CONTEMPORARY REPRESENTATIONS OF MARRIAGE
IN LITERATURE AND POP CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the representations of marriage in the novels *The Marriage Plot* and *Gone Girl*, reality television shows including *Say Yes to the Dress*, *Four Weddings*, and *The Bachelor*, and social media websites such as Pinterest. The analysis focuses on how these contemporary representations demonstrate normative gender roles, and what claims they make about marriage today. Several patterns emerged when using in particular the theories of Judith Butler and Frances Dolan as a framework for understanding the portrayals of marriage. The depictions of marriage included individuals adopting some sort of role-performance, often gender specific, and reiterated the conflict for power in marriage between the two parties. These were magnified in the dramatization of real life, such as reality television shows, and frequently reiterated traditional understandings of marriage within a modern context.
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INTRODUCTION

As a social institution, marriage is a constant across many different periods of time and cultures, reflecting in each instance a facet of the particular social values that a given group of people hold. That culture’s beliefs about marriage, gender roles, and relationships in general are closely intertwined, and can be understood through its collective creations. In this thesis, I examine modern American representations of marriage and relationships in order to evaluate normative perceptions about the topics. In particular, I will examine two novels, a small group of television shows, and several social media websites and blogs that illustrate the role of relationships, weddings, and marriages in our society, particularly with reference to traditional conceptions of gender roles. Although it cannot be determined whether these representations of marriage are more a reaction to or a production of social norms, they provide a fascinating cross-section of society for the sake of analysis.

In addition to the sources noted above, I will use several theoretical frameworks to elaborate on the trends that are visible in various representations. Specifically, I will discuss Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, which describes the way in which individuals act as reproducers of normative gender identities, and Frances Dolan’s models of marriage, particularly the contrast between the idealistically egalitarian marriage-as-fusion model and the more realistic, oppressive marriage-as-hierarchy model. The inclusion of theory that focuses on gender performance is important because marriage is an enforcer of normative romantic relationships and acceptable gender roles. In the application of these two theories to the novels and various pop culture media that I
studied, both revealed the thematic trend of marriage and gender roles in conflict with individual identity. While some of the depictions of marriage in contemporary society seem to be more reflective of historical ideas about marriage, and others refute the institution as constrictive to personal growth, they share this focus on the interaction between identity as an individual and identity as a couple. These conflicting concepts often form the basis of modern representations of marriage in our society, and are certainly at the heart of the analysis in this project.
SELF DISCOVERY AND NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN *THE MARRIAGE PLOT*

*The Marriage Plot* is a novel about three college graduates navigating their lives after leaving the safety of academia, with a central focus on Madeleine, an English major whose love of the 19th-century novel is reflected in her own relationships. Published in 2011, *The Marriage Plot* is Jeffrey Eugenides’ third novel, following the immensely successful *Virgin Suicides* and *Middlesex*. This most recent work is a deconstruction of the traditional narrative structure which places the marriage of the two star-crossed lovers at the climax of the novel, and leaves all other events to the imaginations of its readers. It is frequently described as a novel about novels, due to its numerous allusions to other texts, however it can be read many other ways. Ian Sansom enumerates some of the descriptors of *The Marriage Plot*, calling it “a coming-of-age novel, an Ivy League soap opera...an attempt to do nothing less than update the 19th-century romantic novel” (Sansom). Eugenides himself claims that “[you] can read it as a...post-modern novel, but you can also read it as a traditional realistic novel...it’s actually a very sincere American novel” (“Eugenides”). Regardless of its classification, *The Marriage Plot* provides an interesting look at how traditional narrative elements of weddings and marriages function in a more contemporary society, ultimately arguing that they do not allow for the full growth of characters as individuals.

The novel’s reception varies widely, with some reviews describing how the novel “twists and soars through one witty, erudite, perfectly choreographed sentence after another,” (Charles) and others claiming “the novel is a beat-for-beat analysis of some very ordinary characters' prosaic emotions in response to banal events” (Teitelbaum).
Despite differences in reception, there is a common focus in the reviews on the central character Madeleine, whose narrative comprises the majority of the book. Madeleine’s primary concern in the novel is her relationship with one of the other two protagonists, Leonard, and this preoccupation with idealized love causes some reviewers, like Ilana Teitelbaum, to claim that she falls short of the title of “heroine.” Teitelbaum goes further, saying that “[Madeleine’s] entire character arc consists of romantic deliberations, sex in various positions, and codependency,” clearly stating her disapproval of the character’s lack of interest in nonromantic pursuits. William Deresiewicz simultaneously lauds Eugenides for being “best on young love,” but also criticizes him for creating a character who “is almost wholly reactive...she doesn’t have a ‘journey’ as the others do.” The issue of Madeleine’s character will be addressed later in this paper, although it serves as an interesting point of conversion for the diverse reactions of the novel’s reviews.

Before delving into a discussion of the structure of The Marriage Plot, it is important to review its basic plot and character elements. The novel follows three recent graduates of Brown University -- Madeleine Hanna, Leonard Bankhead, and Mitchell Grammaticus -- beginning with the morning of their commencement ceremony, and frequently looking back to the stories of their days as undergraduate students.

Madeleine is a pretty, preppy girl from New England, majoring in English Literature and besotted with nineteenth-century novels. The reader is introduced first to her books -- the novel opens by describing “her Edith Wharton novels...the complete Modern Library set of Henry James...a lot of Dickens, a smidgen of Trollope, along with good helpings of Austen, George Eliot, and the redoubtable Brontë sisters” (Eugenides
3). It is only after the establishment of her taste in literature that Eugenides gives a succinct description of her character as a whole. As described by her “mid-size but still portable library,” Madeleine Hanna is “Incurably Romantic” (Eugenides 3). This description is only strengthened throughout the novel, which begins by retelling her undergraduate experiences, with a focus on her romantic relationships. After the summary of Madeleine’s college boyfriends follows an account of her relationship with Leonard, whom she met as a senior. Her last year of college includes writing an undergraduate thesis on the marriage plot, taking a semiotics course that deconstructs her notions about love and relationships, and finding herself in a tumultuous relationship that turns her into a character out of one of her books. After her graduation, she follows Leonard to his new job at a research facility, and in a series of escalating events finds herself married to him after a short span of time. As Leonard deals with the fallout of his own problems, their marriage ends almost as quickly as it began, and Madeleine is left alone at the end of the novel, forced to actively address her life for the first time.

Mitchell is the character who receives the second largest amount of attention in the novel, as a spiritually perplexed Religion major whose unrequited adoration of Madeleine leads to their on-again, off-again friendship. The majority of Mitchell’s narration focuses around his habitual “[yearning] in alternation for Madeleine and God” (Deresiewicz). After his graduation Mitchell travels through Europe and Asia, further exploring his religious thought in concurrence with the new locations, and trying to distract himself from his one-sided affections. As much as he attempts to get Madeleine out of his mind he is unable to completely cut off his connection to her, in one
letter urging her, “Don’t marry that guy” (Eugenides 326). After his return to the U.S. and the deterioration of Madeleine’s marriage, he finally achieves some level of self-understanding. After having sex with Madeleine, he realizes that she merely used him to solidify the end of her marriage. This prompts his acceptance of the fact that he will probably never have a further relationship with Madeleine, nor will he fulfill his goal of attending divinity school. Despite these crushing revelations, Mitchell finds a sense of hope at the end of the novel. He remarks that “[Madeleine] wasn’t so special, maybe. She was his ideal, but an early conception of it, and he would get over it in time” (Eugenides 406). This positive outlook is perhaps the most closure the novel gives for any of the three characters, and while the reader is left with no semblance of an idea about Mitchell’s future, it certainly seems as though he will be fine.

Finally there is Leonard, who is a manic depressive Biology major, studying Philosophy on the side. With a mere sixty-three pages dedicated to his narrative, the focal point of Leonard’s story is his struggle to get some sort of control over his mental illness. The present action of his story is mostly told through Madeleine’s point of view, and it is through her that the reader learns Leonard is hospitalized for a breakdown. His portion of the novel both describes his experiences in the mental ward and paints a picture of his childhood and adolescence, revealing his lifelong struggle between the surges of genius that he feels (mania) and the crippling depression that follows. He is particularly frustrated by the side effects of his medication, feeling that the lithium dosage he takes makes him dumber and less capable of achieving what he desires. This frustration prompts him to adjust his intake of medication, and try to “find the sweet spot in the
lower reaches of mania where side effects were nil and energy went through the roof” (Eugenides 284). As he decreases his own dosages, his manic tendencies increase, and his narrative section ends at the height of his energy with his proposal to Madeleine. His downward spiral is told through Madeleine’s point of view, and the end of the novel provides no information on Leonard’s fate. As Deresiewicz puts it, “Leonard gets only a single time at bat, and the novel finally, and rather brutally, shunts him off the diamond altogether.”

A critical theme to note from *The Marriage Plot* is its frequent self-awareness. Much of the novel is a commentary on the idea of writing a traditional love story, where the focus is entirely on finding out if the heroine will live happily ever after. A professor at the beginning of the novel makes clear his opinion that “sexual liberation, divorce and so on - they all eliminated [the] major plot device” of marriage (“Eugenides”), and that contemporary literature “had never recovered from its disappearance” (Eugenides 22). While the emphasis of the professor’s statement is on his disdain for modern novels, his observation is an interesting start to Eugenides’ work. *The Marriage Plot* can be interpreted as a response to this professor’s claim, for it recreates the traditional structure of marriage and then promptly dismantles it. The novel begins by contradicting the statement, including many classic elements of the marriage plot instead of eliminating it completely. By continuing the narrative after Madeleine’s wedding and describing the deterioration of her relationship with Leonard, Eugenides questions the legitimacy of the marriage plot in the context of modern life. Madeleine, Leonard, and Mitchell struggle with questions of identity before, during, and after the occurrence of relationships,
rendering the marriage plot invalid in giving greater meaning to characters’ lives. While
the intricacies of the plot and individual struggles of the protagonists provide a
compelling novel in and of themselves, the additional dilemma presented by the
professor’s remark seeks to answer a bigger question -- Why do we write novels in the
first place? Eugenides’ work does not give one single answer, but it is certainly a
refutation of the idea that all good novels must end with a wedding.

OFFSTAGE ACTION: A FOCUS ON CHARACTER

Eugenides alludes to traditional marriage plot novels in many ways, both through
direct references and through mimicking certain elements that they frequently use. As the
author himself stated in an interview on All Things Considered, “[you] can read [the
novel] as a deconstruction of ‘the marriage plot,’” and this analysis is enacted through the
recreation of a marriage plot novel and then the invalidation of it. Aside from the clearly
“allusive plot and protagonists,” The Marriage Plot parallels the structure of classic
works in its theme of action occurring ‘offstage’ or in the past tense, referenced solely
through memories. When a major event happens in one of the characters lives, the novel
does not describe it in present tense, but rather refers to it as occurring outside of the
scope of the narration. Eugenides uses this trope of offstage action to strengthen his
commentary on the marriage plot novels he is alluding to.

One author in particular who frequently uses offstage action as a device for plot
advancement is Jane Austen. This tendency to have the most important events in a novel
happen in the literary past is based in Austen’s preference for the epistolary novel, the
effects of which can be seen in her frequent use of letters to bring plot-changing news. Besides the clear example of *Lady Susan*, which remains entirely in the form of letters, works such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* still display remnants of Austen’s fondness for the epistolary structure. In *Pride and Prejudice*, a novel that was probably originally written in letter form (“Pride”), multiple important occurrences are revealed to Elizabeth through letters, such as Lydia running away with Wickham, Darcy’s explanation of his history with Wickham, and Mrs. Gardiner’s revelation that Darcy was responsible for negotiating the marriage of Lydia and Wickham. The utilization of offstage action in *Emma* is evidenced in Austen’s use of free indirect discourse, which contributes to the creation of a community guided by gossip. The presentation of the emotions and opinions of characters by the narrator as though they were fact draws the attention of the reader to the way that these subjective interpretations become accepted by the community as a whole. Letters still play a central part in this novel as well, as they describe the lives of Mr. Elton, Frank Churchill, and Jane Fairfax before their arrival to Highbury. However, the passing of gossip from neighbor to neighbor is possibly even more important at relaying information that pushes the plot forward in this novel. In all of these examples, the effect of offstage action is the increased need for interpretation of events, both by the characters and by the reader. Austen’s heroines are forced to draw their own conclusions about events based on secondhand telling of the stories, and this draws attention away from the events themselves, focusing rather on the responses of the characters involved. This adjusted focus is one of the main effects of Eugenides’ use of offstage action, and this shared structural element is not coincidental. As one of the 19th-century novelists
whom Madeleine adores, Austen is a prime example of an author whose work *The Marriage Plot* is responding to.

Eugenides uses offstage action most frequently when his characters reflect on events from their past. The novel opens with a short description of the beginning of Madeleine’s graduation day, and then proceeds to look back to her last fallout with Mitchell, her collegiate dating history, her Semiotics class, and her relationship with Leonard. Similarly, when Mitchell’s narrative begins, he accounts for his own academic and relationship experiences, reflecting on the previous four years of his life on the day of his graduation. In Leonard’s single brief section of narration, he quickly recounts his initial diagnosis and lifelong struggle with manic depression before returning to his present “brilliant move,” his decision to “take his destiny, in the form of his mental disorder, into his own hands” (231). This frequent reflection is convenient for character development, and also fits well into the narrative of three recent college graduates -- they are attempting to understand their lives, particularly out of the context of school, and so it seems natural for them to look back to their past experiences.

Aside from the recurring interludes of telling stories from the past, the most notable instance of skipping over present action is Madeleine and Leonard’s wedding. Leonard’s proposal ends his narrative section, and the reader does not get a conclusive answer until forty pages later, when Eugenides casually mentions Madeleine’s “left hand - the one bearing the gold wedding band” (333). By this point the reader has skipped eight weeks into their marriage, about a year after Madeleine’s graduation. Between the proposal and where the narration picks up again, there is no account of the wedding, or of
the honeymoon, when “Leonard had been hospitalized...in Monte Carlo” (333). The stories are then told retrospectively, with an entirely different understanding of the events that transpired than had they been recounted in the present tense. The absence of a wedding scene is perfectly fitting with the traditional marriage plot novel; Austen’s works frequently ended with a brief or implied wedding, as did Shakespeare’s comedies before her. However The Marriage Plot differs in that it continues afterwards, into the marriage and all of the complications it brings. This digression is central to the novel’s argument about its predecessors, and explores the questions left after the assumed happy endings of nineteenth-century (and earlier) romances.

The effect of leaving out pertinent events in the chronology of a narrative is an increased focus on the characters, and their reactions to the plot that is formed around them. Instead of presenting the reader with a present tense recounting of Madeleine’s excitement during wedding and honeymoon, the novel gives her bleaker retelling of the ordeal with her knowledge of its eventual disintegration, contributing to its overall dismantling of the marriage plot. This is evidenced when Madeleine considers that, “[looking] back, [she] thought that she might have picked up the warning signs more quickly if she hadn’t been on her honeymoon” (354). She recalls that, during Leonard’s energetic response to his self-medication, she “had ridden a similarly cascading wave of emotion,” and “had married [him] in the grip of a force much like mania” (339). While the importance of Leonard’s mania leading up to their wedding and subsequent breakdown during their honeymoon is not lessened by Madeleine reflecting on it after the fact, it is certainly presented differently than had she narrated it as it happened. The
inclusion of her hindsight alters the communication of the story, and emphasizes her reaction to and interpretation of the series of events. Consequently, the novel becomes not a story about what happens to the three main characters, but rather an assessment of how they respond to their respective struggles. While this approach to narration is quite similar to Austen’s representation of the reactions of her heroines to their familial, romantic, and economic turmoil, Eugenides pushes his novel further to approach questions about the marriage plot and its function in contemporary literature. Madeleine’s conflicted thoughts following the quick collapse of her newlywed bliss are representative of the strain that the traditional marriage plot imposes on contemporary women -- clearly Eugenides is not satisfied with leaving his readers to presume the heroine is happy simply because she is married.

The continual self-reflection of the three central characters reiterates the position of The Marriage Plot as a coming-of-age story, not because of the characters’ youth but because of their growth in self-understanding throughout the narrative. The novel is less concerned with the events it describes, fixating instead on how its characters arrived at the point when something takes place, and then how they handle its aftermath. This focus on the development of the characters is an essential component to the coming-of-age narrative -- it is all about gaining a stronger sense of identity. As Leo Robson succinctly puts it, “The Marriage Plot is about metaphor--the ways in which disparate pieces of knowledge are brought together in efforts at comprehension and self-instruction.” While the plot of Eugenides’ novel is interesting and certainly vital to the work as a whole, it
ultimately serves only as an impetus for the characters to explore their understandings of themselves.

RELATIONSHIPS AND IDENTITY EXPRESSION

While the self-reflective nature of the characters in the novel makes its classification as a coming-of-age story logical, this genre does not have an innate connection to the novel’s central theme of deconstructing the marriage plot. However, each of the three main characters -- and many of the secondary characters as well -- exhibit an element of self-discovery in their approaches to relationships. For Mitchell, Leonard, and Madeleine this is particularly evident through the parallels of their ideological objectives and their romantic pursuits. In his article “Why Write Novels at All?” Garth Risk Hallberg identifies a “vocational crisis at the center of The Marriage Plot,” which the characters personify in their romantic relationships. The connections between academic interests and perceived relationship roles reveal attempts at self-discovery; both are methods of exploring how the characters fit into different aspects of their lives. Each of the protagonists is attempting to discern their own identities, and in some ways to fit their lives into a clearer narrative.

This is perhaps most apparent in the case of Mitchell, who desperately attempts to navigate his religious beliefs and his adoration of Madeleine, failing to find refuge in either. During his intermittent sequences of narration, Mitchell explores a variety of religious traditions. The extent of his attempts to find religious faith are revealed when, “[unbeknown] to anyone, as secretly as if he were buying drugs or visiting a massage
parlor, Mitchell [began] attending weekly meetings with Father Marucci, at St. Mary’s, the Catholic church at the end of Monroe Street” (Eugenides 147-8). Mitchell hides his consistent attendance to catechism classes, keeping his personal beliefs separate from the intellectual work he does as a Religious Studies major. This balancing act between maintaining scholarly distance in studying religions and nurturing a personal faith is a central component of Mitchell’s conflicting sense of identity, and he indirectly addresses this problem in several instances.

After his final essay exam in a particularly challenging religion course, Mitchell meets with his professor to discuss his future career plans. They approach the topic of studying religion as a field versus as a faith, particularly when his professor asks if Mitchell’s extensive reading of religious texts is “purely intellectual” (98). When Mitchell asks if the professor believes in God, the professor identifies himself as “a Christian religious believer” instead of affirming a definitive belief (99). Mitchell expresses an understanding of the professor’s desire to leave “room for reservations and doubts, historical accommodations and dissent,” expressing his own ambivalence on the matter (99). When Mitchell remarks that he had not previously been able to tell whether or not the professor believed in anything, he replies simply with “[that’s] the way the game is played” (99). This short exchange gets at the heart of the dilemma that Mitchell faces throughout the novel -- he is unable to fully come to terms with his role as both a scholar of religion and as a human being who yearns for a fully satisfying explanation for his own existence.
During his months abroad, Mitchell makes several attempts at forming a greater connection to Christianity. After conversing with an Evangelical woman in the lobby of an American Express, Mitchell is inspired to attempt to speak in tongues at the Acropolis. He thinks that maybe “he and all his enlightened friends knew nothing about life, and that maybe this (crazy?) lady knew something big” (226). His thoughts after nothing happened were that “[he’d] never really expected to speak in tongues. He didn’t know what good it would have done him, even if he had” (227). Later, when he is in Calcutta volunteering for Mother Teresa, Mitchell has a similar change of heart about his actions, running away from the hospital where he had been assisting with dying patients. In the middle of a day working at the Home for the Dying, he acts on an impulse, “[already] knowing that he would regret this moment for a long time, maybe for the rest of his life...Mitchell headed to the front of the home...and up the steps to the bright, fallen world above” (321). The inability to follow through with these acts of religion reflects the ambivalent mentality that Mitchell has towards his own faith. He deeply cares about religious thought, and clearly longs to feel complete trust in his chosen ideology. However the skepticism and distance he has learned from academia prevent him from fully committing to religion, and he is therefore stuck vacillating between faiths, attempting to find one that fits.

Mitchell’s relationship with Madeleine shares several similarities to his relationship with religion, particularly in the strength of his desire for success in each despite his repeated failures at following through. He describes his relationship with Madeleine as “long, aspirational, [and] sporadically promising yet frustrating” (69).
Despite several opportunities, the relationship between them does not develop further than friendship during their time in college. On one such occasion, Mitchell is staying as a houseguest with Madeleine’s family during a break, and fails to respond to her flirtatious advances. After feeling accepted by her family and by Madeleine, Mitchell has a surge of confidence in their relationship, and yet he does not definitively act on it, even though he has a chance to. He remembers that “because...in that glorious moment, [he] felt the tide had turned and he had all the time in the world to make his move, he did nothing” (76). This failure to follow through and complete the action he had set himself up for mirrors his experiences acting on religious impulses. His misunderstanding and uncertainty of himself prevent him from finding success in faith and in love alike. In a moment of drunken self-reflection, Mitchell considers that “either [his] love for Madeleine was pure and true and earthshakingly significant; or he was addicted to feeling forlorn, he liked being heartbroken, and he ‘emotion’ he felt for Madeleine...was only a perverted form of self-love. Not love at all, in other words” (207). Although Mitchell construes his “self-love” as a negative, masochistic tendency to pursue what he cannot have, when examined in concurrence with his pursuit of religious faith it reflects instead a misguided attempt at self-discovery. Because he so strongly wants to be a follower of Christianity, and he so strongly feels attached to Madeleine, he pursues these particular paths, hoping that they will eventually become consistent with his identity. At the end of the novel, he has accepted that his relationship with Madeleine is platonic (at best), and his religious belief is unclear. But he ends on an uplifting note, remarking that “[he] was feeling a lot better about himself, as if he might do some good in the world” (406).
Leonard’s life, both in his vocational prospects and in his relationships, is guided by his attempts to manage his manic depression. The reader is first truly aware of the divide between the two in his narrated section, which appears a little over halfway into the book. He describes one of his first periods of depression, when “[he] felt as if he were being violently emptied out, as if a big magnet were pulling his blood and fluids down to the earth...His head was an old chandelier, going dark” (239). When he later experienced what “he came to suspect [was]...a condition of borderline mania,” he “started getting his act together...He discovered in himself a capacity for unbroken concentration, studying for ten hours at a time, taking breaks only to wolf down a sandwich” (243, 242). His true mania, the experience that causes him to be hospitalized and officially diagnosed, occurs during his freshman year of college, and is followed by an “ensuing depression [that] had blinded him to everything but his agony” (246).

Following his diagnosis, Leonard spends his life negotiating between the two extremes. He expresses his frustration at the side-effects of his medication, remarking that when forced to concentrate he “felt his mind glaze over for ten minutes at a time,” (268). He later tells his doctor that the lithium makes him feel “Dumb. Slow. Half-alive” (275). Thus he is trapped between the brilliance, energy, and extreme depression he feels when unmedicated, and the overwhelming dullness of regulating his condition with prescriptions. His struggle to live with one or the other of these options equally affects his work during his fellowship and his relationship with Madeleine, particularly his attempts at gaining the approval of her family. He laments his inability to prove himself intellectually, and to charm the Hannas, mostly because he knows that he would not have
a problem with either in his unmedicated state. This prompts him to have “a brilliant idea” -- to take the work out of the hands of his psychiatrist and begin decreasing his dosages of Lithium, trying to ease himself back to “the energy, the creativity, the feeling of genius” that accompanied early stages of mania (284, 293). Organized around this self-medication is the desire to control of all other aspects of his life. Leonard has experienced the version of himself that he wants to be, and he is dedicated to returning to that point. His story in the novel ends with uncertainty -- after another breakdown, he eventually leaves Madeleine, attempting to separate himself in order to find a solution. The somber close of Leonard’s story communicates the pervasiveness of his disease, and the effects it has on all aspects of his life.

Like Mitchell and Leonard, there are clear connections between Madeleine’s academic pursuits, her love life, and her conceptualized identity. Her future is uncertain at the close of her senior year, as she awaits results from various graduate programs. Although she is interested in “the Regency leading into the Victorian era,” and writes a senior honors thesis on the occurrence of marriage plot in these time periods and afterwards, Madeleine becomes dissatisfied with this focus. After the introduction of semiotics at the English department of Brown, she is introduced to a philosophy of deconstruction that “[unmasks] the novels she loves as collections of unstable signifiers, shaky attempts to impose order on an entropic world” (Hallberg). Madeleine’s exposure to this new branch of thinking leads her to question her understanding of herself, particularly because of changes in her career prospects and love life. She is denied admission to the graduate programs to which she had applied, and finds herself in a
relationship with Leonard, whose family background and mental well-being are completely at odds with what Madeleine perceived to be her romantic type. This is particularly surprising to her because she was not originally aware of these transgressions from what she perceived as the norm. She remarks that, “Had she known from the outset about [Leonard’s] manic depression, his messed-up family, his shrink habit, [she] never would have allowed herself to get so passionately involved. But now that she was passionately involved, she found little to regret” (126). Her lack of direction after graduation combined with her renewed commitment to Leonard in his healing state causes Madeleine to live with Leonard in Cape Cod while he pursues a research fellowship. She is his comforter, dealing with his frustration at his disease and the side effects of his medication, dutifully following him and caring for him. She becomes a character in a marriage plot, attempting to live out the narrative she is so familiar with.

MADELEINE AS A HEROINE

As the central figure of the novel and the only female protagonist, Madeleine receives considerable criticism for her role as the novel’s ‘heroine,’ or rather for her failure to live up to that title. Described as “almost wholly reactive” (Deresiewicz), a character who has “splendid [formulations]...laid on [her] rather than emanating from her” (Pritchard), and accused of “allowing her love of Leonard to sweep her hither and yon” (Teitelbaum), it is clear that most critics view her as a relatively flat, antifeminist creation. While they are correct in their assessment that Madeleine tends to be a reactive character, the critics’ interpretation of her as antifeminist in the context of the entire novel
fails to address other possibilities for analyzing her character, and her role in the modern marriage plot.

In some ways, Madeleine’s character reads as a parody of female protagonists, both in classic and contemporary works. The novel begins on the day of her graduation, and it is quickly apparent that Eugenides is poking fun at Madeleine’s role in the marriage plot. She is described as classically pretty, and even “three weeks of romantic anguish, followed by a night of epic drinking, didn’t do much visible damage” to her appearance (Eugenides 7). After suffering through a breakfast with her overbearing parents and her spurned admirer Mitchell, she “asked herself why everyone was being so mean to her” (19). These trivial, amusing details of the present action of the novel are contrasted with descriptions of Madeleine as an intelligent, even intriguing person. In a paragraph enunciating her love of books, Eugenides notes that “[it] was the abandoned hardback, the jacketless 1931 Dial Press edition ringed with many a coffee cup, that pierced Madeleine’s heart” (21). Upon receiving a letter from her much later in the novel, Mitchell remarks that “[she] may have looked normal on the outside, but once you’d seen her handwriting you knew she was deliciously complicated inside” (217). And yet for all of the discussion of her intellect, her complicated and fascinating nature, she often seems rather ordinary, and even foolish, to the reader.

This problem is particularly evident in the discussion of her senior thesis, which is alluded to and described briefly, without ever revealing what Madeleine intends to say. We are not presented with her own thoughts on the marriage plot, despite that this is what she both studies and enacts. William H. Pritchard claims that this contributes to the fact
that “we aren't moved to take seriously her thought and feelings,” and it certainly seems
odd that someone so engrossed in the topic would fail to reveal at least occasionally her
thoughts on it. However in living this traditional plot structure that she seeks to
deconstruct through her academic work, the reader is presented with an indirect form of
Madeleine’s ‘analysis’ on the subject. Instead of simply documenting her thoughts on the
topic, Eugenides has his character act them out; her performance makes clear what a
simple summary could not. Contrary to her expectations, she marries young, and then
quickly finds that marriage does not suit her. This added layer of experience undoubtedly
shapes, and possibly alters, her thoughts about marriage, and in a final conversation with
Mitchell the reader catches a glimpse of what those may be. He asks her if a hypothetical
book ended with the heroine being left to do “more important things with her life” than
get married, would that be a good ending (406)? She answers simply with a yes,
revealing an understanding that the marriage plot does not answer all questions, and is
not necessary to provide a sufficient ending to a narrative.

At the end of the novel, Madeleine is the “one character who does discover her
vocation...to be a feminist scholar of the Victorian novel” (Deresiewicz). Critics who
view her as a reactive non-agent in the novel denounce this path for her, or at the very
least point out its irony, because they see her as a poor representation of feminist ideas.
The conflict between Madeleine as a heroine and Madeleine as a traditional female
character subject to the whims of the marriage plot seem to center around the split
between her actions and her reflections upon the past. In the present, she is clearly the
passive, lovestruck girlfriend/wife that reviewers of the novel criticize. In retold
memories she takes on the characteristics of a fuller character, someone whose decisions
are not based solely around the life of her significant other. When combined with her
relative career success by the end of the novel, when she is no longer married or in a
relationship, it seems that Eugenides is making a deliberate argument about the effects of
the marriage plot on women. It is only when she is freed from its constraints that she has
the space to become a complete individual.
POWER AND ROLE PERFORMANCE IN GONE GIRL

Gone Girl tells a twisting and unsettling story of marriage, glimpsing into the complex forces affecting the relationship between its two central characters. This thriller was written by Gillian Flynn and published in June of 2012, quickly gaining popular attention for its deceptive plot and unreliable narrators. The novel tells the story of the troubled marriage of Nick and Amy Dunne, with its narration alternating point-of-view between the two. While the novel describes characters clearly acting outside of social norms, its description of the structure of their relationship is a compelling representation of modern marriage. Through deliberate performance of traditional gender roles within their relationship, Nick and Amy struggle for power over one another, with dangerous results. As the story progresses, the increasing details about Amy and Nick’s relationship are juxtaposed with decreased certainty in what is true, creating a captivating and haunting story that has become hugely popular amongst readers of contemporary fiction.

Gone Girl “spent eight weeks at No. 1 on the hardcover fiction best-seller list of The New York Times,” and within a year of its publication it sold more than 2 million copies (Itzkoff). The novel’s popularity is not a surprise; Flynn creates an entertaining read and a fascinating, albeit dismal, portrayal of contemporary marriage. While Amy and Nick are far from sympathetic, their troubled relationship raises a frightening question that many people can relate to -- how can you tell if you really know someone? Gone Girl’s effect on popular culture is undeniable, as evidenced both by the widespread critical acclaim and the upcoming film adaptation.
Gillian Flynn had written two other books before *Gone Girl*, both of which received high praise and numerous awards, but less notoriety than her most recent work. While some critics have pointed out that “Flynn has shown her skills at gripping tales and enhanced character studies since her debut *Sharp Objects,*” it is widely held that *Gone Girl* is the height of her work so far (Cogdill). Flynn has been described as a “fearless” writer (Stasio), and her most recent work as “addictive” (Webb). The success of the novel has been described as a “confluence of events that...led to *Gone Girl’s* phenomenal sales,” including the endorsement of a variety of organizations and popular online book clubs, the enthusiasm of the booksellers, and of course “the novel’s twisty-turny plot” (Memmott, “Fly High”). Flynn describes the resonance of her most recent novel as an effect of “the subject matter, the male-female narrator, that push-and-pull between the two narrators and what it’s like to be in a long-term relationship” (Memmott, “Gillian Flynn talks”). Ultimately *Gone Girl* is the story of a relationship and the people in it, whose seemingly ordinary faults and arguments are magnified in the context of a chilling mystery. This intense focus reveals the nature of their relationship as a constant struggle for power, rather than a harmonious union.

The narrative begins on the day of Nick and Amy’s fifth anniversary, when Amy goes missing. Nick is the novel’s first narrator, and he gives a quick exposition of the couple’s unhappy marriage and current life “in [his] little Missouri hometown,” where they moved after they both lost their jobs as writers in New York City (Flynn 4). The worsening health of Nick’s parents served as an extra motivation to move away, though Nick notes that, “to Amy it was a punishing whim on [his] part, a nasty, selfish twist of
the knife” (4). After his relocation, Nick opens a bar with his twin sister, Go, and there he receives the call from his neighbor that eventually leads to the discovery of his wife’s disappearance. The narration switches over to Amy, and this is accompanied by a jump backwards in time to the day that Nick and Amy first met. In a cheerful diary entry, Amy recounts the story while managing to be both witty and sentimental, creating a charming albeit unremarkable picture of their budding romance. In addition she describes her own life and career, the fame of her parents as coauthors of a children’s book series *Amazing Amy*, and her struggle to live up to the fictional character’s perfection. She laments the endless mediocrity of events and people in her life, thinking that they are all just fine, and nothing more. This is then contrasted with her relationship with Nick, which she describes as “so far beyond fine that [she knows she] can never go back to fine” (30).

Each of these narratives continues forward, with Nick describing the increasingly stressful and incriminating police investigations and Amy’s diary giving an account of their deteriorating relationship and her growing fears for her safety. The alternation between points-of-view emphasizes the similarities and differences in their experiences, the unreliability of the characters as narrators, and their status as competitors within their relationship. Each of them clearly share an unhappiness in their marriage, however the separate points of view give vastly different portrayals of the two individuals. Nick describes Amy as stubborn and uninterested in life in Missouri, and feels that the mounting evidence against him was left as a trick by his missing wife. Amy’s diary entries make Nick look highly aggressive and affected by his job loss, whereas she reads as sweet and concerned, and above all harmless. Nick discloses to the readers that he has
been having an affair for quite some time, and this is followed by the reveal of Amy’s alleged pregnancy. The evidence seems to stack up against Nick, who is increasingly overwhelmed by his circumstances and the mysterious clues that his wife has left behind for him.

The status quo of the narrative switches entirely halfway through the novel, when Amy begins to speak to the readers in the present day, in her ‘real’ voice. She reveals that, as Nick had guessed, she had crafted an elaborate scheme to frame him for her murder. Each painstaking detail of her plot is revealed, as she explains her anger at Nick -- for cheating on her, for making her move away from New York, but mostly “for being surprised when [she] became [her true self],” instead of the meticulously composed ‘Cool Girl’ persona which she affected for years (224).

After this revelation, the plot moves quickly as Nick continues to search for Amy and she continues to hide from him. Her initial plan of hiding out in a secluded group of rentable cabins falls through when she is robbed by her neighbors. Out of money and with few places to go, Amy calls on her old boyfriend Desi, who “loves troubled women,” and who she views as a “man you can use for anything” (324). She lives with him and watches as her husband loses the trust of the public, culminating in his arrest for her murder. Despite his steadily worsening situation, Nick manages to capture Amy’s attention with his claims of devotion in all interviews, repeating that he “just [wants] Amy to come home so [he] can spend the rest of [his] life making it up to her, treating her how she deserves” (352). Amy discovers her belief that, though “[it] took this awful situation for [them] to realize it,” she belongs with Nick (353). Following this revelation,
Amy makes a plan to escape from Desi’s increasingly smothering affections, and to create a new explanation for all of the incriminatory evidence against her husband that she had left behind for the police to discover.

The end of the novel is quickly paced, yet its resolutions are mostly frustrating and unsatisfying. Amy kills Desi and returns home to Nick, telling the police that her ex-boyfriend had kidnapped her and raped her daily while she had been missing. She explains away most of the evidence against her husband, spinning a new story with a different antagonist. Nick demands that she “[tell him] what happened...[tell him] everything,” and he attempts to use her confession as a way of getting her convicted, and escaping their poisonous relationship (386-7). But, always one step ahead and relying on years of paranoia, Amy has managed to actually impregnate herself by using Nick’s semen that she had stored in case she found a need for it. By revealing that she is pregnant with his child, she forever traps Nick in their marriage. He stays in order to “save his son, to try to unhook, unlash, debarb, undo everything that Amy did” (411). He stays for his son, but also because he “can’t imagine [his] story without Amy. She is [his] forever antagonist,” and they will continue their twisted, vicious story far into the future (413).

CHARACTER PERFORMANCE

Both of the central characters in Gone Girl purposefully portray themselves dishonestly throughout the novel, attempting to manipulate those around them for their own purposes. While Nick presents his fabricated persona of a loving, concerned husband
only after the disappearance of his wife, Amy’s history of affecting different characters based on her own whims spans far into her past, providing a plethora of different ‘performances’ to examine. In the context of Amy’s disappearance and the evidence related to it (primarily Amy’s diary), both Nick and Amy enact relatively traditional gender roles in their performances, presumably in attempt to elicit the support of the community that is watching them. By the end of the novel, they each briefly reveal their true selves to one another, only to be ultimately pushed into the roles of mother and father and happily reunited couple for the eyes of everyone but each other.

Amy provides consistent examples of conscious role-adoption throughout the novel, although her most significant contribution is the lengthy performance of “Diary Amy” that is introduced to the reader without prior explanation. Once it is revealed that the Amy presented in the numerous diary entries is just another in her string of characters, one who “was meant to be likeable,” and was designed to lead “the reader (in this case, the cops . . .) toward the conclusion that Nick was indeed planning to kill [Amy],” the reader discovers Actual Amy, who is an entirely different person (237). In addition to validating much of what Nick claimed in the first half of the book -- Amy’s neurosis and bitterness and dangerous cleverness -- Actual Amy proves to be a disturbing, frightening person, whose selfishness and high expectations for others leads her to punish those who displease her. In the first chapter narrated by Actual Amy, she states that “[the] way some women change fashion regularly, [she changes] personalities. What persona feels good, what’s coveted, what’s au courant?” (222). She breezes through a list of the past people she has been, naming “Amazing Amy. Preppy 80’s Girl. Ultimate-Frisbee Granola and
Blushing Ingenue and Witty Hepburnian Sophisticate. Brainy Ironic Girl and Boho Babe (the latest version of Frisbee Granola). Cool Girl and Loved Wife and Unloved Wife and Vengeful Scorned Wife. Diary Amy” (236-7). It seems that she is so preoccupied with being other people that she rarely reveals her own self, except in her thought processes and the brief period of her marriage between “Loved Wife” and “Unloved Wife.” During her entire pre-marriage relationship with Nick Amy is masquerading as the “Cool Girl,” the “girl who was in style, the girl a man like Nick wants” (222). Amy describes this persona disdainfully, stating:

Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she’s hosting the world’s biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. Go ahead, shit on me, I don’t mind, I’m the Cool Girl (222).

It is clear from her description that Amy finds this character repellent, and yet she makes a deliberate choice to act as the Cool Girl for several years, even noting that she “was probably happier for those few years -- pretending to be someone else -- than [she] ever [has] been before or after” (224).

This contradiction, as well as Amy’s penchant for adopting different personas, are particularly interesting to consider from the perspective of Judith Butler’s gender
performativity theory. Butler argues that gender is “an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts,” that it is “a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (402). Unlike the actors that Butler describes, Amy is constantly aware of her performance, however she immerses herself similarly in the identity. She recalls that she “didn’t worry about anything that came next. Nothing had consequence, [she] was living in the moment, and [she] could feel [herself] getting shallower and dumber. But also happy” (224). Her awareness of acting a role means that, even when she is being a carefree Cool Girl, Amy meticulously enacts the stylized acts that compose her particular identity. It is almost as if she has divided herself into a part responsible for processing information and making decisions, and another one for acting on those pieces of knowledge. She knows how certain characters are supposed to act, and she knows that they are not congruent with her own self, and yet she acts like them anyways, down to the last detail.

The origin of Amy’s character adoptions can be traced to her parents, who wrote a bestselling children’s book series inspired by her. In one of her first diary entries, Amy notes that as she grew up, Amazing Amy did too, albeit with improvements upon Amy’s real life -- “whenever [Amy screws] something up, [Amazing] Amy does it right” (26). Amy is clearly irritated by this, but she does not discuss the extent of its effects on her until later in the novel -- once she is Actual Amy, not Diary Amy. She recalls that “[until] Nick, [she’d] never really felt like a person, because [she] was always a product. Amazing Amy has to be brilliant, creative, kind, thoughtful, witty, and happy” (224). As a
child she was forced into the character performance that she employs with ease as an adult, simply because she felt compelled to please her parents. She was “never . . . more to them than a symbol anyway, the walking ideal. Amazing Amy in the flesh” (259). So she pretends to be Amazing Amy, and then when she has moved on past pleasing her parents she pretends to be Other Amys as well, all the while simultaneously seeking approval and the attainment of her own desires.

Amy’s various performances are frequently aligned with what is considered acceptable gender roles -- something that she occasionally, although not with any depth, refers to. Her character performances are frequently motivated by attempts to win the affections of men, a surprising trend considering that she appears to be completely independent (for example, her ability to flawlessly plan and execute the framing of her husband for her own murder). Her desire to please men does sometimes serve as a means of manipulating them for her own inclinations, such as her behavior with Desi. With Nick, though, she says that she “was willing to try” to be exactly what he wanted, because she “was crazy about him at first” (223). So she relented, and was the passive, kind, up-for-anything beautiful girl for the first years of their relationship. She was the ideal woman, the “coolest girl [Nick had] ever met,” until she realized that “there was a Real Amy . . . and she was so much better, more interesting and complicated and challenging, than Cool Amy” (300, 225). This recognition of a real person separate from her most recently assumed identity is what begins the conflict of their marriage, what spurs Nick’s repeated questions -- “Who are you? What have we done to each other? What will we do?” (384).
Nick’s journey in *Gone Girl* is almost a track record of his acting ability, demonstrating his slow progression towards catching up with his wife, whose capability for adopting foreign personalities is unmatched for the majority of the novel. As he furthers his role performance, he gains power in their relationship, contributing to the changes in their relationship dynamic when the two are finally reunited. The beginning chapters make frequent references to his performance of the husband character, which he struggles to maintain in order to conceal his secrets. When he is initially being questioned by the police after Amy goes missing, he “raked [his] memory for the lines: What does the husband say at this point in the movie?” (48). He imagines himself as a character in a film, and remarks that the husband’s actions and words “[depend] on whether he’s guilty or innocent,” though he fails to indicate which of these he ascribes to himself (48). Nick’s insecurity about coming off as an innocent man steadily alienates him from law enforcement, his community, and the readers, particularly due to his ambiguous emotions, his frequent habit of picturing the shape of Amy’s skull, and of counting the number of times that he has lied to the police about his marriage.

As more details are revealed about the secrets that Nick is hiding -- most notably his affair with Andie, a young college student -- it becomes clear that his suspicious behavior is purely a result of his fear of being caught, or of being suspected. He understands that his situation “looks beyond bad,” that he is “a man with a missing wife and a secret . . . girlfriend,” making him immediately seem to be the guilty party in his wife’s assumed kidnapping and death (151). So he continues to act, to “perform the scene that the TV viewers expected . . . worried but hopeful” that his wife would return (64). At
times he actively gives himself directions on how to present himself, thinking “Do not smile,” or following written instructions on his speech to “PAUSE. BREATHE. NO SMILE” (192).

Nick is actively trying to be the husband in a faultless marriage, and though he initially struggles, projecting an image of being “totally unconcerned” and “self-centered,” his steadily worsening public image eventually motivates a change in his persona (266). As more fragments of the Dunne’s unhappy marriage are revealed -- their constant fighting, Nick’s affair, Amy’s alleged fears for her safety -- Nick’s life spirals downward, and his anger towards his wife increases monumentally. It is this anger that spurs his efforts at appearing remorseful for his transgressions, and frantic for his wife’s return. He urges himself to “[take] control of the story . . . [for] both the capital-P public and the capital-C wife” (299). His outrage at the torments of his missing wife bubble under the surface of the role he plays, revealing to the reader the change in his character that occurs during the search for Amy. His initial distrust and apathy towards her is transformed into an intense animosity, revealed in the increasingly threatening thoughts about his wife that fill his mind. In an interview he gushes, saying that his wife “just happens to be the coolest girl [he’s] ever met,” but internally he seethes “Youfuckingbitchyoufuckingbitchyoufuckingbitch. Come home so I can kill you” (300).

The fascinating thing about Nick’s transformation in the novel is that he is steadily approaching his wife’s level of sociopathy. As he becomes more adept at externally performing the heartbroken, apologetic husband-role, his internal self turns calculating, wrathful, and violent. When they are reunited, Amy forces Nick to recognize
this change, that he had been his “most impressive when [he] loved her -- and [he] was [his] next best self when [he] hated her” (396). This realization, combined with the ever present fear that Amy “will do [Nick] harm if [he displeases] her,” compels him to “stay close to her until [he] can bring her down” (405, 404).

So he does not leave her, and when she impregnates herself to prevent him from publishing an account of her depravity, he ultimately chooses a life of forever being someone he is not. He stays “because [he] needed to save [his] son,” because he is determined to “raise [his] son to be a good man” (411-12). He does “all the things good fathers-to-be are supposed to do,” and becomes, for all intents and purposes, the ideal, loving husband that Amy wants him to be. In the last scene of the novel, a short exchange between the couple gives a reminder that he is, and always will be, only acting as this exemplar of husbandly virtue. When Amy asks why he is “so wonderful” to her, he responds that “[he feels] sorry for [her] . . . Because every morning [she has] to wake up and be [her]” (415). At that moment it is clear that he has reached parity with Amy -- they are deeply resentful, manipulative, and brilliant, and it is only because of these qualities that they can maintain their performed perfection.

Together, Nick and Amy are a frightening, unstoppable duo. Nick describes their life together after Amy’s return:

We pretend to be in love, and we do the things we like to do when we’re in love, and it feels almost like love sometimes, because we are so perfectly putting ourselves through the paces. Reviving the muscle memory of early romance. When I forget -- I can sometimes briefly forget who my wife is
-- I actually like hanging out with her. Or the her she is pretending to be.

The fact is, my wife is a murderess who is sometimes really fun (404).

When they are completely themselves, while it is only briefly, the two are equal in their anger, cunning, and willingness to do anything -- even kill. Nick comes close to strangling Amy to death, only stopping because he considers that “then [he’ll] be a killer . . . [He’ll] be as bad as Amy” (396). They are each filled with resentment and sometimes hatred, and are only prevented from acting upon it because they want to fulfill an implausible domestic fantasy of “becoming the world’s best, brightest nuclear family” (415). So they continue act as people who they are not, all the while being fully aware of their own misrepresentations and of each other’s.

EGALITARIAN VERSUS HIERARCHICAL RELATIONSHIPS

One clear focus of Gone Girl is the various changes in Nick and Amy’s relationship throughout the narrative. While the veracity of what we are told of their early days is questionable -- it is almost entirely relayed in the perspective of Diary Amy, who is recognized as a fictionalization of Actual Amy -- there are clear changes in the way that they interact during the seven plus years that the novel discusses. There is an obvious attention to power within their relationship, and it is closely tied with their respective character performance and sense of identity at any given point.

Frances E. Dolan’s book Marriage and Violence provides a particularly helpful framework for examining the negotiations of power and identity that Gone Girl’s central characters undergo. In the introduction, Dolan identifies three models of marriage that
have been “inherited . . . from early modern England,” namely marriage as a fusion, marriage as a hierarchy, and marriage as a contract (2). Each of these are notably “incompatible” with one another, and also “riddled with internal contradictions,” for they often give either an overly unrealistic or pessimistic portrayal of marriage (2). In the hypothetical fusion model, the husband and wife share a “loving partnership between equals,” which is rarely fully realized because of the prevalence of the hierarchy model (2). This more historically common model requires that “the husband must take the lead and the wife must obey,” sharing the idea of “fusion” without maintaining the equality between partners that its more idealistic counterpart implies (2). Finally, the marriage as a contract model encourages equality, yet it lacks the “mystical fusion” associated with marriage since it presents the “spouses as contracting parties, each of whom acts out of self-interest” (2). Each of these models reiterates the notion that in a truly loving and ideal marriage something of the self must be given up in favor of the marriage of two people, indicating that equality in this kind of relationship leads to conflict, which must be resolved by “privileging one spouse at the expense of the other. Thus the ultimate message is that marriage only has room for one,” and historically that one person was the husband (3). The inequality inherent to this idea is then associated with violence, as most individuals will presumably not submit to a loss of selfhood without some sort of fight. Notably, Dolan remarks that “[before she] embarked on this project, [she] assumed that certain early modern figurations for marriage would have been rendered obsolete because of, among other things, the dramatic changes in women’s status and rights. But [she] found that this was not the case” (18).
Gone Girl is rife with examples of scenarios where Nick and Amy have a hierarchical relationship, however it is frequently Amy whose personhood encompasses the entirety of their marriage -- her power over Nick is clear and unfltering. Even when he makes small gains, such as winning back part of her affection after a drunken admission that he “[loves] her forever,” ultimately contributing to her decision to return home to him and prove his innocence in her disappearance, she is the one who controls the situation (Flynn 303). Her mastery over the tiniest facts enables her to twist them as she needs, always keeping Nick just minutes away from appearing guilty of attempting to murder her (not to mention her demonstrated ability to kill a man without a hint of remorse).

Another aspect that contributes to Amy’s power is the fact that she never seems to be being herself -- she is always adopting an alternate persona, pretending to be the Cool Girl or the Loving Wife, meaning that she does not put her own actual identity at risk by submitting to the fusion of persons associated with a marital relationship. As Dolan describes it, “identity is understood as separation from others, and marriage requires union,” therefore “there is a conflict between one’s identity as self and one’s identity as partner” (52). Because Amy has already compartmentalized her various identities into these divisions -- Amy as herself and Amy as a wife -- she does not stand to lose this individual self through marriage, and thus she has the position of power in her relationship.

In addition to her ability to retain her selfhood while also binding herself to another person in marriage, Amy has the distinct ability of manipulating traditional
expectations of women in violent marriages when she decides to divide herself from Nick. Dolan describes the recurring theme of battered women in fiction; the wives whose “proactive [approaches] to the problem of the murderous [husbands are] to kill [them]” (67). After all, it is assumed, what else is there for the wife to do? Often, “the wife’s murder of her husband [is presented] as inevitable,” the only plausible escape from her marriage which will ultimately end with a “promising future” for the “suffering heroines” (69). Amy uses these tropes associated with battered women and murderous wives to her advantage in several instances. Her framing of Nick, most notably in her diary entries, plays heavily on the belief that the police and general public will subscribe to the ideology that women feeling threatened in their marriage may be right to resort to violent self-defense. As Diary Amy, she describes her fear that Nick might hurt her, a fear that compels her to go “to the mall, where about half the town buys drugs . . . [because she wanted to buy] a gun, just in case” (197). The implied scenario in her “just in case” is that she might need to kill Nick, if he tries to hurt her (197). This is meant to appeal to the sympathies of those reading her diary, who would understand just how threatened she felt, and resign themselves to thoughts of ‘Poor Amy, what else could she do?’

This, too, was the approach she took when she made a drastic change in her initial plans by seeking the help of her ex-boyfriend Desi, and then eventually deciding that his excessive adoration for and control over her meant that he needed to be killed. Despite his admittedly possessive behavior, Desi did not harm Amy in any way, and yet her dissatisfaction with him necessitated (in her mind) his death so that she could return home to Nick, and set everything right. So she furthered her performance of the battered
woman, making it look as though she had been tied up and repeatedly raped, thus justifying the fact that she slit Desi’s throat (Flynn 388). In the eyes of the public, Amy’s actions are both acceptable and inescapable. Because the “battered woman’s past defines her identity and determines her future,” Amy is expected to kill her kidnapper and rapist -- she has no agency in this decision, it is simply what must happen if she is going to survive (Dolan 70). Her knowledge of the public response to this situation of being a battered woman motivates her to once again manipulate the facts and perform the role, allowing her to essentially get away with murder without any consequences.

The end of the novel, which displays Nick’s sharpened ability to match Amy’s level of role performance, also presents a shift in the nature of their relationship. Where for the majority of the novel they showed clear signs of a hierarchical marriage, they are ultimately described as equals. Dolan describes the traditional depictions of equality in marriage leading to violence in marriage, a concept which is clearly present in Nick and Amy’s relationship (98). When Nick is finally equal to Amy in his neuroses and his anger, when she recognizes that “[something] in him is electric; a switch has turned on,” he nearly kills her from the fury that had been building in him for the forty days that she was missing (Flynn 398). Their equality turns into violence, which subsides only because Nick sees a way to reduce Amy’s power in their relationship, to “[put] her in one of her boxes” (397). The Dunnes present a near perfect, if quite exaggerated, example of the effect Dolan describes -- they demonstrate the idea that two individuals cannot coexist in a marriage without a hierarchical structure empowering one over the other; if they do, the result is violence.
Finally, Dolan describes the necessity of a third party in order to sustain “fictions of marital equality” (99). Using the example of the play *Private Lives*, she argues that “[to] sustain the erotic tension between equal combatants, the couple must displace some of its resentments and obligations onto a third party, who is usually a servant or a slave” (99). In the case of Nick and Amy, this same argument can be made, where the soon-to-be third party is their unborn son. As the sole reason for Nick’s continuation as a party in his marriage, this son is already the impetus for their performance as a happily married couple. In his last chapter as narrator, Nick vows to stay with Amy “as long as she wanted” in order to “try to unhook, unlatch, debarb, undo everything that Amy did,” essentially committing himself to perpetual conflict with his wife through his son (411). He recognizes that he is “rising to [his] wife’s level of madness,” and that he is “finally a match for Amy” (413). Their equality, or closeness to it, is not transformed into violence as usual, but is rather mediated through their son (who has yet to be born). Flynn ends the novel with the implication that the Dunnes will continue to project their anger onto and exert their power over their son throughout the “never-ending war story of [their] marriage” (413).
Whether it is a reaction to or a determinant of public opinion, popular culture has an undeniable connection to how people think about different ideas, and thoughts on marriage are no exception. Representations of marriages are fairly commonplace in Western media, and beyond that the depictions of traditional gender roles within these relationships are typical. The various mediums through which information is shared in contemporary society have the power to create strong messages about normative values in society, therefore the influence of pop culture sources on ideas about marriage, relationships, and gender roles cannot be ignored.

Television shows and advertisements, movies, social media, video games, music, and books all simultaneously act as reactions to and influencers and products of applicable social norms and trends of thinking. In contemporary America, “the primary instrument for developing a common culture is the commercial media,” therefore these media sources are central to understanding cultural ideas (Cosper). Regardless of their accuracy in representing the lives of an average person, these depictions of ordinary lives -- particularly of marriages and relationships -- provide insight into how people think about these social institutions. For the purposes this paper, I will focus primarily on the representations of marriage illustrated by several television shows (especially Reality TV), social media websites, and personal blogs. The examples I have chosen demonstrate the pervasiveness of traditional valuations of the importance of marriage (particularly in the lives of women) and conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity.
TELEVISION AND THE DRAMATIZATION OF REALITY

According to The Nielsen Company, the average American watches over five hours of television per day (“Who Watches”). This figure alone communicates the enormous effect that television has on the everyday lives of individuals, the implications of which are certainly important when considering how it affects popular opinion. While fictional television dramas and comedies (especially sitcoms) provide plenty of examples of marriage representations, the specific genre of Reality Television provides more interesting material because it is intentionally trying to portray “real life.”

The participants in reality television are not actors, and they are usually being filmed in the course of some real aspect of their life. Yet there are many difficulties in determining how to consider the reality that these shows present us with. In their article “Roar Like a Tiger on TV?” Camilla Sears and Rebecca Godderis note that the “very act of observing people, the presence of the television camera, and the editing process all effect what is actually viewed as an end product and, hence, what reality is being portrayed. Thus . . . reality TV does not reflect reality but rather redefines reality into a narrative for programming purposes” (184). This addition of the values and norms prescribed by the creators of reality television -- those individuals responsible for filming, editing, and marketing, if not scripting, others’ lives -- means that reality TV shows are not necessarily true to the ideas and values of the people they center on. Despite the problematic tendencies of Reality TV programs to gloss over “real life,” their focus on relationships and frequent performance of traditional gender roles gives a compelling set of cases for examination.
One particular subset of reality television focuses specifically on weddings and the process of planning a wedding; most apparent is the series of shows appearing on TLC, a television network that devotes an entire day to shows about weddings. Some of the lineup on “Friday Bride Day” include: *Say Yes to the Dress* and it’s several spinoffs (different locations, Bridesmaid’s version, etc.), *Four Weddings*, *Something Borrowed*, *Something New*, *My Big Fat American Gypsy Wedding*, and *I Found the Gown*. These shows almost exclusively focus on the bride, and more specifically center on the wedding dress. *Say Yes to the Dress* and *I Found the Gown* both follow the customers at different bridal salons, providing the viewers with information about these women’s wedding plans, their style preferences, and occasionally the men they intend to marry. Reformatted so that each of the two or three women they focus on per episode share similar struggles (these three women who disagree with their mothers about which dress they want just happened to arrive at the salon on the same day!), the shows have an exaggerated focus on the potential problems with buying a wedding dress. As women try on hundreds of white fluffy gowns, a male narrator describes their journeys, chiding the ones who decide not to purchase a designer gown on that particular visit, and praising those who have found their one perfect dress. Shows like *Four Weddings* focus instead on the ceremony itself, bringing four “different” brides together to evaluate each other’s weddings and determine who threw the best party. The bride who manages to wear the best dress, serve the best food, and provide the best experience is rewarded for her hard work with a free honeymoon.
These types of shows are frequently criticized by feminist scholars, who argue that the portrayals tend to “[deny] women agency and [ignore] diversity among women” (Sears 184). Furthermore, this intense focus on the woman’s experience as a bride is typical of the social attitude that a woman’s life is essentially completed by her wedding. Getting married means procreating, and then life is not about the woman anymore, but about the lives of her children. Her wedding represents the pinnacle of her life experiences, and must be planned and executed perfectly so that such an important day will not be wasted. Thus the wedding becomes a symbolic event of huge proportions, a tradition which lives on today even though women continue to live independent, successful lives while married and with children. Furthermore, the focus solely on the bride rather than on the couple together reiterates the wedding as the “apex of idealized femininity,” a ceremony that is concerned with a woman’s innate femaleness more than the officiation of a relationship (Powers 64). The use of the wedding industry as a source of entertainment dramatizes the experiences of getting married, reemphasizing the outdated notion that a wedding is the peak of a woman’s life. In addition to the various shows that sensationalize the weddings of everyday women, there are often special television events commemorating the marriage celebrations of celebrities. Nearly twenty-three million American viewers watched the live broadcast of the Royal Wedding between Prince William and Kate Middleton, an impressive number considering both the early hour that it was broadcast (the ceremony began at 6am Eastern Daylight Time) and the fact that they are royalty in an entirely different country (Mirkinson). Similar events frequently occur on smaller scales for other celebrity weddings, and arguably the media
attention given to civilian weddings on shows like *Four Weddings* share similar themes of popularizing and dramatizing a ceremony that, at least by current standards, is meant only to represent and officiate the love between two people. This raises the important issue of negotiating the difference between private and public lives, an issue which is easy to witness at play when a person’s private life is nationally broadcast on a reality television show.

Other reality television programs focus more on marriages themselves, rather than simply the wedding. These include the plethora of *Real Housewives* incarnations, shows that focus on the wives of specific types of husbands, such as *Mob Wives* and *Baseball Wives*, and shows that focus on polygamous relationships (only multiple wives, never multiple husbands) like *Sister Wives* and *My Five Wives*. Once again, each of these shows creates dramatic tensions and resolutions out of individual marriages, and though the women are generally the focus of the show, it is primarily while in their role as wives and mothers that they are praised. This is particularly true in the case of the polygamists, who are generally very religious families with traditional ideas about gender roles. In *Sister Wives*, a conversation between husband Kody and one of his wives Meri reveals that while he views polygamy with multiple wives and a single husband as God’s desire for humans, the idea of a woman marrying multiple men is revolting to him. Double standards for gender roles are clearer in more ‘extreme’ shows like those focusing on polygamist families, however they are not unique to them. In many instances, wedding-centric reality television programs reiterate that “categories of woman and man are
delineated, the subordination of women is perpetuated and justified, and masculine and feminine stereotypes are reinforced” (Sears 184).

Television shows branded as “reality TV” focus on “personal history as a spectacle and . . . they claim to portray the real lives of ordinary people rather than scripted performances” (182). The implication of reality shows that focus on marriage is therefore that any depiction of marriage and relationships will be a relatively accurate portrayal of a “normal” marriage -- an idea which is negated by the mere existence and use of editing software. However, because such an emphasis is placed on the reality of these programs, their depiction of marriages cannot be ignored. Regardless of their actual levels of truth, these series are frequently regarded as genuine. This means that we are perpetuating depictions of marriages as rather dramatic, defined by traditional gender roles, and of utmost importance to a person’s identity, qualities which, while they may exist in some of the many marriages in America, are certainly not prevalent to the extent which these shows make it seem.

SOCIAL MEDIA, PINTEREST, AND THE WEDDING CRAZE

Websites and mobile applications like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, and Pinterest all have an undeniable presence in the lives of Americans, particularly in those of teenagers and young adults. Facebook, by far the most popular of these, is used by an impressive 57 percent of all American adults, and 73 percent of Americans aged twelve to seventeen (Smith). These statistics are even more staggering when considering that 64 percent of adult users visit the site on a daily basis.
Facebook in particular has a relationship-centric element to it. All users can identify their relationship status from a variety of options in a drop-down list, including “Single,” “In a relationship (with),” “Engaged,” “Married,” “In an open relationship,” and “It’s complicated,” among others. This identification alone suggests an attention to relationships on the website, and research by the company confirms that bubbles of activity form around the events of a relationship. In a six part series of blog posts, Facebook’s Data Science division examined information they had collected about user’s habits surrounding their relationships. Notably, they found that interactions between two users who switch their status from “Single” to “In a relationship” with each other have a steady increase in various interactions with each other during a 100 day period before the switch occurs (Diuk). This is typical of what the author deems a “period of courtship” before the official relationship (Diuk). More interesting is the data given for user activity following a breakup, which indicates that on the day of a user’s breakup, their interactions with Facebook friends increases by 225 percent (Friggeri). What this information suggests is that the users of Facebook, and presumably other similar social networking sites, are highly aware of each other’s relationship statuses, and that their activity on these networks is in part based on whether or not they are in a relationship, and whether or not their friends are. It is conceivable then, although certainly not proven, that the use of media like Facebook could increase a person’s awareness of and attention to relationships.

A more clearly marriage and gender focused social media site is Pinterest, an online social media billed as “a tool for collecting and organizing the things you
love” (“What is Pinterest?”). The website functions as a sort of online scrapbook, allowing users to post pictures and videos that are attached to a link to the source of this content to individual “boards,” which are then categorized into groups such as “DIY & Crafts,” “Hair & Beauty,” “Health & Fitness,” “Home Decor,” and “Weddings.” These links are generally composed of various products, blog posts, online articles, and other websites, which can be visited simply by clicking on the image that has been attached to the “pin.” As of 2013, Pinterest had reached 70 million users, about a third of which had been active on the site within the previous month (“Pinterest has”). Additionally, it is important to note that “[women] are 4 times more likely than men to use Pinterest (33% vs. 8%),” and that high frequency users tend to be in the age range of 18 to 49, and are more likely to live in suburban areas than urban areas (“User Demographic”).

This demographic information is important to consider in the context of the dominating content on the website, which frequently focuses on women’s roles as brides, wives, and mothers. The inclusion of so much wedding-centric content not only reflects what the users value, but also affects how their followers interpret the importance of whatever they are pinning, e.g. choosing a color scheme for your wedding. Furthermore, the website’s concentration on domesticity reinforces the ideas that cause weddings to be viewed as crucial in a woman’s life. In her dissertation “Postfeminist Social Networks: Traditional Femininity in Life-Coaching Blogs and Image-Aggregating Websites,” Renee Powers describes this phenomenon:

That is, many of Pinterest’s users have active boards exclusively devoted to their roles as wives and mothers. This does not include the number of
boards dedicated to various recipes and DIY crafts, the results of which inevitably benefit a woman’s family. Rather, many women use Pinterest to plan elaborate birthday parties for their toddlers or to collect creative ideas that express their love for their husbands (56-7).

The prevalence of pins and boards that demonstrate and encourage women’s roles as wives, mothers, and exemplars of domesticity communicate the frequency with which these ideas permeate our society.

Pinterest boards dedicated to wedding planning abound, filled with images of wedding dresses and flower arrangements and homemade mason jar decorations. Once the perfect wedding has been planned, the Pinterest user can continue into domestic bliss with helpful pins to articles and blog posts about marriage and child-rearing. And for women at any relationship status there is an endless supply of beauty and exercise tips, not to mention a plethora of products that will ensure our constant femininity. Even something as innocuous as an individual pinning a picture of a wedding dress or a link to an article she likes can be symptomatic of the larger culture that expects women to “plan an extravagant wedding followed by becoming selfless and creative mothers, all the while maintaining flawless looks and a perfect home” (64). When women collect images and articles that center on bridal and domestic success, they perpetuate the idea that these are and should be the focal areas of our lives; an attitude that has existed in our culture long before the existence of the medium through which it is currently being expressed.
TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Popular culture products that focus on traditional gender roles are not limited to the copious wedding and marriage focused examples. Other reality television shows, as well as some fictional narratives such as sitcoms, often heavily rely on gender stereotypes, and personal blogs discussing relationships and men’s and women’s roles are common. Whether or not these accounts explicitly discuss how gender roles factor into marriages, they express related ideas concerning relationships, social expectations, and cultural norms.

Most television shows involve some level of discussion about relationships and the differences between men and women. For example, the concept of some sitcoms or at least some of their episodes often relies on gender differences and the misunderstandings they produce. The most obvious reliances on traditional gender roles appear on dating shows, a particular subset of reality television that aims to pair up single men and women. These exist in many formats, with more conventional shows like The Bachelor as well as those that focus on a niche dating market, like The Millionaire Matchmaker. Both of these shows put strict procedures in place, creating a formula for finding love through the reconstruction of traditional dating. The Bachelor in particular, as well as the spin-off series The Bachelorette, emphasize distinct differences in male and female gender roles, in addition to providing an exemplar of contemporary heteronormativity.

These shows are formed around a bachelor or bachelorette, who is presented with a large initial group of potential spouses that is progressively decreased in number until the final episode, when they must choose between their two remaining options. Getting
from the initial group to the final “winner,” and generally an engagement, involves a process of dates, cocktail parties, “rose ceremonies,” meeting the parents, a night in the fantasy suite, and a decent amount of staring contemplatively at head shots of the “contestants.” Aside from the frequent remarks that contestants on the show make concerning their personal perceptions about men and women (most tend to express traditional understandings about gender), the structure of the shows encourages traditional gender roles. For example, if a proposal occurs on the finale, it is always the man proposing to the woman, even if it is the bachelorette who has selected her partner from the initial group of men. The show mimics the patterns of romantic relationships by appropriating certain elements, creating a formulaic production that habitually places its participants into strict gender roles.

_The Bachelor_ and other dating shows are not the only television programs that emphasize traditional ideas of women’s submissiveness and domesticity. In her article “A slave to the stove? The TV celebrity chef abandons the kitchen: lifestyle TV, domesticity and gender,” Lucy Scholes argues that modern cooking shows fit into “the larger genre of ‘lifestyle’ TV -- a genre that ‘extends and plays upon the notion that daily existence is in some senses inauthentic or hyperreal or simulated or performative’” (46). Through the examination of various British celebrity chefs, such as Jamie Oliver, Gordon Ramsay, Delia Smith, and Nigella Lawson, Scholes argues that TV shows portraying the lives of male chefs focus on entrepreneurial and public service endeavors, whereas female chefs are resigned to showing their audiences how to properly fulfill their domestic responsibilities. Female chefs are frequently shown cooking in their own
homes, or in reproduced kitchens that simulate the home environment. Male chefs, on the other hand, are shown in the public sphere in order to distinguish them from “associations of femininity” (51). This suggests an interesting gender distinction in so-called lifestyle television shows, where women are associated with private domesticity, and men are generally allowed to exist solely in the public sphere. When compared with the intense focus on women in the wedding culture and marriage-centric shows, an interesting trend appears: reality television often depicts women negotiating the line between private and public lives, whereas men are more frequently shown only in their openly public ventures.

This particular gendered difference does not appear in the case of a final example of pop culture relationship representation, a blog called *40 Days of Dating*. The co-written product of an experiment by friends Jessica Walsh and Timothy Goodman, this website follows each of them as they attempt to understand their relationship habits by dating each other for forty days, the amount of time it allegedly takes to “change a bad habit” (Walsh). Each struggle with the opposing forces of private lives -- the intimacy of a relationship -- and public ones -- the publishing of all of its details on a blog for the world to see. The two begin their journey with an examination of their own patterns in dating, attempting to understand the reasons that they are not having success in romantic endeavors. Speaking about Tim’s life, Jessica notes that he “disappears on girls soon after things start to get serious,” contrasted with Tim’s claim that “ultimately, [Jessica] just wants to be in love” (Walsh). Jessica describes Tim as “controlling,” and he often feels that he is labeled as a “womanizer,” and in contrast Tim describes Jessica as “just a
bit submissive,” aligning the two with gendered personality stereotypes. The two provide daily responses to questionnaires that summarize their feelings about their relationship, and relationships in general, tracking the development of their emotions and thoughts. In the end, they commit the same “mistakes” that they had set out to correct, ending their relationship in disappointment instead of resolve. This narrative, neatly packaged in forty sets of two entries, demonstrates both social expectations of role performance in relationships and the self-fulfilling nature of these expectations. Because these two individuals believed that they would follow certain pathways in the relationship, they compliantly did so, despite any attempts at self-analysis and correction. In the same way, social expectations of gender roles within relationships continue to self-perpetuate despite any heightened awareness of their existence.
CONCLUSION

Many contemporary representations of marriage and relationships express ideas that have circulated in our culture throughout history, simply repackaged into time-appropriate formats. Literature, television shows, social media, and other sources continue to describe marriage in terms of the eradication of individuals for the creation of a unified partnership, perpetuating the kind of thinking that restricts women to domesticity and labels her wedding as the summit of her life.

On a larger scale, marriage is frequently depicted as restrictive for both parties, forcing them to conform to specific roles and relinquish individual personhood in favor of matrimony. This results in the perpetuation of portrayals of relationships as a competition for the limited resource of selfhood. Marriages are shown as either egalitarian and violent, with two individuals struggling for power, or hierarchical where one party claims all of the personhood, and the other must be submissive. Despite the progress that society has made towards gender equality, attitudes about marriage are frequently representative of patriarchal norms that have permeated our culture in the past and the present.
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