https://doi.org/10.21301/eap.v17i1.3

Vladana Ilić

PhD Candidate, Department of Ethnology and Anthropology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, Serbia
ilicvladana@gmail.com

Culture Wars in Gothic Mode: The Example of HBO's Miniseries *Sharp Objects*

Abstract: Cultural and political polarization in The United States has been a prominent topic both in social sciences and the media since the beginning of the 1990s. Whether the polarization is understood as a deep moral divide among Americans, i.e., as the culture war between liberals and conservatives, or as a superficially maintained political hostility, i.e., as party sorting between Democrats and Republicans, most scholars agree that the media sphere is deeply polarized, especially since 2016 when Donald Trump emerged as a political figure and then the U.S. president. HBO, known for its progressive cultural capital and liberal ethos, distinguishes itself in the daring narrative productions which often tackle polarizing themes of race, gender, sexuality, etc. Gothic mode or genre is among the often-employed narrative styles of its productions. American gothic, also the subject of increasing academic interest in recent decades, has been largely considered within its cultural and historical context and interpreted as a site where the nation's historical benighted ghosts disrupt and challenge official enlightened national narratives. As HBO's original production told in a gothic mode, *Sharp Objects* (2018) will be contextualized within the U.S. culture wars and analyzed as a Southern Gothic tale told from the liberal progressive perspective. The show's narrative will be seen as a gothic journey deep into the South by a liberal heroine haunted by her conservative ghosts, who attempts to face and settle them. The paper explores the thesis that the gothic disruptive potential is of a conditional and limited impact on liberal America's Enlightenment narrative.

Keywords: Southern Gothic, American culture wars, HBO

In her article on erasure of politics in American cinema, Sherry Ortner argues that American film, by following a long tradition of choosing entertainment over „a history lesson" primarily established by Hollywood, treats historical contexts generally and vaguely – as a sort of a background against which their heroes' and heroines' life plots are represented as personal stories on „human condition" (Ortner 2013, 80–81). These human conditions, therefore, become

(more or less) devoid of their particular sociopolitical, economic, and historical circumstances which might be exactly the ones conditioning the „human" represented in them. One mode or style of storytelling, however, in scholarly literature is constantly considered for its resistance to erasing or suppressing history, and by extension, politics – the American Gothic.

Following Teresa A. Goddu's understanding of the gothic as a mode or a discourse which enables disruptions of the „Enlightenment America" – the utopian vision of the nation ruled by the reason and tolerance, and which brings to the surface anxieties simmering on the journey of so conceived progress, this paper analyses a recent HBO miniseries *Sharp Objects* (2018), filled with gothic tropes. Understanding gothic stories as „intimately connected to the culture that produces them" (Goddu 1997, 2), *Sharp Objects* will be considered within its sociopolitical and cultural context of American „culture wars," in the public sphere and media perceived as deeply exacerbated during Donald Trump's presidency. The HBO culture will be identified as belonging to the liberal, progressive, urban, and enlightened camp. As HBO's original production, *Sharp Objects* will be thus analyzed as emerging within the sociopolitical and cultural context of the U.S. culture wars, situated on the liberal-progressive pole, which tells its story through the gothic mode, particularly using the trope of the South as the dark national Other, thus framing the backward, pathological, and destructive aspects of the American society and culture within the South, i.e., situating and displacing it regionally. The show's narrative will be seen as a gothic journey deep into the South by a liberal heroine haunted by her conservative ghosts who attempts to face and settle them.

American Gothic

Rather than a precisely delineated (literary) genre, the Gothic is described as „a fluid tendency (...), an impulse" that approaches allegory which „resists explicit lexicon" (Savoy 1998, 5–6). The lexicon, however, is veiled in a familiar darkness of „stereotypical tropes (haunted houses, hidden chambers, freakish natural acts) and conventions (narratives of illegitimate, lost, or terrorized victims)" (Faflak and Haslam 2016, 4). Its dark, irrational, mysterious, transgressive, and horrific carries „a set of recognizable figures and concerns: the influence of the past on the present, the limitations of human knowledge, the ambiguities of retribution and revenge, and the dangers of powerful institutions and totalizing systems of thought" (Soltysik Monnet 2010, 4–5). As an uncanny underbelly of the Enlightenment expectations and hopes, the Gothic is „about the return of the *past*, of the repressed and denied, the buried secret that subverts and corrodes the present, whatever the culture does not want to know or admit, will not or dare not tell itself" (Lloyd-Smith 2004, 1 [original emphasis]).

American fiction is most ardently analyzed for its tenacious gothic grubbing up the American sunny meadows of history. The „very American assumption" that „the past can be superseded, transfigured, overcome by the valiant present" (Lloyd-Smith 2004, 1) loses its vigor in the gothic mode. Leslie Fielder famously described American novel as „bewilderingly and embarrassingly, a gothic fiction, nonrealistic and negative, sadist and melodramatic – a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation" (Fielder 1969, xxiv). Acknowledging this contrast, Goddu designates the American gothic as a mode, a literary intervention, or a discourse populating different genres and reappearing in unlikely places[1] in order to resurrect the nation's abject – the historical horrors, displaced from the mythical national narratives (Goddu 1997, 8, 10). Epistemological limitations and ambiguities, and the darkness of the nation's „certain special guilts," primarily the slaughter of the Indians and the slave trade (Fielder 1969, 127), through the gothic mode seem to stand as a dogged naysayer to the Enlightenment vision of the nation – its vision of progress, its ideal of a balanced individual governed by rational faculties applied to the accordingly conceived government (see Howe 1997), its cultural normative of niceness which „assumes Americans are decent and good-natured people with the best of intentions" (Brenan 2017, 8). The American gothic, thus, is a field where „the cultural contradictions of national myth" are exposed, where the nation's abject and its Enlightenment ideals clash and coalesce, and where it „serves as the ghost that both helps to run the machine of national identity and disrupts it" (Goddu 1997, 10).

This ambiguous role of the American gothic is probably most distinctive in its regional form – the Southern gothic. Although recent scholarship on the Southern Gothic and Southern Studies has challenged traditional stereotyping of the region and urged for a more diverse, multiple, and fluid readings,[2] the present analysis is exploring the traditional, stereotyped tropes of the South and their utilization in popular culture. It relies on „a mythic and metaphoric 'South'„ viewed as an „American problem" (Griffin and Doyle 1995, 8), that is, on a cultural and political construct of an „oppositional South" to the (northern) American ideals and values (Griffin 1995).

„Identified with gothic doom and gloom, the American South serves as the nation's 'other,' becoming the repository for everything from which the nation wishes to dissociate itself" (Goddu 1997, 3) – of slavery and racism, of patriarchy and religious orthodoxy, of social and economic classism, of backwardness

[1] For a particularly interesting Goddu's reading of such „gothic interventions" luring in the texts not obviously the subjects for a gothic analysis, see her chapter on Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (Goddu 1997, 14–30).

[2] For a short introduction see Castillo Street and Crow 2016. For a discussion on the topic see, for example, Lloyd 2015.

and ignorance. In Hollywood films and popular media, this other is most prominently personified in variants of poor white trash (hillbillies, rednecks, the white Southern criminal) who require „reformation and purgation" into „middle-class social values" which should turn them into „functioning members of 'progressive' America" (Graham 2007, 342). Along the way, each of these particular bildungsroman narratives should also serve as an attempt to redeem white America and its institutions by, among other methods, identifying „the problem" with „individuals of a particular class" (Graham 2007, 345), that is, with bad apples. In other words, it could be posited that while the gothic part of the Southern gothic detects and voices „the cultural contradictions that undermine the nation's claim to purity and equality" (Goddu 1997, 10), the Southern part displaces, regionalizes, isolates the contradiction, thus marking it, albeit recurring, still subsidiary, incidental, auxiliary – but punishable and hopefully fixable – to the principal, prime, „true" meaning of America. Thus, the ghost that both disrupts and helps run the machine might be, above all, chasing its tail, circling the backwoods and swamps, only conditionally reaching the northern lights.

In order to explore the thesis that the gothic disruptive potential is of a conditional and limited impact on the liberal America's Enlightenment narrative, the paper will analyze the HBO miniseries *Sharp Objects* as an example of Southern gothic TV fiction. The series was released in mid-2018, at the time of Donald Trump's presidency which has been perceived to have deeply inflamed American nation, resurrecting and sharpening the nation's sociocultural polarization. Donald Trump's victory, and then presidency, resurrected once again the nation's historical ghosts which for the liberal America suddenly became uncomfortably visible in the highest national office, indicating the expansion of the nation's dark underbelly beyond its Southern region and threateningly claiming its culture's legitimization as American through the institution of the President. *Sharp Objects*' narrative will be explored as an attempt to represent this experience of the disrupted progressive vision of the forwarding liberal and democratic nation rendered as a Southern gothic tale.

American Culture Wars

Already for decades now, American sociocultural and political conditions have been analyzed and discussed through the concept of culture wars or polarization; moreover, its understanding and interpretation have been polarizing the very scholars studying it (see, for example, Lelkes 2016; Bowman 2010). Those who see American society at culture war argue that the division stems from essentially different moral visions which are hardly reconcilable on a rational political level, while the opposing camp of scholars the polarization views as

a partisan, party sorting buttressed by the political elites and the media, which creates an appearance of the polarized people.

The beginning of the debate is usually marked by the sociologist James Davison Hunter's book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* where the cultural conflict is defined as „political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding" (Hunter 1991, 42). The two opposing moral authorities Hunter identifies are orthodox or conservative and liberal or progressive, which compete for the *meaning* of America, that is, for the way individual lives, society, and its institutions are to be ordered. The orthodox morality is grounded in „an external, definable, and transcendent authority" which is regarded as unalterable and universal, while the progressive is subjective, fluid, and characterized by a strong tendency to „resymbolize its values and beliefs according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life" (Hunter 1991, 44–45). Freedom and justice are also differently understood (Hunter 1991, 108–115). While the conservative morality tends to define freedom as „civic" – the self-governing society freed from despotism, the „liberal" freedom is predominantly focused on the individual and their political and social rights unhampered by institutions or other individuals. While justice in conservative vision, originally rooted in Judeo-Christian tradition, is viewed as a morally conscientious, lawful, ordered society, in the liberal, it is focused on equality and equity. The politics and policies of each side are defined and shaped according to these opposite moralities, which are then contested on „the symbolic fields of conflict" – such as family, education, law, media, and electoral politics, with the aim of establishing and maintaining the power to define reality and – through the institutionalization of that reality – to legitimize it (Hunter 1991, 173 et passim).[3]

This legitimization, according to Hunter, has been largely fought through „the *negative face* of moral conflict" (Hunter 1991, 136). Since the dialogue and reasoned argumentation cannot really suffice („the positive face" of moral conflict) because the opposing arguments come from fundamentally different moral outlooks of the world and evaluations of social ordering, „neutralizing the opposition through a strategy of public ridicule, derision, and insult has become just as important as making credible moral claims for the world that each side

[3] The scholars who reject the culture wars thesis and the polarization in America interpret as a partisan or party sorting argue that the division exists on the level of political parties, Republicans and Democrats, as well as between the political elite, pundits, activists, and the media, whose programs and rhetoric produce extreme and consequently polarized visions, while „normal people – the rest of the electorate" (Fiorina 2017, 22) form a „moderate majority" but are doomed to choosing between extremes. For an early rebuttal of the culture wars thesis see DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996 and Wolfe 1998. For a discussion between Hunter and Wolfe, see Hunter and Wolfe 2006. For another set of arguments against Hunter's thesis, see Fiorina 2005, 2017.

champions" (Hunter 1991, 136). The struggle is conducted through „the technology of public discourse," shaped by various „knowledge workers," which rarely reinforces or sustains balanced and intellectually or morally nuanced discussions and argumentations, thus neutralizing the middle, moderate views. One of the playgrounds where nuance gets lost and where all scholars agree some sort of culture wars or polarization exists, is the media which „define the 'environment' in which public discussion takes place" (Hunter 1991, 161). It shapes questions and conflicts into narratives, filled with characters morally and politically labeled, who speak within familiar conceptual and terminological frameworks. Among visual media formats, narrative film and TV productions traditionally stand out as particularly amenable to structuring moral and cultural outlooks into stories about conflicts between perceived heroes and villains.

During Donald Trump's campaign and then presidency, American (media) environment became highly tense, often acerbic, and certainly even more polarized. Since 2016, Donald Trump has embodied the nation's abject, in the liberal media personifying the racist, xenophobic, sexist, patriarchal, crude, and dishonest aspects or impulses of the nation. As soon as it became clear that Trump was indeed the new U.S. president, the American gothic strategy of regionalizing him – that is, the nation's abject – became visible. Anthropologists were quick to notice this inclination. Rosa and Bonilla observe the problem of the tendency to provincialize and overly exceptionalize Trump and the culture connected to his politics, arguing that such approach effectively sidelines the broader historical, political, and economic context of his election, i.e., the history of the U.S. institutions „fundamentally rooted in and reproductive of racial democracy and racial capitalism" (Rosa and Bonilla 2017, 4). Instead, simplified and often reckless narratives, including the blue-collar (Gusterson 2017) and the white-working/no-college-degree class narrative (Walley 2017), were distributed as media's explanations of Trump's victory. Quickly, the abject spilled over to the voters who were collectively viewed as racist, white supremacist, bigoted, religiously fanatic collective (see, for example, Campbell and Manning 2018, xi-xxiv). America was perceived as a society in the state of „Trump Shock" (see Jung and Wilde 2020), in an alarmingly politically and culturally polarized condition between orthodox, authoritarian personalities, on the one side, and liberal, progressive, non-authoritarian individuals, on the other.[4] The first were lead and the latter were held captive by a leader of dictatorial

[4] Hetherington and Weiler (2009) explain culture wars, as well as party sorting, through authoritarian and nonauthoritarian personalities – the division largely reminiscent of Hunter's but rooted largely in psychological rather than cultural explanation. Authoritarians are intellectually and socially rigid, highly favorable of order and authorities/institutions that guard it, dependant on the established values and mores, and uncomfortable in and unfriendly to change and ambiguities, while nonauthoritar-

tendencies who would harm, maybe even dismantle, American democracy.[5] In short, as it was recently estimated by Trump's successor, President Biden, it was „the worst attack on democracy since the Civil War."[6]

HBO Culture and *Sharp Objects*' Ethnography

Among the liberal media, HBO has its own unique place. Although not a news channel, it does cover daily politics and news through its satirical shows hosted by controversial Bill Maher and effective John Oliver[7] known for their acidic satirization of the „Trump culture" (Gelfand, Jackson, and Harrington 2016). However, HBO's cultural position in the U.S. media environment is primarily marked by its original programs. HBO has accumulated significant and specific cultural capital during the past few decades, particularly through its narrative series productions, „as the queen channel of experimentation in narrations and storytelling" (Bourdaa 2014, 21). The shows are perceived as characterized by high-production value comparable to cinema, by authorship, originality, and

ians are flexible and comfortable in fluid environments, highly motivated for acquiring accurate information, averse to ethnocentrism, and attentive to individual preferences (Hetherington and Weiler 2009, 33–47). According to the authors, political polarization is structured by authoritarianism, i.e., the intensity of the division depends on the level of authoritarians' perceived threat to (their) order, which determines when and what issues are going to become hot, i.e., contested.

[5] Sachs, Jeffrey. 2018. „Trump Is Taking US down the Path to Tyranny." *CNN* July 24, 2018. https://edition.cnn.com/2018/07/23/opinions/trump-is-taking-us-down-the-path-to-tyranny-sachs/index.html.

[6] President Biden Address to Congress, *C-SPAN*. April 29, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9HLaxzdlwE&t=5851s.

[7] Bill Maher and John Oliver are among the distinguished and very popular American liberal TV satirists. Before joining HBO in 2003 with the show *Real Time with Bill Maher*, the satirist had already established his name with an unconventional ABC talk show *Politically Incorrect* (1993–2002) which was eventually cancelled exactly because of a politically incorrect and „unpatriotic" comment about 9/11 terrorist attack (see Jones 2008, 179). „Whereas Maher proclaimed himself a libertarian with Republican sympathies when *Politically Incorrect* first aired in 1993, by the time he started his HBO talk show, his politics were largely anti-Republican and his persona had evolved into a presidential gadfly" (Jones 2008, 181).

John Oliver, John Stewart's „apprentice" on *The Daily Show* (1999–2015), on HBO has been hosting his own satirical show *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* since 2014. In popular media, Oliver has been praised as a formal innovator in TV satire (Wilkinson 2019) and an influential satirist with the power to „change the world" which has become known as the „John Oliver effect" (Holter 2016, Luckerson 2015).

thematic daring of liberal ethos. Some of their formal distinctions, compared to the network shows, include fewer episodes and limited runs; the episodes are longer (typically one hour) as they do not need to accommodate commercials – which also allows for a smoother, more cinematic editing. The originals air without being audience tested first and are initially only available through an HBO subscription (Akass and McCabe 2018, 6). In pursuit of justifying its 1996 logo „It's Not TV. It's HBO.," as Akass and McCabe (2018) observe, following Pierre Bourdieu, HBO has created an image of distinction through an interplay of *auteurs*, particularly writers upon whom freedom for their occasional idiosyncratic creative processes is bestowed, „cultural editors" – critics and award distributers who legitimate its productions as sophisticated, and the audience who is sophisticated enough to choose (through separate or additional subscriptions) to consume it.

HBO TV culture is not only „high culture" but also multicultural. It celebrates „passionate engagement" with „authentic" cultures like the one of post-Katrina New Orleans in its show *Treme* (Parmett 2015), and it has become one of the biggest supporters of community– and identity-based film festivals focused on themes of race, ethnicity, and LGBT rights (Akass and McCabe 2018, 10–11). Thus, HBO's distinction is based on the values of diversity and with it complementary tolerance, authenticity of cultures and identities, their creativity, individual and community engagement – that is, on the progressive worldview and its values. The subject of the analysis here, the show *Sharp Objects*, also gathered a team of distinguished individuals in the creative industry, belonging, in one way or another, to the liberal camp and contributing to the debate or the process of raising awareness about progressive worldview and its discontents.

HBO has already accumulated a production history of gothic shows, most prominently with *True Blood* (2008–2014) and *True Detective* (2014–2019) which „draw on the history, concerns and identity of the South" (Cherry 2016, 471). *True Detective*, wrapped in grotesqueries of Cajun folklore, explores not only a crime but also the history of its investigation in a small post-industrial Louisiana town. *True Blood* has been particularly noticed for its engagement with race, gender, and sexuality.[8] It is described by a critic as „big on allegory, and the tension about accepting vampires into society is an obvious play on civil rights in general, and gay rights in particular" (Bianculli 2008). *Sharp Objects* falls under this HBO production line, specifically under the „non-supernatural Southern Gothic" (Cherry 2016, 471).

[8] See Cherry, Brigid, ed. 2012. *True Blood: Investigating Vampires and Southern Gothic*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Sharp Objects is a miniseries comprised of eight one-hour-long episodes which premiered on HBO in the summer of 2018. Each episode has a one-word title, suggestive of the episode's theme, in the following order: „Vanish," „Dirt," „Fix," „Ripe," „Closer," „Cherry," „Falling," and „Milk." The show is based on the 2006 debut novel of the same title by Gillian Flynn, in 2018 already well-known for her subsequent novels *Dark Places* (2009) and especially *Gone Girl* (2012), both adapted for film under the same titles in 2015 (dir. Gilles Paquet-Brenner) and 2014 (dir. David Fincher) respectively. Flynn's novels fall under a mystery-thriller genre and are known for dark and damaged female protagonists, which is in various opinion pieces often described as Flynn's particular feminist expression. According to some of them, Flynn astutely „co-opt[s] the exploitive trend of battered women in literature" and provides her angry heroines with a space for liberating themselves from a „presumed male authority" (Rothkopf 2012), while also „benefit[ting] from a trend in feminist cultural criticism" through „representations of the 'messy' lives of 'flawed' women [which – the representations] are celebrated as indications of a multifaceted (and maybe even 'radical') portrayal of the gender" (Oyler 2018).

Besides Flynn, Marti Noxon is one of the show's main writers (as well as the series creator), known for her work on the shows *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) and *Dietland* (2018), as well as for her long-lasting interest in the themes of womanhood and its burdens, but only since recently highly sought after – since „the culture caught up with her" and Hollywood became more open for telling such stories (Gilbert 2018) in the wake of *#metoo* movement. All the episodes are directed by Jean-Marc Vallée, considerably awarded Canadian filmmaker, probably best-known for his film *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013) based on a real-life AIDS patient and his struggles with it in the late 1980s when little was known and understood about the disease and its treatments. The film won three Oscars and was nominated for another three.[9] Vallée's previous collaboration with HBO was directing the first season of the show *Big Little Lies* (2017) – a crime melodrama about five women and their tumultuous but eventually mutually supportive relationships. It reaped four Golden Globes and eight Primetime Emmy Awards.[10]

Sharp Objects also won a Golden Globe and was nominated for another two; it also received eight Primetime Emmy Awards.[11] Review aggregators witness very favorable both critical and audience reception.[12] *Sharp Objects* is seen to

[9] See https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0790636/awards/?ref_=tt_awd.

[10] See https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3920596/awards/?ref_=tt_awd.

[11] For the full list of nominations and awards, see: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2649356/awards?ref_=tt_awd.

[12] The show's average rating on Rotten Tomatoes is 92% and on Metacritic 78%, while the users' is equally favorable: 82% and 8.2 respectively.

be „Southern Gothic for the 21st century, probing the grim heritage and often squalid reality of small-town America" (Gilbert 2018a), „a mesmerizing southern show" that „cuts slow but deep" (Poniewozik 2018) while its heroine „weaves a palpably dark parable about history's impact" whose story reveals „how failing to confront its lasting damage traps us" (McFarland 2018). One of the rare negative reviews observes that in her rendition of the novel and deployment of Southern Gothic motifs, Marti Noxon „doesn't spoon her antebellum gravy, she ladles it" (Garvin 2018).

Plot Summary

Sharp Objects tells a story of Camille Preaker (Amy Adams), a journalist in her early 30s, an alcoholic, smoker, and a cutter,[13] residing in St. Louis, Missouri. The story begins when her editor and boss at the *St. Louis Chronicle*, Frank Curry (Miguel Sandoval) assigns her to travel to her hometown Wind Gap (a fictional town in the south of Missouri) to cover the ongoing investigation about two murdered teenage girls. Although unwillingly, Camille returns to her hometown from which she fled years ago: to her home house – a Victorian-style mansion famous for its ivory-tiled master bedroom, and to her family – her mother and Wind Gap's matron Adora Crellin (Patricia Clarkson), her stepfather Alan Crellin (Henry Czerny), and her teenage half-sister Amma (Eliza Scanlen). The family mansion is also the place where her beloved first half-sister Marian (Lulu Wilson), Adora and Alan's first child, died at a young age. Upon her arrival in town, Camille comes across the other main characters of the story: Wind Gap's police chief Bill Vickery (Matt Craven), detective Richard Willis (Chris Messina) who came from Kansas City to assist with the investigation, and Jackie O'Neill (Elizabeth Perkins), the family's longtime friend and a member of Adora's socialite circle.

Camille begins with her investigation by interviewing the girls' family members, particularly the two prime suspects: Bob Nash (Will Chase) – the father of the first victim, Ann, and John Keene (Taylor John Smith) – the brother of the second one, Natalie. She faces resistance and sometimes straight-out interference, most prominently from the Chief who is unwilling to share any information, and from her mother who finds her daughter's disturbing the town's mores unseemly (e.g., Camille's taking notes during Natalie's funeral). With the Detective, however, Camille ends up developing a sexual relationship, and the Detective himself ends up investigating not only the current crime but also Camille's, and consequently, the Crellins' past. By visiting clinics and going through hospital records, he discovers that Adora suffers from Munchausen

[13] Among the words cut on her skin are also the titles of the episodes.

syndrome by proxy (MSBP),[14] which explains Marian's mysterious illness and death, and which seems to be happening again with Amma. He also learns of Camille's earlier self-hospitalization due to suicidal tendencies, as well as of her hospital roommate who eventually succeeded in killing herself.

Meanwhile, John's girlfriend Ashley (Madison Davenport) provides the police with enough evidence to arrest John. Camille finds John before the police in the Mexican part of the town. After having an intimate chat, during which John also admits to not killing his sister, Camille and John have sex in a motel room. The Detective and the Chief break in, arrest John, and leave Camille behind. Although angry at seeing them together, the Detective leaves the hospital records to Camille. Utterly disturbed, Camille phones Curry with the news and goes back to the house. At seeing Amma already too frail under her mother's treatment, Camille puts on an act of being sick in order to derail her mother's caring attention to herself and away from Amma. Just before Adora's medications take their fatal toll on Camille, the police, led by Curry, arrive and arrest Adora. They also find bloody pliers in her kitchen, and Adora gets charged with murdering the girls, too.[15] Camille and Amma recover in a hospital.

The last sequence of the story shows a good-spirited montage sequence of Ama moving with Camille to St. Louis, glimpses from Adora's trial, Camille taking Amma to visit Adora in prison, and of Amma's new girlfriend Mae (Iyana Halley). It is followed by a cheerful dinner party at Curry and his wife Eileen's (Barbara Eve Harris) where Curry also adamantly approves of Camille's last draft on the Wind Gap story. Some days later, however, Camille finds a tooth in Amma's dollhouse[16] and realizes that its entire „ivory floor" is made up of teeth crowns. Amma enters the room and at seeing Camille, repeats the sentence already heard quite a few times throughout the show: „Don't tell mama." The show cuts to the credits, but after about 40 seconds, a very short, fast-paced, violent montage sequence is interpolated showing Amma killing Ann and Natalie with the help of her two girlfriends, and Mae on her own. At the end of the credits, a short shot shows Amma as the Woman in White disappearing into the forest.

[14] MSBP is „a mental health problem in which a caregiver makes up or causes an illness or injury in a person under his or her care, such as a child," and in such case it is considered a form of child abuse. The abuser/caregiver is believed to be regaining a sense of control over his or her life and increased self-esteem, especially through the attention he or she is given by the doctors, nurses, and the community. See https://www.uofmhealth.org/health-library/hw180537#:~:text=Munchausen%20syndrome%20by%20proxy%20(MSBP,child%20abuse%20or%20elder%20abuse. See also https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5875173/.

[15] Both victims were found with their teeth extracted.

[16] Amma's dollhouse is a minute reconstruction of Adora's mansion. Throughout the show we see Amma playing with it and planning renovations of it which mirror the actual ones. She brings the dollhouse with her to St. Louis.

Sharp Objects' Cultural Geography and Its Inhabitants

The story of *Sharp Objects* unfolds in Missouri – the state characterized by sociocultural and political sentiments of a „border state"[17] since the Missouri Compromise (1820).[18] Besides marking the conjuncture between the nation's cultures and politics of the North and South, it also represents a historical connection between its East and West, signifying the eastern terminus of American westward expansion.[19] Within its borders, Missouri has been a site of dynamic sociocultural and economic intersections and tensions: liberal and conservative, Democratic and Republican, urban and rural, with the Republican leaning dominant in the 21st century.[20]

In the show's narrative the cultural poles are sharply designated through the parameters of north-south and urban-rural. Camille lives in St. Louis, Missouri's largest city and its commercial and cultural hub. The protagonist's progressive political and cultural standing is designated in the early minutes of the first episode by two big posters hanging in her apartment: an iconic Barack Obama „Hope" poster symbolizing faith in America's progress and the poster of the feminist icon from the '60s, Gloria Steinem, with her quote: „We are the women our parents warned us against, and we are proud," symbolizing liberal renunciation of conservative idea of womanhood.

The progressive optimism is unambiguously embodied in Frank Curry – white middle-class, middle-aged, good-hearted man, with unthreatening white hair and beard wrapped around his oval face. Frank is not a racist – his wife Eileen is black, not a patriarchal conservative – his wife is his partner, always present during his phone calls with Camille as an emotional comrade in the process of seeing Camille through, and not a cold capitalist – as Camille's boss, he is more of a fatherly figure, understanding and supportive, rather than a professional superior in demand of a „big story." He is what Carrie Tirado Bramen describes as a nice person: decent, good-natured, and well-meaning. Frank's decision to assign the Wind Gap story to Camille emerges from his best of intentions for her – to heal and to become a good writer. His fatherly affection is expressed through his addressing her as Kiddo or Cubby. In one of the early episodes

[17] https://www.britannica.com/place/Missouri-state.

[18] Missouri Compromise, by which the state joined the Union as a slave state, marks an event important in tracing the antebellum and abolitionist history leading to the final clash between the North and the South – The Civil War. See https://www.britannica.com/event/Missouri-Compromise.

[19] See https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gateway-Arch.

[20] For example, after the Clinton administration left the office, Missouri has consistently voted Republican in general elections. For details on different electoral outcomes, see https://www.sos.mo.gov/elections/s_default.

which depicts Frank and his wife, we witness a disagreement in which Eileen tells him that he „can't solve all the problems of the entire world," indicating his „history" of being helpful. Therefore, his niceness is not connected only to Camille; it is his mentality. Frank is authoritative when required without being authoritarian. He possesses a sense of humor which is sensitive not to offend, skilled at soothing a quarrel, and characterized by the capacity for self-mockery. It reveals a person, as Daniel Wickberg describes the moral capital embedded in the understanding of the sense of humor in American culture, of a balanced character, capable of seeing different viewpoints, and of avoiding extremes; his sense of humor makes him a „tolerant relativist" (Wickberg 1998, 97, 106).

South of St. Louis is fictional Wind Gap – "at the bottom of Missouri, Bootheel, spittin' distance from Tennessee," as Camille informs Frank. Wind Gap is, then, as south as one can go in Missouri, located in Bootheel area, a „dangling" part of the state characterized by „a Southern-style agricultural economy and society."[21] Camille describes it as very small, with hog butchering as only industry, so „you got your old money and your trash." When Frank asks her which one she is, Camille responds, „Trash. From old money." Camille's first description sets the „tacit national consensus" of the South as „a heaven-and-hell diptych of social types: sleepwalking belles and gentlemen of the Old South, and rampaging crackers and hillbillies of the Benighted South" (Graham 2007, 335). It evokes the image of the nation's traditional burden of the feudal, classist South hampering the Enlightenment America's progress and its middle-class social and economic mobility. The following Camille's claim irons out the heavenly pole of the diptych, fusing all into trash.

Once in Wind Gap, we witness a desolate, ghost town, filled with heat, sweat, and liquor. The town's pale, worn out posters, murals, and graffities, including the posters of Bill Clinton's presidential campaign, seem to suggest the town's life has stopped since Missourians began voting Republican, and reduced it to „guns and meth and pigs," as the frustrated detective from Kansas City observes. The town's social segregation follows typical economic, racial, and cultural patterning. The old money, represented most prominently by Adora's plantation-era-style mansion, is located away from the town's center, surrounded by large lawns, and gated by a passcode. White trash is situated at the margin of the town, breeding kids with guns and sick mothers on meth and welfare, as shown in the second episode when Camille visits the Capisis home to investigate the eight-year-old boy's claim that „the woman in white" took the girls. When Camille confronts chief Vickery for dismissing the Capisi boy's testimony, we learn – or are at least pushed to reflect upon the possibility – that his testimony is deemed unreliable not only because it invokes local folklore, but also because of his family's social and economic standing in the community: his

[21] https://www.britannica.com/place/Missouri-state.

father is a factory worker and his mother a minimum-wage worker on Adora's pig farm. Even further away, next to the railroads is Bean Town, the Mexican area, „smelling of blood and piss," as a Wind Gap bar owner informs us. For the „city" characters, however, Bean Town turns out to be a place of solace and a safe space where Camille and John can discuss Wind Gap's gender stereotyping and reach deep intimacy.

The conservative and regressive values and mores of Wind Gap's close-knit community are clarified through its inhabitants and their interactions with the „big city" visitors. The representatives of urban values, who also serve as dramaturgical means for revealing, by contrast, Wind Gap's orthodox, rural ones, are detective Willis and John Keene, both coming from the cities north or east of Wind Gap (Kansas City and Philadelphia, respectively). Neither can integrate within the community, and both are the only ones[22] with whom Camille develops an intimate relationship. Detective Willis faces steady resistance from chief Vickery and gets increasingly frustrated by the townspeople's „sugary passive aggression." John Keene (as well as his family), as Camille notices early on, is „not your typical Wind Gap fare." His family is not fully integrated in the town community, as we overhear John's cheerleader girlfriend Ashley whispering at his sister's wake. His culture of open grief, tears, and emotionality sharply stands out from the town's conservative toughness and „men don't cry" culture, which in the eyes of the community makes him suspicious and leads Camille's high-school girlfriends to view him as „sorta gay" and possibly incestuous. The outsiders, especially coming from big cities and their urban cultures are perceived as different, and therefore threatening.

Although reduced to a few characters, the status of the blacks in *Sharp Objects*' cultural geography is differently represented in its south and north. Wind Gap's blacks are narratively and culturally marginalized to Adora's housekeeper Gayla (Emily Yancy) and Camille's old high-school friend Becca (Hilary Ward). Both of them show an „amor fati" disposition, a functional peace with their sociocultural positions and their histories. When Camille asks Gayla why she remained in Adora's employment all these years alluding to the difficult working conditions under her mother's authoritarian mentality, Gayla responds, in a peaceful if not acquiescent tone, that her choices in Wind Gap are domestic work or the hog farm, and she does not like pigs. „Besides," she concludes, „Miss Crellin's bark is worse than her bite." Quite analogously, when Camille asks Becca why she is being nice to her since they (all the other white girls in their cheerleading crowd) were „bitches" to her in high school, Becca responds: „You were better than most," adding that she understood Camille was „going through a lot" dealing with the family tragedy, thus effectively mitigating her

[22] Besides, of course, Camille's half-sister Amma.

behavior. Earlier that day, Becca also relates to Camille that she set the bar low for herself already back in high school, so there is „no way to go but up."

Up north, in St. Louis, African Americans are represented as integrated and active members of the society. Most prominently, it is depicted through an interracial marriage between Frank and his wife Eileen. In recurring scenes of the phone calls between Frank and Camille throughout the episodes, Eileen is always present as a rational and reasonable but also sensitive and caring partner, who performs a sort of a non-authoritarian, supportive authority to Frank and a caring friend to Camille. Mae, Amma's new girlfriend in St. Louis whom we meet in the last episode, is cheerful and agile, and free to foster her ambitions „in politics or journalism." Visually, the integrated urban society is shown in the last episode's dinner scene at Frank and Eileen's in which we watch a multiracial „family" at the table, laughing and conversing. This comes as a sharp contrast to Adora's family dinner we saw at the beginning of the same episode for which we know was served by a black maid and during which Alan discusses Missouri's effectiveness in executing capital punishments while Amma is sitting in her white bedgown, sickly from Adora's medicine, with a chaplet on her head impersonating, as she tells us, Persephone.

Wind Gap's family values and notions on sexuality are also deeply conservative. Already in the first episode do we learn about the community's homophobia: firstly, from the same bar owner, Camille's age peer, who informs her that they „don't really get that type around here anymore," and later from the father of one of the victims, Bob Nash, who thinks „a faggot did it 'cause he [the killer] didn't rape her." The „Pity Party" – girls-only-get-together of Camille's old high-school girlfriends and former cheerleaders, reveals Wind Gap women's intimacy rituals when they watch an old girl flick, cry together, and confine about their marital problems. We learn that the young mothers of Wind Gap follow the Bible's dictum of multiplying and, „not allowing feminism to tell them what to do with their families," believe the ultimate women's purpose is in becoming mothers and caring for their households. The entire scene is visually represented from Camille's point of view at an obvious camera as well as cultural distance, filled with cutaways between her pouring more wine which paint a provincial, kitschy household paraphernalia: artificial fruit, porcelain ballerinas, tacky picture frames. Joined to this point of view is Becca who does not fit in nor follows the Wind Gap's feminine mystique. Although sexuality is officially confined to the marital and private relations, just like liquor is hidden in sugary cocktails and sweet teas, sexual deviancy – rape, impotence, strange masturbation habits, old sheds with pornographic images – is hushed in Wind Gap's whispers and gossip and its woods and swamps. In the episode four, Camille even gives a tour to detective Willis of the Wind Gap woods and creeks and its sites of sexual or sex-related crimes, tragedies, and violence.

Wind Gap's „Southernness" is cemented in the fifth episode, dedicated to the town's local Confederate holiday Calhoun Day which commemorates the town's founding and celebrates „what is unmovable about this place," as Adora's husband observes. At the beginning of the episode, Frank asks Camille for a new installment of the story which would explain what is wrong with that town. When Camille says it cannot be described within the 800-word limit, Frank advises her to paint a „big picture" on „rotting America, fall of Rome stuff." When Camille tells him that it is closer to „the fall of the South" with her mother's lawn littered with the Confederate flags, Frank enthusiastically encourages her to „milk the shit out of that cow." And so Marti Noxon[23] milks Wind Gap's classist, racist, and sexual pathology.

The Calhoun Day barbecue-and-beer celebration is traditionally hosted by Adora – as she is the Calhoun descendent, and at Adora's home, that is, on its lawn, since barely anybody is allowed to enter the house. The class division between the guests is indicated during the morning preparations when Adora gives directions to her housemaid that „Anything with fleur-de-lis is gonna be dining-room service, (...) And of course, anything past the tents is plastic ware." The housemaid is black, and the guests are, as expected, all white.[24] However, when Detective Willis asks Camille if this Calhoun Day is some kind of a „Confederate pride," she tells him that they do not use the C-word in Missouri. „Silent racism is the best," concludes Willis. Camille then goes on to explain the story behind the celebration – the one dramatized and traditionally performed by high-school children on Adora's lawn stage. Zeke Calhoun, „our founding pedophile," was a Southern soldier married to a Union-family „child-bride" Millie – Camille's „great-great-great-grand-victim or something." One day, the Union soldiers attacked her, but she refused to give up her husband even at the price of being tortured and eventually losing her baby. In order to emphasize the Wind Gap's depravity, Camille adds that „it's how she resists that people in this town just love" – tied to a tree, raped, and violated. Wind Gap's sadistic voyeurism is visually confirmed minutes later when, during the scene of rape performed on stage – by high-school children, a cut-away shows a group of men – mostly the Pity Party women's husbands – removing their sunglasses and staring at the stage with increased interest and satisfying laughs.

Chief Vickery is among Wind Gap's relatively moderate characters.[25] He has the Wind Gap's values and mores internalized as his common sense which he

[23] Calhoun Day is not part of the novel; it was added by the show's writers. See https://www.thewrap.com/sharp-objects-marti-noxon-says-calhoun-day-started-as-a-joke/.

[24] Although in one of the wide shots of the crowd gathering a black man can be (barely) discerned.

[25] Another one is Jackie O'Neil who, although a local wealthy, always more or less drunk, spinster who does not shy away from gossip and pricky remarks, is also „sweet, the only woman genuinely nice" to Camille – as she tells detective Willis.

follows in his investigation. He acts as a guardian of the town, unwilling to share information about the case with Camille out of fear for having his community, already known as „hog killers," also labeled as child killers in St. Louis. His common sense quickly dismisses little Capisi boy's testimony as local folklore and unreliable, makes him suspect a Mexican of committing the murders rather than investigate the local community, and arrest the „weirdo" John Keene maybe too hastily. He also carries traces of the „enlightened" Southern sheriff described by Allison Graham – the character developed in the popular representations of the South in the 1960s (Graham 2007, 344–346). As his fictional ancestor, he is overall peaceful, ethical, not overweight, does not chew tobacco, and primarily armed by his common sense (cf. Graham 2007, 345). Vickery's ethics, however, is based on the loyalty to his community and its established hierarchy – the old money above the law. The Southern sheriff character, as argued by Graham, had a role of redeeming the Southern lawman – and by extension, American law, and thus suggesting that the system was working, whereas bad apples were assigned to the violent rednecks (Graham 2007, 346). In this case, Vickery's redemption is strongly conditioned by Frank's agency who had to come down to Wind Gap and „nearly bust the station door down," as detective Willis informs us, in order to have him sent to Adora's. Although not represented as an aggressive or openly crooked, tobacco-chewing villain, Vickery remains a dispassionately despised character, limited by his tribal ethics in executing law, and in need of the push by those who are led by facts and evidence and in pursuit of truth and justice.

Sharp Object's Gothic Tale

Lloyd-Smith notes that American Gothic „explores the tensions between a culturally sanctioned progressive optimism and an actual dark legacy" (Lloyd-Smith 2004, 118). In *Sharp Objects*, this tension is represented through the northern character Frank and Wind Gap's southern inhabitants. Camille, as a both tormented and agential heroine, symbolizes an attempt to resolve, heal this tension by applying the progressive optimism to the historic trauma.

As we learn from the start, Camille has cut her ties with Wind Gap (she barely speaks with her mother and has never met Amma) and progressed from her southern roots, both politically (indicated by the Obama poster) and culturally (indicated by the Gloria Steinem poster). However, she is barely functional, a journalist „only half-good at writing," as Frank declares, haunted by her ghosts which she tries to drown in vodka, but whose past endures on her carved skin. In the opening sequence of the first episode, her teenage self, accompanied by her dead half-sister Marian, visits her in her dream, enters her present apartment, and stings her with a paper clip. This prickly wake-up anticipates her editor's

optimistic plan to send her to a visit home in order to face her demons as „it might be good" for her to „flush some things out and get back on her feet." And Camille journeys south, to the birthplace of her ghosts.

The visual representation of Wind Gap environment follows the Sothern Gothic televisuality, specifically the climate and landscape (Cherry 2016, 464–466). Its sun is aggressively bright and hot, visible on men in their shirts soaked in sweat, as well as in tracking shots of empty streets and squares resembling a concrete desert. Vertiginous rotations of numberless fans which populate interiors of the town stand as a constant visual reminder of a suffocating heat but also as a symbol of potentially harmful sharp objects with its speedy blades. While the desolate, bright open spaces of the downtown Wind Gap look threateningly exposing, the surrounding woods and its muddy waters shield the town's disturbing history from the sunlight.

Somewhere in between is Adora's mansion, haunted by aggression, crime, and sickness which run matrilineally. As revealed in the Calhoun Day episode, the house is a memorial site of the antebellum Southern ethos. Inside, that is a carefully guarded Adora's bedroom with ivory tiling, reminiscent of *Arthur Gordon Pym*'s „perfect whiteness." Unlike Poe's (see Goddu 1997, 88–93), however, *Sharp Objects*' is hardly ambiguous. A wedding present for Millie, „before anybody knew what 'endangered' was," as Adora notes, the ivory tiles retain „soldiers' blood on the floor" keeping the bloody memory of the Civil War. The room is a carefully guarded family memorial. Adora keeps the floor impeccably clean, does not allow random entrances, and only barefoot can somebody enter it. Camille is particularly unnerving around it: when she drops her water bottle which then rolls over into the room, she takes special care not to step onto the floor – reminiscent of her mother's scolding when as a teenager, she stained the floor with her muddy shoes – but to stretch most carefully in order to reach it from its threshold.

Another symbolic whiteness is embodied in the local folklore about „the Woman in White" who, it is believed, snatches the children away. In a magazine essay, it is argued that *Sharp Objects* references Wilkie Collins' novel (Foster 2018).[26] Following this interpretative route, the woman in white is the bearer of the horrific family secret, as well as of the threat that it might be exposed. Bedsides the Capisi boy's mother (Stacy Haiduk) displaying the marginalized rotting of the Wind Gap community in her hospital white gown, Camille wears a white dress on Calhoun Day (contrasting her otherwise always dark jeans-and-

[26] In Collins' novel *The Woman in White* (1859), the mysterious woman in white is an illegitimate half-sister of the other two main female characters. She is also a marginalized and tormented character, hidden in asylums by one of the main villains for the fear of her exposing his illegitimate status. For a short introduction to the novel, see https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/an-introduction-to-the-woman-in-white#.

sweatshirt outfit) while strolling about the lawn and revealing the „true history" behind the celebration. The actual woman in white of *Sharp Objects*, however, as understood in Wind Gap's folklore, although hushed in the darkness of the last episode's end credits, is revealed to be Amma, representing generational inheritance, and thus retention, of the dark, destructive legacy. She figures as a gothic embodiment of the irrepressible past, as well as the ambiguity of Camille's attempt at rectifying it.

As „the family home is the very place from which the Gothic's monsters emerge" (Munford 2012), from her mansion, Adora emerges as a monstrous version of the Southern Belle. Set in the context of the plantation life (and the plantation novel) of the Antebellum South, the Southern Belle, a carefree coquette, once married, „was expected to become a chaste matron, an overseer of the plantation, a nurse, and a mother" (Seidel 1977, 390). Contemporary popular characterizations describe her as graceful, of calm confidence, well-mannered, caring for her community, and deeply attached to the Southern history (Spears 2011). Adora unites all of the above – with a dark underflow. Her grace and calm confidence presuppose not „asking horrible, morbid questions, stirring everyone up," as she scolds Camille for doing it, resembling „conservative politeness" which emphasizes order and norm compliance (Hirsh et al. 2010, 656). When her world's equilibrium is disturbed, she reinstates it by a grotesque habit of pulling off her eyelashes. Her role of the mother and a nurturer has acquired pathological proportions manifest in her MSBP. As we learn both from Alan and later from Adora herself, her mother Joya was a cold woman with sadistic tendencies. Aggression and rage are thus represented in *Sharp Objects* through the matrilineal strand – from Joya to Adora to her daughters, all possibly from the ur-event of Millie's trauma. The daughters, however, represent a threefold embodiment of the inheritance. Marian is represented as an innocent victim of it, Amma – as its continuation, and Camille – as the aggression and rage turned inwards.

In the process of her investigating the crime, but more importantly, in facing her ghosts and demons, Camille has helpers. Those are the three men: Frank, detective Willis, and John Keene – as already noted, all representatives of the liberal culture. In contrast to Vickery, Willis is willing to dig further and deeper and thus ends up revealing the true crime behind Camille's family tragedy, which then enables her to act. With John Keen she finally allows herself to face her body as the memory of her deep trauma and to establish intimacy with a man who sees her, and through that enables her to see herself, without judgement, disgust, or horror. As a sharp contrast to Camille's natural mother – authoritarian, cold, unloving, and ultimately depraved, Frank and Eileen function as Camille's adoptive parents during her „coming-of-age" gothic drama. Their nourishing personalities are anchoring and advising her. Through their regular

phone calls, they function as reminders and guardians of Camille's progress, of the cultural leap, transition she has already made, of her innate decency – which made her different from her mother and the Wind Gap culture, and urged her to leave them in the first place. When her sense of self-worth is deeply disturbed by her dwelling in Wind Gap and its culture, she confesses to Frank, while indicatively in her Calhoun Day white dress, that being in Wind Gap makes her feel like a bad person. Frank compassionately responds that she is one of the most decent persons that he knows. Encouraged, Camille decides to stay in Wind Gap and her mother's house and see this story through.

She does it through an act of sacrifice, by placing herself in her sister's stead for Adora's motherly treatment. This is also the moment when she becomes allowed to enter the ivory room – in order to be tended in it by her mother. Adora removes her dark, urban clothes replacing them with a white gown. It is the second time Camille is in white. By succumbing to her mother's medicine and playing a „good mama's girl" in the ivory room, Camille not only sacrifices herself in order to save her sister – another sister, another girl, another innocent youth, but she also enters the site of the dark legacy, of the repressed and muffled family history, in order to voice it – by trying to elicit the confession from Adora about Marian's death, and to abort it – by offering her body as its material proof. And she succeeds, but only with Frank's help who comes to her rescue and takes her *home*, as he repeats the word while hugging her half-dead body on the ivory floor.

Up north, the cheerful dénouement, bathed in mild sun and pastel colors showing diversity, friendliness, and laughs, indicating both Camille's and Amma's recovery progress, is soon disturbed by the gothic return. The north's progressive optimism is undermined by the south's dark legacy brought *home*, embodied in Amma.

Until this point in the narrative, the benighted south is isolated from the narrative's north; its darkness and depravity are contained both spatially and culturally in the „repository for everything that the nation is *not*" (Goddu 1997, 76 [original emphasis]) as understood by the liberal America. With Amma's entering the liberal space and culture – both as the one emerging from the conservative and the one belonging to the family (and symbolically, the nation) divided into two cultural camps – the divisive line seems to blur, and Amma becomes a promise of a symbolic cultural healing, brought about by the agential heroine – Camille and by the heroine's mentor and helper – Frank. However, the line blurring and the assumption of healing is predicated upon Camille's, and by extension Frank's and liberal, perception of Amma determined by progressive optimism: Amma is young, and therefore believed (or hoped) not to be personally and culturally fully formed yet and therefore still amenable, and she is seen more as a victim of Wind Gap's culture and less as its bearer or a

full-fledged representative. Therefore, she is (chosen to be) brought up north with the intention to be raised, and therefore reeducated and assimilated into the liberal morality, using acts of kindness. Camille's perception of Amma, i.e., the progressive optimism, and what appears to really be Amma, i.e., the historical trauma, clash in the narrative's closing producing a highly ambiguous resolution of the tension. As a tormented heroine, Camille is saved, but as an agent of healing the tension, she seems to fail.

The (Ir)Resolution

The ending can be considered through two planes. The first is the Frank–Camille narrative thread and the second is the Camille–Amma. The first suggests a hopeful, constructive progress manifest in Camille's successful journey and return to the family of her choice. The second, however, shows the enduring trauma and its destructive impulses manifest in Amma, but also a failure to fully recognize that the young, the future might be already spoiled, sick, and stained with crime. Considered together, they indicate the inescapability from the gothic, persistence in regionalizing the past, as well as the failure to settle its ghosts through the acts of kindness/niceness/compassion and punishment – as conceived within the narrative, after which the progressive movement is assumed.

On the Frank–Camille plane, Frank's kindness and compassion enable Camille's facing the demons of her past, learning the truth about her family history, as well as her healing evident both through her disappearing alcoholism and improved writing. Putting Camile's mother and the matron of Wind Gap in prison represents a just punishment, as well as a symbolic act of ostracizing the culture she heads. It is also the act of removing Adora's oppressive influence on Amma – on the growing new generation, who is now hoped to become „a functioning member of the progressive America" through the influence and kindness of the liberal environment.

The promising „valiant present" which is hoped to overcome the past is also expressed in the concluding words of Camille's Wind Gap article:

> „I've forgiven myself for failing to save my sister and given myself over to raising the other. Am I good at caring for Amma because of kindness, or do I like caring for Amma because I have Adora's sickness? I waver between the two. Especially at night, when my skin begins to pulse. Lately, I've been leaning toward kindness."

These words are read aloud by Frank, just before the dinner scene, when he and Camille go over her final draft. After a moment of silence, Frank tells her: „It's beautiful, Cubby. Really beautiful." Besides its literary qualities and a highly regarded quality of making it „a personal story" on „human condition"

which seems to characterize Camille's article, the beauty Frank finds in these words may as well be the kindness embedded in it – Camille's kindness to herself expressed in forgiving herself, as well as her faith in kindness (as her moral value) expressed in her „leaning," i.e., choosing to believe in it and act upon it.

Frank–Camille plane suggests the promise of progress. The dinner scene is relatively lengthy and saturated by a supportive, cozy, mutually understanding atmosphere among the participants. As Marti Noxon explains it in an interview, she „really wanted that [the scene] to breathe," and „to show that she [Camille] has a family that she's choosing."[27] The duration of the scene elaborates on a vision of a happy liberal family offering a long-awaited pleasure of troubles finally settling.

Camille–Amma narrative thread directly challenges so conceived valiant present and its promise of a brighter future. Although Adora is removed, the dark history continuous through Amma. As Adora's daughter, she figures as her extension who carries on her mother's aggression and rage. Like Adora's ivory floor which retains the soldiers' blood, Amma's dollhouse floor preserves the dead girls' teeth. Amma reappears as a disturbing and unmalleable ghost of the past, making her a symbolic undead of the story. However, this is not revealed until the very end of the last episode. Until this point, in contrast to Adora, Amma is treated as a victim whom Camille wishes to save.

Campbell and Manning (2018) posit the emergence of a new moral culture, primarily among liberal America, which they name the culture of victimhood. It assumes victimhood a virtue and assigns to the victim a high moral status while morally condemning the privileged as oppressive. The distribution of kindness, conceived within *Sharp Objects* as tolerance, compassion, and warmly embrace of those perceived as victims, seems to follow such moral standards. Camille's kindness seems to be reserved for the characters framed in one way or another as sufferers of Wind Gap culture, primarily Amma, John Keene and the marginalized blacks – the housekeeper Gayla and high-school friend Becca. The most undeserving is Adora as the villain of the story. Although certain light is shed on her own traumatic childhood, she remains far from acquiring the status of a victim within the narrative since her position is distinctly privileged – both as the town's and family's head. Additionally, her trauma is given free rein in oppressing others. In contrast, Camille has succeeded in containing her trauma and its destructiveness inwardly, thus shielding the people around her from its destructive impulses. It is what makes her, in Frank's estimation, a truly decent person, but also deserving of his kindness and compassion. Compared to Adora, what morally distinguishes Camille is her act, or choice, of victimizing herself instead of others. As a victim herself, she is also highly sensitive to others whom she perceives as victims.

[27] See https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/sharp-object-creators-break-down-020034026.html.

As characteristic of the gothic mode, a doubt in the enlightened endeavor creeps up in the darkness, on Camille's pulsating skin which carries the memory of the trauma. This is dramatized on the Camille–Amma plane which suggests the failure of kindness: firstly, in fully recognizing the trauma and secondly, in treating it with kindness. Since Amma figures as a substitute for Marian – she is about the same age as Marian was when she died, as blond, and as enthralled by Adora and ultimately Wind Gap – Camille perceives her as an innocent victim and projects her almost unconditional kindness onto her. This is exactly what blinds her about Amma. Just before the above cited words from Camille's article, she describes Adora's crime as „Overcare. Killing through kindness" and concludes that „Adora fell on that sword spectacularly." Ironically, Camille seems to fall somewhat analogously. Her kindness, stemming, as it seems, from her sense of guilt for failing to save her sister, but also her hospital roommate, not only impoverishes her perception and investigation into the true perpetrator – and thus the extant of the trauma and its destructiveness, but it also indirectly creates another victim, Mae.

However, the narrative of *Sharp Objects* does not dwell on these concerns. This revelation and the questions it potentially raises are tightly packed within just a few concluding minutes, with the images of violence lurking in the darkness of the end credit rolls. The end is shortened by a dramatic „pulling the rug out" with the intention of avoiding being „too explanatory and too expository," as Gillian Flynn notes in the cited interview. This dramaturgical choice has several potential effects. The first one is maintaining the dramatic weight of the dinner scene and its dominant emotions embedded in the vision of progress. Since Frank–Camille plane is the main narrative thread, with Camille as the actual heroine and with her troubles as the focus of the plot, the duration of the final scene of this thread – the dinner scene, rhythmically extends its importance and therefore the impression and memory of the conveyed progress. Within such context the final narrative minutes are unfolding which reveal the ghost that both helps disrupt and run the machine.

The disruption comes from a shocking realization that Amma is the killer. Despite what appears to be a long process of healing ahead of her – along with Camille as her guardian – as we learn from the dialogue between Camille and Curry before the dinner is served, Camille's hope for Amma's betterment remains. The revelation about Amma comes as a rug pulled out from under Camille's feet, and symbolically from under the liberal vision for resolving and overcoming historical trauma. However, such reading is of a limited potential within the context of both the entire narrative and the particular sequencing of the „double ending." Therefore, the final effect – the one that seems to help run the machine – is retaining the ghost, embodied in Adora and then in Amma, in darkness. Camille–Amma plane, pushed at the narrative's very end, and therefore both rhythmically

and semantically compressed, besides emphasizing surprise and shock, becomes an expression of fear. Since Amma and her inner world, motivations, and trauma are not really explored, she remains relatively flat character, an unknown. Consequently, when regarded within *Sharp Objects*' narrative which is comprised of polarized characters shown as belonging to either conservative or liberal culture, as soon as she is identified as a villain, she is destined to drop from the hitherto assumed liberal camp and fall under the Wind Gap one, marginalized from the narrative and left with the malefactor label. Thus, just as Adora, Amma too – and the trauma they both represent – remains a monstruous and ultimately strange Other, lurking in darkness, known only as a threat, as a reminder of the looming danger. Although the ghost from the past is resurrected through the gothic mode and brought to progressive light, it is simultaneously isolated, ostracized, and eventually displaced once again. Read in the context of American culture wars and President Trump as the embodiment of the (primarily liberal) nation's abject, Amma, as the ultimate abject in the series narrative, could be seen as representing Trump's (and its culture's) threatening penetration of the liberal environment, but also its ultimately tenacious impulse to regionalize it by displacing it into the sphere of darkness, obscurity, and depravity.

What remains at the end of *Sharp Objects* are assumptions that Amma also ended up incarcerated and Camille ended up writing another personal article; the assumptions would also summon up the character of Frank, kindly and unstained, to guide and safeguard the process. In other words, we would assume another narratively analogous circle in what appears a spiraling (maybe *ad infinitum*) gothic story which would again employ presumably identically conceived identification of the victims and perpetrators, as well as of kindness and punishment to heal a trauma and punish a crime. In addition to Camille's almost rhetorical „wavering," a deeper and less decisive – one could say, a more kindly – exploration into the sick and the kind remains wanting.

References

Akass, Kim, and Janet McCabe. 2018. „HBO and the Aristocracy of Contemporary TV Culture: Affiliations and Legitimatising Television Culture, Post-2007." *Mise au point* [Online], no. 10. http://journals.openedition.org/map/2472.

Bianculli, David. 2008. „True Blood," Tasty New TV From Alan Ball And HBO. *NPR* September 5, 2008. https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=94320825.

Bowman, Carl Desportes. 2010. „The Myth of a Non-Polarized America." *The Hedgehog Review*, 12(3): 65–77. https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/does-religious-pluralism-require-secularism/articles/the-myth-of-a-non-polarized-america.

Bramen, Carrie Tirado. 2017. „Introduction: American Niceness and the Democratic Personality." In *American Niceness: A Cultural History*. Cambridge – London: Harvard University Press. Kindle.

Campbell, Bradley and Jason Manning. 2018. *The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. E-book.

Castillo Street, Susan and Charles L. Crow. 2016. „Introduction: Down at the Crossroads." In *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic*, edited by Susan Castillo Street and Charles L. Crow, 1–6. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Cherry, Brigid. 2016. „Shadows on the Small Screen: The Televisuality and Generic Hybridity of Southern Gothic." In *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic*, edited by Susan Castillo Street and Charles L. Crow, 461–472. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

DiMaggio, Paul, John Evans, and Bethany Bryson. 1996. „Have Americans' Social Attitudes Become More Polarized?" *American Journal of Sociology*, 102(3): 690–755. https://doi.org/10.1086/230995.

Edgerton, Gary R., and Jeffrey P. Jones, eds. 2008. *The Essential HBO Reader*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky.

Fiedler, Leslie A. 1960. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. New York: Criterion Books.

Fiorina, Morris P., with Samuel J. Abrams, and Jeremy C. Pope. 2005. *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. New York: Pearson Longman.

Fiorina, Morris P. 2017. *Unstable Majorities: Polarization, Party Sorting, and Political Stalemate*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press.

Foster, Emily. 2018. „Gillian Flynn's Sharp Objects: Re-Writing The Woman in White." *Politics / Letters*, December 20, 2018. http://quarterly.politicsslashletters.org/gillian-flynns-sharp-objects-re-writing-the-woman-in-white/.

Garvin, Glenn. 2018. „HBO's Creaky Adaptation of *Sharp Objects* Will Make You Want to Stab Yourself." *Reason* July 6, 2018. https://reason.com/2018/07/06/hbos-creaky-adaptation-of-sharp-objects.

Gelfand, Michele, Joshua Conrad Jackson, and Jesse R. Harrington. 2016. „Trump Culture: Threat, Fear and the Tightening of the American Mind." *The Conversation* April 27, 2016. https://theconversation.com/trump-culture-threat-fear-and-the-tightening-of-the-american-mind-57866.

Gilbert, Sophie. 2018. „Is Television Ready for Angry Women?" *The Atlantic* June 2018. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/06/marti-noxon/559115.

Gilbert, Sophie. 2018a. „The Twisted, Enthralling Rot of *Sharp Objects*." *The Atlantic* July 7, 2018. https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/07/sharp-objects-review-hbo/564524/?utm_source=feed.

Goddu, Teresa A. 1997. *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Graham, Allison. 2007. „The South in Popular Culture." In *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*, edited by Richard Gray and Owen Robinson, 335–351. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.

Griffin, Larry J. and Don Harrison Doyle. 1995. „Introduction." In *The South as an American Problem*, edited by Larry J. Griffin and Don Harrison Doyle, 1–9. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Griffin, Larry J. 1995. „Why Was the South a Problem to America?" In *The South as an American Problem*, edited by Larry J. Griffin and Don Harrison Doyle, 10–32. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Holter, Lauren. 2016. „5 Times John Oliver Changed the World (Kinda)." *Bustle* February 08, 2016. https://www.bustle.com/articles/140358–5-times-john-oliver-made-a-real-impact-proved-that-late-night-shows-arent-all-fun.

Howe, Daniel Walker. 1997. *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Hunter, James Davison. 1991. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: BasicBooks.

Hunter, James Davison and Alan Wolfe. 2006. *Is There a Culture War? A Dialogue on Values and American Public Life*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center Brookings Institution Press.

Jung, Berenike and Lukas R.A. Wilde. 2020. „Unraveling the 'Trump Shock,' or the intertwined threat communication of 'Post-11/9'." In *Threat Communication and the US Order after 9/11: Medial Reflections*, edited by Vanessa Ossa, David Scheu, and Lukas R. A. Wilde, 156–175. London: Routledge.

Lelkes, Yphtach. 2016. „Mass Polarization: Manifestations and Measurements." *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 80(S1): 392–410. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfw005.

Lloyd, Christopher. 2015. „The Region and Beyond: From the South to the Postsouth." In *Rooting Memory, Rooting Place: Regionalism in the Twenty-First-Century American South*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lloyd-Smith, Allan. 2004. *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction*. New York – London: Continuum.

Luckerson, Victor. 2015. „The John Oliver Effect: The HBO Host's Real-World Impact." *Time* January 20, 2015. http://time.com/3674807/john-oliver-net-neutrality-civil-forfeiture-miss-america.

McFarland, Melanie. 2018. „Women's Anger Is Not to Be Ignored: Lessons from HBO's 'Sharp Objects'." *Salon* July 7, 2018. https://www.salon.com/2018/07/07/hbos-sharp-objects-why-womens-anger-is-not-to-be-ignored.

Munford, R. 2012. „Family." In *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic*, edited by William Hughes, David Punter, and Andrew Smith. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118398500.wbeotgf001.

Ortner, Sherry B. 2013. „Not a History Lesson: The Erasure of Politics in American Cinema." *Visual Anthropology Review* 29(2): 77–88. DOI: 10.1111/var.12006.

Oyler, Lauren. 2018. „Gillian Flynn Peers Into the Dark Side of Femininity." *The New York Times Magazine* November 8, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/08/magazine/gillian-flynn-women.html.

Parmett, Helen Morgan. 2016. "It's HBO: Passionate Engagement, TV Branding, and Tourism in the Postbroadcast Era." *Communication and Critical / Cultural Studies* 13(1): 3–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2015.1068431.

Poniewozik, James. 2018. „'Sharp Objects,' a Mesmerizing Southern Thriller, Cuts Slow but Deep." *The New York Times* July 5, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/05/arts/television/sharp-objects-review-amy-adams-hbo.html.

Rosa, Jonathan and Yarimar Bonilla. 2017. „Deprovincializing Trump, Decolonizing Diversity, and Unsettling Anthropology." *American Ethnologist* 44(2): 1–8. DOI: 10.1111/amet.12468.

Rothkopf, Joanna. 2012. „The Anti–Lisbeth Salanders: Gillian Flynn's Tough Heroines." *The Atlantic* September 12, 2012. https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/09/the-anti-lisbeth-salanders-gillian-flynns-tough-heroines/262103.

Savoy, Eric. 1998. „The Face of the Tenant: A Theory of American Gothic." In *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative*, edited by Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy, 3–19. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

Seidel, Kathryn L. 1977. „The Southern Belle as an Antebellum Ideal." *Southern Quarterly* 15(4) (Jul 01): 387–401.

Soltysik Monnet, Agnieszka. 2010. *The Poetics and Politics of the American Gothic: Gender and Slavery in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Surrey: Ashgate.

Spears, Kate. 2011. „Anatomy of a Southern Belle." *Deep South Magazine* June 2, 2011. https://deepsouthmag.com/2011/06/02/anatomy-of-a-southern-belle/.

Wickberg, Daniel. 1998. *The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America*. Ithaca – London: Cornell University Press.

Wilkinson, Alissa. 2019. „5 Years in, HBO's *Last Week Tonight* Is a Lot More Than 'Just Comedy'„. *Vox* February 17, 2019. https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/2/14/18213228/last-week-tonight-john-oliver-hbo-season-six.

Wolfe, Alan. 1998. *One Nation, After All. What Middle-Class Americans Really Think About: God, Country, Family, Racism, Welfare, Immigration, Homosexuality, Work, the Right, the Left, and Each Other*. New York: Penguin Books.

Vladana Ilić
Doktorand na Odeljenju za etnologiju i antropologiju
Filozofski fakultet, Univerzitet u Beogradu
ilicvladana@gmail.com

Kulturni ratovi na gotički način:
primer HBO mini-serije „Oštri predmeti"

Kulturna i politička polarizacija Sjedinjenih Američkih Država istaknuta je tema kako u društvenim naukama, tako i u medijima od početka 1990-ih godina. Bilo da se polarizacija razumeva kao duboka moralna podvojenost među Amerikancima, tj. kao kulturni rat između liberala i konzervativaca, ili kao veštački održavano političko neprijateljstvo, tj. kao stranačko sortiranje na Demokrate i Republikance, većina autora se slaže da je sfera medija duboko podeljena, posebno od 2016. kada je Donald Tramp postao istaknuta politička figura, te predsednik SAD. HBO televizijska mreža, poznata po svom progresivnom kapitalu i liberalnom etosu, izdvaja se svojim smelim dramskim produkcijama koje se često hvataju u koštac s polarizujućim temama rase, roda, seksualnosti, itd.

Jedan od njenih često korišćenih narativnih stilova ili žanrova je i gotički. Američka gotika, takođe predmet pojačanog akademskog interesovanja poslednjih decenija, mahom se analizira u okviru svog kulturnog i istorijskog konteksta i tumači kao prostor u kome istorijski mračni i regresivni duhovi nacije uznemiravaju i uzdrmavaju zvanični prosvećeni narativ. Kao originalna HBO produkcija gotičkog stila, mini-serija *Oštri predmeti* (2018) biće kontekstualizovana unutar američkih kulturnih ratova i analizirana kao južnjačka gotička priča ispripovedana iz liberalno-progresivne perspektive. Narativ serije tumačiće se kao jedan gotički put duboko na Jug koji preduzima liberalna junakinja, pohođena svojim konzervativnim duhovima u pokušaju da se s njima suoči i da ih opozove. Rad istražuje tezu da je gotički remetilački potencijal uslovnog i ograničenog dejstva na liberalni američki prosvetiteljski narativ.

Ključne reči: južnjačka gotika, Američki kulturni ratovi, HBO

Les guerres culturelles à la manière gothique:
L'exemple de la mini-série « Sharp Objects » dans la production HBO

Le travail analyse la série Sharp Objects (2018) de HBO TV comme une représentation gothique particulière des guerres américaines culturelles à l'époque de l'administration Trump, lorsque la polarisation américaine entre les courants libéral/progressiste et conservateur /orthodoxe devient particulièrement prononcée. Le gothique américain en littérature est interprété le plus souvent comme un espace dans lequel des esprits historiques obscurs et régressistes de la nation troublent et ébranlent le récit officiel éclairé. En tant qu'une production originale de la chaîne HBO TV, connue pour son ethos progressiste libéral, et dont les productions utilisent souvent le style gothique et les tropes, la série Sharp Objects sera contextualisée dans le cadre des guerres culturelles américaines et analysée comme une histoire de gothique sudiste narrée d'un point de vue libéralo-progressiste. Le récit de la série sera interprété comme une route gothique vers le Sud profond qu'entreprend l'héroïne libérale hantée par ses esprits conservateurs dans la tentative de les affronter et de les chasser. Le travail s'interroge sur la thèse que le potentiel gothique perturbateur a un effet conditionnel et limité sur le récit libéral américain éclairé.

Mots clés: gothique sudiste, guerres américaines culturelles, HBO, séries télévisées

Primljeno / Received: 15.06.2021
Prihvaćeno za objavljivanje / Accepted for publication: 26.08.2021.