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The Woman in the Window: Sleuth and perpetrator striving for mental balance

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Abstract: This article begins by reviewing detective fiction types, then analyses American writer A.J. Finn's postmodern hybrid sleuth novel *The Woman in the Window* (2018), focusing on its female protagonist's role as an amateur detective, worried neighbour, and surprised victim. Struggling with her own psychological and psychiatric problems, caused by having killed her husband and daughter while driving, Dr Anna Fox's avatar is gradually unravelled, as she evolves from a state of affliction into her newly realized self. As an amateur detective and victim, Anna's personal drama is studied, including her agoraphobia and general lack of balance caused by the complexity of the extreme experiences she has been through and her own mental depression. The analysis also explores Ethan Russell's psychological instability and the calculated facade he maintains to deceive Anna, while contextualizing his actions within the volatile psychological framework characteristic of serial killers. Last, but not least, Anna's struggle to clear up the mental confusion determined by her perpetrator is exposed in a short section dealing with faltering memory, isolation, and reduced social interaction. Female identity, neurosis, and gaslighting are among the most important aspects dealt with, together with the unprofessionalism of the authorities, which Finn highlights in his book.

Keywords: *crime fiction; metaphysical detective story; roman noir; sleuth; A.J. Finn*, The Woman in the Window.

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Introduction

People today remain widely interested in hidden secrets, enigmas, and mysteries, whatever their source, and literature worldwide continues to meet this challenge by opening interesting perspectives onto worlds much like our own, but often difficult to grasp because of limited knowledge or completely different perceptions of life. In sleuth fiction, literary works have evolved into postmodern hybrids that combine distinct narrative types, such as the classic, the noir, the hard-boiled, the thriller, or the speculative detective story. As consumerist tendencies have also exerted significant pressure on writing, innovative efforts have often led in intriguing directions, greatly contributing to the success of the output.

Today's revolutionized crime fiction has its roots in nineteenth-century detective stories published in London's *The Strand Magazine* (a monthly periodical of "light literature" in which Sir Arthur Conan Doyle made his Sherlock Holmes series known; see Soundy Unwin) or in "penny bloods" or "penny dreadfuls" (booklets costing a penny and containing adventure or detective stories; see Flanders), which were viewed as corrupting readers' morality, a hypothesis attacked at the time by G.K. Chesterton, who disliked the idea that lower classes should be necessarily associated with criminality (Hart 86). As Inas Ababneh writes, early fiction attempted to establish order in hectic everyday life by showing that truth could be uncovered through "logic and methodical investigation" ("Detective fiction" 2), contrary to modern detective fiction, which sees certainty veiled in a foggy reality and puts forth complex ideas meant to support new theoretical guidelines for how the new genre should be moulded. She also shows how the "rational model" created by Edgar Allan Poe (in his "tales of ratiocination") and by Arthur Conan Doyle has evolved into an experimental postmodern one, defined by explanatory metafictional formulae (Ababneh 2).

While drawing his conclusions about the four genres of crime fiction explored in his book *Crime Fiction from Poe to the Present* (i.e., the detective whodunnit, the noir thriller, the anti-conspiracy thriller, and the detective thriller), Martin Priestman states that the wish for something out of the ordinary, coupled with the ordinary reality which the reader discovers in literature are sometimes mocked by writers such as Poe, who mismatches Homeric formulae to the new topics he selects for his narratives (65). Consequently, readers are expected to temper their expectations about the narrative, which may disappoint from the perspective of the leading detective or of how crime is solved.

Crime fiction has long fascinated a segment of readers, and Michael Holquist (144) supports this by discussing Nicholas Blake's (i.e., C. Day-Lewis) theory of detective fiction. Blake argues that, by the end of the Victorian era, people were less interested in following their Christian faith than in reading crime fiction, which is why the latter flourished as a safety valve for their guilt. He draws a parallel between detective storylines and religious rituals by rendering the sequence of *homicide/sin*, *casualty/sufferer,* and *detective/priest* present in the construction of the literary work, with the devotees thinking of themselves as detectives or malefactors (the roles assigned to their dark nature) and by comparing the Biblical Day of Judgement with the day the

detective solves the homicide case. He also uses the Christian goat/sheep metaphor to suggest a separation between good and bad. Blake associates the high priest with the criminal and God with the detective, a reading William Spanos calls "the detective and the boundary" (167), in which the detective annihilates evil in the world.

Although they use a different narrative plan from the one above, writers such as the American novelist A.J. Finn have directed their creative endeavours toward a new literary detective area, where interdisciplinary influences have heavily infused imaginative discourse. *The Woman in the Window* shows us a female psychologist, Dr Anna Fox, dealing with intricate family problems (after a tragedy which left her without her husband, Edward, and her daughter, Olivia) and living isolated in her house between reality and fiction, while also avoiding necessary, responsible medical treatment for her agoraphobia. She accidentally sees what she believes to be her neighbour, Alistair Russell, killing what she thinks to be his wife, Katherine, and as a result, from behind her windows, Anna turns into a stalker of sorts, who gleans knowledge in order to solve the mystery, because the police do not believe she has actually witnessed anything. Somehow parallel to Agatha Christie's *Endless Night* (1967), an example of a classic mystery novel, which deals with the disturbed character of a quite labile man who kills as the opportunity offers itself and also delights in doing so (Horsley 31), Finn's plot dissolves the truth to such a degree that, as in the usual modern thriller, we are manipulated into sympathising with the criminal, being unaware of who he really is.

The hybrid detective genre

Finn's literary work represents a hybrid genre between *roman noir* and *metaphysical detective fiction*. In order to adequately explain it, we have to go back to Tzvetan Todorov's "The Typology of detective fiction," which states that the mystery novel is based on two stories: the story of the murder and the story of the inquiry, to further clarify that 'roman noir' is a detective novel which combines these two stories, i.e. which gives up on the first story and presents only the latter, the inquiry, which actually shows how the events happened in the past (Todorov 57-8); furthermore, here the detective may be in danger and may lose his/ her life (60), which is not at all the case in the book under analysis.

While the detective genre always offers a solved case in the end, the metaphysical one does not (Tyers 8), which suggests that Finn's work leans more on the classical narrative than on the postmodern. The metaphysical detective novel, another term for the later coined 'anti-detective novel', focuses on philosophical issues, which cannot lead to any decisive solution in a murder case, as Spanos clarifies in his study entitled "The Detective and the boundary": the typical archetype of postmodern literature is represented by the anti-detective narrative (and its "anti-psychoanalytical analogue"), whose formal aim is to reflect the desire of finding the killer and of psychoanalysing him/her, so that the writer may in the end upset readers by not offering a solved case (or point to the neurosis trigger) (154-5). Referring to Nathalie Sarraute's *Portrait of a Man Unknown,* he also shows that Jean Paul Sartre first discussed the existence of an anti-novel, which appears to be detective fiction and mocks the quest novel by using an amateur investigator

interested in such entangled work. Rhys Tyers explains that the author of the metaphysical detective narrative uses investigative themes to examine individual secrets, such as the character's relationship to identity and memory. The conventional crime novel usually starts with a cluster of events made known to the detective (seldom does he discover them himself through investigation) that reveal the arrangement of narrative details representing the client's knowledge of how things happened ("Modiano's detective" 2; 6). Tyers also discusses *The Black Notebook*, a literary work by Patrick Modiano similar to *The Woman in the Window*, which presents a random combination of knowledge pieces the narrator cannot render coherently for the reader.

Ababneh makes a reference to Louisa Hadley, who thinks that starting with the stories of Sherlock Holmes, detective narratives have rather centred on amateur sleuths whose capacity to find solutions to murders points to "the inadequacies of the official police force" ("Detective fiction" 8), adding that amateur detectives were perceived as having a better education than professional detectives who were part of the working classes and were not really successful in their inquiries. This same dynamic appears in the detective novel discussed here, where the police agents fail to find any clues and are thoroughly misled by the criminal's calculated performance.

Although some critics consider Finn's literary work a psychological thriller (deemed equal to a suspense novel) and a book pregnant with aspects specific to the noir and the mystery narrative (Todorov 63-4), the extremely compressed story of the actual murder and the complete lack of a well-developed detective-led inquiry story turns it, up to a point, into a rather hazy philosophical narrative told by a woman dependent on psychotics, alcohol, and old crime movies. Her unstable mind makes her a highly unreliable narrator or sleuth, so her version of the truth is bound to be relative and rejected by the police, because she overall appears to be an irresponsible person led by her overwhelming sorrow that she barely copes with.

The Woman in the Window is actually labelled "generic recycling" material, because the author "cannibalizes" particular features of the domestic crime genre and ultimately produces an "empty" book, as Roberta Garrett closely observes ("Smoke and mirrors" 57; 58). The phrase "domestic noir" was coined by British author Julia Crouch (2013), who views it as a detective fiction subgenre dealing with female experience at home or work, focusing on relationships and putting forth the idea that domestic space is either a complicated or a dangerous place for the people living in it. Here, the real threat does not come from Anna's family (husband and daughter), as they have passed away, but from a young neighbour, Ethan Russell, who poses as a vulnerable friend fearing the presence of his violent, menacing father, Alistair.

Finn's book remains innovative because the would-be target of the crime becomes an amateur detective and, above all, she is a single woman. The difference from earlier similar fiction lies in the fact that the female protagonist is not the murderer (women were often seen as being more corrupt than men in the past), but rather the unsuspecting victim, who also plays the role of a mixed-up woman-detective and who, in the end, manages to supply the closure necessary for a convincing narrative. Even though in the beginning, we may find the story's elusive narrative unable to yield the serious detective account that we expect, the lonely, suffering protagonist becomes the heroine needed to stop the murderer

from continuing his criminal spree and to solve the mysterious puzzle, even if she almost loses her life because of it.

Amateur detective and victim: psychological and psychiatric implications

Anna's job as a psychologist helps her to maintain her awareness of her own mental problems and her serious agoraphobia caused by her family tragedy, which was determined by her own inattentive driving of the car in which her husband Ed and her daughter Livvy were also travelling, and by it getting off the road, falling into a precipice, and landing on an isolated cliff where she could not provide them with the necessary help to survive during snowy weather. Back in Harlem, New York, alone in her very big empty house, she is left to deal with a complex trauma which she can face only by imagining how her husband or her daughter would react or what they would say or do in certain situations. She links specific moments from her past to the present, creating chaos that leaves the reader with the impression that, at times, she no longer knows who or where she is. At the beginning of the book, the impression that she lives with her husband and daughter is so vivid that we are drawn in and believe we are reading a different story.

The female protagonist's disturbance takes place on different levels. We gradually realise that various fragments of the given story are only in her mind and have nothing to do with the current reality. She stays up late at night watching old movies focusing on sleuthing endeavours, which also complicate her intellectual hygiene. She also doesn't dare to step outside her house because of the panic it causes, and when she does go out, she uses an umbrella to block everything out and takes one step after another mechanically, as if in a controlled environment. Furthermore, she continuously avoids social interactions, with the exception of the people on an agoraphobia chat platform (where she helps those suffering from agoraphobia with specialist advice), her trainer Bina (who comes to her house and helps her practice her exercises), the odd neighbour that rarely comes by, and her new tenant David, whom she feels attracted to and ultimately has an affair with.

The identity that Finn gives to his disturbed main female character strangely situates her in between spirituality (*St. Anne* being the obvious source of her first name – the mother of St. Mary, who will give up her son, Jesus Christ, to be sacrificed for redeeming the sins of the world) and the subversive animal kingdom (*a symbolic fox*, the animal known for its curiosity and slyness). While the link with spirituality emphasises the idea of Anna Fox's losing her daughter, who will redeem her sin, determined by her affair with her practice partner Wesley Brill (which causes her separation from her husband), the link to a fox suggests her impulses to know more and investigate the mystery of her neighbours Russell's house, but also her moral falsity, which led her to cheat on her husband and jeopardise her marriage. Her name's symbolism and significance are not random, just as her repeated encounters with death are not, and both matter for understanding the deep transformations in her persona.

She first loses her family, then a dear friend she has just met: Katherine (Katie), Ethan's biological mother, whom she believes is Alistair's current wife. She basically has no one close to her and able to support her during hard times, and when she finally makes

a new friend who encourages her to recover and who spends time listening to her, giving her heartfelt advice, and enjoying the same hobbies that she does, she yet again loses this friend to death. The balance in Anna's life is like a boat during times of heavy storm, which does not seem to stop as she gets to the point when she herself is almost killed.

In "History of psychiatry," George Mora explains that Egyptians perceived balance in life through how they related their experience to the forces of the universe, as "an interaction between internal and external forces" (4). Thus, from an esoteric point of view, we can consider that Anna lives a period of disturbing tests meant to assess her psychological strength and to make her more powerful than she is. To do so, she must acknowledge that she can take greater responsibility for her life and face the dangerous external threat more cautiously. Mora also mentions that mental illness was treated in Egyptian times by integrating "physical, psychic and spiritual factors" (4). Consequently, honest and affectionate support is essential to Anna's recovery, as these are basic factors in rebuilding our strength.

We are at times under the impression that Anna hallucinates while she goes unawares back to her memories of her spouse and daughter. The intricate combination of real and imaginative details or events makes it difficult for the reader to discern which is which until the moment she confesses to Ethan that she has lost her family in a car crash. She appears to be suffering from hallucinosis, which, according to Louis Linn, M.D., indicates "psychotic states in which a patient is well oriented, in spite of the fact that he is hallucinating" ("Clinical manifestations" 566). In such a case, a patient enters and leaves the unreal world, with temporary periods of awareness. So, we do see her being aware of the world around her, but having difficulties with her daily life in her own big empty house, and experiencing an extremely hard time when leaving this familiar space, which she also seems to be avoiding, as she finds her situation overpowering, and takes refuge in the shelves of her mind, filled with loving family memories. Hamilton Ford, M.D. labels this a "psychotic depressive reaction" ("Involutional psychotic reaction" 701), which clarifies the sheer complexity of her mental state.

Anna's psychiatrist, Dr Julian Fielding, recommends that she avoid alcohol while taking the anti-psychotic medicines on her prescription, which she conveniently does not, because she feels the terrible urge to give up on reality altogether. While assessing a hallucinatory state, the psychiatrist takes into account the "patient's projection to the outer world", "the sensory modality", the circumstances determining the hallucinations, the patient's insight, and the emotions and ideas which are part of the hallucinations (Linn 567). This shows how deeply Anna has been engulfed by her unreal life. Besides the depression she battles with, she also deals with her agoraphobia as best she can, given her past, which has actually caused it, and we notice her almost constant tendency towards isolation and rejection of potentially fulfilling interactions.

The protagonist cannot be independent, perpetually mixing her past mental space with her present one, seeking balance in the words and encouragement Livvy and Ed would offer. She cannot successfully project herself to the outer world as a widow living her life, without the permanent ghost of the past dragging her backwards. The way she perceives the reality around her is also quite often filtered through the thoughts of her lost family, for whose disappearance she is the only one to blame. She appears to be destroying

herself, for which she uses both external elements (such as alcohol and pills, and she also thinks of killing herself) and the internal reality which she does not wish to control, but allows to continuously flow in an irrational way; this is what provides her with the comfort that she desperately needs. Her insight appears neglected and faded because of excessive wine, medication, and fatigue.

Anna sometimes does attempt to find some balance by giving online agoraphobics advice about how to cope with this illness. The courage she needs in order to cross the threshold and face the space outside her home seems to somehow be gathering, only to dissipate once she is no longer in contact with the agoraphobics who appear to be getting better thanks to her professional recommendations. “Phobias may be extremely disabling” (Frazier and Carr 906), with specialized literature mentioning patients who cannot leave their houses or even a certain room. The helplessness brought about by phobias can be easily perceived in our protagonist, who seems to basically have no real life because of her agoraphobia, which is the reason why she is slightly stronger only when in the company of the neighbours that occasionally visit her. Unfortunately, their beneficial influence doesn’t last, as they don’t spend enough time with her for it to have a lasting impact.

The malefactor’s rationality

Ethan’s visits to the house open the door to a relationship which seems authentic, between a fragile woman under psychiatric treatment and a sociopath behaving as friend and victim of his tyrannical father. He plays the part of a sad, neglected, disoriented teenager, but also a helpful neighbour, disguises that let him have fun while destroying human life. The boy also gathers essential information about her to tailor his “majestic” response to her curiosity about the events at his house. Ethan motivates the killing of his biological mother, Katie, as a necessary thing to do because she was too much of a presence in his life and was tiring to deal with, appearing when she was not really needed. He acts to hide reality and enjoys the forbidden realm of disturbed games, which satisfy his wish to be an important human being. He paints a completely false image of his father, throwing the blame for the murder on him and his dictatorial nature.

The adolescent’s behavioural traits can also be examined through the lens of psychological profiling typically associated with serial killers, because Katie is not his only victim; he tries to murder Anna as well. Lee Horsley notes that “the damaged transgressors” (“From Sherlock Holmes” 40) are what readers most often find in modern detective fiction, and we can also include the serial killer. Serial killers have been protagonists of detective stories since the early 1970s, when the phrase “serial killer” appeared; after the 1970s, they have been included more and more in detective books in a rather inauthentic manner, as “reliable providers of a lurid trail of corpses,” and have been a special element of police procedures (40). Ethan is one such example, and Kaufman explains that the loss of a parent by abandonment is associated with delinquency, which would clarify the root of Ethan’s problems (qtd. in Stubblefield 1421). He also states that in such cases, the child suffers from states of grief, becomes depressive, and embarks on an “angry search for the lost object, with resulting narcissistic

and delinquent behaviour" (idem). According to Redl, the underlying psychological mechanics presuppose that "in the development of an adaptive pattern, certain personality functions become hypertrophic in order to compensate for the existing defect or deficiencies in character structure" (qtd. in Stubblefield 1421). Consequently, Ethan's unusual ego strength developed in an attempt to find a balance missing in his childhood, because of the absence of a responsible mother and a father, which shaped a serious character flaw. Lee Horsley argues that serial killers are seldom central to detective plots, unlike in Patricia Highsmith's or Jim Thompson's books. However, their inclusion in the stories of investigative narratives can go further than the set pattern, and the inclination to give the offender a voice has been one of the aspects defining "the increased Gothicizing" of detective books, greatly changing the topic direction from limited reactions to criminal offense ("From Sherlock Holmes" 42). The same is evident in Finn's novel, which shows Ethan at work in the dark setting of Anna's house on a rainy evening, as various objects cast strange shapes on the walls and help create an atmosphere specific to Gothic fiction.

On being discovered by Anna, Ethan ambiguously confesses that he had harassed Jennifer, the wife of his adoptive father's former boss, a reason for Alistair's losing his job. Ethan proves disappointed by Anna's gullible attitude and does not consider her a good psychologist, mentioning that she is perhaps the only one not asking about his childhood problems or diagnosing him with a personality disorder. Complaining about his real mother, Katie, he slips the essential detail that she was a drug addict and that her boyfriends would beat him up, but also that he never knew his real father and that his profligate biological mother had no idea who he was. Eventually, he tries to kill Anna on the roof of her house, but she manages to throw him through the skylight. As an adopted child, his antisocial behaviour is tolerated by his parents, who cannot do anything but change cities or take him out of school. Anna sees him as a psychopath and realizes his personality defects once she knows what he has done, and he tells her his story, but it is too late to contact the police. He has outsmarted her, and she realizes it, but the narrative ends with her as a heroine, able to turn the book into a feminist psychological thriller.

Roberta Garrett argues that the novel misses key feminist critical aspects, such as the man-woman union and male evilness. She mentions Val McDermid's opinion that female investigators have become "avenging angels" ("Smoke and mirrors" 48-9) and have tended to focus more on women's mistreatment. We can conclude that Anna's character is meant to restore women's trust in their power to solve even the most horrible events and, thus, be the real mistresses of their lives.

Navigating a sea of intellectual fog

Anna's investigation, her watching and finding clues about the case, is impaired by her drinking entire bottles of wine and watching old mystery films late at night, such as *Night Must Fall* (1937), *Vertigo* (1958) or *Whirlpool* (1950), causing her narrative to be excessively complicated because of the mixture of past family memory fragments, detective film fragments and the fragmented version of reality which she offers the reader. Her inability to remember things, or rather her hazy memory, is the result of her drug therapy and her chaotic life, but also of the complete neglect of her intellectual

capacity, which is affected by insufficient social interaction. According to Tyers, if we need to depend on memory, we must deal with "neurotic perspectives" ("Modiano's detective" 7) which change and reemerge all the time, so her chances of easily solving the case diminish the more she tries to create scenarios which would explain the scene she witnessed from her window.

Lee Horsley discusses women characters who are pressured not only by male characters' treacherous and violent nature, but also by their own goals, excessive pride, and "destructive impulses" ("From Sherlock Holmes" 38). In Finn's book, we may notice both male violence and female ambition and destructive impulses that contribute to the unfortunate changes in Anna's troubled identity. Ethan's violence and her ambition to solve the case, and her self-destructive life pattern, contribute to the painting of a landscape in which balance cannot be restored either with the help of the authorities or with that of medical specialists. Detective Little gaslights her during their conversations, making her even more uncertain about her daily activities and past decisions. In her, we can recognise a hypersensitive person who is forced to believe that she has done things that she knows she has not and cannot remember having done. Little's investigation is dangerous; superficiality further highlights the inadequacy of the methods used and the agent's deep disinterest in doing his job properly. Horsley draws attention to the fact that the new methods of investigation have been slowly absorbed by the detective genre which developed with them ("From Sherlock Holmes" 35), as quite often the expertise included sophisticated technology aiding clue inspection (ballistics, digital databases, forensics and profiling); the last two contributing to the creation of two new subgenres of crime fiction. It is indeed mysterious that the author did not think of this at all, and that Inspector Little takes no steps in this respect. We do not see the inspector checking the Russells' house or searching any digital database for Katie, which points to the flaws of this postmodern hybrid narrative.

Jose Ortigas highlights the more complex issue of corrupt authorities, which Finn also fails to address, and the readership's worries about their professional incapacity to master a "violently chaotic world" ("A hard-boiled hero" 230). Although the agents in the novel appear clean and well-intentioned, we cannot ignore the rather unwanted modus operandi of their detective work. Their distrust of Anna's honest confession that she witnessed a crime reflects poorly on their profession, especially since the protagonist almost becomes a victim herself. Even in the crime fiction of the nineteenth century, as Ababneh notes, the amateur investigator has a central role, while the professional investigators of the police agency are given a secondary one ("Detective fiction" 7). Anna does not give up on her investigative attempts, though she knows she may be making mistakes. She has the intention of helping her dead friend, the police, while proving at the same time that she was very much conscious of what she saw. The problem lies in the fact that, as Kenneth Williford explains, intentionality always opens the door to the constant possibility of the person being wrong, which makes us think of "'perceptual hypotheses' even in the best of cases" ("Husserl's hyletic data" 3). Thus, if her witnessing the event is nothing but an unprovable perceptual hypothesis, she must gather evidence to prove it. Meanwhile, her investigative activity explains her intermittent groundedness and seems beneficial, even though it is distressing at times. Alistair's lies and complicity do little to help her and

only deepen her doubts about his honesty. Her obsession with his obvious guilt makes her become more familiar than necessary with his disturbed adoptive son (about whose status she has no clue) and makes her no longer pay close attention to his behaviour, which is a major mistake in the chain of events that she becomes a part of. She focuses on and fights the wrong enemy, and she is taken by surprise when she discovers the murderer is someone else entirely.

While discussing James Cain's noir thriller *Double Indemnity*, Priestman points out its insistence on a Faustian final message: a crime includes "its own nemesis" from both a psychological and legal point of view. In Ethan's case, we also see him do the devil's work and, in the end, become its victim. "[T]he criminal's disturbingly self-justifying view of the world" (*Crime fiction* 40; 42), which is a part of the noir thriller, according to Priestman, can also be found in the analysed hybrid postmodern work, but here this self-justification appears obsolete and rather dull.

What is successfully created, though, is manipulation, which works its charms on Anna. Generally, manipulation works best when it comes from vulnerable individuals who arouse pity, such as children or old people, and the book is no exception. It targets the instinct to help: people feel for children or the elderly and naturally try to support them. As a mother who lost her daughter, Anna is affectionate toward Ethan and pities him because of his relationship with his dictatorial father, an image Ethan skilfully creates to manipulate her more easily and turn her into sure, unsuspecting prey. Anna's investigative skills are impaired by her mental state, and the reader cannot expect her to produce a viable result unless it comes about in an out-of-the-ordinary way. She is blinded by her suspicions about Alistair, so much so that she ignores the real culprit. By the end of the book, she is a new woman who has decided to face life again and gradually build on her newly acquired identity as an independent woman who can make society better by getting involved in solving important community problems. The act of self-defence is the trigger of her unflinching decision to take good care of herself and to finally leave the house and "step into the light" (Finn 368) with Bina's help.

Conclusion

Anna's avatar is constructed from her identity as an affectionate mother to her daughter Livvy, a loving wife to Ed, an irresponsible spouse, a disturbed mental patient, a careful psychologist, an amateur detective, and a credulous victim. She is more attentive to and responsible about her neighbourhood environment and its individuals than the professional detective Little, to whom the heinous crime is signalled in vain, and she manages to use her investigative attempts in order to somehow rebuild herself. Her karma appears to be cleansed by her destroying evilness in self-defence, as Finn quite relevantly mentions at the end of the book that she steps into the light. We assume that darkness has been vanquished and the horrible period of her life is now over.

The protagonist's inability to perceive reality stems from her superficial interest in it, until her new friend is slain. This personal aspect makes her become more involved and attentive, although the self-destructive impulse is still strong because of the trauma she still lives with. She cannot suspect she is wrong in her amateurish search because she

does not go so far as to consider everyone a suspect, as a professional detective would. Her family ghosts, her affection for those unfortunate, and her incapacity to readapt to life turn her into an easy victim to be preyed upon by Ethan, who projects his internal pain onto all older women that he associates with his biological mother.

Finn's hybrid postmodern novel, built layer upon layer, relies on common detective-novel aspects that he combines with consistent elements of psychology, psychiatry, filmography, and philosophy. The gothic dimension is strongly present in the setting and in Anna's perception of her house, as well as in her discussions with her dead family members. At the same time, the detective narrative undercuts itself: the clues, motives, and investigative steps lead the amateur sleuth down a false path on a wild goose chase. Ultimately, this novel transcends standard psychological thriller tropes by centring on an isolated protagonist with a solitary existence, shifting the narrative momentum into the complex arena of her internal world.

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