

The Poison Trickles Down: Maternal Trauma in Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects*

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Georgia Jade Wynn

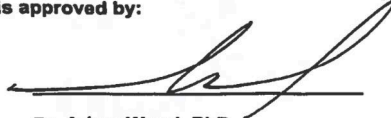
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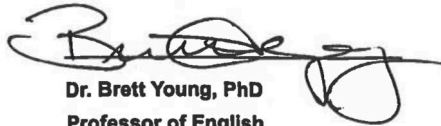
Committee

Dr. Adam Wood, PhD

Chair:

Professor of English

Committee



Member:

Dr. Brett Young, PhD

Professor of English



Dr. Haley Sherman, PhD

Professor of Psychology

Associate

Provost for



Graduate

Dr. Becky K da Cruz, PhD, J.D.

Studies and

Professor of Criminal Justice

Research:

Defense Date:

17 April 2025

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the way maternal abuse cycles form and evolve in Gillian Flynn's contemporary thriller, *Sharp Objects*. I refer to mother-daughter relationships as matrafemafilial relationships. Building off Carl Jung's archetypes, I discuss how assumptions are powerful in the way they shape communal perspectives surrounding women and motherhood. When societies present strict views of motherhood, they may unknowingly contribute to the perpetuation of hidden abuse cycles. Maternal abuse is dangerous, often appearing under the guise of maternal care. In *Sharp Objects*, Camille Preaker's mother, Adora Crellin, has Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy, and the text suggests that her mother, Joya, may have also had the disorder. Adora passes on her abusive tendencies to her daughters, and the cycle of abuse remains in the family for a while. Eventually, the trauma spreads out, negatively affecting others in the community.

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When I was 8 years old, I picked up a book on schizophrenia at a little library in Hahira, Georgia. Later, I came to realize how monumental that moment was. I grew to love psychology and literature, and my passion for those subjects continues to fuel my research. I would like to thank the Lord for giving me the opportunity to study topics that inspire me. God continues building connections in my life and making a way for me.

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DEDICATION

*For my momma, Brandi Gartman,
Who gave me everything, so I could become anything
Who read to me until I loved language and developed imagination
This thesis would not exist without you
I thank the Lord for you
I love you*

Table of Contents

Overview of Research.....	1
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	2
Chapter 2: Assumptions, Stereotypes, & Sexism	5
<i>Archetypes & Stereotypes</i>	6
<i>Sexism in Sharp Objects</i>	7
<i>Adora & Ideal Motherhood</i>	10
<i>The Dangers of Benevolent Sexism</i>	11
<i>Sexism & Murders</i>	12
<i>Women are Wonderful</i>	14
Chapter 3: Female Abusers & Trauma.....	16
<i>MSBP in Sharp Objects</i>	17
<i>Matrophobia in Sharp Objects</i>	20
<i>Amma's Reverse Matrophobia</i>	25
<i>Amma's Dollhouse</i>	28
Chapter 4: Inside or Out - Transmission of Trauma Cycles.....	31
<i>Identity Erasure</i>	32
<i>Bowen's Fusion</i>	33
<i>Bowen's Differentiation of Self</i>	34
<i>Bowen's Nuclear Family Emotional System</i>	37
<i>Hidden Natures and Society</i>	38

Ecological-Transactional Trauma.....39

Chapter 5: Conclusion.....42

Works Cited.....45

Appendix A: Adora’s Family Tree50

Overview of Research

This thesis examines the relationship between societal assumptions about women, motherhood, and the generational cycles of maternal and female abuse in Gillian Flynn's contemporary thriller *Sharp Objects*. I integrate Jung's archetypes and Thomas's stereotypes to provide context surrounding the ways societies conceptualize the positive and negative sides of motherhood. I use the Women are Wonderful effect to serve as a possible explanation for the way people tend to ascribe more positive characteristics to women. To emphasize the ways mother-daughter relationships affect daughters, I implement research surrounding matrophobic hostility and reverse matrophobia (matraphilia) in modern literature. I use Bowen's Family Systems Theory to show how maternal abuse diminishes daughters' subjectivity, causing them to fuse with their mother. Additionally, I explore the environmental-transactional theory of trauma, which emphasizes how environmental factors influence the perpetuation of trauma cycles.

Key Terms:

Matrafemafilial relationships: Mother-daughter relationships

Matrophobia: Fear of becoming like one's mother

Matrophilia (reverse matrophobia): Desire to become like one's mother

Chapter 1: Introduction

“We could therefore say that every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her mother, and that every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter”

— Carl Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*

Medicine and poison can look the same, so can monsters and mothers. Gillian Flynn’s contemporary thriller, *Sharp Objects* (2006), explores female violence and woman’s dual identity as victim and abuser, which challenges the traditional, western view of women as victims and men as abusers. Flynn’s text unveils the ways societal assumptions engender a collective, auspicious view of motherhood and femininity. In *Sharp Objects*, maternal abuse poisons and propagates within mother-daughter relationships, illuminating the way societies perpetuate trauma cycles through assumptions. Building off of the ecological transactional and transgenerational models of trauma theory, I aim to explore the ways societal assumptions and stereotypes promote trauma transmission within broader societal contexts and transgenerational, matrafemafilial¹ relationships. Through the lens of family systems theory, I emphasize how maternal trauma transmits from one generation to the next in an evolving cycle. As trauma moves down generational lines, the methods and effects of abuse mutate, which can result in more expansive trauma transmission: the poison trickles down societies to families and eventually returns to the environment where the trauma originates.

¹I refer to the relationship between a mother and her female children as *matrafemafilial*.

In Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects*, journalist Camille Preaker revisits her hometown Windgap, Missouri to assemble a story about two girls' murders. However, upon her return home, Camille's past traumas begin surfacing in her mind and on her body. The narrative reveals small signifiers indicating the abuse Camille experienced during childhood from her mother, although details surrounding her mother's abuse fully surface much later in the narrative. Through several conversations with family members and townspeople, Camille learns that her mother, Adora, has MSBP, which Adora's mother, Joya, likely also possessed. Camille is one of Adora's three daughters. Adora's daughter, Marian, dies during childhood as a result of her mother's MSBP (MSBP). Camille's youngest living sister, Amma, seeks attention and carries on her mother's abusive nature, while Camille is self-destructive and cuts words into her skin.

Historically and culturally, cases of maternal abuse have often been overshadowed by cases of patriarchal abuse, likely as a result of gender biases and maternal abuse's taboo nature. Although there is limited quantitative data demonstrating the increasing trend of contemporary novels' featuring themes of female violence and maternal abuse, there has been a notable amount of texts featuring those themes released over the last thirty years. A few correlating texts include: A.M. Holmes's *The End of Alice* (1996), Samrat Upadhyay's *The City Son* (2014), *Wild Game: My Mother, Her Lover, and Me* (2019), and *None of This is True* (2023). Additionally, more cases of female abuse, particularly women in more traditionally maternal roles, have surfaced in the media, highlighting a societal shift in the way we perceive parental abuse. Linda Seidel explains that "contemporary American books, movies, and TV shows may have the effect of cementing ideological assumptions about motherhood in place – or, less often, of disrupting those assumptions" (14). One of the most publicized cases of maternal abuse in the last two decades involves Dee Dee Blanchard and her daughter Gypsy Rose, of Springfield, Missouri.

Dee Dee Blanchard had MSBP, an attention-seeking disorder that consists of a parent or caregiver fabricating illnesses and imposing the fictitious illness on the victim. Abusers with MSBP often poison victims and advocate for patients to receive unnecessary procedures. Dee Dee Blanchard abused her daughter Gypsy Rose until 2015 when Gypsy conspired a plot with her boyfriend Nicholas Godejohn who murdered Dee Dee (Petric 1-2). Both the Gypsy Rose case and *Sharp Objects* highlight the consequences of matrafemafilal abuse and MSBP.

Gillian Flynn published *Sharp Objects* in 2006, and the novel has become a famous thriller for its depiction of maternal abuse and female violence. When asked about her novel *Sharp Objects* during an interview with Lynn Neary, Gillian Flynn said, ““What I really wanted to write about was the darker side of the female psyche... You know — female violence and female rage — what made us do bad things, why we messed up, why we became violent and particularly what that looked like generationally”” (Neary). *Sharp Objects* is a text that challenges commonly held assumptions about women and mothers. Moreover, *Sharp Objects* demonstrates the interconnection between transgenerational patterns of abuse and ecological-transactional trauma patterns. Sexist assumptions and stereotypes contribute to the continuation of the trauma within the Preaker family. Societies that perpetuate stereotypical gender and violence paradigms overlook women with violent tendencies. Strict gender expectations can influence the ways societies pay attention to and interact with abuse. In this thesis, I argue that societal assumptions surrounding motherhood encourage the perpetuation of generational abuse patterns between mothers and daughters in *Sharp Objects*. Eventually, the familial abuse extends into the community causing more expansive trauma transmission.

Chapter 2: Assumptions, Stereotypes, and Sexism

In *Sharp Objects*, the Wind Gap community upholds gendered expectations that benefit women who maintain traditional feminine characteristics. The town correlates violence with masculinity, which leaves room for women to commit horrific crimes behind the mask of femininity. Adora exemplifies the ideal Wind Gap woman on the outside, but she is a destructive force within her home. F. I. S. De Zulueta explains that our society does its best to ignore family life violence (46). However, I argue that society has an even more challenging time conceptualizing maternal abusers, likely as a result of traditional gender expectations. Although expectations are evolving, *Sharp Objects* highlights how a woman's worth is heavily tied to her role as a mother, as women are expected to have children, serve as maternal models, and conform to traditional expectations of femininity.

Women living in patriarchal societies are likely to pass on dominant sexist ideologies to their children. When mothers pass down communal perspectives and demonstrate abusive behaviors they may influence their children to maintain those viewpoints and mirror their mother's behaviors, especially towards daughters. Nancy Chodorow explains that "a crucial differentiating experience in male and female development arises out of the fact that women, universally, are largely responsible for early child care and for (at least) later female socialization" (44). Mother-daughter relationships are significantly affected by communal assumptions because both mothers and daughters are expected to conform to dominant expectations of women. Adora imposes dominant expectations of femininity onto her daughters, and she favors her daughters who align more closely with those expectations.

Archetypes & Stereotypes

Sexist ideology contributes to the development of stereotypes towards women and correlatively, mothers. Carl Jung proposed the concept of archetypes, “as universal, symbolic patterns that exist in the collective unconscious of humanity” (Mahmood 140). He suggests that the mother archetype consists of two sides: a nurturing, maternal side and a darker engulfing side. Jung’s first side of the mother archetype aligns more consistently with societally dominant expectations of motherhood. This archetype “symbolizes nurturing, care, protection, unconditional love, the mystical authority associated with women, profound wisdom, and spiritual strength. It represents the source of sustenance and emotional support, providing a sense of security and comfort” (Thomas 140). In contrast, the negative side of the mother archetype, “may connote anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate” (90). In *Sharp Objects*, Adora upholds Jung’s first archetype of motherhood from an outsider perspective, but she also embodies the dark, devouring mother archetype within her home.

Adora’s name serves as a representation of the way the town views her. The community adores her, likely as a result of her conformity to traditionally feminine characteristics. She is beautiful, with long blond hair and blue eyes, and she often appears to be a kind and caring woman. However, Adora is a dominating presence within her home. Her care for her children becomes a source of obsession, which leads her to poison her children so she can take care of them. Adora’s friend from childhood explains that ““Adora devours you, and if you don’t let her, it’ll be even worse for you”” (Flynn 202). Adora’s devouring nature exists behind her more positive external presentation. Whenever communities uphold stereotypical views of mothers and women, including the idea that a beautiful, kind woman is incapable of harming her children,

communities can contribute to the perpetuation of abuse. Often, abusive mothers exhibit some of their darker characteristics. However, stereotypes can cause individuals or entire communities to ignore abuse signs because the thought of maternal abusers does not align with biases surrounding gender and violence.

Jung's theory of archetypes describes a universal, collective unconscious. However, Ronwyn Thomas states, "It is arguable, however, that what, in fact, he [Jung] has delineated for us are stereotypes, the types of human psyches repeated without change because the basic situations within which they have developed have not changed" (160). In other words, the patterns of assumptions and abuse continue, in part, due to the society's unchanging conditions and perspectives. Therefore, the term *stereotype* more accurately describes the unchanging transgenerational perspectives and assumptions moving throughout Wind Gap. Whenever societies uphold fixed perspectives, stereotypes develop and transfer to future generations. Although stereotypes and assumptions typically have negative connotations, upholding assumptions with more positive connotations can also result in adverse effects. Stereotypes surrounding motherhood are typically optimistic, which can be problematic when a woman covertly maintains abusive patterns while others perceive her as good. Jung's theory of archetypes influences the way modern men and women perceive themselves (Thomas 159). Stereotypes also influence the way society generally perceives men and women.

Sexism in *Sharp Objects*

In *Sharp Objects*, ingrained sexism contributes to the perpetuation of stereotypes. Sexism is commonly conceived as a reflection of hostility towards women (Glick & Fiske 491). Hostile sexism is derogatory and more closely aligns with classic definitions of animosity that includes prejudice and derogative feelings towards women who threaten the gender hierarchy (Glick &

Fisk 491). However, benevolent sexism is “a set of interrelated attitudes towards women that are sexist in terms of viewing women stereotypically and in restricted roles but that are subjectively positive in feeling tone (for the perceiver)” (Glick & Fiske 491). In other words, individuals upholding benevolent sexism often maintain assumptions about gender and abuse, glorifying women who maintain traditional gender roles; they may also perpetuate ideology regarding women as gentle and men as violent. When people associate men with abusers and women with victims, societies can struggle to recognize cases involving male victims and female abusers.

Societal assumptions influence the ways people observe and interact with others; often stereotypes lead to harmful and discriminatory practices. Benevolent sexism may seem positive initially but has underlying connections to masculine dominance and traditional stereotypes, which can be destructive (Glick & Fiske 491- 492). Whenever communities prescribe characteristics to specific groups, people tend to limit their perspectives of the group to fit within those societal expectations. In *Sharp Objects*, the community of Wind Gap perpetuates expectations about women and mothers through ingrained sexism, and many women attempt to conform to the dominant feminine ideals. The town praises motherhood, while promoting the idea that women without children are incomplete. Female characters who deviate from the dominant feminine stereotypes face subpar treatment from others within their community. Sexist ideology results in negative consequences for individual characters, families, and the town as a whole.

Benevolent sexism and hostile sexism contribute to the development of trauma cycles in *Sharp Objects*. Wind Gap perpetuates benevolent sexism by idolizing women who maintain traditionally feminine characteristics. Even women in the town reflect the notion that a woman’s worth is defined by her role as a mother, viewing childless, unmarried women as defective or as

others. During a conversation between Camille and some of her friends from high school, one of the women says, “I don’t mean for this to sound cruel...but it seems like part of your heart can never work if you don’t have kids. Like it will always be shut off” (Flynn 134). The woman’s comment reflects hostile sexism, as Camille does not uphold traditional gender expectations: she is unmarried, over thirty years old, and without children (Flynn 44). Further removing her from the ideal, her body is covered in self-harm scars. She abuses alcohol and drugs at times, and she often appears distant and cold. Camille does not maintain traditional expectations of femininity despite her community’s overarching viewpoint that a woman is good as long as she is a mother who fits within dominant expectations.

Despite Adora Crellin’s perfect presentation of womanhood, according to Wind Gap’s views, Adora is violent. Adora’s friend from childhood, Jackie, tells Camille, “Having you should have ruined your mother...any other girl, got knocked up before marriage, here in Wind Gap, way back when, it’d be over all over for her... but your mother always had a way of making people baby her...a beautiful girl can get away with anything if she plays nice” (Flynn 201). Adora plays the role of the epitomic woman and mother and consequently receives positive attention. She treats her children well whenever she wants others to view her as a good mother. Even Camille says, “on the surface, I couldn’t have been treated better when I lived here. My mother saw to that. The town loved her, she was like a cake topping: the most beautiful sweet girl Wind Gap had ever raised” (Flynn 75). Because Adora fits within the confines of traditional femininity, she greatly benefits from benevolent sexism and is able to hide her devouring, hidden nature.

Adora & Ideal Motherhood

Adora desires to uphold an idealistic version of herself and the people and things around her. She demonstrates this through deception and maintaining aesthetics. Adora's housekeeping is one way that she upholds dominant expectations of femininity and sustains control over her home. Adora does not have a job because she inherited generational wealth and her family's pig farm, so she resides at home most of the time. Her house is always well kept; when Camille first comes to her mother's house, unannounced, to cover the murders in Wind Gap, Adora says that the house is not up to par for visitors. Camille explains, "The house was perfect, down to the dozens of cut tulips in vases at the entry hall" (Flynn 24). Adora's need to keep the house in perfect condition parallels her desire for others to adore her. Despite her external presentation, Adora's facade as a perfect mother quickly dissolves upon an inspection of her family's inner workings. Because Adora closely aligns with traditional gender expectations, she eclipses her abusive nature from many people around her.

Secrecy is one characteristic of Jung's devouring mother. In *Sharp Objects*, Adora successfully conceals her abuse for a long time, despite some people knowing that she is not as innocent as she appears. Marian dies when she is ten years old as a result of her mother's MSBP. Adora uses different medications to induce her child's illnesses (Flynn 241). Marian is sick throughout her childhood, and Camille wakes up one morning to find her sister dead (Flynn 61). After Marian dies, almost no one expects that Adora is the one responsible for her death. Beverly Lumm, the nurse overseeing Marian's care, is the only person who believes that Adora is the cause of Marian's illness. When Beverly notes that Adora may be the source of the child's sickness, she almost loses her job. After Marian's death, Beverly asks the head of pediatrics if he saw her note, and she says, "I was told to take the week off. I was one of those hysterical women" (Flynn 229). The phrase *hysterical* here implies that a woman who counteracts

dominant expectations is inherently unstable and irrational. In the note, Beverly suggests that Adora may have MSBP, but the notion that a mother could be capable of harming and killing her child does not align with the nurturing mother stereotype.

Along with the doctors who fail to look into the nurse's concerns, others in Wind Gap assist with Adora's secrecy, thereby allowing her to continue hiding her darker side. During a conversation between a few of Adora's friends and Camille, Jackie starts to say that Adora has been acting strange for a while, and another friend tells Jackie to shut up. Nevertheless, Jackie continues, stating, "I'll say what I please, and I'm saying, Adora can harm..." but is interrupted, and Camille wonders what Jackie means (Flynn 87). The censorship of Jackie's statements and the doctor's inattentiveness exemplify how people can be close to abuse but disregard evidence that contradicts what they want to believe. Communities can allow abuse cycles to continue through overarching gender stereotypes but also through more intimate relationships. People do not want to admit that their friends or family are able to commit abuse, and some of Adora's friends enable her darker side.

The Dangers of Benevolent Sexism

While communities tend to associate males more child abuse, *The Administration for Children and Families' Perpetrator Relationship* statistics, for 2022, indicate that "slightly more victims are maltreated by female perpetrators, at 51.9 percent, than male perpetrators, at 47.3 percent" (Children's Bureau 13). Despite these statistics, literary depictions of maternal trauma highlight how society has trouble accepting that women are capable of violent acts towards children, especially their own. Adora's maternal side only surfaces in public and when her children are ill. While Adora is able to hide her abuse by playing the exemplary mother. Camille explains that Adora has always had problems with children; once her grieving period "for Marian

was over, she'd parade me into town, smiling and teasing me, tickling me as she spoke with people on the sidewalks. When we got home, she'd trail off to her room like an unfinished sentence" (Flynn 97). Adora's behaviors reflect her desire to uphold societal expectations of motherhood but also her disregard for her children whenever she is within her private space. Her positive maternal side only arises when she wants others to gain sympathy and control.

Adora attempts to control the people within her home and dislikes when her daughters fail to uphold her ideal standards for them. Camille explains that Wind Gap is "a town that demands utmost femininity in its fairer sex," so Adora has to demonstrate her femininity to maintain a sense of adoration (Flynn 13). In contrast, Adora also secretly embodies the darker archetypes that describe a poisonous inescapable mother. Even when Camille is outside of her mother's reach, the consequences of her mother's poison remain through Camille's body and psyche. Marian's death is the consequence of Adora's devouring nature, as Adora kills her while trying to continue her cycle of control and comfort. Amma's murderous tendencies arise out of her mother's seduction. Amma desires her mother's love and undivided attention; when Adora tries to connect with other girls, Amma cannot handle her jealousy for her mother's affection. Adora's relationship with the maternal stereotypes stems out of sexist ideology that only favors the good, maternal presentation. Both stereotypes exist in mothers, and a holistic view of motherhood can only exist through recognition of both sides.

Sexism & Murders

The townspeople in Wind Gap perpetuate benevolent sexism by assuming that the person murdering the little girls in town is a man. From the beginning of the investigation, people surrounding the murders always refer to the murderer as him or them, which preserves the idea that women are not capable of committing violent crimes. When Camille joins the search party

for 10-year-old Jane Keene, she asks her search partner if he heard any theories surrounding the murder of Ann Nash. Her partner replies, “Some loony, some crazy man crazy man musta done it” (Flynn 13). Additionally, when Camille visits Ann Nash’s father, to investigate Natalie Keene’s disappearance and Ann’s murder, Mr. Nash says, ““So somewhere along the way...they got her”” (Flynn 19). When Camille questions what he means by “they got her,” Robert Nash replies, ““Them, him, whatever. The bastard. The sick baby killer”” (Flynn 19-20). The townspeople’s comments align with the Nash’s and illustrate how assumptions and biases engender baseless conclusions. They believe that the killer is a man despite having no supporting information to confirm their pre-established beliefs.

People traditionally associate males with abusers and females with victims. This ideology likely arises from dominant gender expectations and the fact that men in the United States are more likely to commit violent crimes. In 2019, “Males accounted for 78.9 percent of persons arrested for violent crimes” in the United States (US Department of Justice). Although societally there is a more prominent expectation that men commit violent crimes, in the United States, women make up a higher percentage of child abusers than men (Children’s Bureau 13). The methods that women use to abuse their children often overlap their maternal expectations and roles, which is another reason why maternal abuse is difficult to recognize.

Even the detectives and police fail to accept the idea that a woman committed the crimes, much less a child. When James Capisi, a boy living in Wind Gap, provides a witness statement that he saw a woman take Natalie Keene before her murder, the police disregard his statement. Camille goes to speak to James Capisi, and he recounts what he saw on the day of Natalie’s disappearance. Camille does not believe that James is lying, but following their conversation, she attempts to rationalize his witness statement. She wonders, “But what if this person simply

looked feminine? A lanky man with long hair, a transvestite, an androgynous boy? Women didn't kill this way, they just didn't...I could feel my thoughts blowing back on themselves, dirtied with old prejudices" (Flynn 70-71). Camille's comment highlights her prejudices and how assumptions can lead people farther from the truth. Even though she experiences maternal abuse herself, her prejudices cause her to grapple with the idea of a female murderer. The town also has tunnel vision when hypothesizing who is responsible for the disappearance and murder of two young girls. Someone suggests that one of the deceased girl's brothers is responsible for her death. Another person suggests that one of the girl's fathers may be the murderer. Each of the suspects the townspeople offer up as a possibility is a man. The generalization that men have a tendency for violence and women are more likely victims contributes to the tunnel vision demonstrated by many characters in *Sharp Objects*.

Women are Wonderful

The "Women are Wonderful" effect serves as other possible explanations for why townspeople assume that a man is the murderer. The Women are Wonderful effect is a psychological and sociological phenomenon that proposes that people generally ascribe more positive characteristics to women and more negative characteristics to men. According to Eagly, and Mladinic's findings, surrounding the way people view men and women, "the most important source of a woman's perceived superiority appears to be the tendency for people to ascribe communal qualities to them (e.g., helpful, warm, kind, understanding)" (553). The findings were surprising because they contrasted with the belief that people generally possess negative stereotypes about women. While sexism often concerns hostility towards those opposing the gender hierarchy, viewing women stereotypically while maintaining positive attitudes towards women in restrictive positions is also damaging. The favorability people have towards women

reflected to an extent “subjects’ monitoring of their responses to avoid appearing prejudiced towards women. Such a tendency could create a ‘bend over backward’ effect in subjects’ responses, resulting in attitudes and stereotypes about women that are biased in a positive direction” (Eagly et al. 554). This positive direction empowers Adora who receives positive attention because of her town’s biases favoring feminine, maternal women.

Wind Gap demands femininity in women, and Adora similarly demands external perfection for herself and her daughters. A. E. Van der Hoven explains false cultural images of femininity serve as a means of social control (Van der Hoven 12). She cares more about the way people perceive her and her children than she cares about her children. Despite Adora's high expectations, she is a destructive maternal model for her children. She is a passive mother who fails to establish strong healthy bonds with her daughters. She controls her appearance and behaviors but also her daughters’. Adora views her daughter Marian as perfect; this viewpoint grows out of Marian’s complete submission to her mother. Marian dies at the age of ten and remains the ideal in Adora’s eyes. Amma explains, “I wish I’d be murdered...Then I’d never have to worry again. When you die, you become perfect. I’d be like Princess Diana. Everyone loves her now” (Flynn 67). Amma views her dead sister as perfect because her mother loves Marian. Amma wants her mother’s love, which is why she makes the statement that she wants to be murdered. Amma’s perception of herself likely stems from the way her mother treats her. Amma wants to be her mother’s ideal, so she tries to behave in ways that please her mother.

Chapter 3: Female Abusers & Trauma

One of the ways that maternal trauma manifests in *Sharp Objects* is through Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy (MSBP), also known as Factitious Disorder Imposed on Another. Roy Meadow initially described MSBP in the article "Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy: The Hinterland of Child Abuse," in 1977 (343). MSBP is an attention-seeking disorder and form of child abuse "in which the parents or the caregivers, almost always the mother, invent illness stories about their children and substantiate the stories by fabricating physical signs" (Unal et al. 671). In cases of maternal abuse, perpetrators afflicted with MSBP uphold some behaviors that are characteristic of traditional maternal expectations. Some common symptoms victims of MSBP experience include diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, breathing issues, seizures, allergic reactions, fevers with untraceable causes, infections, and additional emergency illnesses that require immediate care (Jones). MSBP can be difficult to diagnose because individuals with the condition rarely acknowledge that they have a problem. Individuals with the disorder may repeat their behaviors even if they undergo counseling (ColumbiaDoctors). The disorder is dangerous because individuals with the condition often abuse their victims for prolonged amounts of time without being caught.

Mothers with MSBP often nurture children by providing them with care and affection during bouts of illness. However, mothers affected with this condition only appear present when their children are unwell and neglect their children whenever they are unafflicted. Some methods caregivers use during abuse include restricting food so the child will lose weight, poisoning with medication and other substances, and requesting unnecessary medical procedures, among others.

Along with the physical consequences, victims of MSBP also often suffer psychological repercussions. Individuals with MSBP often appear nurturing and caring towards their children, seek power and control, build relationships with medical professionals, and or work within the medical field. Abusers often lack awareness of the severity of their behaviors (ColumbiaDoctors). In *Sharp Objects*, Adora Crellin abuses her three daughters as a result of her MSBP and her trauma from childhood.

MSBP in *Sharp Objects*

Growing up, Adora does not experience love or care from her cold and distant mother, Joya. During a conversation with Jackie, Adora's childhood friend, Camille learns that Adora was overly mothered as a child. Joya has an imposing authority over Adora, which includes physicality. Joya never touched or smiled at Adora lovingly, but she always had her hands on her, fixing her appearance or tugging on her clothes. Adora was sick all the time: “she was always having tubes and needles and such stuck in her” (Flynn 201). When Camille asks Jackie what Adora was sick with, she replies, “Little bit of everything. Lot of it just the stress of living with Joya” (Flynn 201). Although the text does not provide a diagnosis for Joya, her obsessive attention to Adora and her abusive nature, along with Adora's persistent illnesses growing up, allude to the idea that Joya may have also had MSBP. Additionally, Jackie tells Camille, “I think she's sick, and I think what she has is contagious,” hinting that Adora inherited the disorder from Joya and may transmit the disorder to her daughters (Flynn 203). Some hypothesize that childhood victims of MSBP are more likely to suffer from Munchausen syndrome or MSBP, perpetuating the abuse they endure during childhood onto their children, themselves, or others later in life (Rosenberg 557). Adora passes down her mother's abusive tendencies to her daughters.

Adora becomes pregnant with Camille at the age of 17, and she takes away some of Joya's control by having a daughter of her own. Camille was ““all hers from the beginning. That's what killed Joya. Her daughter finally had something in her that Joya couldn't get at”” (Flynn 202). Joya's desire to control her daughter passes down to Adora. In cases of MSBP, the abuser's desire to fabricate or cause illnesses stems from jealousy, rage, or the desire to control others (Valentine). Adora's abusive nature arises out of her jealousy towards children, her desire to control the relationships between members of her family and others, her anger towards her daughter, and her rage towards her mother. When Adora is pregnant, she believes that Camille is going to save her. However, she quickly develops disdain for her child after giving birth to her. Adora tells Camille, ““I thought you'd love me. And then my mother would love me. That was a joke... Even from the beginning you disobeyed, wouldn't eat. Like you were punishing me for being born”” (Flynn 149). Adora misplaces her frustrations towards her mother and imposes them onto Camille and later, her other two daughters. Adora fails to recognize Joya's abusive nature within herself and consequently, adopts her mother's toxic tendencies which metamorphosize into MSBP.

MSBP allows Adora to uphold her image as a perfect mother on the outside but also provides her with a covert way to control her children. Within the home, Adora abuses her daughters physically and emotionally. She uses poisonous concoctions of medications and other substances to induce or worsen her daughters' illnesses because she craves their dependence. Adora tells Camille, ““I wanted to love you, Camille. But you were so hard. Marian, she was so easy... Let me take care of you, Camille. Just once, need me”” (Flynn 238). She is only present and kind to her daughters whenever they are ill. Adora remarks, ““Camille has never become a good patient – being sick only makes her angry and spiteful... she has Joya's spite. I hate her.

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" (Flynn 242). Adora hurts her children as a way to receive praise but also as a way to gain her children's love. Adora's first-born daughter, Camille, does not respond to the abuse in the way Adora wants. Instead, Camille becomes spiteful and cold when sick, leading Adora to hate her. Marian, Adora's second daughter, is her mother's favorite because she submits to Adora when ill.

Marian was constantly sick during her childhood. According to Camille, Marian was a series of diseases: "She had trouble breathing from the start...Later she had trouble digesting and sat murmuring to her dolls in a hospital bed set up in her room, while my mother poured sustenance into her through IVs and feeding tubes" (Flynn 76). Because Marian is ill throughout her childhood, no one suspects foul play whenever she dies. Very few people witness or acknowledge Adora's perilous nature. Marian is the child Adora gravitates towards the most. Nurse Beverly tells Camille, "dealing with an MBP mom—it doesn't pay to be the favorite. You were lucky your mother didn't take more of an interest in you" (Flynn 229). Marian satisfies her mother's craving for adoration and dependence. Additionally, Adora uses Marian's death as a way to gain sympathy. Mothers with MSBP gain their children's affection through their care; they want their children to rely on them.

Adora's journal reveals her interactions with the medical professionals assisting with Marian's care. She writes, "Dr. Jameson is very masterful and kind, interested in Marian, but *not a busybody*. He seems quite impressed with me. Said that I was an angel, and that every child should have a mother like me" (Flynn 242). Adora wants to take care of her daughters, but she also wants to increase the severity of her daughters' conditions so she can take care of them more. According to Mahmood, Jung's "devouring mother tends to rely too much on her children

and focuses entirely on taking care of them. This kind of mother feels compelled to have children, and being a mother becomes their whole identity” (140). Adora’s life seemingly surrounds her pursuit of her daughters’ submission. Marian is the only daughter who gives Adora what she wants. Camille refuses to succumb to her mother’s abuse until adulthood, and Amma lets Adora poison her in exchange for her love.

Matrophobia in *Sharp Objects*

Adora’s daughters have distinct relationships with their mother and are affected by the abuse in distinct ways. According to María Dolores Martínez Reventós, mother-daughter relationships have been represented in and out of matrophobia in twentieth-century literature (286). Matrophobia is the fear of becoming one’s mother, while reverse matrophobia is the desire to become like the mother. Camille’s relationship with her mother indicates the presence of matrophobic hostility: she does not want to be like her mother. However, Adora’s shadowy presence is enveloping. Camille cannot fully escape her mother’s influence. Inversely, Amma does not shy away from her mother’s abusive nature. Instead, she allows Adora to poison her, and eventually, Amma’s trauma manifests as a murderous mirror.

Adora appears to hate Camille from the moment that she is born, and later, she tells Camille why she does not love her. Reventós explains, “In the female literary tradition of matrophobia, the worst mothers are those who fail to give adequate love and attention, with the consequent negative effects for the daughter’s narcissism” (288). Adora’s lack of love likely arises out of her own childhood trauma and her disdain for Camille’s defiant and oppositional characteristics. Camille’s behaviors do not align with Adora’s “good girl” image. During childhood, Camille resists Adora by refusing her care. Consequently, Adora stops caring for Camille and focuses her attention on Marian. Mahmood explains that neglect can shape a

daughter's upbringing and mental well-being, which can fuel resentment towards her mother and contribute to their strained relationship (144). Enduring Adora's abuse leads Camille to experience conflict between her mother's imposing personality and her own identity during her teenage years and young adult life. She develops a persistent anger towards her mother as a form of protection because her mother fails to provide her with a sense of comfort growing up. Additionally, she experiences matrophobic hostility towards Adora. She does not want to adopt her mother's abusive nature, and she defies many of her mother's expectations as she tries to distance herself from Adora.

Camille experiences matrophobic hostility and attempts to avoid becoming her mother by subverting societal expectations of femininity and womanhood. After Marian dies, Camille develops several maladaptive coping mechanisms; one method of coping includes cutting words into her skin. By harming herself, Camille takes away some of her mother's control and resists patriarchal standards of femininity. Reventós states that "as long as femininity is culturally constructed around the female body (its beauty), the daughter will use it as an instrument of protest or resistance, as a site of struggle against the mother over the issue of feminine identity" (287). Camille uses her body as a canvas for pain; trauma surfaces through her skin, adorning Camille's body with words. Adora dislikes Camille's cutting because she is not the one in control of her pain. During one conversation, Adora grabs Camille and circles the one spot of skin she has uncut on her body. Adora declares, "the only place you have left...someday I'll carve my name there" (Flynn 149). Carving her name into Camille's skin would allow Adora to finally have ownership of Camille. Adora wants Camille's full submission and does not like that she cannot gain full authority over Camille and her body. Camille subverts her mother's desires but also patriarchal expectations through her self-harm ritual.

Camille's obsessive cutting likely develops as a result of her mother's abuse and the loss of her sister. Before Marian's death, Camille is a compulsive writer, but her grief warps her harmless writing habit into something more painful and permanent. Adora's abuse causes Camille to correlate her cutting with comfort. Camille explains the process of cutting herself for the first time. Camille uses her mother's steak knife: "Cutting like a child along red imaginary lines. Cleaning myself. Digging in deeper. Cleaning myself. Pouring bleach over the knife and sneaking through the kitchen to return it. *Wicked*. Relief. The rest of the day, I spent ministering to my wound" (Flynn 60-61). Like Adora harms her daughters to take care of them, Camille cuts words into her skin to soothe her own pain. Her self-harming and soothing mirror her mother's cycle of harm and care. Camille finds solace in the visible, trackable cuts in her skin. She says, "the cutting made me feel safe. It was proof. Thoughts and words, captured where I could see them and track them. The truth, stinging, on my skin, in a freakish shorthand" (Flynn 63). Camille's comfort in the permanent markings highlights her desire for the truth and consistency because her mother does not provide her with a sense of safety.

Adora is a strategic liar, contrasting with Camille's affinity for truth. Alan, Camille's stepfather, accuses Camille of tormenting Adora by bringing up Marian constantly and talking to her about "the corpses of these two dead little girls, or how much blood must have come out of their mouths when their teeth were pulled, or how long it took to strangle them" (Flynn 164). Camille tells Alan that she never said anything remotely similar to the things he accuses her of saying. Camille responds, "'And you know this from Adora...Adora is a liar. If you don't know that, you're an idiot'" (Flynn 164-165). Adora lies to paint Camille in a negative light; Adora wants to divide people within the family to maintain control and lies to achieve her aim. Unlike

her mother's words, the text on Camille's body does not change unless she makes changes herself.

Camille's scars haunt her throughout her life; she feels the words on her skin buzz and scream, and she does not view her scars positively. Instead, Camille hides her skin from the people around her, including people she has intimate relationships with. Whenever Camille, Adora, and Amma go shopping one day, Adora brings Camille clothes that do not cover her arms and legs. Camille says, "Momma, you saw the dresses, you know why they won't work," (Flynn 120) but Adora insists that Camille come out of the dressing room and show them. Once Camille steps out, Adora winces and shames Camille for her self-harm, exclaiming, "Look at what you've done to yourself... I hope you just loved it. I hope you can stand yourself" (Flynn 121). Camille does not like what she has done to her body, which is why she remains covered up and drinks to distract herself from the harm she has done to herself. Her visible scars further separate her from her mother who is disturbed by Camille's self-harm.

Camille's lack of maternal love leads her to have low self-esteem. She experiences "wounded narcissism -her lack of self-esteem and her sense of exclusion- as a result of lack of parental -especially maternal- love and mirroring" (Reventós 288). Her subconscious linking of submission and love leads her to use her sexuality as a form of acceptance. Additionally, her lack of maternal love causes her to look for acceptance elsewhere. Camille explains that in eighth grade, the same year that Marian died and the same year she began cutting, she lost her virginity while having sex with four boys at the same time (Flynn 112). Camille uses her expressive sexuality as a coping mechanism. As an adult, whenever Camille tries to make a sexual advance towards Richard after hurting his feelings, Camille says, "I was back on autopilot again, just like the old days: desperate to submit to him, make him feel better, make him like me again" (Flynn

214). Camille's desperation for approval develops out of her mother's rejection; she lost her mother because she did not submit to her. As a result, Camille feels the need to engage in sexual acts with men to avoid losing their attention.

Camille's career is one way she defies her mother's imposing femininity. Adora does not have a job, while Camille is a journalist who often covers violent and traumatic cases. Whenever Camille tells Adora that her reason for visiting Wind Gap is to cover the case of the murdered and missing girls, Adora is horrified. She tells Camille, "I just can't have that kind of talk around me...About hurt children. Just don't tell me what you're doing, don't talk about anything you know. I'll pretend you're here for summer break" (Flynn 26). Later, during a conversation between Camille, Adora, and Alan, Camille explains that she has written several high-profile stories about three murders since the start of the year. Adora responds before laughing, "And that's a good thing, Camille?... I will never understand where your penchant for ugliness comes from. Seems like you have enough of that in your life without deliberately seeking it out" (Flynn 66). Adora believes that Camille has an affinity for ugliness, which opposes Adora's desire for perfection. Adora enjoys beneficial sexist stereotypes, and Camille willfully resists Adora's attempts to impose traditional femininity on her. The split between the daughter's identification with her mother and her desire to avoid her mother's conventional mode of femininity is characteristic of matrophobic daughters (Reventós 287). Adora perceives Camille negatively because she counters her mother's expectations.

Although Camille, in many ways, deviates from her mother, adopting characteristics that oppose patriarchal expectations, there are some ways that Camille presents or replicates her mother's behaviors. Camille's compulsive neatness is one way that she mirrors her mother's behavior and upholds patriarchal expectations of women. Camille explains, "I have to stop

myself from ironing socks. I even went through a period of boiling things: tweezers and eyelash curlers, bobby pins and toothbrushes” (Flynn 89). Her compulsion likely stems from watching her mother’s behaviors growing up. Adora obsessively cleans her home and pulls out her eyelashes. Camille explains, “During some particularly difficult years... she had no eyelashes at all” (Flynn 25). Camille’s compulsive tendencies may have developed from watching her mother exhibit compulsions during her childhood.

Another way that Camille mirrors her mother is through comments she makes about tending to other people. When Camille first comes to her mother’s house, she mentions that her stepfather, Alan, looks very thin and states, “I wanted to administer an IV when I saw him” (Flynn 25). This comment reflects Adora’s influence on Camille’s mind. Despite Camille’s desire to deviate from Adora, she reveals an unconscious desire to take care of things throughout different moments in the text, paralleling her mother’s desire to care for her ill or hurting daughters. During Camille’s time at the police station, following the discovery of Natalie Keene’s body, Camille says, “I sat in a room the color of egg yolk for two hours while the officer got my story down. The whole time I was thinking about Natalie going to autopsy, and how I would like to sneak in and put a fresh Band-Aid on her knee” (Flynn 29). Camille’s desire to medically assist Alan and Natalie highlights her mother’s imposition on Camille’s thoughts. Camille experiences conflict throughout the text revealing her struggle between becoming versus not becoming her mother. The book leaves Camille’s outcome open-ended; she is good at taking care of Amma and teeters between the idea that she may have Adora’s illness or she may just be kind.

Amma’s Reverse Matrophobia

Amma also participates in destructive behaviors like Camille. However, she does not solely focus on hurting herself, she also harms others. Growing up with Adora causes Amma to develop a distorted love. At thirteen years old, Amma acts out by engaging in sexual acts, drinking, and taking drugs. Amma also assists in her self-harm by allowing Adora to abuse her. Unlike Camille and Marian, Amma is aware that Adora is poisoning her. When Camille and Amma return home after a wild night out together, both of them have wounds on their bodies and feel unwell. After Adora tends to both of them, Amma asks Camille, “What’d she do to you?” (Flynn 193). Camille shows Amma the patch of cropped hair on the back of her head and tells Amma that Adora gave her a liquid that made her sick and groggy (Flynn 194). Amma asks Camille if the liquid was blue, explaining that Adora likes that medication because it makes Amma drooly and hot. She also tells Camille that Adora brings her friends to look at Amma after giving her the medication. During this conversation, Camille has an epiphany that she and Amma are sick like Marian was sick (Flynn 194). She pieces together that her mother killed her sister and that her mother is poisoning her and Amma.

Amma’s relationship with Adora is, in many ways, a reversal of Adora and Camille’s relationship. Amma views their mother more positively than Camille, deeply desiring her attention. According to Reventós, “The reality is that most adolescent daughters in white middle-class culture are matrophobic to some extent; their desire is for a powerful mother that, like mythical non-existent Demeter, rescues her daughter from the pitfalls of adolescence” (292). Amma does not develop matrophobic hostility, like Camille. Instead, she adopts a matrophilic view of her mother. Where matrophobia is the fear of the mother, matrophilia is the reversal; “the girl’s identification with her mother is unambiguously positive” (Reventós 292). During dinner at Adora’s house, Amma asks Camille what fairytale person she would want to be, and Camille

replies Sleeping Beauty. Amma says she would want to be Persephone because she is the Queen of the Dead. Amma says, ““She was so beautiful, Hades stole her and took her to the underworld to be his wife. But her mother was so fierce, she forced Hades to give Persephone back. But only for six months each year”” (Flynn 235). Amma’s comment highlights her reverence for her mother, who she views as powerful like Persephone’s mother, Demeter. Amma’s matrophilic view of her mother causes her to exhibit destructive behaviors.

Matrophilia can be damaging in cases of matrafemafilial abuse because the daughter may idolize her mother’s damaging qualities. Amma develops an obsessive longing for her mother’s love which manifests through her mirroring. Growing up with her mother poisoning her, Amma develops an affinity for hurting. She asks Camille, ““What if you hurt because it feels so good? Like you have a tingling, like someone left a switch on in your body. And nothing can turn the switch off except hurting? What does that mean?”” (Flynn 188). Amma only feels loved by her mother when she is in pain or when she is pretending to feel ill, so she develops a positive association with harm. Camille says that “a child weaned on poison considers pain a comfort” (Flynn 251). Amma, like Adora, experiences pain and hurt as a form of intimacy. Camille says that she submitted herself to boys so they would like her, while Amma’s sexual offerings appeared to be a form of aggression (Flynn 152). Adora is aggressive in her love, only passionately tending to her children whenever she poisons them.

Whenever Adora begins spending time with the little girls, Natalie Keene and Ann Nash, Amma becomes jealous that her mother gives the girls attention. Additionally, Amma gets worried that the girls are going to discover why Amma is sick all the time and ruin her poisonous relationship with her mother. Amma says:

“I was friends with them for a while,” she said finally, talking into her chest. “We had fun, running around in the woods. We were wild. We’d hurt things together. We killed a cat once. But then she” — as always Adora’s name went unsaid — “got all interested in them. I could never have anything to myself. They weren’t my secrets anymore. They were always coming by the house. They started asking me questions about being sick. They were going to ruin everything.” (Flynn 250)

Amma finds comfort in her mother’s cycle of pain and relief, so whenever these girls come meddling around, Amma worries that they are going to ruin her dynamic with her mother. Amma is possessive; she does not want to share her friends with her mother or her mother with her friends. Camille hypothesizes that Amma killed Ann and Natalie because Adora paid attention to them (Flynn 250). For Amma to protect her relationship with her mother, she feels the need to kill the little girls. After Adora gets arrested for murdering Marian, Amma goes to Chicago with Camille. She befriends a few little girls including one named Lily Burke. Camille says, “Amma controlled Adora by letting Adora sicken her. In return, she demanded uncontested love and loyalty. No other little girls allowed. For the same reasons she murdered Lily Burke. Because Amma suspected, I liked her better (Flynn 251). After Adora gets arrested, Amma continues seeking out the same treatment she got from her mother. At one point Amma sobs after asking Camille to wipe her down with rubbing alcohol like Adora does (Flynn 246). Amma wants Camille to replace her mother, but Camille refuses to continue her mother’s cycle of abuse.

Amma’s Dollhouse

Although Amma is thirteen years old, she dresses and acts younger than she is when she is in front of Adora. Whenever Camille sees Amma at her mom’s, she says that Amma has long blond hair and “was in a childish checked sundress, matching straw hat by her side. She looked

entirely her age —thirteen—for the first time since I’d seen her. Actually, no. She looked younger now. Those clothes were more appropriate for a ten-year-old” (Flynn 43). Amma behaves like a younger child when she is in front of Adora, likely as a result of her mother’s love for Marian who dies at the age of ten. Amma also sees herself as Adora’s doll, which is another reason why she dresses younger than her age when she is at home (Flynn 43). Adora is also doll-like; when Camille describes Adora, she says, she does not look much older than her, although “she’s in her late forties. Glowing pale skin, with long blond hair and pale eyes. She was like a girl’s very best doll, the kind you don’t play with” (Flynn 24). Unlike Amma, Camille grows up quickly; her childhood room illustrates how serious she was as a teenager “There were no posters of pop stars or favorite movies, no girlish collections of photos or corsages. Instead there were paintings of sailboats, proper pastel pastorals, a portrait of Eleanor Roosevelt...I’d known little about Mrs. Roosevelt, except that she was good, which at the time I suppose was enough” (Flynn 40). Amma appears to revert to childhood whenever she is with her mother, while Camille does not get to experience much of her childhood.

Adora’s house is another source of Amma’s obsession, and Amma replicates the home in the form of a dollhouse. Adora exhibits an obsessive control over her house that Amma replicates when tending to her dollhouse. Every piece of furniture in the dollhouse has to match its real-world counterpart. Whenever a custom dollhouse table arrives with the wrong pattern on the legs, Amma throws a major tantrum. She screams to Adora, ““you said it would all be perfect. You promised!’... ‘Now it’s ruined. It’s the dining room—it can’t have a table that doesn’t match. I hate it!’” (Flynn 59). Then, she smashes the small table on the ground. Amma wants her dollhouse to be perfect which leads her to lash out when the decorum is not up to her standards. Amma takes her victim’s teeth so she can create a replica of her mother’s ivory

bedroom floor. Camille explains, “As for the teeth, she took the teeth only because she needed them. The dollhouse had to be perfect, just like everything else Amma loved” (Flynn 251).

Amma is obsessive like her mother and wants to create her own perfect model of Adora’s home so she can be more like her beloved mother.

Adora’s MSBP influences the way she develops relationships with her daughters. Her abusive nature causes her daughters to experience different but sometimes overlapping trauma responses. Amma develops a tendency to associate pain with comfort because of her mother’s abuse while Camille develops a more self-imposed correlation of pain and comfort. Amma seems to gravitate more towards her mother and mirrors her mother more closely than Camille who fears becoming like Adora.

Chapter 4: Inside or Out - Transmission of Trauma Cycles

The matrafemafilial trauma within *Sharp Objects* encapsulates the original meaning of trauma as a physical injury or wound, and additionally, what Freud referred to in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1955) as a wound of the mind (12). The abuse that Adora experiences and perpetuates onto her daughters is physical, but the body is not the only space-keeping score. Camille and Amma's behaviors and compulsions reflect the effects of trauma on the mind, a vessel that does not always exhibit wounds immediately, as would a physical wound, but a space that maintains a record of the trauma unconsciously until the wounds emerge again (Caruth 3-4). When an individual returns to the original site of abuse, they may experience reenactment or re-emergence of the subconscious. In *Sharp Objects*, there is emphasis on the home and town as a conservatory of abuse. Psychological and physical abuse occur within Wind Gap causing a feedback loop of trauma.

The physical abuse in the text is fascinating in that it mirrors the covert nature of psychological abuse. Adora poisons her daughters, and the effects of Adora's abuse do not appear like most physical wounds. Although Marian becomes very ill, her ailments do not appear contrived. Adora fabricates illnesses through the use of drugs that induce symptoms characteristic of the illnesses she claims Marian has. Her methods of physical abuse allow her to conceal her dark side. Correlatively, Camille and Amma's trauma responses often remain hidden. Camille conceals her cut scars, while Amma hides her murders and certain elements of her personality from her mother. Adora's position as a wealthy woman and mother who maintains idealized gender stereotypes allows her to maintain the illusion of a perfect mother. However,

trauma only remains hidden for so long before suppressed emotions and memories emerge through dreams, maladaptive behaviors, and or reenactments. In *Sharp Objects*, physical trauma also surfaces after many years of concealment; Adora gets caught during abuse, Amma is arrested for the murders, and Camille reveals her scars.

Trauma in *Sharp Objects* spreads and grows through generational transmission and larger societal contexts. The ecological-transactional perspective of trauma emphasizes the idea of individual abuse but also that environments and broader macro-systems of ecological factors, such as class, gender, income, education, poverty, and more, influence the individual perpetuating abuse. Societal and environmental influences can lead an individual to pass down ingrained stereotypes and ideologies to their children and subsequent generations. An awareness and understanding of the psychological transmission process are necessary to break generational cycles of abuse because awareness and understanding allow for early intervention, treatment, and prevention (Isobel et al. 550). The stereotypes surrounding different ecological factors, including gender and class, in *Sharp Objects*, provide space for generational cycles of abuse. Inversely, transgenerational abuse can evolve and mutate throughout generations, leading to alternative effects that spread into the environment.

Identity Erasure

When mothers abuse their daughters, the children often replicate or adopt some of the mother's behaviors. This perpetuation influences maternal characters' subjectivity but also their daughters' subjectivity, as a result of a cyclical fusing of mother and daughter identities.

Subjectivity regards an individual's ability to construct their own opinions and thoughts independent of external influences. The mother's identity imprints onto the daughter's identity as the cycle of maternal abuse poisons the matrafemafilial line. However, awareness of the cycle

can assist in the dissolution of malignant patterns. In *Sharp Objects*, trauma repeats in three generations of a family's *matrilineal* (maternal ancestral) line. Each female within the family endures and perpetuates abuse in their individual but intertwined ways, and their outcomes emphasize the consequences of unresolved traumas.

Maternal trauma may lead victims to lose their sense of identity, which is what occurs to the women within Camille's family. According to Elizabeth Podneiks and Andrea O'Reilly, broader traditions of literary history consisting of privileged narratives about and by male representatives have lost the mother, and "she [the mother] has been lost within the daughter-centric literatures that do depict the mother: she is absent to her children (almost always daughters) and to herself in that her own voice is silent, her subjectivity lacking or erased" (12). Although *Sharp Objects* is not written by a male author or from the perspective of a male narrator, patriarchal influence surfaces throughout the text causing subjective erasure. The individual mother's identity often gets lost behind her role as a mother; in cases of cyclical matrafemafilial abuse, the mother may be unable to establish a sense of identity because her mother passes on her abusive tendencies which she adopts and adapts, transmitting them to her children. Consequently, the daughter does not form her own subjectivity because she inherits her mother's voice. Each generation fails to establish strong bonds between the mother and daughters, which leads to grander, expansive issues. How mothers interact with their children influences children's development and subsequent generations of mother-daughter relationships.

Bowen's Fusion

Bowen's Family Systems Theory (1961) serves as a lens to discuss familial interactions and the ways family members affect others. The theory focuses on the systems and subsystems that exist within family units, exploring how familial interactions during childhood influence an

individual's sense of self and relationships with others (Bowen, "Family Psychotherapy in Office Practice" 30-44). Bowen's Family Systems Theory includes *fusion*, the emotional and intellectual intertwining of people within a relationship (Kerr & Bowen 68). Although fusion is similar to identity erasure, fusion focuses more on the family system's interconnectedness, while identity erasure focuses more on the way external factors result in women characters' diminished subjectivity. Fusion within families may lead to the development of pseudo-selves, which are people who sacrifice or alter their authentic selves for the goal of togetherness (Kerr & Bowen 27-28). In *Sharp Objects*, Amma develops the most prominent pseudo-self.

Amma's pseudo-self arises out of her desire for her mother's affection. According to Metcalf, an individual with a pseudo-self defines others in terms of self and their self in terms of others. The pseudo-self wants someone to "Tell me who and how to be, and I will change myself for a relationship with you" and will thoughtlessly alter their beliefs and principles for the sake of relationships (Metcalf 44). Amma's desire for her mother's approval causes her to adopt behaviors that align with who she believes Adora wants her to be. Her beliefs and principles "are created and/or modified by emotional pressure" (Metcalf 44). Her mother's inconsistent emotions and distorted affection prevent Amma from developing a solid self, which establishes principles and boundaries, outlines reasonable expectations about what to get from others and what to get from self, assumes responsibility for choices and consequences, and is indicative of stability (Metcalf 44). While Amma is the most representative character who develops a pseudo-self, she is not the only character who struggles to differentiate from her family.

Bowen's Differentiation of Self

Bowen's concept, differentiation of self, regards a person's ability to integrate and choose between oppositional, emotional, and intellectual systems and also the ability to maintain a sense of self while also remaining connected with significant others (Metcalf 43). Unless an individual attempts to change their level of differentiation, they will remain at their level and pass it down to the next generation. Differentiation exists on a scale that goes from the lowest level, 0, to the conceptual ideal, 100; complete differentiation is a theoretical concept (Metcalf 43).

Lower-differentiated people often feel the need to control others and are more emotionally dependent and less adaptable (Metcalf 43). They also are emotionally driven and reactive and "inherit a high percentage of all human issues" (Metcalf 43). The parental trauma each family member endures during childhood likely causes them to experience lower differentiation. Adora, Amma, and Camille all fall within the criteria of lower differentiated people, which highlights how differentiation levels transfer throughout family systems.

Adora's mother neglects her during childhood, while also failing to provide her emotional support growing up. Joya's absence influences Adora's ability to establish a sense of self and form positive relationships with other people. Because her mother never provides her with a sense of stability, she depends on her children to make her feel wanted. She is controlling, reactive, and emotionally driven; Camille explains that the world's problems become Adora's problems; everything is too much for her (Flynn 69). She struggles with the idea of children dying, but she is also the one responsible for Marian's death. Additionally, she struggles to connect with her other daughters. Whenever Camille first comes to her mother's house after returning to Wind Gap, she asks her mother, "How's Amma? [Adora] "looked alarmed, as if she suddenly remembered she'd left her child somewhere" (Flynn 26). Adora's relationships,

emotional nature, and conflicting characteristics correlate with her lower level of differentiation of self.

Amma also struggles with her level of differentiation, as she adopts Adora's level. Although Amma is popular at school and adored at home, her need to control others reflects her lower differentiation. Unlike higher-differentiated individuals, she has difficulty self-functioning, which may also correlate with her age of 13. Amma does not have a chance to escape her mother's direct influence because she is a child who is still under her mother's care. Whenever Camille asks Amma why she was sweet one night but changed on a different day, Amma replies, "I don't know. I wish I could fix it. I do" (Flynn 154). Amma's response indicates her inability to control her own feelings and behaviors. Lower-differentiated people are emotionally dependent on others and less adaptable and flexible (Metcalf 43). Amma is emotionally reliant on Adora and does not respond well to unfulfilled expectations. Whenever Amma feels like she is losing control of her mother, she murders the little girls her mother gives attention to; she wants her friends and her mother to herself.

Lower differentiation can also lead individuals to live their lives based on what feels right (Metcalf 43). Amma participates in sexual activities, drug use, and drinking, among other behaviors, that allow her to feel good. During her drinking and drug use, Amma gets hangovers and sometimes physical wounds. She feels good during the highs, and although she physically experiences pain, the physical wounds do not deter her because she likes to hurt. Amma's mother takes care of her when she is in pain, which is what likely encourages these behaviors in her. Amma's level of differentiation arises from her mother's low level. Qualities of lower differentiation also pass down to Camille. Living in Chicago, Camille has been away from her family for around half a decade. Lower differentiated people are often stuck with or cut off from

their families and significant others (Metcalf 43). Additionally, Camille often feels the need to rebel against others which is characteristic of lower differentiated people. During childhood, she especially rebels against her mother. She does not allow her mother to take care of her whenever she is sick, which pushes her mother away. However, out of her female family members, she is the most differentiated, likely as a result of her awareness of the abuse trickling down her matrafemafilial line.

Camille demonstrates the ability to think through and act during stressful situations, which is more characteristic of higher differentiated people. She does struggle with her coping mechanisms throughout the text, but at the end, she seems more adaptable. She comments, “All sharp objects have been locked up, but I haven’t tried too hard to get at them. I am learning to be cared for. I am learning to be parented. I’ve returned to my childhood, the scene of the crime” (Flynn 251). Camille wonders at the end of the text whether or not she liked caring for Amma because she has Adora’s illness or whether she was good at caring for her because of kindness. Camille explains, “I waver between the two, especially at night, when my skin begins to pulse. Lately, I’ve been leaning towards kindness” (Flynn 252). Camille’s moment of consideration highlights her matrophobia but also her mother’s impression upon her. Although Adora influences Camille, her ability to deviate from her mother’s abuse patterns indicates her ascending differentiation. Camille’s ability to recognize and challenge her familial patterns indicates that she is on a different level than her mother, sister, and grandmother.

Bowen’s Nuclear Family Emotional System

Bowen’s nuclear family emotional system in his family systems theory describes a single generation’s emotional functioning and symptomatic patterns that result from partners fusing as a consequence of their lack of self-differentiation. Whenever the symptoms occur in one pattern,

one relationship or person usually suffers the most, which leaves others within the family more free, comparatively. However, Metcalf explains, “when symptoms appear in multiple patterns, anxiety is diffused across patterns, and functioning levels of all family members are less affected” (45). I argue, while anxiety may diffuse across patterns, the distribution does not necessarily result in less affected functioning levels for family members; although Marian experiences the worst case of her mother’s abuse, Camille and Amma are also significantly affected by their mother’s anxiety.

Bowen’s family projection process explains how parental undifferentiation projects onto children. Parental undifferentiation is initiated by the connection or disconnection between a mother and child, and the projection process passes down and results in impaired functioning (Kerr 201). Intersecting Adora’s behaviors associated with MSBP, Metcalf explains that “parents *scan* a child for potential problems, *diagnose* the child’s behavior as confirmation that the problem exists, and then *treat* the child as though the *diagnosis* is accurate, shaping the child’s development through the parents’ undifferentiated projection lens” (46). Some of the most prominent inherited problems affecting children are self-blame or blaming others for issues, elevated need for approval and attention, trouble managing expectations, and impulsivity as a way of relieving anxiety (Kerr 61). Amma and Camille experience some of the issues indicative of projection. Although Bowen’s theory of projection refers solely to family systems, the effects of lacking differentiation and projection can also influence others outside of the family unit. Additionally, external factors can influence projection within family systems.

Hidden Natures and Society

Societies decide what behaviors are and are not acceptable. In “psychoanalysis, there is no meaningful difference between normal and abnormal...there are merely psychological

differences among individuals, and the issue is one of nondestructive versus destructive behavior” (Tyson 25). In *Sharp Objects*, Adora’s destructive, abusive tendencies exist outside of her society’s accepted behaviors, so she has to conceal her dark nature. Adora gets caught and gets arrested for murdering Marian almost twenty years after Marian’s death. Her ability to hide her darkness indicates her awareness of societal expectations for women. Adora puts on a facade in front of others, but her daughters experience the full range of her emotions and personality. Adora’s concealment influences her daughters, as they directly experience the abuse, but their mother’s hidden nature also influences the way they conceal their own trauma: Camille’s cutting and Amma’s murders. Although individuals may covertly maintain destructive behaviors that are outside of societal expectations, the trauma surfaces eventually.

Camille’s skin cutting is a destructive coping mechanism that she conceals from the outside world. Female self-harm is a taboo that does not align with American societal rules and regulations, as a woman’s beauty influences how others view and treat her. Throughout the text, she expresses her desire to keep her scars hidden, worrying that they will creep out from under her sleeves and that someone will notice. She does not even show the people she has sexual relations with until she has a sexual encounter with John Keene, the murdered Natalie Keene’s brother. Camille expresses, “More than a decade devoted to concealment, never an interaction...in which I wasn’t distracted anticipating which scar was going to reveal itself. Let John look. Please let him look” (Flynn 208). John makes her show him the scars, and she reveals her body because she is tired of hiding. Although she tries to hide what she has done to herself, when she does reveal her wounds, she experiences a sort of release.

Ecological-Transactional Trauma

Societal expectations may cause individuals to conceal their abusive patterns, which can lead to transgenerational cycles of abuse. Eventually, familial trauma begins to seep outside of the family, negatively influencing others within the community. The ecological transactional approach to trauma investigates the way external influences, including those established or promoted by society and families influence the perpetuation of abuse and child maltreatment. Liza Little and Glenda Kantor explain that community factors, “to the community the family lives in, the peer groups of family members, formal and informal social supports, the existence of social isolation...and the availability and access to community services” influence patterns of child maltreatment (135). Although Adora is a wealthy parent with access to the community’s services, she is a victim of maternal maltreatment herself, which influences her development of destructive tendencies. Additionally, her community fails to intervene, despite a nurse’s recognition that Adora likely has Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy. Because Wind Gap upholds stereotypes about women and mothers, many people around Adora fail to intervene because they are unable to recognize and or accept the idea of a mother abusing her daughters.

Community factors and stereotypes along with familial interactions contribute to the transmission and perpetuation of transgenerational abuse patterns. Whenever societies fail to recognize and intervene during one generation of maternal abuse, the mother may pass down her abusive tendencies to her daughters. During the process, the abuse and effects of the trauma can mutate and become something even more destructive. Joya abuses and neglects Adora; unlike Adora, Joya’s abuse does not kill her children. Joya’s abusive nature transfers to Adora, who harms all three of her daughters. During the abuse, she “cannot stop,” and she kills Marian. Although none of Adora’s daughters have children, the influence of their mother’s abuse still transfers to them. Similar to Adora, Amma murders little girls, and the girls’ deaths affect the

whole town. Camille cuts and struggles to connect with others as a result of her mother's abuse, which influences the way she interacts with people around her. Overall, society's stereotypes towards women and consequent failure to acknowledge matrafemafilial abuse can lead to horrible generational patterns that negatively affect the larger community.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Sharp Objects emphasizes how women can exhibit multifaceted identities as victims of a patriarchal society and abusers. Women are expected to become mothers who serve as models for their children, especially daughters. Because mothers and daughters share collective experiences, the mother often passes down parts of her identity to her daughters who continue the cycle. When patriarchal societies expect women to align with dominant expectations of femininity, mothers with abusive tendencies often demonstrate behaviors that align with societal expectations outside of the home, allowing them to get away with abuse in the domestic space. Whenever a daughter observes her mother's dual identity as an abusive mother and societally accepted woman, the daughter may learn to exhibit similar behaviors and covertly perpetrate abuse. Societies often fail to recognize cases of maternal abuse because methods of abuse overlap maternal duties, which in turn, allows for the continuation of abuse and trauma down family lines. Generational trauma eventually spreads outside of the home.

As I mention in my introduction, outside of the literary scope, one publicized case of maternal abuse involving Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy includes Gypsy Rose Blanchard and her mother Dee Dee. Gypsy Rose's mother experienced MSBP, which led her to abuse Gypsy throughout her childhood and early adulthood. Dee Dee claimed that Gypsy had an amalgamation of ailments, including leukemia and muscular dystrophy, and she made her daughter undergo a series of unnecessary procedures. Whenever doctors ran tests and concluded that Gypsy was not sick, Dee Dee changed providers. Gypsy endured her mother's abuse throughout her life until she convinced her boyfriend to kill Dee Dee so she could be free. Right

after the murder, some people within the community became concerned where Gypsy was. They believed she needed her medication and wheelchair, which were both left at the house. However, Gypsy and her boyfriend got arrested soon after their escape, and the truth shocked the surrounding community; Gypsy was not sick but a victim of her mother's abuse. The Gypsy Rose Blanchard case highlights how maternal trauma can affect an individual daughter but also an entire community.

In order to combat biases, societies need to recognize that abuse is not confined to gender, neither victims nor perpetrators. Assumptions are powerful and dangerous whether they are negative or positive. They limit the ways society perceives groups of people, significantly limiting how we conceive violence and abuse. When we collectively assume that mothers are acting in their children's best interest, we may overlook generational abuse patterns. Although *Sharp Objects* is a fictional depiction of transgenerational matrafemafilial abuse, the text emphasizes real issues; assumptions and other environmental factors lead to generational trauma cycles, and generational abuse can poison societies. Literature can open our eyes to the ways we allow assumptions to frame our ways of thinking, challenging us to be more conscientious of the ways we allow stereotypes to cloud our judgment, especially in cases where perpetrators do not align with our expectations. Taboo subjects can be difficult to discuss, especially when child abuse is involved, however, literature provides a safe space to explore the ways trauma behaves in familial and societal contexts.

Chodorow proposed that the only way for a daughter to deviate from her mother's modeling and conditioning is through the presence of another female model. Isolated abuse within families allows mothers to maintain control over their daughters and limit their exposure to other models, which causes daughters to adopt their mothers' characteristics. Out of Adora's

daughters, Camille seems the most likely to deviate from her mother, likely as a result of her distance from her mother, her relationships with other women, and her awareness of the intergenerational patterns of abuse. Camille also seems the most conscious of her community's biases and her own prejudices. Individuals need to be aware of their personal biases and the way stereotypes shape our understanding of the world. Women can be victims of a patriarchal society but also maintain traditional gender expectations as a way to conceal their darker, abusive nature. The poison trickles through societies, down families, and returns to the community where it continues spreading.

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Appendix A: Adora's Family Tree

Family Tree

