

Promising Young Women:  
Contemporary Case Studies in the Rape Revenge Fantasy Subgenre of Feature Films

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## Introduction

According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, one out of every six American women has been the victim of an attempted or a completed rape during her lifetime (Scope of the Problem: Statistics | RAINN, n.d.). However, the American justice system is relatively inactive in their response to this issue, as the vast majority of sexual offenders will not go to jail or prison. In fact, out of every 1000 sexual assaults, 995 perpetrators will not face any consequences (The Criminal Justice System: Statistics RAINN, n.d.). The epidemic of sexual assault has been an issue for centuries, and continues to affect too a significant amount of men and women today. Due to its unfortunate prominence in society, several films include depictions of sexual assault or utilize the event as a key plot device in their stories.

The rape-revenge subgenre emerged in the 1970s following the elimination of the Hays Code in 1968, which abolished censorship in Hollywood in order to introduce a self-regulatory system. Thus, production studios were able to include more controversial matters into their films, including swearing, nudity, and even sex. Concurrently, second wave feminism was gaining influence, which sought to address several women's rights issues, including reproductive rights and the widespread issue of sexual assault. Together, these two historical events provided the perfect framework for the emergence of the rape-revenge film, which originated as a subgenre of exploitive films (Henry, 2014).

Peter Lehman defines the genre as a film in which, "a beautiful woman hunts down the men who raped her and kills them one by one, frequently reveling in the pleasure of the man's agony," (1993). Other characteristics of Lehman's definition include the repulsive characterization of the rapist, execution of rape completed by a group of men, and implausible narrative elements. Although Lehman's definition is confined to the earliest iterations of the

rape-revenge film, it is beneficial in assessing the progression of the genre over time. Barbara Creed presents a more contemporary definition for what constitutes as a rape-revenge film. She argues that it should include a heroine who seeks revenge for herself or on behalf of a loved one due to some form of male exploitation (1993). Creed's expanded definition of the genre continues to apply to twenty-first century rape-revenge films, where the sexual assault occurs off screen or even before the beginning of the film.

First occurring in films such as *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) and *Ms .45* (1981), the genre was overtaken by male directors who sexualized women, even in moments of brutal sexual violence. After contemporary progressions, the genre still exists in films today. Although films of this genre typically are distributed through independent studios, the prominence of the #MeToo movement in 2017 has revitalized the genre and has made it slightly more mainstream within the past several years.

The rape-revenge fantasy places the issue of sexual violence in a framework that does not hesitate from including explicit depictions of sexual assault or upholding the male gaze. Heller-Nicholas asserts that the genre provides audiences with “notable contemporary example[s] of why contradictory and often hypocritical attitudes can co-exist [in society] more generally,” (2011). Within the context of the rape-revenge narrative, the term ‘fantasy’ alludes to the unrealistic narrative development in which the protagonists are able to bring justice to their rapist(s) through physical retribution. Rather than waiting for the justice system to punish the sexual predators, protagonists within this genre take the responsibility upon themselves, thus fulfilling the fantasy.

The intention of this research is twofold: to identify the ways in which the subgenre has progressed from its misogynist, brutalist origins in the 1970s and to determine if these

progressions are sufficient in creating a responsible representation of the aftermath of sexual assault. In order to do this, I will conduct a narrative and cultural analysis on four female-directed rape-revenge feature films that have been released after 2017: *Revenge* (2017) directed by Coralie Fargeat, *M.F.A.* (2017) directed by Natalie Leite, *The Nightingale* (2018) directed by Jennifer Kent, and *Promising Young Woman* (2020) directed by Emerald Fennell. Additionally, I will propose three adjustments that filmmakers should incorporate in order to provide a more meaningful experience for sexual assault survivors.

## **Literature Review**

### *Sexual Violence on Film*

Understanding the history of sexual violence on film, specifically the rape-revenge fantasy subgenre, is essential in order to acknowledge the genre's progress. In the first chapter of Jeffrey A. Brown's *Beyond Bombshells: The New Action Heroine*, he addresses implications of the contrast between the torture of the male action hero versus that of the female action heroine. While the male action hero is subject to violent acts of torture, the female action heroine typically faces horrific acts of sexual violence. These depictions of sexual assault inherently risk eroticizing rape, even if the victim is able to triumph over her rapist. Even with the intention of exposing the inhumanity of sexual assault or justifying the heroine's violent revenge, Brown questions the inclusion of graphic depictions of sexual assault. He argues that contemporary depictions of rape differ from those in traditional rape-revenge films because they, "lay bare the tenuous links assumed in our patriarchal culture between notions of power and powerlessness, masculinity and femininity," (Brown, 2015). Although he recognizes the progress from previous rape-revenge films through the inclusion of discourse regarding the societal gendered

power imbalance, sexual violence remains a threat for both female characters and real women.

Brown asserts the following:

The combination of Hollywood's persistent objectification of women, the implicit eroticization of these types of scenes, the omnipresence of torture chic, and the heroine's physical vulnerability means that the possibility of rape is always an underlying current for action heroines, (2015).

In a study of the representation of female violence in the media, Berrington and Honkatukia argue that such representations provide a subjective impression of events that requires active discernment and interpretation (2002). Additionally, the patriarchy directly causes damaging myths and stereotypes, which lead to increased violence towards women. This, along with the desensitization of violence within the media, results in, "media representations of material that is generally intrusive, personalized and voyeuristic," (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002). They continue to say that these representations not only, "satisfy, but also increase, demand for graphic, explicit, abusive, misogynist material, as consumers become accustomed to and bored with repetition of the same images and scenarios," (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002).

### *Genre Debate*

Modern scholarship remains divisive in its classification of the rape-revenge fantasy. Jacinda Read rejects the notion that the rape-revenge fantasy is a genre or a subgenre, and instead argues that it is a, "narrative structure which, on meeting second-wave feminism in the 1970s, has produced a historically specific but generically diverse cycle of films," (2000, 11). However, since Read's publication twenty years ago, another resurgence of the rape-revenge film has occurred. The expansion of the rape-revenge canon into the 21st century discredits Read's historical definition. Claire Henry presents an alternative classification, arguing that it is

best regarded as a hybrid genre because it “validates the rape-revenge genre as being significant and worthy of study alongside [other] traditional genres,” (2014). Additionally, accepting rape-revenge as its own genre presents the field of genre studies with several unique issues to address, including versatility, cult popularity, and its ideal ambiguity.

### *Empowerment or Exploitation?*

Within the scholarship and criticism of the rape-revenge fantasy genre, there is also a debate surrounding the empowerment of the genre. While some believe that the rape-revenge fantasy is traumatic for survivors since they must reencounter assault while watching the film, others assert that it can be a cathartic experience for survivors. In *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study*, Heller-Nicholas expands upon both sides of this debate. From one perspective, she states that, “rape-revenge films must be unimaginably painful, triggering trauma so deep and personal that to find a descriptive catch-all is an insult to the individuality of those experiences,” (2021). However, directors of rape-revenge films are known to have survivors express their appreciation for such films. Additionally, the production process of any rape-revenge film presents survivors within the film industry an opportunity to process their trauma through a productive, creative outlet. Due to the complexities of sexual assault, it is impossible to generalize the effects of the rape-revenge film to all audience members.

### **Criteria for Selected Films**

In order to adequately analyze the progression of the rape-revenge fantasy in contemporary feature films, several factors contributed to their selection for this study. First, it is important to limit analysis to feature films released within the last five years in order to evaluate the most recent iterations of the genre. Thus, all selected films were released after 2017. Second, because this study focuses on the rape-revenge fantasy, each film must include the narrative

elements that define the genre. Traditional rape-revenge films incorporated a strict three act structure which began with the violent rape of a female character, continued with the character's rehabilitation and transformation into a vigilante, and concluded with that character exacting justice on those who violated her. However contemporary rape-revenge fantasy films typically diverge from this narrative structure. Therefore, I embraced Creed's modern definition of the rape-revenge genre. I considered any films in which the main plot surrounded a character seeking revenge on a rapist, or several rapists, following a sexual assault. Finally, all selected films must be directed by a woman. This is to eliminate the male gaze as much as possible in these films, which inhibited original iterations of the rape-revenge film and led to the sexualization of assault. In order to evaluate the progression of the genre, it is essential to determine if a female perspective can completely overrule the male gaze.

After establishing these criteria, I selected the following films: *Revenge*, *M.F.A.*, *The Nightingale*, and *Promising Young Woman*.

### **Methodology**

In this qualitative study I will employ film analyses of the four chosen films: *Revenge*, *M.F.A.*, *The Nightingale*, and *Promising Young Woman*. When conducting my film analyses, I will employ a combination of both textual and cultural theoretical frameworks to examine the ways in which the narrative of each film both reflects and affects society. It is imperative to analyze rape-revenge films through a cultural lens due to the perceived meanings or values imposed on society as a result of the depiction of sexual assault in film. Stuart Hall argues that these meanings, often derived from narratives, "regulate and organize our conduct and practices - they help to set the rules, norms and conventions by which social life is ordered and governed," (1997). The reflection of society within the medium of film is often problematic as it allows the

filmmaker to insert their perspective and beliefs into the narrative. Even female-directed films reveal the ways in which patriarchal ideals are upheld in society. Thus, cultural criticism is necessary in order to determine the effects of the narrative on viewers and society. Overall, this thesis will connect the narrative elements of each film to their broader social contexts.

## **The Selected Films**

### ***Revenge***

*Revenge* is a 2017 French thriller that was written, directed, and edited by Coralie Fargeat. Following its 2017 festival run, *Revenge* grossed \$1.3 million during its limited theatrical release in 2018. It also received \$231,000 in video sales (*Revenge (2018) - Financial Information*, n.d.). Following Lehman's definition, this film most closely resembles the traditional rape-revenge fantasy subgenre. It features a beautiful woman hunting down her rapists, an unrealistic narrative, and a repulsive characterization of her rapist and all the men in the film.

*Revenge* follows Jennifer who is having an affair with her married neighbor, Richard. Soon after arriving at his secluded home in the desert, two of Richard's friends, Stan and Dimitri, join the couple unexpectedly. Stan is immediately attracted to Jennifer, and tries to have sex with her the following morning. After rejecting his advances, Stan becomes aggressive and claims that Jennifer was interested in him before. Dimitri is fully aware of the sexual assault, but turns up the volume on the television to drown out Jennifer's horrific screams.

When Richard returns, he offers Jennifer payment in exchange for her silence. However, Jennifer refuses, demands to be sent home, and threatens to expose the affair to Richard's wife. Richard instantly turns violent and Jennifer runs into the desert. In a dramatic face off, Richard pushes her off a cliff and she is impaled by a tree branch. After being left for dead, Jennifer



miraculously frees herself and hides in a cave. Noticing that Jennifer has managed to escape, the three men embark on a mission to find her and ensure she stays dead. Following a powerful metamorphosis from victim to avenging angel during a series of drug-induced hallucinations. Jennifer defeats all three men in grotesque fight sequences. The film concludes with a shot of triumphant Jennifer as she is rescued by Richard's private helicopter.

Throughout the first act of the film, Jennifer's body is hypersexualized through the use of several low-angle shots of her near-naked body and tracking her from behind. After the introduction of Stan and Dimitri, the sexualization intensifies as they constantly gawk over her body. There are several shots which place her boobs, butt, and other body parts as the focal point. Furthermore, the only information disclosed about Jennifer is that she is an aspiring actress who wants to move to Los Angeles. Thus, the audience experiences the men's misogynistic perspective of his mistress through an effective use of the male gaze. Jennifer simply exists to be a sexual object that the men can use whenever they desire. Once Jennifer's body was no longer of use to the three men, they not only abandoned their previous attraction to her, but they wanted to kill her. Fargeat provides necessary commentary on men's sense of entitlement in regards to women's bodies, even if she does so through an extreme, unrelatable example.

After Jennifer's empowering transformation in the cave, she is portrayed as a warrior with seemingly superhuman endurance. Although she remains minimally clothed, all shots of her focus instead on her face or the action of the scene. She is no longer displayed through the male gaze, but through her own point of view. Thus, Fargeat effectively subverts the male gaze and promotes the female gaze. Although Jennifer's hyper-sexualization in the first act of *Revenge* is intended to serve as a critique of the male gaze, it must objectify her body to do so. Arguably, this is still harmful as sexualized images of a woman's body are still being depicted in the film. It

also raises the question: can we ever completely subvert the male gaze, or is it embedded into societal perception?

When Richard pushes Jennifer off the cliff, the other men are hesitant to leave her to die. However, they ultimately support Richard and do not save Jennifer. Furthermore, as Stan rapes Jennifer, Dimitri is fully aware of the horror that is occurring in the other room. Not only does he fail to save Jennifer, he decides to actively ignore it, siding with Stan. By prioritizing Stan's pleasure over Jennifer's safety, Dimitri embodies the attitude that men should seek to protect one another from the consequences of their actions rather than aim to eliminate any harmful behaviors. Additionally, Jennifer does not receive any support from the other characters in the aftermath of her assault. Thus, the film depicts the dangers of being isolated following a traumatic event.

### **M.F.A.**

*M.F.A.* is a 2018 American thriller film directed by Natalia Leite. This film diverges from the other three selected films because it never had a theatrical release. Instead, after its festival circuit, it released directly to streaming services. Thus, no box office revenue data is available, but the film grossed \$39,000 in DVD and video on demand sales (*M.F.A. (2017) - Financial Information*, n.d.). Like *Revenge*, *M.F.A.* also aligns with the narrative confines of the rape-revenge film, but does not meet all of the requirements of Lehman's definition. Although it includes a beautiful protagonist and a rape by multiple men, it does not include an implausible storyline or an evil characterization of the rapists. Additionally, it provides social commentary about the institutional failings regarding the lack of support for survivors of sexual assault on college campuses.

*M.F.A.* follows Noelle, a reserved graduate art student who struggles to create impassioned pieces. When an attractive classmate invites her to a house party, she is ecstatic. After going to his room, he violently rapes her and Noelle completely shuts down. Noelle attempts to report the assault through the appropriate campus resources, but is met with hostility rather than consolation. The sexual assault advocacy group on campus is equally discouraging, focusing on shallow efforts rather than preventing sexual violence. Feeling unsupported, she confronts her rapist at his home and accidentally kills him by pushing him over a banister. Inspired by the fatal accident, Noelle makes both an artistic and psychological breakthrough, deciding to seek revenge on the men who assaulted innocent women. She utilizes her sexuality to seduce and murder various predators that attend her university. Later, she attacks the man who assaulted her close friend, Skye. Horrified by what Noelle has done, Skye commits suicide and Noelle is subsequently arrested. The film closes with a shot of Noelle in the backseat of a police car.

This film is eager to provide social commentary and tackle the issues of sexual assault on college campuses. A survivor of sexual assault herself, Director Natalie Leite, said she, “felt like I had to make this movie because I have a personal connection to it, I had gone to art school, I had been sexually assaulted during art school,” (Erbland, 2017) She continued to say that making this film allowed her to be “able to go back and process [her experiences with sexual assault] and speak openly about [them],” (Erbland, 2017). Ultimately, Leite takes pride in her work’s ability to spark a meaningful conversation surrounding sexual assault, even if not all viewers understand the film’s intentions. She believes that if *M.F.A* is, “spurring the conversation, then already one woman in the audience is changed by it, then great. It’s already a success story,” (Erbland, 2017)

The film succeeds in its multi-faceted characterization of the several rapists throughout the story. Luke, Noelle's classmate, appears to be charming, trustworthy, and interesting. Noelle is initially attracted to Luke, and wants to impress him. Their dynamic is an accurate reflection of a common situation among college students. The National Institute of Justice reports that the "most common locations [of sexual assault] are the man's or woman's home in the context of a party or a date," (*Most Victims Know Their Attacker*, 2008). This is the exact scenario in which Noelle is raped. Furthermore, when Noelle attacks Skye's abuser, he begs for his life as he cries out, "I'm a good guy, I'm changed!" This reflects the complexity of sexual predators. Although their crimes of sexual violence are reprehensible, rapists are very rarely a one-dimensional, purely evil person. While this distinction is significant and effective in *M.F.A.*, it almost invalidates Noelle's trauma by leading the audience to sympathize with the rapist rather than the vigilante. However, this nuance is essential to the progression of the rape-revenge genre.

Unfortunately, *M.F.A.* also contains several downfalls, including its graphic depictions of sexual assault, and the invalidation of support resources for survivors. First, Noelle's sexual assault occurs around 25 minutes into the film, which is in line with the conventions of the rape-revenge genre. The situation escalates fairly quickly, which leaves the audience wondering when did the situation shift from an innocent hookup to an unthinkable horror? With effective sound design, the noises of the act are drowned out by a high-pitched ringing, signifying Noelle's sense of shock. Later in the film, Noelle comes across a video of a former student of the college who was gang raped by several members of the fraternity. The horrific video seems as if it could happen in real life, which makes it extremely difficult to watch in the midst of the film.

Additionally, *M.F.A.* invalidates sexual support resources on Noelle's college campus, including the counseling center and a women's advocacy group on campus. Although the

challenges Noelle faces are realistic to that of a student seeking assistance following a sexual assault, the film, perhaps unintentionally, conveys that these resources will never be useful. The women's advocacy group's efforts do not even begin to tackle the issue of sexual assault on the college campus, and the counselor's treatment of Noelle is extremely cold and uncaring. Noelle's attitude during those scenes and attitudes following, as she lashes out and takes matters into her own hands, convey that the only way a survivor can receive justice is through violent means, which is problematic.

### **The Nightingale**

Jennifer Kent's highly-controversial Australian film, *The Nightingale*, was released in 2018. The film grossed approximately \$910,000 at the box office and received an additional \$109,000 in DVD sales (*The Nightingale (2019) - Financial Information*, n.d.). *The Nightingale* is the only period piece analyzed in this thesis. It is set in 1825 during the "Black War," the guerilla war between the British and the Aboriginal people, in Van Dieman's Land, the British penal colony in present-day Tasmania. Although it aims to create a historically accurate depiction of the horrors of British colonialism, the themes of the film are still applicable within a twenty-first century context. Additionally, while this film fits with certain aspects of Lehman's definition, specifically the rape by a gang of men, Creed's modern definition is more applicable to this film. Clare is not only avenging her rape, but the murder of her husband and baby as well.

*The Nightingale* follows Clare, an Irish convict working as a servant under Lieutenant Hawkins. Clare, known as "the nightingale," frequently sings for the soldiers in the town bar. After a day at work, Hawkins makes unwanted advances and ends up violently raping Clare. Once her husband discovers what happened, there is a violent confrontation between Hawkins, two additional soldiers, named Ruse and Jago, and Clare's husband. Hawkins rapes Clare in

front of her husband before shooting and killing him. While Hawkins and Ruse take turns assaulting Clare, Jago murders Clare's baby in order to stop it from crying, before Ruse knocks Clare unconscious and leaves her for dead. Enraged that everything has been taken away from her, Clare sets out on a mission to find Hawkins and murder him. In order to do this, she enlists the help of an aboriginal man named Mangana to guide her through the jungle. The unlikely pair bond over their shared experiences of being oppressed by the British Empire and work together to murder Hawkins. Eventually, Clare murders Jago, and Mangana kills Ruse and Hawkins. The final scene depicts Clare and Mangana together on a beach, each singing a song in their native language.

*The Nightingale* provides necessary commentary regarding the horrors of colonialism, specifically the treatment of women and Aboriginal people. In order to create a responsible depiction of these issues, Kent enlisted the help of Tasmanian elders, as well as rape crisis centers. Clare progresses from her initial dismissal of Mangana due to her racist beliefs regarding Aboriginal people. However, over time the two realize their lives have been destroyed as a result of British oppression. Their relationship exposes the atrocities of colonialism, and the character of Mangana provides audiences with a realistic perspective regarding this immoral era of Australian history.

Alternatively, because the focus of the film shifts from Clare's plan for vengeance against her rapist to the pair's plan for vengeance against their shared oppressor, the film does not provide audiences with the catharsis of watching Clare murder Hawkins. In an equally powerful moment, Mangana applies war paint and murders Hawkins and Ruse. Although this moment is very cathartic for Mangana and all the silenced Aboriginal people of Australia, it is not as

cathartic for Clare. She is able to kill Jago, but her final revenge on Hawkins is executed by a man.

Additionally, the depictions of sexual assault and violence are difficult to watch due to their hyperrealism and frequency. Together, minimal sound design and POV shots immerse the viewer into the situation and create a sense of danger and discomfort. Clare is subjected to several rounds of sexual violence within the first twenty minutes of the film, making it difficult for some viewers to watch past that point. Despite the film's controversy surrounding its several brutal depictions of sexual assault throughout the film, director Jennifer Kent defends her work because she has been "personally contacted by more than a few victims of sexual violence after screenings who are grateful for the film's honesty and who have drawn comfort from its themes," (Thomas, 2019).

### **Promising Young Woman**

In the most recent release out of these selections, *Promising Young Woman*, written and directed by Emerald Fennell, slightly diverges from the traditional rape-revenge fantasy structure because it never explicitly displays the sexual assault which inspires the revenge. Furthermore, the protagonist is not a survivor of sexual assault herself. Instead, she is seeking revenge on behalf of a loved one. Thus, Creed's definition encompasses this film perfectly. This film is the most mainstream out of the selected films, and it even received five nominations at the 93rd Academy Awards, ultimately winning the category for Best Original Screenplay. Despite facing complications from limited capacity and closures of movie theaters due to COVID-19, *Promising Young Woman* still grossed \$13.3 million at the box office (*Promising Young Woman* (2020) - *Financial Information*, n.d.).

*Promising Young Woman* follows Cassie, a medical school dropout who habitually pretends to be drunk at bars so that men will take her home and attempt to have sex with her without her consent. Before anything happens, Cassie reveals that she is sober and forces the men to realize they were about to rape a woman. She does this every night to avenge the memory of her best friend Nina, who was raped while the two were in medical school and later committed suicide. Despite Nina reporting the assault to the school and instance being filmed, no action was taken to bring the men to justice. As Cassie begins a relationship with former classmate, Ryan, she recognizes that her revenge will never bring her closure for what happened to Nina. Thus, she ceases her efforts and focuses on her own personal growth and happiness.

However, this does not last long after Cassie discovers that Ryan was present during Nina's assault and did nothing to save her. She breaks up with him and calculates her final plan for revenge against Nina's rapist, Al. She arrives to his bachelor party disguised as a stripper, before leading him upstairs and handcuffing him to a bed. She reveals her true identity and attempts to carve Nina's name into his abdomen so that it would be impossible for him to forget his crime and her existence. In a shocking turn of events, Al manages to overpower Cassie and suffocates her with a pillow until she dies. Prior to her death, Cassie disclosed her location to the lawyer that previously defended Al in the rape case. The lawyer contacts the police and Al is arrested at his own wedding. The film concludes with Cassie's scheduled messages to Ryan, confirming that Cassie was the mastermind behind Al's arrest.

*Promising Young Woman* redefines the modern rape-revenge film and subverts expectations of the genre. Instead of violent retribution, Cassie utilizes her wit in order to manipulate men into recognizing their inappropriate and predatory behavior. Additionally, audiences never experience the sexual assault that inspires Cassie's acts of revenge. Although



this event is not explicitly shown, the traumatic nature of sexual assault is understood throughout the rest of the film.

Although *Promising Young Woman* accurately reflects what survivors experience in the aftermath of their sexual assault through an effective criticism of rape culture, the film suffers from two major flaws: the absence of Nina and the death of Cassie at the end of the film. Although Nina's death and subsequent absence in the film provides powerful commentary regarding her being silenced by society, it ultimately deprives the audience of learning about her story first-hand. Additionally, her nonexistence precludes viewers from empathizing or relating to a character who experiences sexual assault. Instead, the audience only knows about Nina through the memories of others, including Cassie and Nina's mother. This equates Nina's identity to that of an idea, rather than a whole person.

Additionally, the audience does not experience the catharsis that is typical of a rape-revenge film due to its violent retributions against the rapists. This lack of catharsis is a result of Cassie's non-violent tactics that force men to admit to their problematic behavior, which is arguably more effective in promoting critical thought in the audience. However, this creates an even greater dissatisfaction with Cassie's death at the hands of Nina's rapist at the end of the film. Cassie was about to carve Nina's name into his abdomen, as a permanent reminder of the woman whose life he destroyed. However, he physically overtook Cassie and suffocated her using a pillow. Although he is arrested for Cassie's murder in the last scene of the film, it is not empowering for either Cassie or Nina since they are still dead as a result.

## **Discussion**

This analysis of the contemporary rape-revenge fantasy genre through a combination of narrative and cultural lenses has highlighted several aspects of the film that are consistent among

all case studies. For example, each of the aforementioned rape-revenge fantasy films address two major issues: the societal value of the reputation of men over the well-being of women and the inadequacy of support and justice for survivors. Both of these issues reflect real-life attitudes towards sexual assault and survivors. Due to these films reflecting the current state of the world and women's place within it, it is essential for the rape-revenge film genre to be subject to continuous analysis. Constant research regarding this topic will examine how the genre progresses with society and upholds a responsibility to accurate depictions of sexual assault.

Although there is a well-established area of scholarship surrounding the rape-revenge genre, future research could expand upon the analyses and explore the psychological effects of watching these films. This could provide a definitive answer as to whether survivors of sexual assault find rape-revenge films empowering or exploitive. Research could also evaluate the viewer's emotions towards the protagonist's efforts for revenge, ranging from disgust to empathy for the survivor. Any tools such as surveys, focus groups, or one-on-one interviews could give researchers an insight into the emotions of watching a rape-revenge film. A depiction of sexual assault can pose as a very serious trigger for some, thus it is necessary to conduct adequate research in order to improve its representation in film as much as possible.

## **Conclusion**

Despite improvements from its 1970s origins, many problematic tropes and depictions of sexual assault remain present in the rape-revenge fantasy subgenre in contemporary feature films. Thus, improvements to the genre are necessary to create a more responsible portrayal of sexual violence. As long as sexual assault continues to be a common experience, it is essential to continue to share those stories through the medium of film. However, without improvements, the rape-revenge fantasy subgenre neither benefits survivors nor society as a whole. Thus, I argue

that the rape-revenge fantasy should eliminate all graphic depictions of sexual assault, include better developed protagonists and antagonists, and include endings that express hope for the survivor.

First, it is imperative to eliminate such explicit depictions of sexual assault because they isolate audiences and mostly appeal to shock value. Approximately 20 to 30 audience members walked out of the theater during the Sydney premiere of *The Nightingale* due to the excessive graphic content, with one audience member shouting, “I’m not watching this. She’s already been raped twice,” (Thomas, 2019). As a result, those viewers were disadvantaged because they failed to benefit from the powerful social commentary present later in the film. Such graphic portrayals make it impossible for audiences to ignore the horror of sexual assault. Alternatively, it provides viewers with an opportunity to evaluate their own opinions regarding survivors. However, why does the audience need to be subjected to brutalized sexual violence in order to empathize with the protagonist on her journey to seek revenge? The severity of sexual assault should be recognized without having to explicitly display this on screen. This emphasizes the necessary cultural changes, alongside those made to the filmmaking conventions of the genre, that must occur in order to provide a more supportive environment for survivors. Additionally, explicit depictions of sexual assault risk triggering any survivors by not only reminding them of their previous experience, but forcing them to watch a detailed representation on screen.

Next, rape-revenge fantasy films must include well-rounded protagonists and antagonists so as to avoid caricatures of survivors and assailants. For example, Clare’s character in *The Nightingale* is defined by her anger and need for revenge against Hawkins. Hawkins does not possess any redeeming characteristics, making it impossible for the viewer to not empathize with Clare’s demand for vengeance. Although this film takes place during the 19th century, it is

dangerous to both minimize a survivor to her assault and to characterize an assailant only by his wrong-doings, as this is not an accurate reflection of most dynamics between a survivor and their attacker. According to the National Institute of Justice, “About 85 to 90 percent of sexual assaults reported by college women are perpetrated by someone known to the victim; about half occur on a date,” (*Most Victims Know Their Attacker*, 2008). There is typically more doubt surrounding accusations of an esteemed member of the community or a trusted friend. Thus, rape-revenge films have a great opportunity to explore those challenging dynamics by encouraging audience members to believe survivors, even when it is challenging or difficult to understand.

Lastly, rape-revenge films should include resolutions that depict a greater sense of hope for the survivors of sexual assault. In both *Revenge* and *The Nightingale*, it is ambiguous as to what will happen to Jennifer and Clare, respectively, following the credits. Although they are able to escape their rapists and are free to live their lives, not much else is known about their futures. In *M.F.A.*, Noelle is arrested for seeking revenge, and Cassie is murdered in *Promising Young Women*. None of these endings provide a sense of peace or hope for the protagonists, which perpetuates the idea that their sexual assault will define their life. Additionally, these endings demonstrate that even after seeking physical retribution, the difficulties coping with such a traumatic event will continue to harm the survivor. While it is accurate to convey the long-lasting traumatic effects, survivors of sexual assault could benefit from an ending which allows the survivor to not only survive but to thrive in her freedom from her rapist. Although not every film which depicts sexual assault is created with the intent to provide survivors with concrete solutions, filmmakers must remain responsible and cognizant of the possible effects their films may have on survivors.

There is still a demand for responsible storytelling surrounding sexual assault and violence against women, but the rape-revenge fantasy is currently not the method in which to do so. Despite the progressions from its origins in the 1970s, the rape-revenge genre still does little more than provide momentary satisfaction and entertainment. Additionally, it continues to raise questions about the next steps for survivors after they have completed their revenge. The forced exposure to graphic sexual assault and violence isolates audiences and therefore eliminates any possibility of gaining a new perspective or increasing empathy for survivors.

Ultimately, in order to be accurately categorized as a rape-revenge fantasy film, it must either track a survivor of sexual assault, or a loved one of a survivor, while on their journey to vengeance. Using Creed's broad definition, there are several opportunities for the genre to continue to progress. However, I believe that the amount of progressions necessary to ethically transform the genre will cause it to become a new genre entirely. Additionally, this would distinguish modern stories of sexual assault from the problematic origins of the 1970s.

However, if a survivor currently feels empowered following a rape-revenge fantasy film, their experience should not be minimized or belittled. Each individual will cope with sexual assault in a unique way that is right for them. Despite the positive reactions to rape-revenge films from some survivors, I still assert that there is a moral responsibility of any filmmaker to provide a universally empowering experience for survivors, rather than attempting to do so by using controversial tropes inherent to the traditional rape-revenge fantasy genre. Thus, contemporary filmmakers should not regress into the tropes of the rape-revenge fantasy genre. Instead, they should develop a narrative structure that depicts sexual assault as it occurs in society, not through the lens of a "fantasy." By eliminating graphic depictions of sexual assault, including well-rounded protagonists and antagonists, and deliver a narrative conclusion that conveys a sense of

hope, filmmakers can provide viewers with an opportunity for critical thought and promise young women a cathartic, yet realistic, experience.

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