

Trabajo Fin de Grado

Promising Young Woman: A Modern Take on Rape- Revenge Films

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on the features of the rape-revenge genre, particularly on what the roles of the victim, the heroine, and the rapist entail, and how they relate to feminist ideas. These characteristics will be contrasted with those of *Promising Young Woman* (dir. Emerald Fennell, 2020), a contemporary rape revenge film that uses the genre to put forward a post-#MeToo ideological discourse. The analysis will be structured around three scenes that illustrate different feminist ideas such as the subversion of the male gaze and the critique of rape culture. The tone and formal elements of these scenes will be analyzed to see how the context of this film influenced its specific use of some of the conventions of the rape-revenge genre.

RESUMEN

Este TFG se centra en las características del género de violación y venganza, en particular en lo que implican los roles de la víctima, la heroína y el violador y cómo se relacionan con las ideas feministas. Estos rasgos se compararán con los de *Una joven prometedor* (dir. Emerald Fennell, 2020), una película de violación y venganza que utiliza el género para presentar un discurso ideológico post-#MeToo. El análisis se articula alrededor de tres escenas que muestran diferentes ideas feministas tales como la subversión de la mirada masculina y la crítica a la cultura de la violación. El tono y los elementos formales de estas escenas se analizarán para ver cómo el contexto de esta película ha influido en el uso específico de algunas de las convenciones del género de violación y venganza.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The #MeToo movement was a landmark in film history that brought to the spotlight both the way in which women were treated in the film industry and the way they were represented on the screen too. Karen Boyle argues that this movement can be divided into two different branches (4). “Me Too” (without the hashtag) would be the one started in 2006 by Tamara Burke, who saw it as “an intersectional demand for support and recognition for young women of color who had experienced sexual abuse” (4-5). The second current, the one that is more relevant to the purpose of this essay, is “#MeToo”, which began when Alyssa Milano asked in 2017 for sexual assault survivors to post using this hashtag to make people aware of how widespread sexual assault is (3). Motivated by this call for action, celebrities started speaking out about their experience as survivors using the hashtag and soon the movement became linked to Hollywood stars who suffered sexual assault in the film industry (8). The movement and its relation to the film industry led to a series of films and other audiovisual products with female protagonists and #MeToo concerns at their core. *Promising Young Woman*, directed by Emerald Fennell and released in 2020, fits into this category since it is a film that brings attention to the issue of not believing the victims of sexual assault and the fact that sexual abusers do not necessarily look like monsters.

Promising Young Woman follows the story of Cassie (Carey Mulligan) a thirty-year-old woman who has a double life: during the day she works at a bright and colorful café with her best friend, but at night she goes to clubs and fakes drunkenness to find self-proclaimed “nice guys” in order to prove them wrong. All of them seem to follow a similar pattern. When they see Cassie (on her own and drunk) they seem to care about her well-being (they want to help her get home safely mostly), but once they are left alone with her, they would have ended up sexually abusing her if she had not let them know

that she was actually not drunk. Cassie's strange behavior and *modus operandi* stems from a past trauma: her best friend Nina was raped by an apparently "nice guy" (one of their classmates at medical school) and ended up committing suicide after nobody believed her side of the story. Cassie's behavior and attitude shift after she bumps into Ryan (Bo Burnham), an old classmate of hers, and starts a relationship with him. Yet, when she comes across a video of the night Cassie was raped, things take a U-turn and she focuses her rage on those who hurt her best friend.

At the time of its release, many reviewers mentioned how momentous the film was since it was an overt filmic statement on rape culture and "nice guys" (Bradshaw). Carey Mulligan's acting was also praised for her ability to portray Cassie's duality, which resulted in her being nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actress in 2021 (Tallerico). Nonetheless, the film was widely criticized for its "severe tonal shifts". Benjamin Lee from *The Guardian* claimed that the director could not "seem to decide what kind of film she wants to make", given the movie's mixture of conventions from rape-revenge films, romantic comedies, and thrillers and its constant jumping from one to another without a smooth transition (Lee; Stables).

This essay is going to explore how the film uses and also deviates from the conventions of the rape-revenge genre to make a statement about a type of male violence against women that before the #MeToo movement was, up until a certain extent, normalized. It starts with a section on the features of rape-revenge films that tries to lay the ground for the analysis that follows. The first section of the analysis explores how rape-revenge conventions are used in order to play with the audience's expectations, while the second one delves into one of the greatest changes in tone and deviation from the genre. The last part is concerned with the ending of the film and how its feminist ideas relate to some of the concepts dealt with in rape-revenge films.

2. THE RAPE-REVENGE FILM GENRE

Rape-revenge films rose to popularity in the 1970s, when the Hays Code was no longer in use, and, due to the emergence of second-wave feminism, there were open debates about issues such as rape (Heller-Nicholas 8-9). The main difference between previous films that featured rape as part of the plot and rape-revenge films is that in the latter the rape, rather than being a subplot, is a key element of the film and the one that triggers the revenge plot that follows (Heller-Nicholas 3; Clover 137). The fact that rape-revenge has the word *rape* in it does not mean that the rape has to take place onscreen. In fact, it became common in the mid-1980s not to show it (Clover 140). Nonetheless, the revenge always unfolds onscreen and usually takes up most of the film's duration (154).

In most instances, the victims in rape-revenge films are women while the rapists are men, who need to prove that they are superior to their victims or who, consciously or unconsciously, fear being castrated by one. As argued by both Carol Clover and Barbara Creed, it is a matter of fear and power rather than pleasure (Clover 118, 139; Creed 131). In some cases, the rape is a way of the male characters' proving their manliness to other men (Clover 118, 139). The audience identifies with the victims by having the point of view mostly limited to them and, consequently, the rapists are portrayed negatively (118, 152). As a result, the rape is not sexualized, but depicted as a violent and traumatic experience. In the movie *I Spit on Your Grave* (dir. Meir Zarchi, 1978), for instance, most of the shots are taken from Jennifer's (Camille Keaton) point of view, which enhances spectators' identification with her (Clover 118).

The attackers in rape-revenge films tend to be represented as normal people. Jennifer's rapists in the film mentioned above, for example, are given no justification for their behavior—they are ordinary people and not psychopaths of any sort (119-120, 144).

This way of characterizing the rapists suggests that they are not so different from us. Apparently “good” or “nice” men can also engage in violent sexual acts against women since, up to a certain extent, some of these practices have been institutionalized by a patriarchal society (144). In opposition to the representation of the rapists in *I Spit on Your Grave*, but still achieving the same effect, the rapist in *Lipstick* (dir. Lamont Johnson, 1976) is an attractive and likable man. Spectators are drawn to think positively of him, only to reveal later that he is able of monstrous acts (Heller-Nicholas 27). Similarly, the attacker in *Hard Candy* (dir. David Slade, 2005) is also a character whom most people would consider respectable at first glance, as a way of conveying how normative masculinity can be the façade that hides the most violent acts against women (Stringer 278).

From the description above, it could be inferred that women in rape-revenge films have a passive role as victims. Yet, that reading would not take into consideration the role of the victim as avenger (Clover 12; Stringer 269), a reversal of traditional gender roles which, according to Clover, started to appear in horror movies in the 1970s (alongside the emergence of rape-revenge films) (Clover 16-17). The fact that women can avenge themselves in these movies reinforces their agency and self-sufficiency. This way they are no longer perceived as just defenseless victims (Stringer 269). Sometimes they even use their femininity, the feature that traditionally constructs them as non-violent, as a way to allure their attackers and murder them. This is the case of *The Last House on the Left* (dir. Wes Craven, 1972), in which the dead victim’s mother (Cynthia Carr) performs a sexual act on one of the rapists and bites off his penis to kill him (Stringer 277; Clover 137). Many heroines opt for castration to inflict a pain similar to that their rapists caused them, which is illustrated by the metaphor of the *vagina dentata* (Heller-Nicholas 182-183). This myth is rooted in men’s fears of being castrated by a woman, or *femme*

castratrice, as well as the embodiment of attraction and destruction in women (Creed 106, 127). Nonetheless, no matter how monstrous the *femme castratrice* may seem, the audience sympathizes with her, leaving her actions unpunished and considered cathartic (122-123, 129). The trope of the *femme castratrice* can be seen in *I Spit on Your Grave*, where Jennifer masturbates one of his rapists and takes advantage of this situation to sever his penis, and in *Teeth* (dir. Mitchell Lichtenstein, 2007), where, in literal embodiment of the vagina dentata, Dawn's (Jess Weixler) vagina amputates the penis of her rapists while they are assaulting her (128, 181).

The rape is not always the trigger for revenge in these films. In some of them the revenge is triggered by an ineffectual legal system that cannot protect victims (Heller-Nicholas 7). In *Lipstick*, for instance, the lack of protection offered by the legal system forces Chris (Margaux Hemingway) to become violent and get her revenge once her abuser is declared not guilty, which enables him to rape her sister (Mariel Hemingway) (27). *Extremities* (dir. Robert M. Young, 1986) also depicts the powerlessness of rape victims against the legal system when Marjorie (Farrah Fawcett) realizes that the only way she can be sure not to be killed or raped is by killing her abuser (James Russo), because if she were to go to court, once he would get out of jail (supposing that he would get in in the first place), he would kill her and her housemates, as the rapist himself says to her (32). Like Marjorie, Hayley (Elliot Page) from *Hard Candy* also thinks that killing the rapist would be more effective than having him confess to the police because most probably he would not be punished in a way remotely close to the pain he caused, emphasizing that the suffering caused by the vengeance must match that of the rape (Stringer 279). The fact the legal system may be partly responsible for the feeling of impunity male characters feel in relation to rape is represented clearly in *W.A.R: Women Against Rape* (dir. Raphael Nussbaum, 1987) because the attacker, in this case, is the

policeman investigating the rape, which establishes “the connection between the literal violation victims suffer at the hands of rapists and the continuing symbolic violation received by an unsympathetic legal system” (Heller-Nicholas 63). Apart from this “symbolic violation”, there is the concept of “the second rape” which refers to the fact that rape victims have to relive the trauma and see it made public when they have to testify in the trials (Clover 145). Thus, victims in rape-revenge films tend to take matters into their own hands because resorting to the legal system or the police would further traumatize them and they would not be any safer.

In many cases, the revenge is not just an individual act of redemption, but an act of solidarity with other women, or even an act of collective revenge for all rape victims (Clover 138). For instance, in *Lipstick*, Chris only murders her rapist once he has also raped her sister and realizes that she is not the only person at risk. In *Thelma & Loise* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1991), Louise (Susan Sarandon) shoots a man that is trying to rape Thelma (Geena Davis) (Heller-Nicholas 27, 33-34). In *Ms. 45* (dir. Abel Ferrara, 1981) the revenge takes a collective sense because Thana (Zoë Lund), a victim of rape, murders men who sexually abuse women (Heller-Nicholas 42). The tendency to act as isolated vigilantes is not as empowering as it may seem at first glance: the female vigilante has to protect herself and other women, which is never as effective as political and legal action would be (Clover 142-143; Stringer 280).

3. *PROMISING YOUNG WOMAN*

3.1. IS *PROMISING YOUNG WOMAN* A RAPE-REVENGE FILM?

The opening scene of *Promising Young Woman* shows a group of men dancing in slow motion in a club. They are middle-aged men who, because of their business casual attire, seem to have just gotten out of work. While they dance, Charli XCX's "Boys" plays in the background. It is a song about a woman that is fascinated with men and idealizes them, which contrasts with the portrayal of the men onscreen. They are shown in close shots, showing parts of their bodies in fragments, particularly focusing on their behinds. This fragmentation of the body is, according to Nina Menkes, one that is typical of the filmic objectification of women (2022). This is, for Menkes, also the conventional use of slow motion. As she argues, slow motion is used on male characters in action scenes. Yet, the same feature contributes to the portrayal of women as passive in films and to the reinforcement of the male gaze that allows men to project their own fantasies onto female characters (Menkes; Mulvey 2, 10). In this opening scene, techniques that are usually associated with the objectification of female characters are used on a group of men. This series of shots ends with a wider shot of the group of men dancing that emphasizes their ordinariness and lack of glamour. This opening scene seems a subversion of traditional filmic objectification techniques (which, as Laura Mulvey explains, always presuppose a male gaze). It also sets the tone for the rest of the film, which, as will be argued below, subverts spectators' expectations and rape-revenge tropes.



Figure 1: Fragmented male bodies dancing

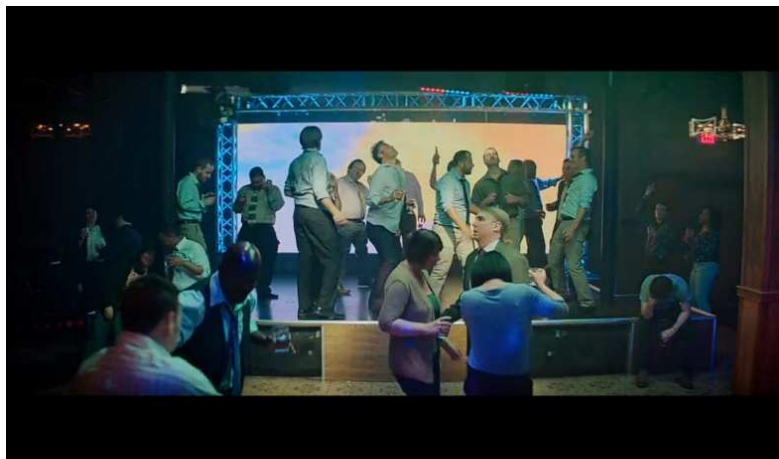


Figure 2: Wide shot of the group of men dancing

Right after this sequence, a group of three men appears onscreen. They start complaining about a female co-worker who will no longer be attending their meetings because she felt excluded for being a woman. While two of them seem unable to understand their colleague's predicament, the third one, Jerry (Adam Brody), is able to at least show some compassion, which puts him in a more favorable light. Then, the men notice Cassie, almost passed-out on a couch, and they comment on how irresponsible she is because any man could take advantage of her in that situation. Yet, it is soon clear that they are not that far removed from that hypothetical "any man" they have just referred to. One says that he finds her attractive. Another says that she is "asking for it". While this

conversation is taking place, we can see a wide shot of Cassie. She is sitting in a cross-like position to hold her body straight. Jerry pretends to be worried about her well-being and approaches her while his friends joke that he is going to make a move on her. In contrast to his friends' behavior, he tries to look harmless by bending down, a feature emphasized by the high-angle shots of Jerry, and offers to take her home.



Figure 3: Cassie sitting in the club

Once they get into the cab, Jerry decides to take her to his apartment to have a drink with her, even if she made it clear that she was not feeling well. At his place, Jerry starts kissing her without her consent and she tells him she wants to lie down because she feels dizzy. Then, he starts assaulting her while telling her that everything is okay, ignoring the fact that she keeps asking him what he is doing. The revelation that Jerry is not a good person introduces the topic of “nice guys”, men who want to look friendly to take advantage of women, and it also plays with the audience’s expectations. When he is about to rape her, she shows that she is not drunk (first to the audience by opening her eyes in an overhead shot and then to Jerry when she asks him, for the last time and in a sober voice, what he is doing). This scene draws parallels with that in the club since we can see in the overhead shots that she is resting in a cross-like position again, implying that in both situations she is in a vulnerable position. The use of a similar framing strategy

seems to suggest that Jerry's intention was sexual from the moment he approached her in the club. Moreover, Cassie is looking down on Jerry the same way she was in the club, but now it is not because Jerry wants to look less menacing, but because the control over the situation has been transferred to Cassie.



Figure 4: Cassie lying in bed in a similar position to that in the previous scene

The moment we see Jerry's reaction, the scene suddenly cuts to the title sequence, in which Cassie has already left Jerry's place and is going back to her house in the morning. Some relevant information has been deliberately hidden from the viewers, who never get to know what happened to Jerry (this will become a pattern in the film since we never get to know what she does to the men that want to abuse her). If we understand *Promising Young Woman* as a rape-revenge film, it could be inferred that she kills the men since that is what the role of the rape-revenge heroine typically entails. And this is also what the movie wants us to believe when we see Cassie leaving Jerry's house. A vertical and upwards tracking shot slowly reveals Cassie's body, and it seems like there is blood on her leg, shirt and arm, implying that she has murdered Jerry. But when the camera shows what she has in her hand, it is revealed that it is actually ketchup dripping from a hot dog she is eating.

The scene makes the audience wonder if she has murdered a rapist because she looks like a rape-revenge heroine, but because of the ellipsis in the syuzhet and the manipulation of the rape-revenge tropes, we cannot be sure about what her modus operandi exactly is. Still, this is not the only implication this tracking shot has. At the same time, it subverts the male gaze, due to the typical use of this shot to linger on the female body and thus objectify it (Menkes). Here, however, the focus is on the “blood”, rather than on her body, and the delay in showing her entire body builds suspense and plays with our expectations, as for a few seconds the audience thinks she is a murderer. Moreover, the font used for the title of the film looks like it is dripping blood, but since the color used is pink, it does not look so violent. This is a reflection of Cassie’s ambiguous characterization and personality: she disguises her rage in a feminine and inoffensive appearance and it is never disclosed what she actually does to the men she tricks into trying to assault her.



Figure 5: Beginning of the shot where we can see the “blood” on the leg and the blood-like pink letters



Figure 6: At the end of the tracking shot, it is revealed that it is not blood, but ketchup

As she walks home, three workers catcall her and make misogynist comments because they think she is just going back home after a one-night stand. This scene echoes that of the club since we find again three men addressing a woman who is alone, which creates a power imbalance, and they criticize and sexualize her at the same time. Instead of walking and ignoring the workers, she overcomes the power imbalance by stopping to stare at them the same way they stare at her, thus reversing the male gaze, which the workers find off-putting. Once, she gets home, she adds a tally and Jerry's name to a notebook she keeps under her bed and which is filled with different-colored tallies and names. The names seem to correspond to her "victims", but the meaning of the colors is never explained and it could refer either to the things she does to the men or the way those men treat her. She also puts on a scrunchie around her hand when she writes down the name of her new victim. As we learn later on, the scrunchie belonged to Nina, her best friend, who took her own life after a classmate raped her at a university party and nobody believed her. Cassie's behavior, then, emerges as an act of revenge on men who assault, abuse and rape women. As we can see, the traditional roles of rape-revenge films are present: the victim (Nina), the avenger (Cassie) and a rapist (Al). However, Al is not alone in this infamous role since most of the men Cassie interacts with are also shown as

potential rapists, as is also the case of Jerry. This makes her role closer to that of Thana in *Ms. 45* than to that of most rape-revenge heroines, as she is concerned with all rapists and not the only ones she has a personal link to.

3.2 A BREAK FROM THE REVENGE PLOT: *PROMISING YOUNG WOMAN* BECOMES A ROMANTIC COMEDY

The scene to be analyzed in this section takes place when Ryan and Cassie start dating. It seems to suggest that Cassie's revenge plot has been left behind and she has moved on. The scene resembles a romantic comedy in which the lovers are protected by what Celestino Deleyto has described as the magical space of romantic comedy (2011). Yet, as will be seen below, the scene is just a diversion since Cassie and the movie's temporal embracement of the conventions of that genre does not manage to do away with her desire for revenge which leads to the film's tragic end.

The scene begins with a shot of a postcard of two cats in a frilly basket that reads "I Love You" and that is printed in shades of pink. This image sets the tone for this section of the film, making clear that what is about to follow has nothing to do with the rape-revenge genre we saw in the previous scenes. At the same time, it also seems a self-conscious commentary on the clichéd nature of romantic love conventions. Paris Hilton's "Stars Are Blind" starts playing as an intradiegetic song in the pharmacy and Ryan begins to sing. The song contributes to the building of the romantic atmosphere since it is a song about two lovers showing each other "real love". The fact that he feels comfortable singing this song in public lets the audience know that he has no issues concerning his masculinity and that he understands women better than most men. Cassie cannot believe that he is singing to Paris Hilton and that he knows the lyrics to the song.



Figure 7: The postcard that appears at the beginning of the scene

The mise-en-scène also reflects the lighter and romantic tone of the scene. It is extremely colorful and what catches our attention the most is the neon sign that says “pharmacy”, whose light reflects a soft red hue on the characters and the products in bright-colored packaging. Cassie’s clothes in this scene are some of the most saturated she wears in the film. Most of the time she leans toward pastel colors but here she is wearing a hot pink cardigan and a bright and warm-colored blouse, which represents her becoming a brighter and happier person now that she is with Ryan and has left the revenge plot behind. As the song plays, there is a montage that depicts the progression of their relationship and their falling in love. The shots in the montage also have a dreamy quality because of the soft lights and lack of contrasts, like in the scene in which they are watching a film and the light coming from the screen tints the shots with pastel colors.



Figure 8: The colorful mise-en-scène

Regarding framing, the camera frames both Ryan and Cassie at the same time in most shots to reflect their compatibility. There are also some reaction shots of Cassie that highlight her happiness. At first, she is embarrassed to see Ryan dancing and singing in public (they are separated by the shelves in the pharmacy as can be seen in Fig. 8), but he makes her feel so comfortable that she goes to his aisle to dance and sing with him. Hence, Ryan is making her a more confident person and helping her forget about her trauma to the point that she is finally able to trust and date a man.

The relationship develops in such a way that Cassie even introduces Ryan to her family, a scene that also abides by the conventions of the romantic comedy genre. They have dinner at Cassie's parents' house, a stereotypical suburban house with lavish decoration that matches Cassie's parents' outfits to the point that they almost blend in with the mise-en-scène. They are very protective of Cassie and want the best for her but they also know that she has to move on, as it is clear in the scene in which they give her a suitcase for her birthday, suggesting that she has to move out of her parents' house and get on with her life. In typical romantic comedy fashion, the dinner is slightly awkward since Cassie's parents do not understand Ryan's sarcastic humor. The clash that works in

favor of the lighthearted atmosphere of the scene and also signals the compatibility between the couple.



Figure 9: Cassie's parents' house is abundant with decorations



Figure 10: The parents' appearance matches that of the house

At this point in the film, Cassie seems to have completely forgotten about her vengeance. Ryan tells her he is falling in love with her and Cassie says that she is falling in love with him too. Yet, the relationship (and Cassie's attempts to move on) are drastically cut short when Madison (Alison Brie), also a classmate from medical school, shows up at Cassie's house with a video of Nina's rape. Cassie decides to watch it and, as if seeing those images was not traumatizing enough, she hears Ryan's voice in the

background. She is devastated and the next day goes to visit Ryan at work to talk about his involvement in Nina's rape. She blackmails him into telling her where Al's bachelor party is going to take place so that she can avenge her friend.

This scene no longer features the soft light and colorful mise-en-scène present in the previous one. The overhead fluorescent lights create dark shadows on the characters' faces and fill the room with cool tones. In addition, the dominant color in the office is a greyish blue that even matches Cassie's dress. Thus, the cheerful color palette from the previous scenes has been swapped for a cool-toned and muted one to make clear that this is no longer a romantic comedy and that Cassie will pick up things where she left off in the previous section of the film.



Figure 11: Ryan's office is covered with muted, cool-toned colors

The romcom-like scenes contribute to the positive characterization of Ryan. He is portrayed as an ideal boyfriend that prioritizes his partner's comfort over what he desires. This makes the moment we hear Ryan's voice in the video more soul-crushing as we, like Cassie, who is the main focalizer throughout the film, had high expectations about him and the way he relates to women. His betrayal only increases her thirst for revenge, doing away with all her progress toward recovery. All of this contributes to her growing distrust in men since, once she has met one she thinks she can trust, she realizes she is not that

different from the men she used to target, he was just better at hiding his real self. Ryan is a “nice guy” who built an attractive façade to make women feel comfortable around him. Therefore, the shift in the tone serves the purpose of playing with the expectations of the audience, as done in the scene analyzed in the previous section, in order to cause a greater shock with the revelation.

3.3 “ENJOY THE WEDDING”

The ending of *Promising Young Woman* is mainly a crosscutting sequence showing the chain of actions that lead to Al’s detention on his wedding day. In that sequence we learn that, although Cassie has been killed, she had also orchestrated a plan so that Al would not get away with it this time.

Before the final montage sequence there is another tonal change, similar to that analyzed in the previous section. The last scene with a dramatic tone is that of Cassie’s death, in which Al smothers her to death for almost three minutes. When Al tells his friend that the stripper is dead, he does not believe him, and jokes with the idea that Al may be trying to recreate a 1990s film such as *Very Bad Things* (dir. Peter Berg, 1998). Al’s friend’s reaction to Cassie’s death and the way in which they decide to get rid of the body is unpleasant to spectators, who feel disappointed because Cassie did not have the chance to fulfill her vengeance. The rather cool way with which Al’s friends react to the news of Cassie’s death and the way in which their lives go on as if nothing had happened seems to suggest that men are likely to get away with their abuse towards women on a daily basis. Nobody seems to care much about Cassie’s disappearance (even the policeman that interrogates Ryan is surprisingly indifferent about what may have happened to her). Al’s friend shows no regret at all for covering up for his friend. He also makes clear his disdain

for women when he is unable to compliment on the bride and jokes about the sexual potential of one of the bridesmaids.

Yet, everything changes when Ryan receives a scheduled message from Cassie and the montage sequence starts. This scene is visually linked to the rest of the revenge scenes in the film because we see again the extradiegetic tallies that allow the audience to keep up with the number of people Cassie had taken revenge on. Now the lighthearted tone seems to indicate that this is a happy ending since Cassie has fulfilled her revenge and can finally be at peace. What is more, Cassie's text messages to Ryan are sarcastic and contribute to the humoristic atmosphere of the final scene.



Figure 12: The tallies that let the audience know her vengeance is not over

Although Al is arrested in the end, it is for Cassie's murder rather than for Nina's rape (even if Cassie has also sent the video to the lawyer which leads us to think that he will probably also be charged with Nina's rape). Yet, the fact that Cassie had to die in order to charge Al with her friend's rape does not only deprive the film of a happy ending (if such an ending is ever possible in a film dealing with rape and sexual abuse) but also has further ideological implications.

The magnitude of the sacrifice Cassie made for Nina is emphasized in this scene with the extradiegetic song that plays in the background: Juice Newton's "Angel of the

Morning”. It brings up the image of a guardian angel, a symbol that is present throughout the film in the compositions that allude to religious imagery (Ide). In fact, the scenes previously analyzed include some of these visual compositions. In the first one, she seems to be crucified and in the second one, a wall decoration in the coffee shop resembles a halo (Ide). In other scenes, we find, for instance, angel wings formed by a bed headrest (Ide). It characterizes Cassie as a martyr but it is important to take into consideration that her death was avoidable and that she planned her vengeance aware of her tragic destiny (Ide; He). This was a path she chose in the face of the guilt she felt for not being with Nina to protect her the night she was raped and she blames herself instead of blaming the system (McAndrews). Therefore, her characterization places the responsibility of bringing justice to Nina’s name on Cassie, an issue common in many rape-revenge films as argued earlier. One of the persons affected by her rape, as it took away from her a person she loved and diminished her probability of having a bright future, is responsible for bringing closure, instead of emphasizing Al’s and the system’s responsibility.

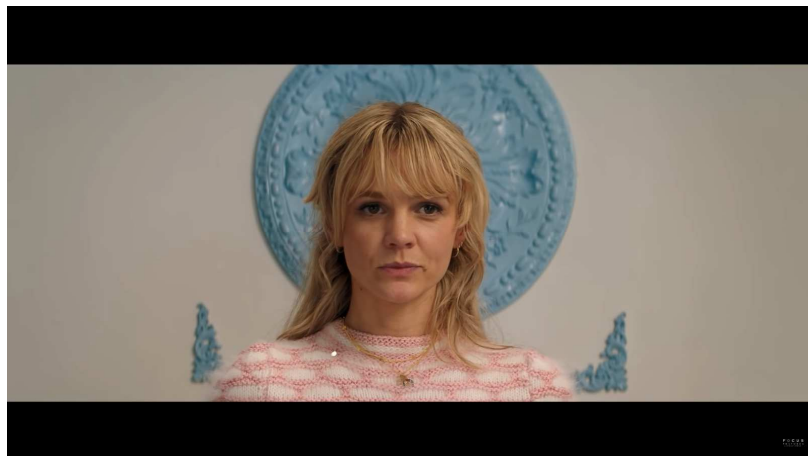


Figure 13: The decorations on the wall form a halo around Cassie's head



Figure 14: The bed headrest looks like wings

The ending portrays the police as the heroes that can put an end to this injustice and subsequently ends up defending the very system that failed Nina. Despite the optimistic tone of this scene, “two women had to die for a man just to get arrested” and that sends out a pessimistic message to survivors as it could be understood that a rape is not enough to get a rapist arrested (McAndrews). This ending reinforces the idea that the system is ineffective in rape cases because if it was not for Cassie’s sacrifice, Al would have never been arrested. But at the same time, it seems to imply that the only way to bring closure is through the justice system. Thus, it shows a reliance on a system that is flawed and it seems that there is little we can do to change this situation since no political action is shown at any point in the film. This lack of catharsis is rare in rape-revenge films given the fact that most of them end when the rapist dies as a result of the heroine’s or avenger’s vengeance. Here, it seems that the police, who have no connection to Nina and have not shown any concern over her, are the ones that finish the revenge rather than the heroine.

4. CONCLUSION

This essay has analyzed how *Promising Young Woman* makes use of the features of the rape-revenge genre or drifts from them in order to reinforce its feminist message. The entire film is characterized by its surprising twists in the plot, tone, and genre. As we have seen, the film, in the beginning, fits very closely into the characteristics of a rape-revenge film because the gaps in the plot make the audience think of Cassie as the typical rape-revenge heroine. Nonetheless, as we get to learn more about her, we realize that this film does not stick entirely to the rape-revenge tropes in her characterization. This deviation from the genre also appears in the shifts in the tone that make some scenes closer to those from a comedy or romantic comedy rather than a rape-revenge.

From the very moment the film starts, we can see how it plays with the expectations of the audience by, for instance, subverting the male gaze, which already lets us know that there is a feminist subtext. The expectations we have about Jerry are also not met once we see that he was planning on raping Cassie. Here it is when the first “nice guy” of many to come is introduced. Once it is revealed that Cassie looks for these “nice guys” and that she is in control of the situation, the audience knows what to expect from these characters. Nonetheless, the romantic comedy-like scenes made the revelation that Ryan is one of them completely unexpected. The topic of “nice guys” is one of the feminist debate topics relevant in the post-#MeToo context that this film includes. Other topics are “asking for it”, being able to consent while drunk, and victim blaming, which are explored both through Cassie’s conversations about Nina as well as her experience at night clubs. However, the avoidance to use terms such as “rape” and “sexual harassment” or to talk openly about Nina’s rape and suicide creates a sense of taboo around speaking out openly about one’s experience, which in the context of the #MeToo movement seems counterproductive.

The police and the justice system are portrayed as flawed systems that fail rape victims. Their inefficacy leads to the death of two women and Al was only arrested because of Cassie's plan. What is more, their actions are many times immoral, as seen in the remorse Al's lawyer feels after so many years. Still, in the end, they are the ones that arrest Al and get the recognition for putting an end to this injustice, while Cassie is not even present in that scene. This hopeless ending offers no solution or alternative to the flawed system, which makes the film rather pessimistic in this sense.

This film shows the ubiquity and pervasiveness of male abuse towards women since we see that any man could be a potential rapist and that even those that seem to be caring, like Ryan, could have been accomplices in a rape. These men can keep on carrying out those actions because it is unlikely that they will face punishment, be it jail or the end of their careers. Meanwhile, female victims see their careers cut short because of abuse, as seen in the fact that Nina and Cassie had to drop out of university after Al raped Nina. This reflects the reality of many victims who do not want to speak out when someone in their job abuses them in fear of being fired ("1 in 4 young women"). The film is a mirror of the situation during the #MeToo movement since men in Hollywood were likely to get away with their abuse because of the respectable and powerful positions they occupied in the industry. Here, the film uses another respectable profession, that of doctors, to tell a similar story of sexual abuse and gender inequality.

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