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Southern Belle: Grotesque Distortion of Archetype in *Sharp Objects*
Južanská kráska: groteskné znetvorenie archetypu v *Ostrých predmetoch*

BAKALÁRSKA PRÁCA

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to analyze the grotesque distortion of the Southern Belle and Southern Lady archetype in the contemporary novel *Sharp Objects* by Gillian Flynn. The novel draws from the literary tradition of Southern grotesque and introduces strong female characters that are judged from the perspective of feminist literary criticism and feminist theory. Furthermore, the novel works within the context of Southern Bell mythology, which functions as a very essential archetype to the culture and mental framework of the American South. Because the setting of the novel is placed within a very specific historical context of the American South region, some historical and sociological traditions, such as patriarchy and plantation system, are explained.

Introductory chapter establishes the historical and literary context for the thesis analysis. Southern mentality and its distinctiveness from other American regions, especially from the North, are introduced. Southern social and economic structure is explained through the definition of patriarchy and plantation economy system. The mythology of Southern Belle, Southern Lady and Southern Gentleman is formulated, and this is set within the context of Southern literary tradition.

The second chapter sets the novel within the context of feminist literary criticism and chief feminist theories are introduced. These will provide a framework for the analysis of the female characters. As the thesis attempts to provide an interdisciplinary analysis, besides the literary theory, I will also discuss feminist and gender theories, mainly those of Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler. Key terms, such as archetype, stereotype, Southern Gothic and Southern grotesque are explained.

The third chapter, the main and most important part of this thesis, analyzes three female and one male character and their grotesque distortion. Considering that *Sharp Objects*, as a contemporary novel, has not yet become part of the literary canon, there are no secondary sources available. Therefore, I conduct my own analysis based on the 'close reading' method. The characters' emphasis on aristocratic appearances and a 'proper Southern' conduct suggest that their self-representation refers to Southern Belle and Southern Lady mythology. Nevertheless, their actual behavior and their deep psychological traumas direct us towards the tradition of the Southern grotesque. A psychological disorder, Munchausen by Proxy is introduced, and I try to explain how it affects one of our main characters.

The final chapter tries to conclude and summarize my analysis. It also attempts to place the female characters of *Sharp Objects* within the Southern literary tradition.

Keywords: Southern Belle, Southern Lady, Southern Gothic, antebellum, postbellum, gender, feminism, Munchausen by Proxy, grotesque

ABSTRAKT

Cieľom tejto bakalárskej práce je analyzovať groteskné znetvorenie archetypu južanskej krásky v súčasnom románe *Ostré predmety* od Gillian Flynnovej. Román nadväzuje na literárnu tradíciu južanskej grotesknosti a predstavuje silné ženské postavy. Tie sú posudzované z perspektívy feministickej literárnej kritiky a feministickej teórie. Román takisto pracuje v kontexte mytológie južanskej krásky, ktorá má úlohu dôležitého archetypu v kultúre a mentálnom svete amerického Juhu. Pretože umiestnenie románu sa nachádza vo veľmi špecifickom historickom kontexte regiónu amerického Juhu, je potrebné vysvetliť niektoré historické a sociologické koncepty, akým je patriarchát a plantážny systém.

Úvodná kapitola predstavuje historický a literárny kontext pre analýzu práce, a preto je v nej vysvetlená južanská mentalita a jej odlišnosť od ostatných regiónov, a to hlavne od amerického Severu. Južanská sociálna a ekonomická štruktúra je priblížená na príklade patriarchátu a plantážneho ekonomického systému. Formulovaná je aj mytológia južanskej krásky a južanského gentlemana a zároveň je zasadená do kontextu južanskej literárnej tradície.

Druhá kapitola umiestňuje román do kontextu feministickej literárnej kritiky a sú predstavené niektoré hlavné feministické teórie. Tie zároveň poskytujú rámec pre analýzu ženských postáv. Pretože táto práca si dáva za úlohu poňať prácu interdisciplinárne, okrem literárnej teórie sú predstavené aj feministické a genderové teórie a to hlavne prístupy Simone de Beauvoirovej a Judith Butlerovej. Ďalej sú vysvetlené aj dôležité termíny, a to archetyp, stereotyp, južanská gotika a južanská grotesknosť.

Tretia kapitola, ktorá tvorí jadro tejto práce, si kladie za úlohu rozanalyzovať tri ženské a jednu mužskú postavu a ich groteskné znetvorenie. Vzhľadom na to, že *Ostré predmety* je súčasný román, a preto zatiaľ nepatrí do literárneho kánonu, zatiaľ neexistujú žiadne relevantné sekundárne zdroje zaoberajúce sa týmto dielom. Z tohto dôvodu vypracovávam moju analýzu na základe metódy ‘close reading’. Dôraz postáv na aristokratické vystupovanie a ‚správne‘ južanské správanie nám dokazuje, že ich seba-prezentácia sa chce priblížiť mytológii južanskej krásky. Ich skutočné správanie ale naznačuje ich hlboké psychologické traumy a posúva nás k tradícii južanskej grotesknosti. Predstavená je aj psychologická porucha, Münchausenov syndróm v zastúpení, ktorá ovplyvňuje konanie jednej z hlavných ženských hrdiniek.

Štvrtá, finálna kapitola si dáva za cieľ uzavrieť a zhodnotiť analýzu literárneho diela. Takisto sa pokúša o zasadenie ženských postáv *Ostrých predmetov* do tradície južanskej literatúry a o určenie ich miesta v nej.

Kľúčové slová: južanská kráska, južanská gotika, antebellum, postbellum, gender, feminizmus, grotesknosť, Münchausenov syndróm v zastúpení

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CHAPTER 1: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

1.1 Southern Mentality and Distinctiveness

There has been an abundance of research and hypotheses about the distinctions between two regions of the United States – the American South and the American North. Background on the American South is required in order to evaluate Sharp Objects by Gillian Flynn. The American South is not only a term describing a given geographical area. It is a region of a unique history, culture and mentality. The American South is considered a culturally, socio-politically, and historically distinct region. Many Southerners take great pride in belonging to this specific culture and proudly differentiate themselves from their Northern counterparts.

For more than two centuries, writers and thinkers have been commenting on and explaining these two different mentalities. In an often quoted passage from one of the founding fathers of the United States Thomas Jefferson's letter to the Marquis de Chastellux in 1785; Jefferson elaborates on this distinctiveness, ascribing both parties very different character traits:

> In the north, they are cool, sober, laborious, independent, jealous of their own liberties, and just to those of others; interested, chicaning, superstitious, and hypocritical in their religion. In the South they are fiery, voluptuary, indolent, unsteady, zealous for their own liberties, but tramping on those of others, generous, candid, without attachment or pretensions to any religion but that of the heart.[1]

Jefferson presents his idea as a direct result of a different climate. The scholar A. Cash Koeniger expands on this idea of meteorology as the most important factor in Southern distinctiveness. In his article Koeniger quotes a different nineteenth century traveler to America, Basil Hall, to whom Southerners appear more courteous and in overall "more agreeable and pleasant."[2] Nevertheless, Hall considers the Northerners to be much more industrious, hard-

[1] James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 9-10.
[2] Basil Hall, *Travels in North America* (3 vols. Edinburgh and London, 1829) 392.

working and ambitious, "we had been everywhere much struck with the air of bustle, and all sorts of industry - men riding about, chopping down forests, building up houses, ploughing, planting and reaping, - but here in Carolina all mankind appeared comparatively idle.[3]" The laziness of his pleasant Southerner is also attributed to climate, but also to another important factor, to slavery.

Jefferson' correspondent, Marquis de Chastellux, on the other hand, provides a different perspective. An idea that will define a distinctive mentality type well established in the Southern literature and in American mythology in general. Chastellux suggests that Southerners command a certain air of aristocracy and even though he limits his depiction to inhabitants of Virginia, the idea eventually spreads to other parts of the South.

Chastellux emphasizes more the national identity, rather than external factors, such as climate:

> [N]ot only in the nature of their climate, soil and agriculture, but also in the indelible character which every nation acquires at the moment of its origin, and which by perpetuating itself from generation to generation, justifies this great principle, that everything which is, partakes of what has been.[4]

As Mrs. Petrušová summarizes in her thesis, Chastellux' hypothesis about different national identities was further developed by later writers and thinkers.[5] By 1830, different cultural codes between the South and the North have been explained by the idea that the two regions have been settled by two different nationalities. Northerners were said to be descendants of the seventeenth century Puritan Roundheads. The Southerners, on the other hand, were supposedly descendants of the Cavaliers, aristocratic social group who adhered to principles of decorum, honor and dignity.

This idea of aristocratic origin might be true to some limited extent in Virginia, as W. J. Cash puts it: "Here were silver and carriages and courtliness and manner. Here were great houses."[6] He points out, though, that these Cavaliers did not go beyond the scope of Virginia land, if we even can talk about aristocracy as such. He argues that this aristocratic class most likely did not spring

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[3] Hall, 398.

[4] Cobb, 11.

[5] Gabriela Petrušová, "Southern Womanhood: A Story Behind the Southern Belle/Jižanské ženství: příběh za jižanskou kráskou, diplomová práce." Univerzita Karlova (květen 2015): 9, Portál elektronických zdrojů Univerzity Karlovy <http:/ /is.cuni.cz/webapps/zzp/detail/150723>, júl 2019.

[6] W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969) 5.

up from a true aristocratic family and it is very significant to realize that "Virginia was beginning very much as New England began – as emerging by slow stages from a primitive backwood community made up primarily of farmers and landowners."[7] Almost right up to the American Revolution, the Southern area of the country was still in frontier or semi-frontier stage and therefore historically speaking, we cannot truly talk about a real aristocracy as such.

Mythology, however, often emerges from the most unlikely sources and the Southern Cavalier legend grew to be very prominent and has remained on the American map of mentalities ever since. Therefore, the two distinctive cultural poles appeared: a Yankee, who might be characterized as diligent, hard-working, individualistic, even materialistic and covetous; the Southern Gentleman, on the other hand, seems to have acquired a taste for honor, gentility, integrity, and principle – if not in reality, then undeniably in cultural stereotypes.

1.2 Plantation System and Patriarchy

Jefferson's assumption that the most important factor that distinguishes Southern and Northern society is climate, ought to be taken into consideration. In the North, most inhabitants in Antebellum America were "obliged to pursue a more diversified approach to agricultural and industrial development. They also concentrated on areas like transportation and trade"[8] because natural conditions in the North did not provide them with such abundant agricultural results. Antebellum North quickly reoriented itself to a more industrial and commercial development.

Colonial and Antebellum South, on the other hand, was a region where climate, land and terrain provided very different outcomes. The availability of the land had an enormous impact on the social, economic, and political structure of the colonial South. The chief economic importance of the land lay in the production of crops for the market. Commercial agriculture became the engine driving the economy. As William J. Cooper puts it in his monography: "...a burst of tobacco-backed prosperity created the first colonial fortunes. Those fortunes were inextricably tied to the land and

[7] Cash, 8.
[8] Cobb, 10.

to the production of a staple crop for an overseas market."[9] Tobacco, cotton, sugar, indigo, sugar cane, and rice became their chief production goods and very soon after, the term "plantation system" came to describe a very specific economic activity where plantation agriculture grew, flourished and created unheard-of affluence and prosperity.

Prosperous landowners dominated large stretches of land and became the ultimate patriarchs in their homes. They embraced slavery mainly because indentured servants became too costly. They turned to African Americans for labor since the settlements required a vast number of workers to sustain them. Tobacco and cotton proved to be exceptionally profitable. The plantations grew in size because these specific crops required big areas of farm land to ensure prosperity.

Free slave labor is one of the key factors why patriarchy survived in this area for so long. As Anne Firror Scott puts it: "Because they owned slaves and thus maintained a traditional landowning aristocracy, southerners tenaciously held on to the patriarchal family structure." [10]She goes on explaining that the patriarchy has been the cultural norm of the seventeenth-century England and as thus it has been adopted by the planters as the most dominant social pattern, which "lived on into the nineteenth century in the whole South."[11]

The Southern patriarchal family endorsed strict hierarchy and the social position of every family member was firmly fixed. The ethos of such patriarchal family was guided by the codes of honor established by the Cavalier mythos. Chivalry, bravery, decency and courtesy became dominate in their mental framework.

The landowner was the supreme head of the family, whose judgment was not to be questioned. Women, children and slaves alike were expected to accept their proper place as subservient and subordinate to the patriarch. A woman's place in the family hierarchy was strictly given. She was expected to feel "the proudest feeling of admiration for her husband … this is as God meant it should be."[12] This imagery of a submissive wife was even reinforced by evangelical theology. Women often found themselves wishing and praying to meet such harsh expectations.

[9] William J. Cooper Jr., *The American South* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009) 33.
[10] Anne Firror Scott, *The Southern Lady* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970) 16.
[11] Scott, 16.
[12] Scott, 6.

"An unattainable perfection was the only standard," [13] and that put a lot of pressure on women of the landowning class.

1.3 Southern Ladies and Gentlemen

The masculine-dominated South created strictly divided roles for men and women of the ruling classes. Male superiority was a given, it was not to be questioned or mistrusted. Southern gentlemen continued in an old tradition from Western European history and their codes of conduct were connected to the ideas of chivalry. Southern gentlemen were to function as protectors and masters of the family. They were often referred to in words that under different circumstances associated with God: Lord and Master were frequent titles given to them. The southern man's superiority was enhanced by the stereotypes of male authority. A Southern Gentleman was supposed to value chivalry, bravery, and honor; he was supposed to find great pleasure in luxury and enjoyment of a plantation life spent in idle indulgences and instant gratifications. He was, however, also a protector of his wife, children and all the slaves, he had the ultimate vote on every issue imaginable, he was the ultimate patriarch. In his lady, a Southern Gentleman did not look for an intellectually equal companion or challenging partner.

To every Southern Gentleman, we must picture his proper counterpart, a Southern Lady. From earliest childhood girls were trained to the ideals of perfection and submission. Correct female behavior was emphasized over intellectual capacity and women were taught to be accommodating to every need of their potential husband. Her "very reason for being was to love, honor, obey, and occasionally amuse her husband, to bring up his children, and manage his household."[14] A proper Southern Lady ought to be completely obedient to her husband. She adores him, never intellectually challenges him and she sees him as the ultimate authority in her life. Patriarchy is deeply inscribed within her code of conduct and she does not question his judgment. According to Anne Scott: "men found intelligence in woman a quality that in general distressed more than it pleased."[15] She is not brought up to think for herself, the value of her judgment is not

[13] Scott, 13.
[14] Scott, 4.
[15] Scott, 8.

taken into consideration and she is to be passed from the hands of a watchful father to the hands of a loving and protective husband.

The Southern Lady's life ought to be naturally centered on her family. Because her intellectual capacity or education are not encouraged, her life is limited mainly to domestic excitements, where strong family ties are upheld. The role of a mother is of utmost importance to the Southern Lady and this is idealized and sentimentalized by the society around her. As Scott puts it: "One of the most persistent threads in the romanticisation of a woman was the glorification of motherhood, with its great possibilities for beneficent influence on the coming generation."[16]

The Southern Lady, besides being devoted to family, home and her children, is also deeply devoted to God. Her piety and religiousness are completely integrated within the Southern society. Piety is interconnected with another trait of a Southern Lady and that is purity. As Diane Roberts puts it: "her body was inscribed with the integrity and glamour of the South itself and her sexual purity translated her into the emblem of racial purity."[17] One of the key components of the racial theory is fear that a white woman's purity might be corrupted by the black man's visceral sexuality, who, partly an animal, cannot control his needs. "Black men could now destroy the purity of their white women,"[18] explains the scholar Kathryn Sidel. A woman's sexual innocence is put on the pedestal and becomes one of the key character traits for any promising Southern Belle.

1.4 Southern Belle Myth

There is a specific time period before a girl of the South transitioned from the house of her father to her future home of her husband. During this period between adolescence and marriage, the young woman would be considered a Southern Belle. When the Southern Belle entered society, she innocently flirted with potential suitors and showed her recommending qualities such as racial and sexual purity, dependence, vulnerability, submission, but also beauty, spirit, and a certain sensibility. She had to present herself as "physically weak, and formed for the less laborious

[16] Scott, 37.
The "beneficent influence of the coming generation" will prove to be of profound paradox in *Sharp Objects*' characters.
[17] Diana Roberts, *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood* (Athens and London: The University of London Press, 1994) 102.
[18] Kathryn Lee Seidel, *The Southern Belle in the American Novel* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1985) 32.

occupations."[19] Self-representing weakness is a key element because she must depend upon male protection. "To secure this protection she was endowed with the capacity to 'create a magic spell' over any man in her vicinity."[20] 'Creating a magic spell' through self-representing oneself as weak, modest, sexually and racially pure, but at the same time beautiful and graceful, is a pivotal aspect of an idealized image of any Southern Belle. Before a Belle safely secures the state of blissful matrimony, she is allowed to spend some time in society, engaging in parties and social gatherings in order to charm Southern Gentlemen and win a husband.

The concept of a Southern Belle (like a Southern Lady) became an idealization, a symbol of white civilization in the South. It is largely a preconceived idea which did not apply to all women in the South. A proper Southern Belle must be of a certain racial and social background, she must be purely white and of aristocratic origin in order to perfectly fulfill the mythology of the Southern Cavalier. All these discussed roles exemplify racial and social perfection that is engraved into the Southern mentality.

As an ideological concept, the Southern Belle has changed throughout history.[21] The Southern Belle of the Antebellum period is represented very differently in literature than the Southern Belle of 20th century, such as in the works of William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams. Even though there is inevitably some development of the archetype, the core values of the mythology remained essentially the same. Southern Belle comes to represent the Old South and its values; it is a product of the white, agrarian elite which dominated this area. Because of specific economic conditions created by the plantation system and slave labor economy, the Southern Belle is allowed to cultivate her femininity and gracefulness. Her financial dependence upon male relatives commit her to complete submissiveness and docility. In this world, she must follow a strict set of rules and possess a particular set of values. As Brown summarizes it: "The private sphere of women embraced femininity, beauty, simplicity, and submissiveness; the highest roles

[19] Scott 4.

[20] Scott 4.

[21] There are two theses worth mentioning, both successfully defended at the Charles University. Both map development of the archetype of the Southern Belle in the course of literary history, namely from Antebellum, Postbellum and New South perspective. Ms. Petrušová MA thesis focuses on the development of the archetype in selected works of American fiction, namely John Pedleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn*, William Faulkner's *Sanctuary* and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. Ms. Soukupová BA thesis introduces specific concepts of a Southern Belle in Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* and Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

to which a southern woman could aspire were those of nurturing mother, dutiful wife, and social moral pillar"[22]

Historians speculate about the origins and historical function of the concept of Southern womanhood in Southern ideology. As has been already suggested in the previous section of this chapter, the function of Southern womanhood is to justify the perpetuation of the hegemony of the male sex, the upper and middle classes, and the white race. The notion has already existed before the Civil War and came to be of utmost importance in the Antebellum ideology of 'Lost Cause'[23] nostalgia.

[22] Alexis Giraldin Brown, *The Women Left Behind: Transformation of the Southern Belle, 1840-1880*, Historian 62.4 (2000). Academic Search Premier

[23] 'Lost Cause' refers to an American historical negationist ideology that regards the cause of the Confederacy during the Civil War as a just and heroic one. The ideology puts on pedestal the values of the Old South, among which the Southern Belle myth is fully endorsed. The Civil War is considered to be primarily a struggle for 'states' rights and Lost Cause adherents do not believe that slavery was the primary cause of the conflict. The Northern aggression is seen as an invasion and threat to Southern way of life.

CHAPTER 2: AIMS AND METHODS

2.1 Structure of the Analysis

In *Sharp Objects* by Gillian Flynn, the characters of interest, wife Adora, husband Alan, and daughter Amma try to impersonate all of the values of Southern gentility previously described. Outwardly they try to present themselves to the world as the idealized Southern Lady, Southern Belle, and Southern Gentleman. Inwardly, we see the conflict the characters experience because they try to maintain this ideal.

The primary aim of this thesis is to discuss how the archetype of Southern Belle becomes grotesquely distorted in *Sharp Objects*. By establishing an idealized image of the Southern Belle with a particular set of values and codes of conduct, I will contrast these to the actual characters of *Sharp Objects.* With regard to the Southern Gothic tradition, I will show how the main characters become grotesquely distorted and disfigured through their terrible actions in the Southern Gothic tradition.

Because the novel *Sharp Objects* is a contemporary literary work, it has not yet become canonical. Since there are no relevant secondary sources dealing with it, I will be depending mainly on the method of close reading and my own interpretation of the characters. The analysis will be structured as follows: feminist theory and literary criticism in relation to Southern womanhood; the terms ‘archetype’ and ‘stereotype’ are introduced as crucial concepts; and the terms Southern Gothic and grotesque will be explained.

Literary works of different time periods include portrayals of Southern belles in Antebellum, Postbellum and New South periods and they map different development of the archetype, in my Bachelor thesis I am working with the idealization of the Southern Belle which has been created in Antebellum South and perfected in Postbellum South as part of the ‘Lost Cause’ ideology. The archetype has been changing and evolving in time, nevertheless, for purposes of this thesis I am working with the idealization only in order to provide a contrast to the distorted reality of our main characters in comparison to their self-representation and conduct to be seen by the outside world.

2.2 Feminist Literary Criticism and the American South

Until the second half of the twentieth century, Southern studies have mostly excluded non-white non-male authors. As with all subdivisions of literary canons, female and minority writers have been judged as inferior and Southern studies were no exception. During the nineteenth century, female voice started to emerge in American literature, women characters, though, were often marginalized or stereotyped. With the appearance of feminist literary criticism and women studies, our understanding of female literature, women authors and female characters has changed, as the scholar Ellen Rooney remarks: "Feminist literary theory has successfully intervened in literary studies as a whole, recasting once commonsensical understandings of genres, the canon, and the aesthetic."[24]

The way we read a literary text has altered significantly, as well and there are multiple approaches to the feminist reading of a text.[25] A literary text can be also analyzed from the social, political, cultural or historical perspective. For example, feminists might examine a text from a sociological perspective where they examine the notion of gender, how it is formed, represented and developed. Feminist theory distinguishes between a biological sex and gender as a construction and a scripted performance. According to 'gender as a construction' view, it is the society and culture that creates gender roles and prescribes these roles as an appropriate behavior for both sexes. Taking this into consideration, feminists view "literature as a tool for creating and keeping belief systems."[26] I will analyze the myth of the Southern Belle and of the Southern Lady from the perspective of archetypal feminist cultural and critical theory. I will also try to utilize a socio-historical perspective since I am examining American South as a historical region and a social construction.

[24] Ellen Rooney (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 16.

[25] Gabriela Petrušová mentions in her MA thesis multiple feminist perspectives of reading a literary text, including for example a queer theory perspective, liberal feminist perspective or anarchofeminist perspective. She also comments on a different methodological point of views that might examine a text, for example an evaluation of the text based on semiotic analysis, discursive analysis or semantic analysis.

[26] Petrušová, 13.

2.3 Archetype and Stereotype

Even though the terms are etymologically similar, there is a significant difference between the words 'archetype' and 'stereotype'. The origin of the term archetype, "original pattern from which copies are made of," has its roots in Greek 'archi', a 'beginning' or 'origin' and "typos" a 'stamp', 'pattern', 'model' or 'type'; it "denotes a primordial form, the original of a series of variations."[27] In literature it can refer to recognizable character types that share roles among universal societies and archetype may create a shared imagery that is easily recognizable within a specific literary work. Apart from a character, it can also refer to a model situation or a model story.

According to Foucault's theory of power[28] and also that part of feminist literary theory that is influenced by his concept, archetype, unlike a stereotype, is not a fixed concept. It is formed, changed and developed constantly and how it is altered depends largely on a particular context. This fluidity of the archetype is a quality that distinguishes it from the second term, stereotype. Stereotype, having also its origins in Greek, comes from the Greek work 'stereos', meaning 'firm' or 'solid' and 'typos', meaning 'pattern', 'model', 'impression'. The word could be thus translated as 'solid impression on one or more idea/theory'.

According to the scholar Annis Pratt, the word stereotype was first used in the printing press "to designate an original plate … from which subsequent imprints are made."[29] This connotation associates the idea of rigidity and fixedness. Stereotypes, thus convey the meaning of a concept not changing or developing in time; unlike archetypes which are "complex variables, subject to variations in perceptions."[30]

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[27] Petrušová, 13.

[28] Foucault uses the term 'power/knowledge' to signify that power is created through accepted forms of knowledge, scientific understanding and 'truth'. These 'truths' are the result of a scientific discourse and institutions, they are constantly redefined through education system, the media and through different political and economic ideologies. In this sense, the battle for truth' is not for some absolute truth that can be discovered and accepted, but is a battle about "the rules according to which the true and false are separated and specific effects of power are attached to the true… [A] battle about 'the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays" (in Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader: An introduction to Foucault's Thought* (London: Penguin, 1991))

[29] Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981) 3.

[30] Pratt, 4.

2.4 Archetype and Feminism

Poststructuralism and poststructuralist feminist theory views archetypes from the perspective of their deconstruction. It analyzes how archetypes were created, what impact they have on the society, including different sociological notions, e.g. gender and the role of women and "what their implications are for the creation of identity."[31] One of the founding feminist texts, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* provides us with a framework of how identity is created. In her ground-breaking work, Beauvoir suggests that a woman is not defined through herself, she is only relative to a man: "She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her, she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute. She is the Other."[32]. Man is considered the default, woman is only the "Other,' therefore she becomes the second sex.

Beauvoir also analyzes myths and explains why the myth of the woman became a fixed notion in the society. She argues that this myth was created for the uses of patriarchy and male dominance: "Humanity is male and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being."[33] This 'relativity' and 'otherness' ensures the patriarchal power structure and inferiority of a woman's social position. Beauvoir additionally claims that: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."[34] From Beauvoir's assertion of a gender as a constructed identity, other feminists follow and elaborate on her key ideas.

Judith Butler argues that gender is a kind of improvised performance. She considers feminine and masculine gender attributes as performative: "as behaviors learned through imitations."[35] Butler unifies the notion of gender and performativity together, stating that: "Gender proves to be performance - that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing."[36] The performance is what actually produces the individual. Butler agrees with

[31] Petrušová, 14.
[32] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010) 26.
[33] Beauvoir, 26.
[34] Beauvoir, 14.
[35] Petrušová, 15.
[36] Judih Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 25.

Nietzsche in his claim that "there is no 'being' behind doing … 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed - the deed is everything."[37]

Both of the feminist theories, Beauvoir's gender as a construction and Butler's gender as performance are crucial to our understanding of the gender roles in connection to the mythology and archetype of the Southern Belle and Southern Lady; I will try to utilize this feminist theory in my analysis of *Sharp Objects* and its characters.

2.5 Southern Gothic and Grotesque

For purposes of the analysis of this thesis, besides defining key feminist literary theories and the terms archetype and stereotype, we will need to establish two more traditions of literary theory: Southern Gothic and Southern grotesque.

The definition of the term grotesque comes from an Italian word "grotte", meaning caves. It refers to underground chambers excavated in Rome, whose walls have been decorated with ornamental arrangements and fantastic human and animal figures. These unusual forms created "distortions of the natural to the point of comic absurdity, ridiculous ugliness, or ludicrous caricature."[38] The etymology of the word might suggest the reason why the word obtained predominantly negative connotations, such as bizarre, absurd, abnormal, ugly or unnatural. The term, originally used in visual arts, came to be associated with literature in the eighteenth century. There are multiple definitions trying to determine the meaning of the term 'grotesque'.[39] For our

[37] Butler 25.

[38] Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda H. MacKethan, *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001) 321.

[39] Vladimír Novák's Bachelor thesis provides an overview of different approaches and definitions of the term 'grotesque'. The second chapter of his thesis includes various scholars explaining the concept, including: Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen, 1972), Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda H. MacKethan, *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), Marian Haar, *The Phenomenon of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction: Some Aspects of Its Form and Function* (Stockholm: Almqvist-Wiksell, 1983), Alan Spiegel, "A Theory of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," *The Goergia Review*. Vol. 26, No. 4 (Winter, 1972) and Maxmillian E. Novak, "Gothic Fiction and the Grotesque," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*. VOl. 13, No. 1 (Autumn, 1979).

purposes, we will use Alan Spiegel's concept, as it refers to the grotesque of Southern authors and it places its primary focus on the characters of the grotesque literary work. Spiegel claims:

> The grotesque, as it appears in Southern fiction, refers neither to the particular quality of a story (noble or ignoble, beautiful or ugly, etc.), nor to its mood (light or dark, sad or joyous, etc.), nor to its mode of expression (fantasy or realism, romance or myth, etc.). The grotesque refers rather to a type of character that occurs so repeatedly in contemporary Southern novels that readers have come to accept - indeed, expect his appearance as a kind of convention of the form.[40]

Spiegel goes on explaining that the strange appearance or conduct of the characters makes them into outcasts and misfits. This specific component of Spiegel's definition, though, does not apply to the characters of *Sharp Objects*. As we will see in the third chapter of this thesis, their behavior and appearance does not exclude them from the mainstream society. It is their mental world, psychological traumas and cruel personality that does. Nevertheless, his definition is still very significant because he deals specifically with American South as a distinctive historical and literary region.

Spiegel makes another significant addition to the definition of grotesque. He goes on explaining the difference between two similar terms, Gothic and grotesque fiction. The two words are sometimes used interchangeably and synonymously because they both relate to very similar aspects. Some of the most noteworthy Southern writers, such as William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Truman Capote and Tennessee Williams, are sometimes referred to as authors of both Southern Gothic and Southern grotesque. Both modes of writing are connected to "vice and disorder, being preoccupied with the deviation from harmony and right morals."[41] Nevertheless, there is a significant difference there. Even though the Southern grotesque does have its roots in the classic Gothic novel, as Spiegel points out: "the Southern novel is not dependent upon its Gothic counterpart as far as the subject matter, technique or style are concerned: furthermore, that its entire philosophy of life is radically different."[42] The Gothic has its roots in the Gothic novel of the

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[40] Alan Spiegel, "A Theory of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," *The Georgia Review*. Vol. 26, No. 4 (Winter, 1972): 428, JSTOR, Web, 20 July 2019.

[41] Maxmillian E. Novak, "Gothic Fiction and the Grotesque," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*. Vol. 13, No. 1 (Autumn, 1979) 36, JSTOR, Web, 20 July 2019.

[42] Marian Haar, *The Phenomenon of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction: Some Aspects of Its Form and Function* (Stockholm: Almqvist-Wiksell, 1983) 33.

eighteenth century.[43] The main distinguishing factor between the Gothic and the grotesque is that "Gothic presents a strange, unfamiliar world full of ghosts, desolate castles and mysteries, which functioned as an outlet for feelings that could not be expressed in realistic novel of the type of produced by Fielding, Hardy and Balzac."[44] Southern grotesque, unlike the Gothic, places its setting in the real world of everyday communities and in most recognizable situations; the setting of the Southern novel is far removed from the mysterious and unnatural. It is the characters of the literary work that are strange and peculiar.

[43] The list of notewrothy English Gothic fiction writers includes Horace Walpole, Clara Reeve, Ann Radcliffe, William Thomas Beckford or Matthew Lewis.
[44] Haar, 33.

CHAPTER 3: ANALYSIS

3.1 Introduction to the World of *Sharp Objects*

Since the novel is a contemporary work, I will briefly introduce it to the reader. *Sharp Objects* was a 2006 debut novel of an American author Gillian Flynn who is also of Southern origin (born in Kansas City, Missouri). The novel follows a young troubled journalist Camille Preaker, who returns to her hometown in order to investigate a series of brutal murders of two little girls. Camille has an extremely complicated relationship with her mother, Adora Crellin, who likes to present herself as a personification of Southern Ladyship and hospitality. Adora, however, suffers from a psychological disease called Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy, which is a condition where a caregiver creates the appearance of health problems in another person, usually a child, in order to gain sympathy for oneself. Camille, who is also deeply traumatized and cuts herself, eventually learns the horrendous truth of the real circumstances of her little sister's death several years ago. She blames her own mother for the murder of the two little girls killed in their present day. Her little half-sister Amma lives a double life; she is a perfect daughter, a true Southern belle at home, but outside her home, she terrorizes her schoolmates and people of the town. At the shocking end, we learn that she is actually the killer of the two little girls because through her mother's manipulation and unhealthy relationship that they have established together, she grew into a monster who feels eager to control and rule everyone around her.

3.2 Southern Lady Perverted

Adora's mental world is very much about outward appearances and outside presentations. She self-stylizes herself as the perfect Southern Lady and the outside world sees her as the impeccable embodiment of the Southern lifestyle and values. She lives in a fictitious town called Wind Gap: "It's at the very bottom of Missouri, in the boot heel. Spitting distance from Tennessee and Arkansas."[45] This brings us instantly to the world of the deep South.

[45] Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2018) 3.

She comes "from old money"[46] as Camille puts it, her family is in the hog butchering business, which is a very profitable enterprise: "... pig factory-farm, a private operation that delivers almost 2 percent of the country's pork."[47] Her social background, therefore, immediately places her among the wealthiest inhabitants of the town. She represents the modern-day aristocracy, since she has not spent a single day of her adult life working or managing the plant, she only collects dividends and annual profits.

The very fact that their wealth comes from such a bloody and gruesome place is already very telling. The poorer inhabitants of the town employed at the farm spend their time in a truly nauseating environment. Most of the time the workers opt to wear earplugs "and they spend their days in a soundless rage" in order to avoid "the constant screams"[48] of dying pigs. The horrors of modern-day meat-production intensive commercial units contrast sharply with the world of Adora and her family. As Camille informs us, her mother's massive house is at the southernmost point of the town, "the wealthy section"[49], as she openly (and judgmentally) calls it. She lives in

> … an elaborate Victorian replete with a widow's walk. A wraparound veranda, a summer porch jutting toward the back, and a cupola arrowing out of the top. It's full of cubbyholes and nooks, curiously circuitous. The Victorians, especially Southern Victorians, needed a lot of room to stay away from each other, to duck tuberculosis and flu, to avoid rapacious lust, to wall themselves away from sticky emotions. Extra space is always good.[50]

Be describing the house where Adora lives with her family, her daughter Camille is already making some judgment calls and she is slowly revealing to the reader the real image of her crippled relationship with her mother. The reader is automatically transferred to the times of the Old South and an image of the big plantation house, a mansion surrounded by the slave quarters is immediately built in one's imagination. Bryant describes this imagery as a sentimentally

[46] Flynn, 4.
[47] Flynn, 62.
[48] Flynn, 62.
[49] Flynn, 28.
[50] Flynn, 28.

exaggerated depiction of the plantation, in which: "the young men were invariably gallant, the young women beautiful, and their black retainers happy darkies."[51]

The white porch, the spacious rooms, the beautiful veranda and decorative components of the Victorian era create a perfect association, all that is missing is the smell of magnolias and singing of the happy slaves to complete the imagery. According to Susan Donaldson, this narration of the past as "the oasis of order, tradition and stability," which the old plantation house certainly came to represent, becomes part of the Southern mythology. [52]

The interior of the house also does not disappoint the reader's expectations of the aristocratic lifestyle. Adora's opulent and extravagant room includes: "massive bed, pillows sprouting out [of] it like barnacles. The full-length mirror embedded in the wall. And the famous ivory floor that made everything glow as if we were in a snowy, moonlight landscape."[53]

Grotesquely enough, the floor in Adora's room is covered with ivory. The floor is known within Southern high-class circle because it reminds them of the "Bygone Times,"[54] which is also the name of the article in Southern Living magazine featuring Adora's renowned floor material. As Amma cynically remarks, it is called "Bygone Times...Because now of course you can't get ivory. Too bad. Really too bad."[55] We as the readers are not sure whether Amma is making this controversial statement to get a reaction from Camille. It is not certain whether Amma actually realizes the appalling procedure of the mass-slaughter of elephants required to fulfill the luxury whims of Southern aristocrats or whether, as her character portrayal might suggest, she is truly lamenting the non-availability of the ostentatious floor component. The fact remains that Adora and her family do not acknowledge the extremely negative connotations of such questionable furnishings. Their understanding of it is limited to the Old South interpretation; it is there simply to represent a certain aristocratic lifestyle; it is a relic of a bygone era that does not bother with

[51] J.Bryant, Jr. *The Twentieth Century Southern Literature* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1997) 12.
[52] Susan. V. Donaldson, "The Introduction: The Southern Agrarians and their Cultural Wars", in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, Donald Davidson et al. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977) xix.
[53] Flynn, 304.
[54] Flynn, 234.
[55] Flynn, 234.

modern-day judgments of elephant poaching. Adora, as a proper Southern Lady, is probably not equipped to recognize its gloomy aspect.

Besides the perfect house and unblemished social background, Adora's self-representation as a Southern Lady goes hand in hand with the right attire and with the proper conduct towards others. When we first meet Adora, according to Camille:

> She looked exactly the same, though, not much older than I am now, although she's in her late forties. Glowing pale skin, with long blonde hair and pale blue eyes. She was like a girl's very best doll, the kind you don't play with. She was wearing a long, pink cotton dress with little white slippers. She was twirling her amaretto sour without spilling a drop.[56]

The image of the doll and a dollhouse becomes a very significant theme in the novel. Adora's complexion and appearance immediately associate almost unattainable perfection and mastery at aristocratic mannerism. The image of her drinking an after-dinner refreshment, where the glass is filled to the topmost rim, but no liquid is ever spilled, establishes Adora as the perfect hostess, a superb lady-like figure who had her entire life to master such aristocratic skills. Her impeccable prowess, her savvy and aptitude for being a Southern Lady is often a source of Camille's jealousy and complete incomprehension of her mother's world.

Adora's behavior and demeanor are also very lady-like, at least on the surface; to the point that it seems a bit too formal for the mother-daughter conversation. As Camille paints the picture for us: "It's the politeness that I find most upsetting."[57] Camille is dreading the moment when she is to show up on the front step and inform her mother that she is staying in town for work. Adora asks her very nicely how long do they get to have Camille for, calling her a familiar name "sweetness" but Camille understands the true meaning and interpretation of this seemingly innocent question: "When do you leave."[58] Adora, in her role of a perfect hostess and welcoming mother, tries to cover her resentment over the fact that Camille wants to stay at their house for the duration of her work assignment, telling her she wished she had phoned beforehand, "Just so I'd

[56] Flynn, 30.
[57] Flynn, 7.
[58] Flynn, 7.

have known. I would have had dinner for you or something."[59] Adora also does not omit to self-deprecatingly comment that the house is "not up to par for a visitor, I'm afraid,"[60] even though the house is in an excellent state, including such little vain details from dozens of tulips in vases in the entry hall to the overall impeccable cleanliness and perfection of the whole household.

She insists on being called Miss Adora by the help, even though she is a married woman and Camille invents a potential conversation on how her request was put to the servant: "I assume it was my mother's affectation to request the *Miss* in front of her name, and I tried to imagine how the conversation might go. *Gayla, the best servants in the best households call their mistresses by their formal names. We want to be the best, don't we?*"[61]

Adora's self-representation of the perfect lady is directed mainly to absolute strangers, the pretenses and appearances of an aristocratic family are to charm and captivate people who are below her in the social ladder but who are needed for different tasks.[62] As Camille puts it, Adora can be extremely welcoming to visitors and outsiders, she calls her "the schmoozer in the family - even the guy who sprays for termites once a year sends doting Christmas cards."[63]

To her own daughter, on the other hand, she is excessively formal, even cold, which later opens into outright hostilities and resentments. This aspect, this extremely unhealthy and non-functioning mother-daughter relationship between Camille and Adora is probably the most obvious Gothic distortion of Adora's role as a Southern Lady. As Fox-Genovese explains, one of the most important rules of a Southern Lady was her role as a mother. There seems to be almost "a mythical cult"[64] around this specific aspect of a woman's life in Southern value system.[65]

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[59] Flynn, 30.

[60] Flynn, 29.

[61] Flynn, 164.

[62] In this aspect, Adora can remind us of a different typically Southern character, William Faulkner's Caroline Compson. She, being a completely inadequate mother, also cares mostly only about the social appearance, according to Williams. See D Williams. *Faulkner's Women: The Myth and the Muse* (Montreal & London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1977) 70.
In one specific episode, Caroline reprimands her daughter for calling her son Benjy by a nickname. She considers nicknames to be vulgar and she informs her daughter that only common people use them. She is trying very hard to distinguish herself and her family member along her from the vulgarity and baseness of the lower classes.

[63] Flynn, 70.

[64] Fox-Genovese, E.D. Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 303.

[65] We also need to point out the fact that in some aristocratic families, the maternal role was often fulfilled by the figure of a Black slave, a mammy. This is the case of many literary characters, for illustration we might mention the

We have already established that one of the principal characteristics of a Southern Lady is supposed to be the devotion to her family and children. She ought to be the ultimate caregiver and loving mother figure in Camille's life; nonetheless, the truth is quite the opposite. It all starts with the bleak welcome when Camille returns home after several years: "She opened the door and stood in the doorway, and didn't offer a hug at all, not even the limp one I'd expected. 'Is something the matter?' "[66]

Adora has always been an emotionally inaccessible and unattainable mother, even when Camille was a little girl and yearned for emotional support and maternal love; especially after a difficult time of her sister's passing after a long illness. Adora, however, has not been equipped with right motherly instincts. She would rather spend all her time grieving behind closed doors, self-pitying herself and presenting to the world an image of a beaten mother who just lost her little baby girl and who is too emotionally overwhelmed to care for her other living daughter. This Grotesques distortion of the Southern motherhood ideal reminds us of another typical literary representation of the Southern aristocratic myth. William Faulkner's mother from the *Sound and the Fury* is also not the perfect personification of an ideal mother figure. Mrs. Caroline Compson is also a whining and self-pitying type, who, similarly to Adora, is not capable of fulfilling her maternal duties, as J. T. Matthews suggests in his analysis in the *Discovery of Loss in The Sound and the Fury*.[67] She often exclaims self-absorbed complaints such as: What have I done to be given children like these.[68]" A scholar C. Brooks is even harsher in her criticism of Caroline Compson's character, calling her the: "curse upon Quentin and the rest of the Compsons."[69]

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characters of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. We can learn more about the figure of the black mammy in J.W. Parkhurst: "The Role of the Black Mammy in the Plantation Household" retrieved from JSTOR: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2714687?seq=1
However, it is important to point out that there is no such maternal figure in Camille's life. Even though her family employs a household help, the race of this minor character is never specified. It is safe to assume, however, that this particular job would be filled by someone of a Black skin color. It is essential to acknowledge the fact that Camille does not develop a close relationship with the help and therefore the stereotype of a Black mammy providing emotional support and maternal love is not fulfilled here.

[66] Flynn, 29.

[67] John T. Matthews. "The Discovery of Loss in *The Sound and the Fury*." In *The Play of Faulkner's Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1882) 63-114.

[68] William Faulkner. *The Sound and the Fury* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1884) 65.

[69] C. Brooks. Man, Time and Eternity. In W. Faulkner and D. Minter (Ed.), *The Sound and the Fury* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 1994.) 202.

Adora spends several months in her gorgeous room with "a floor so glorious it had been photographed by several decorating magazines...That room and its decadent floor had me awestruck, all the more so because it was forbidden to me."[70] Camille paints a picture of her sitting in front of the unreachable room, aching for her mother's affection, while notable visitors from Wind Gap are actually admitted to the room. These strangers, such as the mayor of Wind Gap, are allowed to pay weekly visits because they bring "flesh flowers and classic novels"[71], while the mothers is "always in bed, propped up on a snowdrift of pillows, dressed in a series of thin, flowered robes.[72] Once again, appearances and outward presentation are more important to Adora than the emotional well-being of her living daughter.

Adora's true nature is slowly revealed to the reader through Camille's flashbacks and memories of her mother's cruel behavior. For a while, Camille convinced herself that Adora's distance was a defense constructed after the death of little Marian. But she slowly starts to admit to herself, that her mother, the perfect image of a Southern Lady, probably detests children: "I think, in fact, she hates them. There's a jealousy, a resentment that I can feel even now, in my memory. At one point, she probably liked the idea of a daughter."[73] Camille recollects one specific memory, when Marian was dead about two years and Adora had a cluster of friends come over for afternoon drinks. One of the friends brought a baby and the baby is naturally showered with attention and kisses: "the child was cooed over, smothered with red-lipstick kisses, tidied up with tissues, then lipstick smacked again."[74] When Adora is finally handed the baby, she cuddles it ferociously. "Oh, how wonderful it is to hold a baby again!"[75] She is lovingly playing with the baby, jiggling it on her knee and whispering to it a sweet baby-talk. All of a sudden, this angelic image of a beautiful doting mother is grotesquely reversed. From the perfect caregiver, Adora is turned into an animal-like monster. She is left alone with the baby in the living room, unknowingly watched by Camille who is sitting at the top of the stairs. She describes her mother "staring at the child almost lasciviously,"[76] and suddenly pressing her lips against the baby's cheek, taking "a tiny

[70] Flynn, 88.
[71] Flynn, 88.
[72] Flynn, 88.
[73] Flynn, 123.
[74] Flynn, 124.
[75] Flynn, 124.
[76] Flynn, 124.

bit of flesh between her teeth and [giving] it a little bite."[77] The baby starts wailing, while Adora snuggles it again and tells other women that baby is only being fussy. Camille, subconsciously feeling that what she has just witnessed is wicked and vicious, runs into Marian's room and hides under the covers. [78]

Camille's resentment towards her mother grows as she becomes older. She detests her airs and pretenses, her self-pitying nature and overly emotional reaction towards strangers, when in fact she is not capable of providing affection for her own daughter:

> Every tragedy that happens in the world happens to my mother, and this more than anything about her turns my stomach. She worries over people she's never met who have a spell of bad chance. She cries over news from across the globe. It's all too much for her, the cruelty of human beings.[79]

This last sentence is remarkably paradoxical, considering her actual psychological state. As it is revealed towards the end of the book, Adora suffers from a psychological condition called Munchausen by Proxy. Munchausen by Proxy, as we learn from the nurse, is a condition, when 'the caregiver, usually the mother, *almost always* the mother, makes her child ill to get attention for herself. You got Munchausen, you make yourself sick to get attention. You got MBP, you make your child sick to show what a kind, doting mommy you are. Brothers Grimm, see what I mean? Like something a wicked fairy queen would do."[80] 'A wicked fairy queen' is a term consistent within the tradition of Southern Gothic. The perfect image of a loving mother is turned upside down and perverted into an ugly monster.

Camille, driven with doubts and suspicions about the real nature of her sister's death, visits a hospital, where her sister Marian spent countless hours having all kinds of tests completed, exams administered, and possible diagnoses determined. One nurse observes that Adora showed no

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[77] Flynn, 124.

[78] This physical elements of the Grotesqueness of Adora's actions almost remind the reader of the physicality and the bodily distortions in Tennessee William's short stories. His characters are open misfits in the society, mainly because of their deviant homosexual behavior. Even though we do not have the homophobic element in *Sharp Objects*, the sheer physicality and bodily display of Adora's grotesque actions can remind us of some of William's characters. This is analyzed in detail in the Bachelor Thesis by Vladimir Novák. See Vladimír Novák. *Grotesque or Queer? Homosexual Characters in Tennessee William's Selected Stories*, 2015

[79] Flynn, 88.

[80] Flynn, 293.

interest in Marian when she was feeling better, in fact, she seemed to punish her. She held Marian only when she was sick or crying. Such a grotesque reversal of the role of a caring mother is destroying Camille's already fragile mental state.

Camille's growing realization that she has no relationship with her mother is revealed to her through witnessing other normal mother-daughter bonds. She is left almost emotionally devastated when she overhears normal phone conversations of her roommate Allison and her mom. When the roommate's mom finally comes to visit, she brings Allison a big plastic bag of safety pins simply because she reckoned "they might come in handy."[81] Such innocent acts of maternal love confuse Camille and she cannot help herself but burst into tears: "The gesture - so random and kind - baffled me. Is this what mothers did, wonder if you might need safety pins? Mine phoned once a month and always asked the same practical questions (grades, classes, upcoming expenses)."[82]

Camille cannot recollect any such little gestures that would suggest intimacy between her and Adora. She does not remember telling her favorite color, or what she might name her daughter when she grows up. She even doubts her mother knows what her favorite dish is. Little confidences and acts of affection are completely unfamiliar to Camille. She finally realizes that her mother never told her that she loved her. In Camille's own words: "She tended to me. She administered me. Oh yes, and one time she bought me lotion with vitamin E."[83]

Adora's other role as a perfect Southern Lady, besides the caregiver, is a nurse. She administered to little Marian, who was often sick. Adora loved the time she could tend to her little girl because she felt needed and adored for her self-sacrifice and devotion. As Adora puts it: "Marian is such a doll when she's ill, she dotes on me and wants me with her all the time. I love wiping away her tears."[84] The reader is struck again with the doll image, when Adora views her daughters as little puppets only to be played with. This extremely harmful relationship proves to be fatal for three little girls of Wind Gap.

[81] Flynn, 122.
[82] Flynn, 122.
[83] Flynn, 123.
[84] Flynn, 309.

Adora is very aware of her charm and attractiveness when she is devotedly taking care of her sick daughter; she is enjoying immensely all the attention that she gets from strangers, doctors included. Camille reads Adora's diary entry that reveals to us the extent of her illness and her monstrous conduct. She describes another visit to the hospital because Marian has trouble breathing and is sick to her stomach. The very next line that follows describes in detail what attire she was wearing; she expresses her apprehension that she might have looked "washed-out" in her "yellow St. John suit...like a walking pineapple!"[85] Then she goes on detailing how nice, kind and interested one of the doctors seemed in Marian, and most importantly, in her: "He seems quite impressed with me. Said that I was an angel and that every child should have a mother like me. We had a bit of a flirtation, despite the wedding rings."[86] In Adora's eyes, innocent flirtations are part of her Southern Belle / Southern Lady appeal and she pays a lot more attention to her dress and her appearance instead of her very ill daughter.

Adora's absolute Grotesque distortion is revealed in her last diary entry from May 10, 1988, after Marian passed: "Marian is dead. I couldn't stop. I've lost 12 pounds and am skin and bones. Everyone's been incredibly kind. People can be so wonderful."[87] This last entry from her flowered diary has been entered as a court document for her trial. Devoted mother turned upside down, perverted by the psychological illness, the picture of the distorted Southern Lady completed.

3.3 Two Faces of a Southern Belle

Camille's half-sister, Amma, is only a 13-year old girl but she is already living a double life. At home, she presents herself as the perfect daughter to Adora, her presentation mirrors one of a true Southern Belle. Her behavior outside the house, on the other hand, is a substantially different one. She is the most popular girl in school and also a ring leader of the local mean girls who terrorize their social inferiors. At the shocking end of the novel, we learn that she is actually the killer of the two little girls, whose death Camille has been investigating. Because of her mother's illness, manipulation and an overall unhealthy relationship they share together, she grew into a monster who feels eager to control and rule everyone around her.

[85] Flynn, 310.
[86] Flynn, 310.
[87] Flynn, 310.

At home, Amma fulfills her mother's expectations of a proper young lady. She is dressed "in a childish checked sundress [and] matching straw hat."[88] This attire actually makes her look younger, the dress more appropriate for a ten-year-old and she scowls when she realizes Camille is assessing her appearance: "I wear this for Adora. When I'm home, I'm her little doll."[89] As I have already suggested in the previous chapter, the imagery of a doll and a dollhouse becomes an essential symbol in the novel. Amma plays with a dollhouse, which is an exact replica of the Crellin household. Every single piece of furniture must match their house to the very last detail. Amma informs Camille that the little footstool from the dollhouse's room needs repolstering because "Adora changed her color scheme from peach to yellow."[90] She childishly informs Camille that the dollhouse is her "fancy"[91] and she makes it sound almost natural, as if this was the perfectly normal language for a 13-year old teenager: "The words floated out of her mouth sweet and round like butterscotch, murmured with just a tilt of her head, but the phrase was definitely my mother's. Her little doll, learning to speak just like Adora."[92]

On a different day, Camille again describes Amma's perfect appearance of a beautiful Southern Belle: "She was wearing a linen sundress the color of an unripe peach, her hair pulled down over her ears and held at the nape of her neck in a loose ponytail that had to have taken twenty minutes to get that perfect. She looked, suddenly, a lot like my mother."[93] Her pastel-colored dresses, perfect hairstyle and an overall presence radiate the tradition of a Southern Belle.[94]

Her other appearances outside the house, on the other hand, paint for us a radically different picture. She wears low-cut shorts and provocative tank-tops revealing too plump breasts for a 13-year-old. She has the body of a beautiful goddess, perfect skin, angelic face and in addition to that she is very aware of her sexual attractiveness. Sexual purity ought to be one of the keystone

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[88] Flynn, 54.
[89] Flynn, 54.
[90] Flynn, 54.
[91] Flynn, 54.
[92] Flynn, 54.
[93] Flynn, 198.
[94] The reader is almost reminded of another important literary Southern Belle figure, Scarlett O'Hara in Margaret Mitchell's classic *Gone with the Wind*. Scarlett is also an archetype of Southern upper-class lady, who is presented as if not outright beautiful, then certainly as charming and possessing sophisticated social skills. Her character seems often to be vain, childish, sometimes even deceitful. The parallel with Amma might seem to be a bit far-stretched, however, both are stylized as perfect little dolls who are capable of manipulating their surrounding in order to reach their goals.

attributes of a Southern Belle. Amma, however, uses her sexual energy and sex appeal in order to manipulate and control those around her. Her conduct is very remote from one of an innocent Belle engaging in harmless flirtations. Through her over-sexualized behavior, Amma is teasing John, a brother of a recently murdered girl. He rightly suspects Amma for the killing, she, however, remains completely calm, unaffected and she is actually toying with him:

> Amma stayed up, staring down John, rubbing suntan oil on her shoulders, her chest, breasts, slipping her hands under her bikini top, watching John watching her. … One triangle of her top had fallen askew to reveal the plump breast beneath … Amma's sexual offerings seemed a form of aggression.[95]

Camille also learns from her mother's friends, who enjoy the local gossip, that "[Amma and her friends] take all the boys. And do things we didn't do till we were married women - and then only after the transaction of a few nice pieces of jewelry."[96] Their overly sexualized lifestyle is known to the whole town, but Amma uses her sexuality to control people: "Sometimes if you let people do things to you, you're really doing it to them."[97] She lets herself to be sexually used, in order to gain psychological power over others.[98] She can be completely detached, cold and unconnected to her emotions. She even admits to Camille that after Adora "takes care of [her],"[99] meaning she administers drugs, different laxatives and syrups to her in order to make her feel sick, Amma likes to have sex. After letting Adora manipulate her to become one of her dolls, Amma feels a need to manipulate and abuse someone else in return. Amma is conscious of her mother's disease but she chooses to be drugged and poisoned in return for her mother's total affection and adoration.

Other attributes of a Southern Belle, submissiveness and amicability, are also not part of Amma's personality. She is, in fact, a ringleader of a small mean-girls clique, who terrorizes and

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[95] Flynn, 194.
[96] Flynn, 110.
[97] Flynn, 233-4.
[98] Unlike a different well=known Southern character, Amma is never punished for her open sexuality. William *Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury* character Caddy is harshly judged for her sexual encounters. Her brother Quentin, for example, views it as a breach of the moral code of his whole family because he sees himself as a guardian of Compson honor. Caddy's sexual purity symbolizes the mythological Southern values that must be adhered to and any action going against this must be punished.
[99] Flynn, 233.

bullies everyone and anyone in town. Their manipulative schemes are not a typical teenage powerplay of who is the most popular girl in town, they go one step further, manipulating and controlling children in extremely delicate situations.

The most macabre element of Amma's personality is her psychological jealousy and constant need to be Adora's sole object of affection. Adora and Amma play a twisted psychological game, when Adora administers drugs and poison to Amma in order to make her sick and Amma in return gets to be dolled up, cared for and loved. Adora, however, makes a mistake when she pays attention to the two willful and spirited girls while tutoring them. Amma gets extremely jealous and flies into a murderous rage.

Her unhealthy psychological development pulls her into two separate directions. On one side, she throws childish tantrums over a miniature table pattern because her dollhouse replica does not exactly match the pattern of their actual table: "You promised it would all be perfect! You promised … Now it's ruined. The whole thing is ruined … I hate it."[100] She smashes the little miniature piece of furniture into pieces, breaks down and starts wailing into a sofa cushion. On the other hand**,** she behaves in a very provocative, overly sexualized way, she does not respect authorities, including the local sheriff investigating the two murders and she bullies younger children in a very cruel way.

Southern Belle's gentleness and kindness are also not part of Amma's nature. On the contrary, she enjoys driving down into her mother's pig farm factory, where she is mesmerized and fascinated by the pig's suffering. Animal-processing plants are an inhumane and gruesome place; most sows are repeatedly inseminated until their bodies cannot take it anymore and they go to slaughter. Pigs are extremely sociable creatures and "the forced assembly-line intimacy" of relentless nursing make them fall into despair. They lay nearly comatose on its side, passively suffering and as Camille says, probably wanting to die. Amma's reaction to this Gothic place and to the animals suffering is very disquieting. She sits there, gazing, feeling fascinated and completely hypnotized. When Camille runs out of this horrendous place, Amma is "in the same position, smiling and squirming."[101]

[100] Flynn, 75.
[101] Flynn, 127.

Amma's self-presentation for Adora's sake and her actual behavior outside the home are two very different parts of her twisted personality. She appropriates the Southern Belle mythology when she is at home, acting like a perfect little daughter; her conduct outside their household, however, brings out Gothic and macabre sides of her temper. She kills two girls out of spite and thus the distortion of her Southern Belle image is completed.

3.4 Southern Belle Identity Rejected

The main character of the story, Camille, has never accepted the forced Southern Belle self-presentation. From a very young age, she refused to play part of a sick helpless patient, she was a strong-willed and spirited child who would not let her mother take care of her. As Camille reads in Adora's diary: "I've decided today to stop caring for Camille and focus on Marian. Camille has never become a good patient - being sick only makes her angry and spiteful. She doesn't like me to touch her … I hate her."[102] Camille, from the very beginning, refuses to take on any of the tropes and characteristics of the Southern Belle, even though she is one of the few genuinely caring and good characters of the whole novel.

While growing up, she had every opportunity to become the perfect archetype of a Southern Belle. She comes from an aristocratic background, her family is extremely wealthy and respected in town, considering her mother's business provides most jobs in Wind Gap. She is also a genuinely caring, respectful and tender young lady, she is truly devoted to her little sister Marian and tries to win the affection of her mother Adora. She is also very pretty and popular among her friends. Her social position and character predispositions might have predestined her to become an idealization of a Southern Belle myth.

Camille, however, refuses all of these potentialities and she becomes quite the opposite. It is important to remark that her refusal of the Southern Belle archetype becomes also distorted; her deep psychological pain, however, is not directed towards hurting others. She hurts herself instead: "I am a cutter...Also a snipper, a slicer, a carver, a jabber. I am a very special case. I have a purpose.

[102] Flynn, 309.

My skin, you see, screams."[103] Camille's psychological trauma, caused by an emotionally unavailable mother and her sister's death, haunts her until the present day. She has been recently released from a psychological facility where she was getting treatment for her self-destructive behavior. Besides that, she is also a secret functioning alcoholic. She is unable to establish any healthy adult relationship with a man because her whole body is covered with scars from cutting herself. Her psychological scars cut even deeper and she suffers from an acute feeling of self-loathing and disgust: "I can't stand to look at myself without being completely covered...I drink so I don't think too much about what I've done to my body and so I don't do any more."[104]

Her identity crisis and self-hatred often result in cynical remarks about herself when she talks about her background. When asked about her hometown and the people living there, she characterizes them into two social groups: old money and trash. She mockingly describes herself as "I'm trash. From old money."[105] Camille herself admits that she has been a difficult child when her mother berates her for not being exactly placid at 13-years old: "I didn't know what my mother meant - my cutting, my crying jags over my lost sister, or the overactive sex life I'd embarked on."[106]

Sexual purity and innocence are also something that Camille left behind a long time ago. As a teenager, she engages in unhealthy sexual activities in order to distance herself from her pain and psychological wounds. She falls victim to sexual violence when she gets drunk at a high-school party and gets "passed around … by four or five guys on the football team."[107] Her self-image and self-respect become so distorted that she actually asks whether that counts as an act of sexual abuse. Her first sexual encounter is also emotionally damaging to her and therefore she uses cynical remarks and sarcastic humor to deal with the aftermath:

> [M]y first blow job, at age thirteen. A senior on the baseball team took me under his wing, then took me into the woods. He wouldn't kiss me until I serviced him. Then he wouldn't kiss me because of where my mouth had been. Young love.[108]

[103] Flynn, 76.
[104] Flynn, 79.
[105] Flynn, 4.
[106] Flynn, 83.
[107] Flynn, 139.
[108] Flynn, 142-3.

Her other erotic experiences are also corrupted by the distorted Southern attitude towards sexuality and the girl's obligation to remain sexually pure. She describes an incident when two fifth grade boys cornered a girl at recess and "had her put a stick inside her."[109] The truly grotesque detail of this whole story is that once the teacher found out, the girl had to apologize. Not the bullies, but the girl herself is responsible for her sexual purity and such acts go against proper conduct of little Southern ladies. It is not certain, but a possible interpretation of the story is that Camille herself is the girl being bullied.

Unlike a proper Southern Belle, Camille never cared about appearances. She wears baggy clothes and long sleeve shirts in order to cover up her scars. Her mother tries to take her shopping for a pretty summer dress because "... it will be a nice summer party, a lot of really fine people, and you'll need a dress."[110] The shopping trip ends up in a complete debacle once Adora sees the full extent of Camille's scarred body: "Oh, dear God … Look what you've done to yourself … I hope you just loved it. I hope you can stand yourself."[111] Camille feels so humiliated and rejected by her own mother that her only reaction is to put the cotton dress over her mouth and scream.

Her whole life she has felt unloved and detested by Adora. She despises her mother's hypochondria because she rightly suspects it as a mere attention-seeking device. When Adora cuts her finger on a rose thorn (gardening - just like a proper Southern Lady), both of her hands are extravagantly bandaged and she weakly requests to have her car door open for her. When asked by a shop clerk about her hands, she replies evasively: " 'Just an accident, really. Doing some work around the house. I'll see my doctor this afternoon.' Of course she would. She'd go for a paper cut,"[112] notes Camille cynically.

Camille, unlike most of the inhabitants of Wind Gap, leaves her hometown and tries to create a new life in a big city. She works as a journalist in the Chicago newspaper, her job description, however, is also very dark and gloomy:

> I'm on the police beat, so probably the same junk you see: abuse, rape, murder … Last month it was an eighty-two-year old man. Son killed him, then left him

[109] Flynn, 138-9.
[110] Flynn, 149.
[111] Flynn, 154.
[112] Flynn, 151.

> in a bathtub of Drano to dissolve. Guy confessed, but, of course, couldn't come up with a reason for doing it.[113]

Her whole life is filled with these grotesque images. She is so psychologically traumatized by the violence of her childhood that she searches for the same brutality and destructiveness in her work. Adora refuses to acknowledge that Camille's line of work requires her to deal with such horrendous things; she prefers denying the ugly truth; keeping up appearances are again more important to her than the facts: "I just can't have that kind of talk around me … About hurt children. Just don't tell me what you're doing, don't talk about anything you know. I'll pretend you're here for summer break."[114]

Camille's intelligence, stubbornness and personality prevent her from appropriating the values of the Southern society. When she visits her old circle of high-school friends, she witnesses an episode of a former friend crying because she, unlike her husband, wants to have a third child: "I miss my babies. I've always dreamed of a big household of kids, that's all I've ever wanted ... what's so wrong with just being a mommy?"[115] Camille is accused of being a feminist, a dirty word in the deep South. Her old clique of friends suddenly turn against her because she comes to personify a career woman, a person who supposedly judges Southern women because their sole purpose in life is to have children. Her former friend Angie, a ferocious representative of old family values, tries to give advice to her crying friend: " 'Don't let society tell you how to raise your family. Don't let feminists' - here she looked at [Camille] 'make you feel guilty for having what they can't have.' "[116] Her old friends, who all married well, are living proper Southern lives. The dream is to own a: "big mansion with a few little curly tops and some stud husband investment banker,"[117] drive an SUV, have beautiful children, help out at school with tutoring and never work for one day of their life. If they do, "most nice women in Wind Gap are teachers or … work at places like Candy's Casual,"[118] where [one] might buy jumpers, turtlenecks and sweaters "that have ducks and schoolhouses on them."[119]

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[113] Flynn, 72.
[114] Flynn, 32.
[115] Flynn, 169.
[116] Flynn, 168.
[117] Flynn, 201.
[118] Flynn, 9.
[119] Flynn, 9.

Camille often spends her time thinking what her life would turn out to be if she had a different mother. Adora blames Camille for their non-functioning relationship and she flat out informs her she feels no maternal love for Camille:

> I think I finally realized why I don't love you … You remind me of my mother Joya. Cold and distant and so, so smug. My mother never loved me, either. And if you girls won't love me, I won't love you.[120]

Adora's words are not only extremely toxic and harmful, they are also very immature, almost childish. Only a little child would condition giving out love, certainly not a real mother figure.

With such poisonous relationships all around her, it is not very surprising that Camille struggles with her psychological problems and that she engages in some self-destructive behavior. She has never been willing to fill her mother's expectations of a proper Southern Belle; it is of great significance and even bigger paradox, though, that she is one of the few decent and caring people and one of the most sympathetic characters of the whole novel.

3.5 Southern Gentleman

Even though this thesis's emphasis lies mainly with female characters, I would like to briefly mention and analyze one minor male character, Adora's husband Alan. He does not get much room in the novel and his presence functions mainly for constructing a certain aristocratic atmosphere in the Crellin household. Because this thesis tries to analyze one's self-representation, appearance and airs that the characters try to give, Alan's character cannot be omitted.

Alan also comes from old money, Adora's parents have friends in Tennessee and their son begins wooing Adora right after Camille has been born. Even though Adora was kept under very strict rules that applied to her parents' workers: "...no drinking, no smoking, no cursing, church service mandatory,"[121] Adora actually gets pregnant with some boy from Kentucky who she met at a church camp. She is only seventeen years old. Adora's parents are devastated with the news

[120] Flynn, 190.
[121] Flynn, 95.

and as Camille sarcastically tells us: "[They] grew angry twin tumors to match my mother's expanding tummy, and were dead of cancer within a year of my birth."[122] Adora, alone for the first time in her life and probably in need of a good match, accepts Alan's proposal and they soon get married. Camille is to think of Alan as her father, but they never develop a father-daughter relationship. Partly because Alan is not interested and partly because Adora prefers them to feel like strangers so she can control all the relationships in the household.

He is fifteen years older than Adora, with family money that Adora does not need, having plenty of her own. As Camille informs us: "Neither of them has ever worked."[123] She describes Alan as:

> …a ribbon-winning equestrian who doesn't ride anymore because it makes Adora nervous. He's often ill, and even when he's not, he's mostly immobile. He reads countless books on the Civil War and seems content to let my mother do most of the talking. He's smooth and shallow as glass.[124]

His whole appearance and demeanor exude aristocratic mannerism, which has not changed much since the times of his aristocratic predecessors. Ethel Moore's 1989 *Address of Welcome to the Confederate Veterans* create a very vivid picture of what such aristocratic gentleman ought to be like. The Southern aristocratic gentleman represents: "This beautiful, plentiful, happy South engendered a spirit of chivalry and gallantry for which its men were noted far and near." [125] and Alan seems to be the perfect representation and synthetization of all old Southern values.

William R. Taylor describes the elite class of the nineteenth century as: "aristocrats, the great landholders who … lived in a style of luxury and extravagance, unsupportable by other inhabitants."[126] This is easily applicable to Alan's lavish lifestyle, as well. Alan is disconnected from the realities of everyday drudgery; he is shielded from more unpleasant aspects of life.

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[122] Flynn, 95.
[123] Flynn, 96.
[124] Flynn, 96.
[125] P. Gester & N. Cords (eds.), *Myth and Southern History* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989) 21-22.
[126] William R. Taylor, *The Old South and American National Character* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1963) 9.

His high-class affectation is emphasized by different outfits he wears: "Alan was wearing white pants, the creases like folded paper, and a pale green oxford,"[127] or "he was in a blue seersucker suit, a Panama hat atop his head."[128]

At a different time, Camille describes him sitting on a Victorian love seat, "white brocade and black walnut, dressed in white slacks and a silk shirt, dainty white silk slippers on his feet."[129] She ironically remarks that if he'd been in a photograph, "it would be impossible to place him in time - Victorian gentleman, Edwardian dandy, '50s fop? Twenty-first-century househusband who never worked, often drank, and occasionally made love to my mother."[130]

Even though Camille and Alan spent all her childhood and adolescent life in one household, he is very formal with her and there is no place for familiarity or intimacy. The morning after Camille returns home after a very long time, Alan keeps the conversation very decorous and ceremonial: "Camille. Sit down. What can I have Gayla bring you?"[131] That is all Camille gets from her father figure after eight years of not seeing each other.

Alan does not have much to say, he is living a very comfortable life, eating delicacies, reading books such as "leatherbound book entitled only *Horses*"[132] and drinking after-dinner refreshments with Adora. In this aspect, Alan completely fulfills the stereotype of a true Southern Gentleman, whose life's main fulfillment is the *life of leisure*, as Fax-Genovese suggests in his *Mind of the Master Class*.[133]

Adora, attempting to engage them in niceties, suggests that they all could plan a nice trip for the whole family: "We could have a picnic in the backyard. Or we could take out the convertible, go for a drive, maybe play some golf over in Woodberry."[134] Alan does not engage in planning a nice (snobbish) family outing, he simply sits there, listening to their conversation.

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[127] Flynn, 82.
[128] Flynn, 289.
[129] Flynn, 209.
[130] Flynn, 209.
[131] Flynn, 82.
[132] Flynn, 289.
[133] E. Fox-Genovese, E.D. Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 332.
[134] Flynn, 86.

Unlike a true Southern Gentleman, though, he is not really the head of the family, nor the protector of his children. The patriarchal structure of the household is not adhered to, since Alan has a very passive role in his home. It is very likely to presume that he must have been aware of Adora's sickness all along. Giving him the benefit of the doubt, he might have been uncertain with his first daughter, Marian. However, when Amma suffers from the same sickness after Adora administers to her, it is very difficult to imagine Alan was not aware of what is happening in his own house. His passivity and meek character make him partly responsible for three deaths and a lot of emotional trauma.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

When discussing Flynn's *Sharp Objects*, it is easy to be tempted to make very harsh judgments about the characters. Its dark, unforgiving atmosphere with a very compelling plot twists, murder schemes and family tragedies make it an easy read. Gillian Flynn's book, however, continues a rich tradition of the Grotesque Southern literature, which has been so prominent mainly since the beginning of the twentieth century.

Alongside the Grotesque Southern literature, Southern mythology and nostalgia of Antebellum era play an important role in Southern fiction. The archetype of the Southern Lady and the Southern Gentleman is a typical trope of the Southern literature. It is a well-known model, a cultural pattern that has been widely recognized among the readership. In order to understand the contemporary place of Gillian Flynn's work within the context of the Southern literature, we need to recognize some of the most important literary works that have dealt with the similar Southern mythology. The lost cause nostalgia or the literary response to such sentimentality has a very firm place within Southern literature context.

If we talk about the romanticizing and sentimentalizing bestseller *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell, written in the thirties, we inadvertently talk about the legacy of the post-Reconstruction era and the pathos directly associated with it. Even though *Gone with the Wind* is a Bildungsroman and coming-of age story and therefore does not exactly copy the pattern of our work of interest, there are still some extraordinary similarities and common reference points to a more broad cultural patterns and archetypes.

Scarlett O'Hara, similarly to Adora and Amma, ought to represent the perfect idealization of the Southern Belle, at least on the surface. The character of Scarlett O'Hara, however, is very complex and most of her inner character traits do not match those of the ideal. She is vain, deceitful, manipulative, extremely ambitious and strong-headed. The ideal of the perfect Southern Lady is problematicised and some of Scarlet's actions and misconduct go against the idealized version of the archetype. The distortion of the ideal, however, is not Grotesque in *Gone with the Wind*.

If we consider the works of William Faulkner, mainly *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), published even earlier that *Gone with the Wind*, we realize that we are placed far away from the

nostalgic and sentimental notions of Margaret Mitchell's work. Similarly to *Sharp Objects*, we have a setting of the old plantation house, which, unfortunately, is striking in its decline and diminishing wealth.

The Compson family tries extremely hard to keep up appearances (similarly to Adora's family), trying to uphold some of the Southern cavalier values. Quentin Thompson is sent to study to a prestigious university, in order to gain the classical education so highly valued in the South; the family, unfortunately, is forced to sell part of their land in order to afford this. Quentin forcefully tries to adhere to the notion of the Southern family code of honor and therefore unable to cope with his sister's promiscuity, choosing suicide instead.

Candace "Caddy" Compson ought to represent the idealization of the Southern Belle, at least according to her brothers. Her true actions, though, do not correspond with their expectations. Her sexuality and bodily representation is a direct distortion of the Southern Belle purity, innocence and vulnerability. The ideal is twisted but again we cannot yet talk about the Grotesqueness of this distortion.

The character of the emotionally unavailable mother Caroline Compson is also a certain misrepresentation of the most valuable quality of the Southern lady: the cult of the motherhood. She is a self-absorbed neurotic who has never really shown any true maternal love towards her children (with the exception to her oldest and least deserving son Jason Compson IV). Furthermore, she is also an extremely self-pitying and self-centered figure that reminds us of Adora.

When talking about the distortion of the Southern Lady ideal, we cannot omit a dramatic work by Beth Henley, *Crimes of Heart*, published in 1986. This tragicomedy relates the story of three sisters and their story can be interpreted as the representation of the dysfunctional Southern family; all three sisters have to face the consequences of their heart-related decisions and the "heart crimes" they have committed. The play is set within the Southern gothic comedy. The characters struggle to cope with despair, loneliness and failure, however, they use black humor to deal with the life's obstacles. The Gothic element is certainly present in both works, however, *Sharp Objects* do not use the humor element to deal with the hardship. Within our context, the minor character of Chick seems to be significant. For Chick, social pretenses and social appearances seem to be of extremely high value and she is very dissatisfied with the misconduct of her three cousins. She blames them for destroying the family honor and reprimands them for not adhering to the

stereotypical Southern values. She, however, is more concerned with how it will reflect upon her, rather than with the real wellbeing of her three cousins.

We cannot omit mentioning another prominent Southern writer associated with the Grotesqueness and that is Carol Oates. Her short stories, such as “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”, “Heat”, “Haunted”, “The Premonition” and “Extenuating Circumstances” encompass the element of the grotesqueness, especially of the gender. They thematized elements such as gendered violence, bodily grotesque or gender performativity; all the themes that are prominent in *Sharp Objects*. The distortion and the grotesqueness is quite explicit in the short stories, the motifs of domestic violence, infanticide and female murder provide a direct link to our work *Sharp Objects*, setting this contemporary novel within a very specifically related context of the Southern literature.

Similarly, Tennessee Williams’ short fiction continues in the rich tradition of the Southern grotesque literature. Its dark and mysterious atmosphere can be easily compared to the one in *Sharp Objects*. Most of Williams’ characters are misfits because of their bodily disfigurements or forbidden homosexuality. Even though we do not have similar misfits in *Sharp Objects*, the element of the grotesqueness of the characters is very prominent in both works.

Therefore if we look at the broad context of the Southern literature of the twentieth century, we can easily set *Sharp Objects* as a being part of a broad cultural setting of Southern mythology. If we consider both the archetype models and patterns of the Southern mythology or the tradition of the Southern Gothic and Grotesque literature, *Sharp Objects* irrefutably belong to this literary convention and are direct ancestors of this literary tradition.

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