because before the first time that she was caught Gretchen adopted the role of a psychiatrist and offered her help to the police force who were trying to catch her. She tricks the police into thinking that she is there to offer both a psychological view on the murders and therapy to the officers. In reality, she is trying to get close to the investigation and Archie whom she later kidnaps. In *Let Me Go* her time as a "consultant" is portrayed through flashbacks where she discusses her killings with Archie.

Another way that Gretchen tricks the police and everyone else is by adopting the traditionally masculine role of the murderer. In one of the flashbacks in *Let Me Go* Archie claims that "Women don't kill like this" (84) and later he says to Rachel – a woman Gretchen has paid to sleep with Archie – : "We thought the Beauty Killer was a man back then. There was a consensus that a woman couldn't be capable of that kind of sadism" (241). Her way of murdering is thus unconventional: she does not try to revenge anything or act in the heat of the moment as is often the case with female murderers. In addition, she does not have a motive or a typical victim: she just kills for her own entertainment which confuses everyone who is trying catch her and which is why she remained free for ten years before she gave herself in.

As seen in previous paragraphs, Gretchen has some features of the trickster but it is arguable whether or not she actually is a trickster character and if she truly portrays the most core

elements of being a trickster, in other words whether or not she questions existing social structures. I would argue that she does in her own way offer a comment on existing social hierarchies and traditional ideals of femininity and masculinity. Gretchen mostly comments on the norm of who can or cannot be a serial killer. In the books it is clear that society's consensus is that men can be brutal and kill people but women cannot. The police officers and FBI profilers who are pursuing Gretchen are convinced that the person who they are trying catch is a man. They are certain that only a man could be behind such brutality and be able to kill so many people of different ages, genders and socio-economic status. The police officers live in a society where women are supposed to be the opposite of what Gretchen is; caregivers, mothers, understanding and peaceful. Gretchen challenges this existing traditional female figure and the ideas of who and what a killer is and destroys them. She also forces the police and society to adapt and redefine their system to accommodate and accept new patterns of thinking.

Finally, sexual agency will be discussed. Gretchen clearly has sexual agency because she has control over her body and sexuality, but she performs her sexuality in a deviant manner. Women's sexuality has traditionally been considered a taboo and something that should only exist in a domestic environment between a married heterosexual couple (Spade and Willse 561). Gretchen being a heterosexual is the part of sexuality in which she comes closest to being a traditional woman. Although her sexual identity is not explicitly referred to in the novels, she only performs heterosexual acts in them and thus it can be assumed that she is heterosexual. The only sexual partner she has in the novels is Archie who she seduces when he is still with his wife.

In other aspects of sexuality Gretchen tends to deviate from the norm. Willse and Spade (561) state that traditionally sexual behaviour or intercourse is seen as acceptable if it happens in "at home" and between a married couple or a couple who is in a committed relationship. As the novels portray Gretchen does not care where she has sex; even being at a crime scene will not stop her. In one of the flashbacks in *Let Me Go* Gretchen convinces Archie to have sex in the

crime scene where she murdered her latest victims (139). Gretchen seduces Archie and breaks his resolve by simply kissing and undressing him and stripping in the middle of the bloody room when he starts to hesitate:

‘This is a crime scene,’ he reminds her.

He fumbles to zip up his pants, trying to fight his ache for her.

Her fingers play with a button on his shirt. ‘You said they were finished,’ she says.

He looks at her incredulously. ‘I’m not worried about evidence,’ he says. ‘A woman was murdered in this room. It’s a crime scene. It’s not right.’ ...

When he looks up, Gretchen is slithering out of her skirt. ...

Gretchen stands completely nude, the grisly tableau of the murder bed behind her.

(139)

Furthermore, Gretchen’s sexuality reaches a criminal point of deviance in *Let Me Go* when she sexually assaults Archie in a party that she sneaked to uninvited. Archie was unconscious because of a substance that was injected in to his blood and Gretchen found, dragged him outside and proceeded to sexually assault him while he remained unconscious: “As she did, she walked one hand down his chest and over his groin. ... She wasn’t wearing underwear. Archie could see a thin shadow of pubic hair on her pelvis as she lowered herself down and sat on top of his face. She started grinding herself against him, keeping her own hand working in hard circles, the dress pooled around her waist.” This explicitly displays not only deviant feminine sexuality but criminal sexuality that is wrong in every situation.

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude the exploration of Gretchen’s deviance from or compliance of traditional roles and agency, I will summarize the results of my analysis. In the chapter about traditional roles I studied

Gretchen in relation to different roles and attributes what women are expected to have; being a mother, a caregiver, passive and domestic. Gretchen mostly deviates from these attributes. She is very active as a killer and she does not wait and hide but adopts a role in the group assigned to catch her. She is also a public figure due to her being a famous killer that has managed to escape twice and she does not exactly hide from the public eye when running from the police. But she does somewhat adopt traditional role in that she has a child and she is a nurse. Gretchen's feelings toward her daughter are quite ambiguous as she has given Pearl away but on the other hand, she kept Pearl for two years and it is not completely clear if she killed because of circumstances or because Pearl's death had to be avenged.

In addition to exploring traditional roles, I also studied Gretchen and three types of agency: moral, trickster and sexual. I would argue that Gretchen has moral agency because, although the books are slightly inconsistent, since the first she is apprehended she is trialled as sane and put to a regular jail but on the second time she is put into a psych ward, she can separate right from wrong. Further, Gretchen being a trickster agent is also ambiguous since it is up to interpretation if she conveys the key traits of being a trickster. I argue that she does portray enough characteristics to be interpreted as a trickster. She does offer a comment on social structures and society's view on what is normal and she also tricks authorities. Finally, Gretchen has sexual agency, but her sexuality is mostly deviant.

Lastly, I will discuss some points of interest for further studies. As was said before there are many more themes and aspects of femininity that would be interesting to study in the Gretchen Lowell series. The themes discussed in this thesis could also be expanded and explored further in the future. It would be interesting to study all of the books in the series and how the series as a whole portrays Gretchen, Archie, their relationship, femininity and criminality. Furthermore, the series has a few other female characters that could be studied as individuals and in comparison



to Gretchen, for example how are the female reporter, cop and murderer are portrayed and what similarities or differences their characters might have.

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