

## Feminine Revenge Narrative Within Modern Age Cinema and the Justification of Female Immorality within “Good for Her” Films

A phrase that has been most commonly adopted within online film communities, specifically online feminist spaces, when articulating the success of a complex female character is ‘good for her’. Such a phrase has become so incredibly popularised that it has been created into a prominent thematic narrative for feminist films produced within the last two decades. The bare essentials of a ‘good for her’ movie is a thriller or action film that presents a female protagonist who, despite experiencing extreme moments of turmoil and suffering either emotionally, psychological, or physically (sometimes all three), reigns at the end of the film victorious. Daryn O’Neal of *The Wrangler* defines the ‘good for her’ trope as a subgenre of feminist cinema that includes a “determined woman who has been burdened by the consequences of simply existing in a misogynistic world, and [...] chooses to take her power back using violent and manipulative tactics to execute revenge on the [...] male figures that tortured [her]”.

One of the films that has been credited in kick starting such narratives within these movies is David Fincher’s 2014 psychological thriller *Gone Girl*. The story follows the disappearance of our titular character Amy Dunne (Rosamund Pike) and her husband, Nick (Ben Affleck) who is the primary suspect in her missing persons case. When it is revealed within the film that Amy has purposefully staged her own disappearance as a revenge plot against her husband who has been cheating on her for months prior to the film’s start, the narrative and presentation of how feminine revenge is rationalised shifts in a way that *should* leave audiences questioning the moral justifications for her behaviour. However, this is not the case with how *Gone Girl* is received within contemporary online film spaces. While there is nothing within the film that overtly suggests Amy’s actions, which go to the lengths of murder to hide her guilt, are

morally acceptable, the fact that she triumphs against all odds sends a subverted message that the choices she made in an attempt to reclaim her womanhood are, to some degree, legitimate. Coincidentally, *Gone Girl* being ultimately cited as the inventor of ‘good for her’ cinema exceedingly suggests that viewers agree with this subversion and that the original narrative of the film asserts the belief that she is deserving of this victory, despite Amy being the film’s primary antagonist. While in the name of entertainment I don’t see a genuine issue in siding with the villain in works of fiction, I believe there is something to be said about the interpretation of revenge incorporated into narratives surrounding reclamations of womanhood, especially when enactments of these reclamations include the suffering of those who are not the primary targets of the protagonist’s pain – and it is this element of storytelling that I will dissect within this essay.

Throughout this piece I will be analysing and comparing the character motivations and behaviours of Amy Dunne to the protagonist of the 2020 psychological black comedy *Promising Young Woman*’s Cassie Thomas, and how although both films deal with subject matter revolving around feminine rage, suffering, and revenge at the benefit of male domination, the delivery of each film and overall message about women seeking revenge when justice has become an impractical option for them is fundamentally success in only one of these movies; the movie being Emerald Fennell’s *Promising Young Woman*.

I am going to start off by giving a brief summary of *Promising Young Woman* as a way to contextualize the arguments I will be making shortly. This film follows the life of med school drop out Cassie Thomas who tracks down predatory men in a hope to put an end to rape culture within her community. In the film, Cassie goes to clubs, appearing to be on the verge of blacking out from drinking, to then have a ‘nice’ man take her home in hopes of having non-consensual

sex with her only for her to confirm to them that she is not drunk and is aware that they are attempting to assault her. At the film's start, the audience is under the impression that Cassie's motivations to stop other men from raping women is that she herself is a victim of assault. However, it is later revealed that it was actually her late friend, Nina, who was assaulted when they were both attending medical school. Throughout the film, Cassie implicates a series of revenge plots against those who wronged her friend before she took her own life as a way to not only make them repent for their actions, but also to teach them a lesson so that in the future they won't allow such a thing to happen again.

Surfacely, Amy and Cassie are two women living in a world dominated by men who only care about themselves and their reputations. And this does, to some capacity for both films, affirm an explanation for why they behave the way they do within the contexts of their stories. In *Gone Girl*, Amy is a woman forced to put her life on hold for a man who falls out of love with her the moment he finds another woman to make him feel more powerful. In *Promising Young Woman*, Cassie encounters multiple men who attempt to assert their dominance through either their attempted or committed acts of sexual assault, as well as men who believe they are victims of womanhood when women assert their independence against their domination. Each film also presents the act of seeking revenge on those who inflicted psychological harm on each character. I would argue that in each case, the primary desire to seek revenge is equally justifiable, however, the execution and fundamental intention of Amy's revenge plot versus Cassie's is where their similarities begin to falter.

It could be argued that implicating revenge on those who wronged you is just as unethical to impose as the original suffering you experienced in the first place. In Alan Hamlin's "Rational Revenge", he describes revenge as a backwards method of self satisfaction which conflates

affirmation in what one has experienced and turns it into a process of potential outcomes on the basis of getting even. When we commit acts of revenge without a thorough intention at hand, our justification for these actions become mute and tasteless and most importantly, immoral. But, when considering possible applications of vengeance on a scale of vindication, directly rational intention of revenge is applicable. What Hamlin means when he says directly rational is acts of revenge where there is a direct end view in what that revenge plot entails (Hamlin 378). If you trip me and I hurt my knee, when I attempt to trip you back, but don't actually do so you feel a sense of fear for getting hurt from being tripped, I am acting vengefully with the process of being directly rational because my intentions are not to physically hurt you but to contextualise how the fear of getting hurt would feel. So, when acts of revenge are executed on the basis that there is a primary end goal that is intended to be achieved, and is done so successfully, the method of revenge can be implicated as a morally justifiable action. I bring up this concept of revenge because within each film, both protagonists carry out vengeful plans to get back at those who wrong them in the name of reclaiming their womanhood. However, only Cassie executes out her vengeance in a way that can be described as directly rational.

About 30 minutes into *Promising Young Woman*, Cassie has lunch with one of her old classmates, Madison, to discuss how she poorly handled Nina confiding in Madison that she had been raped. When Madison affirms the stance she had when they were in their twenties: that Nina had a reputation of getting too drunk at parties and was only leaving herself open for potential harm, Cassie encourages Madison to drink an excessive amount of wine and hires a man to take Madison to a hotel room above the restaurant. When Madison wakes up, unable to remember if she had done anything or had had anything done to her, she calls Cassie relentlessly to get information on what happened which Cassie ignores. Later in the film, Madison confronts

Cassie outside her home and she reveals that nothing happened to Madison and that the man she remembers put her to sleep and then left right after. The fundamental stance against Nina being a victim was that she enacted behaviour that could only lead to dangerous outcomes for her on her part. However, when placed within the same situation, Madison no longer feels the responsibility she put on Nina, and begins to empathise with her. The difference between these situations, however, is that Madison was never raped. Had Cassie gotten Madison drunk, hired a man to make advances on her and left them alone for the man to do whatever he pleased, Cassie would no longer be acting in directly rational behaviour and would be seeking moments of vengeance that she could not determine the outcomes of. In Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" she claims that subversion within alternative cinema is a necessity when reshaping the nuances of atypical narratives within film. On page 834 she states that subverted narratives within film provide opportunity for "an aesthetic sense [that] challenges the basic assumptions of the mainstream film" (Mulvey). Cassie subverts audience expectations when presenting a scene where she appears to be reenacting typical abuse tactics towards those who caused her friend, and by extension Cassie, suffering when they were younger. Instead, she decides to inflict minimal harm while still sending the same overt message that to shame others for abuse imposed upon them is not productive and only brings about more suffering for the victims. Her plots for revenge are rational and reshape conversations we have around abuse and contextualise how one can enact vengeance against those who have behaved deplorably, without inflicting any lasting harm on them.

The same however cannot be said for Amy in *Gone Girl*. Throughout the film's run time, it's made clear by the narrative that everything from her disappearance to the arrest of her husband was carefully thought out and executed by Amy prior to her running away. Her

disappearance is her revenge plot at the start, however, the intentions and execution behind her plans change drastically when she realises she will not be the one to reign victorious. At the start of the film, it's also made clear by the narrative that Amy's primary motivation for revenge started when she found out her husband Nick had been cheating on her with one of his students. When Amy goes missing, he is the main source of misery and through a series of flashbacks introduced at the film's introduction, it is asserted that Nick's attitudes towards Amy as a husband bordered on the edges of abuse. Amy writes in her diary found by police that after an argument, Nick hits her and as a result, she fears that Nick will kill her (Fincher 2020). At this point of the film, the audience is rooting for Amy because the information presented to us suggests that she was a sheltered woman fearing for her aggressive husband. However, it is later revealed that this journal was completely fabricated and that it is extremely likely Amy was never abused as she admits during the film's rising action that she specifically created the journal to make Nick look guilty, which is exactly what it does. Up until this point, Amy has enacted a revenge plot that would be described by Hamlin as directly rational revenge. However it is when Amy is robbed of all her money during her disappearance that she begins to enact revenge in an indirectly rational way. And it is in this act of irrationality that makes Amy's entire motivation within the film unjustifiable.

In desperation to keep her smear campaign against Nick going, Amy calls her ex-boyfriend, Tommy whom she manipulated and emotionally tormented during their relationship and later accused of stalking her, for help. He, clearly still in love with her, happily opens up his home to her and allows her to safely reside in it for several weeks. At this point in the film, Amy's intentions are to still take Nick down and send him to jail. However, this desire to destroy her husband's life is forgotten instantly when Nick declares his faults as a husband on

a national broadcasted interview where he begs for Amy to come home and says he loves her. Amy then devises a new plan; say Tommy, who is already affirmed by police to have been obsessed with Amy in the past, kidnapped and raped her incessantly for weeks. Amy manipulates Tommy's security footage, shoves a wine bottle up her vagina to present vaginal trauma and murders Tommy while he ejaculates inside of her to make it appear as though she murdered him midrape. Amy, in the span of a day, decides that the man she devised an intricate plan to destroy over several months is not the primary source of her pain and decides to rechannel this energy into getting back to him so they can fix their marriage. Which, at face value, is not morally detestable. However, what *is* morally detestable is that Amy murders and frames what seems to be an innocent man who only showed her kindness to go back to the same man she claims "[used her] for sex", "wanted to hurt [her]" and "destroyed [her]" (Fincher 2014). The most ludicrous part of all this is that the film actually rewards her for this behaviour, turning her into the "[...] the passive or incidental victim rather than active manipulator of her [...] circumstance[s]" (Boozer 24). Amy is able to convince federal police that the things she alleges happened actually happened and is reunited with her husband who does not want to be with her, but has no choice but to stay with her because of the tragic story of the resilient kidnapped woman who fought her way through hell to be with her one true love. In the end, Amy wins, but not in the way she intended, which is regardless to her because her secondary goal was to beat Nick at whatever childish game they were playing with one another. It is because she wins that suggests the movie is justifying the actions Amy has committed thus far in the film because the story now "intensifies and moralizes these classic narratives" (Boozer 23) of seeking revenge on the basis of being mistreated, rather than being abused as Amy originally asserts.

In *Promising Young Woman*, it could be argued that Cassie too reigns victorious at the end of the film because she achieves what she originally sought out at the film's start; send the man who raped Nina to jail. However, Cassie does not walk out of this victory alive. In fact, she goes into the execution of her revenge plot with the conscious understanding that she very well could die while going through with it because it is revealed in the final few minutes of the movie that Cassie tipped to the police where they should look on the possibility she does end up missing or dead. In the entire scheme of Cassie's attempts at rectifying Nina's trauma, Cassie herself is the only innocent person to receive severe unjust consequences to her actions. No one besides the people who harmed her and her friend are actually punished for the actions they have committed and it is for this reason that *Promising Young Woman* presents the narrative of feminine revenge more effectively than *Gone Girl*. In Cassie's circumstances, revenge was her only option in avenging Nina because at the time of her rape, judicial process failed them time and time again. Cassie, who had no choice to seek revenge unethically, was still able to do so without inflicting real harm on those who stood idly by while her friend was driven to suicide. She sought vengeance in a way that subverts expectations, but also remains justifiable in an ethical context and truly embodies the response of thinking 'good for her' when she succeeds at every turn. Amy, on the other hand, does not elicit such feelings as the one thing she could have done to remedy whatever wrongness she experienced, was to simply ask Nick for a divorce.

My hopes in writing this essay was to articulate that the issue within this new age of cinema is not the creation of morally grey women in media but rather to call attention to this phenomena that executes complex themes about modern womanhood in unsuccessful ways, and how these films are praised regardless in hopes that the next film to make box office breakthrough in such a lens is done so correctly. I believe that the creation of films with morally



grey women is a good step towards gender representation within media because it presents the understanding that women too are nuanced beings with the ability to be both moral and immoral in complex circumstances. However, I think there comes a point where we need to begin to critique exactly how these women are being morally constructed and if they are behaving in a way that is baselessly justifiable on the pretence that they are doing what they are doing in the name of womanhood. Cassie in *Promising Young Woman* does things that in many perspectives can be deemed reprehensible. However, her actions and behaviours, while unorthodox, do not hold any true harm to those inflicted by them because none of her plots for revenge are long lasting. In contrast to *Gone Girl*'s Amy, Amy's behaviour and character motivations are flippant throughout and only lead to the imposition of harm, defamation and death at the hands of people who the narrative continuously assert did nothing wrong to her. Nonetheless, her actions are then receptionally justified on the basis that she is a morally grey woman and that she is in a film that revolves around the framing of seeing a wronged woman and thinking 'good for her'. The problem is that Amy is not a wronged woman. She is not morally grey either. And it is this issue that can arise from the popularisation of good for her movies and the genre of the feminine revenge plots that make it difficult to assert that there are only benefits to such narratives.

### Works Cited

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