

Manipulating Perceptions: The Strategic Use of Gender Stereotypes in David Fincher's *Gone Girl* for Narrative Misdirection

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Abstract: This paper explores how David Fincher's *Gone Girl* strategically employs gender stereotypes to create deliberate narrative misdirection in the movie's first half. The film initially presents Nick Dunne as an emotionally detached and potentially abusive husband, while Amy Dunne is portrayed as a vulnerable, victimized wife. These characterizations align with societal gender stereotypes, reinforcing expectations of male dominance and female weakness. However, the narrative unfolds and these stereotypes are subverted, revealing the female character as the true manipulator who uses her perceived victimhood to control and frame the male lead. This study analyzes the film's *mise-en-scène*, character dialogues, and monologues, highlighting how gender stereotypes are manipulated to deceive both characters within the film and the audience leading up to the turn of events. By adhering to and then challenging these stereotypes, the film critiques societal assumptions about gender roles, demonstrating the destructive power of these stereotypes when used to manipulate perception. Ultimately, the research underscores how *Gone Girl* uses gender norms not just as a narrative tool, but as a means to critique the absurdity and dangers of rigid gender expectations.

Keywords: character perception, gender stereotypes, *Gone Girl*, narrative misdirection

Abstrak: Makalah ini mengulas bagaimana film *Gone Girl* karya David Fincher memanfaatkan stereotip gender untuk menciptakan penyimpangan naratif yang disengaja pada paruh pertama film. Pada awalnya, Fincher menampilkan Nick Dunne sebagai suami yang tidak pengertian dan berpotensi melakukan kekerasan, sementara Amy Dunne digambarkan sebagai istri yang lemah dan rentan menjadi korban kekerasan. Karakterisasi ini sesuai dengan stereotip gender yang ada di masyarakat, memperkuat ekspektasi akan dominasi pria dan ketidakberdayaan wanita. Namun, seiring perkembangan narasi, stereotip gender dibantah dengan dimunculkannya karakter asli perempuan sebagai manipulator yang menggunakan citra dirinya sebagai korban untuk mengendalikan dan menjebak pemeran utama laki-laki. Penelitian ini menganalisis *mise-en-scène* film, dialog karakter, dan monolog, menyoroti bagaimana stereotip gender dimanipulasi untuk menipu karakter dalam film dan penonton menjelang pelintiran alur cerita. Dengan mengikuti dan kemudian menantang stereotip gender, film ini mengkritik asumsi masyarakat tentang peran gender dan menunjukkan kekuatan destruktif dari stereotip tersebut ketika digunakan untuk memanipulasi persepsi. Pada akhirnya, penelitian ini menekankan bagaimana *Gone Girl* menggunakan norma-norma gender tidak hanya sebagai alat naratif, tetapi juga sebagai sarana untuk mengkritik absurditas dan bahaya dari ekspektasi gender yang kaku.

Kata kunci: persepsi karakter, stereotip gender, *Gone Girl*, penyimpangan narasi

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender is the values and characteristics that people ascribe to different sexes (Blackstone, 2003). The difference between men and women is captured by the stereotypical images of each gender. Gender stereotypes are the widely accepted belief of how all men and women would think and behave (Ellemers, 2018). Through the existing stereotypical images, society expects each gender to act

following the stereotypical image of their gender. It also may influence the perception of individuals themselves. Being a pervasive stereotype, the gender stereotype mirrors the general expectation of the social role that each gender holds (Xu, Zhang, Wu, & Wang, 2019). The gender stereotype creates an image of each gender's trait, including female's dependency on males. The male and female genders differ in their social perception and expectations.

Women are considered to be more likely to be victimized than men, and women are assigned more general and characterological blame than men (Howard, 1984). Following the widely accepted gender stereotype, women are considered weaker than men, and this results in women being viewed as more possible victims than men. The gendering effect demonstrates the stereotype that the victim is feminine and the offender is masculine (Mulder, Pemberton, & Vingerhoets, 2019).

Mise-en-scene is the arrangement of film elements that is seen in front of the camera (Bordwell & Thompson, 2003). The narrative of the film is impacted by these elements, including décor, lighting, space, costumes, and acting. They play a significant role in delivering meaning through visuals and imparting an atmosphere to the story. It includes the properties set as part of stage design, the movement and positioning of on-screen characters, and the visual composition (Barsam & Monahan, 2010).

The film explored many themes, including societal gender stereotypes and norms, through the depiction of both main characters. Nick and Amy play on the stereotype of man and woman norm. As in the beginning, Nick is depicted as an ignorant and manipulative husband, whilst Amy is portrayed as the dependent, weak wife. This research holds importance, as it highlights the influence of societal role for each gender. Often, gender stereotypes remain unnoticed, yet they significantly impact societal perceptions. By examining how the gender stereotype is utilized in a media form, there is a better understanding of how it shapes and be used to manipulate public views on gender. This essay thus explores the question: How does David Fincher utilize the gender stereotype in the film *Gone Girl* to create a deliberate misdirection in the narrative?

2. METHODOLOGY

Critical essays discussing this film frequently psychoanalyze Amy Dunne's character and examine the domestic relationship of the Dunne household. However, this research will highlight how Amy and Nick follow the gender stereotype to establish their role in the relationship which further creates the misdirection in the film. This essay reviews the critical essay regarding Amy's character to see the contrast both essays discuss. This research question is worth investigating since it focuses more on how the film successfully creates a misdirection by emphasizing the weak nature of women.

To investigate the research question stated above, the characterization of both Nick and Amy will be explored to discuss the topics of women's portrayal, male portrayal, and the reveal scene. Using descriptive qualitative research with triangulation, peer review, and consultations. The research will be conducted with mise-en-scene analysis, identification and analysis of dialogues from the film, and the characters' monologues and attitudes will be explored. The author uses the official final shooting script as a reference for the scenes, however, due to the minor differences found between the final shooting script and the dialogue in the film, the data are taken from the actual utterances in the film. The data findings will be compared to see how gender stereotypes are implemented in the film.

3. RESULT AND FINDINGS

a. Analyzing Women's Stereotypes through Complex Female Characters

The film *Gone Girl* focuses on the married couple Nick Dunne and Amy Dunne. The story is told from the perspective of both characters, with Nick's point of view being the present day, during the investigation of Amy's disappearance, and Amy's point of view being flashbacks narrated from her diary about their relationship. Through her voice-over narrative, the audience can understand the beginning stages of their relationship and gradually realize the downfall of their relationship. As it was written in the early days of their romantic relationship, Amy is still head over heels for Nick, praising Nick, and repeatedly showing her happiness over meeting him.

In Amy's narrative's first emergence, Amy is instantly depicted as a feminine woman, as seen by her diary log written with a pink pen. After Nick's unflattering introduction to their relationship, Amy is posed to be positively glorifying their relationship. Without showing her expression, this scene resembles her happiness over their relationship. Using simple, hyperbole words, her first voice-over line and first line in her diary imply the shallowness of a woman's mind, as her happiness depends on a man's attitude toward her. At the same time, as she expresses her feelings using a girly pen, writing with underlining and an exclamation mark, she objects to the women stereotype, as women are mostly depicted as dramatic and vocal about their feelings.

Nick: "Excuse me, ms? I just want you to be careful where you put down that, uh, monk-brewed Belgian wheat beer"

Amy then went on to explain in detail her encounter with Nick. This meet-up shows Amy as a vulnerable woman whom Nick needs to save, as seen in the quotation above. The implication of this scene is women are weaker than men, as women do not think fully, meaning that they need protection from a man. Using an eye-level close shot, Amy's change of expression is highlighted. Upon seeing her friend with a guy while she remains alone, her initial desperate look is lit up upon being approached by Nick. Nick is in the shot, a blurred back view of his figure closer to the camera. This mise-en-scene portrays Nick as a bigger more significant character than Amy, while she is the one in focus, this scene revolves around Nick approaching Amy. As they exchange dialogues, the lighting in this scene depicts Nick as the light source for Amy, as only the left side of her face is lit up, the side facing Nick.



Image 1. Amy and Nick's first encounter at a party

The portrayal of Amy as a weak woman in need of protection from men is again shown in the second flashback scene, a diary entry titled 'Amazing Fucking Amy is getting fucking married!' as Amy is shown to be feeling inferior to her literary alter ego, as her character gets married before she does. In this scene, she loses to her literary alter ego on a subject that reflects society's expectation for women to get married. She is then shown to be attacked by pesky journalists, and Amy is portrayed to be embarrassed as the journalists compare her and her alter ego. However, her expression is lit up again as Nick swoops in and saves her by proposing. Nick's proposal triggered an extensive amount

of happiness from Amy where it can be inferred that getting married will solve all her problems, seen in the quotation below.

Amy: "And then, the night wasn't so bad anymore."

This film depicts Amy Dunne as a calm, soft-spoken, and graceful woman. She is shown to be a good wife as she is repeatedly shown to be calming Nick's temper. The depiction of her grace is emphasized in a flashback scene to the regression, showing Amy's ability to calm Nick down in an instant, as seen in the quotation below.

Amy: "We have each other. Everything else is background noise"

Nick: "You are...exceptional"

Even though the apartment is dimly lit, Amy's figure is portrayed clearly. This mise en scene shows Amy's role as the light source in the darkness. In accordance with the female stereotype, her job is to make her husband feel better and become his source of happiness. This job is further emphasized when Amy explains that she made a decision without involving Nick, her independence is responded with irritation from Nick, emphasizing that a woman is not able to make their own decisions and hence should depend on their man.

During their fallout, Amy admitted to changing herself for Nick to 'The kind of woman I used to mock' reiterating the point that Amy is conforming to the gender stereotype. By saying 'the kind' she admits that there are types of women stereotypes, one of which she is condoning. This refers to her efforts to hold back Nick from going out and forcing him to keep her company. Amy is usually a calm woman who argues in a mannerly fashion. However, in this scene, she portrays herself as more flirtatious than usual. This unexpected argument led to her expressing her desire to have a kid. This scene portrays both characters in accordance with their respective gender stereotypes. Amy is portrayed as a maternal figure who wants to have a child. While Nick views offspring as a burden that he lacks the desire to possess. As the argument's heat tops off, Amy is thrown on the ground by Nick. This turning point in the narrative highlights Amy's vulnerability contrasted to Nick. With the high-angle shot of Amy lying helplessly on the ground, she is depicted as the ultimate victim of this relationship.



Image 2. Nick and Amy's dispute

Another scene depicts Amy in a bubble bath, enjoying her time alone. Amy is shown with a long shot from the doorway, seemingly calmly rinsing her feet dry from bubbles. Then a figure close to the camera passes and covers Amy in the scene, this figure is then shown to be Nick lurking around the

hallway. This seemingly simple scenario led to her quickly changing her expression and submerging herself deeper in the bubbles. This anxious expression over Nick's seemingly simple behavior depicts her as a helpless victim of an abusive husband. The use of a long shot of Amy's increasingly anxious face depicts her as smaller and helpless compared to Nick.



Image 3. Bubble bath

b. Dissecting Men's Stereotypes Through Male Archetypes

In the film's first scene, the audience is shown Nick's point of view. A close-up shot of the back of Amy's head lying on Nick's chest with a voiceover by Nick,

*Nick: "When I think of my wife...I always think of her head.
I picture cracking her lovely skull, unspooling her brains...trying to get answers."*

This initial introduction instantly depicts Nick as a violent husband. Amy is resting her head on Nick, showing trust and dependency, however, even though Nick is gently caressing her hair, the audience is shown the contrast of violent thoughts in his head. Through this first scene, Nick is shown to tend towards violence, even though in this scene his thoughts are hyperbolic.

The next scene shows Nick going to The Bar, a bar he and his twin sister owned. Nick then shows his lack of happiness about Dunne's fifth wedding anniversary. This is depicted through his straight face while saying

Nick: "I'm just having a bad day. It's our anniversary."

This scene ends with a fade-to-black transition to Amy's first diary log about the start of their relationship. This juxtaposition shows the difference of the two characters in the relationship. The wife is depicted to be emotional and have a drive for their relationship. At the same time the husband is shown to be emotionally distant and chooses to spend their anniversary at the bar away from his wife. Nick adheres to the male stereotype, as he is shown to be aggressive and doesn't express his emotions.

This is further strengthened by the flashback scene where he is shown to be showing interest in Amy, however, he approaches her with a straight face, in contrast to Amy's constant bright smile. His approach to Amy includes his assertion of dominance and power, as he gives a warning to Amy about her safety. Adhering to the stereotype that males are stronger than females, hence, males should be able to protect females from danger. The medium shot of Amy and Nick talking side by side shows their height difference, Nick is taller. This, in addition to Nick carrying the conversation, shows his dominance over Amy, him being the guy in the relationship.

Nick: "I'm the guy to save you from all this awesomeness"

This line is spoken by Nick, whilst the shot only shows Amy against a wall smiling at him. The back of Nick's head can be seen poorly lit as a silhouette. This scene shows Nick's immense power. Even without his character being shown in the scene, the audience can see the shift of power that Nick controls over Amy. The utilization of a medium shot emphasizes Nick's superiority over Amy, as

the scene mainly focuses on showing Amy's admiration towards Nick.



Image 4. Nick and Amy at a party

Since the start of the investigation, Nick is portrayed as a horrible husband to Amy. He can't answer any questions from the police, showing his uncaring behavior towards his wife. His lack of knowledge of superficial information about Amy starts to raise the public's suspicion towards Nick. He is questioned at the police station, using a white light that sets the cold ambiance of the situation. This establishes Nick's cold behavior towards his wife, showing his apathy and lack of care.

Males are commonly depicted as lazy and stupid (Kleinfeld, 2009). This stereotype is used in the investigation, as the crime scene is found to be poorly cleaned. Upon this discovery, both the male and female detectives are more evident in pointing their fingers at Nick. As Nick is portrayed as an apathetic husband, they assume that Nick will also be indifferent towards a crime scene. This blame shows that the detectives assign Nick to the stereotype that males are lazy and won't be able to clean properly.

In the flashback scene to Nick's proposal, Nick comments on the stereotype of how a female is obligated to be married, as Nick states the condition of Amy not being married to be a situation he should fix. Nick also presents himself as a savior to Amy's life problems. This perception is accepted by Amy as the audience can see her face lit up upon being proposed, shown in the line below

Nick: "Isn't it time we fixed that"

Then a flashback scene presents the Dunnes in a recession, where they both lost their job, and Amy lent her parents money from her trust fund. This led to a quarrel between the couple,

Amy: "I say I'd do it"

Nick: "Without talking to me?"

This scene depicts Amy as a graceful female who can calm her husband in a tragedy. In the same scene, Nick's temperament is shown as his tone immediately shifts upon being told that his wife did something without consulting him first. This establishes Nick's perception of his role in the relationship as he views himself as the decision-maker and that he knows the best for their family. The dim New York apartment lighting further emphasizes their grim situation. Nick is facing the light source while wearing a black t-shirt, hence only half of his face is lit up, this establishes the dark side that Nick possesses. Nick repeatedly condones the male stereotype as he views himself as superior to Amy, he portrays himself as the one holding control over their relationship.

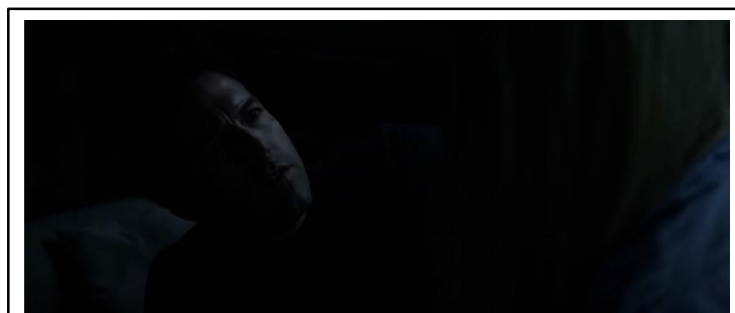


Image 5. Nick and Amy during a recession

This scene fades to another scene showing Amy's desperation as she walks into the house and sees Nick recklessly spending their money during the economic regression for takeouts, beers, and games. The composition in which the characters are framed in the scene suggests a widening gap between them, showing the deterioration of their marriage (Coro, 2018). This scene shows Nick's inability to judge priorities as he buys games instead of searching for a job. Nick's lack of judgment is further established by his replies to Amy's concern with the line below,

Nick: "Yeah, I just wanted to shoot some folks"

Nick is shown to be prioritizing his needs above his family's. All the things that he bought satisfied only him. This is also emphasized through his constant focus on the TV screen, answering Amy's questions halfheartedly without thinking. His reply also restates his tendency to violence, as he calms himself through violence. The scene then follows with Nick losing his temper and picking up a fight over Amy's calm demeanor. He mentions prenuptial agreement, as Amy criticizes his reckless spending on games, as he implies that they have an unfair agreement on money.

c. Unveiling Facade: the Narrative Misdirection

At 1:06:16 in the film, the story cuts back to the day Amy has gone missing, showing her being well and alive. This contrasts with the previous scene, which shows Amy being petrified by Nick's possible intention of murdering her. This scene becomes the plot twist of the film, as the audience is shown that they were misled from the start. This reveal shows how each main character, Nick and Amy, in reality, subverts the gender stereotype instead of following it as what Fincher leads the audience to believe.

The lighting in this scene is bright, unlike the scenes before the reveal which use dim lighting to create shadows in the characters' faces and emphasize the story's dark tone. As the point of view is switched to Amy's, the bright lighting implies the upper hand that Amy holds during the case. The monologue also reveals that each of the diary entries providing the audience with Amy's point of view turns out to be fabricated by Amy. Hence, the lighting in the monologue emphasizes Amy's contentment with the situation.

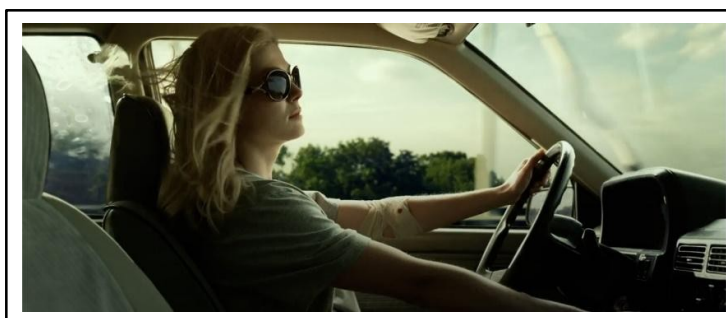


Image 6. Amy's Cool Girl monologue

This monologue reveals the manipulation of a female character who is portrayed as fitting the gender stereotype: their neighbor Noelle Hawthorne. She is depicted to be comically an exact representation of a suburban housewife, an example of her shallowness is depicted in a scene where she objects to a question and answer session with the detective because she has a motherly duty at that time, shown in the line below.

Noelle: "But that's usually bathtime."

The characterization of Noelle Hawthorne includes being a pottery barn lover, coffee table book collector, loves to dress up her identical triplets, and being a dense woman. Her character is used by Amy as a pawn in her game, as she is easily manipulated. Noelle's dramatic behavior becomes a key to Amy's game as she needs Noelle to open her secret in front of the media. Noelle's entire screen time shows her fitting into the gender stereotype. She is dramatic, easily manipulated, emotional, and exaggerates her words. Her shallow character is further emphasized in Amy's reveal monologue, as she repeatedly utilizes Noelle's idiocracy to her advantage.

Amy: "Befriend the local idiot"

Amy's monologue highlights the ways in which Fincher twists the stereotype surrounding gender, as he shows the contrast of two female characters that follow the gender stereotype while the other one breaks it. Fincher challenges the extent to which the gender stereotype can be manipulated to narrate a story.

This monologue reveals how Amy's characterization is written around the gender stereotype. She portrays herself according to the women stereotype and utilizes the male stereotype in her effort to frame Nick. Amy emphasizes her weakness as a woman contrasting to her husband's domineering personality. She also builds the crime scene with mistakes that she believes will point to a man.

Amy: "My lazy, lying, cheating oblivious husband" Amy: "You need to clean poorly...like he would"

Thus, confirming her manipulation of the gender stereotype. She believes that people will associate the stupid mistakes she meticulously planted with something a man will do. In addition to that, she states the carefree nature of a man, as they won't think thoroughly about cleaning the crime scene, or that they aren't able to clean.

Amy: "And cram her with stories about your husband's violent temper"

The line above is a voiceover on a scene with a medium length shot, highlighting the tears streaming down her face as she calmly explains to Noelle about her lack of power over Nick. The shaking hand gesture conveyed by Amy while telling this story emphasizes the buried anxiety that she holds over her husband's behavior. Thus, Amy portrays herself as a calm woman who holds back any negative emotions that she feels.

Amy also states the stereotype of women's pregnancy, showing pregnancy as a state that makes women more likable to society.

Amy: "America loves pregnant women"

It suggests the stereotype that women are only useful in a feminine manner; being married and producing offspring. Amy herself condones the stereotype, as she knows that society and media are more likely to be on the side of the feminine, weak, dependent, loving women.

Amy: "The world will hate Nick for killing his beautiful, pregnant wife"

She also suggests that beauty is an important aspect of a woman, as she juxtaposes Nick's violent behavior of killing with her beauty. This implies that without having beauty, the world will like women less.

Amy's monologue also states her manipulative nature since the start of the relationship, as she reveals that she alters her characters to better fit Nick's preference. This preference is said to be a general preference by all men, a desire to have a 'Cool Girl'

Amy: "Cool Girl never gets angry at her man. She only smiles in a chagrined, loving manner"

Amy's description of the Cool Girl characteristic with simple syntax and repetition of the character Cool Girl emphasizes the submissive nature of women that men adore. Cool Girl is a calm, obedient woman who follows their man's wish.

4. CONCLUSION

Fincher challenges the gender stereotype in the narrative twist, creating a belief in the audience's mind that Amy is a weak woman and Nick is a manipulative abusive man. The gender stereotype is an important part of the narrative of the film as it sets the dynamic between the main characters. The depiction of Nick and Amy Dunne is highly influenced by their gender, especially in Amy's point of view as she manipulates the stereotype and emphasizes the nature of each gender. This research explores the first half of the film, analyzing the effect of characters written to conform to the gender stereotype. The first half of the film abused the concept of gender stereotypes, emphasizing the power that men hold and the weak nature of women. The utilization of gender stereotypes highlights the societal perception of each gender, the film acts as if it has a predictable plot, as it conforms to the gender stereotype. This point is true, as the plot that Amy, the woman, is holding control of the whole situation is portrayed as a plot twist.

The emphasis on gender stereotypes on each character mirrors the societal expectation of the role that each gender holds. The film acts as a societal critique, showing how the gender stereotype is an absurd concept that will not always mirror the truth. Gender stereotypes can act as a destructive force, this is shown in the film through the media's blame on Nick based on the societal perception of male violence and female victimhood. Furthermore, it highlights the power of gender stereotypes, as it has created a patent image in society's mind about each gender, showing that it can be utilized to manipulate and control the narrative.

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