

# Scars of the Mind: A Comparative Study of NSSI (Non suicidal Self-Injury) in Patricia McCormick's *Cut* and Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects*

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## Abstract:

This research article mainly focuses on the concept of NSSI (Non Suicidal Self Injury). As NSSI is viewed as taboo regardless of culture and society. So there is a need to address this psychological problem. This article by analyzing two novels *Cut* by Patricia McCormick and *Sharp Object* by Gillian Flynn has brought out what is happening in the minds of NSSI victims and the traumatic history that he/she has and the message that they are convey by self injuring their bodies.

**Keywords:** Non Suicidal Self Injury(NSSI), Trauma, coping mechanism.

Non suicidal self-injury (NSSI) refers to the deliberate infliction of harm to one's own body without suicidal intent. Often misunderstood, NSSI is used as a coping mechanism for emotional pain, psychological trauma, or internalized distress. According to the DSM-5, it is most commonly found among adolescents and young adults and is linked with disorders such as depression, borderline personality disorder, and anxiety (American Psychiatric Association 803). In recent decades, literature has emerged as a critical medium for exploring mental health issues, giving voice to personal suffering and psychological struggle. Two standout novels that depict the complexity of NSSI are Patricia McCormick's *Cut* and Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects*. This paper investigates how both novels represent NSSI through their female protagonists and analyzes how each work contextualizes self-injury within themes of trauma, identity, and recovery. By comparing these texts through a literary and psychological lens, we can better understand the narrative role of self-injury in fiction and its broader cultural implications.

Patricia McCormick is a prominent American writer of realistic young adult fiction. Her works are noted for tackling socially significant themes such as child trafficking, war, mental illness, and trauma. Her debut novel *Cut* (2000) received critical acclaim for its sensitive portrayal of adolescent self-harm. McCormick is also the author of *Sold* (2006), a National Book Award finalist, and *Never Fall Down* (2012), based on the life of a Cambodian child soldier. McCormick's style is characterized by sparse, emotionally direct prose, often written in the first person, which creates intimacy with the reader and a raw portrayal of the protagonist's inner life.

Gillian Flynn is an American novelist, screenwriter, and former journalist, best known for her psychological thrillers. Her debut novel *Sharp Objects* (2006) introduced her dark, gothic tone and

fascination with female psychology, trauma, and rage. Flynn's other major works include *Dark Places* (2009) and the global bestseller *Gone Girl* (2012), which was adapted into a successful film. Flynn's writing is often marked by unreliable narrators, layered symbolism, and an unflinching exploration of trauma and dysfunction, particularly within families. In *Sharp Objects*, Flynn uses psychological horror and crime fiction tropes to dissect mental illness and NSSI, making her work both disturbing and revelatory.

*Cut* centers on Callie, a teenage girl admitted to a residential treatment center after multiple episodes of self-harm through cutting. Written in the first-person voice, the novel intimately explores Callie's struggle with depression, trauma, and emotional detachment. Throughout the narrative, readers witness her painful journey of confronting the underlying causes of her self-injury, which include feelings of isolation, loss, and a desire to regain control over her overwhelming emotions. The fragmented, concise prose mirrors Callie's fractured mental state and difficulty expressing her inner turmoil. As the story progresses, Callie begins to build connections with fellow patients and her therapist, Grace, which fosters a gradual process of healing and self-understanding. McCormick's sensitive portrayal provides insight into the complex emotional and psychological landscape of nonsuicidal self-injury, highlighting themes of pain, resilience, and hope. The novel is widely used in adolescent literature to raise awareness about mental health struggles and the possibility of recovery.

*Sharp Objects* follows Camille Preaker, a journalist who returns to her hometown of Wind Gap to report on the murders of two young girls. During her investigation, Camille confronts not only the dark secrets of the town but also her own history of self-harm and psychological trauma. Haunted by her toxic relationship with her controlling and emotionally abusive mother, Camille's self-injury manifests as cutting words into her skin, symbolizing both her pain and her attempt to externalize inner suffering. The novel employs a dark, Gothic atmosphere filled with motifs of decay and repression, mirroring Camille's internal struggles. Flynn's complex narrative delves into themes of trauma, familial dysfunction, and identity, illustrating how past abuses continue to influence Camille's present. The vivid and often unsettling descriptions of Camille's self-harm emphasize the persistent nature of trauma and the difficulty of breaking free from cycles of pain. *Sharp Objects* blends psychological thriller elements with a profound exploration of mental illness and self-injury.

Patricia McCormick's *Cut* presents the story of Callie, a teenage girl admitted to a treatment center after multiple incidents of self-injury. Told in the first person, Callie's narrative draws readers directly into her fractured emotional world, where silence and pain coexist. The novel's sparse prose and fragmented chapters mirror Callie's psychological state, reflecting her inability to articulate the intense feelings that drive her to cut. Callie admits, "When I cut, it was only for the weight to stop" (McCormick 34), a statement that highlights the function of self-harm as an escape from unbearable emotional pain. McCormick's intimate portrayal aligns with clinical perspectives, such as Matthew Nock's research, which identifies NSSI as a coping strategy for emotional regulation rather than a suicide attempt (Nock 342). This insight helps readers understand the behavior not as attention-seeking but as a desperate attempt to regain control.

In contrast, Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects* depicts Camille Preaker, a journalist who returns to her hometown and confronts her long-standing self-harm habit. Unlike the restrained narrative in *Cut*, Flynn's prose is darker and more visceral, capturing Camille's compulsive cutting as an externalization of trauma. Camille literally carves words into her skin, creating a physical record of her pain and memories. Harper argues that "the blurring [of words] itself constitutes a way of querying the dynamic

between internal and external modalities, the material surfaces of objects as an extension of one's skin and one's skin as an extension of ideology-driven cultural practices" (Harper 150). Her body becomes a literal site of expression, covered in carved words that narrate her unresolved pain. This metaphorical inscription transforms self-injury from a mere symptom into a communicative act, revealing the depth of Camille's psychological wounds. The third-person narration, interspersed with journalistic detachment, distances readers slightly but emphasizes the horror of Camille's inherited trauma, contrasting with Callie's more introspective voice.

While Callie's self-injury offers temporary relief from emotional numbness, Camille's cutting serves as a deliberate, symbolic gesture, an indelible mark of familial violence and emotional neglect. Camille confesses, "I had a need to hurt myself. It was the only thing that made me feel something" (Flynn 103). Individuals engage in NSSI to escape emotional dissociation. The difference in these motivations—immediate relief versus sustained narrative expression—highlights the nuanced spectrum of reasons behind NSSI. Callie's journey in *Cut* emphasizes recovery through reconnection, whereas Camille remains trapped within her cycle of self-harm, caught up in generational pain and secrecy.

The narrative structures of the two novels further reinforce these themes. *Cut* uses fragmented, brief chapters that mimic Callie's broken sense of self and her struggle to rebuild. As Catriona Mackenzie and Jacqui Poltera argue, individuals experiencing psychological trauma often "lack the kind of narrative integration required for full personhood and autonomous agency" (Mackenzie and Poltera 33). In *Cut*, the disjointed structure and fragmented narrative reflect Callie's fractured sense of self, echoing how trauma disrupts one's capacity to construct a coherent personal identity.

The novel's hopeful progression is marked by Callie's increasing willingness to communicate and form relationships, particularly with her therapist, Grace. This therapeutic context can be observed that young adult literature can serve as "bibliotherapy" (Crothers) helping readers process mental health struggles through empathetic engagement. Thus, McCormick's novel not only represents NSSI but also models a pathway toward healing.

Conversely, *Sharp Objects* employs Gothic tropes—the decaying house, a sinister hometown, and a toxic maternal relationship—to externalize Camille's internal chaos. Camille's cutting can be described as a resistance to disappearance, a refusal to be rewritten by violent maternal legacy. The setting of Wind Gap becomes a metaphor for Camille's psyche: alluring yet poisoned by family secrets and emotional rot. This gothic atmosphere underscores the inescapability of trauma in Camille's life and her self-injury as both an act of self-punishment and a desperate attempt at control. Unlike Callie's journey toward recovery, Camille's narrative suggests a cyclical, inherited trauma that resists resolution.

Social context plays a significant role in how each protagonist experiences and responds to self-injury. Callie's treatment at Sea Pines centers on community and connection. Through interactions with other patients and a caring therapist, she slowly learns to articulate her pain without resorting to cutting. This social dimension is crucial in McCormick's portrayal, reflecting the importance of interpersonal support in recovery from NSSI. The therapeutic setting models a hopeful message for adolescent readers: healing is possible through openness and understanding. In contrast, Camille is isolated, both physically and emotionally, from her community. Her mother's manipulative control and familial dysfunction exacerbate her suffering, making self-harm a solitary act of rebellion and expression.

Ethically, both novels approach NSSI with sensitivity, avoiding glamorization or sensationalism. McCormick's *Cut* refrains from detailed descriptions of cutting, focusing instead on the emotional experience of self-harm. This respectful portrayal fosters empathy and understanding without triggering

readers. Flynn's graphic depiction in *Sharp Objects* is more unsettling but serves to confront the reader with the raw reality of trauma. Despite the differences in narrative style, both authors succeed in humanizing their protagonists' suffering, inviting readers to witness without judgment.

The symbolism of the body is central to both novels but is employed differently. In *Cut*, Callie's body is a site of both injury and potential repair. As she heals emotionally, her physical scars begin to fade, symbolizing the integration of self and recovery. Meanwhile, Camille's body in *Sharp Objects* is a living archive, covered with carved words that resist erasure. This corporeal storytelling highlights the persistence of trauma across generations and the complexity of self-injury as both pain and narrative. The body thus becomes a contested space where identity, history, and suffering converge.

The intersection of psychological theory and literary form in these novels enriches our understanding of NSSI. McCormick's depiction aligns closely with clinical models that frame self-injury as a coping mechanism for emotional pain, emphasizing recovery through connection. Flynn's narrative complicates this picture by integrating Gothic elements and familial trauma, suggesting that self-injury can be both a symptom and a language of trauma. Together, these works offer a multifaceted representation of NSSI, reflecting its complexity in real life.

By portraying NSSI in young female protagonists, both novels also critique societal expectations around female pain and silence. Callie and Camille embody struggles that are often hidden, challenging the stigma attached to self-injury. Their stories compel readers to confront uncomfortable truths about mental health, trauma, and the body. The novels underscore that NSSI is not simply a personal failing but a response to deeper social and psychological wounds.

Ultimately, *Cut* and *Sharp Objects* expand literary discourse on NSSI by situating it within different narrative frameworks—therapeutic recovery and Gothic trauma. McCormick offers a hopeful narrative arc centered on healing, while Flynn presents a haunting exploration of pain that resists resolution. Their complementary approaches deepen readers' empathy and awareness, showing that the scars of self-injury are seen and unseen, personal and inherited. McCormick and Flynn challenge readers to move beyond judgment toward understanding, using literature as a space to make visible the unseen wounds that many endure. Their portrayals remind us that behind the act of self-injury lies a complex story of pain, survival, and the search for identity.

Both *Cut* and *Sharp Objects* offer complex, compassionate, and unsettling portrayals of nonsuicidal self-injury. While McCormick's narrative speaks directly to young adults and emphasizes the therapeutic process, Flynn's novel delves into the psychological horror of trauma with brutal honesty. Each novel treats self-injury not as a spectacle, but as a deeply personal act tied to emotional survival and identity. Through literary techniques, character development, and symbolic landscapes, McCormick and Flynn bring readers into the inner lives of those who harm themselves—not to sensationalize, but to humanize. By examining these texts, we gain not only a literary appreciation but also a deeper psychological understanding of why people hurt themselves and how healing might begin.

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