Everybody Loves a Bad Girl
– A Study of Female Evil in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* and Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*

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Abstract

This essay examines the two female antagonists Zenia from Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* and Amy Dunne from Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl.* It explores traditional female evil in literature, and compares the two villains to the traditional roles that evil women often have. In addition to this, it also examines what way Amy and Zenia might not just be evil characters, by adding a feminist perspective to their roles as women who reject traditional patriarchal values. The essay will investigate how we might be expected to label these characters as evil, and I will argue that we are not actually meant to label them, but instead question what makes these women bad.

Table of Contents

Introduction

The female villain has existed for centuries in literature, taking forms such as witches, evil step-mothers, ghosts, mad-women, vengeful wives and femme fatales. Sometimes the women are just dreadful and haunting, but often they are also alluring, cunning, manipulating, and not afraid to use their sexual appeal as a tool to get their way. Sarah Appleton Aguiar, who analyses bad women in her book *The Bitch is* Back, states that in the surge of second wave feminism, in a desire to display female characters in a good light, these malevolent women became more rare, particularly in feminist literature (1-2). Aguiar also points to a resurgence of these characters in the hands of late 20th century female authors, and with it, a redefining of what it means to be a wicked woman in literature (6).

Two prominent characters that have been born from respectively after this resurgence are Zenia in *The Robber Bride*, by Margaret Atwood from 1993, and Amy from Gillian Flynn's bestseller *Gone Girl,* published in 2012. *The Robber Bride* is the story of three women and their common enemy Zenia, whom they all presume dead until she one day walks back into their lives perfectly alive and kicking. The story progresses through both present and past timelines and unravels the women's pasts with Zenia, who has attempted, and in some cases succeeded, to ruin their relationships, their careers and more. With her return the three women must come to face their physical demon Zenia, as well as their figurative demons: their feelings of inadequacy and how they were not able to protect what they would come to lose. When Zenia is finally confronted by them, she tells the women wildly different stories of her situation and of what has happened, and claims that she has, in fact, helped them by her actions.

In *Gone Girl*, Nick Dunne's wife, Amy, disappears from their home in Missouri, leaving what seems to be a crime scene behind. Through every other chapter the story unfolds through a perplexed Nick's perspective, and we follow the police investigation and learn about a marriage where the passion has dwindled. However, the chapters in between take the form of several years of diary entries written by Amy, and in them we are instead told about a relationship that changes from loving to abusive to life-threatening. When the investigation deepens, the evidence seems to point in Nick's direction, but through a shift in the narrative we learn that Amy is alive and well. In fact, the diary entries are mostly fictitious and she has faked her own disappearance in order to frame Nick for her murder as punishment for his infidelity and lack of appreciation and affection. While the outline of the story may sound

like a classic tale of a vengeful wife, Amy is not just any ordinary woman scorned. She displays a behavior that could be argued to render her a psychopath, and she truly seems to believe that her behavior is justified. However, she also provides gripping social criticism and at times we are very willing to believe in her cause. Because of the fact that her narrative control spans half the novel, we are also provided with something that is not always given to "evil" women in literature: her side of the story.

However, I believe that Zenia and Amy are not simply traditional villains. I therefore, in this essay intend to examine, compare and discuss Zenia in *The Robber Bride* and Amy in *Gone Girl* as bad women with a feminist perspective. I will compare these women against traditional literary types of female evil and investigate how the women are portrayed by their texts as well as the narrators of the story. I will then analyze what this says about their roles as "evil" or "bad" women. What makes these characters "bad" and what purpose might be served by portraying them in an ambiguous light?

The first part of this essay will, in order to define what normally constitutes a "bad" or evil" woman in literature, define and discuss female evil and villainy in literature in general, with a historical and feminist perspective. I will study different archetypes and incarnations of fictional evil women, and take into consideration male- vs female-authored literature. The following part will provide an examination and comparison of how the two women of the novels are portrayed, both by the narrative voices in their stories and by the authors. These examinations will be compared to the observations on female evil conducted in the previous section and I will investigate how these portrayals compare to traditional ones. In the third part I will investigate how Amy and Zenia's portrayals might deviate from traditional female evil and if they serve a feminist purpose. Finally, my conclusion will discuss the results.

Bad women and female evil in literature

First of all, I would like to suggest that bad serves as an umbrella term for a range of character tropes and archetypes. Bad can mean evil, rebellious, cruel, irresponsible and many other things. Therefore, bad women can be different from each other depending on the type of texts they appear in, as well as on the roles that they are given. Their crimes can range from disobedience to violent murder and they are not always ordinary women; sometimes they are not even human. However, I would like to argue that there are several aspects and

characteristics that bad and evil women in fiction often have in common with each other regardless of who they are and what literature they appear in.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word "bad" as "not good", and "[o]f poor quality or little worth" (oed.com). "Evil" is described as "[m]orally depraved, bad, wicked, vicious" (oed.com). The terms wicked and vicious often implicate cruelty and harming others, and could be considered to be relatively straightforward. However, the phrase "morally depraved" might be more difficult to dissect, particularly in terms of female evil. What constitutes morals may differ between different time periods and cultures, as well as between genders. The expectations, norms and pressure, in some cases even laws, placed on women tend to differ from those placed on men. Therefore it could be argued that what constitutes evil, bad, and good behavior, is also likely to differ between men and women.

In fiction, there are several qualities that appear to be distinctive for female evil and bad women. Such qualities are sexuality, violence and brutality, not being a good mother, and rejecting the patriarchal social order by striving for more power than women are normally granted. Naturally, the frames for how much or how little of these qualities female characters can display without being perceived as evil change slightly depending on what genre, time period and culture a literary piece belongs to. A fictive woman in a contemporary Western society could possibly have sexual relations without being married, without this causing her to be considered as a bad woman. A female warrior in a fantasy novel might not necessarily be labeled as evil, despite the fact that she might be violent. However, even in such cases, any abundant displays of traditionally bad behavior often put women in a negative light regardless of what type of novel they appear in. To strengthen my claim on what tends to constitute female evil, I have below examined some existing female characters and character types throughout literary history, and to an extent the social, moral and juridical views and aspects that accompany the time periods of the characters' conceptions.

In Greek tragedy (and mythology) bad or evil women appear in relatively powerful forms, such as the gorgon Medusa. In the myth, Medusa is raped by Poseidon in the temple of Athena. As a punishment for defiling her temple, even though Medusa is the victim and the crime is committed against her, Athena curses Medusa. The curse is the curse of ugliness: Medusa's appearance becomes hideous and her hair is transformed into snakes. As a result of this ugliness, anyone who looks at her will turn to stone. This leads her to become or be perceived as a monster and a villain. Eventually she is defeated by the hero Perseus who presents Athena with her severed head. In her essay about the Medusa myth, Doris K.

Silverman points out that several variations of the myth exist (117). Some versions say that Medusa is a seductress, others suggest that she is a wealthy queen whose riches Perseus wants to obtain for himself (Silverman 117). Even if the elements of the myth vary, it could be argued that Medusa is punished for being sexualized, and that she is ultimately killed because of the threat her power poses.

Evil women are also a frequent occurrence in biblical stories, lore and legends (Aguiar 5). In fact, Eve herself can be viewed as a bad woman. She defies the word of God by eating from the tree of knowledge, persuades Adam to do so too, and thus she condemns mankind. In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, it is Eve's decision to spend time apart from Adam that ultimately leaves her vulnerable to the temptations presented by Satan. The cases of Medusa and Eve could be argued to exemplify the supposed dangers of women's sexuality, independence and power. Aguiar, using the term "bitch" to represent "bad", reflects upon these early incarnations and states that "[t]he bitch, by her very definition, is the embodiment of female evil" in her role as the hero's bane and as a corrupter of morally righteous protagonists (5). Aguiar also states that "patriarchal mythology displays a rampant hatred and overlying fear of women" (35). She further observes characters such as the ones just mentioned, serve as "potent warning[s] for female readers" (Aguiar 5). Sexuality, power and independence are to be associated with evil and misfortune, and displays of such characteristics from female characters lead to condemnation and punishment.

In Elizabethan works we encounter several "bad" women. It is observed by Cristina León Alfar that women from this time are "frequently represented by evil, sickness and death" (15). Ana Sentov, in her essay about Shakespearean female villains, explains that the view on women deteriorated by the time of the Shakespearean era (27). The scholars of the period adopted, both in terms of medicine and philosophy, the theory of ancient masters, and this in combination with the development of Protestantism is argued by Sentov to have shaped the idea of women as "weak and sinful, lesser than men" (27). This attitude can be argued to have caused the shift in the depictions of women in literature towards more dire and sinister associations. However, Alfar also claims that "cultural attitudes toward women were firmly established before and continued on after Shakespeare's time" (30). At this time, much like during antiquity, women held an economic value, which could often lead them be seen and treated as commodities. (Alfar 31). Alfar explains that this was due to the "desire for a pure line of descent", and thus a calculable and trustworthy plan for creating heirs (32). This meant that virginity and chastity were the most valuable assets a woman could have. Alfar continues:

"[A]s a result of the value attributed to the pure female body, anxieties about its opposite – the nightmare figure of the adulterous, rebellious woman – proliferate and give rise to the need for control over that which denies order" (31). In other words: women's sexuality was something that needed to be controlled, and women who displayed autonomous sexuality and desire were considered to be wrong and unnatural.

In Shakespeare's tragedies, we encounter several "bad" women whose evil is amplified by their sexuality. In *Titus Andronicus*, the Barbarian queen Tamora seeks vengeance for the murder of her son, who was himself killed as an act of vengeance for murders Tamora had previously comitted. She uses her sexuality not just for pleasure, but as a tool to control her husband, and Sentov argues that her status as a sexual being is made more distasteful to the audience because of her status as a mother (29). Similarly, Goneril and Regan in *King Lear* demonstrate a sexuality that exceeds "proper" behavior. Both they and Tamora are married to men that cannot control them, and thus embody the previously mentioned nightmare figure that men feared.

Another aspect that appears to characterize these female villains is their adoption of traditionally male attributes such as ambition and ruthlessness. Tamora's ambition and desire for vengeance strengthen her status as an evil character, despite the fact that both traits are also exhibited by the play's title character Titus, because they diverge from the traditional ideals of femininity (Sentov 29). According to Sentov, Goneril and Regan "are being condemned for actions that would have been expected from male rulers" (29). Sentov also states that these women break the patriarchal order by attempting to obtain power that in these societies are considered to be male, disobeying someone who is both their father and their king (30). Lady Macbeth, who is notorious in the female canon, is a more ambiguous case. Her role as a villain is different from the previously mentioned Shakespearean examples. She is ambitious not for her own sake but for her husband's, she is loyal in her marriage, and she does not attempt to gain superiority over her husband. However, Lady Macbeth rejects her own femininity in order to coerce Macbeth into killing the king, and consequently "violates her role of good wife" (Sentov 31). This eventually drives her mad with guilt, which subsequently causes her to commit suicide. Thus, she is punished for her defiance of her feminine role and the "natural order".

While the female characters examined above are indeed considered villains, Sentov does state that Shakespeare's "'evil women' are more true to life" than his heroines, and that these characters are not simply villains but people who try to object and liberate themselves

from the constraints of their patriarchal society (31). Having said this, it is possible to conclude that sexual desire, ambition, and rejection of their own femininity are factors that threaten the patriarchal order and are usually features that contribute to labeling fictional women as "evil" in the Elizabethan period. Sentov further notes that all these women share the features of trying "to win male prerogatives, such as the power to rule the land or make decisions" (28). In the end, these ambitions lead to their deaths.

Another key feature that seems to often be connected with female evil in literature is independence. Gonzáles and Rodriguez-Martin, who examine the connection between female evil and independence, state that "[w]itches, spinsters, rich widows who decide not to remarry or unloving stepmothers in control of the power left by an absent father" are frequent and long-established representations of the threat that women's independence poses to "the order established by patriarchal society" (202). These types of characters are commonly found in fairy tales, but also in novels such as *Jane Eyre* and *Great Expectations*. The patriarchal order subjugates women to men by making them dependent on men for economic, social and emotional support (Gonzáles and Rodriguez-Martin, 203). If the need for material and social support were to vanish, women would display a greater resistance and opposition towards being controlled (Gonzáles and Rodriguez-Martin 203). Aguiar comments that women who reject and overlook male protection in favor of autonomy and freedom appear suspicious to men (38). This can in some cases lead to accusations of witchcraft (Aguiar 38). These observations are supported by Sentov's claim that the power of uncontrollable women "is ascribed (by the male characters) to the supernatural forces" (28). Aguiar also addresses that although the witch traditionally is an old crone, male heroes are often confronted with witches that are "succubitic and sexually treacherous" (28). The witch thus emphasizes sexuality as an evil trait among women, and especially highlights the use of sex as a weapon.

A modern reincarnation of this the independent witch could be argued to be the femme fatale. Like the witch, she uses sex as a destructive force and actively harms men. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the femme fatale as "[a]n attractive and seductive woman, esp. one who is likely to cause risk to or the downfall of anyone who becomes involved with her" (oed.com). Naomi Segal who examines different femme fatales claims that the femme fatale originates from the Romantic art-movement and its sensitive heroes (105). However, the most notorious kind of femme fatale is that which emerged in the early 20th century, perhaps most often represented in espionage- and noir stories and films. Kirsten Smith, in her analysis of the contemporary femme fatale, explains that a femme fatale "is identified by the power she

has over men and how she uses this for her own benefit" (37). Her role is to attempt to obstruct the prowess of the male protagonist, usually by means of manipulation and seduction, and then she will "deceive and betray him" (Smith 37). Because of the fact that she is not initially registered as a threat to the protagonist, she becomes unique in comparison to other potential enemies (Smith 38). This, Smith suggests, is what makes her "an alluring danger" (38). Smith also states that the femme fatale emerged from "themes of sexuality, particularly promiscuity, independence, adoption of masculine clothing or mannerisms, and rejection of maternal duties" and is the embodiment of the fears men possess about women and the threat they pose against masculinity and the patriarchal order (38). However, Kenneth Lota, in his study of the re-invention of the femme fatale, comments that in classic noir "the female characters are regarded as objects—whether femme fatale or good girl— and rarely endowed with the same narrative control" (151) Despite the fact that these femme fatales display autonomy and purposely direct the plot, their stories, background and motivations are not explored.

What also appears to be distinctive for the femme fatale is her inevitable demise. Because of the fact that these women deviate from their own gender roles, and also threaten masculinity by deceiving and fooling men, Smith points out a trend of punishing them (45). Smith also argues that it is the femme fatale's "promiscuity rather than her use of violence" that leads to her demise, because it appears to harm masculinity more. Mary Ann Doane, who discusses the cinematic femme fatale, states that "her textual eradication involves a desperate reassertion of control on the part of the threatened male subject" (2). However, Lota does comment that in neo-noir, the contemporary femme fatale can occasionally escape punishment and even be triumphant to some extent, which would not have been a possibility for her traditional counterparts (157).

Neo-noir came into existence in the 1970's, and is a reincarnation of traditional noir with modernized themes and style (Lota, 154). Lota explains that while the traditional femme fatale represents postwar problems, the neo-femme fatale "reflects new gender anxieties" (154). The neo-femme fatale is a product of a diminished censorship and the development and progress of feminism, which suggests she is a more empowered type of character and sometimes "boldly transgressive in terms of gender politics" (Lota, 157). However Lota argues that "she can also be a weapon deployed by the patriarchy to indict [feminist] progress" (155). "boldly transgressive in terms of gender politics" (157).

While most of the previously mentioned literature has been written by men, not all bad women in literature have male creators. Many different evil and bad women appear in literature written by women, and in many cases for female consumption (Aguiar 57). It is proposed by Elaine Showalter that female authors have a "tendency to project and expand their own culture-bound stereotypes of femininity" (271). Women have frequently created evil female characters, though they have created them differently than male authors. Aguiar states that there tends to be a distinction between male- and female-authored female villains, especially in terms of motives (57). She suggests that even though the male-authored characters serve as impetuses for the plot, and thus affect the reactions of, and actions made by, other characters, they lack a clear purpose (Aguiar 57). Despite the fact that female villains written by men drive the plot forward, they are not provided with their own drive, and thus appear to be bad without any comprehensible reasons. This is explained by Aguiar as a failure "to analyze the external and internal factors that may have contributed to [their] creation" (57). Aguiar suggests that evil women in women's stories display a deeper emotional connection to their own actions (57). If one assumes this to be true, it could be argued that female evil written by women contradicts the patriarchal idea that women who do bad and evil things solely act out of irrationality and maliciousness. Gonzáles and Rodríguez-Martín even suggest that "wickedness may be the only way left for [women] to survive whilst maintaining their autonomy" (202).

There are also female characters that demonstrate bad and evil behavior but still remain rather well-liked, or at least respected, if not among their fellow characters, then at least among the readers. Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*, Lady Susan in *Lady Susan* and Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair* are all women who display selfishness, ambition and desire and who neglect their motherly duties. Despite this they have received both appreciation and understanding from readers. Characters such as these could be argued to demonstrate that female characters must not be "good" to be enjoyed and appreciated, but instead, they must be entertaining. Sebastian Faulks, in his exploration of the British literary hero, acknowledges the difference between "real-life and literary morals" and comments that "the highest virtue a fictional character can possess is *interest*" (Faulks). So what is the reason for these women's popularity and why are they considered interesting? I would like to argue that the answers lie in the fact that these women are the protagonists of their own stories, not the antagonists of someone else's. Regardless of whether they are to be labeled as "heroes", "anti-heroes" or "villains" their status as main characters provide them with narrative power, which is arguably

the most effective way to humanize a character. They are provided with voices and with motives behind their actions, which makes all the difference. These well-liked evil fictive women are labeled "evil" for the same or similar reasons as disliked ones (sexuality, selfishness, ambition), but it is their perspectives that allow for a less harsh reception among readers.

While not all female, bad characters are disliked by readers, the observations made above can be argued to allude that most fictive, bad women have the same set of reasons that categorize them as "bad" and "evil". It can be concluded that there does indeed seem to be certain qualities that are inherently considered bad when associated with to women, even though many of the same qualities often are praised or at least not as disapproved of, when demonstrated by men. They also appear to be rather unchanging regardless of time. Not even the elements that attach modern women to "evil" appear to be any different. It is still the refusal to conform to societal norms and gender expectations that is considered inherently dangerous to masculinity and patriarchy. The tradition of punishing bad and evil women also seems to remain in most types of literature. As a result of having refused, opposed or defied the patriarchal order, the bad women must pay the price and are frequently killed to cement patriarchal control over narrative and order. Aguiar comments that regardless of how dangerous and powerful defiant women are, they have little potential of victory (50).

Zenia and Amy: How bad are the bad girls?

The evil, bad and morally ambiguous women in literature declined in number during the middle and later half of the 19th century (Aguiar 2). Aguiar explains that this was because second-wave feminism caused an unwillingness among female authors to create characters with traits that could be considered to display women from a negative viewpoint (2). In an interview in *The New York Times* regarding *The Robber Bride*, Atwood herself discusses the lack of evil women in modern literature and comments that she wishes for a re-emergence of characters such as Lady Macbeth and Becky Sharp (Lyall). Zenia, with all the evil that comes with her, thus perhaps serves as an antithesis to the many good girls that dominated literature in the 1970's and 1980's.

It is evident from the start that Zenia is perceived by the protagonists as a malicious character. Already on the first page she is described by Tony as someone who "enjoyed such

turbulence, such violent contradictions" (Atwood 3). By the time she physically appears in the novel, the three protagonists react to her with shock and fear: "[t]hey feel caught out, they feel trapped, they feel guilty" (Atwood 38). However, even though Zenia is back from the dead, the protagonists quickly accept her revival, almost as if they were expecting it. We also understand that the history the protagonists share with Zenia has left them not only hurt but also haunted. Even though Zenia is initially thought to be dead, Tony, Charis and Roz cannot refrain from constantly thinking about her, even many years after they last saw her. Tony, who narrates the first chapter, admits that "[s]he frequently thinks of Zenia" and that even now "Zenia's name is enough evoke the old sense of outrage, of humiliation, and confused pain" (Atwood 11). She also says: "Zenia likes hunting. She likes hunting anything. She relishes it." (Atwood 43). It is evident that whatever harm Zenia has done, it was made intentionally and has caused deep wounds. This leaves us with the conclusion that she is indeed an evil character.

When one analyses what type of female "evil" that Zenia represents, it can be argued that she shares many similarities with the femme fatale. As previously mentioned, the femme fatale is manipulative and beautiful, and uses sex to seduce and use men. We learn that Zenia has in the past successfully seduced the protagonist's respective partners and ruined aspects of their lives. Tony's husband West left her for Zenia (with whom he had a relationship before he met Tony). Once Zenia left West for the second time, West went back to Tony again in hopes of her taking him back, which she did. Billy, Charis's boyfriend, was seduced by Zenia, but she then exposed him to the authorities as an American illegal immigrant who fled to Canada to avoid serving in the war. Roz's husband Mitch left her for Zenia and became so captivated by her that when she left him he tried to follow her and eventually committed suicide. Tony, Charis and Roz assume that it is solely Zenia's fault that their men were ensnared by her, and that she possesses a power of seduction that men find irresistible. She also uses men for money and shelter. As previously stated by Kirsten Smith, the femme fatale's trademark is the "power she has over men and how she uses this for her own benefit", which is exactly what Zenia has been proven to have and do (37). The image of Zenia as a femme fatale is strengthened by Atwood's writing. Tony states: "Zenia was a double agent. Or not even that, because Zenia wasn't working for one side or the other. She was on no side but her own" (Atwood 218). This writing serves as a reference to the noir- and espionage femme fatales. Zenia even fulfills the traditional femme fatale's inevitable destiny when she dies at the end of the novel, either by suicide, murder or accident; the truth is never exposed.

There are however certain differences between traditional femme fatales and Zenia. The most notable one of these is perhaps that while men suffer by her hands, they are not her main focus. Instead, she centers on the three female protagonists. Naturally, women also fall victim to traditional femme fatales, but they are rarely the original target but rather collateral damage. In *The Robber Bride*, Zenia seduces the women, not with sex but with stories, companionship and mystery that is specifically catered to each individual woman. In her seduction of men, she adapts herself to them in order to project a version of a woman that they desire and that they feel strengthens their masculinity. Similarly she projects different versions of herself to the women in order for them to find aspects of her that interest them, make them empathize with her, and desire to obtain her friendship and skills. This, too, could perhaps be considered unusual because of the fact that women does not tend to be fooled by a femme fatale in the way that men are in literature. Yet, Zenia manages to fool both men and women.

Zenia also possesses autonomy, independence and ambition, which are characteristics that are traditionally associated with female evil. She has no family that we know of (because we can assume that the stories about her background are mostly fictitious), and she does not seem to have any relationships that she is not willing to abandon. Even though Zenia technically depends on others to provide her with an income and shelter, she is the one who initiates the relationships that offer such things. Because of the fact that she is in control of her own actions and that she manipulates the people around her into providing for her, it can be argued that the conditions for Zenia's dependency are always her own. Thus she defies the patriarchal idea that women need to depend on men. She is also ambitious, and she is willing to lie, cheat and manipulate to get her way. She convinces Tony to write her essay for her, thus achieving both academic success and control of Tony (because Zenia threatens to expose the truth regarding the essay). When Zenia starts working at the magazine Roz owns, she redirects the content of the magazine which causes it to become financially successful. She also manages to seduce investors and board members, including Roz's husband. These two factors allow her to become more powerful in her role at the magazine, but they also harm those around her.

If Zenia represents the traditional noir femme fatale, Amy in *Gone Girl* is the femme fatale of neo-noir. She is beautiful, manipulative, and very good at fooling men for her own benefit. She uses her attractiveness as a way to control men, mainly attempting to change them into something that suits her desires. However, Amy is also violent in a way that

traditional femme fatales are not. Unlike Zenia, who causes violence indirectly by manipulating others into performing violent acts, Amy actually commits a violent crime: she murders her ex-boyfriend Desi by stabbing him. Thus, Amy moves beyond the classic boundaries of the femme fatale. Lota suggests that Amy is a "meta-noir character" and that "it is her correct assessment of contemporary gender roles that allows her to get away with what she does" (167). When men fail to live up to her expectations or disappoint her, she has no qualms about attempting to ruin their lives, and in fact gladly dedicates herself to such causes.

Like Zenia, Amy has also perfected the art of adopting different personas and playing different feminine roles. She has spent most of her life devoted to different types of roles: "Amazing Amy. Preppy '80's Girl. Ultimate-Frisbee Granola and Blushing Ingenue and Witty Hepburnian Sophisticate. Brainy Ironic Girl and Boho Babe" and ultimately "Cool Girl" (Flynn, 319). However, the reason why Amy has played these roles is not necessarily just to manipulate people. Instead she seems to have played them because she has not known who she was. Amy herself claims that it was her relationship with Nick that made her understand that she had her own personality. When she explains her actions after having revealed to the readers that she is alive, she says: "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" (Flynn, 303). This could be argued to suggest that Amy's tendency to take on fake personalities sometimes stems from different reasons than those of a femme fatale.

Another trait of Amy's is her ambition, which takes the form of competitiveness. Unlike Zenia, who seems to desire more tangible things such as money and power, Amy's ambition is driven by a need to outshine others. This is addressed in the novel by Nick who states: "But her obsessions tended to be fueled by competition: She needed to dazzle men and jealous-ify women" (Flynn, 61). Amy appears to take this competitiveness into all aspects of her life. In regards to her relationship she says: "Not that love is a competition. But I don't understand the point of being together if you're not the happiest?" (Flynn, 302).

Amy also, much like the femme fatale but also female villains in general, uses sex to manipulate those around her, although not necessarily in the most traditional sense. She has realized that it is not just sexual desire that can be used as a tool of manipulation. She accuses one of her ex-boyfriends of rape when he cheats on her, thus sex becomes not just controlling but an actual threat. She also uses a consequence of sex – pregnancy – to control Nick.

Women are expected to have nurturing and motherly qualities, and to want children. To reject motherhood is, even today, frequently regarded as strange and unnatural, thus it is often a trait of evil women. Gonzáles and Rodriguez-Martin state that "a woman who decides not to adapt herself to the traditional roles established for her – freely rejecting, for instance, marriage or maternity – is seen in some quarters as a weird specimen going against what nature has intended for her" (202). Aguiar states that women who have rejected motherhood are "[d]epicted as particularly vile in much of the male-authored work", but she adds that in fiction written by female authors, women who renounce motherhood are not usually as harshly critiqued (72).

In *Gone Girl*, Amy clearly rejects the idea of motherhood from early on. This establishes her as "other" and unnatural, and strengthens her position as "bad", because she denies societal expectations. By the end of the novel however, Amy does adopt the role of mother. I use the term "adopt" to accentuate that while she seems to conform to an ideal, she does so partly from malevolence and partly to protect herself. Nick threatens to expose what Amy has done, and therefore Amy uses pregnancy as insurance to prevent such a thing from happening. Nick has always wanted children, but he is also afraid of becoming like his own father who was emotionally distant and at times cruel, and who held a traditional patriarchal role as head of the house without providing love and support. Nick displays an almost desperate need to assure both himself and the reader that this will not be the case with him. Amy knows this, and can therefore use his combined longing and fear to her advantage. When Amy's pregnancy is confirmed by doctors, Nick completely submits to the idea that he will stay by Amy's side for the sake of the child. He states: "Amy had me forever" and "I needed to save my son, to try to unhook, unlatch, debarb, undo everything that Amy did. I would literally lay down my life for my child" (Flynn, 551). Thus, Nick becomes the one entrapped in an abusive marriage in order to protect a child, a role that mostly has belonged to women. Because of the fact that Amy conceives a child in order to emotionally extort and control Nick, it can also be claimed that she rejects the selflessness and love that motherhood is normally associated with. Therefore, it could be argued that Amy does not conform to motherhood but instead uses it to her advantage and "taints" the sanctity of the role.

It is also the pregnancy that ultimately guarantees that Amy ends up as the winner of the story. Despite the fact that she has murdered, lied and defied patriarchal order, she still comes out on the other end mostly unscathed and with a nuclear family. Nick has become the man she wants him to be: loving, adoring, obedient, and what she considers to be the best version

of him. While she is aware that he is only playing a role, she believes that he will learn to "love her unconditionally, under all [her] conditions" (Flynn, 555). Nick even admits that "[he] can't imagine [his] story without Amy" (Flynn, 555). He will at least pretend to be the man she originally fell for. Thus, Amy gets her happily ever after, a privilege few fictive evil women earn.

Ultimately, while Zenia and Amy have both similarities and differences, the biggest contrast between them could be argued to be their narrative voice. Zenia possesses no narrative voice at all; we only ever experience her from the viewpoint of others. Despite the fact that she is never provided with her own voice, the images of herself that she wishes to portray are very clear thanks to the three protagonists' detailed depictions of her. Tony, Charis and Roz seem to have such a strong obsession with Zenia that she does not need her own narrative. However, her lack of narrative does mean that her purposes and the reasons for her behavior remain hidden. Even when Zenia is directly confronted about her motives, she adapts the story for whomever she is talking to, thus keeping the reader from assuming any of them to be true. As previously mentioned, the lack of clear purpose is usually something that normally characterizes female villains written by men. Atwood has thus deprived Zenia of what female authors tend to provide their characters with.

Amy, on the other hand, is provided with a first person narrative. Of course, she shares the role as narrator with Nick, which means that she does not have complete control over what story the readers are told. However, Amy has the ability to manipulate the story through her diary, which means that she does not always have to tell the truth. Therefore it could be argued that she might have slightly more power over the narrative than Nick does. She uses her voice to explain her reasons and justify her cause, whereas Zenia uses the voice of others to shroud herself in further mystery. Zenia is an enigma from beginning to end, Amy is completely transparent.

Zenia and Amy: Secret feminists?

Having examined and analyzed Zenia and Amy in regards of how traditional female evil in literature is often represented, it could be argued that they both present many of the characteristics that female evil is normally associated with. They are not only selfish, cruel, seductive, sexual and violent (directly or indirectly), but they also reject traditional gender

roles and expectations such as motherhood and submissiveness. It must be stated that these women have become notably popular among readers, in large part due their lack of conformity, and the novels they appear in have been praised for their feminist content. Yet, both the characters and the novels, have also faced criticism from some for being misogynistic.

It is possible to claim that Zenia, who in so many ways exemplifies traditional female evil, is an antagonist and a villain. However, Zenia claims that she has in fact helped the three protagonists by relieving them of the things that held them back, mainly their men. Tony has always doted on and babied West, whom she believes too weak to handle any form of temptation or heartbreak. Roz is incapable of forgiving herself for her husband's suicide. Charis remains obsessed with Billy and refuses to acknowledge that he was an unpleasant man that she wanted to use to escape reality. Aguiar argues that because the women do not let go of the their false ideas about the men they love, Zenia is forced to return to destroy those ideas (131). Aguiar further explains "Zenias return, then, may be viewed as beneficial, a final "lesson" for the women" (131). Tony even agrees with Zenia when she says: "Mitch was a creep. Roz is better off without him" (Atwood, 494). Likewise there is truth in Zenia's observation regarding Charis's lost love: "He's just an excuse for you; he lets you avoid life" (Atwood, 513). Zenia also remains unapologetic in the midst of everything. She firmly rejects accusations the protagonists throw at her, pointing out that "that Mitch was responsible for his actions" and claming: "It wasn't *because* of me. I was just the excuse" (Atwood, 528, 494). This forces Tony, Charis and Roz to reflect on the fact that their men do have the capability of making their own decisions, and are not just completely captured by some woman.

As I have suggested earlier, Zenia might have been invented as a response to the good girls that dominated literature after the second wave of feminism. Fiona Tolan, who discusses the idea of post-feminism in *The Robber Bride*, states that Tony, Roz and Charis "represent the second wave values of sisterhood, loyalty, unity, whereas Zenia represents postfeminist individualism, sexuality, and diversity" (Tolan, 45). Tolan continues by explaining that post-feminist women reject "organised feminism" (Tolan, 46). In the novel, Zenia helps the protagonists become more realized versions of themselves. She helps Tony develop social skills and bravery, she grounds Charis and forces Roz to take action. If one applies these thoughts to the previously mentioned metaphor of feminism and post-feminism, it could perhaps be argued that post-feminism is needed to fully develop feminism's potential.

Yet, despite the fact that Zenia indeed can be argued to have a positive influence on the protagonists, she remains as the villain of the story. Therefore one can not say that Zenia in any way is a good character or woman. She still does cruel, evil and bad things, have little regard for anyone but herself, and uses people as she sees fit. She also remains completely unapologetic about her own behavior. She is cold and calculating but can also be entertaining, funny and witty, because that is how she originally presents herself to the protagonists. Throughout the novel, they are sometimes quite meek and careful, and often dote on men who the reader sees differently than the characters. Therefore Zenia's harsh and brutally honest character provides a startling, but perhaps welcome contrast among readers.

Whether or not *Gone Girl* is a feminist or misogynist text has been debated. Nile Capello for *the Huffington Post* claims that "*Gone Girl* is decisively misogynistic. There is not a single woman in the entire novel that isn't a complete and utter mess" (Capello). Eliana Dockterman of *Time* magazine is slightly more diplomatic, stating that: "nobody can agree if [*Gone Girl* is] a sexist portrayal of a crazy woman or a feminist manifesto. The answer is both and that's what makes it so interesting" (Dockterman). Of course Amy's behavior and actions are far from acceptable and she could of course be interpreted as the "psycho-girlfriend"-character that often serves as an ill-intended stereotype. Nick himself states that "[he] really did marry a genuine, bona fide psycho bitch" (Flynn, 363). While I do agree with those words to an extent, one can not simply reduce Amy's character to someone who is "crazy". Her observations and comments on gender roles and patriarchal expectations can be argued to serve as a relevant criticism of society.

After Amy reveals that she is alive, she dedicates several pages to her frustration about the expectations that Nick has of her, and how, when she did not want to live up to those expectations any more, he replaced her. Amy launches into a long commentary were she explains "the Cool Girl. Men always say that as *the* defining compliment, don't they? *She's a cool girl*" (Flynn, 299). Amy continues: "Being the Cool Girl means that I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes and burping, who plays videogames, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes" and so on. (Flynn, 299). The Cool Girl is a man's ultimate fantasy: she enjoys everything he does, is attractive, and never gets angry. Lota states that the Cool Girl is a reincarnation of the original good girl character, "because they facilitate patriarchy" (166). Amy states that "[m]en actually think this woman exists" and attributes that to the phenomenon that women willingly play this part (Flynn, 300).

While it is evident that Amy has little in regards for men she also displays a strong dislike towards most women. In her diary-sections, Amy occasionally talks about her female friends, most often for the purpose of comparing her relationship to theirs. Once we leave the diary behind and Amy's active narrative voice takes over, we can see that these comparisons are anchored in rivalry and resentment towards women who pretend to be either "the cool girl" or someone else they are not. Even if she comments that "it's tempting to be cool girl", she is not very forgiving of those who subjugate themselves to the ideals of men (Flynn, 301). There is also an irony to this, because Amy herself seems incapable of completely letting go of her need to be liked. When she addresses the physical changes she has undergone during her disappearance, she claims: "I don't miss men looking at me" (Flynn 336). Yet, when a man she gets to know during her time as "gone" prefers another woman over her, Amy says: "She is much prettier than I am. Cheap pretty" (Flynn 371). Gonzáles and Rodríguez-Martín note that "instances of female enmity contribute to maintain the same order that oppresses women. In order to survive, therefore, it is important for a patriarchal society to keep women as enemies" (204). It could be argued that Amy, whilst very much aware of the patriarchal pressure on women to conform to expectations and stereotypes, and for women to play their parts in preserving the patriarchy by being rivals, still manages to fall victim to it.

However, although some of Amy's actions can, at least to some extent, be attributed to society and her refusal to subject to patriarchal wishes, there is still no possibility of claiming that she is a heroine. Amy fully believes that what she done is justified; in her mind, Nick has killed everything that she is, thus he has killed her. The punishment should fit the crime. While the reader might sympathize with her, it is also evident that no "good" character would act that way.

Something that might affect how good or bad Amy is perceived by the audience is her movement through the novel from victim to perpetrator to victim again, and ultimately once more to perpetrator again. Of course, the initial victimization of Amy is not real. As we know, she has made herself the victim by concocting the majority of her story, and when the search for her shows no progress, suspicion is turned on Nick. Because of the fact that Amy has portrayed herself as friendly and loving in front of most people, her friends, family and even the public all start to believe that Nick is guilty. When the reader learns that Amy is alive and has orchestrated her own disappearance, Amy shifts from the victim, as her diaries has led one to believe, to the mastermind behind a conspiracy. By doing so, she turns the story of domestic abuse and a battered wife on its head. Because Amy is now known to be in control

of the situation and Nick turns out to be the victim of it, perceptions of the characters shift. It becomes evident that Amy is in fact powerful, and that Nick has very little ability to affect the outcome of what Amy has planned. Amy's intention to kill herself can also be argued to be the ultimate weapon. The case is investigated as a disappearance but a dead body would guarantee a murder investigation and definitely incriminate Nick. Thus, Nick's chances of survival depend on Amy's capability of actually committing suicide; she holds the power over his life. However, she decides against killing herself, which can be considered the catalyst of Amy's eventual re-victimization.

When Amy cancels her plans to commit suicide, she has already created a simulation of friendship with some people. These people eventually rob her, and thus Amy is placed in a vulnerable and desperate position which causes her to seek the help of her ex-boyfriend Desi. Although some knowledge has been distributed through the novel regarding his character, we now experience him they way he truly is: utterly obsessed with, and possessive of, Amy. Amy comes to live with him under the pretense of hiding from Nick, but soon realizes that she has lost control of the situation. In this segment of the novel, Amy actually is the victim of male power, and one can discern an increasing panic in her narration. This provides a version of Amy that mirrors the projected Amy presented in the diary with whom we sympathized.

While the purpose of her diary was to incriminate Nick it is also used as a way for Amy to gain sympathy and approval from whoever reads it, including the reader of the novel, as is evident in the following passage: "I hope you liked Diary Amy. She was meant to be likable. Meant for someone like you to like her" (Flynn 319). It could be speculated that the fact that she has fooled not only the fictive people of the story but the actual reader as well, might provoke a stronger sense of dislike from the audience. Her statement could also be seen as Amy displaying a sense of superiority to the reader which is another factor that might cause the reader to dislike her. Therefore, it could be speculated that Amy's real victimization, being trapped by Desi, is used to regain the sympathy from the reader that Amy might have lost. She even takes on a role similar to a Gothic heroine, having to escape a man who holds her captive in a big mansion-like home. We are presented with a new cause to root for her. These shifts in her position as victim and perpetrators it is possible that the reader's perception becomes muddled and/or transforms again.

Eventually Amy resorts to killing Desi in order to escape. This course of action places her in control of her situation again and it also makes her an actual murderer, a role that she until then only has occupied figuratively. This too can be argued to complicate one's

perception of her. One one hand, we recall her brutality and her initial intentions of murdering her husband. On the other hand, she can also be considered to have acted in self-defense to escape captivity. However, she then returns home with the intention of keeping Nick captive in their marriage. This reinstates her as the perpetrator.

Taking all the analyses above in account, it is possible to argue that Zenia and Amy possesses many different characteristics and traits that makes their status as evil ambiguous. There are elements of their character and stories that can be argued to serve either feminist purpose, or at least question if their status as "completely evil". It could be argued that a pattern can be discerned for both Zenia and Amy, where they act under the flags of both "necessary evil" and "pure evil".

Conclusion

Zenia and Amy represent two cases of literary villains that are not as easily defined and analyzed as many of their female counterparts. They both conform to, and deviate from, the norms that usually accompany villains and evil women, which indicates that they might not be meant for easy deconstruction and categorizing. As mentioned in the first chapter of this essay, fictive female villains and bad girls have often been used to represent or discuss male fears regarding women. Female bad characters are also frequently punished in order to either solidify male control, make an example of what happens to women who does not conform to patriarchal expectations, and to warn female readers of such behavior.

If one compares Zenia and Amy to traditional female evil in literature they in many ways conform to the expectations of what a bad woman is. They are sexual, selfish, willing to harm others, ambitious and rejects the patriarchal social order. However, Zenia and Amy also manage to make us aware that the expectations they refuse are actually derived from a patriarchal society in order to make women conform to a desired ideal. Thus, their acts as bad women could be said to be in order to fight against patriarchal control, and to be empowering. They balance between being truly evil and being "morally" vindictive. This is something that I believe contributes to these women's popularity among readers: their ability to behave outside of what is considered to be right for women, behave badly even, but also to an extent serve a feminist agenda. Yet, Zenia and Amy cannot simply be labeled feminist champions either. They are always selfishly motivated; their actions are never intended to be for the

greater good. The lengths to which they go to achieve their ends can be considered to pass the boundaries of human decency. They are willing to hurt and scare people, and jeopardize the lives of others. The fact that Zenia and Amy can be viewed in such contradictory light leads me to believe that we are not meant to be able to label as either good or bad. Instead I believe that we are meant to question what defines someone, women in particular, as bad.

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