MURDERERS AND MAD SCIENTISTS: DECONSTRUCTING THE TROPES OF GENRE FICTION WITH FEMINIST NARRATOLOGY

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims to combine genre theory and feminist literary criticism to examine how female writers of genre fiction utilize the concepts of narratology and characterization to critique the patriarchal systems that created the genre and character archetypes they fall under. Through the specific deconstruction of tropes in Gillian Flynn's neo-noir Gone Girl and Larissa Lai's cyberpunk novel The Tiger Flu, the authors show how narratological concepts, combined with the subversion of tropes and character archetypes, can be combined with feminist knowledge to critique gendering in noir and science fiction and shape new literary canons for female writers.

Introduction

Narratology is "a branch of literary analysis and writing dealing with the structures and functions of narratives," as Susan S. Lanser explains in her article "Towards a Feminist Narratology." Feminist narratology is a writing practice dedicated to exploring implications of sex, gender, and sexuality to understand the form and functioning of narrative, thus exploring the full range of elements that constitute narrative texts. This form of thinking is compatible with a variety of genres, where narratological concerns and feminist criticism are used in conjunction to address the problem of gender-based tropes. Two contemporary works of genre fiction to note are *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn and *The Tiger Flu* by Larissa Lai; both of which use several concepts of feminist narratology in their works to explore their genres' gendered characterizations of the femme fatale and the mad scientist, critiquing the patriarchal systems those genres and characters are bound to.

Lanser's article provides insight into the origins of the practice of feminist narratology, which blends feminist critiques with semiotic studies of literature. Narratology, as Lanser states, is "the study of narrative structure and the way it affects human perception," often looking at "the distinctions between the 'story' behind a text and its resulting discourse in and outside the text." She believes that "feminist criticism, and particularly the study of narratives by women, might benefit from the methods and insights of narratology," and that narratology, as a result, "might be altered by the understandings of feminist criticism and the experience of women's texts" (Lanser, 342). Lanser offers a deconstructive approach to narratological criticism, arguing that certain narrative strategies can provide women with opportunities for representation and ideological meaning. Authors like Flynn and Lai use these narrative strategies in their respective genres and combine them with common literary and popular tropes to make a statement about their genres, which have historically given female characters and writers little importance.

Noir and Gone Girl

The noir genre is characterized by its thin line between "good" and "evil" and its attitudes of fatalism among characters. The defining female character of this genre is the femme fatale, a figure described by Jack Boozer's genre study "The Lethal Femme Fatale in the Noir Tradition" as "closely tied to undercurrents of sexual, social, and ideological unrest." Femme fatale characters are typically ambitious and sexually liberated, striving for more independence, and

readers are meant to view them as "visionary villains" whose ambition makes them act this way (Boozer, 20). They often contribute to the "profound social alienation" of the genre's male narrators, as Kenneth Lota states in "Cool Girls and Bad Girls: Reinventing the Femme Fatale in Contemporary American Fiction." These women, Lota argues, are treated as "objects" and are "rarely endowed with the same narrative control" as their male adversaries (Lota, 151-152). In the context of noir, then, feminist narratology works by giving a perspective on the social alienation of women. Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* uses these narratological structures to provide a fresh take on the femme fatale through the character of Amy Elliott Dunne, one of the two primary narrators in the novel, and her deconstruction of expectations in both the noir genre and the world.

"Fantasies of women are sociohistorically based, and thus affected by, the position of women in any given historical movement," and as a result of their creation in the post-World War II era, "typical" femme fatales usually do not control the way the story is told, but rather only indirectly influence it on the narrator (Lota, 152). If Amy is read as a femme fatale, then she is characterized by how she manipulates gendered expectations in a way that subverts yet reflects her gender. She controls the direction of the story in a constant push and pull against her husband Nick. Amy's hatred of women, for example, is a form of internalized misogyny, and comparing it to Nick's gives way to a deeper understanding of how she functions as a femme fatale. Nick's misogyny was ingrained into his mind thanks to the oppressive patriarchal system in his family, leading him to subconsciously think like his father at times, but Amy's hatred is a more personal vendetta – she is driven to be perfect and more important than other women because of family pressures. Her childhood was cannibalized through the *Amazing Amy* books, children's books written by her parents portraying a fictional Amy as the "perfect child" they wanted. Rather than seeing it as an upbringing, Amy perceived her life as a disappointment to her parents' constructed narrative. This transformed Amy into a perfectionist determined to keep control of her life, and by extension, the lives of those close to her. Because the fictional Amy touched the hearts of many, the real Amy saw her parents' creation as a way of undermining her femininity and agency. This desire for power over the discourse in her life is what drives Amy to be the femme fatale in this noir work, allowing Flynn to give a narratological perspective to the femme fatale, an unfortunately gendered and one-sided archetype. Women are vilified in many noir narratives for simply being women, and while she is still considered a villain in lieu of her status as a femme fatale, Amy's gender is not the aspect that vilifies her ambition and her desire for control.

Narrative Control

Amy's diary serves as a plot device to fulfill her desire for narrative control, through feminist critique of noir and the narratological concept of heteroglossia, the "usage of different languages, narratives, or voices as a subconscious subterfuge" of readers' expectations (Lanser, 350). The motif or theme of writing is common in noir, as characters who investigate and control the narrative in the genre are traditionally men working as detectives or journalists. This motif is present in Gone Girl because Amy and Nick were both writers by trade – as producers of discourse, they manage. They both want to be seen as the righteous person in their narrative and conflict, but Amy's manipulation of the narrative only makes her ambition stronger.

Amy created her diary to seem innocent and "like a victim," both when she faked Nick's murder and after she murders another man. Readers both in and outside of Flynn's crafted world are given a glimpse of the usage of false narrative to gain control – Amy desires to be perfect, to be "Amazing Amy, the girl who never did any wrong," but her parents' social scripts turned her into this (Flynn,

229). She became desperate for control over the narrative of her life and how others view it and used "Diary Amy" as an outlet to have the final word. Her status as "Amazing Amy," what several people know her as, makes her want to hold herself apart from other women, and she takes any opportunity she can to put down and generalize the other women she is around. She created "Diary Amy" as an outlet to criticize those women, too – her constructed "Cool Girl" image, a "hot, brilliant, and funny" woman that "men think exists" and "women are willing to pretend to be," is harshly criticized in her narration, as are women who "fall into any roles men make for them" (Flynn, 218). Amy used the fact that everyone loves the "Cool Girl" due to her submissive and friendly nature to give herself an advantage in constructing a narrative that people would believe, a narrative she could gain control over (Flynn, 220). When the reader thinks they find an answer to Amy's supposed murder, the revelation of her diary being a falsified narrative in the second part of the book changes and raises the stakes of the novel. Changing the novel's central question from "what happened to Amy?" to "what will Amy do next?" using the diary, Flynn subverts the expectations of readers who thought they had Amy figured out as the victim she was not.

Heteroglossia

A key aspect of feminist narratology ripe in *Gone Girl* is the presence of two or more voices or expressed viewpoints in a text that lean towards the same argument, the aforementioned heteroglossia. This happens in the novel through Amy's critique of "acceptable" behaviors for women in society. As a private narrative, "Diary Amy" is an explicit subtext – her voice in the diary expresses things that Amy cannot express in her real life due to her parents' expectations and Nick's control over her life. Upon becoming "Dead Amy" to further her scheme, Amy keeps her true self a private narrative only seen by her and Nick, pretending to be someone she is not to the public to finally establish dominance in her narrative and keep Nick under her control. While Amy is a cruel psychopath, Flynn makes her a somewhat sympathetic or charismatic version of the femme fatale in a slightly twisted way thanks to her usage of heteroglossia. Amy uses gender roles and stereotypical views on women to challenge the oppressive systems that create them, exemplified through her desire for narrative control, something women, especially femme fatales, rarely receive in noir stories. Flynn uses the diary as a private discourse to "call out" and play with readers' expectations for what happens to the femme fatale.

Thanks to its recurring theme of writing and narrative, Gillian Flynn goes one step beyond simply critiquing the gendering of the femme fatale, creating one who has at least partial control of the narrative instead of simply desiring control. Amy, like her husband, was a writer by trade. Because of the increasing rifts in their marriage because of her deception, Nick and Amy are both obsessed with taking back the reins of their own stories, leading to a constant struggle for control over the narrative of their lives and their marriage. As Kenneth Lota argues, Amy is then more of a "meta-noir" character, one who "sees through both the tropes of noir and the cultural mindsets of the people around her and uses her awareness of those very categorizing tendencies as a basis for her plans." She manipulates people using her knowledge of gender roles that they would primarily follow as a basis for her schemes, but her knowledge and invocation of noir tropes make her a threat to Nick's desire for narrative control and his desire to be seen as a hero (Lota, 167).

Through its usage of feminist narratology, especially heteroglossia, the gender roles in noir – and the oppressive systems that created the genre – are critiqued in *Gone Girl*. In creating a more complex version of the femme fatale, one with a desire to control the narrative on a figurative and literal level, Gillian Flynn demonstrates how Amy Dunne can be written as a dangerous yet multifaceted character despite

the typical femme fatale depiction in male-dominated noir narratives.

Tiger Flu

Similar to noir, women – and feminist thinking – have never been able to find their footing within the genre of science fiction. In his book *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, literary critic Darko Suvin provides a framework for typical aspects of the genre, saying that it "has been wedded to a hope of finding in the unknown an ideal environment, tribe, state, intelligence, or other act of supreme good" within its narrative, often placed in a new world (Suvin, 5). Suvin describes science fiction as "the literature of cognitive estrangement," a genre both reflective of reality and involving norms different than the reader's own. This mechanism of estrangement is called the novum, and signals to readers that they are no longer in a realistic world. Building from Suvin's definitions and analysis in her article "Feminist Theory and Science Fiction," Veronica Hollinger reads science fiction as "a potent tool for projects of feminist imagination," one that can do the work of imagining feminist worldviews in societies free of oppressive ideologies (Hollinger, 128). The world in Larissa Lai's science fiction novel The Tiger Flu supports both Suvin and Hollinger's primary arguments with its feminist narratology. In Lai's universe, a global epidemic left most men in the world dead or suffering, leading to different networks of women being in power. Through this narrative, Lai subverts the gendering of tropes in science fiction by featuring crumbling societies, typical to the genre, but with women in charge.

A characteristic of Lai's novel is its imagination of feminist futures, apparent in its narrative. The novel features two narrators – Kora Ko, a poor fifteen-year-old girl, and Kirilow "Kiri" Groundsel, a doctor in the Grist Village, a community of genetically-modified queer women. With its two distinct narrative perspectives, Lai uses principles of feminist narratology to present readers with a future in which the patriarchy is no more, the Earth is destroyed and humanity is on the brink of extinction. In *The Tiger Flu*, the dedication to improving the lives of others is prevalent in the narrative through subversions of mad scientists.

Science, Gender, and Objectivity

In the article "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," Donna Haraway argues that objectivity, the "form in science," is not actually objective but "artefactual social rhetoric of crafting the world into effective objects." She believes that science has not been truly objective, and rather built on an oppressive system that renders non-male bodies as "others." (Haraway, 81-83). Haraway argues instead, that true scientific objectivity should come through embodied knowledge, and that how we embody the world through our various social and cultural norms produces meaning. While objective knowledge is often presented with the novum, a "new" science in science fiction texts, Lai inverts readers' expectations and creates a novum based on the "other" kind through her narrative style. The two main characters in *The Tiger Flu* have distinct narrative styles, proving there is no language or code that translates all meaning perfectly, translating two forms of knowledge across a novum and a human community.

Being a member of the Grist Sisters, Kirilow "Kiri" Groundsel is a part of the narrative's largest novum, as her network of asexually reproducing queer women is an expression of sisterhood based on shared strengths and resources. Her narrative style is in first-person, subjective and looking at inner thoughts and feelings. She focuses on the body and embodied practices traditional among her community, representing embodied forms of knowledge traditional to feminist and indigenous communities. The perspective of Kora Ko, on the other hand, is in third person and conforms with the reader's expectations

for realism. As she lives in a controlled society, she is the objective human common to science fiction narratives, interacting with different novums and representing "scientific" knowledge. In her usage of two distinct narrative styles representing two different breadths of knowledge, Lai creates a unique narratological structure, again using heteroglossia to compare and present two different societies – one based in scientific knowledge and the other based in embodied practices. When Kora and Kiri meet, they learn from each other, representing how these two distinct approaches to reasoning can benefit from one another. Kora learns she is a Grist sister from Kiri, while Kiri learns about her true past through Kora's scales. Their two societies – one on the brink of destruction and the other just beginning to thrive – come together to blur the boundaries between embodied and objective knowledge.

These resistive writing strategies are made stronger through the characterization of different characters as "mad scientists." The mad scientist is an "individualized genius," as Suvin points out, based on a humanist critique of post-Enlightenment thought, specifically the turn to science and rationality that increased the importance of scientists in society (Suvin, 7). Science became a tool of domination, and humanists created the mad scientist to represent the over-valuation of scientific thought. They are almost always white men who represent an establishment, because it is the privileged who are seen as "eccentric" instead of dangerous. *The Tiger Flu* features a critique of this trope's gendering through the novel's antagonist Isabelle Chow, a woman whose scientific knowledge drives the plot, suggesting a feminist outlook on the dominant discourse in science fiction. The mad scientist as a character is used to project social anxieties about the relationship between science and human nature, and in Lai's narrative, Isabelle represents an additional anxiety around the culture surrounding science fiction, as well as in the broader world, when the power of science is put in a woman's hands.

Isabelle's scientific creations forget embodied experiences, and only rely on scientific knowledge to create fabricated embodiment, typical to the character of the mad scientists. An example is the scales manufactured by Isabelle, used throughout the Saltwater City where Kora's narrative takes place. Scales, a novum in the story, are used to pass down knowledge in the form of histories and narratives. Not openly available to the public, scales are inserted into the human brain through a false embodiment – by inventing and controlling the scales, Isabelle creates a disparity between people in the City's Quarantine Rings based on their access to knowledge – she controls knowledge, and in that way, she can control society. Raffaella Baccolini's article "The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction" mentions that "female characters in science fiction stories often do not contribute to the buildup of negative myths surrounding science," claiming that women are often the "intermediary between humans and science" in these stories (Baccolini, 51). Mad scientists in other works are almost exclusively male, and by creating one who is a woman of color, in a position of power with control over one of the main novums in the story, Lai demonstrates the flexibility of stock characters in science fiction, subverting their gendered origins.

From a narratological perspective, Isabelle's scales function as private discourse. The only people who can access them are those with enough money or social status, while the Grist Sisters' mad science – analogous to indigenous depictions of "science" – consists of the retaining and passing down of information through public discourse and embodied practice. This conflict is what ultimately leads to a conflict between the novel's central establishments. Learning one's history through uncommon practices, the way the Grist sisters do, however, is necessary for liberation from oppressive systems – and this disrupts Isabelle, the mad scientist, and her production of the novum. Baccolini states that the "recovery of history and literacy,

together with the recovery of individual and collective memory, becomes an instrumental tool of resistance for their protagonists," which is exactly how Kora is freed from the mad scientist's oppressive thought and regime by Kiri. This uncommon way of knowledge, made by the two scientific and non-scientific protagonists joining together, functions outside of empiricist thought and ultimately leads to the destruction of the mad scientist, critiquing the world's turn towards science, rationality and empiricism by using its novum of the scale as the loss of a traditional way to achieve and transmit knowledge (Baccolini, 520-521). In various stories, the mad scientist is only destroyed by greater scientific knowledge, but a combination of science and embodied practice as the source of Isabelle's downfall proves that science cannot and should not be the only thing responsible for restoring the values of society. Lai giving importance to non-scientific practices and values through her protagonists is an invitation for readers to understand the oppressive nature of empiricist thought and the dangers of women scientists, an important invitation often unexplored in the genre.

Another common aspect of the mad scientist, especially in science fiction narratives, is their "playing god" – an ability to control who lives and who dies, often through their scientific creations. Isabelle Chow partakes in this action throughout the novel, and Lai uses her status as a woman scientist to critique the fact that mad scientists and technocrats alike use their creations to feel powerful, through her control over the novel's central novum – the Upload. The Upload is the transfer of consciousness, splitting mind and body, discursive and material properties, with the false claim of immortality. Isabelle has invented a technology to "cure the mind of the body" through the satellites Chang and Eng. This represents giving into objective knowledge, as the satellites are where Isabelle wants people to Upload their consciousness and be slaves to her empire and empiricist thought forever. As a public figure, Isabelle's discourse manages to be influential on the material conditions of others, but her private life and private discourse show that she is only trying to get revenge and create a perfect site for the Upload – a future that is feminist in name but not in practice. While she seems to be promoting an ideal society due to her gender and public narrative, this society is void of any real harmony due to its separation of mind and body, and it is driven by her private ambitions and perfectionism. Much like Flynn does with the femme fatale, Lai uses narratological elements of public and private discourse to give the mad scientist a more human edge, driven by her relatable, competitive nature from her private life to create a complicated female character that subverts the trope's gendering.

Both protagonists and readers are reminded of an important notion as they find out more about the enigmatic Isabelle – science is important, but her mad science must be let go because it forgets embodiment. The mad scientist is no longer considered an idol, but a dangerous threat that comes with relying on science and forgetting yourself, similar to the world's turn towards science and rationality in the 2010s, when the novel was written. As Kiri says, when Isabelle is using false memories to trick her into Uploading, "Grist sisters believe that body and mind exist together in harmonious balance. When one dies the person no longer exists." She relies on falsified networks based on real networks people had, such as Kiri's friends and Kora's mother, to pacify people into participating (Lai, 239). The novel asks readers to be suspicious of this mad scientist because of her desire to separate the network between mind and body. Despite being praised by the public for her techno-capitalist network, Isabelle is in fact allowing worlds to give in to objective knowledge. Kiri and Kora's network and narrative go beyond the objective knowledge praised throughout the history of science fiction, creating one of true sisterhood – connected through both situated and embodied thought – to prevail over the mad scientist. Aware of the

dangers of science and the realities that grind down embodied practices in contemporary society, Lai's creation of more "heroic" mad scientists in the end show a healthy stability between the two, a combination resonant to readers who have read too many stories about the dangers and problems of science in the genre. While Isabelle manages to be convincing due to her position of power in this feminist world, it is Kora and Kiri's rejection of Isabelle's promises that allow feminism and feminist narratology to prevail over techno-capitalism and false promises from influential figures.

While Isabelle's science is based on a novum found in technology, typical to the science fiction genre, *The Tiger Flu* uses a feminist perspective to be critical of an integral notion that the narrative of a mad scientist provides. As Lai characterizes mad science as unsafe and promotes a combination of science and embodied practice, she claims that science alone cannot save or improve human lives, and that it is not the solution for a sustainable future. She claims instead that a combination of embodied and objective knowledge is the way to imagine equitable and sustainable futures. As someone bound to science and scientific knowledge, Isabelle is a mirror of several mad scientists – real and fictional – of the past, and Lai's usage of narratology destroys the oppressive system she creates, but not without leaving hope in the story. The novel's ending is ambiguous, a technique described by Baccolini as something that "[allows] readers and protagonists to see hope by resisting closure" (Baccolini, 520). The humanism and naturalism of the Grist sisters, promoted through their network of sisterhood, is improved by HoST technology to foster a more equitable future. The Starfish Tree is an open system, offering hope, opportunities for embodied and objective knowledge, and a sustainable society. In this open ending to the narrative, embodied practice is shown to be as important as science in creating feminist futures, a sign on Lai's end that both forms of knowledge should be equally valued in the genre and the world. Unlike the thwarted Isabelle, who relies only on science to advance her ideal world and leave behind those who do not follow, the Grist sisters and their mad "science" combine scientific knowledge with their traditional sisterhood, leading to a potential improvement almost never featured in stories centered around mad scientists.

Conclusion

Feminist narratology in both *Gone Girl* and *The Tiger Flu* is a tool to subvert several tropes common to the genres they are a part of. This subversion goes beyond that, and is used as a resistive writing strategy against popular genres traditionally created and enjoyed by men. Amy Elliott Dunne and Isabelle Chow are very similar characters, as they use their knowledge of narratives to fuel their similar desire to control the narratives and lives of others by limiting perceptions of the truth. Despite this, Amy is additionally much like Kiri Groundsel despite their fighting on opposite sides in their respective narratives, as their uncommon narrative styles complement the more traditional one of each novel's opposite narrator. In many senses, these narratives are similar for what they do – they are both cases of female writers creating strong female characters that distort readers' perceptions of the limits that these genres provide if viewed under any other lens. As none these characters do not conform to a binary opposition of "good" and "evil" common to literature, it makes for an interesting contrast to previous works in their genres, as both deconstruct the tropes that their genres were thought to be bound to.

The strategic writing practices used by Gillian Flynn and Larissa Lai in their novels show a great change in what is deemed "acceptable" in each genre's canon. While noir stories are traditionally told under the lens of a disgruntled man summarizing events, much like Nick Dunne in Gone Girl, Flynn pays special attention to Amy's inner feelings and perceptions of the

world around her. This is often achieved through material objects and their additional narratives, which provide readers with the perspective of a villain that would have been reduced to a mere side character in another noir author's work. This makes readers more sympathetic to Amy's motivation than they would be in a male author's work by playing with the gendering of her characterization. Science fiction texts almost never portray female characters with as much importance as they do in *The Tiger Flu*, and Lai's awareness of that fact, combined with the integration of uncommon tropes in the genre like creating a new norm of queerness and deconstructing of the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity, allows readers to feel agency for her mad scientist characters, immersing themselves in a world that ultimately promotes equality through the presence of hope. Flynn and Lai both use feminist narratology as a form of resistance – they provide more agency to their multifaceted female characters as a way of reimagining the standards of their respective genres, a reimagining that becomes a deconstruction thanks to each writer's knowledge of narratological concepts. The histories of noir and science fiction are parallel to one another due to their status as being written by and for men traditionally, alongside the lack of women's roles in them outside of stereotyped supporting characters. Contemporary novels like *Gone Girl* and *The Tiger Flu* subvert the traditional gender representations in the genre by, most importantly, giving their characters independence. They are permitted freedom from the tropes in their genres, representing a break away from the traditional way of writing women, complicating and changing readers' expectations. The novels' stakes are different due to these multi-faceted female characters despite the same formulaic patterns thanks to the concepts of feminist narratology, a language for articulating new ways to represent and re-present women's realities through narratives. The positions and fears of women in society are represented through the creation of characters like Amy and Isabelle, and writers' integration of narratological concepts provides a stronger connection with readers, not entirely found in previous works in these genres, that mirrors feelings and conditions experienced by women in contemporary culture. The evocative power of female writers is almost vernacular when creating these worlds – they utilize these writing practices to deal with new conditions, real and fictional, to provide new spins on the genre that many readers nowadays might feel.

Gone Girl and *The Tiger Flu* are hardly the beginnings of feminist writing in genre fiction, nor are they the final word in this sphere of women's writing or the only thing to reinvent them, but feminist narratology works positively in their regard. Narrative strategies, female characters, and tropes can all combine to deconstruct the gendering their genres seem ideologically bound to. These works, while different in genre, scope, and narratives, are similar in the way they take tropes from their male-dominated genres and subvert them in criticism of the ideological systems that unfortunately bind them.

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