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Female Anti-Heroes in Contemporary Literature, Film, and Television

Sara A. Amato

Eastern Illinois University

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Female Anti-Heroes in Contemporary

Literature, Film, and Television

(TITLE)

BY

Sara A. Amato

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
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I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING
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Abstract

The anti-hero character has steadily become more popular in contemporary literature, film, and television. Part of this popularity is due to the character’s appeal to the audience. This character type often commits acts that challenge the regulations of society. These acts, however, can become wish fulfillment for some audience members, making the acts of the character a vicarious experience as well as making the character more relatable because of the character’s flawed nature.

This study will trace some of the evolution of the female anti-hero by discussing an ancestral character of the female anti-hero—Hester Prynne the protagonist of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel The Scarlet Letter. The study then shifts into the evaluation of contemporary literature with current female anti-heroes Libby Day and Amy Dunne from Gillian Flynn’s novels Dark Places and Gone Girl. These novels were also adapted into films, which is the focus of the third chapter that analyzes the modern films and their female anti-heroes: Shosanna Dryfus (Mélanie Laurent) in Quentin Tarantino’s film Inglourious Basterds (2009) and Lisbeth Salander (Rooney Mara) in David Fincher’s American film version of The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo (2011).

Finally, female anti-hero characters have made the most progress in the television genre concerning the evolution of this character’s development. The fourth chapter discusses the progress of the female anti-hero protagonists in the contemporary television series Nurse Jackie (Showtime, 2009-2015), House of Cards (Netflix, 2013-Present), and UnREAL (Lifetime, 2015-Present). The television series genre, unlike an independent novel or film, allows for continuous and deeper character development—development that is needed to create and delve in to the complexities of the female anti-hero character.
Dedication

Thank you to Reagan for being the best writing assistant and to my husband Matthew for always reminding me of our goals and successes.

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Introduction

The Evolution of the Female Anti-Hero

Anti-hero characters appear in many forms: a blood spatter analyst who moonlights as a serial killer, hunting people who deserve punishment; a drug addicted nurse who steals pills from her patients but saves their lives during traumatic emergencies; an attractive advertisement executive who makes tremendous progress for his company but lacks integrity as a husband and father; or a politician’s wife who is conniving and ruthless but is still trying to make a better country for the people of America. All of these characters have contradicting personality qualities and incongruous goals, but these paradoxes are what make the characters intriguing and entertaining. Because of their flaws, these characters are realistic and enticing, and they lure in large audiences.

Anti-Heroes: Appealing yet Aversive Ambitions

The anti-hero character has recently emerged as a prominent figure in entertainment. The anti-hero is, as it sounds, the opposite of a heroic figure. Anti-heroes often make morally questionable choices, fall prey to human temptations, and usually challenge the boundaries of authority within society. In “Rise of the Anti-Hero,” Jonathan Michael clearly defines this figure:

The ‘anti-hero’ (also known as the flawed hero) is a common character archetype for the antagonist that has been around since the comedies and tragedies of Greek theater. Unlike the traditional hero who is morally upright and steadfast, the anti-hero usually has a flawed moral character.
Michael reveals that anti-heroes are not only flawed, but they are willing to cross lines, or cause physical harm to another person, in order to achieve a desired goal. This character’s flaws sometimes include substance abuse, infidelity, or narcissism. Upon first impression, anti-heroes often seem untrustworthy, criminal, and perhaps unlikable, but as their stories strategically unfold audience members learn the reasons behind their ethically questionable ways and usually begin to root for the character. As the anti-hero storyline develops, audiences see a character who is arguably more relatable, human, and realistic than the heroic figures who have come before them.

Current literature and media audiences seem to want to see more characters fighting to protect themselves or their families instead of flawless heroes saving entire cities. Cooper Packard, author of “A Love-Hate Relationship: Television’s Anti-Hero Archetype Reflects Society,” points out that “of the past 15 Emmy winners for Best Actor in a Drama Series, 13 were anti-heroes. So it’s not just a minor fad, but a steady reaction to our culture” (1). This new character dominating the entertainment industry is compelling; viewers and readers are able to relate to an anti-hero easily since the character is imperfect and often struggles with the same principles and constraints as the audience members do.

Along with these struggles comes the discomfort of watching someone attempt to cope with adversity. Anti-heroes often cope in ways that current members of society are not able or willing to because of the risk that accompanies their radical measures.

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1 Jason M. Stewart discusses in “Tube Talk: TV’s Female Anti-Heroes” the design of the anti-hero character’s personality along his with admiration for television stations’ decisions to air series that have less palatable female characters—a leap that films are not as eager to take.

2 In “Women Who Aren’t ‘Likeable’ Still a Tough Sell in Films,” Christy Grosz comments on how an anti-hero character’s path toward, and often failure to achieve, redemption is another quality that makes the character appealing, while also adding to the character’s ability to be disliked by audiences. The character can simultaneously be frustrating and relatable because he/she continues to make the same mistakes.
Therefore, the writer of the anti-hero narrative must coax audience members into accepting a character who may share similar flaws and taboo desires as the viewers/readers but differ drastically in how they allow such to manifest. If the audience members are able to recognize and accept these potentially negative qualities in themselves, then the reaction may be twofold: one, they may feel discomfort from acknowledging these negative traits and seeing the traits reflected on the page or screen, or two, the viewers and readers may embrace these qualities and live vicariously through these entertainment products that tap into their subconscious desires.

This paradoxical appeal of the anti-hero character is discussed in Lionel Shriver’s article “Perfectly Flawed.” Shriver states: the anti-hero is “a protagonist the author has clearly portrayed as malign but for whom, curiously, we root anyway.” Packard also comments on the psychological attraction of watching or reading about these character’s actions: “There’s a type of release in watching them, a vicarious thrill of people doing illicit things that we aren’t allowed to do because of our repressive society. The entertainment lies in the containment” (1). Because audience members may feel trapped or limited by society in regards to what they can do in order to solve their own problems, watching or reading about such issues may be a way for people to process or handle these needs and desires.

Even if some viewers cannot relate to a character who justifies committing criminal acts, they can often relate to some characteristics and conflicts that anti-heroes typically face, for example, struggling to provide income for one’s family. Narratives including similar storylines feature anti-heroes who choose a somewhat unethical way of proving money for their family (e.g. stealing, lying, cheating others). (For example, Ray
Donovan from *Ray Donovan* [Showtime, 2013-Present] and Jax Teller from *Sons of Anarchy* [FX, 2008-2014] are some of these characters who make unethical choices in order to benefit the people close to them.) While their actions are worthy of disapproval, the underlying reason behind the action is often understandable which allows audiences to forgive their actions to some degree. Jordyn Kreshover asserts: “Each [anti-hero] character is delivered with at least a bit of humanity. They all have families or somewhat normal lives that allow us to see their repeated sins as versions of ourselves gone wrong” (“Why We Root for the Bad Guys”). While this is certainly one interpretation behind the reasoning of why anti-hero characters can be so enticing, others argue that this idea of the self-gone-awry is not enticing or relatable to all viewers. Extreme immoral acts may cause some viewers or readers to not feel connected to the character. Due to this concern, authors occasionally struggle to craft anti-heroes—particularly strong female anti-heroes—who will be palatable enough for mainstream audiences.

**Creating the Anti-Hero Character**

With the rise of the anti-hero and the transition into females starring in these lead roles, many critics have commented on this ability to relate to a character who is morally compromised. Shriver, a fiction writer, acknowledges this concern but discredits the idea that authors should only write characters who can be easily received. Shriver states: “‘Unattractive’ main characters alienate the audience, so commercially canny authors are obliged to write about nice people.” But, novels would be boring, and much easier to write, if authors only wrote about good people who do good things. Instead, thankfully, many contemporary authors are creating characters who test reader’s affection and reflect the fact that in real life not everyone is charming.
These authors face the challenge of crafting anti-hero narratives featuring sordid characters that push the moral boundaries to the limit but still allow audiences to relate to them. But how does this actually work? One might assume, just like the challenging people audiences meet in real life, that they would want to avoid such characters. But, as their popularity proves, this isn’t happening. Kreshover suggests that the psychological catharsis of engaging with an anti-hero character is strong enough to overpower the abrasive qualities that audiences may be taken aback by initially. “After watching these types of shows [with anti-heroes], we no longer feel so badly about the acts we’ve committed, because we see characters on TV doing them as well” (“Why We Root for the Bad Guys”). The anti-hero can make us feel better about ourselves and, therefore, we oftentimes like them (“Why We Root for the ‘Bad Guys’). These characters offer an escape and a chance for audiences to fantasize about acts they cannot commit; they may even serve to justify small-scale acts of rebellion the audience members may have committed in reality. Viewers/readers are often relieved to have encountered a character—male or female—who makes mistakes or challenges societal ideas.

The anti-hero character is able to encompass many traits; its complexity is interesting and appreciated by audiences. This complexity has slowly developed over time, resulting in the evolution of the character and shifting societal reactions to it. Packard asserts that audiences are (more recently) so gripped by anti-hero storylines because of how they reflect issues within society. For example, “in a post-9/11 world, the vast majority of people feel relatively powerless in their own lives” (Packard). This era has bred cynicism and distrust in political leaders (Packard). As a result, audiences have gravitated towards entertainment featuring controversial characters who share these
characteristics—characters who are as gritty as the real life circumstances audiences are faced to confront. Some critics argue that modern characters who do not reflect this ambivalence no longer seem trustworthy or realistic: “Characters who shine as morally pure and upright don’t ring true to us anymore, because it’s not who we see around us in the word. Neither is it what we see when we look in the mirror” (Michael). The realism of these anti-heroic traits seems to be their most important feature:

Each anti-hero has a past, and something has caused them to be the way they are now. They have a background story that allows the audience to understand and ache with the character. We have compassion with the anti-hero because they reflect the complex, not perfect world we live in today. (Kreshover)

Audiences can relate to characters who have residing conflicts from their pasts or characters who are not morally pure. The anti-hero character is seemingly the vessel that is able to embody all of these conflicting emotions. The male anti-hero was the original version of this character, but is not the only form in which this character can appear.

Female anti-heroes such as Catwoman/Selina Kyle (DC Comics) or (arguably) Ellen Parsons (Damages, FX 2007-2012) or Elizabeth Jennings (The Americans, FX, 2013-Present) have emerged and are just a few of recent female anti-heroes who are taking the lead.

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3 A psychological study, “Perceiving and Responding to Media Characters,” by Hoffner and Cantor from 1989 suggests, “negative information is more influential than positive information in forming impressions and evaluations of others.” Therefore, a character who performs one negative act may still be judged harshly no matter how many other kind acts the character also performs (73). Now, in the past decade, audiences have seen a shift in this perception and response to a character who may indulge in reckless behavior. As mentioned previously, some audience members may still have trouble relating to such a character, but others may be able to relate even more. The latter seems to describe the majority of audience members since anti-heroic characters, ones who consistently exhibit “bad behavior,” have become so popular.
Importance of the Female Anti-Hero: Gender Equality in Literature and Media

Recently there has been a transition in literature and media toward featuring strong female anti-heroes (instead of only male anti-heroes who first dominated such narratives). This study will focus on this shift, attending to the advances authors and screenwriters have made over time—across genre and media—to create an adapted version of this character. This shift reflects the fact that writers and viewers are still working towards gender equality on the screen, the page, and in the real world. Long before the term "anti-hero" was a popular phrase applied to characters, authors were crafting female characters who were unpleasant, evil, and manipulative. These early characters contributed to the development of today’s female anti-heroes. Tracing the evolution of this character reveals that they have not always been as strong or even played a leading role in the narratives they existed within—especially when compared to their male counterparts—but currently these deficiencies are falling away.

Contemporary audiences have witnessed the most drastic changes in the characters they are spending time with, especially when it comes to female characters. Sarah Appleton Aguiar, author of *The Bitch is Back: Wicked Women in Literature*, discussed the earlier forms the evil female character took on in narratives. They were featured as village gossips, calculating gold diggers, merciless backstabbers, sinful sirens, evil stepmothers, deadly daughters, twisted sisters, hags, bags, and crones (Aguiar 1). As she makes clear, audiences have always encountered evil women, but these women were rarely the protagonists. These characters were truly evil villains, antagonists, or (more commonly) supporting characters, rather than the unlikable anti-hero featured at the center of a storyline.
This project traces the evolution of this female character type and critiques the ways in which she is employed in contemporary narratives. Analyzing various narratives featuring female anti-heroes suggests that industry practices may contribute to some of this figure’s shortcomings. However, this study also advocates for the ways in which this character could grow into a more dynamic character that would sidestep some of the narrative problems found in contemporary storylines featuring a female anti-hero. For example, future iterations of this character could showcase her developing independently, allowing her not to be undermined by her reliance on a male counterpart. By attending to some problematic tropes connected to this character, authors/writers and directors could work toward crafting a fictional character that reflects gender equality in a more productive way.

In order to fully consider the influence this new character could have, this project studies its current reception among critics and consumers. For example, individual chapters in this thesis turn to online forums to study the ways in which people are reacting to the androgynous nature of the female anti-hero—the way she embodies traits that are normally coded as masculine (e.g. abrasiveness) rather than typically feminized characteristics (e.g. nurturing). And finally, this project also considers the ways in which genre and medium influence the development of a female anti-hero and, as a result, her potential impact on consumers.

**Chapters of the Thesis**

The chapters of the thesis will appear in the order of how the female anti-hero character was created, tracing its evolution and presence in past literature and its increasing popularity in contemporary bestselling novels, film, and television. Studying
these characters provides insight into the ways in which this developing character type simultaneously entertains and delivers social commentary to modern audiences.

The first chapter of the thesis “The Evolution and Rise of the Anti-Hero Character” will outline the traits, tropes, and overall mold of the anti-hero character. This chapter will discuss the reception of the anti-hero character and how audience members are able to relate to a character who is traumatized by a troubled past and often crosses the line between right and wrong in order to achieve a personal goal or to find a form of redemption. Chapter One will discuss the evolution of the anti-hero by analyzing an example of an older, more canonical female anti-hero character—Hester Prynne from *The Scarlet Letter*—as a potential predecessor for the figure audiences have today.

The second chapter of the thesis is titled “Angry Anti-Heroes: Female Protagonists in Gillian Flynn’s Bestselling Novels *Dark Places* and *Gone Girl*.” Chapter Two analyzes the female characters’ development in these literary works and how it is eroded by the influence of the main male characters in each novel. *Dark Places* spent over 100 weeks on the *New York Times* Bestseller List. Later, *Gone Girl* surpassed the popularity of *Dark Places* with over 130 weeks on the *New York Times* Bestseller List with 37 of those weeks at number one (“Gillian Flynn”). Both protagonists are strong, perhaps unlikable, women who have dark pasts and challenge the moral boundaries of society. These characters’ goals, however, are significantly influenced by the actions of the men in their lives, and they go to extreme measures in order to alter the fate of these men. By addressing Flynn’s craft decisions, and their alignment with larger publishing trends, this chapter looks at the ways in which Flynn attempts to create a new type of female character, but does not completely succeed since her female characters ultimately
come unraveled when making crucial decisions and, stereotypically, resort to relying heavily on the males in their lives.

The third chapter is titled “Female Anti-Heroes in Films.” This chapter will analyze two female anti-hero characters from recent critically acclaimed films: Shoshanna (Mélanie Laurent) from *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) and Lisbeth Salander (Rooney Mara) from *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011). In these films the women choose to make morally questionable choices based on revenge and/or past wrongs in order to seek redemption or to prove a personal point. These female characters are influenced by their male counterparts who ultimately contribute to helping them achieve their goals, but also undermine their impact as a major female role. While this chapter does not suggest that the ideal female character should be isolated, or only surrounded by females, or devoid of men in their lives, it does suggest that such characters could be written to develop independently, so they can stand alone. Additionally, even though anti-heroic female characters were present in films before the 21st century, this study primarily focuses on female anti-hero protagonists from contemporary films in an effort to call attention to the ongoing production pitfalls that female characters still seem to be encountering. The analysis of these films addresses broader problems with production decisions due to the current expectations of Hollywood. In order to achieve change and further evolution, writers and directors will need to go against patriarchal and societal norms by depicting a female character that is more autonomous. Women deserve to be entertained, taught, and emulated by strong female characters who are equal to their male peers.
The fourth and final chapter of my thesis “Female Anti-Heroes in Contemporary Television Shows” will analyze the character traits and goals as well as moral codes behind several current female anti-hero characters on the television—the medium that seems to be developing these characters the most effectively. This essay will study main characters from different televisual genres including Jackie Peyton from Nurse Jackie, a dramedy, Rachel Goldberg from UnREAL, a comedy, and Claire Underwood from House of Cards, a drama. The female anti-heroes of these television shows are portrayed as cold, troubled women; women who must sacrifice in order to achieve their goals. However, each of these female characters’ development is strongly influenced by the men in their lives. As with the prior chapters, this essay will consider the ways in which this narrative inclusion limits the potential of these female anti-heroes. Although the narrative arc of the programs will be taken into consideration, analysis of the female character’s portrayal in the pilot and season finales will be the primary focus. Also, two of the television series studied in the final chapter are still being developed since they are on the air to date.

This study will end by discussing the affordances of the televisual medium in comparison to literature a film because the contemporary novels analyzed were adapted in film versions, which leads into the film chapter, ends the focus on isolated texts, and shifts to the analysis of serial texts such as television series. Television is already beginning to overcome the feat of portraying a more autonomous female character with the rising presence of several female anti-heroes on prime-time TV, but literature, and film especially, seem to have more obstacles with this particular type of progress. Jason Mittell notes three prominent reasons as to why television has become the more
progressive medium: 1) writers are able to maintain more control over their work compared to collaborating with an outside source (e.g. film director, publisher), 2) many writers embrace the possibilities and creativity available in a long-term series to expand character development and plotlines, and 3) complex narratives tend to be the biggest hits (31). Consequently, serial texts allow for more character development since they are delivered and consumed over time compared to a stand-alone novel or film where the character is contained within its pages or minutes. Since novels and films are controlled by an entity other than the writer and consumed as a whole, these structures provide fewer opportunities for development. Therefore, characters like the multifaceted female anti-hero have been able to thrive and evolve more in television series because of the affordances of this medium. Due to the affordances that literature and film lack, perhaps this is why authors or film directors are hesitant to take the leap of starring a strong female anti-hero, but this also makes them slower to evolve. Television, however, has already proved that this character is becoming more prevalent and potentially more popular.
Chapter One

Formidable Females: The Evolution of the Anti-Hero

The anti-hero is not necessarily a new type of character; this character archetype has evolved over time. Its ancestors can be found in older, more canonical works of literature as well as the contemporary pieces readers and viewers are experiencing today. This study will go beyond analyzing the traditional anti-hero, instead focusing on the evolution of the female anti-hero character in literature, television, and film. The anti-hero role used to be male dominated, but recently female characters have been taking over. This thesis suggests that the modern female anti-hero has antecedents in earlier literary works—specifically within the past 100 years—which will be discussed later, that have laid the foundation for the creation of this more modern character.

Historical Progression of the Anti-Hero

As mentioned in the Introduction, anti-heroes are characters who take controversial situations into their own hands, often times breaking rules and engaging in perilous behavior in order to make ends meet. This behavior usually challenges the parameters of appropriateness set by society but is done for a specific reason. Specifically focusing on the female anti-hero, this research studies female characters who have come before her and who share similar traits. Sarah Appleton Aguiar, author of The Bitch is Back: Wicked Women in Literature, states: “American literature is full of ‘Dark Ladies’” and she provides chronological examples: the shrewish Dame Van Winkle; the beautiful debased Zenobia in Hawthorne’s The Blithedale Romance; Fitzgerald’s amoral Daisy Buchanan; Faulkner’s carnal child-bitch Judith Sutpen in Absalom! Absalom!“(5). All of these female characters are examples of women who break the traditional expectations of
femininity; they are not gentle, caring, or nurturing. Instead, these characters are malevolent, conniving, and not concerned about breaking moral codes. These character traits continued to surface in modernist literature, but the female characters who embodied them often played a secondary role in their narratives or were repressed by male characters. Notably, these are the underlying traits audiences are seeing in anti-hero characters today. But the contemporary female anti-hero is no longer a secondary character; she is the protagonist (or one of the protagonists) in a narrative. At times the anti-hero can also act as or commit the disreputable deeds of an antagonist. This character grew and adapted to appeal to the interests of audiences.

As briefly noted in the Introduction, male and female anti-heroes often reflect the mindsets of audience members—one example being a distrust in leadership. In “The Anti-Hero in Modernist Fiction: From Irony to Cultural Renewal” Shadi Neimneh explains:

Modern anti-heroism in the early twentieth century is a response to the uncertainties of people about traditional values; it is a response to the insignificance of human begins in modernity and their drab existence; it is a feature of modernism and its zeitgeist. With rapidly changing times and cultural upheavals, the human race questioned moral values. (75-76)

For example, during the Modernist era and beyond, characters such as Nurse Ratched from Ken Kasey’s novel One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest or Sally Seton from Virginia Woolf’s novel Mrs. Dalloway emerged who questioned moral values and challenged societal authority. Characters such as these continued to lay the groundwork for the more
contemporary anti-hero characters. These characters can be frightening, difficult to like, and reflect the impact of authoritarian control.⁴

As literature progressed, authors continued to create characters who rebelled and challenged sovereignty in an effort to mirror people’s feelings of discomfort and disagreement. This uneasiness increases when people are faced with times of austerity. After wars, widespread distress, and other remorseful, taxing pressures of life, people often turn to look for answers to large problems—for other ways to escape and to cope, which can be found in entertainment. In “The Rise of the Anti-hero,” Jonathan Michael comments on the effects of wars and other nationwide conflicts. He starts by listing several: WWII, the Vietnam War, two Kennedy assassinations, the Civil Rights movement, 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Iraq War, Hurricane Katrina, and an economic recession. The anti-hero character has developed and become more popular as a result of such experiences. For example, in 1972 Francis Ford Coppola’s film The Godfather⁵ was

⁴ Nurse Ratched’s character controls and manipulates everything including her patients, their medications, and the schedules of their daily lives so much so that there is no room for error or change. Nurse Ratched’s character could be read as a symbolic figure of the authority and power humans contend with in society or as a strong female character who makes questionable moral decisions. In “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest: Rhetoric and Vision” Michael M. Boardman asserts that “[The novel] was written from the point of view that man’s problems are caused by a woman who refuses to allow him to play the domineering role which nature intended him to play” (173). The character, Nurse Ratched, is only one example of a character who contributed to the evolution of the female anti-hero. Even though Nurse Ratched is not necessarily the protagonist, she demonstrates the female anti-hero traits of manipulation, control, and asserting strength.

Woolf’s female character Sally Seton is a woman who reacted as a result of being oppressed by too much patriarchal power during her youth. Sally Seton was rampant and rebellious. She wanted to reform society, not marry, and perhaps act further on the sexual tension with her friend Clarissa Dalloway (the protagonist). Sally eventually becomes the member of society that she used to criticize by attending upper class parties, marrying, and giving birth to five sons. Jean M. Wyatt in “Mrs. Dalloway: Literary Allusion as Structural Metaphor” analyzes Sally’s character: “The young Sally is masculine, too, but a virile lover, not a dying nobleman; she is ‘handsome,’ ‘wild,’ . . . ‘daring,’ ‘reckless,’ ‘gallant’” (441). Wyatt goes on to say that Sally was known for “refusing traditional feminine passivity,” the character qualities she exhibited in her earlier life were “bad behavior,” especially for a woman. Sally’s character challenged the traditional ideal and expectations of a woman in society, which could also be a precursor that contributed to the female anti-hero’s development.

⁵ The Godfather (Marlon Brando) is the leader of an Italian mafia family who employs his son Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) to learn the nature of the family business, which he will eventually inherit. From business meetings during his daughter’s wedding to sneaky, premeditated murders and gruesome warnings
released. Often regarded as one of the best films of all time, P.J. O’Rourke in “The Godfather Decade” suggests that in response to all three parts of *The Godfather* being released “corruption has been the hallmark of the post-Soviet world” (74). Another example of the emergence of a character who is a result of what society has impressed upon him is Travis Bickle from Martin Scorsese’s 1976 film *Taxi Driver*. Barbara Mortimer in “Portraits of the Postmodern Person” explains that *Taxi Driver* “documents not only the desire of people today to create ‘authentic selves,’ but the impossibility of doing so, for all the selves that one could fashion are no more than roles that have been played before” (29). Again these characters are reflecting the desires and concerns of audiences: the will to control and protect one’s life and family, even if that means resorting to criminal activities and the sense of not knowing or being able to find oneself, so the focus turns to helping another. It seems that the anti-hero character has been greatly used as a vessel for relaying messages that question moral righteousness and to mirror the ambivalence of citizen’s concerns. Because this character is imperfect and conflicted like the audience, the anti-hero often appears in comparable situations as the current public, but this character usually takes the more risky way out.

As mentioned above, the anti-hero character has developed as a result of people’s desires and concerns with society. Like the male anti-hero that has been discussed in previous examples, female characters who resemble the current female anti-hero were also present and evolving. These women were pushing the moral and gender boundaries to others who dare to cross their paths, this family makes it clear that they have power and will assert their own authority.

6 Travis Bickle is a Vietnam War veteran who has been discharged and is searching to create a new life for himself. He suffers from insomnia and schizophrenia, but is hired to work as a taxi driver during the graveyard shift. Bickle fantasizes about ridding the world of impure people and soon morphs into a vigilante of sorts in an effort to carry out his plan of helping a young prostitute find a better lifestyle.
with their behavior on the screen—again contributing to the foundation of the female anti-hero audiences have today. For example, pre-code Hollywood films like Animal Crackers (1930) or Mata Hari (1931) feature bawdy jokes about women or women clad in revealing dresses as they dance to seduce a man. During the Great Depression, screwball comedies like Bringing Up Baby (1938) became popular. Screwball comedies are characterized as a “distinctly American class of battle-of-the-sexes romantic farce” (“Screwball Comedy”). Bringing Up Baby offers an example of gender flipping where the male protagonist resists romance and is more passive and weak compared to his female counterpart (“Screwball Comedy”). Tim Dirks explains that after WWII, Femme fatales also emerged such as Mary Astor from The Maltese Falcon (1941). This emergence of a new type of female character was “possibly reflecting male fears of female liberation and independence during the war years” (“Femmes Fatales”).

During times of disorder, people may be more prone to take part in rebellion, in questionable moral behavior, or at least in strides to cope with extenuating circumstances. Subsequently, postmodern literature shifted again to include a protagonist that was not only flawed, but also unreliable. As this evolution of the anti-hero character continues to unfold, current viewers are being introduced to characters like Carrie Mathison from the television series Homeland (Showtime, 2011-Present) and Piper Chapman (or several other characters from the cast) in Orange is the New Black (Netflix, 2013-Present) for example, who are defined by their substance abuse, casual sex lives, or self-obsessive worries. Similar characters have been portrayed by men in the past (Don Draper in Mad Men [AMC, 2007-2015] as another example), but now that women are taking the lead, the effect seems stronger. These examples can arguably fit the anti-hero role and are also
fulfilling the recent trend revolving around women showcasing the same—or worse—
behaviors (due to their anxieties of trying have a career and a family or insecurities about
finding happiness or fulfillment) that viewers and readers have been witnessing from
men. And, notably, these women are also filling the role of the protagonist instead of
contributing as a secondary character. Andrea Morabito in “Ladies’ Night Female Anti-
heroes are Rockin’ It in Prime Time” states “television has slowly started to
unapologetically embrace the idea of women behaving badly.” Viewers may not be used
to seeing women, especially protagonists, behaving badly, but this appearance is certainly
becoming more regular, and the anti-hero is the vessel writers seem to be using more
often.

The Anti-Hero’s Gender Shift

Recently television has experienced a “mini golden era” as some viewers and
critics are calling it, which marks a time of widely acclaimed series that feature the
emergence of anti-hero characters (Michael). Viewers have become enthralled by
characters like Tony Soprano—a quick-tempered, overweight mob boss who orders hits
on people, but only if they threaten his family or business, or Walter White—a chemistry
teacher who is diagnosed with lung cancer and begins producing and selling
methamphetamine in order to relieve his family of the financial burden from his medical
bills. For over a decade, these male characters and others like them have flooded
television stations.

But now, within the past few years, viewers have witnessed a shift in this
character’s gender. Women are filling anti-hero roles. And these women are proving to
be just as dangerous, morally corrupt, and successful as their male predecessors. Sarah Hughes author of “Children of the She-volution” claims:

The anti-hero hasn’t so much left us as had a sex-change: where TV used to be all about men behaving badly, these days the women are catching up. Yet in contrast to the male anti-hero, whose writers ask you to love him despite his flaws, the entitled female anti-heroine is written to be loathed, almost as though the writers are daring you to find something salvageable amid the self-obsession and greed. (2)

As the female anti-hero becomes more prominent, writers also seem to be joining their characters in testing the limits. Even though writers appear to be challenging their audience to see how far from the line they can go, but still have their characters be accepted and enjoyed, viewers still seem to be interested and craving more.

These new female characters are, arguably, less lovable and perhaps worse behaved than the male versions before them—consider Paul Feig’s 2011 film *Bridesmaids*, all the female characters act rashly or make compounding irresponsible decisions throughout the movie. While comedic, their actions were new and somewhat shocking to audiences because women, not men, are playing these roles. Since male characters have been dominating the screen, audiences are not as accustomed to seeing woman behave in a similar manner to men. Now that writers have bridged the gap by creating female characters who do act in equally despicable ways as the male characters who have come before them, audiences are now trying to bridge the same gap. They are being entertained and beginning to accept a female character who, by comparison, is not actually worse behaved than her male counterparts, but the effect seems stronger since
viewers are not used to seeing a woman act, especially as a protagonist, irresponsibly, carelessly, or dangerously. (Writers have a hard time creating them, and audiences have a hard time accepting them.) Because of these harsh qualities, anti-heroes can be unlikable, and their actions may cause audiences to feel more uncomfortable rather than entertained.

Women are starting to be portrayed in the same light as men—women in this new role are not as burdened by societal expectations, but rather in depicting realism. The ability to cast women in the same roles as men has not always been a widely acceptable option. Working towards this equality has taken time and shows the vast evolution of the strong female character. In “Why Critics Can’t Handle the Female Anti-Hero” Michelle Juergen argues that the rise of the female anti-hero is a result of “cultural progression” that frees women of traditional representations and is “reflective of a desire to see not just ‘strong female characters,’ but human female characters, more fully knowable in their rawness and realness” (emphasis in original). The creation of the female anti-hero, therefore, is making strides towards the more realistic portrayal of women in media and entertainment—portrayals that no longer show female characters who reveal no character development or simply act as a secondary character to help advance the male lead. The current representations more accurately reflect the modern women in society who are consuming such media.

Sophia McDougall writes about the challenges behind writing the “strong female character” and highlights some of the conflicts writer and directors have encountered in the industry. For example, in The Lord of the Rings film series, screenwriters gave Liv Tyler’s character, Arwen, a sword and a brief action scene in order to expand her role and to make her appear stronger. McDougall also comments on how Paul Feig has to “justify the fact that Bridesmaids hinges on a complex, interesting female character who appeared rather weak” (“I Hate Strong Female Characters”). Carina Chocano writes about Feig’s character design process and how “he had wanted to. Do a project for ‘strong women characters’ for a while” (“Tough, Cold, Terse”). Feig essentially had to explain to critics that Kristen Wiig’s character, Annie, was not a typical “strong female character” in order to produce a strong female character with realistic human flaws in a film.
Heroines and Pre-Anti-Heroes

Studying the ancestors of the female anti-hero provides a foundation for understanding the evolution of this character. Since the anti-hero character has so many facets, it is important to understand how all of these elements came together to create one, influential character. Looking into previous, more traditional characters provides the context to appreciate the massive steps forward that female characters have made with their presence in literature. Aguiar calls for writers to continue the forward movement of this female character by pointing out the deficiencies that still exist. Writers still need to create female characters who reject the “patriarchal ideals of womanhood” and acknowledge women’s—like men’s—“inclinations toward evil, unsavory behavior, flaws, failings, and downright nastiness” (6). If writers can produce more characters who embrace these human, degendered flaws and, as a result, go against patriarchal expectations of women, then eventually readers may learn from these characters and also reject such ideals.

Some other canonical texts featuring female characters who also rejected the ideals of society and contributed to the acquired character traits of the female anti-hero include: Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*, and Henry James’ “Daisy Miller.” These characters are not anti-heroes in the traditional sense, but rather are female characters who were written to struggle with their sexuality to the point of rebellion. Other literary works continued to branch out and show female characters transgressing in ways beyond rebelling against sexual restraints. Audiences are now seeing characters, notably anti-heroes, take form as female criminals, sinners, and
outcasts, these characters ultimately become an exemplar through their deliverance of the author’s message and critique of society.

Some authors have tried to forge this path, but there are not many to note. This next section analyzes one example of a previous strong, flawed female character. *The Scarlet Letter* was chosen as the canonical text for this study because, similarly to these other canonical characters, Hester Prynne’s character supplied a warning to readers about gendered social norms (in most of these cases about sexuality). They provide a good contrast to today’s anti-hero since the female protagonist no longer seems to be punished for her attempts to vicariously teach the audience a lesson. By studying, specifically, a female character who challenges the authority of society and paves the way for other characters of the same gender, this study will discuss the layers involved to create the multi-dimensional anti-hero character that so many people are connecting with today.

*The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne

The current female antihero, such as Jackie Peyton (Edie Falco) in the television series *Nurse Jackie* (Showtime, 2009-2015) or Rachel Goldberg (Shiri Appleby) in the series *UnREAL* (Lifetime, 2015-Present), possesses a few distinguishing qualities that stand out and make her the unique character that she is. These particular qualities and tropes—morals that clash with society, loss of femininity, and a chance at redemption—are also identifiable in Hawthorne’s character Hester Prynne. Through discussing these qualities and analyzing Hester’s characterization, underlying connections between previous canonical characters and the contemporary female anti-hero will become more evident. This character’s historical roots and evolution can help scholars and audiences
understand this character’s current formation and prominence in contemporary literature and media.

Hester Prynne, the female protagonist in Hawthorne’s novel, begins as a character who is despised and looked down upon by the people in her village, but as the novel progresses Hester eventually becomes more accepted in her community as the shock of her bad behavior fades away. This transformation is similar to the female anti-hero in the sense that audience members are often distant and unsure about the character initially, but as the story progresses they warm to the character’s rough ways or forget her past wrongs. Hester is a unique protagonist for her time since she is female and does not conform to the traditional heroic mold. She is flawed, like the current anti-hero, and she is not afraid to go against the ideas of what is considered proper in societal terms.

Hester Prynne has a child out of wedlock, and the Puritan community she is part of desperately wants to know who the father is. Hester will not reveal this information. The community forces Hester to wear a red letter “A” embroidered with gold thread, which labels her as an adulteress. In current media, creating a female character who has a freer sex life and showing various sex scenes has nearly become a staple in many anti-hero narratives. Hester has set the stage for this integration of female sexuality; Hester also shows how a character or women in her position would cope with the reactions of people who become privy to her sex life. Many of the townspeople scoff disapprovingly at Hester’s actions and the emblem on her chest “so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom. It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself” (Hawthorne 82). The letter is meant to label Hester and to seclude her from society.
The townspeople judge Hester for her loose morals concerning sexual encounters with a man and are unwilling to forget it initially. Hawthorne continues to describe Hester as a spectacle when the townspeople comment on her rejection and shame, but continues on to discuss how she embraces the letter. The townspeople notice how she embraces the letter: "'She hath good skill at her needle, that's certain,' remarked one of her female spectators; 'but did ever a woman, before this brazen hussy, contrive such a way of showing it? Why, gossips, what it is but to laugh in the faces of our godly magistrates, and make a pride out of what they, worthy gentlemen meant for a punishment? (Hawthorne 82). Hester decorates the letter using her a skills with needlework. Hester undergoes waves of public scrutiny and shame for years but does not fold under pressure. Nina Baym, in "Passion and Authority in The Scarlet Letter,” explains the significance of Hester’s decorated emblem: In the social context, the amoral, sensuous activity of her art takes on moral significance, because by making the letter beautiful Hester is denying its social meaning” (219). Then, the townspeople become even further insulted when Hester confidently wears the letter, which was intended to force her into segregation. Instead of allowing others to ruin her life, Hester makes the best of her situation by loving her daughter, not revealing the father, and continuing to live her life without being consumed by shame. Hester eventually moves to the outskirts of town, but after her husband and lover both die, she returns to Salem to don the red letter once again. Soon, she is buried next to her lover—they both have an “A” on their gravestones.
Morals vs. Society

This novel is a staple in many American classrooms thus providing audiences with a foundation and background information about one of the original female protagonists who challenge the authority of society—much like the female anti-heroes in contemporary literature and media. Jamie Barlowe of “Rereading Women: Hester Prynne-ism and the Scarlet Mob of Scribblers” explains that “The Scarlet Letter has often been taught as a moral text in high school and university classrooms in the US, with Hester Prynne as the scarlet (white) woman and adulteress who serves as a cultural warning to girls and women and therefore functions as part of their social conditioning” (199). Not only is Hester a pre-female anti-hero in the sense that she is a character who demonstrates “bad” behavior and makes morally questionable decisions that will impact her entire life, but she is also used as an allegory to instruct women to behave in morally respectable ways—or else there will be consequences. But, over time authorial intent and the purpose of characters has changed, and the role of the female anti-hero has veered away from that of didacticism. The modern female anti-hero is no longer used solely as a warning or message for readers, but rather a cathartic outlet for such actions against society. This is, in part, because the cultural climate has shifted in terms of gendered expectations for women since the publication of Hawthorne’s text.

Hester Prynne is an outcast of her community because of her sinful act. Alison Easton in “A Critique of Puritan Society,” describes the duality of Hester’s predicament: “Paradoxically the need to hide and protect part of oneself in the face of a threatening condemnatory world engenders an increasingly pressing desire within the consequently alienated being to be understood” (121). This is the same paradox that the female anti-
hero faces in media today. The character is confined by the need to protect a vulnerable part of herself that is disapproved of by others and often misunderstood. Baym further explains that Hester’s sexual encounter was:

an act neither of deliberate moral disobedience nor of conscious social rebellion. The two characters [Hester and Arthur Dimmesdale] had forgotten society, and were thinking only of themselves, their passion, and momentary joy. Yet, in the Puritan world of this novel, where the community dominates all life, to forget the claims of society is to sin against it. (209)

While Hester is not as hurtful as a thief, con artist, or murderer, she does commit an act of selfishness and lustful desire that is severely punished by the standards of Puritan society. Hester is forced to change her entire life based on one choice.

The anti-hero character is often set up in a position where he/she is challenging a position of moral contradiction. This character is often burdened with excessive personal issues, which can make them seem like a lesser member of the community, but overall the character is able to overcome hardship and prove a point about moral contradiction. Hester Prynne is a character who does exactly this—thus laying the groundwork for the female anti-heroes to come. Author of Beneath the American Renaissance, David S. Reynolds explains that for the first time Hawthorne boldly brings together moral exemplars, fallen women, and woman criminals under one fictional roof, which creates a variety of ironies: “The contemporary ironies take on universality and a resonance” since they are powerful and set with a Puritan backdrop and are treated with great seriousness.
This universality has become the character traits of the anti-hero that can be traced throughout recent history (as noted in the beginning of this chapter).

Hawthorne used his character, Hester Prynne, in similar ways as she struggled with the disapproval of being a woman with a child out of wedlock. Hester was cast out by the townspeople, but eventually she overcame this hardship. Baym states that Hawthorne defined his focus on situating his protagonist in “the conflict between passionate, self-assertive, and self-expressive inner drives and the repressing counterforces that exist in society and are also internalized within the self” (88). Hawthorne purposely wrote a character who was confined by society and whose crime was of passion and self-service, a crime that could be seen as terrible and scandalous, but one that readers could perhaps relate to and forgive. The current female anti-hero is set up similarly: audiences are presented with a character who is repressed by society, who commits crimes for personal gain, but who also solicits empathy. Examples of such characters include the main characters of Gillian Flynn’s novels, *Gone Girl* and *Dark Places*, which will be discussed in Chapter Two.

In Hawthorne’s canonical text, Hester is able to gain some empathy and acceptance from the townspeople (and perhaps her audience) through her needlework, kindness, good deeds, and steadfast determination to continue living her life proudly. Waggoner suggests that throughout the story Hester’s morals move “ambiguously up” even though “her beauty withers under the scorching brand” (74-75). As Hester is slowly welcomed again Hawthorne balances her new likability and positive choices with the loss of her feminism. Though her reputation was tarnished in the past, Hester is able to work
towards redemption, even if it means losing some of the sexuality that brought her trouble before.

**Loss of Femininity**

As will be addressed more fully in Chapter Two, there is something important to note about the character design of both Hester Prynne and the contemporary female anti-hero: the loss of femininity. Barlowe explains: “Mainstream scholarship has generally interpreted Prynne as sexually transgressive and thus morally inadequate and/or defeminized” or as “desirable and/or politically radical” (200-201). Certainly, many scholars devote their studies to the opposite analysis—the femininity and sexuality of Hester—but even Hawthorne spends parts of the novel discussing Hester’s transformation from a lusty, attractive woman to a more masculine, less desirable person as the novel progresses and she continues down her newly directed path in life without a male companion.

Furthermore, In Sacvan Bercovitch’s “The A-Politics of Ambiguity in The Scarlet Letter,” it is noted that “Hawthorne remarks, with a note of disgust, that she had lost her "womanly" qualities, had become almost manlike in her harshness of manner and feature” (632). Similar to the Hester, the female anti-hero also seems to demonstrate a loss of femininity that is often due to the need to fill personality space with more aggressive, masculine qualities.

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8 For example, a current character like Nancy Botwin (Mary-Louise Parker) from Showtime’s 2005 series *Weeds* also displays similar qualities as Hester due to her situation in life. After her husband’s death she is forced to fill the role of both parents (masculine and feminine) mother and father. Nancy’s sexuality is extenuated and used to her advantage, but it is not her dominant feature. Her sites and overall goals once stemmed from providing for her family, but eventually they shift to focus on survival and greed. As the series progresses her more feminine qualities such as caring, nurturing, and regarding the safety of her children are slowly pushed aside she develops more masculine qualities (e.g. aggression, anger, risk-taking, etc.) in order to expand her drug business.
The Promise of Redemption

The final similarity that Hester shares with the contemporary female anti-hero is her quest to achieve redemption. As noted previously, this trope is often what makes the character more humane and keeps the audience rooting for the protagonist’s success, even in the face of questionable likability and moral ambiguity. Waggoner questions the redemption of Hawthorne’s characters: “The Puritan People and Chillingworth are condemned, but are Hester and Dimmesdale redeemed? It is also significant that though Hester bore her suffering nobly, it is not clear that she ever repented…” (77). It is not clear in the novel if this was a religious redemption or redemption within the eyes of society, either way Hester does reform in some ways.

While Chillingworth and the Puritan society are proved wrong for casting Hester out so cruelly, Hester does redeem herself by proving to be a valuable community member. In “The Madonna, the Women’s Room, and the Scarlet Letter” Susan Elizabeth Sweeney states: “Even within the rigid Puritan orthodoxy, her scarlet letter can be read in more than one way—in particular, as a sign of her sin, her punishment, or her redemption. By the end of the novel, in fact, the Puritans read the letter on Hester’s breast as signifying "Able" or "Angel," rather than "Adulteress," because of her service to the community (415). Again, Hester represents herself in the eyes of the community as a changed woman. She evolves from a woman of “stoic dignity, antinomian rebelliousness, nonconformity” to a woman who is "powerfully transgressive free-thinking" and has "powers of moral reimagination” (Barlowe 197). Hester is able to reconstruct her actions while also calling attention to the values in society that once marginalized her. In the end, as Reynolds goes on to discuss, Hester does not succumb to her sin, which may impress
readers. She does not become “callously amoral or vindictively murderous” and as a working woman she does not give way to “suicidal despair, or become a prostitute, or contemplate armed revolution” (Reynolds 374). Instead, Hester prevails. Similarly, more current female anti-heroes are also often plagued with a flaw, but as their stories conclude, they are able to look past personal needs and focus on aspects that are bigger than the individual. This realization and newfound practice usually manifests itself in an act of redemption. This act is one of the many appeals that draws audiences into a story with this character type and helps to explain how the character has come to exist and continues to be popular today.

Unlike Hester, however, not all current female anti-heroes succeed in redemption. Instead, they focus more heavily on behaving badly or achieving equal representation compared to their male counterparts. More recently, these misbehaving characters are taking form in the female anti-hero—a character who has been developing and evolving through centuries of literature. People’s interests have moved towards anti-hero characters who were imperfect, flawed, and who flaunt their questionable morals. The anti-hero was always depicted as male, until recently the female anti-hero made her debut. The female anti-hero is finally leveling the representation concerning the realistic portrayal of female characters, which audiences seem to be appreciating and celebrating. This discussion of *The Scarlet Letter* highlights a notable shift from the concept of a strong female character who challenges the expectations of her community as did Hester Prynne—to what is being analyzed in later chapters of this study: strong females such as Jackie Peyton (Edie Falco) in Showtime’s 2009 series *Nurse Jackie* or Amy Dunne in Gillian Flynn’s 2012 novel *Gone Girl*, who also challenge the rules of society by making
morally questionable choices—examples that female readers and viewers can learn from and apply to their own battles with gendered expectations. Hawthorne’s text is not as violent or explicit as some of the more recent narratives. Although, specifically looking at the concept of punishment is interesting because it is still an extreme in both the realms of Hester and the modern female anti-hero. Hester is severely punished by her community in the hope that she will conform to gender expectations, whereas female anti-heroes are not usually punished for their unlawful acts. This spectrum might reveal society’s shift towards gender conformity; therefore, analyzing this text and comparing it to contemporary ones enables scholars to see the expanse of evolution and change that has occurred with this character type.

Newer characters like the female anti-hero viewers are seeing on more recent television shows and older literary characters like Hester Prynne have all impacted the evolution of the strong female character through their crusade to abolish previous norms that have plagued and stifled the vibrant impact that writers of female characters have been working towards for so long. Characters like Hester Prynne experience many of the same issues that current female characters are facing too—issues that are still a reflection of society. These characters contend with the opinions and expectations from their fictional society, and they make choices that align more with personal morals rather than the rules of authority. They also have to compete with the men in their lives in order to atone for past mistakes or to prove their abilities or personal value. Reading a character like Hester Prynne and comparing her to contemporary female characters shows patterns among their personality that challenge traditional expectations of sexuality, morals, and gendered norms of society.
Along with women becoming more equally represented in literature and media, the purpose of their narrative has changed. Instead of telling a tale about consequences if proper behavior is not observed, like *The Scarlet Letter*, now stories are showcasing the lack of proper behavior and providing people with a less bleak version of what might happen if they choose to act apart from the constraints of society. The difference is that the contemporary outcome seems to depict characters, especially women, who are finding fulfillment or engaging in self-discovery—not becoming an outcast or rehabilitated person. These women are not enduring a punishment as Hester did, which is not due as much to the craft of the character as it is to cultural appeal. Audiences seem to be looking for a new type of ending: not an ending with a character who has eventually found a place to fit peacefully into society, but an ending that features a character who has developed individualistic traits that fit into a unique, less restricted lifestyle.

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9 Kristin Magaldi explains, using *Breaking Bad* as her example, that by the end of the series viewers are "almost happy Walter became the badass that he did; he represents the small man taking back his dignity ... You wish you had that courage" ("Our Love of Antiheroes", emphasis in original). This ending demonstrates the rebellion, power, and freedom in one's life that people seem to crave, and therefore enjoy watching these cravings played out in the narrative we invest our time in.
Chapter Two

Angry Anti-Heroes: Female Protagonists in Gillian Flynn’s Bestselling Novels Dark Places and Gone Girl

Recently books of a more graphic and explicit nature have making their way to the “What’s Hot!” or “Book Club Titles” shelves. Books such as E.L. James’ *50 Shades of Grey* fiction trilogy (2011-2012), which centered on a couple’s sexually exploratory S&M relationship, Lionel Shriver’s fiction novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2003), which focused on a boy who participates in a school shooting, and Jordan Belfort’s nonfiction memoir *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2007), which narrated the corruption and reckless lifestyle that accompanied the rise and fall of his career as a stockbroker, are just a few examples of the topics that are catching peoples’ interests. These books have also caught Hollywood’s attention as film adaptations were released shortly after these stories became popular. What is unique about the popularity of these narratives is not only their uncensored content, but also their flawed protagonists—some of which fall into the category of the anti-hero.

This thesis attends specifically to female anti-heroes who have not been widely studied in academic scholarship to date. This chapter in particular focuses on the characterization and reception of Gillian Flynn’s female characters in her bestselling novels *Dark Places* and *Gone Girl*, protagonists who, arguably, could be classified as female anti-heroes. These popular books feature characters who may be deemed as unlikable, dark, morose women—characters who, interestingly, exhibit many masculine traits that may be designed to make their abrasive qualities more palatable. By addressing Flynn’s craft decisions, this analysis looks at the ways in which Flynn attempts to create a
new type of strong female character, but does not completely succeed since her female characters ultimately come unraveled when making crucial decisions and, stereotypically, resort to relying heavily on the males in their lives.

**Admiring Flynn's Anti-Heroes**

The massive popularity of these novels indicates that Flynn's character experiment is worth investigating. Dark Places was on the New York Times Bestseller List for over 100 weeks (“Gillian Flynn”). One of many Goodreads followers commented on Dark Places:

... gillian flynn sure does love writing about horrible people doing horrible things.and i sure do love reading about them. especially because she isn't one of those writers coasting on shock value and 'can you belieeeeeeve a delicate flower of a woman is writing this??' but she can really tell a story and i, for one, was completely surprised and pleased by the ending of this one. [sic] (karen)

This reader highlights the extent to which Flynn’s female characters go down the path of immorality while also pointing out that it was a woman, a quite talented one, who conceived such a surprising and disturbing story that this reader and many others loved. This reader is commenting on the surprising combination of a woman writing about female characters who commit horrible acts. Usually readers are more accustomed to reading about male characters behaving badly, which are typically written by male authors. Other Goodreads posts and internet buzz commented on the hype readers felt while waiting for Gone Girl to be released since they loved reading previous Gillian

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10 After Flynn’s novels were released and gained popularity, movie adaptations were created. Gone Girl had a domestic total gross of $167,767,189 and Dark Places followed at $208,588.
Flynn novels and cannot wait for more dark characters with twisted narratives to be released.

Perhaps this contributed to the fact that *Gone Girl* held its ground for over 130 weeks on the *New York Times* Bestseller List with 37 weeks at number one and more than 15 million copies in print throughout the world ("Gillian Flynn"). A Goodreads follower commented on Flynn’s novel:

No one writes the inner workings of warped and damaged human psychology better than this woman. With complete conviction I place her in the same category alongside the likes of Flannery O’Connor and Shirley Jackson. Flynn has a devilish, uncanny flair for creating memorable characters and twisty plots that drive down unexpected roads shrouded in fog the end of which you cannot see until you're smack upon it. [...] As you read, you begin to wonder if either of these narrators are in the least reliable, if you're perhaps not getting full disclosure after all. I absolutely adored that *pernicious doubt* and shifting sympathies. It's like watching nature programs that can be shot to make you cheer for the wolf pack one week, and for the moose the week after. (Trudi, emphasis in original)

This reader, who has read Flynn’s novels and thoroughly enjoys her work, is classifying Flynn among other great American women writers who have a zeal for writing dark, horrific fiction. This reader also comments on the unreliability of Flynn’s narrators, a stylistic device that may contribute to the debatable unlikability of female characters;
however, despite this combination, Flynn’s characters are still being well received and appreciated by fans.

**Understanding the Appeal of Anti-Heroes**

Attempting to understand phenomena such as this, scholars are looking into the draw of novels featuring dark, morally compromised women. Keen, McCoy, and Powell introduce the scenario: “If you hear about someone on the news who does something bad, you can immediately think, ‘He (or she) is a bad person.’ All you know about the person is the behavior in this instance, so it is an easy conclusion to make. You have no information about the situation he or she was facing that might influence your attribution” (131). If a character is barely introduced and attacks another character that readers love, then readers think the character who did the attacking is bad-natured. Conversely, if readers know more about a character, good or bad, through narration, flashbacks, internal commentary, etc. then readers understand more about the situation and the influences on the character. As a result, this familiarity makes readers more likely to forgive the character of any “bad” behavior because readers understand his or her potential motivations and reasoning (Keen, McCoy, and Powell 131). The psychology behind this can be seen in the case of Amy Dunne’s character. Throughout *Gone Girl* Flynn slowly reveals to the audience the reasons behind Amy’s actions. If Flynn had not gradually enlightened the audience, and instead opened with the novel with negative, incomplete information about Amy, then readers would be less inclined to like or connect with character. However, the gradual divulgence of information does contribute to Amy’s unreliability as a narrator.
Part of what makes a character unreliable is not necessarily the character’s traumatic past or questionable morals, but rather the fact that the character presents a situation (past or current) differently than other characters. In *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration* by James Phlean, “A character narrator is ‘unreliable’ when he or she offers an account of some event, person, thought, thing, or other object in the narrative world that deviates from the account the implied author would offer” (49). As a result, the reader doesn’t know what to believe. This action eventually deteriorates the reader’s trust for the character overall, and the reader may rethink allowances given to this character. Thus, creating the mold for the characters in this study: female anti-heroes who may also be unreliable narrators.

In the case of an anti-hero, this might mean that it becomes more difficult for the reader to accept previous (or future) unethical actions. That is, the reader may become uncertain whether the unreliable anti-hero is worthy of any trust or forgiveness, thereby changing the character/reader dynamic. In the case of a female anti-hero, this is complicated further as the female anti-hero puts readers even more at risk of feeling this sense of betrayal because people often associate women—and female characters by extension—with aspects of nurturing and honesty. Unreliable female anti-hero narrators completely violate the expectations put in place by some readers’ prior conceptions.\(^{11}\) The female protagonists in Gillian Flynn’s novels *Dark Places* and *Gone Girl* are prominent examples of characters who challenge reader expectations and prior conceptions.

\(^{11}\) Roxane Gay’s article “Not Here to Make Friends” addresses the topic that the female anti-hero is often deemed unlikable since she does not conform with the traditional, nurturing roles society expects women to embody.
Novel Summaries

*Dark Places* opens with an apathetic woman, Libby, who lives in a grungy apartment haunted by stolen trinkets, boxes of baleful family history, and a deprived cat. Libby does not take care of herself or her belongings; she is desperate for money but would rather contemplate her own suicide than find a job.

Soon, Libby comes to terms with the fact that she can no longer live off sporadic income from her acquired fame—the fame of surviving the massacre of her family nearly 25 years prior. Thought to be the murderer, Libby’s brother Ben has been sitting in jail for years. But Libby meets Lyle, a member of the Kill Club, an underground organization of people who investigate murders, serial killers, and other lethal mysteries, and she begins the sinuous task of finding her mother and sisters’ true killer—for a price. This is also the key to Ben’s release. As her search expands, Libby finds herself facing the same dangers she did on the night of the massacre.

*Gone Girl*, the bestselling novel that followed *Dark Places*, is an ambiguous tale of a couple in a perturbed marriage, disrupted by a recession, lost jobs, and financial pressure. Amy goes missing on their fifth wedding anniversary, and everyone in America thinks Nick is responsible. As the plot unfolds, readers are told several sides of the story from both Nick and Amy’s perspectives, all of which are intertwined with a very public police investigation. Nick’s actions prove to be less than faithful, but Amy’s diary entries prove to be even more incriminating. By the end of the novel, readers may question how well they think they know someone.

Flynn successfully develops female anti-heroes as protagonists as well as unreliable narrators, which provides them with unconventional motivations for their
actions. In order to carry out these actions, Flynn’s protagonists display more masculine qualities such as aggression compared to feminine qualities. Despite their truculence, the other characters that surround these protagonists inhibit them since they lack female support systems and are subverted by their male counterparts.

**Background and Bias: The Pasts Behind Libby and Amy**

In *Dark Places*, Libby is an unreliable narrator due to her childhood trauma, the murder of her mother and sisters, and her mind is clouded by the guilt she feels for giving a coached testimony of her brother’s participation in the murders when she was seven years old. During her visit with Barb Eichel, the author of a book about the Day murders, Libby reveals more reasons as to why her testimony was flawed. Barb explains: “...I ignored obvious red flags...like the fact that you were clearly coached, that you were in no way a credible witness, that the shrink they had assigned to you, to quote ‘draw you out’ was just putting words into your head” (Flynn, *Dark Places* 56-57). Libby is outraged at being called a liar, but she knows there is truth behind their mistakes. This excerpt proves that Libby’s gave a coerced testimony—and she knows it—stating that she saw Ben commit the murder, when in reality she was escaping through her mother’s bedroom window during the killing spree. This also adds to Libby’s unreliability as a narrator since readers are leery of more partially true information Libby may have implied, yet readers are still interested in her end goal. This unreliability is highlighted during Libby’s first visit to the prison to see her brother. Ben states:

> Well, your testimony... It only surprised me that people believed you. It didn’t surprise me what you said. You were in a totally insane situation.

> And you always were a little liar. ... No, seriously, the fact that they
believed you? They wanted me in here, I was going to be in here, that just proved it. (Flynn, *Dark Places* 98)

This scene may prompt readers to continue to question Libby’s motives and to lose confidence in her due to the lack of honesty, even if she was young and traumatized. As the story progresses, it is confirmed that Libby’s testimony was not completely true and that people wanted Ben in prison because there was no other evident killer.¹²

In *Gone Girl*, Amy witnesses her husband’s infidelity, but this does not necessarily cause her trauma that might justify her status as an unreliable narrator. In this case, readers are at the disadvantage: first, readers are presented with the account of events from Diary Amy, Amy tells an account of the story from the fabricated personal diary she made to aid in framing Nick, which is interlaced with Nick’s commentary and experiences while Amy is missing. Then readers are presented with narration from Dead Amy, Amy who is on the run after faking her own murder, as she goes through the experience of being on the run and her subsequent plans to eventually blame everything on Desi Collings. Amy makes the decision to involve Desi Collings after she decides not to kill herself—her original plan in order to present the dead body and finalize the act of framing Nick for murder. Nick brings attention to Amy’s crime—which she thought was justified for the sake of her meticulous plan—after she makes her “miraculous” return:

You killed Desi so you had a new story, so you could come back and be beloved Amy and not ever have to take the blame for what you did. Don’t you get it, Amy, the irony? It’s what you always hated about me—that I

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¹² Libby is a rare type of semi-unreliable narrator, since this is the only section of the story, while important, where readers question her version of the truth. Usually, readers eventually come to question everything from the perspective of an unreliable narrator, but this is the only issue readers really need to question with Libby.
never dealt with the consequences of my actions, right? Well, my ass has been well and duly consequenced. So, what about you? You murdered a man, a man I assumed loved you…. (Flynn, *Gone Girl* 386, emphasis in original)

Amy’s character provides an interesting balance from multiple perspectives as the innocent girl who inspired *Amazing Amy* (a series of children’s novels published by Amy’s parents which were inspired by events from Amy’s life), narration as a victim of adultery, and as a conniving wife lusting for revenge.

**Maltreatment and Motivation**

Flynn’s main characters, Libby Day and Amy Dunne, are characters who have very specific motivations. Studies also show that in the brain, achieving revenge or punishment positively affects the same pleasure centers that receive rewards (Keen, McCoy, and Powell 139). However, with Libby and Amy, this is not the case since they are women and their motives are not entirely based on pleasurable responses. Libby spends the beginning of the novel wasting time and wallowing in self-loathing about the murder of her mother and sisters, but eventually she does decide to seek revenge—in a way. She becomes determined to find out if her brother, Ben, was actually the killer, or if he has been wrongly put in prison. At first Libby’s search is motivated by her need to earn money, but soon she becomes immersed and wants to solve the mystery for Ben’s sake and her own peace of mind. Amy, on the other hand, creates evil plans and conducts her actions entirely based on revenge and punishment—she is determined to make Nick pay for cheating and contributing to the decline in their marriage. While Amy does get some form of a pleasurable response from doling out punishments to people who she
thinks deserve them, she also forces herself to be very disciplined and to withstand bodily
damage (e.g. creating several, accurate journal entries in her alternate personality as
“good” Diary Amy, slicing her arm and draining the blood onto her kitchen floor to stage
the fake crime scene, waiting an entire year to frame Nick while slowly putting all her
moving pieces in place, etc.).

Amy’s sense of being wronged by the people in her life—her parents, Desi
Collings, Hillary Handy, Tommy O’Hara, and Nick—causes Amy to go about achieving
justice through her own code of ethics: she punishes the people she thinks have
mistreated her by threatening embarrassment, shame, fear, the illusion of loss, public
scrutiny, lies, and even death. Both of these characters’ actions are influenced by their
negative life circumstances. Libby, on the other hand, is not the same type of anti-hero as
Amy;¹³ Libby’s actions are not nearly as extreme. While Libby is exploitive, a liar, thief,
and has other unlikable qualities, she is not nearly as devious or lethal as Amy. Flynn
created Libby and Amy as shocking female characters with multiple layers and
motivations in an effort to provide readers with a new, less traditional type of strong
female protagonist.

Flynn’s Intentions for Her Female Characters

Flynn’s “For Readers” page on her website explains why she wanted to write a
different type of female character, one who challenges traditional expectations. Flynn
states that she wanted to write women who were rough and perhaps unpalatable—she
wanted to show multiple sides of female characters readers have typically only seen from

¹³ Joanna Robinson’s article “How a Lifetime Show Gave Us TV’s First Pure Female Antihero”
discusses the new Lifetime television show *UnREAL* and how the anti-hero main character, Rachel,
presents herself as the one viewers want to root for and can relate to, but by the end of the season
viewers realize how manipulative and evil she actually is. This is similar to some readers’ experience
with Amy.
male characters. For example, many female characters are not depicted as violent or aggressive, unlike many male characters. But, female characters who are portrayed with these traits are labeled as masculine, and they are often seen as less feminine and/or less likeable. On this, Flynn explains:

... And we still don’t discuss our own violence. We devour the news about Susan Smith or Andrea Yates—women who drowned their children—but we demand these stories be rendered palatable. We want somber asides on postpartum depression or a story about the Man Who Made Her Do It. But there’s an ignored resonance. I think women like to read about murderous mothers and lost little girls because it’s our only mainstream outlet to even begin discussing female violence on a personal level. Female violence is a specific brand of ferocity. It’s invasive. A girlfight is all teeth and hair, spit and nails—a much more fearsome thing to watch than two dudes clobbering each other. And the mental violence is positively gory. Women entwine. Some of the most disturbing, sick relationships I’ve witnessed are between long-time friends, and especially mothers and daughters.

(“Gillian Flynn”)

Flynn wanted to portray women more realistically by showing negative traits and behaviors displayed by some real world women as opposed to simply regurgitating ideal myths of perfect females. Perhaps Flynn is challenging readers to accept the fact that woman can be just as violent as men and is not trying to provide an explanation why. These narratives, while they can make readers uncomfortable, can also provide a sense of understanding and relatability. Analyzing Flynn’s characters reveals that she did carry out
her intentional goal of writing violent, dark female characters who are made worse by the other women in their lives, but they do, in the end, perpetuate the cliché of the "Man Who Made Her Do It" character through their dependence on the male influences in their lives. Because of this perpetuation, Flynn’s audience may end up missing the new character development Flynn is trying to create by, instead, focusing more on the clichéd, familiar storyline.

Flynn writes female protagonists who lack strong female support systems, and who are surrounded by a dreary collection of harsh, easily unlikable female characters. Perhaps because of this, both protagonists, Libby and Amy, repeatedly make decisions based on the men in their lives. Therefore, despite her intentions to the contrary, Flynn is still painting the female character society has come to expect: a woman whose troubles stem from or are solved by a man. She is inadvertently undoing her goal of creating a strong female character by smothering her female characters under prominent male characters. Although Flynn’s characters may not completely break free from previous narrative tropes, Flynn does broaden our definition of a female character. However, she—and authors who follow her—need to go further in order to create the type of female character readers need: one who is able to develop without the influence of a male counterpart.  

Chuck Wendig author of the blog "terribleminds" also discusses this argument: even strong female characters ultimately end up being an object of male attention; a tool used to progress male character development. He cites many tests—one being the Bechdel Test—that many pieces of literature do not pass regarding the strength and concerns of their female characters. Wendig claims that readers need to give female characters their agency to be in control of a story and to embody a character who resembles a woman in reality ("terribleminds").
Competing Counterparts

In both novels Libby and Amy are conjoined to their male counterparts; men who undermine their feminine potential and prevent them from completely fulfilling the role of the strong female protagonist. Instead, Flynn ultimately perpetuates the “Man Who Made Her Do It” angle that she was trying to avoid recreating. The stories cannot develop without the actions of Ben (Libby’s brother) and Nick (Amy’s husband). Throughout *Dark Places*, Ben is the driving force behind Libby’s reasoning: in the beginning, she is determined to push away her guilt and to continue declaring Ben as the murderer. But, as the story progresses, Ben’s narration of past events and what he recounts during Libby’s prison visits becomes the motivation for Libby to find the true murderer and to begin improving her quality of life. Also, in *Gone Girl*, Nick’s narration creates an equivocal effect that contrasts Amy’s version of events during their marriage and after her staged murder. Nick’s narrations not only keep the reader guessing about the outcome of the plot, but they also increasingly heighten the reader’s suspicions of Amy as a reliable narrator.

Libby and Amy must display assertiveness, confidence, and aggression—actions society often labels as male-dominated traits. And as a result, one reason for the wide appeal of these female anti-heroes is because they are embodying the anti-hero role previously held by males. These characters often get classified as feminist characters but this seems troubling considering they earn this classification only after have they have been forced to give up their femininity and embrace masculinity. Thus, in order for these female characters to appear strong, they must act with more masculinity. In “Recovering
the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony, Mimi Schippers explains:

gender is a socially constructed binary that defines ‘men’ and ‘women’ as two distinct classes of people. The discursive construction of gender assumes that there are certain bodies, behaviors, personality traits, and desires that neatly match up to one or the other category. (89-90)

Therefore, if people are confronted with a feminine character, then they expect her to have personality qualities that match her gender description. Female characters can certainly be confident and aggressive (male-coded qualities), since women are not incapable of displaying these traits; however, in Flynn’s novels it is notable that the characters’ femininity seems to be removed in order to provide room for the male characteristics associated with the anti-hero. Flynn’s characters are displaying strong qualities, but in order to make readers more comfortable with their less feminine attributes, the female characters are associated with male traits instead, and the characters become more palatable. For example, as Dark Places opens, on the first page, Flynn describes Libby’s appearance and personality:

I have a meanness inside me, real as an organ. ... It’s the Day blood. Something’s wrong with it. ... Me going to school in my dead sisters’ hand-me-downs: Shirts with mustardy armpits. Pants with baggy bottoms, comically loose, held on with a raggedy belt... In class photos my hair was always crooked—barrettes hanging loosely from strands, as if they were airborne objects caught in the tangles—and I always had bulging
pockets under my eyes, drunk landlady eyes. Maybe a grudging curve of
the lips where a smile should be. Maybe. (Flynn, *Dark Places* 1)

Flynn opens by describing Libby’s innate being, her default personality trait—meanness. Then, her description transitions to that of, perhaps, a young boy: “mustardy armpits” and baggy pants; it is not until readers reach the description of Libby’s hair, then Flynn reveals minor feminine attributes—barrettes and “drunk landlady eyes.” Next, Flynn adds to this description by explaining how Libby was not a loveable child (Flynn, *Dark Places* 1). As the book opens, readers are already poised to receive a different kind of character—one who is not feminine or necessarily likable. Libby’s personality is created to be accepted as a character who behaves badly due to her background.

In *Gone Girl*, Amy displays harsh personality qualities, similar to Libby’s. Amy is described as an attractive woman with a seemingly kind nature, but once the readers learn that there is more beyond Diary Amy, then her real, more complete characterization is exposed. Flynn uses Nick and Amy’s narration to completely reveal all the pieces of Amy’s personality. After Amy’s disappearance, an ex-boyfriend, Tommy, comes to visit Nick to warn him of the stunts Amy has pulled in the past in order to punish other people and to teach them a lesson. Tommy explains to Nick:

> But I know you must know this: Amy likes to play God when she’s not happy. Old Testament God. … But we start dating, and we date a few months, two, three months, and then I find out the catch: She’s not the girl I thought I was dating. … The next thing I know, two cops are at my door, and they’ve done a rape kit on Amy, and she has ‘wounds consistent with forcible rape.’ … Couple of weeks later, I got a note, anonymous, typed,
In this chapter, Flynn is portraying Amy with strong, forceful personality traits that contribute to her meanness, assertiveness, and ability to frame an innocent person for an awful crime he did not commit. Amy is portraying qualities, which are often labeled as masculine, to pursue her goals of punishing others who have wronged her—according to her moral code. Then, Amy’s character is juxtaposed on the next page. As the next chapter opens, Amy is seen riding bumper boats and spending time with new acquaintances in the sun and a bathing suit as a carefree young woman, pretending to be anyone except Amy Dunne.

Now, female anti-heroes like Amy Dunne are beginning to become more prominent, but many writers do not dare to go as far as Flynn does. Usually authors (both men and women) do not write a character who is as unlikable or uncomfortable to read as Amy from *Gone Girl* or Libby from *Dark Places*. Unlikable characters used to mean an unlikable book that would not sell, but now readers are being exposed to characters who are less than perfect—characters they can relate to. Flynn’s characters are also unique in the sense that they are “nice” women with plenty of feminine-coded traits such as sensitivity. Instead these characters have a distinct blend of combined masculine and feminine qualities.

**Where Flynn Falls Short**

Flynn creates characters who are female but who cast off feminine qualities to display masculine-coded ones like anger or harshness. This is a noteworthy craft decision, but it does not make Flynn’s characters completely exceptional. The problem is
not just that these female characters are touting primarily masculine qualities, but that Flynn is not staying true her original goal—to create dark “violent, wicked women. Scary women” who can stand independently (“Gillian Flynn”). Authors need to create a female anti-hero who is different than the male anti-heroes before her to prove that female characters—depictions of women in society—are strong and unique enough to stand as independent beings rather than a character who is still falling prey to the industry standards and expectations that help to make the character automatically popular instead of an effective messenger. Overall, Flynn (like many other authors) does not write female characters who do not erode their progress from the beginning of the narrative. She created female characters who lack femininity and still act based on male influences. Libby and Amy are strong because they cast off their femininity, but it seems they cannot be feminine and strong and dark. Flynn conforms to this trap; therefore, undermining herself and her characters, instead of using this opportunity to force readers to grapple with a character that has female-coded traits and a strong, dark personality.

Flynn’s craft decisions seem to project the assertion that a character cannot be effeminate while realistically carrying out dastardly acts as their male predecessors did. It seems, the anti-hero character design heavily lends itself to the project of masculine qualities. Whether a male or female character is placed in the lead role of anti-hero, authors and directions appear more likely to succumb to crating a character with inherently masculine—rather than feminine—qualities. Future female anti-heroes should be crafted with more diversity and break free from the underlying masculine qualities that line the frame of the anti-hero. Or, at least, future anti-heroes should be designed without purposely removing femininity to make room for masculinity. Developing an anti-hero
with more feminine qualities would add to this diversity. This character does not have to be a woman. A male character with feminine qualities could be just as interesting and effective in removing cultural training surrounding the concept of strength as masculine.

**Androgyny and the Female Anti-Hero**

One way in order to do this would be to design what Mary Ellen Ross calls an, "androgynous model for a character"—one that represents both male and female traits in order to create a whole person (48). Ross goes on to explain that traits are seen differently among the sexes due to society's expectations and what is emphasized for each. For example, Ross explains:

- Males become active: They learn to compete, to lead, to speak out.
- Females become passive: They are pressured to be deferential and self-sacrificing and to listen. These two sets of traits are separate but not equal, because American society values the aggressive characteristics more highly and the passive qualities serve to keep women from acquiring social power. (49)

Ross also cites Carol Gilligan and her research comparing decision-making strategies between the sexes. Ross cites examples of canonical female characters who are famous for their questionable actions that challenge the rules of society. Ross uses the Greek mythology female character Antigone\(^\text{15}\) from Sophocles' play *Antigone* as an example to demonstrate her point of a "healthy fusion of masculine and feminine in the character of the androgyne" (50). Ross also mentions the early female anti-hero discussed in Chapter

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\(^{15}\) Even though her brother is considered a traitor to their country, which causes him to lose his right to a proper burial, Antigone defies the king and properly buries her brother's body so his soul can leave the earth.
One, Hester Prynne,\(^{16}\) arguing that she is an example of wisdom and a form in which androgyny can be observed. Both of these female characters defy the norms of society (even if the expectations are corrupt or unfair) to do what they think is right.

**Cultural Expectations and Female Characters**

Literary works can reinforce or challenge cultural expectations. Consider the fact that women are socialized to be nurturing and self-sacrificing. Flynn's novels work to questions this gendered expectation for women. Libby and Amy do not perpetuate do not perpetuate this particular female prototype; thus, supporting Flynn's goal of creating a different type of female character, but she is still not breaking far enough from the mold.

In *Gone Girl*, Amy uses the appeal and illusion of womanly characteristics to hatch her evil plan. She befriends Noelle Hawthorne, a pregnant neighbor who already has triplets. Not only does Noelle (unknowingly) provide the guise of a friendship for Amy, and the urine Amy uses to fake a positive pregnancy test, she plays right into the idea that society portrays: pregnant women are vulnerable, helpless, dependent, and therefore, they cannot be responsible for a crime.

Amy twists this portrayal by staging her own pregnancy and further intensifying Nick's confusion and punishment. But eventually Amy realizes how deep she is in with her multi-layered plan. Amy explains: "I can't be discovered. If I were ever found, I'd be the most hated woman on the planet. I'd go from being the beautiful, kind, doomed, pregnant victim of a selfish, cheating bastard to being the bitter bitch who exploited the good hearts of all America's citizens" (Flynn, *Gone Girl* 284). Amy knows that her femininity has helped her gain support of Americans during the investigation of her

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\(^{16}\) Hester Prynne defies society when she is labeled with the infamous red letter A for adulteress because she has a child out of wedlock but refuses to name the father, not permitting him to the same public shame.
disappearance, but she also knows that this trust cannot be broken or else people will turn on her, categorizing her as the other popular depiction of women: a cold-hearted bitch. Amy uses Noelle, the epitome of society’s idea of a woman, as a pawn to order to progress her motives, which, in the end, works in Amy’s favor. Amy’s actions are dishonest and aggressively destructive—the opposite of what society expects from women.

As the media and police find the compiling damning evidence, Nick reveals even more personality flaws and bad choices he has made—having an affair with Andie, maxing out credit cards on expensive items he does not even use, putting Amy’s last bit of money from her trust fund towards opening The Bar, and truly hating his wife but doing nothing even though he knows she is unhappy. Nick’s sister exasperatedly goes down the list of Nick’s indiscretions as they discuss the likely outcome of his predicament: “We have to give them [the police] Amy’s motive, it doesn’t work otherwise. … Money problems, check. Pregnant wife, check. Girlfriend, check. It’s a murderer’s triumvirate. You’ll go down. Women will line up to tear you appear with their fingernails” (Flynn, Gone Girl 269). Throughout Gone Girl, readers are tossed between feeling sympathy for Nick because most of America hates him for a crime he did not commit, then feeling justification for Amy’s foolproof plan since it seems she will win this battle. The public is more likely to believe a man, Nick, committed these crimes, and so they are more likely to rip him apart because he fits the mold of society’s negative expectations.

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17 Vance Packard author of The Sexual Wilderness: The Contemporary Upheaval in Male-Female Relationships specifically states: “Society is still scornful of the male who marries for money” (89).
This societal expectation of men as more probable criminals creates the foundation for *Dark Places*—most of the public believes that Ben is responsible for murdering his family, even though there is not enough evidence to prove it. *As Dark Places* opens, Libby describes her life in a run-down, dingy apartment complex. Libby is also not a maternal, nurturing, or caring woman; instead, she is lazy. She does not keep any food in her home, for herself or for her cat. She does not maintain her personal hygiene or the cleanliness of her home, and she does not care about the state of her finances—until they run out. Instead of building a résumé, making connections, and finding a job, Libby prefers to find ways to continue living off her family’s unfortunate demise. But, she is the protagonist, and readers do want to find out if she will achieve her goals. As the plot unfolds, readers are forced to question their alliance to Libby as the protagonist or their alliance to justice, which could put Libby at fault for Ben’s imprisonment. Libby goes against reader’s expectations of a female character because she is dishonest, rude, solitary, not particularly attractive, and self-centered—all traits that are not traditionally deemed as feminine.

Many scholars have studied gender roles and the perceptions of what makes a person feminine. Jenefer Robinson and Stephanie Ross authors of “Women, Morality, and Fiction” discuss Carol Gilligan and her stance on reading women and their responses to fictional or real life dilemmas. Robinson and Ross explain that women see situations in life as a web, whereas men see situations as a succession with a hierarchy of relationships. Robinson and Ross state: “Gilligan contrasts ‘male’ morality—an ethics of rights—with ‘female’ morality—an ethics of responsibility. The first emphasizes separation and individual rights. The second emphasizes attachment and the urge to care”
Overall, the “care” perspective—commitment to other people and their wholeness—is different from the justice perspective—commitment to rules, values, and principles, whereas the “gender difference” perspective suggests that the “care” perspective is characteristically a woman’s moral voice, while the “justice” perspective is typically a man’s moral voice (Robinson and Ross 79). Readers can see these types of moral decisions unfolding in *Dark Places* and *Gone Girl*.

In *Dark Places*, Ben has accepted his prison sentence due to his male-centered ethics of rights. The narration of Ben’s chapter near the end of the novel describes the murder of his sister:

Ben closed the door, instead of opening it wide, calling for his mom, he wanted everything to stay quiet, no other instinct than to stick to the plan which is don’t wake anyone up, and he was trying to reason with Diondra, thinking it would all be OK, *Diondra, Diondra, calm down, she won’t tell, let her go* and Diondra leaning deeper onto Michelle’s neck… Ben put his hands on Diondra’s shoulders to pull her off but instead they just rested there. (Flynn, *Dark Places* 312, emphasis in original)

Ben had a part in Michelle’s murder, even if he was a bystander. He did not do anything to stop Diondra from strangling her, and so he is content with being in prison. Ben is also serving his prison sentence in order to protect Diondra. He did impregnate her, does love her, and feels as though it is his right to take the blame for this situation as a father and protector. Even as Diondra is leaving the Day house, chopping at everything with the axe—the walls, his mother’s dead body—Ben wonders how he could be so calm, telling himself not to collapse but to pull it together, “*be a fucking man, do it be a man do what*
needs to be done be a man” as he ushers Diondra outside (Flynn, Dark Places 329, emphasis in the original). In these moments, Ben is putting Diondra above all the other people in his life, even himself. He is making the decision to protect her, to shield her from the consequences, and he is willing to face them alone.

As the story progresses, Diondra explains to Libby: “I do think you could find some peace… I hate to say this, but whatever happened that night, Ben needed to be in prison. He even says so. He had something inside him that wasn’t right for the outside world. A violence. He does so much better in prison” (Flynn, Dark Places 308). Even though Diondra strangles Michelle because of Michelle’s incurable love for gossip, which threatens Diondra’s mission to keep her pregnancy a secret, Ben does not stop Diondra as she strangles his sister, and therefore, he feels content serving his prison sentence since he was an accomplice to murder. Once the truth is uncovered, Ben goes from being a brutal murderer to a decent guy who made mistakes and paid for them. And by the end of the novel, readers truthfully discover that Ben did not kill his family. His mother hired a man (Calvin Diehl) to kill her, which did not go exactly as planned, so this man ended up killing Debby—the witness—too.

Libby is also haunted by her guilt due to her female-centered ethics of responsibility. She was supposed to give a fair and honest account on trial of what happened the night of the murders, but she was not the witness everyone thought she was. In the beginning of the novel, readers see the mindset that Libby has been living with in an effort to make peace with the tragic situation: “…I reminded myself that Ben was guilty (had to be had to be), mainly because I couldn’t handle any other possibility. Not if I was going to function, and for the first time in twenty-four years, I needed to function.
... I fell asleep, the rum bottle still in my hand, reassuring myself: Ben Day is a killer” (Flynn, *Dark Places* 44, emphasis in original). This guilt keeps Libby from dealing with her sour residing emotions because she feels partly to blame for her brother’s prison sentence. Eventually, she understands that each member of her family contributed to the horrible actions that night—they are all connected by their familial web—but she still does not want to face the fact that she ignored her ethical responsibility of giving an accurate testimony in court (even though she was young and coaxed into saying specific details that contributed to his sentence). So, in order to cope afterwards, Libby pretends to not care about the outcome of the trial, her bother’s fate, or the truth until she meets Lyle and begin investigating these painful memories because she needs to earn money.

At this point in the novel, it is unusual that Libby is suddenly embracing feminine qualities instead of casting them aside (to be replaced by more masculine ones) as she did throughout the majority of the story. This is another example of how Flynn allows her character to fall into the more traditional female character role instead of clinging to the dark, coarse female character design she originally intended on portraying. Flynn could have written Libby differently: her character could have cared less and harbored less guilt about Ben’s imprisonment as well as residing feelings of responsibility about her testimony, all of which affected Libby’s motives and ultimately made her a more likable character.

In *Gone Girl*, Nick is more concerned with his male-centered ethics of rights—the fact that he did not commit murder. Nick desperately explains to his sister: “Amy’s framing me, Go, Amy bought this stuff. She’s framing me... It’s her grand statement. *Presenting: Nick Goes to Jail!***” (Flynn, *Gone Girl* 227, emphasis in original). He is
trying to keep Go on his side as he pleads his case to America, while attempting to prevent his looming arrest.

Amy, on the other hand, is more concerned with the ethics of responsibility. On her quest to teach Nick a lesson, she reveals her anger at the persona she was forced to embody after she discovered his new love interest, Andie: “You know how I found out? I saw them. ... I still believed he’d love me again somehow ... I got there just in time to see him leaving with her. ... I had a new persona, not of my choosing. I was Average Dumb Woman Married to Average Shitty Man. He had single-handedly de-amazed Amazing Amy” (Flynn, *Gone Girl* 233-234). Nick wronged her and disrespected their marriage; therefore, he must be punished.

With Amy's character, Flynn is more successful in adhering to her original goal and character design. While Amy does portray the female-centered moral concern for ethics of responsibility, she twists this conduct to apply to the actions of others—rather than her own. As a result, Amy continues to embody the masculine qualities of assertiveness and aggression she adopted throughout the story by focusing more on the male-centered ethics of rights and justice. Amy is determined to bring (her form of) justice down upon Nick in order to right his wrongs.

**The Culmination of Libby’s and Amy’s Characters**

Throughout Gillian Flynn’s novels, readers meet several angry, dangerous, and potentially unlikable female characters. It was Flynn’s mission to write characters who depicted the sides of women that readers do not often see represented in narratives (since society deems them unfavorable), and Flynn does accomplish this. In both *Dark Places* and *Gone Girl*, Libby and Amy are dark, cold, and unconcerned with making true friends
or maintaining better relationships with their loved ones. But by the end of both novels, readers see these two female protagonists return to their previous lives. While both have made significant points—Libby solved the mystery surrounding the murders of her mother and sisters, and Amy taught Nick a distinct lesson about respecting her—Flynn’s work in building up these female characters is undone by their need to return to and be accepted by a male counterpart. In a way, this return creates the “happily ever after ending” readers usually hope for at the end of a story, but does not consistently support Flynn’s original goal of writing truly morose, contentious female characters.

Ultimately, Flynn’s characters cannot stand alone. Libby is motivated by the actions of men: her brother, Ben, due to his part in their family’s murder, the lack of interest and occasional abuse from her father, Runner Day, the constant reminder of low funds and poor financial status from Jim Jeffreys, and the prodding from Lyle Wirth to help the Kill Club solve the mystery and find her family’s actual killer. And, Amy, as readers slowly learn throughout the novel, is repeatedly punishing the men in her life who she feels have wronged in some way: her father—for his part in plagiarizing her childhood through the publication of the Amazing Amy novels, an old boyfriend, Tommy O’Hara—for losing interest/not giving her more attention in their casual relationship, Desi Collings—for idolizing her and then trying to imprison her in his extravagant home, and finally, Nick Dunne—for having a mistress and not giving their married life the attention it deserved. Libby only gets a happy ending after she wades through the mess her brother, father, and Calvin Diehl created, which resulted in the massacre of her family. But, Amy does not develop or change; she continues to be bitter and punishing. Both of these female characters, who are friendless, angry, and somewhat suicidal, go to
extreme measures that endanger themselves and others with little concern for the consequences besides achieving their goals, which stemmed from the impact made by the men in their lives.

However, Flynn is adding to the literature landscape by writing more female characters who have different traits than previous, traditional female characters. But, she is not creating female characters who can stand alone, who can be as powerful and independent as a male character. An ideal female anti-hero character for twenty-first century readers would be a woman who does not need a man to complete her. Instead, Flynn ultimately still creates a character who indulges in readers’ expectations; readers want a happy ending and expect women to have a male counterpart. In *Dark Places*, Libby is able to solve the mystery, amend her finances, and improve the relationships in her life. Lyle was always kind to Libby, so of course readers want to see their relationship flourish, especially since Libby has finally achieved peace of mind. Readers end the book with positive feelings about Libby’s situation. In *Gone Girl* the ending is not as settling, Amy is able to leave behind her less than glamorous life on the run and avoid carrying out her original plan—suicide. She returns home and is able to reconnect with Nick in their own depraved way. Amy continues to hold power over Nick, but he is content with the dynamics of their relationship. Considering these endings and the fact that readers inherently root for the protagonists, both novels fulfill traditional reader expectations. Perhaps if Flynn was writing for another genre or audience, she could have made more drastic moves involving the outcome of her protagonists, but for mass readers and the *New York Times* best-selling list her endings were fairly traditional and digestible. Even though Flynn worked to create cold, flawed, and unlikable female protagonists she
undermines her own work by allowing these characters to be liked by other—male—characters. If Flynn, or another author, is able to create this new version of the strong female character who is not undone by male characters and does not conform to the more traditional roles in storytelling associated with women, then perhaps Flynn’s characters and more female anti-heroes to come—in various forms of media—will prove to be more groundbreaking and influential within the evolution of the strong female character.
Chapter Three

Female Anti-Heroes in Films

Anti-heroes are flooding media: some are moving from the page to the big screen—like the adaptations of Gillian Flynn’s novels—and now films are moving towards creating and featuring female anti-heroes. The films featured in this chapter star strong female characters in leading roles: a woman who spends a lifetime running from Nazis, eventually developing a plan to kill Hitler and his most devoted followers, or a woman who is ward of the state but becomes determined to catch a serial killer targeting women as his victims. This chapter will analyze two female anti-hero characters from recent critically acclaimed films: Shosanna Dryfus (Mélanie Laurent) from Quentin Tarantino’s Inglourious Basterds (2009) and Lisbeth Salander (Rooney Mara) from David Fincher’s American version of The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo (2011). In these films, the female characters choose to make morally questionable and dangerous choices due to their motivation to seek revenge and to prove a personal point; however, choices their male script writers and film directors make stunt their character development. These choices are perhaps made in an effort to appease the film industry and idealistic notions about how the female character’s design and actions should culminate. In both films the main female characters are developed with strength and exceptionality, but the end of each film reduces the female leads to a more typical version of what Hollywood expects from female characters—to continue standing behind male characters.

18 In the box office, Inglourious Basterds was ranked 25th among all films released in the United States during 2009, which also makes it Tarantino’s highest grossing film to date (Herzog 274). On a popular movie-rating website for critics and audience members, Rotten Tomatoes rated Inglourious Basterds as 89% “fresh” and The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo as 86% “fresh.” These films were well received and appreciated by critics and audiences alike.
Heroines or Anti-Heroes?

Depictions of female anti-heroes have been transferred from literature to film as discussed in regard to the recent adaptation of Gillian Flynn's novels, *Gone Girl* and *Dark Places*. The same can be said for *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. This character was originally presented in Stieg Larsson's novel *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, which was released in 2005, and later was adapted into Swedish (2009) and American (2011) film versions. Quentin Tarantino, on the other hand, created his female character entirely for the film world through his writing and directing. While both Shosanna and Lisbeth could arguably be categorized as heroines, this chapter will argue for why these characters could more accurately fit the anti-hero mold through analysis of their roles in the films.

These female characters are not heroes. Lara Stache, a scholar who has studied men's writing of female characters, discusses the traits that female action heroes possess: Female heroes must fight to save their own lives, but they are also public. They also have to fight to save the human race by helping or protecting others (74). Furthermore, just as people have debated villains verses anti-heroes, Stache offers another categorization, preferring to call characters like Shosanna or Lisbeth the “avenging woman” (73). Stache argues that this character may be one of the ways “Hollywood has attempted to make sense of feminism and the changing shape of heterosexual femininity in the post-1970 period” (73). She goes on to explain that the avenging woman is “both physically strong and aggressive, but she is also highly sexualized and feminine” (Stache 73). This is where the characterizations between the avenging woman and female anti-hero begin to differ. Shosanna and Lisbeth do not encompass the heroic or the “avenging woman”
characterization; they do not demonstrate brute strength, and they are not overtly sexualized in the films. Unlike the avenging woman whose sexualization undermines her, the current female anti-hero is not sexualized and any displays of femininity do not undermine the character. Instead, the female anti-hero’s acts of sexualization can be read as a performance to employ their femininity as a way of thwarting their male adversaries.

The female characters in this study fit more completely into the anti-hero mold, partially due to their ability to manipulate social conventions of gender. Elif Ince explains that an anti-hero’s quest is one concerning identity and a struggle to continue to refine oneself: “Standing in stark contrast against the unchanging personality of stock characters, the postmodern antihero is shaped by the constant battle between his individual desires and social conventions” (11-12). Shosanna and Lisbeth both have desires for revenge and are willing to break any conventions necessary in order to satisfy these desires.

_Inglourious Basterds: Shosanna’s Side of the Story_

Shosanna’s (also known as Emmanuelle Mimieux) entire family is killed by Nazis. Shosanna was able to escape, but only at the mercy of Col. Hans Landa (Christoph Waltz) who decides not to shoot Shosanna as she is running away. Time passes and Shosanna inherits Le Gamaar cinema from her aunt and uncle. This cinema has been chosen to host an event, the premiere of _Nation’s Pride_, which Hitler and several other high-ranking Nazi officials will attend. Shosanna plots to record a personal message about her “Jewish vengeance,” insert it into the film, and burn her cinema to the ground while they are all trapped inside. Driven by the dark past of her family’s murders and the
lust for revenge, Shoshanna achieves her goal of killing the Nazis but also dies at the hand of one.

Shosanna is an influential character because she is willing to fight violence with violence in order to achieve her revenge and send a message to Hitler that many other Jewish families would have loved to have done. Shosanna ultimately achieves her goal and contributes to the death of Hitler and many of his high-ranking followers, but she is also undermined in her role. Her storyline competes with the irony of her demise—being shot by the Nazi man who showed romantic interest in Shosanna earlier in the film. Shosanna’s performance is also heavily outweighed by the schemes of the Basterds, and the more anticipated performance from Brad Pitt as Lieutenant Aldo Raine. Therefore, Shosanna’s character, which does add another example of the female anti-hero’s portrayal in film, is still not the strongest depiction.

Even though Shosanna is an essential character in the film narrative, her character “does not seem to have captured the attention of critics and reviewers up to this point” (Schlipphacke 115). This is true. Many critics who reviewed Inglourious Basterds simply mentioned Shosanna’s involvement in the film without adding much thought or analysis or they skirt around her role entirely.19 By focusing this analysis on Shosanna’s character, particularly her role as a female anti-hero, this chapter aims to highlight the intricacies

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19 For example, Slant Magazine, does not mention Shosanna once their review of Inglourious Basterds. Cohen does mention Bridget van Hammersmark, Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman) from Pulp Fiction, and Beatrix Kiddo (Uma Thurman) from Kill Bill: Vol. 1 in the name of mentioning Tarantino’s foot fetish, but Cohen does not use this opportunity to dig deeper into the discussion of what else there is to these female characters apart from their feet (“Tarantino’s Masterpiece”). Another article by Rolling Stone by Peter Travers mentions Shosanna’s contribution to the plotline, but does not go any further with the discussion of her role. Instead, the article focuses on discussing the director and the male roles featured in the film.
and relevance of such a character while also drawing attention to the lack of reverence this character has received in the film industry.

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo: A Movie Named After a Girl but About a Man

Lisbeth’s depiction is also a unique addition to the definition of the strong female character, but, unfortunately, her character is undone in similar ways. Due to the choices of the screenwriter and director of this film, Lisbeth’s character begins as a distinct and remarkable female character, but by the end of the film her defining qualities are diminished as she is reduced to a more digestible, predictable female character.

Upon the introduction of Lisbeth Salander, viewers are guided to notice her discomfort during social situations and the allusions to an ominous past. Lisbeth’s underlying issues are not made entirely clear to the audience, but the conclusion that Lisbeth is a unique character is further solidified by Lisbeth’s shocking appearance: a petite frame, short and unevenly cut black hair, but little to no eyebrows, pale skin, and several piercings. Lisbeth’s strengths—a photographic memory that enables her to conduct precise research along with unmatched computer hacking skills—lead her to Mikael Blomkvist, despite her distrust in men. Mikael is a journalist who has been hired to investigate the alleged death of the niece, Harriet (Moa Garpendal), of a respected corporation owner, Henrik Vanger. Mikael takes the job, wanting to get away from his previous position where he was the subject of a scandal, but the research becomes overwhelming and he requests to hire an assistant. He is drawn to Lisbeth but also intimidated by her skills. (She is the one who conducted Mikael’s background check, finding too much personal information by hacking into his computer.)
Lisbeth’s contributes to the investigation of Harriet, and her involvement with Mikael becomes multifaceted—not only are they working together to solve this crime, they start sleeping together, and Lisbeth develops romantic feelings for Mikael. (Mikael does not reciprocate Lisbeth’s feelings by the end of the film once he returns to his wife.) They discover that Harriet’s brother Martin (Stellan Skarsgard) has been raping and killing women for decades, but he did not kill Harriet. Mikael learns this information as he is trapped and strung from the ceiling of Martin’s basement, about to become the next victim, when Lisbeth appears swinging a golf club and breaking Martin’s jaw. Martin drives away from his house, Lisbeth close behind on her motorcycle, but Martin crashes and dies in the explosion. In the end, Mikael and Lisbeth discover that Harriet ran away when she was young and has been living her life elsewhere, unbeknownst to her family.

**Pivotal Scenes: Women on the Wide Screen**

While both of these films feature strong female characters, they receive less screen time compared to their male counterparts. Shosanna is shown even less than Lisbeth. Scholars comment on the importance of these characters, but the truth is that they still are not as renowned as the male leads. Shosanna’s character, while not present in many scenes of the film, does still have quite an impact. Shosanna’s plan to burn down her cinema on the night of the viewing of *Nation’s Pride* “both drives the action of the film and slows it, embodying both a problem and a solution” (Schlipphacke 115). Schlipphacke also discusses how Tarantino immediately tries to catch the audience’s attention during the opening credits by keeping “Mélanie Laurent as Shosanna” for about a second longer on the screen compared to the other actors’ names—none of which are listed with their roles (115).
Shosanna is most present in the scenes leading up the premiere. While preparing for the evening when Shosanna will execute her plan, audiences see Shosanna putting on make-up, but instead of characterizing this as an entirely feminine act, Shosanna treats it like masculine war paint and applies red streaks across her cheeks. Willis suggests that this “sensuous sequence offers lingering close-ups of the make-up itself and of its application. In its luxurious fetishization of feminine masquerade, this sequence clearly recalls countless film noir femme fatales” (178). Shosanna then dons a black hat and birdcage veil that hangs over her face. The dark color stands out oddly against her bright red dress and lips, but once Shosanna joins the crowd in the cinema, she matches the color of the décor—Nazi flags. However, “in much of the film, she is dressed not as a femme fatale but as an androgynous girl, in slacks and a hat” (Schlipphacke 127).

Shosanna is putting on her disguise to face her enemy. She is dressing up to play the part, which is ultimately what she is forced to do—similarly to how she was forced to take a fake name to protect her existence. This ensemble makes her look weaker, less dangerous, and almost like teammate with the Nazis. She is donning an attractive feminine appearance to indulge the male patriarchy and to play the role of a gracious cinema owner. Shosanna is dressing up for the occasion to blend into the scene by looking compliant and innocent as men often expect women to be. But in the end, this disguise is to fool others so she can carry out her revenge.

In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Lisbeth’s appearance and later her disguise also mirror Shosanna’s intentions and flip the gender expectations. Brown explains that Lisbeth is “not overtly sexualized, her past abuses have left her seething with animosity, and her unusual appearance is carefully constructed to scare people away” (55). Lisbeth’s
appearance is individualistic, but it is also off-putting. She looks neither like a man or a woman, she often wears her hood up to appear even more closed off or threatening, and she shows no interest in changing her appearance to fit an idea of attractiveness. Instead, her appearance is a tool for her to keep people at a distance—a tool to reflect her discomfort and rejection of social conventions.

On the other hand, Lisbeth’s appearance at the very end of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* changes greatly. She asks to borrow money from Mikael, then goes to buy business attire, wigs, make-up, and jewelry—all of which are not her style. At the point in the narratives, both Lisbeth and Shosanna have utilized the power of the feminine masquerade. In both films, they put on feminine attire (dresses, make up, and accessories) in order to use their femininity as a tool to strategically manipulate the patriarchal control around them. These acts speak volumes for the potential of diverse iterations the female anti-hero could encompass. By being female, this character may appear to have less strength or power compared to her male predecessors. But, as female characters who can divert their femininity, appearing more androgynous, or enhance it and still demonstrate that they are a contending character, this makes these characters arguably more powerful and dynamic than the male anti-heroes before them.

Due to this masquerade, Lisbeth executes her own plan by donning the disguise, stealing Wennerström’s money out of his accounts, and then telling some of his associates where he is located, thus getting him shot and killed. Lisbeth is unperturbed by breaking the law. She commits fraud by posing as another person, steals money, and contributes to the murder of Wennerström. All of these acts, however, were motivated by her need to carry out her own moral codes of justice. Lisbeth discovered that
Wennerström pressured one of his sexual partners into having an abortion (stieglarsson.com). Lisbeth could not stand for this injustice against women, and she was able to help Mikael, thus achieving revenge all around.

**Tarantino Discusses Designing Dark Dames**

Tarantino himself did not seem entirely certain of his plan to develop a strong female character or how influential he wanted her to be. Some fans and critics find Tarantino’s writing style controversial in the sense that it can be unclear as to whether he is trying to positively represent female empowerment or fetishizing violence against women, to this Tarantino responded: “I just dig strong chicks” and claimed not to have “set out to write a strong woman, but to instead be drawn to the type of woman that would be strong” (Stache 76). Tarantino seems to find the strong female character appealing, and therefore they find their places in his films—and he does have several. Lizzie Likness comments that the jury is still out about whether Tarantino is more of a misogynist or a feminist. His female characters endure so much violence that viewers and critics alike continue to wonder if the treatment his female characters are part of his fantasies or a move towards showing that women can be treated the same as their male counterparts (“Misogynist or Pioneer?”).

Tarantino’s lack of clear intention behind creating a female character seems even more construed upon further discussion in an interview with Ella Taylor. Tarantino discusses Shosanna’s character development:

My original conception of Shosanna was of a real badass, a Joan of Arc of the Jews, killing Nazis, sniping them off roofs, pulling Molotov cocktails.
Then I thought, no, that's too much like the Bride. So I made her more realistic, more of a survivor, and then a situation happens that she can take advantage of. Then comes my favorite sequence, a Romeo and Juliet shootout at a movie premiere. (“Quentin Tarantino Interview”)

It could be argued that making Shosanna’s character more realistic could contribute to her anti-hero design. While Tarantino’s decision to make Shosanna more realistic perhaps made her more of anti-hero, this particular amendment did not necessarily make her a stronger female character in the film. Due to the context of this film, downplaying Shosanna’s character may have been a move to more evidently juxtapose her against the forehead-carving Basterds. If her character had demonstrated more similarities with The Bride, then perhaps she would have stolen the show.

McGee also comments on Tarantino’s development of Shosanna’s character. He had originally imagined her as a female messiah, but this view is:

ambivalent, not because he doesn’t clearly express in visual language his admiration for those individuals who are able to transform themselves from victims to aggressors, but because in doing so he nonetheless articulates an apparently antithetical truth. (McGee)

Again, Tarantino’s thought process is bringing Shosanna down from a position of power. In her main scene, Tarantino makes Shosanna a victim: Fredrick Zoller (Daniel Bruhl) shoots her. Tarantino even remarked that this shootout was his “favorite sequence.” But, this plot sequence results in Shosanna not dying with her cause and still dying by the hand of a Nazi.

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20 Tarantino’s female lead (Uma Thurman) in his previous films Kill Bill: Vol. 1 and Kill Bill: Vol. 2.
Lizzie Likness also analyzes the reasons that lead up to Shosanna’s death and pegs the main issue on male entitlement. Zoller forces his way in the projection room in an attempt to spend more time with Shosanna despite her disinterest in him. She tells him to go away, but instead he kicks open the door, after which their lethal shoot out commences. Dassanowsky asserts, “Inglourious Basterds offers Tarantino’s most trenchant portrayals of the female struggle for agency because it is allohistorically grounded in a battle of male superiority” (xi). If Zoller had not indulged his male entitlement, then he and Shosanna could have died how she had planned. If Shosanna had died according to her plan, then her revenge would have been complete, Shosanna’s anti-heroic characteristics, furthermore, are the significant traits that define how she goes about obtaining her revenge.

**Shosanna: Feisty French Female Lead in Inglourious Basterds**

What makes Shoshanna’s character and the film Inglourious Basterds even more interesting to study is the layered effect that a film about WWII brings to the audience. Ince reminds readers that the anti-hero is “not just a typical villain cast as a protagonist, but a complex bad character with lots of grey areas and redeemable aspects” (6). Ince discusses the postmodern anti-hero specifically, and how this character evolved after World War II (6). Shosanna is reduced to threatening a film producer’s life in order to carry out her plan. As mentioned previously, the very traits and actions that make Shosanna an anti-hero are the ones she demonstrates while plotting her revenge. McGee explains that in the movie itself (compared to the original script), “not only does Shosanna use Nazi tactics to fight the Nazis, but she uses Marcel’s love for her to put him into a situation that will most likely bring about his death” (McGee). Shosanna and
Marcel beat up this man, but they also force him into doing something that could compromise him in the eyes of the Nazis, potentially bringing him more pain and suffering (McGee).

While Shosanna does show the audience her gray areas of morality, she also reason and code behind committing these acts. Schlipphacke comments on the purpose of Tarantino’s filmmaking along with Shosanna’s plotline:

Tarantino’s task: to re-write the most infamous narrative of the twentieth century. Via the projections and representations of Shosanna, the only Jewish figure in the film with an axe to grind based on her own experiences of persecution, Tarantino explores the impossible temporality of revenge. And when the gender of revenge is feminine, it is both mythic and self-destructive. (114)

The entire film is a fictional version about how Hitler died and the Germans succumbed to WWII. She is one of the few Jewish characters who should rightfully be out for revenge. Yet since she is a woman, then her revenge must be idealized or mythic? The Basterds (all men) are united by their Judaism, but their plan to also bring down Hitler is much more idealized and exaggerated. They have put a cast on the actress Bridget von Hammersmark’s (Diane Kruger) foot, since she was shot in an earlier scene, in order to force her to attend the premiere flanked by fake colleagues (Italian cameramen). Aldo Raine’s (Brad Pitt) men have dynamite strapped to their ankles and have hidden guns in the cinema. They plan to leave the dynamite under their seats and then shoot anyone who is not killed by the explosion—a plan that is much more hyperbolized compared to Shosanna’s plan to simply lock the doors and set fire to the building. Not to mention, the
Basterds’ plan is also not as self-destructive. Raine is seen in the cinema carrying out their plot, but he does not die in the fire, instead he makes a deal with Col. Hans Landa to end the war among the other high-ranking officials. Then, the final scene is Raine carving a swastika into Landa’s forehead.

Shosanna’s plan overlaps with the Basterds’ only in the sense that they are both targeting Hitler on the same night in the same theater. Once Shosanna has created her film, then she executes her plan. As Zoller says on screen (in English), “Who wants to send a message to Germany?” Shosanna’s face cuts in stating, “I have a message for Germany: that you are all going to die.” Hitler rises screaming as the projection of Shosanna continues: “I want you to look deep into the face of the Jew who’s going to do it” (Willis 181). The shot goes to a close-up of Shosanna laughing, and Marcel flicks his cigarette igniting the film nitrate. While Shosanna’s revenge frames her anti-heroic qualities, it also contributes to her demise. Her revenge does result in her destruction, but it is not as exaggerated as the Basterds’ plan.

**Lisbeth Salander: The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo**

As noted before, the theme of revenge is also prominent in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*: in fact, Lisbeth’s revenge often critiqued and celebrated. The depiction of her rape sets up the tensions on which her revenge is grounded. Lisbeth is robbed near the subway, chases down the man who stole her backpack, but is rewarded with a broken computer. Lisbeth visits her case supervisor, Nils Bjurman (Yorick van Wageningen), who coaxes Lisbeth into trading sexual favors with him in order to receive money and a satisfying report for the state about her social skills and finances (even though she does admit to being insane). During their second encounter, Bjurman bonds, gags, and
violently rapes Lisbeth. After the awful occurrence, he writes her a check for ten thousand dollars. Afterwards, Lisbeth is physically and emotionally scarred but determined to get revenge. Later, she returns to Bjurman’s apartment, blackmails him with the footage of her rape from the camera in her bag, ties him up, sodomizes him, and tattoos “I am a rapist pig” on his chest. Under the threat of the video going viral, Lisbeth makes Bjurman promise to continue to write satisfactory reports and to observe abstinence.

While she is certainly coerced into trading oral sex for money during (what viewers see as one of her first encounters with Bjurman), Lisbeth does not walk away. She is cornered by the required report for the state, but she is also smart enough to obtain money in other ways. Lisbeth then goes back to Bjurman to ask for more money, knowing he will expect something from her in return. Unfortunately, this encounter leads to her rape. Lisbeth’s recovery and how she gets revenge are some of the main events that have fueled her popularity. These events, however, are also the very acts that also make her an anti-hero. Lisbeth was expecting foul play when she went to Bjurman’s apartment or else she would not have set up the camera in her bag to film the event. Lisbeth is a victim of this man’s terrible acts, but she was also willing to participate—to a small extent—in order to continue pursuing her larger goals.

Despite these ambiguities, Lisbeth’s character was still defended. Several critics describe the character design of Lisbeth Salander: Roger Ebert described Lisbeth’s appearance as stark, haunted, and a cross between goth and S&M while her personality is “fearsomely intelligent and emotionally stranded” (Brown 53). Entertainment Weekly described Lisbeth as “‘the inscrutable, androgynous, and explosive heroine,’ a ‘sleek,
spooky avatar of payback,’ and ‘a stone-cold female badass’” (Brown 53). Along with interest in her unique appearance and unparalleled design, Lisbeth’s popularity has skyrocketed as well:

Hundreds of blogs cheered Salander’s emergence as a realistic fantasy of a feminist avenger. FemMagazine.com wrote, ‘Ms. Salander is a bona-fide badass. I believe she appeals to women because she operates under a code of justice that gains revenge for victimized women everywhere.’ … Forbes.com claims that ‘what’s significant—and utterly awesome—is that Lisbeth is not a victim, she’s a revenger seeking payback and justice.

(Brown 57)

Audience members have accepted and celebrated a character like Lisbeth. A character who is not confined by the traditional expectations of a woman, and a character who is in charge of her own life, even if that means coping with scarring events.

Of these scarring events, torture can bring a variety of reactions to any character’s story. For female characters specifically, “on-screen torture foregrounds issues of sexualized violence, rape, power, and gender in a manner very different than with male characters” (Brown 47). Both main characters of Dragon Tattoo are put in the position of the torture victim. While Lisbeth’s rape is anything but sexualized and more along the lines of repulsive, the concept here is more applicable to Mikael’s character. Sean Temple makes notes that the gender dynamics switch when Martin captures Mikael. Tied up in Martin’s basement, Mikael finds himself in the same position as Lisbeth in the beginning of the narrative—soon to be a victim of rape and torture (“Dragon Tattoo a Feminist Film?”). Mikael does not redeem himself here by finding a way out of the
scenario; instead Lisbeth comes to the rescue. In this scene, the gender tables are turned, but as the film comes to a close, the tables, unfortunately, do not remain turned.

Mikael ultimately solves the mystery surrounding Harriet’s death, confirming her escape and confronting her about her true identity—even though Mikael could not have done so without Lisbeth’s help. Lisbeth did help him capture a killer of women. (She will continue to follow this plotline through the rest of the novels in the Millennium series although the other novels have not yet been made into American films). But, Mikael is the character who truly comes out on top by the end of the film: he has solved the case, gotten revenge on Wennerström (mostly due to the actions of Vanger and Lisbeth), and is back with his wife (much to Lisbeth’s dismay).

Byerly and Ross comment on strong female characters like Lisbeth and the idea that their “performance as tough women in the contemporary action genre cannot be read off simply as progress, art reflecting life. Rather, such performances may connote a deep ambivalence about the limitations of women’s flight to equality” (Byerly and Ross 26). The tough girl is often cast to show what lies at her core: “womanliness, her essential subordinate position to man” (Byerly and Ross 26)—a concept that is driven home when Lisbeth is left alone on the sidewalk with her gift for Mikael that she quickly tosses in the dumpster. Due to the expectations of society and the cultural context surrounding the development of such a character, shortcomings have been noted about how they are crafted.

A major disappointment concerning the development of Lisbeth’s character arrives at the very end of the film. Lisbeth is hindered by her emotions and the possibility of companionship with Mikael—investments Lisbeth seemed to put little stock in at the
beginning of the film. Temple adds to this argument by saying how Lisbeth is reduced to a woman who has fallen completely in love, buys an expensive gift for her man, and is disappointed when she is replaced by his wife—thus becoming a much more typical female character ("Dragon Tattoo a Feminist Film?"). The same conclusion about how writers and directors undermine their female characters was also made in Chapter Two. These female characters are written to be strong and progressive, but then they are reduced to stereotypical female characters and pigeonholed, often by a single scene, near the end of the narrative that obstructs their development. This unfortunate "reduction" should be avoided with future female characters.

Character Clips: Conclusion

As female anti-heroic characters, Shosanna and Lisbeth's actions are controlled by their moral codes and purpose for revenge, but overall the revenge—in Shosanna's case—against the Nazis leads to her demise, and the revenge—in Lisbeth's case—against Wennerström leads to her newfound unhappiness due to Mikael's ability to return to his original career and his wife. In Shosanna's main scene, the music is also meaningful as plays in the background. Schlipphacke mentions that the lyrics "putting out fire with gasoline" from David Bowie's song "Cat People: Putting Out Fire" outline Shosanna's lesson for viewers: "There is no equivalence; revenge is like putting out fire with gasoline, producing excess violence and pain beyond anything originally imagined" (128). In spite of the continuation of the chain of brutality, both women choose to fight violence with violence while obtaining their revenge.
Lisbeth’s other revenge from the brutal rape was necessary to show to justify the extent of her revenge. Some critics have argued this point; however, this argument also lends itself to the concept that it is acceptable to fight violence with violence—like Shosanna did. While Lisbeth’s revenge is well thought out and certainly punishing, the entire experience is also violent and scarring (not that Bjurman did not deserve it).

Apart from the violence, both Shosanna and Lisbeth bring forth unique character identities that showcase women in strong roles. Although, their progress is limited, perhaps by two reasons: 1) male directors who do not have the interests of their female leading roles at heart and 2) the fact that these women are starring in a film and not in a television series. Wilterdink asserts: “Whereas television is experimenting with normative expectations, film still seems to adhere to more banal notions of right and wrong. That is to say, will television eventually surpass film as an innovative medium or has it perhaps already done that?” (71). In the case of the anti-hero character, literature and film seem to have fallen behind the strides of the television industry due to their limited narrative space to develop the elaborate structure of this character without falling into preconceived gender norms. By providing examples of characters whose development has thrived due to the extensive narrative of a television series, the final chapter will discuss the positive representations and evolution of female anti-heroes.

An argument still had to be made for Shosanna and Lisbeth’s classification as anti-heroes, even though they do make gray-area decisions. While Stache claims that “the man-fighting, violent heroine playing by the same set of rules as her male protagonist

21 Brown opens his essay by addressing this very argument: Was the graphic and prolonged depiction of Lisbeth’s horrific rape misogynistic? “Or was it necessary to reveal the brutality and inhumanity of the act and to justify her violent revenge?” These debates resurfaced when the Swedish and American film versions of the novel were released (47).
counterpart is an even more recent phenomena, and one worthy of study” (72). The female character should go even further and match her male counterparts in character design and development on the big screen. If female characters in film were written to stay consistent to their character design throughout the entire narrative and to stand independently as protagonists, then perhaps film could become a more worthy contender with literature and television in the fight to equally represent strong female characters and advance the development of the female anti-hero character instead of trying to gratify industry expectations.
Chapter Four

Female Anti-Heroes in Contemporary Television Series

The female anti-hero on the small screen seems to be where character evolution is growing the fastest today. As a result, recent iterations of the female anti-hero are some of the most popular to date. Women in these roles are demonstrating their power and dominance while in compromising positions such as a law professor who becomes entangled in a murder (*How to Get Away with Murder* ABC, 2014-Present), a ruthless lawyer who twists any situation to benefit herself or the case she is defending (*Damages* FX, 2007-2012), or a crisis management firm owner/director who works to protect the reputations of White House politicians (*Scandal* ABC, 2012-Present). With this new character comes a new type of viewing process wherein audiences have a different relationship with the protagonists than they do with those from other television narratives. As previously discussed in the Introduction, viewers of anti-hero programs enjoy these narratives despite the fact that they may not morally agree with the actions of the protagonist.

Since the anti-hero character’s actions often challenge viewers’ morals, viewers have to connect with the character in a different way. Usually, viewers still become intrigued by this character simply because she (in these cases) is the protagonist. Once viewers become invested in a TV series, over time and after several episodes, they form a bond with the main character. In her current book *The Antihero in American Television* Margrethe Bruun Vaage claims, “Engaging in a television series’ narrative… triggers audience members to take sides, show favoritism, and evaluate events with the bias of sympathy and familiarity of a well-known character’s point of view” (45). Due to this
sympathy and bias, viewers become more inclined to forgive or accept an anti-hero’s diabolical acts and continue to watch the narrative unfold.

This chapter analyzes the character development of female anti-heroes from three recent television series of varying genres: Jackie Peyton in *Nurse Jackie* (Showtime, 2009-2015) a comedy-drama about a drug-addicted nurse who is willing to do whatever it takes to save her patients and to keep her addiction alive, Claire Underwood in *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-Present) a political drama about a husband and wife who mercilessly climb their way to becoming President and First Lady of the United States, and Rachel Goldberg in *UnREAL* (Lifetime, 2015-Present) a dark satire about reality dating and the manipulation that occurs behind the scenes of producing dramatic television. These series were selected because they are critically acclaimed contemporary programs that showcase how strong female characters often develop differently in various televisual genres.

The popularity of these shows and actresses is reflected in the various awards they have received. Edie Falco, and a co-star Merritt Wever who plays Zoey Barkow, won Emmys in 2010 for their work on *Nurse Jackie* (Deggans). In 2014, Robin Wright won a Golden Globe for Best Performance by an Actress in a Television Drama (“House of Cards”). And, *UnREAL* won the Critic’s Choice TV Award in 2015 and the TV Program of the Year Award in 2016 (“UnReal”). The popularity of these shows is beginning to be reflected in their cinematic successes as well as network ratings.²²

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²² Network ratings: The final season of *Nurse Jackie* received a 0.21 rating meaning 700,000 viewers in the 18-49 age demographic watched Season 7 (“Nurse Jackie Ratings”). *House of Cards* Season 3 attracted 2.6 million viewers or 6.5% of subscribers during its first 30 days and is one of the most binge-watched show on Netflix (“Netflix Ratings Report”). *UnREAL* nearly tied with *Nurse Jackie* with a 0.27 rating and about 700,000 viewers in the same demographic (“*UnREAL* Ratings”).
These female characters are unique because they operate without being hypersexualized, and they reject the notion of motherhood or femininity in favor of displaying more masculine qualities that help them achieve their goals. All of these female characters also exhibit several anti-heroic tropes—dark pasts, personal moral codes, obsession with power, issues with authority, and the frequent use of deception. These three programs serve as positive examples as to how strong female characters can be developed strategically in order to show resistance against societal and gendered expectations. This chapter will also discuss how various genres lend themselves to this development of the female anti-hero character on television compared to this character’s development in literature or film, arguing that *Nurse Jackie* and the drama-comedy genre creates progressive version of the female anti-hero.

Furthermore, this chapter will address the concept that male and female viewers can enjoy television shows starring female anti-heroes since these characters demonstrate both male and female-coded traits making them appealing to audience members of either gender. While humans can relate to a character no matter which gendered traits that character projects, the concept of an androgynous characters provides more opportunity for appeal since it displays traits coded from both genders. As a result, this character evolution towards androgyny—a concept discussed in depth in Chapter Two—is a positive step towards female character development and a more appealing viewing experience.

**Television: The Mirror to Society?**

Television not only provides entertainment for audiences, but it also gives writers a platform to comment on societal issues such as gender representation. Andrea Press in
“Class, Gender, and the Female Viewer,” explains “Throughout history, television programming in the US has presented us with a view of our society. ... Television has in many respects misrepresented women’s changing historical relationship to work and family overall” (158). With the rise of the female anti-hero, this representation is changing from the previous flat, domesticated female character\textsuperscript{23} to one who is career-focused, aggressive, or conniving. These representations are exaggerated portrayals of contemporary women and can be viewed as a reaction to the previous more domesticated depictions of females on TV. Kevin O’Keeffe, however, offers another possible reason for this change in female portrayals: “like a trend on TV, the influx of Strong Female Characters on network shows can’t be attributed to one factor. But a quick look at numbers offers an obvious explanation: Women viewers dominate broadcast ratings” (“TV’s Renaissance”). As women continue to be a target demographic for television programming, writers and producers seem to be making strides towards changing the depiction of female characters—away from previous depictions and misrepresentations—to more appealing ones in order to intrigue their largest audience. Women might find these new characters more empowering since they mirror realistic traits the viewers may see in themselves. Since viewers still live in a patriarchal society, these characters may be a more active version of a woman some female viewers may fantasize about being—a version still thwarted by contemporary culture.

\textsuperscript{23} Maral Cavner provides several examples of women who were portrayed in roles that left them with little room to evolve or boxed them into traditional gender stereotypes such as Carol Brady (Florence Henderson) from \textit{The Brady Bunch} (ABC, 1969-1974), Annie Camden (Catherine Hicks) from \textit{7th Heaven} (The WB, 1996-2007), and the women of \textit{Desperate Housewives} (ABC, 2004-2012) ("Women’s Roles in Popular Television Shows").
Girly Guise: Gender on the Screen

Even though these female anti-hero characters are rising to the top, some writers and producers continue to display their skepticism by keeping their shows more male-oriented in order to appeal to a wider audience. Mary Beth Oliver in "The Respondent Gender Gap" argues that men and women share gendered traits; therefore, a character of either gender could appeal to men and women equally. Oliver explains that while femininity is associated with qualities such as empathy, nurturance, and emotions, masculinity is associated with qualities such as assertiveness, dominance, and independence. Despite these cultural constructions, in reality, a woman may more masculine traits than some males, and a man may have more feminine traits than some females. As a result, each viewer's level of gender-coded traits may be a better indicator of their ability to relate to a show (or character) than their biological sex (Oliver 230). Oliver's argument then suggests that both men and women have the capacity to enjoy or to identify with these shows starring female anti-heroes in spite of viewers' own gender differences or the gender/gender-coded actions of the main character. Since the female anti-hero is making a move towards a more androgynous design, this characterization could potentially be more appealing to audience members of either gender since it displays both types of gender-coded qualities. The female anti-hero also has the ability to adapt to various genres, and as a result, hopefully close gap surrounding gender representation—perhaps on both the big and small screen.

Recent television productions have portrayed characters through "counter-stereotyping (depicting men in traditionally female roles, or women in typically male
roles)” (Macdonald 21). Instead of being confronted by an androgynous character, audience members may be presented with a character who acts apart from his or her typical societal expectations. Megan Angelo argues for the importance and need for characters who flip stereotypes: “These moments matter, not just because they are entertaining, but because they broaden the definition of what a woman can be—while everyone, man and woman, is watching” (118-119). These female anti-heroes, designed as androgynous or counter-stereotypical characters, are widening the definition of what a woman can be, and these interpretations are reaching a wide variety of viewers.

This shifting focus towards characters who flip the gender binary or strategically blur gender lines show efforts towards trying to portray humans, of either gender, more realistically. Channing Dungey, executive president of ABC, discusses this in regard to the female anti-hero: “as human beings, we all have those highs and lows, the light and dark sides to our personalities. What we’re trying to do is show women in all of their strength and beauty; to not be afraid or shy away from the part of these women that are a little more complicated and challenging” (qtd. in O’Keeffe). As a network, ABC seems to be on board with this recent shift towards creating more realistic characters, especially women who can be as multifaceted as male characters before them. Additionally, Kate Elliott, a cultural critic and young adult author, asserts that “it’s not enough to say ‘let your female characters do everything your male characters do’” because that mentality can lead back to the idea that women are only as important as their participation in

24 For example, in the comedic series Arrested Development (Fox, 2003-2006 and Netflix, 2013), Michael Bluth (Jason Bateman) is a single father who is often put in the challenging position of raising his son George Michael (Michael Cera) while also giving him advice and juggling the needs of their dysfunctional family. Another example is Veep (HBO, 2012-2016) starring Julia Louis-Dreyfus as the Vice President of the United States. As the VP, Dreyfus’ accurately embodies this character demonstrating qualities of vulgarity and aggressiveness that add to the show’s satirical comedy. Both Bateman and Dreyfus’ characters are casted in roles that often force them to act within the expectations of the gender opposite of their biological one.
“men’s lives or men’s actions.” Writers should allow their female characters to “exist for themselves, not merely as passive adjuncts” (“Writing Women Characters as Human Beings”).

Throughout the past several decades, television dramas have begun to expand the action/dramatic parts of women, however, they have problematically sexualized these women even while placing them in “empowered” roles. In the 1970-80s, a significant shift occurred with the arrival of shows like Wonder Woman (ABC, 1975-1979) and Cagney and Lacey (CBS, 1982-1988); not only were these female-centered dramas, but they also drew a wide audience (Lotz 3). In the 1990s and into the 2000s, strong female leads like Elaine Benes in Seinfeld (NBC, 1989-1998), Dana Scully in the X-Files (Fox, 1993-2002), and Buffy in Buffy the Vampire Slayer (The WB, 1997-2003) began to emerge and fill prime-time slots. As the characters evolved throughout the decades, sexualization seemed to be come less of a requirement as more recent characters pulled away from the previous female character design.

Now, the current anti-hero series are also drawing from a wide audience, but the sex appeal requirement for female characters is continuing to fade away. While characters like Jackie Peyton (Nurse Jackie) and Rachel Goldberg (UnREAL) are certainly shown having sex, they are not always depicted as sexy—often going about their days without make-up or changing clothes. Claire Underwood (House of Cards), on the other hand, is always dressed in business attire and looking her best, and she is rarely (if ever) depicted on screen not fully dressed and made-up or while having sex. Instead, Claire is portrayed as business-like and formal. Even though each of these characters are depicted differently, they all are removed from previous sexual stereotypes; the focus is
otherwise shifted to highlight their careers—as nurses, politicians, and reality TV producers.

**Careers and Motherhood: How These Characters Cope or Decline**

Television series like *Nurse Jackie*, *House of Cards*, and *UnREAL* are all set in the workplace with the female protagonist’s personal life seeping in around the edges. Lotz argues that television shows featuring women with careers used to suggest that women had to assimilate into a male-dominated workplace, that women are not as well suited to be in the workplace, or that women should not try to have a career and be a mother. But, these new series have “examples of such characters grappling with new gender scripts and modes of femininity” (Lotz 145). Viewers see Jackie struggling with her attempts to be a mother while also indulging in her addiction and Claire considering the possibility of having children even though a family is not part of her and Frank’s plan as politicians. Along with pushing away maternal roles, or denying motherhood altogether (like some of their predecessors), for the majority of the series these female protagonists dominate their workplaces.

At the end of season one, Jackie is feeling suffocated by her personal life—another recurrent motif within anti-hero narratives. Vague weighs in on this theme of feeling overwhelmed by the constraints of family life: “The home represents everything the antihero needs to break free from in order to become enjoyably transgressive” (171). In the case of *Nurse Jackie*, it seems as though all the pressures of life are too much for Jackie—a feeling many viewers may be able to relate with easily. Viewers see Jackie drink three vials of morphine sulfate in an effort to cope with her stresses. Lying on the hospital room floor during her drug-induced state, viewers see Jackie’s mind playing an
image of her family against a cartoonish background; they are waving at her and smiling. Jackie seems to prefer her family this way: they are at a distance, simply observing her, perfect and peaceful, but unrealistic as the background atmosphere indicates. Jackie is retaliating against the institutions that have confined her, a demanding career and marriage/family, choosing instead to indulge in her pleasures. These female characters are doing more than showing the unpleasant side of juggling their work and family lives; they are representing an extreme portion of women who are recoiling from being in the motherly role.

*House of Cards* also renders Claire in a similar position as Jackie, but her role is more focused on an extreme representation of a wife rather than a mother. Claire is Frank’s coach, but she also has to remind him of their equality. This is momentous for the role of a wife since traditional depictions of wives have cast them as being subordinate and acquiescent rather than powerful and equivalent to their husbands. In the pilot, Claire also delivers a pep talk to Frank after he does not get the Secretary of State position, which she will continue to do repeatedly as the series progresses:

Claire: You didn’t call me... Nine hours... You don’t not call me when it’s this big. We do things together. When you don’t involve me, we are in free fall... How could you not see this coming? You should be angry... I don’t see that. You’re better than that. My husband doesn’t apologize—even to me.” (“Chapter 1”)

As she is walking upstairs, viewers hear Frank breaking a lamp. Claire is scolding Frank for not updating her on their status, for failing to achieve the goal, and then for not being
upset enough about the situation. By confronting Frank, Claire is demonstrating her less traditional spousal role.

Claire’s character is battling with the same gendered expectations as previous female characters, and the craft of her character is sticking to the anti-hero mold. As the series progresses Claire is faced with a lawsuit from a woman, Gillian, who was laid off due to Claire’s prior order. This woman is pregnant and thinks her pregnancy is a reason behind why she was let go. In order to continue her rise to the top, and to get out from under the lawsuit, Claire forges Gillian’s signature submitting a consent form to her insurance, which effectively cuts off Gillian’s ability to a necessary medication for the remainder of her pregnancy. Gillian comes into the office to confront Claire about this issue. Claire clarifies that the forged signature was “civil, not criminal” but becomes even more cold and heartless: “I am willing to let that child wither and die instead of you if that’s what’s required. Am I the sort of enemy you want to make?” (“Chapter 14”). Claire convinces Gillian to drop the lawsuit and then offers her an empowering position in the company. Claire is willing to push boundaries of legality and compassion for the benefit of her business and personal well-being, which are actions viewers are usually accustomed to seeing male characters doing. Claire, as a female anti-hero with several masculine-coded qualities, is rejecting her maternal impulse and displaying her cold-heartedness.

Claire maintains her callous demeanor as she backs up her efforts to keep her political agenda moving forward, while also rejecting motherhood (for herself and Gillian). Sherman analyzes the cultural impact the actions of Claire’s character may raise in response to her choices to avoid motherhood by having an abortions: “Instead of
seeing Claire act out of shame—internalizing and accepting that she is bad for making her choices, as society would have her believe—she’s shown as a woman who was confident in her decision to seek abortion care, reflective in her choice to share, and navigating a world that she knows disapproves” (“The Second Lady’s Abortion”). Even though motherhood does appeal to Claire, she will continue to choose her career instead of starting a family. Claire understands that people may not approve of her choices, but in the end she is confident that she will be able to spin this private information from her past and redeem herself by continuing to connect with the American people.

**Troubled Pasts and Routes Towards Redemption**

Similarly to Claire, Jackie seems to constantly be on a quest for redemption or indulging in her addiction. Jackie calls Dr. O’Hara to help her clean up a mess—a dead man in her living room who overdosed on street drugs—exclaiming: “I can’t stop wrecking… I want to, and I don't. I think someone needs to lock me up” (“Kettle-Kettle-Black-Black”). After this traumatic incident, Jackie volunteers to go to a rehabilitation center. Throughout the series, Jackie is running from her previous mistakes and lies only to make more. Over seven seasons of development, this television series effectively portrays the relapse and redemption pattern that typically victimizes addicts.25

Comparatively, this type of development in a film or novel would not be as expansive since those mediums are consumed singularly. Jane Eberts comments on the advantages of television narratives: “Unlike its cinematic counterpart, television allows the story to grow past the boundaries of its literary base” (27). A television series has the longevity to nourish a relationship with the audience using ample narrative content.

25 Deggans’ article also discusses the accuracy of *Nurse Jackie’s* portrayal of addiction throughout the series.
Jackie’s ongoing addiction is one example of a flaw that drives inexcusable acts from which Jackie is rarely punished and often forgiven.

Claire also finds herself in a position where she is on the cusp of being punished through ridicule by society, but she is able to redeem herself through manipulation of others. She twists the story of her abortion to instead feature stories about rape. After admitting to having an abortion on national television, Claire visits Megan (Libby Woodbridge)—a Marine who was raped by a general; the same general who raped Claire and who Claire claimed was responsible for her third abortion, even though it was actually Frank’s child. Claire distorts this situation to remove some of the pressure from the disapproval about her abortion. She is also conveniently able to add to her reputation by showing the public that she is punishing a man for his crimes against women. Megan, however, has been reduced to a terrible condition and is now taking medication to cope with her depression and anxiety from hiding from the press—another example of Claire advances at the expense of other women, which is a reoccurring theme throughout the series. Conor Friedersdorf explains Claire’s overall goal behind the personal information she chose to share on the air: “She named the man who actually raped her, but lied about being impregnated by the rape, the timing of her third pregnancy, and her real reason for terminating it: political ambition” (“Feminism in House of Cards”). While Claire does have a troubled past and was able to overcome such an unfortunate occurrence, she uses this form of redemption and recovery to her advantage by removing questions about her abortion of Frank’s child in order to continue pursuing their political careers. Along with her past, Claire uses Megan’s rape—much to Megan’s disadvantage—to manipulate the press and their focus on reporting about rape rather than abortions. Claire, as an anti-hero
character, brings an interesting angle to a situation about societal improvements concerning gendered issues. She is simultaneously spreading good and evil. While bringing proactive attention to the issue of rape, Claire is also using the tribulation of a young woman to her advantage and covering up her own lies to enhance her appearance as a politician.

The female anti-hero narrative provides a background that trains audience members to forgive a character’s flaws and accept their bad behavior. Without this sympathy concerning their dark pasts, and the extended narrative relationship that television series provide, viewers could be less inclined to connect with these characters. But the female anti-hero also draws in the audience by fighting for a cause that most people can support or understand such as quick and effective medical care or confident and determined leadership skills that help run a country. Rachel, on the other hand, also has a woeful past, but the cause she is fighting for is on a smaller scale. Rachel is a somber, cynical woman with questionable hygiene habits in addition to a criminal record and chronic homelessness, and a history of mental instability (perhaps induced by her over-eager mother who is a psychiatrist). As the first season unfolds, Rachel’s past is revealed as she struggles to work with an ex-fiancé Jeremy (Josh Kelly), to pay court fees—the previous season of Everlasting ended with Rachel drunkenly interrupting the marriage of the couple and stealing a sports car off the set—and to live with her conscious as she continues to manipulate the women on the show in order to make good television.

Cameras are on Rachel as she reenters the set. After the disastrous end to the previous season, the clinging consequences, and the unhealed emotional scars, Rachel has
still decided to return to the job that has injured her. She walks on, noticing the cameras following her, and calls out: “Yeah, crazy is back. Don’t everyone rush to hug me at one time. I’m... Shit...” (“Return”). Her initial response works on two levels: first, she is bashing herself for her previous behavior and joking at the lack of affection from the crew in an effort to cover up her nerves, and two, she is using sarcasm to announce herself while also calling herself “shit,” knowing this is going to be a tough comeback. Rachel’s haunted past stems mostly from her career, so it is intriguing that she is returning to this position, especially since she does not seem liked or appreciated. As the narrative unfolds, viewers become privy to Rachel’s personality: she loves power and she is very talented when it comes to deceiving people. The extent of deception and manipulation used to produce Everlasting bothers Rachel occasionally, but these moments highlight Rachel’s line of boundaries, which reminds audiences that she is forgivable.

**Gender-Flipping**

While overcoming adversity is one of the staples of the anti-hero genre more generally, the female anti-hero narrative often shows the protagonist doing so by specifically acting in ways that run counter to gender expectations. On their narrative paths, Jackie, Claire, and Rachel reveal their pasts and redemptive qualities while also working to excel at their careers and to achieve goals (respectable or otherwise). To achieve in these areas, these characters often display masculine-coded traits and are usually juxtaposed by characters—usually male—who display some feminine-coded traits. As a result, audiences see gender-flipping occurring between the characters on the screen. This can be seen in the way that Nurse Jackie’s central character is defined and
how she interacts with others. Jackie has all of the qualities of a female anti-hero and none of traditional female character stereotypes: Jackie is aggressive, not emotional; she is domineering, not submissive; and she is confident, not indecisive. Alyssa Rosenberg mentions that “the tension of an anti-hero comes from an audience rooting for a character against our better judgment, and again and again, the things that have lured us in have been masculine-coded traits” (“Female Tony Soprano”). Jackie is portraying a female character with many of the gender-coded qualities of a male character—an arguably more realistic and appealing version of what female characters could be and what audiences seem to be encouraging.

For example, after one of the many times Jackie displays her masculine-coded qualities she receives a complaint from a colleague. Dr. Cooper (Peter Facinelli), a male colleague, approaches Gloria Akalitus (Anna Deavere Smith), the ER Administrator, to file a formal complaint against Jackie for being bossy, rude, unpleasant, and ultimately a bully. He describes this before crying in the office with Akalitus looking at him quizzically. The gender stereotypes are flipped here. Typically, a woman would be cast in Dr. Cooper’s position as the emotional victim, while a male would be the bully or domineering co-worker in Jackie’s.

Another example of gender flipping in Nurse Jackie is the role of Jackie’s husband, Kevin (Dominic Fumusa). Kevin is depicted as an anti-hero’s spouse with more maternal responsibilities: As mentioned previously, Kevin is the main caretaker of their children but “he is never portrayed as the sneering captive as is so often the anti-hero’s wife. ... The anti-hero’s wife, as we have seen, typically wavers between wanting to leave her husband and staying with him throughout the series” (Vaage 173-174). In the
beginning of the series, Kevin does not know about all of Jackie’s secrets and
transgressions, and later on he files for divorce. These actions, and his character
development overall, allow his role to side-step much of the scrutiny that often falls upon
the wives of male anti-heroes; wives who are often seen as unsympathetic nags. Vaage
ultimately argues that all anti-hero series juxtapose their protagonists with their family
lives, but, when the gender roles are flipped, the husband of the female anti-hero is
portrayed with more dignity, and the female anti-hero is portrayed as less transgressive
than previous male anti-heroes (174). This chapter is not refuting this claim. It is clear
that in series featuring female anti-heroes, the protagonists commit despicable acts, but
these acts may not be as violent as the acts of male anti-heroes. In this sense, female anti-
heroes may not operate in the exact same ways, or female anti-hero’s character
development may be showing the divide between the gender-coded qualities that writers
are willing, and unwilling, to share between male and female characters. But overall,
these shows are using gender-flipping in a productive way to show society how gender
stereotypes can be reversed or repealed.

By the end of season three in House of Cards, Claire is taking on the more
assertive, masculine role by pursuing additional political responsibilities, and she thinks
Frank is passively evading discussing this with her. Claire has been facing adversity from
senators and the Cabinet about her tactics and upcoming plans as the First Lady, so she
barges into Frank’s room while he is sleeping and demands that a press conference be set
to her announce her role as ambassador: “Set a date, press conference, let’s do it”
(“Chapter 27”). Claire is pressing Frank on this motion so he cannot back out of his
promises to her either:
Claire: Francis, let’s be realistic. There’s no guarantee you’ll get elected.” I need to be prepared if you don’t…

Frank: Well, you have that much faith in me, do you?

C: More faith than you have in me it seems.

F: I believe in you more than anyone, Claire.

C: Then show it! Nominate me. I should not have to convince you. …

I’m almost 50 years old. I’ve been in the passenger seat for decades. It’s time for me to get behind the wheel. That needs to start now—before the election.

…

Frank: I will win. And I will leave a legacy.

Claire: You mean we will. (“Chapter 27”)

Claire is not only bullying Frank into supporting her nomination, but she is also drawing attention to his shortcomings and selfishness. Herman argues that what truly divides Claire and Frank is not the evil deeds they both have had hands in, but rather the fact that the climb to the top has resulted in Claire simply being his wife. Frank is President, but she is still in his shadow even as the First Lady (“In Defense of House of Cards”). In order to part with the seemingly secondary gender role of being a wife, Claire decides to leave Frank, despite the unfortunate highlights from the press and the impact this might have on their campaigns. This act is one step closer—for both Claire’s character and the female anti-hero character—towards achieving independence from a male counterpart. This act was achieved through the abandonment of casting women in traditional gender roles, using instead gender-flipping to progress these characters.
As *UnREAL* unfurls, the biggest gender flip in this series is perhaps seen more often with Quinn’s character. Rachel’s crude, loud, and demanding boss Quinn King (Constance Zimmer) drives Rachel to continue her lifestyle as an *Everlasting* producer, eventually promising her a larger position in their next production. Quinn, however, constantly takes control of the *Everlasting* set, and will go to extremes (or demands others to do the same) to produce the show. She is not afraid of being vulgar or offensive to people in order to motivate them into doing her deeds. One example is when Quinn is yelling out women’s labels such as “villain” or “wifey” as the first episode of *Everlasting* is underway—no one questions her tactics, they simply let her continue to label and manipulate people. Marama Whyte suggests that Quinn is proud about being able to do her job well: “as the audience, we are forced to confront our own enjoyment in seeing her begin to break through the glass ceiling in a male-dominated word.” But, viewers also have to watch how poorly she treats other people as she achieves this (“UnREAL’s Complicated Feminism”).

Rachel still morally struggles with Quinn’s tactics—and does not own the production process like Quinn does—but Rachel continues to act like Quinn. Both women showcase their aggressive, explicit directions as they bark orders to the other employees on the set. What makes these characters unique overall is their gender-flipped qualities: watching Quinn and Rachel working together is like watching two men working together, but with a feminine spin to their insults. Quinn and Rachel are examples of women behaving “badly” or women in men’s roles that audience members were not as accustomed to seeing before the female anti-hero emerged. The actions of these characters are examples of how women are perhaps going even further than their
male predecessors by being bigger bullies who are even more lewd: these female characters are out-doing the roles—anti-hero and beyond—that men have been casted in before.

**Good vs. Evil: Using Moral Codes and Redemption to Reap and Reject Authority**

Jackie is a character who, arguably, comes closest to the most literal definition of an anti-hero: she is a nurse who saves people daily from life threatening medical emergencies, but she is also a drug addict who will do nearly anything to continue acquiring and ingesting drugs. Therefore, she is a hero while she is at work, and being a nurse is how Jackie identifies herself, but she is anything but a hero as she is putting the lives of those she cares about at risk every time she functions while being high. As the first episode opens, Jackie quotes a nun who once told her: “The people with the greatest capacity for good are the ones with the greatest capacity for evil.” Then she shakes the pill bottle saying: “One left...that sucks. 16 grains... Just a little bump to get me up and going” (“Pilot”). Jackie is the person the nun was describing, and her addiction to drugs forces her to walk that thin line between good and evil. Vaage goes on to discuss Jackie’s character as an anti-hero: she displayed her power without being violent or overtly criminal. She is unfaithful, a drug addict, but she does not commit the blood murders that male anti-heroes have previously (173).

Along with her addiction, Jackie’s bold personality is evident through her assertiveness at work and lack of regard for others’ feelings who do not take their work as seriously. For example, as an ER patient (a bike messenger with a leg injury) is being wheeled in from the ambulance, Jackie yells at the presiding doctor: “You can do this—you can stay the fuck out of my way” (“Pilot”). Dr. Cooper is of higher status than Jackie
as far as medical rank is concerned, but in the ER Jackie is not concerned about rank or manners—only saving the patient. In response to Jackie’s medical suggestion to order a full-body scan, Dr. Cooper calls her “bossy,” but later she confronts him about his lack of measures, which caused the patient to die. A subsequent scene shows Jackie forging the patient’s signature to be an organ donor, saying his death “may have been a shame, but it will not be a waste, that I promise” (“Pilot”). Jackie does what she can to remedy the tragic situation by trying to help someone else down the road. Jackie refuses to let authority stand in her way and instead makes her own amends by following her personal moral code as the anti-hero character design suggests.

Rachel is demonstrating the anti-heroic characteristic of following her own moral code in order to advance her career goals, even if it is at the expense of others. Rachel lies and twists information all in the name of producing drama and prime-time entertainment. She seems conflicted as she does this, pausing to think or tearing up, but in the end she chooses to do as Quinn demands—to continue to manipulate people. Rachel edges her way into a conversation with one of the contestants, Mary (Ashley Scott), in order to coax her to talk to Adam (Freddie Stroma). Viewers then see Rachel wiping her eye before getting back to work. Again, even though Rachel is emotionally uncomfortable using scarring events from the contestants’ lives to motivate them, she still deems it as somewhat acceptable in the name of her job.

As the episode, season, and characters develop, viewers witness a continuous power struggle between Rachel and Quinn. In order to manipulate Adam and the show, Rachel suggests to him that he vote off the villain, Britney (Arielle Kebbel), and instead keep the kinder, somewhat awkward contestant, Faith (Breeda Wool). Rachel ensures
Adam that this will enrage Quinn—something they both want in an effort to achieve
minor revenge.

Because of Adam’s choice, Britney is furious as she goes to leave the set. Rachel
approaches: she is armed with personal information about Britney’s childhood spent in
foster homes, but this time Rachel seems more willing to use it. Rachel feigns a need for
“girl talk” as she yells for drinks and reclines with Britney on patio chairs. In an attempt
to help Britney understand the potential reasons behind why she was asked to leave,
Rachel starts by referencing Britney’s greeting with Adam:

Rachel: You did come on kind of strong.

Britney: You told me to.

R: I did not tell you to, like, French him and grab his ass.

B: Wow… You’re something else, Rachel.

R: Do you think you’re forward because of things that happened in your
upbringing?

B: What are you talking about?

R: You know, when bad things go down sometimes your kid brain computes it as,
like, I don’t know, ‘you must be unlovable.’

B: (Cries, then slowly, fiercely, looking directly into camera) I am completely
lovable. (Spits on Rachel and yells) Burn in hell, you witch! (“Return”)

All of the workers on the set watch in suspense. Rachel does all of this because Britney
refuses to give her a sound-byte about her true emotions after Adam asked her to leave
the show. Since Britney would not give Rachel what she wanted, Rachel forces her to
without Britney even realizing. This scene demonstrates just how manipulative Rachel is
willing to be, and she is neck in neck with other characters like Jackie and Claire. Rachel is willing to cross the line—even though her character competes with the divisions between good and evil—but she is willing to go far enough to assert her own authority and to get what she wants, simultaneously pleasing her authority figure, Quinn.

In the final scene of the first season, Rachel’s nerves and emotional pain seems to have driven her even farther from the line where she usually tried to return to good. Instead of communicating her emotions, Rachel clings to her newfound moral code and threatens Quinn—the source of authority and conflict that has been paining her. Quinn and Rachel are alone reclining on patio chairs. Rachel brings up her ideas to create a new show about women competing for a career instead of a man, which Quinn shoots down claiming a lack of audience interest. Rachel eventually agrees. Instead of plotting a new show, they reflect on this season and look to the next:

Quinn: Love is swell, but it is not something you build a life around.

Rachel: Actually, some people do.

Q: Oh, some people? What like Mary? [a contestant who committed suicide during the course of filming that season of Everlasting]

R: Nice, really nice. (long pause) We killed somebody didn’t we?

Q: Yeah... Let’s not do that again.

...

R: Whatever – just no murder next season, okay? At least not with the contestants.

Behind the scenes I can’t be so sure.

Q: Excuse me?

R: Well, I mean, I’m sure Jeremy would like to see me dead, for example.
Q: Yeah, well if he gives you any trouble—I’ll have his head. (pause) What?
R: Nothing.
Q: No, tell me.
R: I love you. You know that? (tears up then switches to a hard stare)
Q: I love you too. (nervously) … Weirdo. (“Future”)

By the end of the season, Rachel seems to have uncovered a new degree of cold by delivering a veiled threat to Quinn, but she does not stand up for her new show ideas. This ending and lack of initiative undermines Rachel’s actions throughout the entire series. Rachel’s purpose was to produce a new series of *Everlasting*, even if she did so begrudgingly and amidst several bumps. She does this, but is still tied to Quinn. Maybe this threat is the start of Rachel’s plan for next season, but for this season it only seems to further Rachel’s ruthlessness and not her overall goals.

Based on these examples from *Nurse Jackie* and *UnREAL*, *Nurse Jackie*’s drama-comedy genre lends itself better to creating a female anti-hero who does truly stick to own moral codes by acting as her own authoritarian and balancing the good and evil she sees in the world. Like Claire, Jackie simultaneously spreads good and evil by nursing others but also by feeding her addiction. The despicable acts Jackie commits because of her addiction are balanced by the comedy that is played out with Jackie and her co-workers and the allowances they make for her since she is so good at her job. This balance adds another element to the delicate dynamic the viewer experiences when building a relationship with a serial television anti-hero character. Unlike Rachel, who is confined to the limits of the reality dating show that she is producing and is ultimately the star of (since viewers are watching a satire about the production of reality dating shows),
Rachel is not able to develop as fully. Rachel does not seem to have an agenda that will help anyone apart from herself. She is constantly lying and betraying people only to create a television show or to complicate her love life. Some may argue that Rachel is a more accurate representation of the female anti-hero because she is a more accurate portrayal of a typical woman in current society: a woman who is troubled by her career, men, and past mistakes. She never truly achieves independence from the men, her boss, or from herself. She is unhappy. Whereas, other anti-heroic characters like Claire will stop at nothing to achieve happiness through her success. And, Jackie, who is perhaps the most exemplary of all three female anti-heroes analyzed in this chapter, revels in her pleasures whether they are destructive or helpful and does not change for anyone. Rachel’s anti-heroic qualities revolve mainly around her struggle to obtain authority and power while demonstrating her talent of manipulating and deceiving the contestants to produce a dramatic show.

Deception, Control, and Power: Intertwined in the Making of an Anti-Hero

Rachel is ruthless with her contestants, and her co-workers, at times, but Jackie is willing to deceive all the people in her life. The only punishment that seems to affect Jackie how she is treating herself. She revels in the secrecy, and of course, bodily pleasure she receives from drugs, but she continues to use them as her most dependable support system. For example, is in the season five finale when Jackie has achieved sobriety for one year. On the day of her celebration, she takes a pill that she has been keeping in her nightstand in the box with her former wedding ring. Since her lies and deceptive actions fueled by her addiction ruined her marriage, perhaps she sees no reason to not take part in what she has left—drugs. Lesley Goldberg, a TV News Editor and
blogger, writes that Jackie was doomed to use since she was confronted with the confusing and unfamiliar emotion—joy—therefore, she returned to her crutch. After taking the pill, Jackie stands in front of all of her family and friends at the meeting to declare that she has been drug-free for a year. Goldberg comments: “it was so satisfying just as a viewer of watching drama and comedy to see something that authentic” (“Jackie’s Surprising Decision”). Again, Jackie’s character is satisfying audiences with her frustrating actions but realistic outcomes. The scene is hilarious in the sense that viewers inherently root for Jackie as the protagonist—as concept discussed in Chapter Two—since Jackie always does what she wants, but the scene is also dramatic. Jackie has lost so much because of her addiction, and this is casted in great irony as Jackie stands in front of all the people who love her, and think she is truly sober, but really she has just broken her sobriety. The duality of the drama-comedy genre, in addition to the extended length of a television series, provides Jackie’s character with the narrative space necessary to develop its complexity.

As *House of Cards* approaches the end of its current season, viewers are exposed to more deception as Claire and Frank work to retain their political, and as the season comes to a close viewers see the complexity of Claire’s character deepen as she her role is expanded to perhaps become truly equal with Frank’s character. Claire briefly mentions another point in their path to power where the deception has become unclear: “We’ve been lying for a long time Francis” (“Chapter 39”). He thinks Claire is talking about voters, but she is actually referencing their troubled marriage. While Claire and Frank have certainly been deceiving the American public, Claire realizes that they are beginning to deceive one another too.
When *House of Cards* began, Claire was certainly overshadowed by Frank and his leaps towards becoming President. Claire asserted dominance and made strides to advance her political career along the way, but she was always technically second to Frank based on their titles. Towards the end of the most recent season, Claire is dealing with worldly issues and communicating with terrorists, Frank is trying to control the press. It seems as though Claire has become more powerful, even if she does not have the iconic label of President. Nikola Grozdanovic, a review writer, agrees stating: “Robin Wright has undoubtedly become the main star of the show” (“Season 4 Hits a Fever Pitch”).

Finally, after Claire and Frank watch an innocent man being executed by terrorists, Claire breaks the fourth wall by looking directly at the camera for the first time. They are at last a team within the presidency. As a result, she joins Frank as a true protagonist and potential narrator of the show (“Chapter 52”). By the end of the fourth season, the Underwood partnership seems to have reestablished its equilibrium. Claire’s character has surpassed the feat that some current female anti-heroes have fallen prey to: she has achieved equality with their male counterpart. This success was possible in part due to the genre of the series, but also due to the character type of the protagonists. The political drama comfortably supports the reoccurring themes of deception, control, and power that anti-hero characters seem to relish in, and after four seasons the writers have been able to evolve Claire’s character to possibly become more popular and developed than Frank’s by the end of the series.
Defining the Female Anti-Hero on Television

Female anti-heroes, like Claire, are becoming equal to their male anti-hero predecessors. These female characters have challenged societal authority, followed their own codes of conduct, and displayed masculine-coded qualities for career-related and personal gains. These are similar qualities that male characters have displayed, and viewers still accepted them. Now writers are asking viewers to do the same with these female characters, and they, too, are being accepted. Alana Jane Chase writes:

Television has matured, and as content has begun to uncover the incredible complexities of storytelling, character development and human nature alike, a bridge between male and female anti-heroes has been laid. While it is only getting started, the kind of progress already being made here is immense and paramount to the future of female anti-heroes in television and even in film. ("Bad Girls Club")

Characters like Jackie, Claire, and Rachel not only fill the shoes of the male anti-heroes before them, but they also expand their genres even further and help to diversity the definition of what an anti-hero can be with their flawed determination to continue using drugs, to run a country, or to produce a drama-filled television series.

Another contributing factor to the development and evolution of these female anti-heroic characters is the genres of these shows. As mentioned previously, the drama-comedy genre, arguably, offers the widest range of character development due to the ability to cast the character in dramatic as well as humorous scenarios. The political drama could offer similar opportunities for development, but Claire’s character must compete with Frank, an equally strong male protagonist, which impacts her development
altogether. The dark satire of *UnREAL* is also limited, but by its parody of reality dating, a genre that automatically disinterests most male viewers from a network (Lifetime) that has previously catered towards women exclusively. However, all of these television series offer more possibilities for these characters to progress since they are consumed over time—unlike the individual consumption of a novel or film.

All of these female anti-heroes exhibit the qualities outlined in previous chapters: troubled pasts, down-played sexuality, questionable morals that follow a unique code, problems with authority (avoidance when it comes to being controlled and obsession when it comes to having control), repeated use of deception to gain power, a disconnection from motherhood, and assertive/aggressive natures that take the place of feminine nurturing/caring qualities. They are characters who more closely resemble realistic people—women who endure hardships and are filling the same roles as males. They are also closing the gender equality gap on the screen by filling roles that were previously filled or typically would be filled by men.

Robin Wright is a very relevant example of how changes within the content of television programming sometimes mirror changes happening off screen in the industry. Wright is not just a popular female anti-hero changing the television landscape but also an activist working toward gender equality in the media. Peck explains how Wright seized the moment and asked for the equal pay she deserves: “I was looking at statistics and Claire Underwood’s character was more popular than [Frank’s] for a period of time. So I capitalized on that moment. I was like, ‘You better pay me or I’m going to go public.’ … ‘And they did’” (“Same Pay as Kevin Spacey”). Not only these female
characters, but also their actresses are moving in the right direction towards visibility, prominence, and equality in the entertainment industry.

The female characters of this study were chosen due to the diversity of their design within this character archetype as well as the contribution these characters added to the evolution of the female anti-hero. As discussed in this study, the expansion and adaptation of the female anti-hero has been in making for centuries. Characters like Hester Prynne laid the foundation for other strong female characters to follow suit. Recently, female authors like Gillian Flynn have created and released a more daring and less palatable female character by pushing boundaries of what has been created previously and revealing harshly realistic characters. As examined with characters like Shosanna, Lisbeth, Jackie, Claire, and Rachel, these more realistic and callous female characters are also mirrored and on the rise in the film and television industries.

Although, as this thesis aimed to prove, these characters are still being undermined (intentionally or not) by their creators and could be improved further. Female anti-heroes need not to be limited by their male counterparts, previous female stereotypes, or the scope of their genre. The ideal female anti-hero would not be restricted in these ways. By continuing to create new, progressive female characters like the anti-hero, the media will have a landscape rich with diverse female depictions. Perhaps these future narratives can act as tools to combat the problematic gender training that men and women receive. If so, then the actresses playing these roles and the writers and producers developing them are doing important feminist work that could help pave the way toward gender equality on the page, on the screen, and possibly in the real world as well.
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