The Art of Persuasion: A Rhetorical Analysis of Amy Dunne's Narration in *Gone Girl*

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Gillian Flynn's 2012 novel *Gone Girl*, as well as the 2014 movie adaptation, portrays the story of a wife, Amy, whose suppressed resentment in a dysfunctional marriage that caused her to frame her husband, Nick, for her murder. The story takes the audience through the plot of the disappearance and investigation through the alternating perspectives of the two spouses. Amy's accounts of their relationship initially paints Nick as guilty, but it later reveals that the entire disappearance was a ploy, meant to convince the public of his faults while uplifting Amy's character. This essay seeks to use rhetorical criticism to analyze the persuasive devices of emotional appeal, credible identity, and logical reasoning utilized by Amy Dunne's character to manipulate other characters and media into believing that her husband killed her. It will also analyze how she uses those same rhetorical devices to attempt to convince the readers that her actions in framing her husband for her murder were justified. This analysis won't solely focus on how she goes about persuading the characters, media, and the audience; It will also analyze why it was so easy for her to do so. As a result, this essay will use sociological criticism to reveal the power that mass media and public perception hold in regard to criminal justice cases, and how this pressure from the media corresponds with a present-day bias favoring privileged white women in America's criminal justice system.

The crime fiction fiction genre is an overarching space of literature that tends to focus on the art of careful investigation and problem-solving in relation to a crime, highlighting the good of society versus the darker, more sinister side. In many cases, these pieces of fiction tend to reflect aspects of our real lives, using written pieces of fiction to reveal the unspoken truths of society. This is emphasized in the theoretical framework of the sociological criticism of literature, which considers modern societal issues and their influence on a written piece (Blanchard). This framework, along with rhetorical criticism—which interprets the persuasive arts used in a communicative act —serves as the foundation of this essay's examination of the 2012 novel *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn as well as its 2014 movie adaptation (Leeman). Throughout the novel, Amy's narration utilizes rhetorical elements of emotional appeal (pathos), credibility as a victim (ethos), and logic (logos) to effectively manipulate the media and characters in the novel to believe that her husband committed the murder. Furthermore, she uses these same rhetorical devices to justify her actions to the reader in the second half of the novel. The overall ease and effectiveness of Amy's ability to skew the criminal investigation through the manipulation of mass media reveals the influence that media pressure has over criminal justice cases. Furthermore, it reveals a larger issue of the impact of public perception in the legal system, which very often lends itself to a societal bias towards privileged white women in America.

The plot of *Gone Girl* revolves around the mysterious disappearance of antagonist Amy Elliot-Dunne, who is suspected of being killed by her husband, Nick Dunne. With alternating first-person perspectives between Amy and Nick, the audience is taken through the criminal investigation regarding Amy Dunne's disappearance during the past and present days of the relationship, initially painting Nick as the prime suspect. The novel is set up to follow the traditional form of a "whodunit," which is the mystery subgenre that takes the audience through the puzzle of discovering the truth behind the crime by planting clues throughout the piece. As the novel reaches the halfway point, the story breaks the traditional form of a whodunit when the narrator reveals that the disappearance was a ploy set up by Amy to get back at her husband for being unfaithful. Ultimately, she returns home after fabricating yet another story of false kidnapping by an ex-boyfriend, whom she ends up murdering to keep up the appearance of her elaborate story. Although she admits her crimes to Nick, the truth of Amy's actions is never revealed to the public, nor is she ever formally penalized for murder, fraud, and defamation of her husband. The story ends with the couple spiraling into an even more toxic relationship, in which Amy manipulates Nick into continuing their marriage by revealing that she is pregnant with his child, which she announces in a tense scene in front of a talk show host.

One of the most imperative factors in Amy Dunne's ability to persuade others to believe her story is her manipulation of the media. As Ahmed Hussein states, "Amy displays an obsession with making the people she abhors constantly suffer the 'wrath of public opinion'" (146). In other words, Amy uses the media and the public's negative opinions to punish those that have wronged her, especially her husband Nick. To do so, she places her own public identity at odds with Nick's, creating a situation in which the press must choose one side or the other. Out of all the rhetorical appeals that she uses, establishing credibility (ethos) is perhaps the easiest for her to accomplish, but is also one of the most important as it serves as the driving force behind the investigation and overall public outlook on the case. As Phillip and Steidly state in their article, "the likelihood that a defendant accused of a death-eligible murder will be sentenced to death is three times greater if the case involves a white female victim." This statistic is especially important in Amy's case because she utilizes this knowledge to sway the case in her favor. By framing her husband as the murderer, she is stripping him of all his credibility in depicting him as a criminal.

Opposedly, Amy is a well-educated, wealthy white woman who is well known by many in the story due to her being the inspiration for the popular children's book Amazing Amy. As her character mentions in the novel, the book character "Amy is the Elliot bread and butter, and she's served us well…" (Flynn, 26). So well, in fact, that Amy mentions her trust fund of nearly $800,000 provided by her parents to "make me feel secure enough so I didn't need to make choices based on money—in schooling, in career" (Flynn 86). These lines point to the lifestyle that she was raised in, confirming the notion that she has been positioned very highly in society in terms of class and race. Furthermore, the character of Amazing Amy serves as a mirror to reflect good traits onto Amy's character in the eye of the public. Amy herself describes Amazing Amy as "my literary alter ego, my paper-bound better half, the me I was supposed to be" (Flynn 26), proving that the character in the novel is meant to be a more idealized and loved version of herself. This then allows Amy to take on the fictitious persona of Amazing Amy in the eyes of the public, "adopting the heroine's traits of perfection and female virtue [to] establish her appeal to an audience" (Vouza 40). As such, there is an inclination by society to automatically believe her side of the story without question because of the reputation that has been constructed through the media, which greatly impacts the way that her "murder" case is perceived by the nation.

An additional layer of an appeal to ethos that Amy Dunne uses is directed towards both the characters of the story and the readers themselves. The narration of *Gone Girl* shifts perspectives, going back and forth from Nick's view to Amy's view. While Nick's narration is through a first-person depiction of his inner thoughts, Amy uses a reflective, diary entry to depict her life leading up to and after her

disappearance. The form of epistolary, or diary, writing is an especially effective tool for persuasive storytelling because it is "particularly effective at producing reactions of sympathy, since [it] encourages extradiegetic readers to respond to intradiegetic writing" (Snyder IV). In other words, writing in this way prompts the audience that exists outside the fictional world to critically and emotionally interpret events that happen within the fictional realm, causing them to accept it as truth. Upon reading Amy's diary, the audience is under the impression that they are gaining insight on the innermost personal thoughts of the victim leading up to the crime.

However, we later discover that the narration the audience sees through the diary entries is meticulously set up to uplift Amy while incriminating Nick Dunne. By carefully injecting false scenarios and fears in her diary entries, it's extremely convincing to the readers that he committed the crime, as they initially read the diary entries with no other context than Amy's recollections. As Amy reveals in the novel, "I wrote her carefully, Diary Amy. She is designed to appeal to the cops, to appeal to the public should portions be released" (Flynn 238). This line reveals the intricate ways in which Amy purposely manipulates her identity, fragmenting "Diary Amy" as an entirely separate entity from her actual self. According to Isavella Vouza, Amy uses the diary to demonstrate her belief that "selfhood is not something that one is but something that one does" (39). Rather than completely transforming herself into the likable persona that the public wants, she puts on a performance of sorts to create a different persona compiled of traits that she knows will appeal to both the reader and the characters in the novel.

In her explanations of staging her husband's crime, it is apparent that Amy is acutely aware that to have any credibility in framing her husband, she needs to make herself a sympathetic victim beyond the scope of reasonable doubt. During the criminal investigation, Amy knows that she must make both the detectives and the public relate to her through the struggles she endures at the hands of her husband. As a result, Amy's use of logical appeal to the detectives is crucial to establish herself as a victim in their eyes. One of the main ways in which she establishes a logical appeal to the detectives is by manipulating a staged crime scene. According to Bitton and Dayan, "the most common victim–offender relationship involving HSS [homicide scene staging] is an intimate partner relationship, and most staged homicidal scenes involve the killing of an intimate partner" (1056). In other words, most cases in which the crime scene is altered relate to the murder of intimate domestic partners, such as a husband or boyfriend. This is something that Amy's character capitalizes on and uses for the basis of staging the home crime scene; she creates a scene that is believable at first glance but has deeply obvious flaws which signal to law enforcement that her husband, Nick, is a strong suspect in her disappearance.

Amy manipulates this statistical evidence of crime scene staging by pointedly setting up her home in such a way that leaves a breadcrumb trail for investigators, prompting them to look deeper into the crime. She expresses this notion in the movie adaptation through a voiceover by emphasizing the importance of "Meticulously [staging] your crime scene with just enough mistakes to raise the specter of doubt." (*Gone Girl* 1:08:38-1:08:41). Along with selectively destroyed furniture that presented indications of struggle, Amy further increases her appeal to the investigators' sense of logic by using unmitigable DNA evidence to stage the scene. According to Steven Lee, DNA is often referred to as the "silent witness," as it is the only concrete way to place or connect someone with a crime (2). As such, Amy is intentional in using her own blood on the floor of the kitchen to frame her husband. She expresses in Flynn's novel that after cutting herself, she "cleaned it up as poorly as Nick would have done after he bashed my head in" (220). This was done because Amy knew that the forensics team would come to the logical conclusion that her husband was trying to cover up the murder once they discovered the cleaned-up blood via blue light and luminol—an organic compound commonly used by forensic teams to discover blood and other human fluids on crime scenes. These two factors that contributed to a staged scene in the home are very effective in their appeals to the detectives' deductive reasoning by manipulating the crime scene in a way that would make sense in a typical domestic disappearance investigation.

A staged crime scene was only one part of what Amy Dunne altered to what was deemed as common sense to the detectives; another approach she took in appealing to the detectives' common sense was by creating false incentives for her husband to kill her. To give more validity and probable cause to her husband killing her, she had to make the marriage appear troubled. Amy had extremely effective ways of going about this. In building up to her big reveal, Amy constructed a marriage riddled with money problems. She explains in the first half of the novel how they are first burdened with "his-and-her-layoffs" as well as Nick's spending of her trust fund money to fund their sudden move to Missouri and to purchase a bar (Flynn 85). Furthermore, as the investigation into her disappearance continues, she makes countless purchases that would put their credit cards into massive debt. As she expresses in the film through flashbacks of the initial stages of her plan, she must keep up appearances and "Secretly create some money troubles: credit cards, perhaps online gambling" (*Gone Girl* 1:07:13-1:07:17). She takes it a step further in making it seem that her husband signed off on raising her life insurance a few months prior to going missing: "With the help of the unwitting, bump up your life insurance" (*Gone Girl* 1:07:20-1:07:24). By doing this, Amy was able to sway the characters and the audience in her favor because there are tangible documents that can be used as proof of incentive for the husband

committing the crime. In hindsight, audiences see a husband who made their money troubles worse by spending thousands upon thousands of dollars worth of purchases and signing off on life insurance right before the disappearance of his wife. This would lead any rational person, including the audience, to believe he is guilty.

The same can be said about her appeal to the detectives, by creating numerous means of evidence that would force them to make the most logical conclusion in the investigation. Amy continues this notion with the reader, as she goes on to explain that what she is doing to her husband is justified. A famous line from the film adaptation explains her reasoning as such: "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. Let the punishment fit the crime" (*Gone Girl* 1:06:36-1:06:48). It is evident from the text that Amy Dunne elicits the audience's emotions by depicting how Nick Dunne went about ruining her life, financially and emotionally. Even with the given knowledge that she is actively trying to incriminate her husband, she is appealing to the reader's empathy by explaining that she is essentially getting back at him because of what he did to her. In her mind, Nick's infidelity with another woman after all that they invested into their marriage is the same as ending her life. She's using this reasoning to explain that potentially sentencing him to the same fate is within the lines of just punishment.

This analysis of Amy's ease in her ability to use rhetorical devices to persuade the literary audience reflects some of the larger societal issues that come into play regarding privilege in criminal justice cases. The investigation and media coverage of Amy's case in *Gone Girl* is a clear example of the sense of urgency and importance that white female victims receive in criminal cases in comparison to other citizens of the country. A study done by professors at the University of Denver in the department of Sociology and Criminology supports this notion, stating that "white females were victims in 36% of the approximately 1,000 cases in which capital defendants were sentenced to death." The same study also found that "an execution was 2.8 times more likely in cases with a white female victim than one would expect in a system that is blind to race and gender" (Phillips et al.). These statistics regarding the execution of perpetrators committing crimes against white women suggest that there are harsher repercussions in our justice system when the victim of the crime is a white woman. Furthermore, in violent crimes like this where the victim is a white woman, media outlets exert more outrage and pressure than they would with victims of other demographics.

The bias found in the justice system can be attributed to the combination of two things: the white privilege that makes their life more of a concern to the public, and the media's desire to deliver an entertaining story. Beale explains this phenomenon,

stating:

> The news media are not mirrors, simply reflecting events in society. Rather, media content is shaped by economic and marketing considerations that override traditional journalistic criteria for newsworthiness. In the case of network news, this strategy results in much greater coverage of crime, especially murder, with a heavy emphasis on long-running, tabloid style treatment of selected cases. (401)

This idea of network news focusing on 'long-running, tabloid style treatment of selected cases' works perfectly for the media because newscasts can make their own perceptions of criminal cases. If it's within reasonable rationale with the evidence provided, newscasts have freedom in how they convey cases, regardless of the objective truth of the matter.

The manipulation of media based on societal biases was the driving force behind Amy's plot in *Gone Girl*. News stations were able to create a seemingly clear-cut story of a husband who killed his pregnant wife, despite the manipulation that was at play behind the scenes of this crime. Because of the utilization of her privilege as a white female "victim," it was easy for Amy to convince everyone in the novel, including the readers, to go along with her side of the story. Additionally, the shock factor of the story allowed it to garner enough attention from the nation to also be pressured by the opinions of common people, despite the investigation still being ongoing. In this way, the power of the media was able to correspond with Amy Dunne's status as a privileged white woman, effectively influencing the detectives, the consumers, and the criminal case itself. This ease in her execution of the revenge plot proves that, in our society, the media has too much influence over criminal cases and investigations. Too often, it alters the sense of unbiased reasoning in criminal cases by creating incriminating narratives in advance based on preconceived notions of who the victims are.

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