

On Sentimental Sisterly Bonds and Poisonous Motherly Care: Negotiations of Southern White Female Victimhood in Jean-Marc Vallée's *Sharp Objects* (2018)

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ABSTRACT: This essay explores the ways in which Jean-Marc Vallée's *Sharp Objects* (2018) can be understood as part of a sentimental Southern Gothic visual culture and how this enables a profound analytical entry point for the critical study of the ideologies attached to imaginings of white Southern femininity. Thus, it examines the employment of 'strategic white womanhood' and the weaponization of 'white innocence' in the context of white Southern women through a distinct Southern Gothic lens that subverts established archetypes of the Southern belle and the Southern lady alongside sentimental tropes of motherhood. In this way, this paper also proposes how, through the overt sentimentalization of sisterly bonds, the miniseries invests in maintaining an imaginary in which white Southern women and girls can nevertheless be conceived as victimized and pitiable.

KEYWORDS: Sentimental Southern Gothic; White Femininity; *Sharp Objects*

"Be careful, someone in town is killing little girls..."
– "Yeah, but not the cool ones"
(*Sharp Objects*, "Vanish" 00:46:00-00:47:47)

Introduction

The critically acclaimed HBO miniseries *Sharp Objects* is an adaptation of Gillian Flynn's 2006 novel of the same name and traces the return of Camille Preaker to her hometown of Wind Gap, Missouri. A journalist, struggling with alcoholism, she is to report on the town's two missing, soon to be revealed as murdered, teenage girls, Ann Nash and Nathalie Keene. During her stay, Camille is confronted with the trauma of her past marked by abuse, loss, and sexual violence. At the same time, she must navigate not only the rising tensions in the town, but also within her female-dominated family home: tormented by her abusive mother Adora, the outbursts of her estranged teenaged half-sister Amma, and the grief she feels for her deceased half-sister Marian, who passed away during Camille's own coming-of-age in Wind Gap.

Over *Sharp Objects'* running time, it is ultimately revealed that Adora exhibits symptoms of FDIA (Factitious Disorder Imposed on Another)¹ through which she caused her own daughter Marian's untimely death. Yet, despite this arguably traumatic event, Adora, once again—and

¹ Otherwise known as Munchhausen-by-Proxy Syndrome (MBPS), FDIA is a condition in which a person/patient intentionally makes their loved ones (typically their children) sick in order to care for them and as a result, receive pity, attention as well as admiration from their surrounding community (Abdurrachid and Gama Marques 17-18, 22).

without the intervention of her husband and Amma's father, Alan—provides the same destructive care to Camille's teenage half-sister Amma in the present that *Sharp Objects* constructs. As the plot unfolds, Adora's malevolent actions towards her daughters lead to her being incriminated and eventually imprisoned for the murders of the two town girls, Ann and Nathalie. Yet, ultimately, the end of the series exposes Amma as the true murderess of Nathalie and Ann as well as of her new-found friend Mae. The ending credits are intercut with flashing images of Amma alone and together with her two Wind Gap girlfriends violently murdering the girls.

The miniseries' main perpetrators, Adora and Amma, can thus—through their distinct embodiments of white Southern female archetypes, the Southern lady (Adora) and the Southern belle (Amma)—be understood as aggressors who weaponize their attributed status of victimhood. In this paper, Jean-Marc Vallée's *Sharp Objects* is therefore assessed as an exploration of what Ruby Hamad calls "strategic white womanhood" (32), drawing on myths of 'white innocence.' Yet, the miniseries also proposes that other white women and girls, such as Marian and Camille—through their shared, heavily sentimentalized sisterly bond further intended to evoke empathy and pity—can still be conceived of as innocent victims. At the hands of patriarchal violence as well as of their mother's abuse, which is further marked by the perversion of the sentimental trope of motherly love, the white female subjects are framed as in continued need of protection and pity. Hence, despite the aggressors of *Sharp Objects* (2018) being predominantly other white women, it is through the cultural work of the sentimental—as "a communicative and relational code which can draw on emotional knowledge and activate empathy" (Paul and Pritz 9)—that a continued perception of white women and girls as 'innocent victims' is enabled. It is through this embedded employment of the sentimental code within broader genre-specific themes of the Southern Gothic that Vallée's *Sharp Objects* can further be understood as a distinctly sentimental Southern Gothic text, thereby allowing for a new analytical entry point into decoding the politics of prevalent imaginings of white (Southern) femininity.

The Sentimental Southern Gothic

In this contribution, I propose the concept of a sentimental Southern Gothic to assess the sentimental tropes and codes employed in Southern Gothic visual culture. It is set against an analytical and theoretical backdrop encompassing studies of the sentimental, as employed in the sentimental novel and twentieth-century melodrama, and the Gothic mode with a distinct focus on the US South. For one, I draw on the very notion of an interconnection between the Gothic and the Sentimental which Peter de Voogd has referred to as "sentimental horrors," proposing that both the respective traditions of the Sentimental and the Gothic novel, at their core, draw on eliciting an excess of emotion (76). The affects "that gothic texts aim to generate, for example, fear, shock, and disgust" (Reyes 16) may at first seem quite opposed to the excesses of melodramatic weeping and heartfelt declarations of pity that sentimental

texts are typically associated with (cf. Gerund and Paul). However, the sentimental also accommodates outrage, anguish, and dispiritedness once confronted with “the violation, actual or threatened, of the affectional bond” (Dobson 266-67) and can further be traced through various forms of media, such as the melodrama² (cf. Paul et al.). The sentimental can therefore be conceived of as “a communicative and relational code which can draw on emotional knowledge and activate empathy” (Paul and Pritz 9) and that functions “as a mirror to the political landscape, while simultaneously (re)shaping public sentiment and identity” (13). Going back to de Voogd’s initial musings, the sentimental and the Gothic alike can thus, in a more abstract sense, be thought of as modes, as well as codes, through which different forms of feeling and especially expressions of pain, such as melancholy, longing, and yearning can be worked through.

Next to the plane of similar or shared excesses of emotion, the sentimental and the Gothic further share historic, traditional investments in the focus points of whiteness, religion—specifically Christianity—, and femininity (Paul 63-68; Donovan-Condron 340; Wester 56; Spooner 125). The ties of the sentimental to notions of whiteness and femininity were famously established by Harriet Beecher-Stowe, urging her white middle-class female readership to ‘feel right’ in her seminal 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Paul 63-68). The rise of the melodrama (cf. Paul et al.) and its interconnection with the history of women’s film (cf. Walsh; Schatz), featuring classic narratives and tropes of female victimization and emancipation and drawing from the canon of the seduction novel (Paul 56), further institutionalized the racialized and gendered underpinnings of the sentimental and the melodramatic which scholars such as Lauren Berlant and Xine Yao, among many notable others, critically assessed and interrogated. Southern Gothic’s investments in constructing the US South “as a haunted geographical and cultural terrain, beleaguered by its history of slavery, civil war, and the subsequent dismantling of the myths of the Old South” (Horsely 67), furthermore, mark it as just as much about Blackness and masculinity as about whiteness and femininity—with recent years in particular having seen a significant shift in representation (e.g. *Sinners* [2025]).

Yet, imaginings of white femininity remain overrepresented in the “reliable, if distorted, mirror of the cultural anxieties that shape [...] [US American] national conversation” that is the Gothic South (Crow “Southern American Gothic,” 154). Vallée’s *Sharp Objects*, set in rural Southern Missouri and with its almost exclusively white female cast, thereby falls directly in line with this trend, yet it ambiguates the underlying connotations of overrepresentation by positioning its white female characters as both perpetrators and victims. In my analysis, I aim to show how the miniseries works to codify its perpetrator characters, Amma and Adora, in

2 The study of the melodrama further provides an analytical entry point for the study of horror film, as proposed by Linda Williams’s concept of the ‘body genre,’ foregrounding the shared logic of excess and sensations that both melodrama and horror are centered on generating (2-3).

line with the archetypes of the Southern belle and the Southern lady, making it part of their employment of “strategic white womanhood” (Hamad 32), which allows for their deliberate weaponization of an attributed status of victimhood. Yet, while this works to debunk myths of white, specifically female, innocence, I will also argue that Vallée’s *Sharp Objects*, through the employment of a sentimental code pertaining the sisterly bond of Camille and Marian and positioning them as pitiable victims, also maintains those myths at the same time. Through a specific lens of conceptualizing a sentimental Southern Gothic, I therefore investigate the sentimental tropes and codes entailed in Southern Gothic visual culture and decode the ambiguous cultural work they perform through and within the respective imaginings of white femininity.

Conceptualizing White Southern Femininity and the Ideology of White Female Victimhood

As a further theoretical framework, I want to draw on two distinct conceptualizations and archetypes of white Southern femininity which will inform my ensuing analysis: Southern belles and Southern ladies. The Southern belle as an archetype originated in the antebellum South and operates in this exact context. As contended by Maika Aira Gallardo, they could be perceived as “the perfect example of the myth of the old south: young, fragile, delicate and beautiful” (150). Modern interpretations and conceptualizations of the Southern belle continue to center on the idea of a debutante from an affluent background and the exhibition of deeply conservative, gendered scripts of societal performance, where “a lady never raises her voice; doesn’t tell everything she knows; never lets a silence fall; [and] talk[s] real nice” (Smith qtd. in Defibaugh and Taylor 6). In turn, the Southern lady, as “the ideal of southern femininity” (McPherson 171), evolves and builds on the archetype of the (white) Southern belle. In order to “successfully complete [...] the transformation from flirtatious belle to tasteful and propertied lady,” marriage needs to be secured (171). It is through the continued adherence to heteronormative and patriarchal values—and the fulfillment of the inscribed roles of loving wife and doting mother—that the status of the lady can be achieved. As explored in the imagery of the notorious staple of Southern cinema, *Gone with the Wind* (1939), “the ‘feminine’ ladies, [...] are identified as [...] petite, high-class, and, it goes without saying, white” (52).

Thus, both of these archetypes are tied to larger discourses on “white women[’s] [...] stereotypical supposed traits (including helplessness, goodness, and motherliness)” (Francis and Gray 10). Specifically in conversation with “the colonial archetype of the virtuous white woman,” they are evocative of “the damsel in distress” with “the delicacy of white bourgeois femininity [further] act[ing] as a continuation of colonial values” (Hamad 32). This attached ideological belief can be historically linked to the dominant discourse on the position white US American women held in the slave-holding system which previously concerned itself with the passivity of white women, yet seldomly acknowledged their role as active perpetrators of

violence and exploitation of the enslaved (cf. Hamad; Jones-Rogers; Churchwell). Specifically in regard to the antebellum South, it was “the cult of Southern white womanhood,” where a white woman’s “chastity [was to be] defended by gallant plantation aristocrats [...] from Black debauchery by any means necessary” (Churchwell 165). Therein, “[t]he white southern lady – as mythologized image of innocence and purity – floats free from the violence for which she was the cover story” (McPherson 3). Alongside the myth of the ‘Lost Cause’³ that serves as “the foundation of America’s modern myth of white victimhood” (Churchwell 115), it is the myth of white female victimhood and “the romanticized notion of the pure white [Southern] woman” (Williams 26) that remain central. From the postbellum South onwards, “many white southern women were [...] unwilling to question white privilege, buying into a return to the pedestal on which southern femininity was popularly situated” (McPherson 19). It is in this context that “strategic white womanhood,” as proposed by Ruby Hamad, comes into play as it enables the weaponization of white privilege (32): From the ‘Miss Anns’ of the nineteenth century to ‘Becky’ and the ‘Karens’ of the twenty-first century,⁴ white women have been able to systematically weaponize their attributed status as victims to not only turn into aggressors themselves, but furthermore utilize their ‘white innocence’ as a shield to hide behind (Hamad 25, 30).⁵ It allows them “to freely oscillate from the helpless damsel in distress in need of white male protection to the enforcer of whiteness: the damsel in defense” (Hamad 32).

Vallée’s *Sharp Objects* as a Sentimental Southern Gothic Tale: Its Central Imaginings of White Southern Femininity and Their Politics

Sharp Objects (2018) constructs the town of Wind Gap, Missouri, as a distinctly Southern space by mediating cultural and idiomatic qualities that position it as such (Horsley 204). This is done in Vallée’s miniseries, for example, through the town celebration of Calhoun Day “in which the rape of a Confederate wife [Millie Calhoun] during the Civil War is reenacted to celebrate her sacrifice to the town and its history” (Sanders 105). Despite Missouri having been a slaveholding state, it was not part of the Confederacy. Thus, the fabrication of a Confederate

³ As proposed by Sarah Churchwell, “[a] mythical version of Southern history, the Lost Cause claims the Confederacy fought the Civil War (1861-1865) as a principled defence of noble civilization (the Old South) and its democratic rights, rather than as an unprincipled defence of the white supremacist system of chattel slavery” (8).

⁴ The terminology of “generic-sounding first names [is] used by African Americans as stand-ins for nosy or dangerous white women” and has its origins “in antebellum slavery where ‘Miss Ann’ contained coded warnings to avoid a certain white mistress” (Hamad 22). As further argued by Ruby Hamad, following ‘Miss Ann’ was ‘Becky’—“more commonly denoted a younger white woman, [...] likely to perform white racial innocence or even aspire to Blackness only to respond with distress when treated with suspicion” (23)—and, lastly, ‘Karen’, who, further gained public traction and mainstream attention. As a stand-in archetype (22) and signifier for whiteness (24), Karen “seeks to destroy [Blackness] and leverages her proximity to authority to do so” (24); the predominant form of enactment being the “calling [of] the police on Black people for ‘living while Black’” (Williams qtd. in Hamad 23).

⁵ For in-depth discussions on the weaponization of white femininity, specifically against people of color, through the use of ‘white tears,’ see Ruby Hamad and Alison Phipps.

reenactment as part of Wind Gap's history and present, which is entirely absent in Gillian Flynn's 2006 novel, further amplifies the coding of the space as Southern in the miniseries adaptation (Horsley 203-04). This is additionally echoed by the plot of the play in which the character of the pregnant "child-bride," Millie (played by Amma), endures torture and a resulting miscarriage to protect her husband Zeke Calhoun from Northern military forces by refusing to reveal his location ("Closer" 00:34:49-00:40:44). Next to presenting a case of prevailing 'Lost Causism,' this reenactment further encapsulates the overarching "ideas of class, Southern culture, and femininity" (108) that are held by Wind Gap's community: Female suffering and devotion to patriarchal structures are to be expected and celebrated, thereby solidifying the perception of white (Southern) women as victimized.⁶ Building on these gendered expectations of "passivity, silence, and compliance" (Miller 495 qtd. in Schwarz 64), the ambiguous displays of particular imaginings and archetypes of white, and distinctly Southern, femininity unfold: Tapping into the Southern Gothic's legacy of "dismantling the myths of the old south" (Horsley 67) and with them the colonial ideology of white female innocence and victimhood, Vallée's *Sharp Objects* challenges the 'pure' status of the Southern belle and the Southern lady by exposing the atrocities they are capable of.

Therefore, instead of sentimentalizing the Southern belle and lady, as done in classic Southern film (Williams 26), *Sharp Objects* puts forth another manifestation of the sentimental, which is, however, predominantly bound to explicitly female relationships and characters. Specifically refraining from the concept of motherly love, as the otherwise "ur-sentimental" concept (Schweda 212), it is the sibling bond and specifically the concept of sisterly love that takes its place. Through this engagement with the sentimental code, I propose that the miniseries can not only be conceived of as Southern, but, as I argue, be read as distinctly sentimental Southern Gothic in order to fully unpack the complex cultural work that Vallée's *Sharp Objects* performs through the different imaginings of white Southern femininity and girlhood and the politics of white female victimhood encoded therein.

Sentimental Sisters: Tears, Trauma, and Pity

Oscillating between past and present, it is only through recurring flashbacks that *Sharp Objects* offers glimpses of the sisterly bond between Camille and her younger, in the miniseries' present already deceased, sister, Marian. Drawing on a heavily affectively charged register, the distinctly sentimentalized dynamic between the two is explored by visualizing Camille's memories of her and Marian sneaking out with their rollerblades to ride around town, lying in bed together, smiling and laughing together while pointing out shapes on the ceiling ("Vanish" 00:02:12-00:03:40; 00:29:50-00:30:18). The grief associated with the loss of a beloved sibling

⁶ While in this case, victims of (white male) Northern soldiers' aggression, the play does not intradiegetically work to critique the prevalence of patriarchal violence at large as it ends with the 'happy' reunion of the married Calhoun couple of the "child-bride" and the "town's founding pedophile" ("Closer" 00:26:00-00:27:11; 00:34:49-00:40:44).

builds on this affective, sentimental bond, predominantly expressed through tears—with varying levels of sentimental weeping and violent crying out (cf. Warhol; Tompkins; Dobson). In this vein, the sentimentalized notion of mourning the beloved, lost sister, not only establishes the sentimental dynamics of pity and empathy, but also emphasizes it through positioning Marian as the ‘angelic’ girl child (cf. May). With her blond hair in pig tails, blue eyes, always smiling and never once showcased throwing a tantrum or acting unpleasantly in any way, Marian is a stand-in for purity and innocence. This is enabled through a complete absence of insight into Marian’s interiority, resulting in her being rendered as an idealized vision of ‘demure’ white girlhood—the epitome of not only childhood but white female innocence—thereby casting Adora’s acts of poisoning her own child as ever more heinous.

Moreover, it is specifically the absence of tears that take on a central position in Vallée’s *Sharp Objects* to challenge normative and sentimentalized concepts of motherhood while also further establishing Camille as a pitiable subject. One of the most prominent scenes to establish this is the one prior to Marian’s funeral where the teenaged Camille watches Adora, dressed in black, from behind in the chapel, believing to see her mother wiping away tears (“Dirt” 00:11:57-00:12:50). Touched by what is understood as the display of her mother’s apparent grief, Camille approaches her, kneels down next to her, and puts her head on her mother’s leg who, however, almost immediately stands up and leaves, therein disrupting the briefly created moment of familial intimacy and showcasing Adora’s avid refusal to provide comfort. This subversion of the sentimental figure of the grieving mother, marked by love, care, and sacrifice (cf. Schweda), is additionally elevated by the revelation that the gesture Camille interpreted as a wiping away of tears, was in fact Adora’s compulsive plucking at her eyelashes which she sees left behind on the funeral program—a realization that is mimicked and enhanced for viewers by adopting Camille’s gaze via a lingering close-up shot. At the funeral itself Adora again does not weep, going against these distinct scripts of ‘feeling right,’⁷ and it is Camille who takes over this culturally inscribed role. Instead of the grieving mother, it is the grieving sister with whom viewers are meant to empathize and feel for, as she is the one ‘feeling right.’ Yet, this disposition, too, is visualized differently in Vallée’s *Sharp Objects*. Rather than quietly dabbing away her tears according to the established behavioral codes—legacy of the Southern belle and lady as demure, put-together, and gentle (cf. Gallardo)—Camille, upon seeing her sister’s dead body in the casket, devolves into a fit of rage and sobs, having to be escorted out of the building (“Vanish” 00:55:01-00:56:30).

This refusal to comply with existing normative scripts is further visualized through Camille’s practices of presenting herself, as she wears exclusively dark colors and casual wear, set in direct opposition to the traditional, hyperfeminine codes oriented towards bodily desirability which Adora and Amma embody (cf. Sanders). As one of the primary victims of Adora’s emotional abuse, Camille is continuously taunted by her mother’s subtle as well as overtly

⁷ For an extended discussion of the importance of tears in connection to white female sentiments, see Heike Paul’s discussion of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in *Amerikanischer Staatesbürgersentimentalismus*, pp.63-68.

expressed rejection of her. This is repeatedly explored throughout the miniseries, showcasing Camille, as in the scene at the chapel, reaching out for her mother only to be physically refused by her, and through Adora's repeated gaslighting⁸ and verbal rejection of her daughter—"I never loved you" ("Closer" 00:42:29-00:44:52); "You're ruined" ("Closer" 00:13:44-00:14:59). This situates Camille in a position of powerlessness paired with an almost childlike innocence, as despite her continuous efforts, she cannot obtain her mother's affection nor cease to not be hurt by its absence. It is through the amalgamation of trauma—of abuse from her mother, grief for her sister, and experiences of sexual violence during her adolescence⁹—that Camille is established as a (white) female character whom viewers are meant to feel for, empathize with, and pity. The perpetuation of white female subjects as 'innocent victims' is thereby distinctly enabled through the employment of the sentimental code, here specifically applied in the way that the sisterly bond Marian and Camille shared is sentimentalized—most notably in the nostalgic, grieving 'look back,' visualized through flashbacks.

On Poisonous Motherly Care and Weaponized Victimhood

As established through the previous exploration of the strained familial bonds of the Crellin women, Adora's role as a mother comes second, as her embodiment of the Southern lady archetype takes the primary position: She mimes the grand hostess of the Calhoun Day celebrations at the Crellin family estate, is always dressed up as hyper-feminine and in a put-together look to the point where she even wears heels in her own home, always "talks real nice" (Smith qtd. in Defibaugh and Taylor 6) to those she aims to charm, and shuts down any conversation topic she deems upsetting or improper. She can therefore be understood to adhere to a strict behavioral code on societal Southern white feminine performance which she imposes on others, harshly punishing any transgressions thereof, as evidenced by her abusive treatment of Camille (cf. Sanders).

Adora does not only hold culturally inscribed power by complying to the above-mentioned scripts, but furthermore holds economic power. She is the breadwinner of the family as well as the biggest employer in Wind Gap, given her ownership of the town's hog farm, whereas it

⁸ Adora thereby manipulates their social circle through the deliberate dissemination of lies, such as claiming that Camille taunted her with gory details about the mutilated bodies of the murdered victims, aimed at turning Camille into a perpetrator of emotional harm and herself into a victim. Furthermore, blame for minor inconveniences is repeatedly shifted onto Camille, framing her as a disturbance and at fault for causing her mother's unwellness ("Cherry" 00:19:58-00:21:50).

⁹ As a teenager Camille was raped by a group of Wind Gap High School boys ("Vanish" 00:20:24-00:20:32; "Cherry" 00:27:41-00:28:26). While this constitutes one of the most brutal epitomes of patriarchal violence in the miniseries, the overarching oppressiveness of this structure is conveyed repeatedly throughout the series via shifts in tone and mood. This can be notably traced in the array of sequences in which a teenaged Camille takes a dip in a nearby lake ("Vanish" 00:11:39-00:12:14). At first rendered calm and serene, the framing of blissful solitude is disrupted, turning frantic, as local teenage boys out on a hunt appear with their rifles. Rather than the local fauna, it is Camille who then becomes the boys' target. While they refrain from shooting at her, the act of aiming the rifle constitutes a similarly violent act by overtly turning her into a target, praying on her vulnerability as a young, barely clothed girl all alone, and infringing upon her humanity by equating her with their intended non-human victims.

is her husband Alan who is not seen to engage in or be connected to forms of paid labor in any way. While this constitutes a significant subversion of the patriarchal underpinnings inscribed in the archetype of the Southern lady, this notion is further heightened by Adora making conscious use of this economic position of power, for example, by jokingly (yet subtly) threatening the chief of police and dismissing people who have fallen from her favor. Nevertheless, she repeatedly chooses to play to patriarchal norms and perform female powerlessness within the domestic sphere—an artifice that, given the true power relations, is in fact a conscious display of power: It is Adora who tells Alan that he—as the implied ‘man of the family’—is to reprimand Camille (“Cherry” 00:15:49-00:17:24), and it is Alan who must care for her, but only in the specific ways she dictates (“Ripe” 00:23:40-00:24:18). Adora thereby manufactures the façade of a patriarchal family structure which, in reality, is a matriarchy under her own destructive reign shaped by her (poisonous) motherly care and enactment of weaponized white female victimhood.

Through her destructive and even murderous mothering, Adora’s character represents the dichotomy of the good mother and the bad mother. As proposed by E. Ann Kaplan (468):

1. The Good Mother, who is all-nurturing and self-abnegating—the ‘Angel of the House’. Totally invested in husband and children, she lives only through them, and is marginal to the narrative.
2. The Bad Mother or Witch—the underside of the first myth. Sadistic, hurtful, and jealous, she refuses the self-abnegating role, demanding her own life. Because of her ‘evil’ behavior, this mother often takes control of the narrative, but she is punished for her violation of the desired patriarchal ideal, the Good Mother.

The former reflects Adora’s outward façade as the Southern lady to Wind Gap’s community, while the latter links back to Adora’s ‘inner self,’ indicative through the malevolent actions towards her daughters. Thus, in rudimentary terms, the good and the bad mother can be understood as collapsed onto one figure. However, this collapse of categories as applied to Adora is not employed subversively. In principle, the role of the ‘Bad Mother’ can harbor innate emancipatory potential, given its undermining of the “desired patriarchal ideal” (468). However, Adora’s ‘taking control’ is merely reflected in the enactment of abuse upon others, specifically her daughters, propelled by her FDIA (Factitious Disorder Imposed on Another). She emotionally manipulates those around her to get her way and consciously makes her own children sick in order to get attention and praise from others, resulting in a perversion of the ‘ur-sentimental’ concept of motherly love (Schweda 216). This leads to the notion “of the idealized self-sacrificing and nurturing mother” then being attached not to Adora but to Camille: It is Camille who ultimately lets Adora feed her the ‘medicine’ (a homemade concoction of toxicants made by Adora herself) in an attempt to save her sister from the destructive, poisonous care their mother provides. Through Camille’s willingness to sacrifice herself, the “sentimentally coded core values” (Schweda 214) otherwise attached to “[m]otherhood as a social role” (216) are thus displaced from the mother onto the daughter to take on.

In this context, it is also through the complacency of white Southern men in acts of abuse and the paternal absences in the Crellin family that weaponized white female victimhood is further

enabled. The only presented ‘healthy’ paternal relationship Camille has is the one with her head editor Frank Curry, who together with his wife, functions as a stand-in parental unit that offers the familial care Adora withholds.¹⁰ Camille’s father remains entirely absent in the miniseries, without visualization, voice, or any indicative representations in flashbacks. While Alan, Camille’s stepfather and Marian and Amma’s father, is present in the domestic sphere, he does not take on the social role of fatherhood nor partakes in the affective labor that accompanies it. Despite select scenes hinting at a paternal bond with Amma, showing the two briefly dancing together and sharing a hug, Alan is primarily devoted to his wife Adora on whom he is also economically dependent. He caters to her every whim and worships her despite his awareness of Adora’s disorder, consciously letting her poison not only Camille but also his own daughter, Amma. Even though he at times challenges Adora, for example once his own male pride is hurt (“Ripe” 00:37:02-38:57), these interventions never last, nor are they followed by any significant action, casting him not as a parental figure but as a detached observer, who neither dares nor wants to oppose the Southern lady. Instead of getting help for Amma, he sends her upstairs again with the promise of bringing her cake (“Milk” 00:19:45-00:21:25). He recommends that Adora’s poisonous motherly care does not “go overboard” (“Milk” 00:17:48-00:18:36) and deliberately turns up his music to cover up Camille’s potential cries for help once the police come to visit for the first time (“Milk” 00:25:40-00:27:14). Thus, Alan’s character functions as an embodiment of passivity and resulting complacency. Otherwise traditionally (and falsely) attributed to white women (Hamad 27), his actions showcase the violence that complacency yields: Actively aware of Adora’s crimes, he continues to enable her destructive form of mothering. Yet, he is not the only (white) man in town to do so. Bill Vickery, the town’s chief of police, is another admirer of Adora and, in the past, repeatedly refused to investigate concerns raised against her regarding a potential FDIA disorder. As a result, he, too, is complicit in covering up Adora’s crimes.

Adora’s deliberate employment of strategic white femininity and the weaponization of her victimhood has thus far allowed her to evade legal consequences or other repercussions of her actions. She is permitted to carry on by the patriarchal society of Wind Gap through her active embodiment of the Southern Lady archetype and the conservative cultural ideal of the doting mother, and it is only during her ultimate arrest that this fabulation is brought to the extreme and collapses. Attempting to draw on her position of power and avoid punishment for her crimes, she appeals to the chief of police in utter disbelief while having her housemaid Gayla help her slip into her high heels: “You know me” (“Milk” 00:31:36-00:33:15). Attempting

¹⁰ This additionally echoes sentimentalized ideas of the nuclear family and patriarchal structures in opposition to the toxic patriarchy of the Crellin household. Together with his wife, Eileen, acting as a motherly figure, Frank—under the pretense of ‘tough love’—assumes the role of a father to Camille. He is continually concerned for her well-being, calls her, and ultimately comes to her rescue, as it is only through his vehement advocacy that police forces raid the Crellin family home to save Camille from Adora’s poisonous motherly care (for an in-depth exploration, see Janine Schwarz’s discussion of this in her article on Flynn’s novel).

to dismiss the entire proceedings by proclaiming Camille as at fault and insane, she pleads and weeps, ultimately dissolving into sobs when crying out for Amma (but not Camille), enacting a mother's emotional distress upon being separated from their child. Yet, this is to no avail as despite Vickery's remaining sympathy for Adora, evident in his "trying to do this as respectfully as possible" ("Milk" 00:31:36-00:33:15), the other present detective orders her to be put in handcuffs, treated like any other criminal. Thus, while the weaponization of her white victimhood is further enabled through her display of the Southern lady archetype, Adora is uncovered as an aggressor through her transgressions as a mother. Her non-subversive embodiment of the 'bad mother' trope positions her outside of a 'redeeming' application of the sentimental code, and locates her outside of the narrative of white female innocence that strategic white womanhood builds on, causing this construction to collapse.

The Murderous Southern Belle as Victim and Perpetrator

The character most ardently affected by Adora's destructive form of mothering in *Sharp Objects*' present is Amma, Camille's fifteen-year-old half-sister. While a victim of her mother's abuse, she is also a perpetrator. Having killed Ann and Nathalie through strangulation and having mutilated their bodies afterwards by pulling their teeth, Amma's crimes are violent and gruesome, thereby offering a counter draft to gendered conceptualizations of female crime in opposition to Adora's acts of poisoning which are traditionally coded as feminine (cf. Weiler). Amma's age provides another relevant analytical divergence from the novel, given that she is only thirteen years old in Flynn's original work. While the characterization of Amma in both texts remains similar in exploring her ambiguous coming-of-age between infantility and promiscuity, increasing her age by two years in the miniseries is intended to further distance her from the position of a child, instead situating her in the midst of adolescence: As repeatedly reiterated by Amma in the miniseries, according to her mother Adora she is "almost a woman" ("Fix" 00:36:54-00:39:18). This, on the one hand, can be understood as a move away from the inherent shock value attached to the figure of the murderous girl-child (cf. Woodward)—which at thirteen Amma would only be at the cusp of leaving behind. Yet, through favoring the figure of the murderous teenager—who, on the other hand, at fifteen years of age is still transgressive and non-normative through her criminal behavior—Vallée's *Sharp Objects* further enables the codification of Amma as a Southern belle, in line with established archetypes of Southern femininity. The Crellin family is clearly positioned in Wind Gap's upper-class, with their generational wealth being evident through Adora's ownership of the town's main source of income and the legacy of their family home¹¹. At the same time, Wind Gap is coded as a distinctly Southern space through the family displaying their affluence and values of Southern hospitality during the Calhoun Day festivities. This alignment with the

¹¹ See Sanders for an elaborate exploration through the lens of thing studies of the relation between the Crellin family home and, specifically, the function of the ivory tiles placed in Adora's bedroom as indicative of the prevailing legacy of white supremacy entailed therein.

social sphere, hence, works to further support the encoding of Amma—through her social status and age, as well as her display of select gender stereotypical codes—as distinctly falling in line with the archetype of white Southern femininity that is the belle.

This positioning between the murderous teenager and the Southern belle reflects the ambivalence and ambiguity of Amma's character. She, on the one hand, plays up to the Southern belle archetype in the domestic sphere to comply with her mother's gendered expectations of white Southern femininity through her behavior as well as her appearance. She deliberately acts demure and proper amidst fits of rage and infantile behavior entailed in utterances such as "I want Mama" ("Falling" 00:05:40-00:06:50), while she, at the same time, presents as hyper-feminine through her dress, hair styles, and overall put-together look (cf. Sanders). On the other hand, in the public sphere of Wind Gap, as well as in the confines of her room outside of her mother's watchful eye, Amma displays an entirely different persona: As the leader of a group of popular teenage High School girls, she dresses in revealing clothes, abuses drugs, and viciously bullies others. In this vein, Vallée's *Sharp Objects* purposefully ambiguates Amma's character, situating her between rebellion and devotion.

However, despite Amma's partial rejection of the distinct iterations of white Southern femininity that Adora perpetuates, it is in the most crucial moments that Amma falls back to rely on them and, thus, on her mother. In this context, the bond between Adora and Amma as Southern lady and Southern belle, mother and daughter, is established as one that, rather than sentimental and motherly, is coded as unsettling and transactional where compliance grants acknowledgement.¹² Despite an implied awareness of Adora's wrongdoings—"I'm OK, she now has you to care for" ("Milk" 00:18:37-00:19:44)—where Amma is evidently aware that she is being poisoned, she nevertheless repeatedly refrains from, or falters in, opposing her mother, who is the central figure in her life. This is most notable in the finale, where Camille sacrifices herself by willingly letting Adora care for (that is, poison) her in order to divert her attention from Amma, so that the latter may recover to get help from the outside. However, a dazed Amma, after a brief attempt, does not leave after all; despite an open door, she chooses instead to smoke a joint in her own room. Once encountered by Camille in this disposition and being questioning about her failed escape, she merely replies: "I want to stay her good girl" ("Milk" 00:27:15-27:48). This discrepancy in attachment is again mirrored in the ending, as Camille discovers the victims' teeth in Amma's dollhouse, exposing her as the true killer. In the face of her older half-sister's devastated facial expression, Amma only whispers: "Don't tell Mama" ("Milk" 00:46:10-00:47:10).

¹² Most notable is an instance where Amma falls ill ("Falling" 00:11:15-00:13:18) and she tries to diverge from her mother's regime of 'care' by asking for a grilled cheese sandwich instead of complying with the intake of Adora's potions and her mandated bedrest. She even admits to merely being hungover rather than sick, yet this does not deter Adora. With Adora falling into a monologue about not being needed anymore by her daughter, Amma is ultimately upset and distraught, and—rather than upsetting her mother, aiming for the continuation of her care on her own terms—complies by getting in bed and consuming Adora's 'medicine' (poison).

The sisterly bond between Camille and Amma is therefore of a more ruptured nature and marked by rejection and disillusion from Camille's perspective. While she feels and acts maternal towards Amma by taking her in and caring for her in times of struggle, she is ultimately only 'second best' to Adora which Amma's final spoken words in the miniseries underline: "Mama."¹³ Yet, while at distinct odds with the heavily sentimentalized bond Camille and Marian shared, Camille's relationships with her half-sisters are both marked by the looming presence of her mother that repeatedly disrupts the unfolding of the sisterly bonds to their fullest potential. Even though Adora is largely absent from the scenes showcasing Marian and Camille's time together, she does appear, however briefly, to break up their togetherness and take Marian away to 'care' for her ("Dirt" 00:36:18-00:36:40). Even her absence is set against the precarious backdrop of the possibility of her spontaneous appearance and the sisters' concern about being caught when sneaking out or into each other's rooms. Similarly, Camille and Amma's sisterly relationship blossoms through the shared moments of rebelling against Adora by partying together and sneaking into the family home ("Cherry" 00:43:52-00:45:40). This bond is not only repeatedly broken by Amma's fickleness and Adora's interventions, but is ultimately severed by Amma's unwavering dependence on her mother's judgement, even in her absence.

Therefore, while white female girlhood in Vallée's *Sharp Objects* is represented as angelic through the character of Marian, white teenage femininity is not—a notion that is distinctly explored in the attitudes of Amma and her friends. Visually evocative of the classic looks of Southern belles (cf. Gallardo), yet bored and indifferent in their expressions, they are framed as harboring an uncontained potential, which centers around the transgression and violations of existing moral codes. For example, they do not only play a game of toss and throw with memorabilia dedicated to the (at this point in the narrative) still missing Nathalie—which they themselves murdered—but further add on to this ardent act of disrespect in conversation with Camille. To her proposition that they should be careful as "someone in town is killing little girls," one of the girls merely replies: "Yeah, but not the cool ones" ("Vanish" 00:46:00-00:47:47). This provocative lack of compassion, from the beginning on, not only marks them as teenage girls acting disrespectfully but, more broadly, calls into question the general assumption as to how far specifically young (white) femininity is rendered distinctly vulnerable in comparison to others. Through Camille's backstory, marked by trauma and sexual violence, the narrative, on the one hand, highlights this threatened vulnerability as real. Yet, on the other hand, through the teenage girls of the present, the underlying assumption of (white) 'little girls' being in need of protection is challenged—as in the end it is the little girls who kill the little girls. The ones deemed most vulnerable and in need of protection are the

¹³ This, interestingly enough, as pointed out by Schwarz, is also an anagram of Amma's own name (60), thus offering a point of critical inquiry wherein Amma is bound to her mother, enforcing acts of destructive care in her own way (further see Sanders for a profound discussion of Amma's crimes as being in alignment with her mother's enforcement of specific displays of femininity).

perpetrators. In addition to these Southern belles, it is also the Southern lady (epitomized in Adora) who is a twisted killer in her own way.

Yet, through their respective actions, it also becomes evident that the characters themselves have internalized this reliance on the societal, ideological narrative of white female innocence, believing in the position of power that it secures them. Next to Adora's disbelief regarding the police arresting her, Amma and her friends felt so assured of not being under suspicion that they did not only kill once but twice. After having already gotten away with murder once, they further escalated their *modus operandi*: dramatically staging the body of Nathalie to be found in the middle of town, openly mocking the police investigations, making Nathalie's brother the prime suspect, and playing a public game of toss-and-throw with memorabilia dedicated to their victims. Thus, next to the girls' declaration that cool girls do not get killed (instead, they themselves become the killers), their entire demeanor exhibits a deeply internalized, overt confidence rooted in the assuredness of always being conceived of as an innocent, yet badly mannered, victim. By juxtaposing the assumption of 'innate victimness' with the commission of gruesome crimes, Vallée's *Sharp Objects* makes a critical comment that questions precisely these ideological beliefs pertaining to white femininity.

Conclusion

The overarching colonial ideology of white female victimhood with its ties to 'white innocence' has always been and still is at odds with historical and present realities. Taking into account the vast amount of racist atrocities committed in the name of allegedly protecting white women, the pervasiveness of mythical conceptualizations of white Southern femininity along the lines of demure belles and ladies, and the horrors white women in positions of power have committed and are able to commit by weaponizing their victimhood, it is evident that the shadows of this ideology are still present and linger (cf. Hamad). Despite at constant threat of patriarchal violence—constituting white women's ambiguous "dual role of oppressor and oppressed" (Hamad 25)—white privilege enables strategic white womanhood and with it weaponized victimhood based on the internalized belief that authorities are on their side because they are white women (32), as in the case of 'Karens.'

In *Sharp Objects*, the characters of Adora and Amma, too, employ strategic white womanhood, therein relying on Wind Gap's community and especially its men—who, at least in the case of Wind Gap's chief of police, constitute the authorities—to buy into the internalized belief of their innocence. This is enabled not only because they are white and female, but because they further deliberately conform to the distinct archetypes of Southern femininity, the belle and the lady, harboring seductive potential through their hyper-feminine, conservative 'charm.' Thus, the chief of police does not investigate Marian's death despite other clues pointing towards Adora, and Amma and her friends are never under investigation despite their exhibitions of profound self-assuredness of believing themselves above the law,

highlighting how *Sharp Objects* questions precisely this ideological belief in white Southern female innocence and victimhood.

To conclude, Vallée's *Sharp Objects*, through a Southern Gothic lens, encourages viewers to acknowledge the insidiousness and violence that enactments of strategic white (in this case, Southern) womanhood can entail. Yet, in addition to countering the ideology of white female innocence and victimhood, the miniseries also perpetuates distinct imaginings of white (Southern) women and girls, embodied by Camille and Marian. Portrayed as victims, 'worthy' of protection and pity through the employed sentimental code, further emphasized by their heavily affectively charged sisterly bond, their white female vulnerability is maintained. In reading Vallée's *Sharp Objects* as a sentimental Southern Gothic tale, the ambiguities in its politics on representations of white (Southern) femininity can thus be decoded as oscillating between a profound critique of strategic white womanhood and an ongoing perpetuation of myths of white female victimhood.

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