



Universidad
Zaragoza

Undergraduate Dissertation
Trabajo Fin de Grado

The Two Faces of *Promising Young Woman* (2020):
Drawing from the Rape-Revenge and the Romantic
Comedy Genres

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2023

ABSTRACT

This BA thesis explores the conventions of the rape-revenge and romantic comedy genres used in the film *Promising Young Woman* (2020). This is done in order to prove that the movie has detached from the classical rape-revenge films and approached to romantic comedies to offer a feminist and not fetishized view of the rape, but also to subvert the expectations created by a romantic heterosexual relationship.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo de fin de grado explora los géneros de violación y venganza y comedia romántica utilizados en la película *Una joven prometedora* (2020). Esto se hace con el fin de demostrar que la película se ha distanciado de las películas clásicas de violación y venganza y se ha acercado a la comedia romántica para ofrecer una versión feminista y evitar una visión fetichista de la violación, así como para socavar las expectativas creadas por una relación romántica heterosexual.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As contemporary society has become more involved in social and feminist movements year after year, more and more books, TV series and movies have been created to address the issue of misogyny and the abuse of women. Claire Henry states in her book that during the 70s, “an easing of censorship restrictions and a mainstream of public discussion about sexual politics”, along with “second-wave feminism in the 70s” resulted in the production and distribution of rape-revenge films (2). The most important censorship restriction was the Hays Code, which according to Talbert (2), was eliminated in 1968. From that moment, as Talbert argues, “production studios were able to include more controversial matters into their films” (2). As a result, some films started dealing with and showing the atrocities and traumas women suffer after being sexually abused. These films developed into what is now known as the rape-revenge genre, which is characterized by the quest for revenge after sexual abuse. Heller-Nicholas defines the genre as “one whereby a rape central to the narrative is punished by an act of vengeance, either by the victim themselves or an agent—most commonly a partner or a family member” (9).

The film this BA thesis is going to revolve around, *Promising Young Woman* (Emerald Fennell, 2020) deals with rape and also with revenge, although not in the same way classical rape-revenge films do, as its aesthetics and the way it addresses violence make the movie depart from the genre of rape-revenge to approach the genre of romantic comedy. *Promising Young Woman* gives an account of the story of Cassie -Cassandra- (Carey Mulligan). She is now an adult woman who lives with her parents and works at a coffee shop. She is a former student of medicine, who dropped med-school after her best friend Nina was sexually abused by some of her classmates. Nina tried to denounce the abuse, but the female dean chose to believe the perpetrator instead of the victim and dismissed the case. Moreover, Al’s lawyer, Jordan (Alfred Molina), bullied her and she ended up dropping the case. Finally, as she could not face this trauma, she committed

suicide. What makes this movie interesting is that apart from trying to avenge Nina's death, Cassie is also trying to scare possible sexual predators. In many scenes she appears drunk in a club, waiting for men to take her home. Obviously, as the movie revolves around rape, those men try to assault her, and it is at this moment that she reveals that she is not drunk and turns on them to scare them. Cassie does this in order to show those guys she tries to scare, but also the audience, that taking advantage of a woman, drunk or not, is not ethical. Later in the movie Ryan (Bo Burnham), a former classmate of Cassie and Nina, goes to the coffee shop where Cassie works. Through him Cassie learns about the lives of people she suspects are involved in Nina's abuse: Al Monroe (Chris Lowell) and Madison McPhee (Alison Brie). With the information Cassie gets about these people's lives, she starts planning her revenge.

The aim of this B.A. thesis is to show how by mixing characteristics of two completely different genres (the rape-revenge movie and the romantic comedy), Emerald Fennel has managed to play with the audience's expectations of watching a romantic relationship between Cassie and Ryan, only to subvert the stereotype of the good guy in order to show that even good guys can be bad. Furthermore, this BA thesis will also explore how by slightly detaching from the rape-revenge genre *Promising Young Woman* has become one of the first films from this genre that is seen from a more feminist and feminine perspective because it focuses on the woman protagonist's feelings aims and feelings, apart from not offering a fetishized view of the rape. Nevertheless, as the introduction of romcom aesthetics makes it seem as if the film does not focus on important issues, this thesis will also aim at explaining how, by introducing typical characteristics of rape-revenge movies, the director points out to the fact that misogyny and abuse are still part of contemporary societies, and that eliminating deep-rooted patriarchal social norms will take time.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Before starting to analyze the movie in depth and talk about its connections with the rape-revenge genre and the romantic comedy, I will provide some background information about both genres. First, I will discuss the key characteristics of the rape-revenge genre, as the movie follows some of its conventions. As stated in the introduction, the rape-revenge genre emerged in the 70s along with the second-wave feminist movement and the withdrawal of the Hays Code, an elimination that allowed film directors to show more controversial topics in their works, some of them being rape scenes. Claire Henry argues that rape-revenge has “proven to be more versatile and durable” because remakes and adaptations have been made, as well as fusions with other genres such as westerns, horror films, film noir, romantic comedies, and so on (3). Heller-Nicholas points out that the vast majority of people assume that rape-revenge films belong to the horror genre, but to consider the rape-revenge genre as a subgenre of horror “risks misidentifying its diversity and broader cultural significance” (93). As it can be observed in *Promising Young Woman* the rape-revenge can be approached in different manners, which do not necessarily fall under the horror genre we are used to watching, as it does not feature explicit scenes of rape, violence, or bloody murder scenes. Nevertheless, Henry claims that although “the settings and aesthetics of the genre” can be modified by the other genres rape-revenge hybridizes with, the genre has its specific characteristics such as “mud-covered semi-naked rape victims, red lipstick and fetish costumes of the transformed avenger; castration; women with guns; stock characters; and some key themes and conflicts such as transformation, rape trauma, ethics of revenge, vigilantism or torture” (4). *Promising Young Woman* follows some of these characteristics, but I will address this issue when analyzing the film in depth. As the name of the genre itself suggests, the films belonging

to the rape-revenge genre feature a rape (most of the times of a woman) and an act of revenge. Heller-Nicholas defines it as “a rape central to the narrative” being punished by an “act of vengeance, either by the victim themselves or an agent” (10). In the case of *Promising Young Woman*, the rape is not shown, but it is recurrently talked about. In addition, it is not the victim who seeks vengeance, but an agent, Nina’s best friend, Cassie. Heller-Nicholas also declares that these films are “uncomfortable and hard to comprehend” (10), but as it is evident, sometimes this is not the case of *Promising Young Woman* because the explicit scenes of rape I briefly mentioned earlier do not appear. In fact, Nina’s rape is not even shown, and in the scenes where Cassie is about to get raped by all those men she tricks, the action is abruptly ended by her.

As *Promising Young Woman* is not as uncomfortable and “serious” as the rape-revenge genre, some theorists such as Maria Medina-Vicent in her article “Consentimiento y deseo sexual en *Promising Young Woman*” have compared it to a romantic comedy, since it shares some of its characteristics. The author further points out in her article that “this feature gives it a greater potential to connect with today’s youthful audience” ([my translation] 14). However, the fact that the movie is not uncomfortable or that it is supposed to reach a wider audience does not mean that it does not address important issues. As is the case with the rape-revenge genre, the public also makes assumptions about the romantic comedy genre, believing that it does not tackle important questions. Nonetheless, Leger Grindon argues that the romantic comedy genre actually addresses “issues of fundamental concern and maintains an audience” because the ideas or critiques are presented in a simple and easy-to-follow format (7). Furthermore, he says that the audience engages with these films and grapples with important issues ranging from problems in the heterosexual marriage, to gender inequalities and even sexual issues. And this is what happens with *Promising Young Woman*, a serious subject (rape and its

consequences) is tackled following some of the conventions of romantic comedy to attract viewers and make them think about topics such as sexual abuse, the power patriarchy has in society, consent, silence, and even death. The fact that *Promising Young Woman* intermingles between two genres (rape-revenge and comedy) is not arbitrary, in fact, Celestino Deleyto explains that “contemporary critics have adapted quite smoothly to the proliferation of movies which use conventions from various genres” (6). But why does a film that is supposed to be part of the rape-revenge genre mingle with romantic comedy? Deleyto describes romantic comedy as the “intersection of three interrelated elements”: “a narrative that articulates historically and culturally specific views of love, desire, sexuality and gender relationships; a space of transformation and fantasy; and humour as the specific perspective from which the fictional characters, their relationships and the spectator’s response to them are constructed as embodiments of those discourses” (45). As I commented earlier, this movie grabs the audience because it is easy to follow, and a feature that makes this possible is humour. Many scenes of the movie use irony in order to criticize an important topic in a subtle way which often makes the audience laugh. As I pointed out, Deleyto says that a fundamental ingredient for understanding romantic comedy is the comic perspective (23), however, he asserts that this comic space may be “virtually absent from a film in order to suggest desolation and despair” (45). Obviously, as *Promising Young Woman* is also part of the rape-revenge genre, humour is not always present. In many scenes, the audience feels disgusted, there is suspense, and even fear that something may happen to the protagonist. Furthermore, Deleyto argues that romantic comedy explores “love and human sexuality and its complex and fluid relationships with the social context” (29), and that “female friendships have become central in recent independent romantic comedy scenarios” (145). Therefore, it can be clearly observed how

some of the conventions of romantic comedy conventions fit perfectly within this film and that they combine with the rape-revenge genre in productive ways.

3. *PROMISING YOUNG WOMAN*

3.1.A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT RAPE-REVENGE FILM

Having offered a theoretical contextualization of the romcom and rape-revenge genres, and having introduced some of the key topics the film addresses, I will now analyze the movie in more depth. To do this I will provide some instances of the general characteristics of the rape-revenge genre in order to explain how *Promising Young Woman* engages with generic conventions. Later on, I will focus on the features and scenes that have bring the film closer to the romantic comedy genre.

The fact that the film revolves around rape makes it part of the rape-revenge genre, but this is not the only characteristic that makes the film belong to this genre. As I have been commenting, Claire Henry discusses a pattern that the rape-revenge follows, and that can be found in *Promising Young Woman*. To start with, she mentions that in these films the “transformed avenger” uses fetish costumes or uses red lipstick (4). If we observe the character of Cassie we realize that she has chosen to construct a double life in order to find the revenge she desperately wants, and she does this by changing her costumes constantly. As can be seen in figure 1, in her day-to-day life she works at a café and wears these pink outfits that make her appear as a feminine, innocent, angelic, and good girl. In an interview for *Variety*, Carey Mulligan describes her outfits as a “beautifully wrapped candy”. However, when she finishes her work shift, she completely changes her outfits. The colour palette of these outfits changes drastically. The bright and pastel colours are replaced by the use of red and black when she disguises as a drunk woman to unmask possible sexual predators (see figure 2). As opposed to the innocence

Cassie's pink outfits convey, black and red portray Cassie as an avenger and as a danger for men. Therefore, the purpose of Cassie's constant change of outfits is to portray her double life but also her ambivalent and affected personality by the death of Nina. In figure 3 it can be seen that she also makes use of this red lipstick Henry talks about in her work. Again, this colour represents the danger posed by Cassie as she only makes use of the red lipstick when she is trying to frighten men, but it is also a tool she uses in order to feel more empowered and to represent the figure of the *femme fatale*. However, the most important fetish costume she wears is the one of the "sexy nurse". After finding out that Al is going to marry and that he is going to throw a bachelorette party, Cassie chooses to dress as a sexy nurse in order to be able to work at that party. As can be seen in the movie, this outfit is an essential element for her revenge to be achieved. As can be observed in figure 4, it is as if this outfit represented two different people, as there is a huge contrast of colours. One part of the costume is characterized by the wig in pastel shades which clearly characterizes Cassie's aesthetics. This choice of colours is very important because it shows the audience that even though Cassie dresses up, she is still herself and her innocent part also wants to find revenge. The other part of the costume is characterized by the red details, which again symbolize the imminent danger Cassie poses.



Figure 1: Cassie's innocent aesthetics



Figure 2: The drastic change of outfits

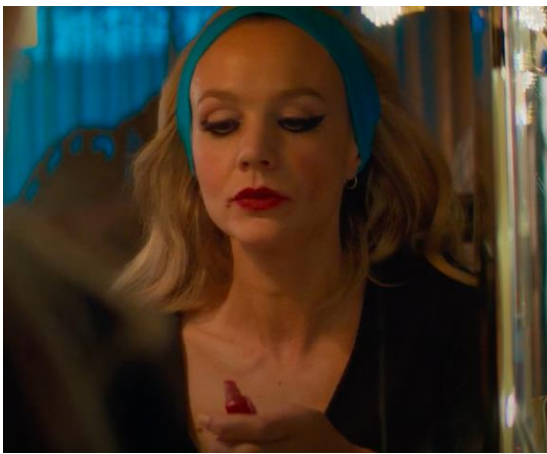


Figure 3: The use of red lipstick



Figure 4: The most fetish costume

Henry also points out that these kinds of film feature “stock characters”, which can be “young, white, attractive victims turned *femme fatale*, rapists or rednecks” (4). Moreover, she asserts that the rape-revenge genre depicts some key themes such as “transformation, rape trauma, ethics of revenge, vigilantism and torture”, and that it offers a “two-part structure”; the first part being the rape, and the second the revenge (4). *Promising Young Woman* follows some of these characteristics, as it portrays Cassie as a *femme fatale* who, after undergoing trauma because of the rape and suicide of her best friend, wants to avenge her death and psychologically torture the perpetrators. Needless to say, the film does not only show the figure of the rapist through Al, but also through

all the characters that are involved directly or indirectly in Nina's rape. Although the rape is not shown, *Promising Young Woman* also follows the two-part structure that characterizes most rape-revenge films. After Nina's rape, Cassie is determined to seek revenge. It can be argued that the fact that Cassie is the one pursuing this vengeance may make the film discern from the rape-revenge genre, however, Heller-Nicolas argues that revenge can also be sought by an agent, who can be a member of the family, a boyfriend, or as it is the case in this movie, a friend (9). Nevertheless, *Promising Young Woman* does not follow all of the characteristics of the rape-revenge because as Henry points out "the settings and aesthetics of the genre are often modified by the other genres rape-revenge hybridizes with" (4).

As this BA thesis focuses on showing that *Promising Young Woman* hybridizes with the romantic comedy genre, I will now concentrate on the ways in which the film differentiates itself from films that would fit more clearly within the rape-revenge genre. According to Medina-Vicent, the movies that belong to the rape-revenge genre have a similar structure; the protagonist is attacked and raped by an aggressor, but she unexpectedly survives and starts her revenge ([my translation] 13). Moreover, Talbert argues that traditional rape-revenge films have a strict three-act structure that encapsulates the violent rape of a female character, the character's rehabilitation and transformation into a vigilante, and the character exacting justice on those who raped her (7).

However, as I commented in the introduction, *Promising Young Woman* diverges slightly from this kind of structure. As Talbert argues, Cassie is not a survivor of sexual assault herself (15). The one who has been raped is her best friend, Nina. However, as she is not alive to pursue her revenge, Cassie is the one in charge of making the aggressors pay for their actions. In addition, as previously stated in the introduction, *Promising*

Young Woman differentiates itself even more from the classical rape-revenge films because the sexual assault that inspires the revenge is never shown. The act itself can be heard in a tape that Madison shows to Cassie, but there is no visual representation of it. The filmmaker does this to approach a different audience, but also because the movie has been produced from a female point of view, and it is directed mostly to the female gaze. In order to differentiate her film even more from the rape-revenge genre, which is “typically fetishized, grimy, and crafted for an audience that is decidedly not women, such as male horror fans” (Heimberger, 35), Fennel has decided to omit the graphic representation of the rape in order to avoid the “trivialization and fetishization” of the act, and to prevent a “further victimization of Nina” (Figueres, 37). Moreover, the violence that would be expected in traditional rape-revenge films does not appear in *Promising Young Woman*. Heimberger argues that most rape-revenge films drive their female protagonists into using “brutal physical violence as a form of processing [their] trauma” (44). However, in *Promising Young Woman*, as Talbert claims, Cassie takes advantage of her wit and teases men in order to recognize their predatory behaviour (16). Moreover, Figueres argues that, as a character, Cassie’s role is to fight for accountability and retribution (33), and not violently attack the aggressors. In fact, the most shocking and violent part of this movie is one of the last scenes in which Cassie is brutally murdered by Nina’s rapist (see fig. 5). This outburst of violence is shown in order to subvert the expectations of a happy ending that have been created by the resemblance with the romantic comedy genre, as it shows how cruel life can be, and that women die because of gender violence on a daily basis. Also, this brutality is the only one shown on-screen because, as Medina-Vicent points out, “these types of movies respond to a specific social reality, that is, the sexual violence that is exercised against women in a systematic and global way” ([my translation] 14). That is, director Emerald Fennell is trying to show that

even if the woman seems to be in control of the situation, the patriarchal system is tougher than her need for revenge and that probably the system will not change no matter how hard the heroine tries to change it (see fig. 6).



Figure 5: Cassie's death



Figure 6: Getting rid of the evidence

3.2. PROMISING YOUNG WOMAN AS A HOLLYWOOD ROMANTIC COMEDY

The second and last part of the analysis of this BA thesis will be devoted to analyzing the participation of *Promising Young Woman* in the romantic comedy genre. This will be done through the analysis of the cast used for this movie and also through the examination of the mise-en-scène, which according to Barsam is everything the audience sees, hears, and experiences while watching a film (156). The elements that I will examine will be the setting, the use of colour, framing, props, and music. All of this will be done through the analysis of several scenes that exemplify the film's resemblance to the rom-com genre.

To begin with, I will direct my analysis toward the examination of the cast that director Emerald Fennell has decided to use for this movie. According to Grindon, the film

industry guides the audience to know what kind of film they are encountering when they cast actors who are identified with a particular genre (2). Therefore, Fennell's decision to cast Bo Burnham (Ryan), a famous comedian, was not arbitrary at all. In the movie, Ryan is a former classmate of Cassie who is now a paediatrician. A striking feature of this character is that he is depicted as a good guy; he heals kids who are sick and Cassie's parents adore him. What this does is create a dramatic contrast between the guys Cassie meets in the bars and who deserve to be punished, and Ryan, who seems to be the perfect future boyfriend and a person who we, and Cassie, will never expect to do something bad. As Meek discusses, Fennell has chosen this charismatic actor for his film in order to play with the audience's wish for a romantic plot between Ryan and Cassie (2), although we know that given Cassie's previous experience with men, this may be impossible to achieve. However, for a large part of the film, their relationship seems to flourish as the sudden appearance of Ryan in Cassie's life turns her it upside down. Figueres argues that Cassie's destiny shifts once she meets Ryan again because it can be perceived that she starts to heal from the trauma of losing her best friend (35). Once they meet, the romantic comedy part of this film begins, although it is important to state that most of the time comedy is absent in some scenes because the audience knows that Cassie has other plans that do not involve falling in love with Ryan. This lack of comedy is perfectly explained in Deleyto's work, as he defines the romantic comedy genre as predominantly a narrative of the heterosexual couple (16), that does not necessarily need to include a comic space, in order to suggest "desolation and despair" in the relationship (45). Cassie's and Ryan's relationship will be one of desolation and despair, although both the audience and the couple live in a bubble of happiness thinking that nothing could go wrong. However, the absence of humour is a hint that advances what will come later on.

To start analyzing the formal elements that give the film a romantic tone, I will discuss the scene in which Cassie and Ryan meet for the first time because it is a perfect example of the classic romantic comedy encounter, the meet cute. As can be observed in figure 7, they meet at Cassie's workplace, the coffee shop. Choosing this location for their first meeting is no coincidence. Fennell has stated for the magazine *Screen Daily* that this setting is emblematic because it is a place in which Cassie feels safe, something that makes her feel empowered and in control of the situation. The "hyper-feminine aesthetic" that Fennell talks about in her interview with the magazine *Sight & Sound*, together with the cake-like colour palette that characterizes the coffee shop and Cassie's outfits make the coffee shop a feminine location in which men have no power. Cassie's boss is a woman and most of the clients are women. It is as if the coffee shop was destined for a feminine public. Additionally, the coffee shop seems to symbolize Cassie herself, as her style and the café's aesthetics are similar. Furthermore, the presence of men in Cassie's life is minimal, as she prevents them from having power over her life. Furthermore, this aesthetic reminds the audience of teen comedy films such as *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 1994). In an interview for the magazine *British Cinematographer*, filmmaker Benjamin Kracun declared that the soft pastel colour palette employed by the film are more in line with the 90s romantic comedies. As a result, this teen, romantic atmosphere, apart from making the coffee shop a safe place, converts it into an idyllic place for Ryan and Cassie to meet. Another stylistic technique that turns this moment into a boy-meets-girl romantic moment is the use of framing. According to Barsam, the use of different framing techniques allows the cinematographer to determine what appears within the borders of the image during a shot (229). For example, in figures 8 and 9 we can observe a close shot of both Cassie's and Ryan's faces, with special emphasis on their eyes. This shot, which has a rather long duration, plays with the audience's expectations and suggests that

something may happen between Cassie and Ryan. Furthermore, the fact that Cassie looks directly into Ryan's eyes suggests that she is trying to decipher Ryan, and although she may seem to feel comfortable around him and may start to trust him, the trauma that Nina's suicide has left on her is stronger than any feelings she may have for Ryan. Barsam points out that the camera creates intimacy between actors and the audience, and that close-ups tend to isolate the actor, making the audience concentrate on his/her face (306). As can be observed in figures 8 and 9, Cassie's facial expression is relaxed, but also serious, suggesting the viewers that her attitude towards men might have changed after meeting Ryan, but also that she is still not trusting them, whereas Ryan seems to be waiting for something (Cassie's response to his question: "Do you wanna go out on a date with me?"), and he also seems sceptical because he does not understand Cassie's attitude yet.



Figure 7: Cassie's and Ryan's first encounter



Figure 8: Cassie's ambivalent feelings towards Ryan



Figure 9: Ryan's expectant gaze

The scene I just discussed introduces the audience to the world of romantic comedy as the film has adopted a new perspective and it guides viewers towards thinking that what we will encounter from that point onwards will be a romantic relationship and that Cassie will forget about her plan of avenging Nina's death. A scene that further reinforces this impression is the one in which Cassie and Ryan go out on a date because they get to know each other better and they end up doing what all couples do in romantic movies: go out for a meal and to the movies. Two important elements in this scene are clothing and performance. As it can be observed in figure 10, Cassie's outfit has nothing to do with those she wears when she goes to the bars or the one she wore when she went on a date to Neil's (Christopher Mintz) house (see figure 11). The midi dress she chooses to meet Ryan perfectly describes her innocent personality, whereas the total black outfit she wears when meeting Neil expresses the darker side of her personality. In the scene before meeting Ryan (minute 25:45) she looks really happy and willing to have this date, and the importance of the outfit is reinforced by her father's compliment: "You look beautiful, Cassie". This places the movie within the rom-com genre, because as Jeffers McDonald argues, in romantic comedies the "special outfit for the big date" is a key

element in what this author identifies as the “visual characteristics” of romantic comedies (11). The fact that Cassie chooses to wear a special outfit introduces the audience even more in this romantic atmosphere because it is obvious that Ryan is starting to be part of Cassie’s life.

As in the first scene that I have analyzed, the setting also proves to be a crucial component in Cassie’s and Ryan’s date. The date takes place at a restaurant, a typical location for romcom dates. As can be seen in figure 12, the cake-inspired colour palette is used again, suggesting that in this location Cassie also feels safe, especially because the encounter takes place in daylight. Another element of *mise-en-scène* that is important in this scene is framing. In figure 12 it can be observed that a medium close-up brings Cassie and Ryan together and allows the audience to see that as they get to know each other better, their complicity grows. Nevertheless, the high-angle shot that can be seen in figure 13 stands out in its underlining of the romantic dimension of the scene, because through it we can see that more dates are taking place simultaneously. Through this use of framing and the *mise-en-scène* the director emphasizes the importance of romantic relationships and gives again a hint that the relationship between Cassie and Ryan may become serious.



Figure 10: Cassie’s “romantic” outfit



Figure 11: A darker outfit



Figure 12: The date at the restaurant



Figure 13: High-angle shot

The scenes that have been discussed help to give *Promising Young Woman* a romantic atmosphere that may give the impression that the romantic relationship completely takes over the plot. However, Cassie still has not forgotten about Nina, and she stops seeing Ryan for a time to continue with her initial plan of avenging Nina's death. This indicates that this relationship is not yet as important to her as the details I have mentioned before may suggest. This is something which is reinforced by her unwillingness to establish physical contact with Ryan. However, after having a conversation about this, Cassie and Ryan decide to start over and give another opportunity to their relationship. According to Grindon, in romantic comedies the courting couple struggles to find "common ground" (4), that is, Cassie and Ryan are learning to have a relationship and for that, they need to have uncomfortable conversations. The following scenes that I am going to discuss are the ones that establish Cassie and Ryan as a romantic couple and the ones that more closely resemble the aesthetics of the romantic comedy genre. One of these scenes (figure 14) takes place after the conversation in which the couple decides to start over. As can be observed, the setting is again Cassie's safe place, the coffee shop. However, this shot is completely different from the one of the first scene that I have analyzed. Now, there is no physical object that separates the couple (the coffee counter),

and Ryan enters the coffee shop's pantry, a place in which only Cassie and her boss Gail (Laverne Cox) are allowed to enter. This suggests that our protagonist has finally let her guard down and that she is going to let Ryan into her life and into her heart. Even Ryan's outfit blends with the aesthetic of the coffee shop, suggesting that he is part of Cassie's life. Furthermore, the composition of this shot together with the colour palette used for the characters' outfits makes them look like they come straight out of a princess fairy tale, Ryan being the prince who has finally kissed the princess.

The influence of elements of the romantic comedy is even more obvious in the scene that takes place at the pharmacy. This scene happens just before Cassie and Ryan kiss at the coffee shop in which they finally consolidate their relationship. The scene starts with a close-up shot of a gift card in which two cute cats appear (see fig. 15). With this, a romantic atmosphere is suggested because these two cats may be symbolizing Cassie and Ryan's growing passion. Additionally, when this shot is on-camera, Ryan is talking off-camera, saying that this is their first trip to the pharmacy, and that this is a "big step". This somehow shows that their relationship has consolidated and that they soon may say "I love you". After this, the camera focuses on Cassie and Ryan. As can be observed, the setting has finally changed, the couple is no longer at Cassie's safe place nor on a date at a restaurant. They are visiting a mundane place where it is not common for couples to have dates (see fig. 16). An important characteristic of this scene is the use of music. While the couple is at the pharmacy, *Stars Are Blind* by Paris Hilton starts playing. This element creates a perfect aura for the couple to demonstrate their happiness. The tone of this song is happy, it allows them to dance and Ryan to make funny gestures. Moreover, the lyrics are also important because they talk about real love, and Ryan even sings "let's see what this love can do". However, the predominant feature of this sequence is the use of colour. As can be seen, Cassie and Ryan still wear their characteristic colours (pink

and blue), but the aesthetic of the setting has changed. Now, the hyper-femme neon aesthetic introduced by Benjamin Kracun is applied. This neon aesthetic may suggest that Cassie and Ryan's relationship has moved on to another point characterized by the intensity and passion common of the first phase of infatuation. Yet, these giant letters in neon can also signal that imminent danger is approaching, which is the path that the film actually pursues, as, a few scenes later, Cassie's and Ryan's fairy-tale ends with Cassie's murder.



Figure 14: The prince has managed to kiss the princess



Figure 15: Cats symbolizing the couple



Figure 16: Cassie and Ryan's big step

4. CONCLUSION

The aim of this BA thesis has been to explore the ways in which *Promising Young Woman* mixes the conventions of the rape-revenge and romantic comedy genres. As has been discussed, the movie draws from these two genres in order to subvert the expectations of the audience.

The analysis of this film has been divided into three parts. The first part has been devoted to the commentary of the conventions of the rape-revenge genre that the film follows.. Cassie's radical personality and her willingness to make the perpetrators pay for their actions together with the incorporation of some aesthetics of the rape-revenge genre such as the use of red lipstick and the masquerade have crafted a typical character from rape-revenge films, *the femme fatale*, or female avenger. Through the use of these conventions the film manages to make the audience think that this film will be like many others that belong to this genre. However, as it has been discussed in the second section of this

analysis (which focuses on the film's detachment from the rape-revenge), this film aims at avoiding certain conventions of the rape-revenge genre because of its potentially misogynistic tone and its generally fetishized view of the rape. As it has been argued, the use of violence and the brutality characteristic of these type of films has been erased in *Promising Young Woman*. The fact that the avenger does not use violence or that Nina's rape is not shown helps the film avoid fetishization and to align the movie more closely with a female gaze.

Finally, the third and last section of this analysis has been centred on the romantic relationship of this movie. It has been argued that by using different conventions of the Hollywood rom-coms that affect mainly the mise-en-scène, the film plays with the expectations of the audience and makes the heterosexual romantic relationship be one of the central elements of this film. Additionally, the introduction of a romantic relationship has been used to make the audience think that Cassie has forgotten about her plan of revenge and that she has finally managed to overcome her trauma. However, this is only done in order to play again with the audience because at the end it is shown that Cassie's big love is only a farce because he also participated, although "indirectly" in the rape of Nina.

Promising Young Woman excels at subverting the audience's expectations. At the beginning of the film, it seems that it will be a classical rape-revenge movie, then it appears that the universe of romantic comedies has erased any trace of unhappiness and trauma; however, the end of this film gradually brings viewers back to the sometimes dreary and bleak aspects of life itself and, more specifically, of the patriarchal society that the film denounces. The unexpected use of rom-com conventions makes viewers think that the heroine will have a happy ending. However, the ending is not at all happy, neither for her nor for those involved in Nina's rape. The brutal use of violence at the end of this

film shatters the audience's expectations, and Cassie's resolution of her plan of revenge cancels the possibility of what Deleyto calls the basis of the romantic comedies: the consolidation of the heterosexual romantic couple. In this way, the movie shows the audience how our beliefs can be shattered, and Cassie's death only reinforces the statement that it is difficult to end with the patriarchal society, especially if you plan to do it alone.

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