Schwarz, Janine

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Blaming the Mother: New Momism and Failed Matriarchy in Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects*

Janine Schwarz, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen

Abstract

This chapter investigates the representation of motherhood in Gillian Flynn's novel *Sharp Objects* (2006). The novel's focus on the domestic and maternal illustrates its participation in contemporary thematic trends in two broader genres: crime fiction and domestic noir. Based on a close reading of the novel's representation of motherhood, this chapter argues that *Sharp Objects* reinforces patriarchal ideology on two levels. Firstly, the novel echoes the cultural myth of Mother Blame by creating a genealogy of perverted motherhood in the family of protagonist and first-person narrator Camille, connecting them through Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy as a plot device. In so doing, it also reinforces the essentialist gender ideology of New Momism, coined by Douglas and Michaels, because motherhood is perverted either through neglect or 'over'-nurture. Secondly, the novel implies that these perversions of motherhood are connected to a 'lack' of patriarchal order by representing Camille's family as matriarchal, and therefore 'toxic,' because fathers are absent and passive. The chapter shows how the novel meaningfully contrasts Camille's biological, matriarchal family with an idealized example of a nuclear, patriarchal family particularly towards its end: because Camille experiences a significant improvement of her mental health while staying with the nuclear, patriarchal family, *Sharp Objects* thereby valorizes this family unit, suggesting that motherhood becomes perverted and harmful for children especially within familial structures that 'lack' a patriarchal order.

Keywords

Motherhood, Mother Blame, New Momism, patriarchal ideology, matriarchy, Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy, domestic noir

Introduction

Towards the end of *Sharp Objects*, one of the novel's mother figures, named Adora, tells a story about her mother Joya to her adult daughter Camille:

> "When I was a little girl, my mother took me into the North Woods and left me," Adora said. "She didn't seem angry or upset. Indifferent. Almost bored. She didn't explain why. She didn't say a word to me, in fact. Just told me to get in the car. I was barefoot. When we got there, she took me by the hand and very efficiently pulled me along the trail, then off the trail, then dropped my hand and told me not to follow her. I was eight, just a small thing. My feet were ripped into strips by the time I got home, and she just looked up at me from the evening paper, and went to her room." (304-05)

When Camille asks Adora why she is telling her this story, Adora responds: "'When a child knows that young that her mother doesn't care for her, bad things happen'" (305). This is a key moment in the novel for two reasons. First, Adora's story and evaluation of it clearly echo the concept of Mother Blame. According to this concept, a child's development is dependent primarily on their mother and, thereby, any 'defects' in children are the fault of mothers alone for failing to conform to societal ideals of mothering. Adora's story does exactly that: It characterizes Joya and her performance of motherhood as not conforming to essentialist ideals of it as inherently nurturing and loving. In the story, Joya is, after all, "[i]ndifferent" to Adora, "[a]lmost bored" (304). Adora's suggestion that "bad things happen" when a child does not receive love from their mother then anticipates her own version of mothering, although Adora herself does not evaluate it as bad (305): Because Joya did not provide loving care, Adora developed an obsessive need to care for her daughters. She even explains this to Camille once she is done with the story: "I wanted to love you, Camille. But you were so hard . . . . Let me take care of you, Camille. Just once, need me" (305).

Second, Adora's story also reproduces the concept of Mother Blame in the sense that she holds Joya responsible for her own non-conformity to essentialist ideals of motherhood. A few pages before Adora tells the story, Camille is at the local hospital to investigate the death of her younger half-sister Marian. Before Marian's death, Adora used to frequent that hospital with her daughter because Marian was often sick. There, however, Camille talks to a nurse who had filed a report years earlier in which she describes her suspicion that Adora suffers from Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy (MSbP) and that Marian's symptoms of illness are induced by Adora. The nurse even provides a, if somewhat biased, definition of it: "The caregiver, usually the mother, *almost always* the mother, makes her child ill to get attention for herself" (293; italics in original). She continues: "You got MBP, you make your child sick to show what a kind, doting mommy you are" (293).[1] When Camille learns about her mother's illness, she also concludes that Adora must have poisoned Marian for years, killing her eventually when Camille was thirteen. Just like her mother Joya, then, Adora does not conform to essentialist ideals of motherhood and, in fact, perverts motherhood through 'over'-nurture that results in murder. Whether Adora herself is aware that she suffers from MSbP is unclear, but it is also not relevant.

[1] Although the term MSbP is no longer in usage in medical discourse, I am adopting it here because it is employed in the novel's story world. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2022) terms the disorder not MSbP but "Factitious Disorder Imposed on Another (Previously Factitious Disorder by Proxy)" and defines it as the "Falsification of physical or psychological signs or symptoms, or induction of injury or disease, in another, associated with identified perception" (367). The diagnosed individual thus "presents another individual (victim) to others as ill, impaired, or injured" (367). Importantly, then, "the perpetrator, not the victim, is given the diagnosis," whereas "the victim may be given an abuse diagnosis" (368).

What is much more relevant is the causality Adora and her story imply: By juxtaposing Joya's and her own version of mothering, Adora implies her version of mothering to be reactive to her mother's and thereby reproduces the concept of Mother Blame.

Such cautionary examples of 'bad' mothers who are allegedly responsible for defects and developmental issues in children are ubiquitous in *Sharp Objects*. And, as I will show, they are always placed within family structures that suggest a matriarchal hierarchy. I argue here that, through this interplay of representing motherhood as perverted *and* as originating from matriarchal family structures, the novel eventually valorizes the patriarchal, nuclear family and thereby patriarchal ideology. To show this, I first demonstrate how the novel represents motherhood as perverted either through neglect or 'over'-nurture in the form of MSbP. The novel thus perpetuates a narrow and essentialist ideal of motherhood that is similar to the one propagated by what Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels have called "New Momism," a gender ideology they claim emerged in the 1980s (4). By employing MSbP in the first place, the novel also echoes the concept of Mother Blame and creates a genealogy of perverted motherhood within Camille's family that intensifies from generation to generation. In a second step, I show that *Sharp Objects* and particularly its ending further valorize the patriarchal, nuclear family by contrasting Camille's biological family with her boss and his wife. While the former is represented as a 'toxic' and matriarchal family because fathers are absent either literally or figuratively by being passive and motherhood is perverted, the second family unit represents the ideal of the patriarchal, nuclear family. Importantly, Camille can improve her mental health only within the latter. The novel thereby implies that motherhood becomes perverted and harmful for children especially within familial structures that 'lack' a patriarchal order.

While I concur with interpretations of *Sharp Objects* that point out the novel's subversive potential regarding gender roles, I argue that this potential is not fully realized. Alyson Miller, for example, claims that the novel negotiates cultural anxieties about the "monstrous mother" who poses a threat to the patriarchal system by not conforming to hegemonic ideals of motherhood (495). Through its insistence on the superiority of the nuclear, patriarchal family at the end, however, I argue that *Sharp Objects* not only dramatizes patriarchal anxieties, but also reinforces patriarchal ideologies. Similarly, Malinda K. Hackett interprets the female characters in the novel as "creat[ing] a visual rhetoric that disrupts idealized versions of femaleness" (81). According to her, the women "partake in performative acts of pathology to reject notions of idealized femininity, beauty, and motherhood" (80). This is true: By perverting motherhood in the first place, the novel reconceptualizes and, to some extent, challenges essentialist conceptions of it as inherently nurturing. However, I contend that this critique has its limits because other essentialist and patriarchal

ideologies, most importantly those of New Momism and Mother Blame, are perpetuated at the same time.

Such ideological tensions and contradictions regarding gender are ubiquitous in contemporary crime novels that focus on the domestic – and *Sharp Objects* clearly is part of this trend, too. In fact, with the onset of the twenty-first century, the crime novel has seen a growing interest in the domestic, not only as a geographical location but also as a spatial meaning-making entity regarding gender roles and motherhood. Nowhere does this become clearer than in the name 'domestic noir,' a currently immensely popular subgenre in crime fiction, whose beginnings are commonly traced back to Gillian Flynn's 2012-bestseller *Gone Girl* (Joyce 4). Scholars of crime fiction locate one of the reasons for this contemporaneous interest in the domestic in the rise of neoliberalism, that is, the expansion of political and economic thinking into all public and private spheres governed by an emphasis on, i.a., privatization, individualism, and entrepreneurialism. Ruth Cain, for example, argues that the dominant neoliberal ethos of individualism and the growing privatization of family life lend themselves to a dramatization of "crucial conflicts of neoliberal maternal life" in the genre of domestic noir (290). While I concur with this contextual reading of domestic noir texts that focus on the maternal, neoliberalism as a concept does not explicitly factor into my interpretation here for reasons of brevity. A more holistic interpretation of motherhood in *Sharp Objects* could include pondering the question of how neoliberal contexts influence the understanding of this text's representation of motherhood.

Sharp Objects and New Momism: A Genealogy of Perverted Motherhood

The genealogy of perverted motherhood, as mentioned in the introduction, reaches over three generations in the family of protagonist Camille. At the same time, it intensifies from generation to generation. This section unravels this genealogy and shows how the novel's three central mother figures – Camille's grandmother Joya, her mother Adora, and her half-sister Amma – pervert motherhood through either neglect or 'over'-nurture. In the novel's present, Camille travels from Chicago to her hometown Wind Gap as a journalist to investigate the murders of the local teenagers Ann and Natalie. Because Camille stays at her mother Adora's mansion, she must confront memories of her childhood and her deceased half-sister Marian. As explained earlier, she learns towards the novel's end that Adora, suffering from MSbP, killed Marian. While the novel conditions readers for a long while to assume that Adora has killed Ann and Natalie, too, they learn in a final plot twist that it was Camille's thirteen-year-old half-sister Amma. Although Amma is not a mother biologically, the way she kills Ann and Natalie echoes Adora's perverted performance of motherhood and murder of Marian, and she thus appropriates motherhood

through these murders. As such, Amma stays true to her telling name, itself an anagram of 'Mama.'

Through these perverted performances of motherhood, I argue, *Sharp Objects* perpetuates a motherhood ideal as promulgated by the gender ideology of New Momism. Coined by Douglas and Michaels in 2004, New Momism prescribes hegemonic ideals of motherhood that are based on an essentialist perception of gender and rests on three core beliefs: It insists "that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children" (Douglas and Michaels 4). In so doing, the ideology promotes a mothering ideal coined "intensive mothering" by Sharon Hays, requiring women to define themselves exclusively through their role as mother, to "expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children," and to exhibit "unselfish nurturing" while doing so (Hays x). These markers illustrate that New Momism is a distinctly narrow ideal: After all, it also "insist[s] that mothers perfectly regulate their behavior, that they never become over-invested in their kids but never seem underinvested, either" (Douglas and Michaels 152). Ultimately, women must walk a fine line to be deemed a good mother: They must be caring, but not too caring, and their mothering must be, above all, selfless.

What New Momism's narrow motherhood ideal reveals, then, is the ideology's propensity to reinforce the concept of Mother Blame. The ideology suggests that a mother's failure to conform to the ideal results in long-term damage in her children. It implies that "[i]f mothers screw up" by failing to perform motherhood according to the three core beliefs named earlier, the result would be "permanent psychological and/or physical damage" (6). This causality is also evidenced by a case study conducted by Douglas and Michaels in which they analyze news stories from the late 1980s until the mid-90s which put forth the narrative that the largest threat for children comes "from mom herself" (140). They show that, within that period, the media "built an interlocking, cumulative image of the dedicated, doting 'mom' versus the delinquent, bad 'mother'" (7). Mother Blame thus is a central myth propagated by New Momism.

As I have already detailed in the introduction, Joya deviates from the New Momism ideal through her neglectful and loveless mothering. In addition to how Adora's story, quoted in the introduction, depicts her mother, Adora also tells Camille that Joya "never loved [her]" and characterizes her mother as "cold and distant" (190). Other characters in the novel describe Adora and Joya's relationship as similarly lacking affection. For example, one of Adora's childhood friends explains to Camille that Joya never "smile[d] at [Adora] or touch[ed] her in a loving way" (258). Instead of such "loving" touches, she recalls that Joya treated Adora like an object at her

convenience. When Adora needed some form of nurture, Joya seemed to hierarchize her own pleasure. For example, "[w]hen Adora peeled from a sunburn . . . Joya would sit next to [her], strip off her shirt, and peel the skin off in long strips" (258). And, most importantly: "Joya loved *that*," meaning the pleasure Adora's body could afford her but not Adora herself (258; emphasis added). Joya's performance of motherhood as loveless thus perverts New Momism's essentialist conception of it.

Importantly, the same childhood friend who describes Joya and Adora's relationship as lacking love also contends that "Adora was . . . overly mothered" by Joya (258). This suggests that Joya, too, may have suffered from MSbP. After all, the same childhood friend also remembers that "'Adora was sick all the time. She was always having tubes and needles and such stuck in her'" (259). The novel thereby draws a connection between Adora's illnesses as a child and those of her daughter Marian, and this connection is reinforced by using similar imagery. An image similar to the "tubes and needles" stuck in Adora also appears in one of Camille's childhood memories of her sister: "Marian was a sweet series of diseases. She had trouble breathing from the start," Camille narrates (96-97). "Later she had trouble digesting and sat murmuring to her dolls in a hospital bed set up in her room, while [Adora] poured sustenance into her *through IVs and feeding tubes*" (97; emphasis added). Through this, the novel equates Adora's and Marian's experiences, implying that Adora may have been the victim of MSbP as well. In the end, whether Joya really had MSbP or not is not relevant. What is important is that the implication of her *potentially* having suffered from it and then having passed it on to her daughter Adora is there, and the novel thereby clearly echoes the concept of Mother Blame.

Although my focus here is on the mother figures in Camille's family and how they pervert motherhood ideals, various other 'bad' mothers appear in the novel, adding to its perpetuation of New Momism's narrow motherhood ideal. As the first-person narrator in *Sharp Objects*, Camille functions to connect these examples of 'bad' motherhood through her judgmental narration. In fact, the first quarter of *Sharp Objects* functions as a general introduction to the theme of motherhood with a focus on 'bad' mothers who deviate from the ideal by being neglectful. One of these examples appears on the novel's first page. Working as a journalist, and before traveling from Chicago to Wind Gap, Camille tells the story of Tammy Davis whose version of motherhood she clearly evaluates as 'bad':

> My story for the day was a limp sort of evil. Four kids, ages two through six, were found locked in a room on the South Side with a couple of tuna sandwiches and a quart of milk. They'd been left three days, flurrying like chickens over the food and feces on the carpet. Their mother had wandered off for a suck on the pipe and just forgotten. Sometimes that happens. No cigarette burns, no bone snaps. Just an irretrievable slipping. I'd seen the mother after the arrest: twenty-two-year-old Tammy Davis, blonde and fat, with pink rouge on her cheeks in two perfect circles the size of shot glasses. (1)

That Camille judges Tammy is clear because she introduces the story to readers as a "limp sort of evil" in the first place. Although Camille concedes that Tammy had "just forgotten" her kids and "[s]ometimes that happens," her initial description of the story as "evil" implies a degree of intentionality on Tammy's part. Particularly the image that Camille's narration invokes in the reader's mind of a young, drug-abusing mother who forgot about her children for a quick drug fix establishes that Camille is speaking from an assumed moral high ground. The description of Tammy's "pink rouge on her cheeks in two perfect circles the size of shot glasses" only broadens the notion of drug abuse through the reference to alcohol. At the same time, Tammy's neglect of her own appearance – suggested by her 'bad' make-up application and because Camille describes her as "fat" – implies a similar neglect towards her children. Tammy's 'fatness' furthermore characterizes her as selfish in Camille's eyes: while her children are "flurrying like chickens" over the inadequate food Tammy left for them, her body bears signs of overeating. Camille's judgment becomes more explicit later when she describes having had a dream about "the item on *miserable* Tammy Davis and her four *locked-up* children" (33; emphases added).

This introduction of 'bad' mothering via Tammy conditions readers to perceive neglectful mothering as most harmful for children through Camille's narration. In this context, Adora's performance of motherhood becomes significant: her version of mothering is introduced to readers as diametrically opposed to Tammy's, the 'bad' mother, because she is hyper-focused on nurturing and her mother role, among other things. Adora thus fulfills, or at least seems to fulfill, the ideal of "intensive mothering" purported by New Momism (Hays x). Importantly, though, Camille's narration still conditions readers to perceive even Adora's version of mothering as 'bad' by presenting it as peculiar and inappropriate, on the one hand, and by establishing that it continues the genealogy of perverted motherhood in the family initiated by Joya, on the other hand.

The peculiarity and inappropriateness of Adora's performance of motherhood is most obvious in her tendency to 'babyfy' her thirteen-year-old daughter Amma. This is exemplified best by the first representation of Adora in her role as mother that the reader encounters. A few days into Camille staying at her mother's house, she narrates the following episode: "Amma and my mother sat on the couch, my mother cradling Amma – in a woolen nightgown despite the heat – as she held an ice cube to her lips. My half-sister stared up at me with blank contentment, then went back to playing with a glowing mahogany table" for her dollhouse (Flynn 73). Although Amma is thirteen years old at the time, Adora still "cradl[es]" her daughter like a baby, something that seems even more peculiar when considering the size of Amma's body at that age. That Amma is playing with furniture for a dollhouse only intensifies the peculiarity. Like Camille's judgmental description of Tammy earlier, the way she narrates this scene between Adora and Amma as peculiar achieves a

similar effect in the reader, namely, to judge Adora's performance of motherhood as undesirable and transgressive. This becomes clearest in the way she introduces the episode to readers: "The scene was startling, it was so much like the old days with Marian" (73). As such, the "scene" not only functions to condition readers to evaluate Adora's version of mothering as "startling" and, therefore, peculiar, but also to foreshadow her suffering from MSbP by comparing the episode to Camille's memories of her deceased half-sister Marian.

The scene furthermore exemplifies how Adora perverts motherhood through conditional motherly love. In fact, as detailed in the introduction already, Adora herself suggests that because her own mother Joya neglected her, she developed a reactionary version of mothering that is conditional on her daughters' readiness to accept her love. Adora even admits this to Camille: "'You remind me of my mother. Joya. . . . My mother never loved me, either. And if you girls won't love me, I won't love you'" (190). Adora thereby also stays true to her telling name: She wants to be loved and 'adored' by her daughters, and only then does she love them back.

What is more, Adora's conditional motherly love and her habit of babyfying Amma are linked, showcasing her insistence that her daughters perform their role in alignment with her performance of motherhood. The scene quoted earlier where Adora "cradl[es]" Amma exemplifies that Adora and Amma's respective performances of mother- and daughterhood are reciprocal: Adora nurtures and Amma happily and passively receives her mother's care, evidenced by her "star[ing] up at Camille with blank contentment" (73). Adora's children thus only receive her love if they readily accept her mothering and thereby perform daughterhood in alignment with her role as mother. Camille, for example, remembers that she often refused her mother's 'care' in the form of medicine, or rather poison; her half-sister Marian, by contrast, did not. In the novel's present, Camille realizes that this made her lose Adora's "full attention as a mother" (74). This is even corroborated by Adora herself. In a diary entry from 1982, six years before Marian's death, she explains: "I've decided today to stop caring for Camille and focus on Marian. Camille has never become a good patient," which is, of course, Adora's way of expressing that Camille has never been a 'good daughter' (309). In fact, Adora's identity as a mother is dependent on her daughters being both: daughters *and* patients. This becomes clear when Adora continues explaining that "'Camille doesn't like me to touch her. I've never heard of such a thing. . . . I hate her'" (309). Camille's half-sister Marian, on the other hand, is a good patient/daughter: "Marian is such a doll when she's ill, she dotes on me terribly and wants me with her all the time. I love wiping away her tears" (309).[2]

[2] It is meaningful that Adora refers to Marian as "a doll" when she praises her performance of daughterhood. In fact, Adora not only babyfies her daughters but also 'dollifies' them, thereby imposing specific gendered performances onto them and effecting, as Miller argues, "a static vision in which girls are little more than objects of beauty and play" (497). Although Adora's habit

Adora's and Camille's relationship thus exemplifies Adora's conditional motherly love. In the scene quoted earlier in which Adora "cradles" Amma, for example, Adora ignores Camille consciously precisely *because* Camille does not conform to her mother's insistence on an idealized performance of daughterhood. Camille explains that she "was about to linger near [her] mother, waiting for her to put an arm around [her], too" (74). Adora, however, does not show any reaction: "My mother and Amma said nothing. My mother didn't even look up at me, just nuzzled Amma in closer to her, and cooed into her ear" (74). While this description of Adora might be read as her conforming to motherhood ideals because she is seemingly so invested in her role as mother that she forgets her surroundings, it must be read instead as a conscious choice by Adora to ignore Camille because Camille has never performed femininity in alignment with her performance of motherhood. In fact, Camille's stepfather Alan acknowledges and even speaks to Camille in the same scene, meaning that Adora not noticing Camille's arrival is even more unlikely.

On a broader level, Adora's insistence that her daughters match her performance of motherhood relates to further, collectively perceived gendered ideals in Camille's hometown, Wind Gap. According to Miller, because the novel is set in Missouri, this local ideal of femininity is highly influenced by "the social rules of Southern etiquette" which insist on "feminine behaviors that fulfil gendered stereotypes of passivity, silence, and compliance" (495). Adora herself regards these ideals highly in her daughters and attempts to enforce them through her mothering. Therefore, her loveless relationship with Camille must also be understood as Adora despising Camille's infringement of these local ideals of femininity: Precisely because Camille does not perform her role as daughter by passively accepting her mother's nurture, she fell out of favor with Adora. Adora's conditional motherly love is thus dependent on her daughters not only matching her performance of motherhood but also conforming to the local ideal of femininity.

The genealogy of perverted motherhood then finds its climax in Adora's daughter and Camille's half-sister Amma. Her murders of the local teenagers Ann and Natalie must be read as a climactic doubling of Adora's actions and recall both Adora's and Wind Gapians' insistence on idealized femininity. The novel introduces Ann and Natalie to readers as violating these ideals, thereby equating them. Ann's father, for example, tells Camille a story of Ann rejecting markers of idealized femininity: "My wife wanted to put her hair in rollers the night before school photos. Ann chopped it off instead. She was a willful thing. A tomboy" (26). Similarly, Natalie's brother describes Natalie as "kind of a tomboy," too (160). The girls are also equated through their propensity for violence. According to stories by police chief Vickery and other

of dollifying her daughters is another example of how she perverts motherhood, I am not further elaborating on this here for reasons of brevity.

locals, "[t]he girls weren't friends. Their only connection was their shared viciousness" (90). Vickery, for example, tells Camille that Ann "had killed a neighbor's pet bird with a stick" and Natalie and her family had "moved here [to Wind Gap] two years ago because she stabbed one of her classmates in the eye with a pair of scissors" (57). He even agrees with Camille's sarcastic comment that everyone in a small town like Wind Gap "knows who the bad seeds are" (57). Vickery's agreement suggests a communal perception of the girls as "bad" and highlights that these ideals of femininity are not just reinforced by Adora or a few locals but rather by the community generally.

Considering both Ann and Natalie's obvious rejection of idealized femininity, then, Amma murdering them functions as a symbolic correction of the other, 'not-ideal'-feminine. This is evidenced by Amma's *modus operandi* both before and after the killings which imposes stereotypical feminine beautification onto them. According to the FBI agent supporting the police investigation, "Natalie's fingernails were painted a bright pink. Ann's legs were shaved. They both had lipstick applied at some point" (299). In so doing, Amma exaggerates Adora's perverted performance of motherhood to an extreme: While Adora 'nurtures' only those daughters who conform to idealized femininity, Amma violently imposes those ideals onto Ann and Natalie. As Miller argues, Amma's murders enforce "an ideological framework" of ideal femininity by "ironically expos[ing] an insistence on the articulation of feminine behaviors that fulfil gendered stereotypes" (495).

What is more, Amma's *modus operandi* after the murders recalls the babyfying she experiences at the hands of Adora in a much more perverted way: By pulling the girls' teeth, Amma symbolically babyfies Ann and Natalie and violently enforces herself as their mother figure.[3] When Camille finds Natalie's corpse in the middle of town, the way Amma has placed her body functions as a symbolic reminder of how to perform femininity 'correctly': Her body is "aimed out at the sidewalk," visible to passengers, and she is "[w]edged in the foot-wide space between the hardware store and the beauty parlor" (34), two places denoting stereotypical masculinity and femininity. This placement comments on Natalie's liminal position as "tomboy," on the one hand. On the other hand, it reflects Amma's criticism of exactly that: Natalie's gendered performance is liminal, a death sentence in a town that, according to Camille, "demands utmost femininity in its fairer sex" (17).

As I have shown, *Sharp Objects* establishes a genealogy of perverted motherhood that intensifies from generation to generation. While the novel only implies that Joya

[3] That Amma pulls the girls' teeth also recalls Adora's habit of dollifying her daughters – which I mentioned in the previous footnote – albeit in an exaggerated way. Camille's description of Natalie's corpse corroborates this: With her teeth pulled, Natalie's "lips [cave] in around her gums in a small circle. She look[s] like a plastic baby-doll, the kind with the built-in hole for bottle feedings" (35).

may have suffered from MSbP, a nurse diagnoses Adora within the story world. Moreover, it is never clear whether Joya had any other children apart from Adora, but she clearly never killed Adora – although Joya abandoning Adora in the forest could be interpreted as attempted murder. Adora, on the other hand, *has* killed Marian. Joya and Adora's perversions of motherhood thus focus on their biological children. Amma, by contrast, and of course this is also because she is only thirteen, kills children who are not her biological children, imposing her role as mother onto them violently. Through this genealogy of perverted motherhood within Joya, Adora, and Amma, the novel suggests that their versions of motherhood are causally connected. In so doing, *Sharp Objects* perpetuates the myth of Mother Blame, also one of the central beliefs of the New Momism ideology, and thereby also supports the patriarchal system within which this ideology and myth are fostered in the first place.

Sharp Objects and Failed Matriarchy: Valorizing the Patriarchal Family

Apart from its propagation of Mother Blame and New Momism, *Sharp Objects* furthermore reinforces patriarchal ideology because it valorizes the patriarchal, nuclear family both throughout the novel and particularly through its ending. Tellingly, the novel's tagline on its front cover already suggests with a pun that non-patriarchal family structures, such as matriarchally hierarchized ones, are a breeding ground for toxicity, to use the terminology in the tagline. Referring to Camille's family, it declares that "[t]his family isn't nuclear, it's toxic." Importantly, the previously analyzed perversions of motherhood in Camille's family – the toxicity to which the tagline refers – originate from family structures that 'lack' a patriarchal order. *Sharp Objects* thus implies that matriarchally structured family units are a 'toxic,' unhealthy breeding ground for perverted motherhood because they cannot produce children without developmental issues. In so doing, the novel ultimately valorizes the patriarchal, nuclear family by representing it as the only family unit able to do so instead.

The 'lack' of patriarchal order within Camille's family, just like perverted motherhood, is multi-generational, and reaches across two generations. Camille's family is matriarchally structured because, on the one hand, husbands and fathers are absent either literally – such as Camille's biological father about whom she "knows almost nothing" (96) – or figuratively because they are quiet and passive. Camille's grandfather, for example, was so passive that a family friend "do[es]n't even remember his name. Herbert? Herman? He was never around, and when he was, he was just quiet and… away" (259). The same family friend also equates both father figures in Camille's family by describing them as similarly passive and by explaining that Camille's grandfather was just "like Alan" (259), Marian and Amma's biological father and Camille's stepfather. On the other hand, the mother figures in Camille's family,

particularly Adora, hold more power than the father figures. Early in the novel, Camille explains that Adora insisted that she "was to be considered Alan's child" (96). Both Camille and Alan lived by that rule, negotiating Adora's position of power in the family. As a father figure, however, Alan was only a façade, a means to portray a public image of an idyllic nuclear, patriarchal family. Camille remembers that she was "never really fathered by him, never encouraged to call him anything but his proper name" (96). Instead, Camille explains that "Adora prefers [them] to feel like strangers" and "wants all relationships in the house to run through her" (96), further cementing her position of power within the family. Adora's powerful position as matriarch is substantiated by Camille's characterization of Alan, which underlines not only his passivity but also his subordination to Adora: Alan is "a ribbon-winning equestrian who doesn't ride anymore because it makes Adora nervous" and who "seems content to let my mother do most of the talking" (96). Evidently, then, the family structures within which perverted motherhood is fostered in *Sharp Objects* are distinctly non-patriarchal.

In this context, Camille's relationship to her boss at the newspaper in Chicago, Frank Curry, referred to as Curry, and his wife Eileen is meaningful. As a family unit, they function as a foil to Camille's biological family and represent the ideal of a nuclear and patriarchally structured family. Although Curry and Eileen seemingly deviate from this ideal because they have no children, Camille's relationship to them mirrors that of a child-parent relationship. Importantly, Camille assumes that Curry and Eileen are not without children by choice. Instead, she suspects that "they'd been unable to conceive" because they married late (100). Unlike her biological family, they provide comfort to her, Camille phones them regularly for advice, and especially Eileen has a soothing effect on her. Eileen conforms to essentialist ideals of femininity and, by extension, motherhood, although she is not a mother per se. When Camille phones the Currys one time and Eileen picks up, for example, Camille describes her voice as "soft and steady as a hill" (295). Another time, "Eileen was warm when she answered the phone, which was what [Camille] needed" while staying at her mother's house (101). Eileen's warmth thus contrasts with Adora's coldness, a characteristic Camille even points out to Adora: "I never felt anything but coldness from you" (190). Ultimately, Eileen is characterized to readers as particularly nurturing, and she thus also functions as a foil to Adora whose conditional motherly love deviates from idealized motherhood.

What is more, Eileen and Curry represent the ideal of a nuclear, patriarchal family because they perform their gendered roles within this unit in a way that matches idealized and essentialist conceptions of gender. As I have shown, it is particularly Eileen's warmth and soothing effect on Camille that mark her as conforming to idealized woman- and motherhood. Curry is also nurturing towards Camille, not only

in his roles as her boss and professional mentor but also as a substitute father figure.[4] Importantly, however, he retains a relative distance as well as a gender and age hierarchy and thereby performs his role in a way that matches essentialist and patriarchal conceptions of it. This is exemplified by Curry's nicknames for Camille. He refers to Camille either as "kiddo" (2, 6) or "my girl" (80, 101), two nicknames which invoke a stereotypical father-daughter relationship, or as "Cubby" (102, 215, 216, 296), an endearment of "cub reporter" (102). Curry's double role of professional mentor and father figure is also implied in the nickname "Cubby": it is both close to his own name, 'Curry,' and, at the same time, marks Camille as a "cub," that is, 'young reporter.' What is more, by calling Camille "kiddo," "girl," and "cub," Curry clearly establishes a hierarchy between the two based on their age difference, thereby retaining distance while expressing his fondness for Camille at the same time.

Another instance towards the novel's end furthermore exemplifies both Curry and Eileen's adherence to traditional gender roles in a rescue scene Camille imagines. This imagined scene highlights not only that Curry and Eileen represent the ideal of a nuclear, patriarchal family but also that Camille obviously yearns to be part of such a family unit precisely *because* she imagines them as conforming to that ideal in the first place. By the time in the novel when Camille imagines the scene, she has already grown increasingly suspicious and afraid of Adora, suspecting that she has killed her half-sister Marian and possibly also the local teenagers Ann and Natalie. Paralyzed by fear, with her "hands . . . sweating" while her mother is outside her room, Camille turns her mind to the Currys for comfort and imagines them rescuing her: "I had a flash of Curry, one of his crappy ties swinging wildly over his belly, bursting into the room to save me. Carrying me off in his smoky Ford Taurus, Eileen stroking my hair on the way back to Chicago" (244-45). It is telling that, even though the scene only happens in Camille's mind, the way that Curry and Eileen perform gender here conforms to essentialist conceptions of it and, by extension, to an idealized image of the patriarchal, nuclear family: Frank is strong and active, performing a fatherly and heroic role by "bursting into the room to save" Camille (244-45); Eileen, at the same time, is calm and comforting, simply "stroking [Camille's] hair" (245).

Eventually, this imagined rescue scene becomes a reality, albeit not as Hollywoodesque as in Camille's imagination. Regardless, the scene recalls the same values that the imagined one did because Curry and Eileen still adhere to traditional gender roles. For my final line of arguments to make sense, I want to summarize the order of events towards the novel's end: The police arrest Adora for the murders of Marian,

[4] Although I stated in the introduction that neoliberalism does not factor into my interpretation, it is worth noting that Curry strikingly functions to connect neoliberalism and the domestic by being both Camille's professional mentor and a father figure for her. Through this, *Sharp Objects* links neoliberalism and patriarchy and equates them as positive systems.

Ann, and Natalie, assuming they are connected. Camille becomes Amma's guardian, and, together, they return to Chicago. There, Amma kills another teenager with the same *modus operandi*, thereby acquitting Adora of killing Ann and Natalie but not of killing Marian. Eventually, Amma is found guilty of murdering Ann, Natalie, and the teen in Chicago. Once both Adora and Amma are incarcerated, Curry and Eileen take Camille into their home. Now, their formerly childless family is no longer childless because Camille functions as their substitute child:

> Curry and Eileen packed my things and took me to their home, where I have a bed and some space in what was once a basement rec room. . . . I am learning to be cared for. I am learning to be parented. Eileen and Curry wake me in the morning and put me to bed with kisses (or in Curry's case, a gentle chuck under the chin). . . . Eileen runs my bath and sometimes brushes my hair. (321)

Although equality is suggested between the two, the way they care for Camille still recalls the separation of gendered roles in the earlier rescue scene. Eileen puts Camille "to bed with kisses," emphasis on the plural. Curry, on the other hand, gives Camille "a," meaning one, "gentle chuck under the chin." Curry retains his relative distance, and Eileen continues her nurturing care. The Currys thereby confirm their role as a patriarchal, nuclear family.

Within this family, Camille can now find comfort and improve her mental health. Recalling the novel's tagline, Camille's biological family is established as distinctly non-patriarchal and, therefore, 'toxic' and unhealthy. The Currys, by contrast, are the exact opposite, and only this family unit can allow Camille to better her mental health which has suffered greatly in her biological family. This is evidenced by the fact that neither her tendency to self-harm (which started in her youth and lasted into her adulthood), nor the genealogy of perverted motherhood continue now that she is living with Curry and Eileen, the ideal nuclear family. In fact, "[a]ll sharp objects have been locked up" by the two, but Camille explains that she "ha[s]n't tried too hard to get at them" anyways (321). She does not need to, she can now be a child, or rather, child-like, because she is now "learning to be cared for . . . learning to be parented," as she puts it (321).

Ultimately, the novel's last lines and particularly Camille's thoughts effect a final valorization of the patriarchal, nuclear family. *Sharp Objects* ends with Camille pondering the question whether she "was . . . good at caring for Amma because of kindness" when she was her guardian, or whether she "like[d] caring for Amma because [she] ha[s] Adora's sickness," that is, MSbP (321). Camille's answer to her question again suggests that the order the patriarchal, nuclear family provides and the development of idealized mother- and womanhood are connected: "Lately," Camille says, referring to her staying within the 'healing' patriarchal, nuclear family, "I've been leaning towards kindness" (321). By juxtaposing "kindness," connoting idealized motherhood as promulgated by New Momism, and "sickness," connoting perverted

motherhood, both Camille and the novel clearly hierarchize one over the other. At the same time, Camille's self-assessment of having been "good at caring for Amma" and her final "leaning towards kindness" imply that a woman is inherently 'good' and can perform motherhood with "kindness" if – and only if – she is part of a patriarchal family. The ending thus also implies that Camille can figuratively break the cycle of "sickness" within her family precisely because she is willing to join a patriarchal family.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have shown that *Sharp Objects* reinforces patriarchal ideology by creating a genealogy of perverted motherhood in Camille's family and thereby echoing the cultural myth of Mother Blame. Because these instances of perverted motherhood are placed within family units that 'lack' a patriarchal order, the novel also advocates for the superiority of the patriarchal, nuclear family. This is also evidenced by the 'healing' powers Camille experiences regarding her mental health while staying with Curry and Eileen, who represent an idealized version of the nuclear family and thereby function as a foil to Camille's biological family. While I acknowledge that the novel does reconceptualize motherhood to some extent by subverting essentialist conceptions of it as inherently nurturing, I have shown that this reconceptualization is limited precisely because other essentialist and patriarchal ideologies are clearly perpetuated at the same time.

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