

ENG 180: Second Place

Gone Girl: The Loss of Identity in the Social Hierarchy of America

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Audience Analysis: Those interested in reading this paper would be individuals who find themselves in similar situations as those portrayed in the cinematic work, middle- to upper-class citizens, married individuals, and generally anyone intrigued by a critical view of the current social landscape of the U.S. These readers value their autonomy, self-identity, and share somewhat liberal views in relation to social hierarchy. These readers will value a cohesive and broad approach to the issues depicted in *Gone Girl* and will appreciate an analysis focused on generalizations and motifs of the film that relate to social class dynamics, rather than its minutiae.

In today's fast-paced, productivity-focused, and utilitarian social landscape it's oftentimes hard to answer the question of: "Who am I?" Exploring the concept of self-identity, specifically within America, always leads to the age-old argument of nature versus nurture. Are we merely reflections of our environment, doomed to a fate already assigned to us at birth, or do we have the capability to build our own future? Reality—as is oftentimes the case—opts for an equitable answer: of course we are in control of our own actions, yet there is an overwhelming amount of stimulus from society, peers, and as a result ourselves. Positive, negative, major or minor—the presence of social pressure on the identity of the individual in modern America is undeniable and undeniably important for Americans in different stages of their life: the unsure college student, the estranged married couple, and nowadays, simply your gender. Social commentary and deeper themes such as this are relevant in most popular media, such as television and film—yet in film, there is significantly less time to express and explore such complicated concepts. This results in methodically crafted characters, story arcs, and symbolism to attempt to convey the same message to the audience. Director David Fincher constructs *Gone Girl* to portray the social class structure of America in a detracting light: the "American Dream" so many in the lower classes strive towards is, in fact, a lie—an amalgamation of cultural stereotypes, myths, and illusions that the upper classes choose to live under the control of—shown in the character arc of Amy and Nick, the portrayal of mass media and society, and the misanthropic development of events in the narrative.

In *Gone Girl*, director David Lynch tells the story of Amy and Nick Dunne, an upper-middle-class couple not unlike any other—well-educated (Amy graduated from Harvard), strongly supported by parents, and under the same pressure to succeed and appear perfect to the

outside world. They are meant to be a representation of the conventional American's best case scenario for life: attend college, acquire high-income employment, get married, own a home, and raise a family. However, as the individual matures in the convoluted culture of post-modern America, the reality is revealed—the entire ordeal is stressful and unclear, and many individuals find their identity lost and time wasted at the conclusion. Not everyone wants to follow the same path, believe in the same things, or will be satisfied with where they rest at the end of their journey. Those issues are also all internal, whereas a clear facet of the problem is external—parents, peers, employers, and even your own lover will never cease to impose the expectations of the society we all belong to onto you, in various forms and manners. Amy is pressured all her life to be better; her dad literally writes children's novels surrounding a character that is based on her—Amazing Amy. Amazing Amy succeeds in every place the real Amy Dunne fails; she makes the sports team, wins her class elections, and she even gets married before the real Amy. Thus, even from a young age, Amy is thrust onto the pedestal of perfection, an unfortunate but inevitable fate most, if not all, fortunate Americans are doomed to. Yes, we don't have to worry about food or where we will sleep tonight, but in its place, we are constantly berated, expected, and pushed to do better—even if the thing we're doing is not where we belong. Amy feels exactly this way when the couple is forced to move away from the East Coast after Nick loses his job and his mother becomes ill. Amy loses everyone and everything she knows and is forced to look to her husband for comfort—except he is occupied with his ailing mother, and they become estranged. He turns to the bottle and infidelity and she, in turn, loses all her inhibitions for self-preservation. Amy begins to convince herself that she is a victim of her husband and her environment—they have constantly, without missing a beat, been beating her

down and transforming her into something she never wanted to be and calling it the American dream. The situation is not some horrible horror story or a sob story posted in a self-help blog. It is the reality most, if not all, Americans citizens above the middle class will face at some point in their lives.

The difference in *Gone Girl* that is the driving force of the entire piece is Amy's reaction to the burdens put on her. You can call it her loss of sanity, a brave rebellion against the patriarchy she found herself a victim of, or dismiss the notion of Amy representing others in the work as an exaggeration, "*Gone Girl* is a fantasy, of course" (Rothman 5). Amy fakes her death, frames her husband, and disappears in an ultimate plan to win her identity back from its killer (Nick) and his boss (society). The ensuing situation where we follow society's search for the missing pregnant wife, Nick's attempts to prove his innocence as new details in the case arise and the audience is shown details of Amy's story from her diary, do a great job of representing the values, beliefs, trends, and harsh realities of living in a such class-dominated society as modern-day America.

Amy, at first impression, is portrayed as some kind of psychopath, a once-normal housewife pushed to the edge by her husband's infidelity and decides to take revenge in the most devious way possible: she carefully crafts a masterplan, exhibiting all the traits of a sociopath—able to manipulate, charm, and lie her way to her benefit. However, under more careful observation and from a different perspective, one can give chance to the notion that Amy's actions were of merit:

"We can interpret Amy's actions in a new way—as a wicked form of protest rather than a dangerous psychotic break, or the demented actions of a powerful, manipulative witch.

The film offers several clues as to what motivates Amy's seemingly crazy behavior—something far short of domestic violence but a form of violence nevertheless. In a voice-over, Amy explains that she embraced one of femininity's tried and true roles in order to be attractive to Nick. Amy was "Cool Girl": "Cool Girl is fun. Cool Girl is game. Cool Girl is hot. Cool Girl never gets angry at her man... Cool Girl likes what he likes and puts him first and does it all with a fucking smile." Rebelling at her own embrace of the misogynist Cool Girl image, Amy takes revenge on Nick and on herself, hitting herself in the face with a hammer." (Marso 883).

Amy is feeling pressure to change her identity to suit the expectations of her husband—to maintain the facade of a happy, married, life—a life that was regarded as all she had ever desired and one she was meant to live. Yet, as the film portrays, external strain put on the couple sheds a new light on their personalities. Under stress, both of their true identities come out of the woodwork. Amy, once enamored by Nick's charm and confidence, now sees it all as a piss-poor defense mechanism. He forced her to change her life, move to a different state, and then cheated on her. Amy feels the despair of her carefully constructed life crashing down around her and feels disgraced because of it; in fact, she claims that Nick is the true murderer, the killer of her identity and therefore happiness, values, dreams, and freedom.

Nick, on the other hand, is a much less controversial character, so much so that he seems all too realistic at times:

Imran Siddiquee argues that Amy's character is less threatening than Nick's because she is a

"hyperbolic fictional character," an exaggeration of the scorned wife... 'But Nick Dunne?

The man at the bar with the subtle resentment towards women? The one who

occasionally slams a desk or shatters a glass in frustration? He's all too real. Nick is our neighbor...the man in the police uniform...our husband.'...Ben Affleck gained fifteen pounds in order to embody the role of Nick (Rodriguez), and it is his weight gain and penchant for wearing plaid button-downs that contributes to the "everyman" quality his character possesses. (VanLeuvan 49)

Nick is the embodiment of our perception of the average American male, albeit in a negative light:

If Nick Dunne is representative of males at large, then Fincher's film undoubtedly depicts masculinity through an undesirable lens. While both Amy and Nick certainly possess significant flaws that contribute to the tension in their relationship, Nick's weakness is foregrounded throughout the narrative. (VanLeuvan 49)

Nick loses his job and begins a sedentary lifestyle illustrated by Fincher in shots of him lounging, surrounded by empty Chinese takeout boxes and engrossed in his video games. Yet, Nick is still shown to be able to hold his own when he wants to, in terms of charisma and manipulation:

Amy falls in love with him during a romantic adventure through a sugar cloud in New York City . . . Detective Boney delays in arresting him, in part because of his amiable personality . . . it is through Nick that Fincher comments on a man's ability to balance his prevailing selfishness with a 'good guy' façade, with charm that can easily be misidentified as sensitivity. (VanLeuvan 49)

His characterization can be related to class dynamics: what can happen to an average middle-class (or in this case, upper-middle-class) man when he doesn't have to work for much,

feigns a lot of his personality and actions in favor of capturing a goal (in this case, Amy's hand in marriage), and a generally cynical attitude towards his situation, constantly desiring and chasing after a life that seems more lucrative than his. Such a lifestyle may seem contemptuous, yet familiar all the same—present in those of us following a path in life constructed by our society, peers, parents, and ultimately ourselves.

The middle class and above in America follows central values and beliefs: getting married, owning a home, starting a family, being the person your wife/husband wants you to be... all very personal life choices that turned superficial by the rampant dishonesty with our own character in efforts to achieve them. As portrayed through the dramatic, exaggerated situation in Amy and Nick's marriage, we see that contemporary society is dominated by the image. Amy exacts a perfect plan of revenge against Nick for forcing her to morph her identity and image into a woman that he most desires and wants to be with: "Cool Girl." She then murders and deceives (impressively, against sizable opposition in the media and police—both trained to pinpoint such fabrication who question her integrity and innocence to a high degree) her way back to her husband, but only because she has once again fallen in love with a false appearance after his talk show interview in which he gives his best impression of a remorseful, honest, and loving husband pleading for her return and forgiveness. Once they meet, the truth is revealed: Amy designed a conspiracy to frame him and inseminate herself, and Nick has been playing Amy like a fiddle throughout their entire marriage and still is—yet shockingly, Amy chooses to reject reality. She opts to ignore the lie of her life for good this time and believe what she wants—Nick is the man she saw on TV and the man she fell in love with, and she is still "Cool Girl"—the embodiment of all her lover wants her to be, complete with an inheritor in her

belly. Nick, seeing that he is in a sense trapped, and having gone through the lunacy of defending himself from Amy's manipulation, knows that the best option for him is to follow suit, regardless of his sense of identity, justice, or morality. They will both follow the life of the couple on the five o'clock news, lovers reunited after almost losing each other, with a bright, hopeful future ahead. Thus, we as an audience are left to answer on our own if the lives we live are indeed our own lives, comprised of our own goals, desires, dreams, likes, dislikes, and opinions. The frightening second option is that we are living a life that was constructed for us long before we were born, dominated by social norms, expectations, pressures, and values that we believe are all they're cracked up to be, when in reality they have no resemblance to our true, deepest desires and dreams that transcend any kind of social norm, class dynamics—the outside world.

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