

Trabajo Fin de Grado

“You think I'd let him destroy me and end up happier than ever? No fucking way”: The Effects of the Patriarchal Backlash in David Fincher's *Gone Girl*

Autora

Sandra Muniesa Gregorio

Directora

María del Mar Azcona Montoliú

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras
2016

Abstract

This essay explores the David Fincher's film *Gone Girl* (2014) in the light of the cultural phenomenon that Susan Faludi describes as "the backlash against independent women." As this essay will argue, Amy Dunne is presented in the film as a dangerous female psychopath so as to punish her for her independence, which turns her into a new and improved version of "bitch from hell"; one that is even more dangerous to men and society as a whole for it originates from within. The essay starts with an introduction that contextualizes the film in the generic context of Linda Williams's "erotic thriller". Then it explores the role of the internal narrators in the film and the process of demonization of Amy Dunne, which runs parallel to the victimization of her husband, Nick Dunne.

Key Words: the backlash against independent women, David Fincher, *Gone Girl*, masculinity crisis.

Resumen

El objeto de estudio de este es el análisis de la película *Perdida* (*Gone Girl*) David Fincher en relación con el fenómeno cultural que Susan Faludi describe como "el ataque contra las mujeres independientes" (*backlash*). Lo que este ensayo va a argumentar y defender es que la caracterización que la película hace de Amy Dunne como una peligrosa psicópata se debe al deseo de castigarla por la independencia que la convierte en una nueva y mejorada versión de "la perra del infierno" ("bitch from hell") que es incluso más peligrosa para el hombre en particular y para la sociedad en general ya que tiene sus orígenes en esta. Este ensayo empieza con la introducción que contextualiza este filme en el contexto genérico del "thriller erótico" ("erotic thriller") de acuerdo a Linda Williams. Tras esta introducción al contexto de *Perdida*, el ensayo se centra en el papel de los narradores internos de la película y en el proceso de demonización de Amy Dunne que es paralelo a la victimización de su marido, Nick Dunne.

Palabras Clave: el ataque contra las mujeres independientes (*backlash*), David Fincher, *Perdida*, crisis de la masculinidad.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	2
2. The Backlash through the Decades: from the 1980s to 2014.....	4
3. <i>Gone Girl</i>.....	9
3.1. From “America’s sweetheart” to “mind-fucker of the first degree”: Narration in <i>Gone Girl</i>.	10
3.2. From “Cool Girl” to “Gone Girl”: Amy’s Metamorphosis	15
3.3. “I am so sick of being picked apart by women”: Projecting the Masculinity Crisis into Nick’s Victimization	20
4. Conclusion	27
5. Works Cited	28
6. Films Cited	29

1. Introduction

Gone Girl is a 2014 film directed by David Fincher. The production company, Twentieth Century Fox, marketed the film as follows: “On the occasion of his fifth wedding anniversary, Nick Dunne reports that his wife, Amy, has gone missing. Under pressure from the police and a growing media frenzy, Nick's portrait of a blissful union begins to crumble. Soon his lies, deceits and strange behavior have everyone asking the same dark question: Did Nick Dunne kill his wife?” (“*Gone Girl* (2014)”). However, this brief description, which makes the film sound like a “whodunit”, does not exactly fit the plot of the movie. Right in the middle of the film, spectators stop wondering about Nick’s (Ben Affleck) involvement in his wife’s disappearance. In a surprising turn of events, Amy (Rosamund Pike) herself decides to tell spectators directly the truth about her disappearance. Whereas in the first part of the film Amy presents herself through her narrative voice-overs as an innocent and naive wife, in the second part she makes it clear that this image of the poor victimized wife is nothing but a bunch of lies: she has planned her disappearance and is going to kill herself in order to make Nick pay for his sins.

Amy’s confession of her Machiavellian plan is an unexpected narrative twist that both shocks and baffles spectators. The representation of Amy suddenly goes from victimization to demonization. It is precisely the demonization of the female character in *Gone Girl* that will be the main concern of this essay. As I will argue, the demonization of female characters has a long tradition both in the cinema and culture in general. It is part of what Susan Faludi refers to as “the backlash against independent women”. Faludi describes this phenomenon as an attack against women that, in Hollywood filmmaking history, she traces back to at least the 1940s and the figure of the dangerous and alluring *femme fatale* of film noir. However, this cultural attack is not

specific to a historical period for, as Faludi argues, it is cyclical, chameleonic and reappears each time women are improving their condition (*Backlash* 10). Faludi describes the 1980s backlash as “an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard non-victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women” (9, 10). Both Deborah Jermyn agrees with Susan Faludi on the fact that one the cinematic articulations of this backlash is the portrayal of women as either angels of the house or the so-called psychotic “bitches from hell” in the contemporary psychological erotic thriller (251) that was inaugurated by *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987) and includes top-rating films like *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) and *Single White Female* (Barbet Schroeder, 1992).

In the cultural and historical context described by Faludi in the prelude of the fifteenth edition of *Backlash*, there is no place for strong, independent women such as Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl* only for dependent and weak “brides of America”. This essay will explore the demonization of the character of Amy Dunne in the film as part of the contemporary backlash against independent women. As I will argue, Amy is presented as a dangerous female psychopath so as to punish her for her independence, which turns her into a new and improved version of “bitch from hell”; one that is even more dangerous to men and society as a whole for it originates from within.

2. The Backlash through the Decades: from 1980s to 2014

Susan Faludi describes the backlash against women as “sophisticated and banal”, deceptively “progressive” and proudly backward. It deploys both the “‘new’ findings of ‘scientific research’ and the dime-store moralism of yesteryear” (*Backlash* 10). The rationale behind it, she claims, responds to “the, sometimes unconscious, patriarchal desire of “controlling women--pushing them to conform to comfortingly nostalgic norms and shrinking them in the cultural imagination to a manageable size” (84). In addition, she states that in the United States there have been different backlashes against feminism and emphasizes the chameleonic nature of this movement that has become a subtle way of persuading women themselves into embracing the backlash principles (62). As she puts it, these ideas lodge “inside a woman’s mind [turning] her vision inward, until she begins to enforce the backlash, too--on herself” (14).

According to Faludi, although this attack originally started during the colonial period, in its contemporary version it goes back to the mid-19th century, when mass media and mass marketing appeared and started to spread the idea that educated women were “spinster gentlewomen”, who would have to put up with “a man shortage” and would suffer from “career burnout” (64). These women were considered almost criminals, which is quite in line with “dualistic sensibility” that according to Mary Beth Rose was used to see women as either angels or whores (in Deleyto “The Margins of Pleasure” 22) and in which “only the women that transgress the limits imposed on them by patriarchy are punished in various ways. Those who conform to their prescribed roles are saved and even glorified.” (36)

For Faludi, the recent history of the United States can be described as an alternation between periods that are celebratory of women liberation followed by

periods of backlash. Regarding Hollywood history, these periods have been characterized by the effort to silence the female voice, as is the case of the 1940s's women's films, whose heroines were passive, muted and victimized by their male counterparts (Faludi, *Backlash* 128). Consequently, strong, active and independent women were punished; hence the figure of the femme fatale, who is "intelligent and powerful, if destructively so, and derive power, not weakness, from their sexuality" (Place 35). This combination of aggressiveness and sensuality turns the *femme fatale* into a dangerous woman that threatens the male characters' masculinity, so that it must be destroyed (47). For Deleyto, heirs to these spider women are the protagonists of the cycle of psychotic working women of the 1980s and 1990s ("The Margins of Pleasure" 21), which started with the psychotic woman of *Fatal Attraction*, Alex Forrest (Glen Close), and evolved into a more subtle, alluring but still dangerous woman in the character of Catherine Trammel (Sharon Stone) in *Basic Instinct*. Both films are examples of the genre that Linda Williams refers to as "erotic thriller".

The erotic thriller is characterized by a mixture between the thriller, a genre whose main aim is the creation of suspense, and eroticism ("The Margins of Pleasure" 22). As Deleyto has argued, the explicit sexuality of the female characters onscreen is directly linked to the degree of danger they represent (22). In its beginnings, the female characters in these films followed Rose's "dualistic sensibility". In *Fatal Attraction*, for instance, Alex is the demonized working woman who tries to seduce and steal Dan (Michael Douglas) from the good wife because both the "man shortage" and the "infertility epidemic" have forced her to act desperately. She ends up having a nervous breakdown, which psychologists of the 1980s referred to as the "early career burnout", and which, of course, was mainly associated with strong professional women and directly linked to feminism. Without a man to call her own, Alex goes mad and starts

harassing Dan and his family, progressively becoming more evil so that the pity that spectators may have felt for Alex at the beginning of the film disappears and is replaced by hatred and even laughter (Faludi, *Backlash* 125, 135). Just like many femme fatales before her, her aspirations and her condition as a powerful, single, working woman marks her fate: she is shot down by Dan's wife when this "hearth angel" takes back what is hers and reestablishes the initial patriarchal order, which is the nuclear family. This film initiated a stream of similar Hollywood films like *Surrender* (Jerry Belson, 1987), *Crossing Delancey* (Joan Micklin Silvin, 1988) and *Baby Boom* (Charler Shyer, 1987) (Faludi, 129, 140, 143).

The erotic thriller genre became more sexualized in the 1990s because, as William claims, "the thrills are *in* the sex, the sex drives the thriller action" (26). This sexualization can be seen in Catherine Trammel, the main female character in *Basic Instinct*: she is a darkly alluring and dangerous woman, in complete control of all men (and some women) around her with her sexuality and her intelligence. Whereas *Fatal Attraction* just shows a brief love affair between Alex and Dan and the pervasive feeling in the film is one of danger and hazard, *Basic Instinct* is full of sexuality, sensuality and danger. The male characters are just puppets at the hands of the powerful and sexually alluring female character. The film also includes homoerotic elements such as the relationship between Catherine and Roxy (Leilani Sarelle) and Catherine's past affair with Beth (Jeanne Tripplehorn) and condemns both women and homosexuality since these three female characters are depicted as homicidal and obsessive (Deleyto, "The Margins of Pleasure" 30, 35). Thus, as Deleyto claims, the traditional opposition between the light and the dark woman disappears to be replaced by a misogynistic perspective: all the female characters end up dead with the exception of Catherine Trammell, the alluring devious and threatening sexuality (36).

As Williams explains, in the 1990s, with the exception of *Basic Instinct*, the erotic thriller was relegated to direct to video B-movies (7), which makes its influence not as significant as it was in the 1980s. However, its evolution, especially in the 2000s, was a quite unusual one for the genre. The *femme fatale* is no longer the mere object of scopophilia, the object to be looked at and enjoyed as in the traditional Mulveyan theory (Williams, 41). Rather the erotic thrillers of the twentieth first century manage to be women's films as well as sex films because despite their sexualization, women are empowered in a "feminist-revenge narrative" (Williams, 42, 43). Thus, the conservative values of the backlash are combined with active women who take revenge on the abuses of patriarchy.

Nevertheless, as Faludi argues in *The Terror Dream*, a renewed version of the backlash against women and feminism came up after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York in 2001. For Faludi, feminism was blamed for feminizing the United States and strong women were responsible for that feminization (Faludi, *The Terror Dream* 27). For Faludi this implied the return to a traditionally patriarchal society in line with the values and attitudes of the western: John Wayne-like men as strong protectors and saviors of the damsels in distress that ought to be kept at home as "perfect virgins of grief" (260). To this umpteenth version of *Backlash*, Faludi adds a new element: post-feminism. As she claims, post-feminism sees femininity as a product to be achieved in order for women to become independent. Thus, U.S. 21st century women are compelled to consume beauty products so as to prove that they are both feminine and feminist while, at the same time, they are asked to study and work harder than men to fulfill their aspirations of getting a god job (*Preface* xv-xvi).

As Stéphanie Genz argues, the "contradictions surrounding contemporary Western femininity go beyond the binary logic of progress and backlash" (25). The

inherent complexities of post-femininity can be seen in the evolution of the *femme fatale* in the 2000s as was mentioned above. Like those contemporary heroines, the protagonist of *Gone Girl*, Amy Dunne, is involved in a feminist-revenge narrative because she wants to take revenge on her cheating husband. Yet, her revenge is not exactly empowering because of the way in which Amy is demonized in the film. She goes from a poor, defenseless wife to a manipulative and psychotic woman. It is this shocking change of perspective that makes *Gone Girl* a significant deviation from the filmic norm of the contemporary thriller where the *femme fatale* is no longer seen as evil but as an empowered woman.

The following section will explore the workings and meanings of the backlash in *Gone Girl*. It will start with an analysis of the role of the internal narrators in the film, Amy and Nick. After that, it will explore those elements of patriarchal oppression that are undermined in the film so as to demonize Amy. Finally, the essay will analyze the figure of Nick Dunne in relation to the victimization of men and the crisis of masculinity.

3. *Gone Girl*

Based on Gillian Flynn’s global bestseller *Gone Girl*, the film entitled *Gone Girl* was well-received by both critics and spectators. It made more than \$368 million, which makes it the highest grossing film by David Fincher (“*Gone Girl* (2014)”).



Figure 1: *Gone Girl*'s official theatrical poster

Some critics like Ken Lombardi have defined *Gone Girl* as a “career-best” for David Fincher, Ben Affleck and Rosamund Pike. Some examples of praise are Claudia Puig’s from *USA Today*: “If Alfred Hitchcock were alive today, he'd surely have wanted

to film 'Gone Girl.' But the brilliant Fincher may just be his successor, having done the job magnificently." Critic Michael Philips's from *Chicago Tribune* wrote:

"David Fincher's film version [...] is a stealthy, snake-like achievement. It's everything the book was and more--more, certainly, in its sinister, brackish atmosphere dominated by mustard-yellow fluorescence, designed to make you squint, recoil and then lean in a little closer." ("David Fincher's "Gone girl" finds praise")

3.1. From "America's sweetheart" to "mind-fucker of the first degree": Narration in *Gone Girl*.

Unlike in novels, where the narrator is an essential figure, the use of a narrator is an option in filmic texts, which can tell a story without one. In *Gone Girl*, there are two internal narrators, Amy and Nick. Nick's voice-over opens the film in a shocking manner with the following words: "when I think of my wife I always think of her head, I picture cracking her lovely skull, unspooling her brains". The combination of his words, "cracking her lovely skull", with the way he is caressing her head makes the audience fear for Amy's life. Thus, spectators' identification is initially with Amy and Nick is seen as a dangerous man that might hurt her. After this opening, one could expect that Nick would resume his narration in the following scene, but this is not the case. Instead there is a fade-out and several establishing shots in which we see the city of North Carthage over the opening credits. Then, Nick appears onscreen, just looking around his yard as if he were watching his surroundings, looking for something that is unknown to the audience; then the date is provided: "July 5th, the morning of". After that we see him going to work and his behavior confuses the audience for he shows no hints of his dangerous nature as he did in the opening-scene. Now he looks like a good-

for-nothing man. In his conversation with his twin sister, Nick says resignedly that it is his fifth wedding anniversary. This is the moment in which Amy's narration, which is the main narrator, starts.

Amy's narration starts as a "written diary narration" ("Me, Me, Me" 249) with a detailed shot of her writing a diary entry that Amy's voice-over reads aloud: "I am so crazy, stupid happy". This is the narration of how Amy met Nick on January 8th, 2005, which is accompanied by a flashback, but it is still a subjective narration for it is Amy's memory. They hit it off and Amy describes Nick as a "great, sweet, gorgeous, cool-ass guy". Then we see the beginning of their relationship. This memory contrasts with the reality of their marriage for now Amy thinks of Nick as an "oblivious and uncaring asshole" and the audience can see that Nick does not care about Amy. Then his neighbor calls Nick and he is seen going home where he discovers that Amy has gone missing, which he considers just "weird" and he does not seem worried at all.



Figure 2: Shot of Amy writing an entry in her diary on how she met Nick. This is the beginning of her narration.

The next diary entry is about “Amazing Amy”, a book character based on the real Amy Elliot¹ that was created by her parents and became a best-seller. Amy refers to how far she is from the fictional character that is based on her. Her conception of herself as “regular, flawed, real” is supposed to create pity on the spectators, because we can imagine how difficult and painful it must have been to have a character based on you whom you can never catch up with. This narratorial intervention ends with the memory of Nick’s proposal. Amy refers to this moment as the perfect ending to their “two magical years” of dating, which contrasts harshly with the shots of the present in which we see that Nick has a lover and does not seem to care about his wife.

This pattern of Amy’s voice-over, coming from a diary-entry, accompanied by a flashback, which is supposed to be a memory of that moment, and followed by non-narrated parts of the present is repeated throughout the first half of the film allowing us to see the progressive degeneration of their relationship. The film shows, how they became like “all those awful couples”, especially after they move from New York City to Missouri to take care of Nick’s mother, who is terminally ill. Through Amy’s flashbacks and narratorial interventions we also see how they become more and more distanced. One evening, during a fight, we see how Nick pushes Amy to the ground. At that point, Amy, in her narrative voice-over, tells spectators that she has started to fear for her life: “what scared me was how much he wanted to hurt me more”. She adds that she is thinking about buying a gun: “Nick wants me gone but he won’t ask for a divorce [...] I’m being paranoid, crazy, it’s just... that I’d sleep better with a gun”. The diary entries and the flashbacks make spectators suspicious of Nick and his involvement in Amy’s disappearance. We see Nick as a violent husband, and we identify with Amy and fear for her life.

¹ When she marries she becomes Amy Dunne, but in the flashback she is still single.

Spectators' suspicion towards Nick and identification with Amy increases when we find out that Amy was pregnant when she disappeared, that Nick has a lot of debts and that Amy's life insurance policy had just been increased by Nick. It is at this point that we get Amy's last voice-over narration of a clue of the treasure-hunting game she has prepared for their fifth anniversary. This voice-over is simultaneous to Nick's figuring out the clue and opening her sister's wood shed and the police finding Amy's diary that ends up with her final diary entry in which she concludes that she will try to pretend he loves her and will love their child but that she thinks that "this man of mine may kill me", which directly points out to Nick as being the murderer.

However, in a surprising turn of the narration, after a fade out, Amy resumes her narration. This is not a written narration any more, this time it is Amy in voice-over saying: "I am so much happier now that I'm dead". We see her driving a car on the same day she has gone "missing", which makes spectators reconsider all the inferences they could have made from her previous narration. Even her voice has changed. Her sweet and slow tone has given way to a harsh and cutting voice and her actual words also become more violent and crude. Then, she proceeds to explain her plan to frame Nick for her "homicide" to make him pay for being a "lazy, lying, cheating, oblivious husband", which is accompanied by shots of her running away from their home and the way she arranged everything to frame Nick for her alleged murder. It is at this point that Amy goes from victim to victimizer and becomes completely demonized as she herself confesses to the viewers that she has invented everything: "the spending, the abuse, the fear, the threat of violence".



Figure 3: A shot of Amy driving away on the day she went missing. This is the beginning of Amy's "cool girl" monologue in which she confesses her plans to frame Nick.

In this monologue, we see her throwing away the different toy pens she used to write the diary, an action that is not without connotations. With her toy pens she is throwing away symbols traditionally associated with the female world: a baby-carrying stork (motherhood), a bride and a groom (marriage) and a pink pompom (femininity). Her act of throwing them out of the window represents the end of her former life with Nick and, as she claims; once her plan is executed "Nick and Amy will be gone". At this moment we have another surprising turn when she says "But then, we never really existed", which makes the audience think that nothing we have seen or heard of Amy is true, that she had been faking both her personality and her relationship with Nick. As she puts it: "Nick loved a girl I was pretending to be. Cool girl", then she explains how she built this image up to attract Nick because men like Nick like this type of girl, the cool girl.

After the "cool girl" monologue, which is also the longest of Amy's interventions as narrator, Amy does not narrate anything else. This is due to the fact that the film wants the audience to detach completely from Amy so that we do not identify with her anymore, hence the lack of access to her subjectivity. This lack of narration

altogether with her “cool girl” monologue, makes the audience strongly identify with Nick in a radical role reversal. Nick becomes now the victim, the victim of a girl who pretended to be somebody she was not from the very beginning and who has now turned into a psychopath who is trying to frame him for her murder

The film closes with another narratorial intervention. Nick’s initial voice-over narration is partially repeated as the film comes to an end. It starts from “what are you thinking?” and he then adds “what will we do?”. At the same time we see a close-up of Amy, who is looking right at the camera. The repetition of this final scene and Nick’s voice-over gives the film a circular narrative structure that suggests that Nick is trapped in this hell of a marriage. It also allows the audience to reinterpret Nick’s initial narration. His desire to “unspool her brains” takes a different meaning and our initial reaction to this narrative voice-over. Nick as a violent victimizer and Amy as the poor, helpless victim are reversed: Nick is now the helpless victim whereas Amy is the victimizer.



Figure 4: Last shot of the film when Nick’s voice-over adds to his initial monologue. This gives the film its circular structure.

In conclusion, the narration in the film is a powerful tool to change the way the audience sees Nick and Amy, making Nick the victim while Amy becomes the victimizer, which is the exact opposite position they occupied at the beginning of the film.

3.2. From “Cool Girl” to “Gone Girl”: Amy’s Metamorphosis.

As was mentioned at the beginning of this essay, *Gone Girl* was marketed as a film about Amy’s disappearance. However, one could argue that Amy “disappeared” well before her fifth wedding anniversary. This section will argue how Amy’s transformation from a “cool girl” into a “gone girl” was a progressive process, one that we only become aware of if we pay attention to the flashbacks and that, precisely because of the dubious status of these flashbacks (once Amy says that she has been lying to us in her diary, we can never be sure whether the accompanying images we see are completely reliable), Amy’s progressive disappearance at the hands of patriarchal expectations is, if not completely overlooked, at least very much downplayed because of her demonization.

To start with, it is interesting to have a look at the implications of the title of the film and Amy’s status as a “gone girl”. As the title suggests, she is a “gone girl” because she has disappeared but that is just the most obvious meaning of the word ‘gone’. Another implication of the adjective ‘gone’ would be the portrayal of Amy as a psychologically unstable woman. She is a “gone girl” because she has gone mad. The extents to which she goes in her plan to frame Nick for her own murder (we see her hurting herself, draining her blood and even getting a pregnant woman’s urine to fake her own pregnancy), do not allow us to think otherwise. The film never explores the

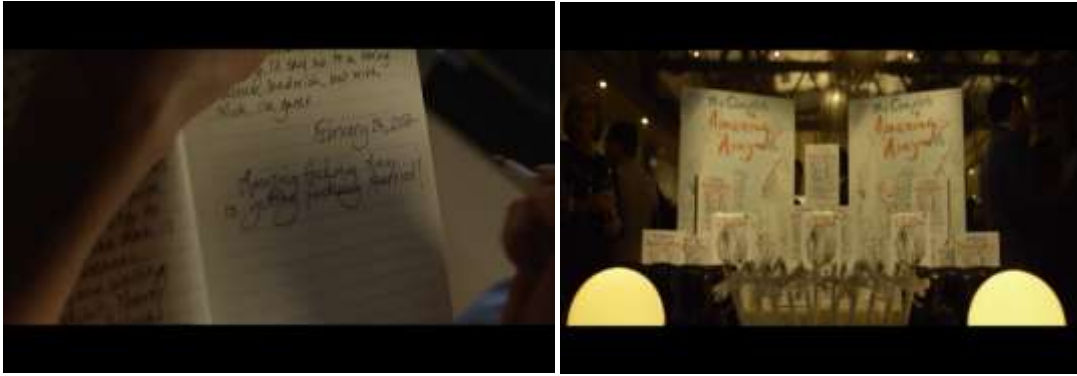
reasons why she has gone mad. Quite the opposite, what is suggested is that Amy has always been insane and she was just playing the role of a “cool” (and sane) girl. This is precisely what we can infer from what her two previous boyfriends say about her. Apparently she falsely accused Tommy O’Hara (Scoot McNairy) and Desi Collings (Neil Patrick Harris) of stalking her.

Another possible meaning of Amy’s condition as a “gone girl” could be the fact that she has lost everything she used to have as a single, independent, New York woman. As she puts it in her “cool girl” monologue: “Nick Dunne took my pride and my dignity... and my hope and my money. He took and took from me until I no longer existed. That’s murder”. The deterioration of their relationship is partly a consequence of the economic situation. As she says, after two perfect years of marriage, “life got in the way”: “add one recession [her parents needed almost all her trust fund], subtract two jobs [the economic crisis started]”. This situation is stressful enough for both of them and then something else happens, which leads to Amy’s complete abandonment of her previous life: Nick’s mother is terminally ill and they have to move to Missouri to help. It is with this moving that she feels utterly alone because, as she says, “Nick is happy to be home, but I don’t know if he is happy I’m with him [...] I feel like something he loaded by mistake. [...] I feel like I could disappear”.

The reliability of these diary entries and the flashbacks that go with them is highly debatable because Amy herself says that most of it is just a lie (“only the romance is true”, she claims). However, in spite of the possible unreliability of what we see in the flashbacks, there are some facts which are undeniable: Nick and Amy fell in love, they got married, they lost their jobs, they had to move to Missouri and Amy had to pay for everything (she even bought him “The Bar”, the bar where he and his twin sister work). The narration that accompanies these facts may be disregarded as the

audience finds out Amy's true self but we cannot deny that Amy is sacrificing everything she has to be with Nick. The married woman who has to leave her old life behind for the sake of her husband can be considered a typical patriarchal expectation, and as such, it overlooks the gradual process of the "destruction" of the woman's life, which turns her into a 'gone girl'.

Nevertheless, it could even be argued that the way in which Nick "takes away" some of the most defining features of Amy's identity could be the continuation of a process that had been started by her parents a long time before Nick married her. As we know, Amy Elliot is the character on which the very successful collection of books "Amazing Amy" is based. In this way, Amy was under a great amount of pressure because her parents were constructing an idealized version of their daughter: "They improved upon it [Amy's childhood], and then peddled it to the masses". As Amy Elliott says to a journalist at Amazing Amy's fictional wedding party, "Amazing Amy has always been one step ahead of me". She was never able to catch up with the idealized character their parents have created and, even if she may not say this directly, one can imagine the type of pressure that this must have put on her as a child and as a teenager. It is after Amy says these words that Nick appears as the charming hero who comes to save her by proposing to her. This social interest in Amy's life does not end with this wedding party. It goes on because everybody knows Amazing Amy, which makes Amy want to be the perfect woman: the perfect daughter, girlfriend and then wife. As a perfect wife, she will sacrifice herself for her husband's sake and will always be one step behind him, as she does when she is walking around the party with Nick



Figures 5 and 6: The book character based on Amy, “Amazing Amy,” was always one step ahead.

Even after her disappearance, her parents refer to her daughter as “Amazing Amy” and the web created to find her is called “www.findamazingamy.com”, as if she was the literary character. Besides, despite the Elliott’s open words of affection toward her daughter at the press conference where they ask for the citizens’ help, they appear cold, snobbish and somehow unattached for they talk about Amy’s academic curriculum and not about their feelings about Amy’s disappearance.

Later on the film, Amy also finds herself subjected to the will of Desi, her ex-boyfriend, who helps her to hide and wants her to be the Amy he knows and loves. He wants to shape her appearance (Amy dyed her blond hair a mousy brown when she ran away in order to hide) and posses her (she is controlled by cameras and cannot escape from his house). This situation of entrapment, which can be seen in Desi’s extravagant house (a big open space but with many framings from which Amy would not be able to escape even if she tried to), may have caused the audience to identify again with Amy, fear for her life, but what the audience feels is that Amy had got what she deserved. Subsequently, Amy’s demonization process goes one step further when she kills Desi, in a similar way the female psychopath killed her victims in *Basic Instinct*, and manages to make it look as personal defense, re-writing the facts to be the victim abducted by her crazy ex-boyfriend, who has caged her and abused her repeatedly.



Figures 7 and 8: The first is a shot of the female psychopath killing her first victim at the beginning of *Basic Instinct*; the second is the shot of Amy killing Desi in a similar manner.

At this point in the film, Amy cannot be redeemed and the changes and sacrifices that she had to make once she married are forgotten. In this post-feminist world, she has been asked “too much” all her life, just as Faludi states in her preface to the fifteenth year anniversary version of *Backlash* (xv), and in her attempts of satisfying these demands she has progressively lost herself but the audience no longer considers this loss relevant. Amy has been demonized, first because of her lies to the spectators (through her diary), then because of the shocking revelation of her plan and, finally because of her killing of Desi. Her demonization does not stop there but continues when we see her forcing Nick to stay with her at the end of the film because of her pregnancy. In this way, Nick, the man’s whose sinister words opened the film, has been completely exonerated and he is now the victim controlled by his wife, the evil psychopath. Thus, the next point of the essay deals with the victimization of Nick in order to illustrate the way in which the masculinity crisis, an element of the backlash since the 1980s (Faludi, *Backlash* 134), is presented in this film.

3.3. “I am so sick of being picked apart by women”: the Projection of the Masculinity Crisis in Nick.

Celestino Deleyto explains in *Ángeles y Demonios* that although the real causes of the masculinity crisis, which started in the 1980s and kept on rising throughout the 1990s were, among many others, the loss of economic power caused by the fluctuations and recession of the labor market and the defection of father figures, many men considered that feminism was to blame for this crisis and tried to return to the role of traditional men to gain back the power they had lost to feminism (166). Hollywood helped to spread this idea with narratives that had at their core the victimization of men as a key element of the backlash against independent women (Faludi, *Backlash* 150). Thus, the traditional individualistic hero of Hollywood evolved from the spectacle of powerful masculinity of the 1980s, which Deleyto reads as a means to counterattack the feminist threat (*Ángeles y Demonios* 164), towards the more insecure masculinity of the 1990s, which brings to the forefront the, until then, hidden fears of men (168, 169). Although, *Gone Girl* was released two decades later, the historical context regarding men’s fear towards strong women seems a similar one, as was mentioned before (Faludi, *The Terror Dream* 206), which makes it possible to analyze the main male character in *Gone Girl* in that light.

Tough Nick Dunne strikes spectators as potentially dangerous and weird in the opening scene (when he says that he wants to “crack” her wife’s lovely skull and “unspool” her brains”), in the rest of the film Nick is portrayed as a weak and pusillanimous man. He does not know how to act and what to say when Amy is confirmed to be missing. Even when he finds out Amy’s farce he still needs other characters’ help to make Amy come back. This lack of decision, which separates Nick completely from the manly individualistic hero, is due to the fact that, as he admits, he

“was a con artist [...] I pretended to be better than I was”. He pretended to be a cool guy, just like Amy pretended to be a cool girl, to make Amy like him. Thus, it can be said that Nick is trapped both in Amy’s double trap (first marriage and later on her fake disappearance) and in society’s expectations of what a good husband should be. When Nick is interviewed he appears double framed: by the film’s aspect ratio and then by the TV where Amy is watching him. Thus, the connotation is that he is lacking in power, that he is trapped. This feeling of entrapment is emphasized in this interview because the generic conventions of film noir are subverted. Therefore, Nick is not in the powerful position because he is the object to be looked at--he is the focalized instead of the focalizer--and Amy is the one who is looking, becoming the focalizer when she is watching Nick on the TV. Consequently, whilst the generic convention would be that Nick was the focalizer and Amy, the focalized, the scene is the complete opposite, emphasizing Nick’s helplessness. (Place 45)



Figures 9 and 10: Two shots from Nick’s interview in which we can see the subversion of the pattern focalizer/focalized, which dispossesses the man of his former power.

Another element that contributes to Nick’s characterization as passive is his family situation. He has lacked a referential male figure since their parents’ divorce, a feature which was considered one of the causes of the masculinity crisis in the 1990s

(Deleyto, *Ángeles y Demonios* 166). Besides, his twin sister Margo (Carrie Coon) is the only one that he seems to trust and rely on; she acts as Nick's conscience. Margo seems to be the only influential female figure in his life. He consults all his decisions with her, which can be seen as display of weakness because he is dependent, unable to decide on his own until the very end when, against his sister's opinion, he decides to stay with Amy. To this emotional situation, it is necessary to add the economic situation: Nick is the first to lose his job as a journalist in New York; a situation that forces him to depend on Amy's finances up to the point that when they moved to Missouri, Amy was the one who paid for everything (she even bought him "The Bar", as was mentioned above). This could be considered a reversal of patriarchal gender roles: Amy plays the role of the provider, while Nick becomes the dependent part of the couple. In fact, Nick and Amy's first fights as a married couple are related to Nick's unemployment (he just stays at home playing while Amy is at work) and Amy's economic independence (she decides to lend most of the money in her trust fund to her parents without consulting with Nick).

Finally, the setting and the rest of the cast contribute to the representation of the masculinity crisis by means of the reduced number of male characters in the film and their characterization and the fact that many of the female characters are part of the media's harassment of Nick. In terms of the rest of male characters, they are either subordinated to a female figure or are victims of Amy. On the one hand, there are passive characters, like Police Officer James Gilpin (Patrick Fugit), who is under double subordination to a female figure. His boss is detective Rhonda Boney (Kim Dickens), a dominant female figure as represented by her physical appearance and her body posture: he tends to be in the background of the frame whereas detective Boney is in the forefront. In addition, he is always repeating his wife's opinions as if he had no opinions of his own: "My wife says he is a killer," he says several times throughout the film.

On the other hand, there are active men like defense attorney Tanner Bolt (Tyler Perry), who is represented as a dominant man as when he laughs at and responds sarcastically to the female interviewer's crude description of him as "patron saint to wife-killers everywhere": "as always Ellen, thank you for such a warm welcome". Similar to Bolt in his power, there is Amy's ex-boyfriend Desi Collings because he has money and is able to trap Amy in his wealthy lake house. However, the audience can see that there is something not quite right with him. At the lake house, he tells Amy that she does not to worry about anything because "there are cameras everywhere", which sounds more like a threat than a reassurance taking into consideration that Desi was accused of stalking Amy when they were young. Thus, Bolt and Jeff (Boyd Holbrook), a secondary male character who punches Amy and steals her money while she is hiding, are oddities in this world of North Carthage where men are no longer manly and independent.

As far as the connection between the media's harassment and female characters, it can be argued that the majority of the female characters of the film are powerful journalist like Ellen Abbot (Missi Pyle) and Sharon Schieber (Sela Ward), who can shape the opinion of society either in favor or against Nick. Three other female characters of the film that influence the social perception of Nick are Noelle Hawthorne (Casey Wilson), the "pregnant idiot" that Amy befriends to build up her story, Andie Fitzgerald (Emily Ratajkowski), Nick's lover who betrays him by publicly confessing her affair with Nick, and Marybeth Elliott (Lisa Banes), Amy's mother who after Andie's confession admits that she thinks that Nick was responsible of her daughter's disappearance. The only exception is detective Boney, who tries not to take sides because, as she claims, she is "conducting a crime scene investigation, not a witch-hunt" but at the end she fails because Amy still is "the bride of America"; she is powerless to

do anything because there is no evidence against Amy, which further emphasizes Nick's impossibility to escape his entrapment.

As has been mentioned above, Nick stays with Amy at the end because she has got herself pregnant with Nick's sperm (in vitro) and he does not want to be like his father and abandon his child. However, Nick's decision is not so simple: his sister Margo thinks that Nick wants to be with Amy, that the pregnancy is just an excuse, and Nick's final voice-over narratorial intervention says "what have we done to each other?", which is ambiguous because it implies that he is somehow responsible, that he has done things to Amy just as Amy has done things to him. However, the final impression that the film leaves spectators with is not ambiguous because Amy's demonization throughout the film exonerates Nick. Therefore, although there are some traces of ambiguity, the remaining impression is that Nick is the poor husband who has decided to stay with his evil wife because she has trapped him with her pregnancy. This sacrifice of Nick exonerates him of all of his mistakes (his adultery, his lying, his real violence when he pushes Amy when she tells him she is pregnant, and his lack of action) in the audience's eyes and definitely condemns Amy as the evil character responsible for everything, similarly to the character of Catherine Trammel in *Basic Instinct* because she remains free and powerful over the rest of the characters.



Figure 11: in this shot we can see that Nick is violent but at this point the audience justifies his actions.

In short, the representation of men undergoing a deep masculinity crisis that was said to be the result of women's' independent movement was and is still part of the backlash movement against women. These new heroes were seen as weak and lost because they had lost their social privileged position, which turned them into victims of feminist women that had taken over men's possessions. In *Gone Girl*, Nick encapsulates this crisis by means of his physical and psychological characterization, his familiar and emotional situation. The crisis can also be seen in the film's portrayal of weak male characters that lack agency and powerful and manipulative female ones. Even if at the end there are some subtle traces of ambiguity in Nick, the film's last impression is that Nick is the victim, forced to stay with his wife out of moral obligation, whilst Amy is completely condemned and demonized, as was the case in previous backlash films like *Basic Instinct*.

4. Conclusion

This essay has analyzed *Gone Girl* in the light of the cultural phenomenon that Faludi calls “the backlash against independent women”, which she describes a cyclical attack on women’s advances in society and which can be traced back to the 1940s in Hollywood history (*Backlash* 128). This decade saw the rise of two types of film genres that are focused on women: the women’s film and the film noir. In the first, women are objectified and silenced by their male counterparts (Faludi, *Backlash* 128). In film noir, women’s depictions followed what Mary Beth Rose calls a “dualistic sensibility”, which means that a female figure is either an angel of the house or a whore, which in film noir is embodied in the figure of the *femme fatale* (in Deleyto, “The Margins of Pleasure” 22). As Deleyto explains, the *femme fatale* of the 1940s is the ancestor of the psychotic working woman of the 1980s like Alex Forrest in *Fatal Attraction* (21). Thus, the backlash reappeared in the 1980s and was spreading until the 1990s with top-rating films like *Basic Instinct* in the genre that Williams calls “the erotic thriller”.

What is remarkable about *Gone Girl* is even if it could be considered a 20th thriller imbued with erotic elements, the female character and her revenge narrative is not portrayed as a positive one, as Williams thinks it is the case of the erotic thriller of the 2000s (41,42). This generic deviation can be explained as a result of the resurgence of the backlash as a consequence of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York in 2001 and the effects of postfeminism on women. Thus, the good woman is again the passive damsel in distress who is to be saved by the hero and any other type of women is demonized (Faludi, *The Terror Dream* 260). Consequently, the female protagonist of *Gone Girl*, Amy Dunne is going to be demonized because she is an active character that constitutes a threat to the stability of the patriarchal values defended by the backlash.

In order to analyze the working of backlash in *Gone Girl*, this essay has focused been structured around three main points: narration, the portrayal of Amy and the victimization of Nick. Although these three points refer to different aspects of the film, they all point in the same direction: the way the film shapes Amy (through the narrative, her actions and Nick's actions and position) is a working of the backlash against independent women because Amy is completely demonized and her sacrifices and the possible wrongs that have been done to her are both downplayed and later on forgotten. Neither legal (she becomes the victim) nor moral (Nick stays with her) justice is met, which further contributes to the demonization of Amy and the victimization of her male counterpart.

5. Works Cited

Deleyto, Celestino. "The Margins of Pleasure: Female Monstrosity and Male Paranoia in *Basic Instinct*." *Film Criticism* 21.3 (1997): 20-42. Print.

-----, *Ángeles y Demonios: Representación e Ideología en el Cine Contemporáneo de Hollywood*. Sta. Perpétua de Maguda: Paidós Ibérica, 2003. Print

-----, "Me, Me, Me: Film Narrators and the Crisis of Identity." *Books in Motion: Adaptation, Intertextuality, Authorship*. Ed. Mireia Aragay. Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2005. 243-262. Print.

Faludi, Susan. *Backlash: the Undeclared War against American Women*. New York: First Three Rivers Press, 1991. Print.

-----, "Preface". *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. New York: First Three Rivers Press, 2006. ix- xvi. Print.

----- . *The Terror Dream: Myth and Misogyny in an Insecure America*. New York: Picador, 2008. Print.

Genz, Stéphanie. Introduction. *Postfemininities in American Culture*. By Genz. Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009.1-36. Print.

“*Gone Girl* (2014)” *IMDb*. IMDb an Amazon Company, n.d. Web. 20 Feb 2016 <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2267998/>>

Jermyn, Deborah. “Rereading the Bitches from Hell: A Feminist Appropriation of the Female Psychopath.” *Screen* 37.3 (1996): 251-267. Web. 24 Feb 2016 <http://www.academia.edu/1780715/Rereading_the_bitches_from_hell_a_feminist_appropriation_of_the_female_psychopath>

Lombardi, Ken. “David Fincher’s “Gone Girl” Finds Praise from Critics”. *CBS NEWS*. 3 Oct. 2014. Web. 20 June. 2016 < <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/gone-girl-ben-affleck-critics-reviews/>>

Place, Janey. “Women in Film Noir.” *Women in Film Noir*. Ed. Ann Kaplan. London: British Film Institute, 1980. 35-67. Print.

Williams, Linda Ruth. *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. Print.

6. Films Cited

Belson, Jerry, dir. *Surrender*. Cannon Group, 1987. Film

Fincher, David, dir. *Gone Girl*. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, Regency Enterprises and TSG Entertainment, 2014. Film.

Lyne, Adrian, dir. *Fatal Attraction*. Paramount Pictures, 1987. Film.

Micklin Silvin, Joan, dir. *Crossing Delancey*. Warner Bros, 1988. Film

Schroeder, Barbet, dir. *Single White Female*. Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1992.

Film

Shyer, Charles, dir. *Baby Boom*. United Artists and Meyers/Shyer, 1987. Film

Verhoeven, Paul, dir. *Basic Instinct*. Carolco Pictures and Canal +, 1992. Film.