Traditional Tropes and New Psychological Disorders:

Analyzing Amma as an “Evil Child” in Gillian Flynn’s *Sharp Objects*

The 2006 mystery novel *Sharp Objects* details the life of Chicago journalist Camille Preaker and her reluctant return to her hometown of Wind Gap, Missouri. Her job is to cover the story of the disappearances and murders of two preteen girls within the small town. Written by Gillian Flynn, who has also written *Dark Places* and *Gone Girl*, her inspiration for the characters of novel were derived from the Brothers Grimm short story “The Juniper Tree,” which follows the life of an evil stepmother who is jealous that her stepson would receive the family’s inheritance rather than her daughter. The stepmother ends up murdering the son by beheading him. Flynn liked the idea of the un-caring mother and deviating from the tropes of the nurturing mother-figure, which then brought her to creating the character of Adora—the “bad” mother of the novel. Fredrick Sommer’s 1948 photograph entitled *Livia*, also helped develop the characters in *Sharp Objects*, the picture shows a young girl with all of the characteristics of innocence in terms of clothing and hairstyle, but her facial expression shows her to, perhaps, be much more malevolent. (“Gillian Flynn”). Sommer’s photograph represents Amma, Camille’s thirteen-year-old half sister. Amma, a seemingly secondary character in the novel until the later part of the book, is a very explorative young girl who experiments with sex, narcotics, and other various recreational drugs. Camille and Amma develop a relationship throughout Camille’s stay in Wind Gap and investigation of the murder case. It is also made known to the reader that Camille’s mother, Adora, has Munchausen by Proxy Syndrome (MBPS), a psychological disorder in which she feels the need to purposely make her daughters and those that she cares for sick on purpose, so that she looks like an excellent caregiver to those on the outside. With this reveal, the reader is
led to believe that Camille’s mother, in fact, killed the two young girls; however, her youngest
daughter Amma is actually responsible for the murders. Amma has been a victim of her mother’s
MBPS, and as a character portrays a dependency on her mother only taking care of her. Amma
also carries feelings of intense jealousy when her mother shows affection to other girls her age.
Her mother used to tutor the two deceased girls, and Amma murdered them so that she could get
all of her mothers “love,” even though she was actually making Amma sick. This information is
revealed in the last five pages or so of Flynn’s novel when the teeth of the young girls were
found in Amma’s doll house—which replicated her own mother’s mansion—serving purpose as
the ivory tiles in the smaller version of Adora’s bedroom.

   Amma, however, is not the first murderous child, nor will she be the last. One of the
earliest novels that had an “evil child” as its main character is *The Bad Seed* by William March,
written in 1954. Rhoda Penmark is an intelligent, manipulative, and murderous little girl and can
be seen as one of the more traditional “evil children.” Author, Elaine Showalter, has even
commended March about his characterization of Rhoda as an “evil child” by saying: “Today,
even those who have never read the book, and never seen the play or film, use March’s image of
the ‘bad seed’ as a proverbial term for an evil child” (first10pages). With this praise, I like to
think Rhoda, indeed, sets a good foundation for all “evil children” that came after her, including
Amma from *Sharp Objects*. The tropes of manipulation and intelligence are seen in many
different “evil children” texts now; some of those examples include the film *Joshua* (2007), Ray
Bradbury’s short story “The Veldt,” and the 2009 film *The Orphan*. Of course, there are many
other different concepts and ideas that can develop an “evil child” character, like possession or
some other supernatural force, but these characteristics take away blame from the child or child-
like figure who is being portrayed as “evil.” In regards to the traits of super-intelligence and control, these are characteristics that are set in their own personalities. There is no outside force causing the child to act out or be murderous, therefore, giving more responsibility and accountability to those children. Amma also abides by the many tropes of an “evil child,” but rather than her malicious tendencies just stemming from the external ideas of a cursed womb or demonic possession, she holds more traditional characteristics like Rhoda, and her mother’s MBPS adds to Amma’s condition and makes her daughter physically and mentally ill.

The Impact of Intelligence: From *The Bad Seed* to *Sharp Objects*

There are many different movies, books, short stories, etc. in history and in contemporary culture that portray the idea of an “evil child.” It would be unfair to categorize all “evil children” into one genre, though. Karen Renner in *The ‘Evil Child’ in Literature, Film and Popular Culture* helps one not lump all “evil children” together by explaining why the term “evil child” is problematic; age of a child is subject to change—someone who is a legal adult could act childish and have evil tendencies. Then, to even try to explain “evilness” in children is another issue. In March’s *The Bad Seed*, Rhoda Penmark, is an eight-year-old girl who kills her classmate with her metal-plated shoes, is she considered evil? Does a child of such a young age have the “maturity and forethought necessary for moral decision-making” (Renner 5)? Regardless, among the many different brands and types of “evil children,” specifically the child sociopath, there are certain tropes that consistently show up in “evil children” narratives that support the idea that the child committing the horrific act knows exactly what they are doing. Although the “evil child” is represented in many different ways—like the possessed child, the demonic child, or even the
gifted child—it is common place to see a more sociopathic child with incomparable intelligence and the ability for extreme manipulation. Rhoda and Amma carry both of these characteristics.

In *The Bad Seed*, Rhoda is seen by her peers and caretakers and extremely intelligent, mature and self-sufficient: “Rhoda was one of the most satisfactory pupils the school has ever had” (March 26). Although her preciseness and maturity is seen as odd by her fellow classmates, it’s in Rhoda’s nature and she does not care about what others think about her. The only thing that matters to her is her own personal gain and accomplishment. For example, in the very beginning of the novel she is set on winning her school’s Most Improved Penmanship medal, but she loses to another young boy. In her resentment towards the boy she repeats to her mother, “[t]he medal was mine . . . It was mine” (March 10). This anger then motivates Rhoda into killing her classmate, with no regret or sign of empathy. Rhoda is very aware of her actions and thoughts, and explaining that she is so intelligent gives her this sense of responsibility and takes away the excuse of childhood innocence since she is portrayed as so mature. This trope is continued throughout the novel and creates a very haunting demeanor for this eight year old little girl who knows more than most people around her.

The characteristic of maturity and intelligence is developed even more in Amma in *Sharp Objects*. Her academic intelligence is touched on, Amma explains that according to an IQ test, she should actually be in the tenth grade, but her mother thinks that she should be with kids her age. She also confides in her sister Camille that she is “bored all the time” and that is why she acts out the way she does (*Sharp Objects* 183). This bit of information is given towards the end of the novel. However, Amma’s intelligence is portrayed through her actions leading up to this point in the novel. A subtle example of this intelligence is when Camille walks past Amma’s
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room and sees “her sitting very properly on the edge of a rocking chair, reading a book called *Greek Goddesses*. Since [Camille] had been here, [Amma] played at being Joan of Arc and Bluebeard’s wife and Princess Diana” (123). Amma has a wide-range of historical knowledge of different female figures from different eras, whom she looks up to and admires. She enjoys to read and learn about these female figures, even though most girls her age are not as interested in the same kind of literature or even the same kind of topics. Another instance where Amma’s intelligence is shown is when she is talking with her sister about how she acts around her friends and peers. Camille recites to her the old saying that it is “[s]afer to be feared than loved,” and Amma immediately responds with the name of the man who originally said the famous line, Machiavelli (183). Camille is completely surprised by how she knows that and Amma continues to explain that she knows “tons of things [she] shouldn’t know” (183). Amma’s intelligent mind plays into the trope seen in other works where there is an “evil child,” and they are significantly smarter than their peers. This puts her on a different level from those around her, and gives the audience the sense that she is unlike any other thirteen-year-old girl, and she has capabilities that other teenagers don’t have.

In both *The Bad Seed* and *Sharp Objects* the girls’ academic intelligence is brought up and looked at, as well as their overall understanding of themselves and those around them. These examples of their personality impacts their character greatly and sets a specific tone for how the girls should be viewed for the rest of the novel. Particularly with Amma, she is a thirteen-year-old girl, who, stereotypically, would be seen as innocent and unaware of the very mature and adult-like things that she is surrounded by (like her sister’s alcoholism and her mother’s MBPS). However, even though her emotions match her age—much like Rhoda—her intelligence far
surpasses that of a young teenager. With this trait, Amma can be given responsibility for her thoughts and actions. She is well aware of what she is doing and her sister Camille, as well as some of the other people in town notice Amma’s peculiar mind: “Amma [is] a smart girl—she did her acting out away from home,” she knows how to act around certain people in order to get what she wants (Sharp Objects 101). The trope of super-intelligence in Amma is crucial to the rest of the novel because it keeps her accountable in her actions, and also relates to her ability of being able to manipulate everyone around her.

Mommy’s Little Angel: A Deeper Look at the Trope of Manipulation in Sharp Objects

The intelligence that Rhoda and Amma carry also allows them to have the capability to manipulate those around them in terrifying ways. The facade that Rhoda puts up is simply “mommy’s little angel,” but this trope of manipulation has since developed, and can be seen in Amma. Specifically, in The Bad Seed, Rhoda is able to manipulate those around her, but with the same persona. Whereas, Amma, has the ability to take on different personalities and adapt to the different groups she surrounds herself with—her parents, her sister, her friends. This can still categorize Amma as more “traditional,” but her manipulation skills have been expanded to make her even more “evil.” Rather than Amma just being “[Adora’s] little doll,” she is able to take on multiple personas depending on whom she is presently associating herself with (43). This character development in Amma allows the novel to, overall, have more depth and adds new plot points. Furthermore, Amma’s ability to switch personalities is not only used as a mere plot device, it also gives her power in her murderous endeavors and allows her to go so long without getting caught.
In *The Bad Seed*, Rhoda is seen as a “conservative, thrifty child . . . [who] has qualities remarkable in a child,” speaking directly about her extreme courage (March 26-27). This is how she is seen, at least in the opinion of her mother, neighbors, and teachers. Her intelligence gives her the capability to put on the façade of being the obedient and innocent little girl in order to hide the maliciousness that is inside of her. Again, Rhoda is only eight years old and—unfortunately—when her eight-year-old emotions get the best of her, and when they overtake her, she acts on them and her front decomposes. After not winning the penmanship medal, she began teasing the boy who did win. Her instructor noted that she “[followed] the boy about, making his life miserable,” by staring at his medal and asking him for it (64). This instance of acting out started the suspicion of Rhoda’s involvement with the boy’s murder early on in the novel.

As for Amma, she is able to keep up the charade of her innocence until the last ten or so pages of *Sharp Objects*. Amma’s different façades can be seen in the way she acts and the way she dresses around the different people in her life. When she is around her peers she dresses in “a miniskirt, platform sandals, and a tube top” (*Sharp Objects* 77) and Camille describes her to have “long colt legs [and] breasts rounded out by pushup bras” (33). Amma is also very mean to her friend group by putting them down constantly and holding herself up in a seemingly higher position than the rest of them. She makes herself feared by her friend group through verbal abuse. Amma is obsessed with being in control, while being feared, loved, and admired, much like Rhoda. She uses the fear that she instills in her peers to make them do things for and with her, much like a Charles Manson-like figure. Once Amma is found out for the murders, her friends explain how Amma talked them into assisting with the killings of the two young girls.
Then, when Amma is around her mother, instead of wearing her usual, more risqué wear, Amma is seen in a “childish checkered sundress, [with] a matching straw hat by her side” (43). Camille explains that in this scene she looked even younger than her actual age of thirteen. Amma notices that Camille is assessing her style choices for the day and she responds to her with, “I wear this for Adora. When I’m home, I’m her little doll” (43).

Amma certainly knows how to dress the part of whatever role she needs to play, but she is also able to mentally manipulate those around her as well. She explains to Camille her theory of how she handles people: “if you let people do things to you, you’re really doing it to them . . . if someone wants to do fucked-up things to you, and you let them, you’re making them more fucked up. Then you have control. As long as you don’t go crazy” (182). Amma’s mentality directly relates to her mother’s MBPS, and how Amma is aware of what Adora has been doing to her for years. Amma’s reverse manipulation of letting Adora make her sick makes her feel that she has a power over her mother. Amma is okay with making her mother’s psychological illness even worse as long as she still feels that she is in control.

A Mother’s Murderous Love: Munchausen By Proxy Syndrome in Sharp Objects

Gillian Flynn gives Amma’s mother, Adora, Muchausen by Proxy Syndrome (MBPS). MBPS “is a psychological disorder marked by attention-seeking behavior by a caregiver through those who are in their care” (WebMD). It has been noted that “the vast majority of Munchausen by Proxy abusers are mothers who appear to all the world to be wonderful, concerned parents,” but in reality they are making their child/children sick in order to obtain the attention of being a “good” caretaker (Schreier). However, an article focusing on men being the perpetuators of
MBPS noted that they can be, and “fathers may be even more difficult to detect when they do not fit previously described personalities and traits associated with mothers,” although, they do not know how many actual cases there have been where the father has had this disorder due to the fact that they are not as suspect (Makar). This is a particularly rare illness with a reported frequency of about one to three in 100,000 people that would actually be diagnosed with MBPS, but it is likely that the actual number of undiscovered cases is actually a lot higher (MedicineNet). Someone with this disorder normally victimizes children that are in their early stages of childhood, and if noticed can be saved. Unfortunately, this is not always the case and approximately ten percent of the victims die (Boros). There have been varying cases throughout history, one of the most famous cases being that of Kathleen Bush. Her story made was told on the investigative television series *American Justice*, which aired in 2003, just three years prior to Flynn’s release of *Sharp Objects*. The special followed Bush’s MBPS and her eight year old daughter Jennifer, and how far this illness can go, not only for the child, but in terms of the media and politics as well.

Amma, on her own, might have been able to kill. However, I do think that the relationship she has with her mother Adora has a lot to do with how she acts out and perceives the world. Amma knows what her mother has been doing to her, but she lets her keep doing it so that she stays on her good side and will always have her love. Even though Amma feels she is in complete control of her mother’s MBPS, she is unaware of how she has developed this idea that her mother could only love her and never anyone else, causing her intense feelings of jealousy when she sees Adora care for someone else. This is what drives her to murder those who pose a
threat to her. The obsessive love that Amma and Adora share with one another is disturbing, and in reality, makes both of their conditions worse.

Towards the end of the novel, Camille and Amma are both sick and their mother vows to take care of them. Camille confides to Amma that Adora had given her something pale blue, but with a milk-like consistency that made her feel groggy and sick. Amma tells her sister that her mother is partial to that specific medicine, and that when it makes you fall asleep it allows Adora to "bring her friends in to look at you" (*Sharp Objects* 194). Camille finds out that their mother gave them pills and various medicines that made them purposely sick. Camille is finally able to correlate the death of her youngest sibling, Marian, to her mother. The next morning when Adora was apprehended, the following items were found in her pantry: "[e]ight vials of anti-malarial pills with overseas labels, big blue tablets that have been discontinued due to their tendency to induce fever and blurred vision . . . Seventy-two tablets of industrial-grade laxative, used primarily to for loosening the bowels of farm animals . . . Three bottles of ipecac syrup, used to induce vomiting in case of poisoning . . . [and] One hundred and sixty-one horse tranquilizers" (241). All of these, and more, were found in Camille’s toxicology tests. After finding a pair of bloody pliers that had DNA matching that of the two dead girls, Adora was convicted of murder.

All of this leads to Amma getting away with murder. Even though her mother was making her sick, Amma accepted it because she craved the attention: “She is a very needy child . . . Amma worries she’ll shrivel up and blow away if attention isn’t always on her” (154). Adora had tutored the two young girls that had died, and when Amma saw that, it fueled her overly-jealous tendencies and caused her to act out. With Adora no longer in the picture, Camille
takes Amma back to Chicago to care for her. Camille became the new mother-figure for Amma, trying to help her transition from having an abusive mother. This leads Amma to become dependent on Camille, and wanting her love, always. So, when Camille shows a speck of love or infatuation to her younger sister’s new schoolmate, Amma feels it necessary to kill her peer in order to keep all of Camille’s love. This results in the true murderer being revealed, and the evidence being found in Amma’s doll house: the teeth of the young girls were used as the ivory tile that laid out the floor of the replica home.

Even though Amma’s intelligence and manipulation skills got her far, her age still shines through emotionally when it comes to wanting to be loved by her mother. Much like when Rhoda from The Bad Seed could not handle losing. There is an expectation that both of these girls have, and when it is not met, killing is their only way to express that frustration. When they act out like this, it is when their true age shows and all of the maturity that has been built up goes away.

Conclusion: Cultural Relevance

Gillian Flynn’s award-winning first novel Sharp Objects touches on a variety of controversial subjects: cutting, alcoholism, child serial killers, and murderous mothers. With the use of Amma Crellin, a thirteen-year-old girl, and her mother Adora, Flynn is able to not only bring awareness to serious psychological disorders and illnesses, but also develop her own “evil child” narrative. Through the tropes of intelligence and manipulation, mixed with bad mothering and childish jealousy, Flynn creates a provocative child-killer in Amma.
The concepts of super-intelligence and manipulation have been seen in “evil children” narratives since the genre was really brought to life. In one of the earliest novels, William March in *The Bad Seed* presents Rhoda Penmark, an eight-year-old girl who is smart enough to kill when things do not go her way. In both Amma and Rhoda, their ages shine through in their emotions—whether it be when they are receiving mother’s love or things are not going their way—and through their intelligence and manipulation skills they are able to kill in an efficient manner. However, something Flynn does that March does not, is add more fault to the mother. Flynn brings acknowledgement to the rare psychological disorder of Munchausen by Proxy Syndrome and how this can potentially affect the children victims who are subjected to the harm of their mothers. Surely, *The Bad Seed* in 1954 had relevance to the time period, but in today’s era there are more things going on that Flynn was able to successfully bring to light in her novel.

Works Cited


