

A MODERN NOIR MARRIAGE?

# GOONE GIRL



**SPOILERS!  
SEE THE  
MOVIE  
FIRST!**

In its opening moments, *Gone Girl* sums up the specific anxiety underlying the noir vision of marriage: a fear that other people are impossible to know, even—or especially—the ones closest to you. A beautiful blonde woman turns an indecipherable gaze to the camera as her hopelessly outfoxed husband wonders: “Who are you? What are you thinking?” Deception and betrayal are the keynotes of all relationships in film noir, but there is a special cruelty when these lurk within the intimacy of love and marriage, like worms in a rose. **Imogen Sara Smith** finds the links between 2014’s most controversial film and its film noir antecedents.



**Amy Dunne (Rosamund Pike) remains an enigma to her husband Nick (Ben Affleck) in David Fincher's adaptation of Gillian Flynn's bestseller**

Adapted from a best-selling novel by Gillian Flynn, who wrote the screenplay, *Gone Girl* (2014) is a new entry in the gothic tradition of marriage thrillers that goes back to Bluebeard, the gruesome fairy-tale penned by Charles Perrault in 1697. The story of a bride who opens a forbidden door to discover the corpses of her husband's previous wives has inspired countless variations that use the premise to explore the mysteries of marriage—the interplay of trust and lies, curiosity and secrets, intimacy and estrangement swirling around the question, “Who is this person I married?” Film noir versions include *The Secret Beyond the Door* (1947), *The House on Telegraph Hill* (1951), *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948), *Caught* (1949), *Sudden Fear* (1952), *Woman in Hiding* (1949), *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* (1948), *Suspicion* (1941), and *When Strangers Marry* (1944); as well as *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945), *Bedelia* (1946), *The Locket* (1946) and *Ivy* (1947), which prefigure *Gone Girl* in switching the gender of the dangerous spouse.

These stories of marital terror paint even darker portraits of wedded non-bliss than the transactional marriages so common in noir—cynical trade-offs of youth and beauty for money and security—because they tend to start out as fairy-tale romances. Enchantment has to precede disenchantment. *Gone Girl* follows this pattern with a typically convoluted noir timeline; it begins with a crisis, as Nick Dunne (Ben Affleck) discovers his wife Amy (Rosamund Pike) is missing from their home, and then jumps back in time to reveal how things got so bad. Flashbacks depicting the sugar-coated early years of Nick and Amy's relationship and its gradual disintegration are presented as entries in Amy's diary, and play like clips from a generic romantic-comedy reel. The good-looking guy and girl meet at a party

and impress each other with knowing banter, then share a first kiss so picturesquely framed that it is drained of any spontaneity. The cliché-ridden triteness of these scenes feels false from the start, but the whiff of phoniness is more than a clue to the diary's unreliability. It goes to the heart of the film's relentless theme: that people pretend to be better than they are, and relationships crumble or explode when they can't keep up the acts.

Amy is both acutely conscious of this duality and terminally warped by it, having served as the model for “Amazing Amy,” the heroine of children's books her parents wrote. She complains to Nick that she was always overshadowed by her superior avatar, yet she's a pathological narcissist who needs to be admired and adored, and to have her husband play along with the charade of an ideal marriage. The treasure hunts that Amy organizes for each wedding anniversary—and which she uses as the groundwork to stage her own mysterious disappearance—epitomize this oppressive, controlling perfectionism. The same qualities mark her devious, fiendishly detailed plot involving money, blood, life insurance, a gun, and a fake pregnancy—all neatly organized with post-it notes.

In her chilling ability to hide sociopathic tendencies under a pretty, feminine façade, Amy is a sister to the central female characters in John Stahl's *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945) and John Brahm's *The Locket* (1946). In the latter film, the disturbed and disturbing anti-heroine Nancy (Laraine Day) is described by all three of her suitors as “perfect,” the dream girl they've always looked for. The men are destroyed when they discover she is really a lying, murderous kleptomaniac. *The Locket* is a film about the way men perceive women, and it builds a subversive case that the figure of the femme





Gene Tierney as the pathologically jealous Ellen Berent in *Leave Her to Heaven*, perhaps the most memorable depiction of female psychosis in a Hollywood movie

fatale is a creation of men's impulse to idealize the women they love—and to demonize them when they fail to live up to that ideal. It is not so much the women themselves as the men's blind infatuation with them that is fatal. Guys like Jeff Bailey in *Out of the Past* swing from one extreme to another, worshipping a woman and then labeling her evil. Their hatred springs from resentment at having been fooled, played for a sucker—though they often seem as much self-deluded as taken in by a woman's lies.

Even more than greed or selfishness, dishonesty is the core attribute of the femme fatale. This reflects both a misogynistic view of women as naturally deceitful, and a profound insecurity that men harbor about being deceived by women. The titular locket at the root of Nancy's damaged psyche is a potent symbol on several levels, representing the secret enclosed within a buried memory, and the way that women are imagined by men to be enigmatic, unfathomable creatures—the way Nick regards Amy in the prologue to *Gone Girl*.

*The Locket's* Nancy Patton is a chronic fabricator, constantly trying to maintain her desirable façade by telling stories to cover up her flaws. She needs to be perfect as much as

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men want her to be; she needs to be loved and cherished by them. "I want you to want me, very much," she tells the last of her fiancés. At the heart of *Gone Girl* is a scene in which Amy, cruising happily along the highway after faking her own murder, explains her motives in a long and insidiously persuasive voice-over. She talks about how women have to be what men want, how she had to play the role of "Cool Girl," the eternally game and fun dream girlfriend. "Nick loved a girl I was pretending to be," she says—echoing *Bedelia* (1946), in which the disillusioned husband declares, "I loved a woman who doesn't exist."

But Amy's feminist declaration of independence and her complaint about having to play a part are both contradicted by her character. She really wants to go on "pretending to be other people," and in a reversal of the Pygmalion-Galatea pattern of so many noir stories, it is she who wants to make over her husband into an ideal mate. When he makes her feel invisible and expendable, she thinks death is not too harsh a punishment for him, and she is even willing to kill herself in order to ensure he'll be executed. (The shot in which she envisions her corpse in the river is surely an homage to the famous shot of the murdered





Tierney's impassive beauty masked Ellen's obsessive machinations ...

wife in *Night of the Hunter*, another Bluebeard story.) In going to this length she takes a page from the book of Ellen (Gene Tierney), the wife in *Leave her to Heaven* who eliminates her crippled brother-in-law and her own unborn child because she can't stand to share her husband's attention, and finally commits suicide so as to frame her own sister for murder.

Shot in luscious Technicolor and full of settings as artificially immaculate as magazine spreads, *Leave her to Heaven* evokes a cold vacancy within the material fantasies of domestic life, and finds something scarily mannequin-like in Ellen's glowing, flawless beauty. She dons a lacy, baby-blue bathrobe before throwing herself down stairs to induce a miscarriage, and in the next scene comes running gaily out of the surf in a bathing suit red as fresh nail-polish. Obsessively devoted to her husband and home, she is the postwar pin-up pushed to a monstrous extreme, both hyper-feminine and anti-feminine. In the end she is pathetic in her voracious need, a damaged Daddy's girl who can't function in an adult relationship.

The standard account of the femme fatale trope is that men returning from World War II were alarmed by the emancipation of women who had taken wartime jobs, and so they created characters that demonized strong, independent women. But this explanation makes no sense, because the femme fatale is never a woman who works and is independent. She is always a woman who manipulates men to serve her ends, using the most conventional feminine wiles: seducing both with sex and with weakness. She complains of an abusive husband or

lover, she poses as frightened and helpless, appealing for a man to rescue her. "You can never help anything, can you?" Jeff Bailey says disgustedly to Kathie Moffatt in *Out of the Past*: "You're like a leaf the wind blows from one gutter to another."

Amy Dunne fits into this pattern precisely. Though she works as a magazine writer when she meets Nick, she loses this job and moves unwillingly from New York to her husband's home town in Missouri when he wants to be near his dying mother. There she becomes a classic woman alone in an empty house with nothing to do. When Nick is questioned by the female Detective Boney, he confesses that he doesn't know how his wife spends her days, and claims that she has no friends. Their house, the film's central setting, is a contemporary version of that noir staple, the dream home that is really a prison. Big, new, plushly upper-middle-class, it is also blandly generic, unmarked by personality or lived-in warmth.

When Amy flees her home, she has no plan to make a life for herself. Brilliant and talented, she seems to have no ambition

other than to stage-manage her marriage (a gift to her husband of Punch and Judy puppets drips with ironic symbolism). While hiding out, she devotes her days to following the case and gloating over her husband's persecution. She remains obsessed with Nick, and makes a dizzying change in her plans when she watches him giving an interview on television. After awkward public appearances that turned opinion against him, he has been carefully coached and gives an impeccably phony performance, declaring his love for the wife he in fact hates. Amy is riveted, deciding that Nick—whom she has despised as a vulgar, cheating slob—has finally become the man she wants: he



... Just as no one—except, eventually, her husband—can imagine the depth of Amy's vengeful psyche





Douglas and Stanwyck in *Martha Ivers*: a *pas de deux* of mutual destruction

has learned to lie and act as well as she does.

Amy proves even more ruthless and violent in her second scheme to save her marriage than she was in her first scheme to destroy her husband. What makes her more disturbing and controversial than other femmes fatales is how gleefully she impersonates a victim. She pretends to be an abused and frightened wife, and falsely accuses two other men of rape. This touches a raw nerve, given the long and ugly history of women who bring rape accusations being dismissed as unreliable or smeared as sluts who must have “asked for it.” Amy embodies the most vicious misogynist stereotypes: the judgmental princess obsessed with controlling men; the temptress who tricks men into sex and then cries rape; the biological terrorist who gets pregnant in order to hold a man hostage. Unsurprisingly, the film has attracted controversy, but the real problem with this clever and well-crafted work is that the script tries to present too many different sides to the story, ending up broad and shallow rather than narrow and deep.

We get Nick’s point of view and Amy’s—though neither one has emotions that anchor our response. We also get a rather obvious *Ace in the Hole*-style satire on media sleaze and the fickleness of the crowd, as Nick is hounded by sanctimonious female TV hosts and thrill-seeking women who mob his saloon and insist on taking selfies with him. Both the upper and lower classes are nastily caricatured: when Amy hides out in a trailer park (seeming to perversely enjoy re-making herself as a plebeian frump) she gets robbed by a pair of tattooed lowlifes. Meanwhile her parents and her wealthy ex-boyfriend Desi (Neil Patrick Harris) are depicted as such pretentious phonies that they can have no real feelings, and deserve whatever they get. The only sympathetic characters are Nick’s sister Margo (Carrie Coon, whose honest, visceral emotions almost seem to put her in another movie), Detective Boney (Kim Dickens), and Nick’s defense

lawyer Tanner Bolt (Tyler Perry). The two women are down-to-earth truth-tellers, while the lawyer’s spin-doctor slickness is grounded in his ability to see through the whole game.

In the end, the weakness of *Gone Girl* is that its cynical vision of society—everyone playacting and falling for their own and others’ performances—overshadows and oversimplifies the psychology of the two central characters. The plot becomes increasingly contrived and glib. The scene where one of Amy’s ex-boyfriends tells Nick how she framed him for rape is a convenient but flimsy plot device; while Desi, who whisks Amy away to his luxurious lake house, is such an unconvincing character that the distinction between reality and Amy’s false version of it seems to be breaking down. Despite Rosamund Pike’s wickedly enjoyable, quicksilver performance, Amy herself is the greatest victim of the script’s desire to have its cake and eat it too. If she were wholly opaque, she could be a sleek, terrifying villain. If she

had a richer inner life, she could be fascinating and tragic. But Amy is caught somewhere in the middle. At times we are encouraged to identify with her and enjoy her cleverness (while we are discouraged from sympathizing with the rather dim and crass Nick, embodied with perfect hangdog sleaziness by Affleck.) But her character is less complex or ambiguous than sketchy and incoherent: both a smart, triumphant anti-heroine and a psychopath completely lacking either empathy or self-knowledge.

The last section of the film, after Amy has returned home, feels over-long but is not really long enough to pull off the final turn of the story: the process by which Nick, initially determined to get a divorce and see Amy punished, is blackmailed into staying and eventually sucked back into the hypocritical charade that has become second nature. The reunited couple gives a TV interview in which Nick matches Amy lie for lie, quipping of their happy marriage, “We’re partners in crime.” They now aspire to the ultimate form of noir matrimony, the sick marriage, in which two people who know the worst are bound together by a toxic bond of guilt, bitterness, and dependence. Joan Bennett and

Charles Bickford in *Woman on the Beach*, Barbara Stanwyck and Kirk Douglas in *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* exemplify this *pas de deux* of mutual destruction. Compared with them, Nick and Amy are just a 21<sup>st</sup> century couple who have mastered the art of playing to the media, whose relationship is not a private battle but a public performance. It seems more like shallow cynicism than anguished knowledge when Nick tells Amy that all they did was resent and try to control one another, and she retorts,

“That’s marriage.” ■

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