

Gone Girl and *L'étranger*: two sides of the same coin?

There's something wrong with Nick Dunne. One single paragraph of reading, less than one hundred words, and we're already biased against him. It's almost impossible not to. What kind of man recalls his wife's head shape as his first memory of her, comparing it to a fossil or – even worse- to a skull? Only an insane character could be able to do such a disturbing thing and have the guts to admit it out loud. “*Like a child, I picture opening her skull, unspooling her brain and sifting through it, trying to catch and pin down her thoughts*”. This borderline scene, with a clear aftertaste of gore movie, will remain in our subconscious for over four hundred pages. Because Gillian Flynn wants so.

She is a master in influencing readers against a character. The beginning of *Gone Girl* (2012) has the power of a revelation. Nick seems to wear his heart on his sleeve when he starts a wandering soliloquy on how his –their!- live(s) went from heaven to hell in no time. He sounds so honest that at some point we have the illusion of witnessing an attempt of confession. We have the intuition that something is rotten in the state of Mississippi. And Nick Dunne stinks more than anyone else around there. But why are we already rushing to condemn him? Cultural Anthropology and Sociology hold the key to explain that. They... and metaphysical author Albert Camus, who made one of the finest attempts to decode human behavior and self-consciousness in *The Stranger* (*L'étranger*, 1942).

Gone Girl is far more than an utterly compelling thriller. It's a timeless sociological portrait featuring the importance of public judgment and how human beings struggle to fit in society. So it is *The stranger*. In spite of the generational and philosophical gap between both books, they can be considered as the portrait of the concept of individualism in Western contemporary societies.

Camus, one of the figureheads of Existentialism and Absurdism, made the portrait of a young man, Monsieur Meursault, who has to face two critical episodes in his life: the disappearance of his mother and a trial for murder. Doesn't he sound a lot like this Nick Dunne, whose wife has gone missing and who risks to be taken to court as all the evidences seem to frame him? On the surface both of them match with the stereotype of an average man: listless, passive, so grey that they're barely remarkable in a world ruled by high social standards. They have a job – or at least a career-, some personal relationships, a daily schedule, a routine. It might not be great, but they have a life.

Little problem there: Meursault and Nick are not good at dealing with emotions. It doesn't mean they are not sensitive or caring. It's just that they are lack of emotional intelligence. They don't follow the pattern, even if they're perfectly aware of it and they know that will get them in trouble. Both of them seem to be unable to show their feelings and –the worst- to share other people's emotions. To sum up: they simply cannot empathize. And in a social space where the public image is crucial, that is considered as a major disability. Nick Dunne has baggage, so has Meursault. The Mississippi guy grew up in a shattered family, witnessing his father's violence against his mother. He's nothing but a traumatized man, permanently hunted by the parental pattern of behavior. He might be the smart, witty, cute, responsible guy every

girl wishes for, but in his head he's a scared kid looking for approval. On a different level, Meursault as well has to deal with a dysfunctional family history. He stopped coming round to visit his mother when he realized they had nothing to say to each other. Then he buried her in his memories and let her outside alone. Alone, like Nick's dad. How can these two characters be capable of such coldness towards their parents? They both have analytical minds, which wouldn't be a problem if it wasn't apparently incompatible with emotional reactions... especially when they are publicly judged.

Both Albert Camus and Gillian Flynn depicted the crash between the individual and the society. We are social beings. That's in our nature and it distinguishes us from animals. Evolution perfected the way we relate to each other and civilization represents a pattern, a frame which rules social behavior and manners. For the sake of Humanity. We want to fit, we need to in order to gain social acceptance. That's what the rules are made for. But what happens when society becomes an almighty power and threatens individual freedom? We risk becoming strangers chased by the Big Brother, always living on the edge.