Aalborg University

# Can You Guess What Every Woman's Worst Nightmare Is?

A Study of Rape-Revenge, Sympathy, and Morality in Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman*

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Master's Thesis
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3 January 2022

**Abstract**

In the wake of the #MeToo movement, a lot of focus has been put on sexual harassment and sexual assault of women in particular. A lot of rape victims still experience victim blaming and the process of going through a trial can be psychologically damaging. Two out of three rapes go unreported, and out of those reported, 975 perpetrators out of 1000 sexual assaults walk free. In 9 out of 10 cases the victim is female. Thus, sexual assault and consent is an interesting topic, because so few cases end up in court and get the rapist convicted. *Promising Young Woman* centers on the topic of rape culture, victim blaming, and the consequences it can have when the perpetrator goes unpunished. Thus, this study seeks to investigate the ways in which Emerald Fennell uses the revenge story in *Promising Young Woman* to problematize rape culture and victim blaming, as well as its effect on the spectator, in order to determine what the combination of the topics of revenge, sympathy and morality in the film imparts about the prevalent discourse in rape culture and the gray areas of the debate.

The study employs a selection of theories in order to investigate how *Promising Young Woman* use revenge, sympathy and morality to problematize rape culture and victim blaming in the prevalent discourses and a debate full of grey areas. In the field of cognitive film theory, Murray Smith's theory of character engagement and Margrethe Bruun Vaage's theory of the antihero are used to determine sympathy structures in the film, and Cassie's role as an antihero. Allison Young and Claire Henry's characterization of the rape-revenge genre is used to determine if *Promising Young Woman* is a traditional rape-revenge film or a new take on the genre. Miranda Fricker's notion of testimonial injustice is used to analyze how a rape victim's credibility is often questioned while the rapist's is not, and how this results in silencing and victim blaming. The study will employ an interdisciplinary approach using film analysis and literary analysis mixed with culture studies.

The main protagonist Cassie is a rape avenger and antihero, who takes proxy vengeance for her friend Nina, bringing her on a path of revenge where she makes her targets think they are being raped or are in danger to prove a point and then reveals they are not in danger when they have changed their minds. Nina experienced persistent and systematic testimonial injustice undermining her as a speaker due to credibility deficit resulting in silencing. Her rape and subsequent death function as a plea for excuse to justify Cassie's revenge, as rape is morally disgusting. Ryan was an onlooker to Nina's rape, who at first appears sympathetic, but he protects himself instead of telling the truth. He becomes an onlooker to Cassie's murder through Al's arrest resulting in an unsympathetic allegiance and represents white male privilege contributing to a negative portrayal of men. The five-act revenge plan shows the

difficulty in getting justice as a rape victim. A friend, the education institution, and the justice system silenced Nina through victim-blaming. Both the friend and the educational institution maintain their position, forcing Cassie to punish them, as they favor the rapist. The justice system represented by a defense attorney who regrets his actions is spared from punishment, because he shows remorse. The rapist is built up to be an antagonist but turns out to be a weak man showing a fragile masculinity. He does not take responsibility for his actions, and by a turn of events, he suffocates Cassie. However, Cassie rises as a phoenix from the ashes and takes her final revenge post-mortem, getting the rapist arrested to the relief of the spectator. The ending provides a realistic view on the asymmetry between rape and murder in reality and fiction, as it is easier to get convictions in murder-cases than in rape cases. The film presents a negative portrayal of men, through white male privilege and toxic masculinity, and that every man can be a potential predator.

The study problematizes that there is a general understanding that every rape accuser is a potential liar, as opposed to every rape accused being potentially guilty. By posing as an intoxicated woman and being taken advantage of by men who are shocked when Cassie is discovered to be sober, the film highlights gray areas of the rape debate, where it is often difficult to get a conviction. Thus, it comments on issues of consent, and how the burden is placed on the victim for proving that a crime has been committed towards them, while they experience silencing and victim blaming, and everyone sides with the attacker. As a result, the film provides a nuanced view on a difficult discussion.

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Master's thesis
January 2, 2022

## Introduction

In the wake of the #MeToo movement, a lot of focus has been put on sexual harassment and sexual assault of women in particular. More and more survivors of rape are coming forward, and consent-based rape legislation is being discussed to great length. However, a lot of victims still experience victim blaming and the process of going through a trial can be psychologically damaging. According to the anti-sexual violence organization RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network), only 310 out of every 1000 sexual assaults are reported to the police, meaning two out of three rapes go unreported, and in those reported, 975 perpetrators out of 1000 sexual assaults walk free, suggesting an unwillingness to report sexual assaults due to the difficulty of getting the perpetrator convicted (RAINN).

Contrary to what many believe, 67 % of sexual assaults take place at or near the home of the victim, the perpetrator, or the relatives of either, and in 72 % of the cases, the rapist is someone the victim knows and not just a stranger who attacks the victim in the street (RAINN). In 9 out of 10 cases, the victim is female, and in the college setting, women are twice as likely to be sexually assaulted than they are to be robbed (RAINN). This proves the existence of a college rape culture that has developed over the years, as only 20 % of female students report sexual assault to law enforcement (RAINN).

Thus, sexual assault and consent are interesting topics, because so few cases end up in court and get the rapist convicted. There are a lot of grey areas which create much debate, however this debate should be more straightforward, as rape is illegal. Often cases end with a 'he said, she said' situation, where it is difficult to find sufficient evidence to prove the rapist guilty. Often a reputation, choice of clothing, or an intoxicated state is used to blame the victim for being raped, while the rapist walks free, especially in cases with privileged white men against women. In this way, victim blaming can lead to an attitude that does not hold the perpetrator accountable (Morin, A).

*Promising Young Woman* is the first feature length film by director, writer and actress Emerald Fennell, and it centers on the topic of rape culture, victim blaming, and the consequences it can have when the perpetrator goes unpunished. The film revolves around the

woman Cassie, whose best friend Nina has been raped and is now dead, and her plan to get revenge from the people who failed to help Nina and let the perpetrator get away. Thus, the film portrays an interesting and highly relevant topic, and throughout the film, the spectator is taken on an emotional rollercoaster ride which evokes feelings of frustration, outrage, despair, hope, happiness, sadness, and righteousness questioning sympathy with certain characters. The film gives an interesting view into the discussion of rape, questioning the way society views rape victims when they come forward in the college setting and how friends, educational institutions, and the justice system treat the victim and the rapist differently. Moreover, it also calls into question where the moral line of revenge can be drawn and explores the possibility of a rape avenger getting justice without turning into a violent vigilante. These considerations have formed the basis of the following thesis statement:

This study seeks to investigate the ways in which Emerald Fennell uses the revenge story in *Promising Young Woman* to problematize rape culture and victim blaming, as well as its effect on the spectator, in order to determine what the combination of the topics of revenge, sympathy and morality in the film imparts about the prevalent discourse in rape culture and the gray areas of the debate.

To explicate the above thesis statement, this study will employ the following method. The first chapter is a presentation of Murray Smith's theory of character engagement based on his book *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (1995). This theory is placed within the area of cognitive film theory, and it proposes how spectators identify with characters through sympathy and empathy. Firstly, accounts of the notions of character and spectator are provided to give a theoretical framework with which to analyze films within Western culture. Secondly, the structure of sympathy and the three engagement levels of recognition, alignment, and allegiance are presented, and finally empathy is considered through the terms affective mimicry and emotional simulation to complete the model of character engagement. This theory provides a way to interpret how spectators do or do not sympathize with characters through moral evaluations; it is an attempt to theorize how the spectator responds to film with an understanding of the filmic devices that are used to evoke a particular reaction. Of course, it must be kept in mind that the theoretical spectator is based on a generalization of beliefs and cultural knowledge that will not apply to all individual spectators. Furthermore, this thesis is produced by a white, cisgendered woman whose gender, cultural and emotional predispositions, and general values inevitably affect her spectatorship. However, Smith's theory accounts for a view of characters within Western culture where the spectatorial response is based on universally acknowledged cultural assumptions and stereotypes of the Western

world which are not gendered or founded in individual ideologies, thus allowing for the use of a generalized, theoretical spectator.

To aid Smith's theory, the second chapter looks into Margrethe Bruun Vaage's concept of the antihero from her book *The Antihero in American Television* (2016), also within the area of cognitive film theory, which provides a more emotional approach than Smith's rational, moral evaluations. Thus, firstly, an overview of Vaage's critique of Smith's theory is given before her theory of sympathizing with the antihero is presented. Then the notions of fictional relief and reality checks, partiality and familiarity, moral inversion of suspense, pro-social punishment and aesthetic attraction, and finally rape and moral disgust are characterized, as they provide a theoretical framework for understanding engagement with characters that are not entirely morally good. Even though the theory concerns antiheroes in American television, Vaage's concepts and notions are still applicable to film due to the similarities in the cinematographic construction of film and series despite their difference in length.

In relation to Vaage's theorization about rape and moral disgust, the third chapter of theory discusses rape-revenge as a genre using Allison Young's chapter "Rape-revenge" in her book *The scene of Violence* (2010) and Claire Henry's book *Revisionist Rape-Revenge: Redefining a Film Genre* (2014). The chapter provides an overview of the typical rape-revenge film and how it has changed over time, to be able to determine if *Promising Young Woman* is a traditional rape-revenge film or a new take on the genre.

The fourth and final theoretical chapter concerns testimonial injustice coined by Miranda Fricker in her book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (2007). Only the concept of testimonial injustice is employed in the project, as it is most relevant to the topic of rape and consent. This concept is used to analyze how rape victims' credibility is often questioned while the rapists' is not, and how this results in silencing and victim blaming, as there is a general understanding that every rape accuser is a potential liar, as opposed to every rape accused being potentially guilty.

The second part of this study is an in-depth analysis of *Promising Young Woman* using the theories as the theoretical framework. The analysis is divided into two sections, one of which focuses on typical characters from the rape-revenge genre, while the second section examines the institutions that contribute to testimonial injustice. The first section thus provides an analysis of the vigilante Cassie, the victim Nina, and the onlooker Ryan respectively, and the second section entails an analysis of the five-part revenge plan, as it happens chronologically in the film. The revenge plan section centers on a former friend, the educational institution in the form of a Dean, the justice system through a defense lawyer, the rapist, and

lastly, the final revenge. All will be seen in relation to the sympathetic allegiance of the vigilante and her role as a female antihero, thus expanding the analysis of her while incorporating analyses and discussions of the other characters.

To mobilize the theory in the analysis of these characters, the study will employ an interdisciplinary approach using film analysis and literary analysis mixed with cultural studies. From film analysis, tools like cinematography, mise-en-scene, and sound are used to analyze the characters' moods and mental states combined with a literary analysis focusing on characterization and focalization. To look at the study from a cultural point of view, the film analysis and literary analysis are combined with critical cultural concepts like patriarchy, white male privilege, and toxic masculinity to discuss how the characters reflect and represent discourses in society.

Lastly, Cassie's way of taking revenge is discussed using Jack Halberstam's notion of imagined violence to determine why imagined violence towards men is worse than physical violence against women. Furthermore, some cultural issues of the film are discussed, like the significance of the film being written and directed by a British director yet taking place in an American setting, or the rape victim being portrayed by a white woman, when the typical rape victim is Native American. To end the discussion, the film is discussed in relation to the rape-revenge genre, to determine its contribution and development of the genre.

## Engaging Characters Through the Structure of Sympathy

In the following, Murray Smith's theory of character engagement from his book *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (1995) is presented within the area of cognitive film theory in an attempt to define identification.

### Character

Characters are central in understanding identification, as a character is "a fictional analogue of a human agent" (Smith 17), reflecting an actual identifiable person. A character is an important but dependent part of a narrative, as humans experience most of the social world through other human faces (18). However, the fictional nature of characters subsequently renders them as mere constructs without autonomy (17-18). Thus, a character is assumed to have some specific physical features similar to a real person, such as a body, and the spectator then fills in the blanks via cultural models, stereotypes, contrasting characters, words of reference and other clues provided by the text (19-20).

To establish what characterizes a human agent, Smith presents the 'person schema' as the primary theory for what a person is. The person schema is a set of assumptions which is shared across cultures, as characters also depend on conceptions of social roles in a specific culture. Thus, the human agent in the person schema should have the following features and capacities to fulfil a social role:

1. a discrete human body, individuated and continuous through time and space;
2. perceptual activity, including self-awareness;
3. intentional states, such as beliefs and desires;
4. emotions;
5. the ability to use and understand a natural language;
6. the capacity for self-impelled actions and self-interpretation;
7. the potential for traits, or persisting attributes (21).

When spectators construct characters, they base it on the person schema and adapt it to the particular film in question. The person schema is an imaginative instrument to construct characters beyond what is seen or implied in the narrative. However, the schema can always be revised according to cultural assumptions or other missing capacities, and these allow the spectator to form expectations and fill in blanks in their construction of the characters (31). Embedded in the concept of character is a mimetic assumption that characters imitate a human

agent, and the notion of character obtains a mimetic relationship between a fictional narrative and the real world (34).

According to the person schema, a person usually has a discrete human body, and thus some of the physical constraints within human societies must be conformed to, and this discrete human body is also continuous, which makes a reconciliation of conflicting qualities possible while it also provides a way to talk about "conflicted persons, split subjects, and 'disunified characters'" (26). Representations of characters depend on conventions, and one such convention is that a character is played by a single performer, also written as the ratio 'one performer : one character' (27). Over time, another convention has become important, and that is the assignment of proper names to characters. The person schema is used to organize the traits of a character, and this is not beyond words, as it is assumed that every human agent satisfies the person schema in relation to their body and/or name. However, proper names also have a typifying function, as they can add information about things like nationality, gender, and class (30).

**Spectator**

Smith's concept of spectator concerns the spectators' imaginative abilities to negotiate their relationship to a film and to ideology. Spectators' emotional responses to film are not manipulated by the positioning of the spectators, but are more impulsive, unconscious and bodily, and emotions "form part of an integrated cycle of perception, cognition, and action" (Smith 41). The spectator has to be aware that a film is always a representation in order to react to it accordingly. For instance, when a film diverges from real time, the spectator must be aware that the temporal dimension of the narrative is manipulated, and the spatial dimension is also manipulated, because the spectator most often is an onlooker to the events taking place in the film (43). Furthermore, the assessment of the plausibility of a film is dependent on "the degree to which the particular text conforms to a set of beliefs about reality, rather than an objective world standing outside of all beliefs and values" (45). Thus, a film is more realistic when it resembles the spectator's unconscious beliefs about society, since it is plausible and familiar, whereas a film that challenges these unconscious beliefs about society will be seen as unrealistic.

Imagination plays a key role in understanding the process of identification between spectators (real persons) and characters (fictive persons). Looking at imagination from a cognitive psychological viewpoint, which incorporates the constraints on thought and agency, provides a good definition (47). A central term is schema defined as "a pattern which allows

the mind to organize and process the mass of sensory data it constantly receives" (47). Schemata help predict outcomes and provide connections to get to an understanding of and form expectations of the outcome, and imagination comes into play when a person tries to get an understanding and form expectations (47-48). Cultural models are also important, as they enable people to identify characters and actions from a few key details, and people always use schemata to comprehend social events and structuring them within a certain schema. The behavior related to schemata happens unreflectively and quickly, but can be a way into a reflection, and thus schemata are conscious, but not something people think about, as it is an automated process. This also involves general cultural and ideological beliefs and values, which becomes a lens to see the world with, but not a lens people see (51). Imagination is important as a view of human cognition, because even though beliefs and values shape the social structures people grow up in, they have the ability to expand and adapt their existing schema because of new experiences, which also apply to fictional characters (52).

Mimesis is also important for the understanding of the spectator, and the concept is "the imitation of human action by the body or voice, […] or cinematic image" (53). Spectators go through a mimetic process to understand a representation and use their knowledge of textual and artistic practice, but also their knowledge of the real world, as it is defined for them. Thus, spectators must use the same schemata they use to understand reality to understand fiction (53). Therefore, characters should be seen as human agents where the person schema and cultural models are utilized. However, a fictional work also asks spectators to revise their assumptions, beliefs, and values so they match the film, which can suggest other physical laws, histories, moral codes, and social rituals. Thus, the spectators need their experiences of the world to understand a fictional film, but the film can also transform the spectators' understanding of the real world (54).

The consequence of emotional reactions to fiction concerns the paradox of fiction which is "the idea that in engaging with fictions we behave as if we both believe and do not believe in the reality of the fictional events" (55). For emotional responses to fiction, there is not a requirement of actual existence, only the imaginative belief that the objects and events in the fictional representation are real. However, spectators' emotional responses are different, and they are conflicting in their emotions, for instance when watching films based on a true story (57). Furthermore, "emotional responses to real events cannot be seen as more significant and legitimate than emotional responses to fictions" (58).

In Smith's model of the spectator, the active and creative work interpreting the materials and structures of a fictional text by the spectator plays an important role. The

spectator's understanding of a fictional text is affected "by their socially formed desires, values and interests" (63). A film can change a spectator's beliefs and values and provide new possibilities, as the motivation for engaging with film is the element of surprise and the confrontation with something unfamiliar. Filmmakers bring beliefs, values, and interests into the making of films, and they use stereotypes and other aesthetic devices to create a specific affect and belief in the spectator. Thus, filmmakers and spectators are roles individuals inhabit, and the spectator responds to a film with an understanding of the practice the film uses to obtain a particular feeling (64).

**The Structure of Sympathy**

Smith's comprehensive theory of character engagement uses the structure of sympathy consisting of the three levels of engagement, namely recognition, alignment, and allegiance (Smith 82). Essential to understanding the levels of engagement are the definitions of central and acentral imagining. Central imagining is when the spectator thinks of him- or herself as being the character in a specific situation, whereas acentral imagining is the spectator's reaction to the thought of the character in a specific situation (79). Thus, the linguistic difference is that central imagining often is formulated by "I imagine…" calling for certain senses and emotions, whereas acentral imagining is formulated by "I imagine that…" creating an understanding of what it must feel like (76-77). Central imagining plays an important role in the process of identification, but it is not restricted to a single character, and it functions within an overall structure of acentral imagining (81). Thus, the structure of sympathy is an acentral structure which draws upon central imagining.

**Recognition**

Recognition is the process in which spectators construct characters and happens through a perception of the image of the body in film seen "as an individuated and continuous human agent" (Smith 82, 110). Individuation concerns "the criteria for the numerical distinctness of persons who have the same general description" (110), and continuity, also called re-identification, concerns "the criteria for reidentifying the same individual in different contexts, under different descriptions, or at different timers" (110). Thus, re-identification is dependent on individuation, as the spectator is not able to re-identify a character that is not individuated, and together individuation and re-identification make up recognition (110-111). However, recognition also depends on some foregoing mental operations called 'proto-recognition'.

Proto-recognition deals with the ability to differentiate human agents from other objects. The spectator assumes that a character follows a mimetic hypothesis unless the film contradicts the spectator's belief (82). Accordingly, a character has to consist of human traits and functions for the spectator to be attracted to him or her, as the spectator cannot become allied with "an inert bundle of traits" (82).

For Smith, the face, body, and voice play an important role in recognition, and there are two reasons as to why he looks at both psychological dispositions and bodily features as character traits. Firstly, the fact that a character is a continuous human agent means that he or she can change over time for instance by aging. Thus, the bodily features of a character are not fixed but are subject to change just as psychological dispositions are (113). Secondly, facial expressions and bodily features often express psychological dispositions, for instance through shifty eyes or a slight smile. Hence, it is difficult to separate the body from the psychological state when recognizing characters, as the mental states of characters are made available to the spectator through physical movements (113). The star persona also plays a role in our recognition, as the actor or actress portraying a character will provide the spectator with schemata that makes them able to assign traits to the character based on the star persona (119).

Continuity is also important for the unity of a character. Unity traditionally refers to an identical core that cannot change even though the physical and mental states of the character change, and a character is said to be disunified if there are two conflicting or contradictory mental states or traits in one discrete and continuous body. Because of this, re-identification helps the spectator in creating continuity between two different figures, for instance an older and younger version of a character, and the continuity between these figures then helps create unity (114). However, this does not mean that characters cannot be complex and have different beliefs within themselves, but they will have body discreteness and continuity as a real person (82).

Recognition is thus primarily focused on the physical features as body, face, and voice, although language can also play a role in terms of dialogue or voice-over, but as Smith argues "we usually encounter persons first 'through' their bodies and are assured re-identification when we are familiar with the body of the person" (114). However, spectators depend on names, pronouns, and descriptions to construct characters that are not there physically to distinguish them from other characters. Also, once the person schema is elicited, a body is imagined for such a linguistic character which becomes the focus of continuity for that human agent. Hence, the physical features of a character are often the first thing a spectator sees, and thus recognition relies on body, face and voice, and in the case of linguistic characters, where

the body is not featured or described, the spectator still assume that it exists because it is evoked by the person schema (116). Consequently, recognition is a process in which the physical features of body, face and voice are the key functions, but language may also contribute with features and characters. Smith sums up:

> the principal materials for the narration, in eliciting character recognition, are bodily images (face, clothing, deportment, actions performed by the character), vocal cues, and language (proper names, 'titular' names which designate social roles like 'father', pronouns, descriptions) conveyed through title, dialogue, or voice-over narration, with bodily imagery assuming a historical and pragmatic though not logical primacy (117-118).

**Alignment**

Alignment is the process in which spectators are given access to the actions, thoughts, and feelings of characters through visual and aural information (Smith 75, 83). The term is linked to focalization, also known as point of view, in literature (145). Spectators are guided by the film to link their perceptions with one or more characters and align them with these characters. The structure of alignment consists of two functions, spatio-temporal attachment and subjective access, which is associated with narrational range and depth and will be elaborated below (142, 144). There are many different patterns of alignment generated by various degrees of spatio-temporal attachment and subjective access, as spectators can have access to and be attached to a few characters and have limited access and attachment to other characters (144-145). In addition, a premise for alignment is recognition, as the spectator cannot become aligned with a character before he or she has been individuated. However, once the spectator is aligned with one or more characters, alignment can affect recognition of other characters, as the spectator perceives the narrative through the character's perspective (144).

Thus, alignment refers to a range of possibilities involving spatio-temporal attachment and subjective access. Spatio-temporal attachment deals with how the narration focuses on the actions, thoughts, and feelings of one or more characters over one or several spatio-temporal paths, thus becoming more or less exclusive (142). Thus, there are two extremes within the range of spatio-temporal attachment: exclusive attachment to one character or multiple attachment to many different characters (146). As these are two extremes, most films are placed somewhere in between.

Subjective access is the degree of access the spectator has to a character's mind and thus into their subjectivity. This can be different from character to character, as the main characters will often provide more subjective access than minor characters and can range from subjective transparency to opacity (83, 142, 150). The degree of subjective access can vary, so the spectator is given more or less subjective access to characters. The subjectivities of different characters can be presented successively and simultaneously, and it is also possible to have multiple intersubjective access to a shared mental state of more characters (150). Hence, subjective access is also a range where most films are placed somewhere in between. In analysis of subjective access, both the performance by the actor or actress and music are important, as they give information about the inner states of characters (151). To recap, "[a]ttachment is that function of narration which renders characters as agents, entities that act and behave; subjective access is the function that represents characters as entities that desire, believe, feel, think and so forth" (143).

Perceptual alignment is alignment through optical and aural point of view (POV) shots and it is one resource in controlling alignment, but not the most important one, as there are other ways for spectators to gain access to different characters (83-84). POV structures can give information about a character's thoughts in relation to what the character is seeing, but "the mind is not always consumed by what the eyes see, and what the eyes see does not itself tell us what the mind thinks" (156-157). Therefore, POV should be seen as a technique that adds to character subjectivity but does not provide it solely (158). Also, optical POV shots do not give the spectator access to a character's facial expressions, which are important to create meaning, and this creates a paradox as the more a film tries to give subjective access through optical POV, the more it loses the subjective access to a character's mental state (169-160). POV shots have two functions related to alignment: "the *marking* of alignment and the extreme *restriction* of narration" (161). A film does not need to use POV shots to create subjective access and form alignment between spectator and character, but sometimes they are used as an emphasis to create or strengthen the alignment structure, and thus become a marker of alignment (161-163). If the spectator is positioned as the character, he or she is not gaining any deeper access to the character's subjectivity and is thus aligned in an extremely restrictive way. The spectator is aligned with the character based on a shared limited knowledge and this creates a strong bond between spectator and character, but only forms a larger part of the alignment structure and not the main structure (163-164).

**Allegiance**

Allegiance is the process by which spectators perform moral evaluations of characters, and how a film influences the spectator's sympathies or antipathies for different characters. This is closest to the everyday notion of identification where the spectator identifies with characters based on perspectives of class, nation, age, ethnicity, and gender. However, allegiance also depends upon the spectator having reliable access to the character's emotional state, understanding the reason behind a character's actions, and having evaluated the character morally with this knowledge in mind (84). Allegiance is not dependent on alignment, but often spectators are aligned with characters they are expected to be sympathetic towards, yet in some cases, like with the antihero, the spectator is aligned with a character they feel unsympathetic towards (Smith 187).

The spectator evaluates characters in relation to other characters and becomes allied with the character who has a morally preferable set of traits, and then the spectator forms an emotionally appropriate response to the situation the character is in (188). These moral evaluations can change over time, as the spectator only has to believe that he or she has a basis for evaluation at some point in the narrative of the film (85). When a spectator sympathizes with a character, he or she does not simulate or mimic the character's mental state but understands the character and the context of the situation he or she is in, and on the basis of this makes a sympathetic or antipathetic evaluation of the character and responds emotionally appropriately (86).

Moral evaluations of characters are both cognitive and affective, and the spectator forms moral structures and patterns of moral orientation which together make up the structure of allegiance (187). Common mechanisms of moral orientation are character action, iconography, and music (84). Character action concerns the behavior of main characters towards minor characters, for instance thoughtful and generous behavior towards socially and physically weaker characters result in a positive evaluation (190). Iconography, relating to images, affects the spectator's moral evaluations through general assumptions like racial types or through suggestions specific to genres or the text itself (192). Lastly, music adds to the mood of characters and their actions (193). In addition to these mechanisms, linguistic techniques like sociolects and symbolic names add to the moral orientation, and the star persona also plays a role, as the spectator's moral evaluations of characters are affected by the actor or actress, and thus "star 'charisma' can (…) be used to direct our sympathies" (193).

Smith states that "[m]oral orientation is the narrational complement to the notion of moral structure" (216), which will be elaborated below. However, there are two types of moral

orientation: stable and dynamic. A stable moral orientation is one where the spectator is conscious of a character's true moral categories throughout the film (216). A dynamic moral orientation is one where a character's moral values are suppressed from both the spectator and other characters and can change in a minute and undermine the moral structure constructed by the spectator (216).

Moral structures are used to organize and rank characters according to their moral preference and make up the second term in the structure of allegiance (84). There are two types of moral structure, the first one of which is the Manichaean moral structure. The Manichaean moral structure is a binary structure where a character or group of characters inhabit each pole and the protagonist and antagonist have conflicting goals which lie at opposite ends of morality (198, 204). Examples of this are superhero movies, where the hero saves the world from the antagonist who wants to end the world. Characters are specified as either consisting of only positive traits or of negative traits, making the spectator's moral evaluations uncomplicated and thereby sympathy structures are easily determined (209). Characters can be constructed as amalgams between character traits and ideologies, for instance a character seen as obese, nicely dressed, and belonging to the bourgeois relates to the ideology of capitalism (203). The second moral structure is the graduated moral structure, where characters are placed on a spectrum of morality and not into binary positions, and thus characters can take positions between the two poles being neither good nor bad (207). Examples of this are antiheroes, which will be elaborated below. Characters are generated through a combination of culturally negative and positive attributes becoming an 'alloy' showing a more plausible representation of the character, but also denies the spectator an easy assessment of sympathy as the moral evaluation is made more complex (209).

**Empathy**

Neither of the engagement levels in the structure of sympathy results in the spectator taking on the emotions of a character, but the spectator responds emotionally and thus acentrally to the character. Generally, empathy is defined as "the adoption in a person of the mental states and emotions of some other person" (Smith 96), and thus empathy is a reaction the spectator has to a character but differs from sympathy in the fact that the spectator does not need to share values, beliefs, or goals with the character (96). As a result, Smith relates acentral imagining to sympathy and central imagining to empathy (96). To fulfill his theory of identification, Smith combines the structure of sympathy with empathetic phenomena such as the notions of affective mimicry, emotional simulation, and autonomic reactions.

**Emotional Simulation**

Emotional simulation happens voluntarily and is the notion that is most clearly linked with central imagining (Smith 96). It is connected to practical reasoning, which is the hypothesizing of how one will act or react in a situation, and also a speculation of one's feelings in a situation in the future (97). Practical reasoning can be extended to include a simulated prediction of the states of other persons to be able to predict their behaviors, and these simulated predictions can include beliefs, desires, and emotions. Importantly, simulated prediction does not mean that spectators lose themselves in a character, but that they imagine obtaining certain predicates of the character (97). Thus, when spectators are given limited information and see the behavior of a character in a situation, they will imaginatively assign themselves into the situation and speculate about the emotions the characters could be enduring (97). With the purpose of building a bigger picture and predicting the behavior of a character, the spectator simulates the most obvious emotions. When spectators get more information, they correct their prediction through effective trial and error and adapt the most obvious state of the character (98). Thus, when spectators simulate an emotion, they are centrally imagining it, and not just recognizing or understanding it (98).

**Affective mimicry**

Affective mimicry is an involuntary reaction which depends on a perception of and reflexive simulation of the emotion of another person through his or her facial and bodily cues (Smith 99). There are two kinds of mimicry, the first being motor mimicry which is the mimicry of muscular actions of the person being observed. Thus, it "is a weak or partial simulation of a physical motion" (99). The other kind of mimicry is affective mimicry. Some basic affective states, like happiness, sadness and anger, are cross-culturally equated with certain affective states. Therefore, the spectator can recognize these basic affective states and does not need to mimic them to understand their meaning (100). Facial feedback also plays an important role, because if the spectator mimics a facial expression suitable to a certain emotion, then his or her subjective experience is increased, although in a weaker form than the character experiences it. Thus, facial feedback not only makes the spectator categorize an emotion into a basic affect, but it also makes them experience the emotion (100). As mentioned, mimicry is performed involuntarily, and it is also not a reaction to a specific reason on a specific event, rather it functions as a physiological mechanism a person uses to explore the meaning of his or her milieu (100).

Emotions are distinguished by evaluation of the character, and this proves a problem as mimicking an expression does not depend on an evaluation. Therefore, the spectator must recognize different affective states through mimicry, and fill in details as more information is given about the situation (101). Another part of central imagining which is similar to affective mimicry is the autonomic reaction, which is the response to the visual and aural environment the character is in. Autonomic reactions are also involuntary reflex reactions, like the startle response to a high noise, and as with affective mimicry, the autonomic reaction does not come from an evaluation of the character (102). Instead, the spectator experiences a shock that is identical to the shock the character experiences.

**The Model of Character Engagement**

The model of character engagement, which is Smith's view on identification, is now ready to be presented. It combines the structure of sympathy with the empathetic processes of emotional simulation, affective mimicry and autonomic reactions and is thus a combination of central and acentral imagining. However, there are two main differences between the structure of sympathy and the empathetic processes. Firstly, the structure of sympathy needs an understanding of the narrative and the characters, whereas the empathetic processes do not. Secondly, in the structure of sympathy, the spectator recognizes an emotion, evaluates the character, and responds with a different, appropriate emotion, whereas in the empathetic processes the spectator simulates the same emotion or reaction of the character (Smith 102).

Nevertheless, in relation to the connection between sympathy and empathy, the empathetic processes of emotional simulation and affective mimicry are often incorporated into the structure of sympathy, as they are essential to gain understanding of the characters and the narrative world (103). Hence, the empathetic processes are minor parts of the structure of sympathy, as they provide initial understanding of the emotions of character, but they also undergo change and modification, as the spectator gains more information, and the cognitive construction of the narrative is developed, and the structure of sympathy then becomes the dominant part (103). On this basis, empathy has two functions. The first function is to act as an initial investigation into the construction of the narrative situation. The second function is to create the primary emotions of the characters in the viewer. Thus, "they function to 'attune' the spectator to the emotional tenor of the narrative" (103). However, there is also an important difference between emotional simulation on the one side and affective mimicry and autonomic reactions on the other, which is that affective mimicry and autonomic reactions happen

involuntarily. Thus, these two empathetic processes can give responses to a film that the structure of sympathy is not able to integrate (103).

Consequently, the model of character engagement begins with the spectator who engages in characters through empathy and the structure of sympathy, which uses emotional simulation and affective mimicry and recognition, alignment, and allegiance, respectively (105).

## A Theory of Antiheroes

In the following, Margrethe Bruun Vaage's theory of the antihero from her book *The Antihero in American television* (2016) is presented, also within the area of cognitive film theory.

### Sympathizing with the Antihero

As seen above, Smith postulates that when spectators engage with fiction, they make moral evaluations throughout the duration of the film, however the antihero challenges this assumption (Vaage 1). Vaage criticizes Smith's theory of character engagement as Smith does not properly define what a moral evaluation is. Moral evaluation is sometimes assumed to be a deliberate evaluation, but it is also influenced by non-moral factors (5-6). To Smith, the antihero is a character spectators are aligned to but do not form a sympathetic allegiance with, but he also argues that conventionally spectators are aligned to those they are encouraged to form allegiance with (6). Thus, in this sense, moral evaluation is a rational, deliberate evaluation of the characters that the spectator is aligned with, otherwise it should be acknowledged that alignment influences how the spectator evaluates a character morally (6). However, Smith also suggests that the non-moral factors of iconography, music, and the star persona influence moral evaluations of characters and that certain genres require a suspension of values for the spectator to engage, and thus moral evaluations cannot be entirely rational (6). Nevertheless, Smith still defends his theory, albeit admitting that moral evaluations may not be the determining factor, but they are a frequently underlying factor, and that non-moral factors can influence these moral evaluations, but they cannot replace it (6, 10).

In contradiction to Smith, Vaage's definition of the antihero is a morally flawed protagonist who the spectator is encouraged to sympathize with despite his or her moral flaws (xvi). Antiheroes are immoral, since they continue to violate moral principles, and they are considered more or less bad by social norms and can be seen as unsympathetic, morally questionable and a villainous figure (xi-xiii). However, female antiheroes' moral transgressions

are often minor compared to those of the male antiheroes', meaning that the female antihero is often morally better than the male antihero, but she is still punished harshly for these transgressions (173-174).

Instead of making only rational moral evaluations, Vaage suggests a dual-process model of morality consisting of two different cognitive responses to character engagement. The first cognitive response is an intuitive, pre-reflective, emotional moral judgement of a character, where spectators use their gut-reaction to determine whether the character did something good or bad and have not yet made a moral evaluation of right or wrong (1-2, 18). Intuitions can both be hardwired or socially learned (3). The second cognitive response is a rational, deliberate, conscious moral judgment of a character relating to Smith's notion of moral evaluation in allegiance (1-2, 18). Thus, the dual-process model is a description of how spectators make moral judgments (3).

The main hypothesis Vaage wants to put forth is that when spectators engage with characters and form sympathetic allegiances, they mainly rely on their moral emotions and intuitions and circumvent rational, deliberate moral evaluations. The reason being that the spectator's evaluation is influenced by many non-moral factors as those discussed above (1-2, 15). The antihero story is a form of narrative that makes the spectator rely on moral emotions and intuitions, and thus makes it easy to manipulate the spectator through narrative devices, and consequently makes the spectator see the antihero as morally preferable to other characters in the narrative (1-2, 15). In addition, the reason why spectators enjoy antihero narratives is because they want "moral disengagement for the sake of entertainment" (23). Thus, the spectator wants to relax and be entertained when they engage with fiction and, thus, allow themselves to rely mostly on their moral intuitions (23). Also, a requirement to engage with the antihero narrative is that the spectator does not dwell on silly questions, or makes rational moral evaluations, as it will ruin the appreciation of the story (24).

Moral disengagement for the sake of entertainment leads to the notion of fictional relief, which is defined as: "the relief from fully considering the moral and political consequences of one's engagement with fiction, from considering whatever relevance the fiction film may have for the real world, and from whatever realistic basis the narrative has" (23). Thus, fictional relief suggests that spectators engage with characters in an intuitive, emotional way rather than a rational, deliberate way (14-15, 23). Spectators allow themselves to be attracted to a character without considering the moral implications of the character's actions or their approval of the actions rationally and objectively (23). An example of this could be when an antihero kills, and

the spectator does not question it, because they want to enjoy the narrative and understand the reasons behind.

Another important notion in relation to the antihero narrative is the reality check, which is defined as "that which occurs when something in a fiction reminds the spectator of the moral and political consequences his or her emotional engagement would have, were the fictional events real" (25). Thus, reality checks function as an encouragement to re-active the rational, moral evaluation of the antihero, because it confronts the spectator with the consequences of the character's actions had they taken place in reality (25). An instance of reality check could be when the antihero hurts someone innocent or his or her action affects someone innocent. Thus, the aim of the antihero narrative is to have the spectator like the antihero through fictional relief, but also to occasionally dislike the antihero over the course of the narrative through reality checks (XVI).

**Partiality and Familiarity**

According to Vaage, morality is a mental activity used to secure cooperation in groups, making a person put the group before him- or herself. Thus, morality is said to both bind and blind people, because it makes a person loyal and biased towards the persons and views of the group (Vaage 17). The concepts of partiality and familiarity are two intuitive moral responses to characters that undermine a rational moral evaluation and follow this classification (61).

Partiality is the tendency of the spectator "to become partial to the antihero's perspective through alignment" (39). Often antiheroes follow a moral code of loyalty towards those belonging to the same group for instance by protection or revenge (39, 61). Thus, family (genetically or chosen) is the antiheroes' typical excuse for their immoral actions, and this is presented as a noble cause in the narrative (39-40). Research has shown that loyalty towards those in your group strengthens the spectators' sympathetic engagement with a character, because loyalty towards family and friends is seen as a morally good trait, and hence the antihero becomes morally preferable to other characters who do not respect this convention (40-41). Thus, spectators become partial towards antiheroes, because they understand the reasons behind their actions and see them as morally preferable over other characters (17, 61). Learning the antihero's reasons behind his or her actions influences the spectator's moral evaluation. In real life, family and friends are typically the people spectators know the most about, and humans tend to favor those they love and know well (41). Thus, when spectators see characters they know well, they tend to see them through a lens of favoritism and turn a blind eye to the immoral actions they perform. They do this, because rational evaluation of

characters is cognitively demanding, and humans try to use as little cognition as possible in their daily lives (41).

The notion of familiarity is the exposure to a character over a longer period. This is mostly relevant for television series, as the familiarity principle is used to maintain a sympathetic attitude towards a character, but it is also relevant in fictional films, as alignment with a character creates more familiarity and partiality, because the spectator gets to know the character intimately (42-43). Familiarity also contributes to keep the spectators' sympathetic allegiance, because spectators are stubborn sympathizers who are blinded by familiarity in the sense that they "turn a blind eye to the liked character's moral flaws" (45). This is also known as pleas for excuses, because knowing someone well makes the spectator evaluate his or her behavior more favorably, which is a notable way for alignment to influence allegiance systematically (46-47).

The antihero is portrayed as a complex person with both positive and negative sides (47). This is reflected in the structure of sympathy in antihero narratives, where the spectator is firstly urged to sympathize with the morally bad antihero, but then this sympathetic allegiance is tested by reality checks, yet as the narrative moves on the spectator is pulled the into the sympathetic allegiance again, making it a graduated moral structure (56-58). One last important notion in this section is the concept of contrast characters. Contrast characters are characters that appear morally worse than the antihero, thus making the antihero morally preferable and effects the spectator's sympathy towards the antihero (47). These types of character are often the antagonist in the narrative and will be explored further in the section on rape and moral disgust.

**Moral Inversion of Suspense**

Vaage also theorizes about suspense and its effect on the spectator's moral evaluation by what she calls moral inversion of suspense, which is "when the spectator empathizes with characters who are immoral, who are not necessarily presented as morally preferable in the narrative and may thus otherwise have been perceived as unsympathetic, and feels suspense in relation to a situation where it seems unlikely that this character will succeed" (77). Sometimes, spectators are encouraged to feel suspense for a character performing an immoral action, because it makes them engage in the fictional universe (64). Vaage distinguishes between sympathizing, liking and forming a sympathetic allegiance with a character. Sympathizing with a character is feeling sorry for him or her and rooting for him or her to succeed with the action being performed locally in the narrative (65). Liking a character is the attraction to a character, on the account

of possessing some notable good attributes (65). Forming a sympathetic allegiance with a character is when the spectator comes to see the character as morally preferable to others in the narrative (65). Yet, it is not sympathetic allegiance that is important for suspense, rather it is the other way around that a suspenseful situation creates or maintains sympathy (65).

According to Vaage, empathy is also a dual-process model consisting of embodied empathy and imaginary empathy, which is low-level automatic, mirroring mechanisms and cognitively deliberate, imaginative efforts, respectively, each linking to Smith's terms of affective mimicry and emotional simulation. Thus, empathy is a slow or fast process as sympathy is (65). Through alignment, empathy can lead to sympathy, and not only the other way around, since embodied empathy can affect the moral evaluation by empathizing with a character in a suspenseful situation and makes the spectator want the character to make it through the situation despite it not being morally right (66, 72). Thus, embodied empathy suppresses the spectator's moral evaluation, as the spectator wants the character to make it through regardless of morality (73-74).

According to Vaage, there are three kinds of suspense; vicarious suspense where the spectator knows more than the characters, shared suspense where the spectator is aligned with a character and has the same knowledge, and direct suspense where the spectator feels anxiety on his or her own behalf rather than the character's (70). Together with partiality, moral inversion of suspense is part of luring the spectator back into sympathy with the antihero after reality checks (74).

Another reason why suspense is important in relation to antiheroes is due to narrative desires. Spectators have narrative desires regarding the story, because they want the story to be engaging and move forward, and suspense makes a film more engaging and also creates plot twists that develop the story (75-76). These narrative desires are not high-level, cognitive reflections about where the spectator wants the story to go, rather spectators just want films to be engaging, and engagement does not happen if a film portrays a normal, sometimes boring, life (76). Thus, narrative desires are often immoral in the sense that spectators want something bad to happen to the morally preferred antihero, because it makes a good story (76). This is also the reason why spectators sometimes empathize with immoral characters, which may not be the main protagonist, because it drives the story forward (76). Therefore, moral inversion of suspense is most easily obtained if the spectator is aligned to a character, and the scene has a clear goal of the action the character is performing in a narrow time space, where the spectator does not know if the character will make it but hopes that he or she will, because it will move the narrative forward in a desirable way (77).

**The Attraction of Antiheroes**

In addition to partiality, familiarity and suspense, the attraction of antiheroes in relation to pro-social punishment and aesthetic appreciation is also a part of creating sympathy. As noted in the last section, narrative desires play an important role in enjoying antihero narratives, as immoral elements make the film more engaging (Vaage 91). One such immoral element can be the punishment of morally worse characters than the antihero. This relates to pro-social punishment, which is the human willingness to punish a wrongdoer even though the wrongdoing action had no effect on us personally (97). Because spectators want fictional relief when watching fiction, they enjoy revengeful acts, since they do not feel the need to evaluate these acts rationally (98). Thus, when spectators see the antihero punishing an antagonist, they feel righteous indignation and feel pleasure that the antagonist is punished, even though they might not condone such a severe punishment in real life (97, 102). Hence, an antagonist is also a device of narrative desire, as spectators love to hate them, and they drive the story forward by making drama, which enhances the spectator's emotional engagement (103).

Aesthetic appreciation is the admiration of the film as an artefact, meaning appreciation of the plot and the style it is filmed in (108). Thus, a film is seen as an artefact made by someone, and spectators then wonder how the complex characters in the film are constructed, why they lose their self-control, and how it affects them as viewers (108-109). Spectators can appreciate how a film makes them empathize, like and sympathize with the antihero, then putting this sympathetic allegiance to the test through reality checks to have it rebuilt again. Reality checks serve the function of making spectators question their engagement, as the antihero is seen as morally preferable, but this moral preference still breaks with what they see as morally right in reality (92-93). Thus, even though spectators are made aware that they enjoy engaging with these immoral characters, they are attracted to these types of narrative, because it leaves them thought-provoking and puzzled (109-110). Because spectators like engaging in these types of narratives, they find ways to like the antihero, despite his or her moral flaw, and they push the knowledge of the moral flaw to the back of their mind, so they can enjoy the engagement (93, 98). Hence, spectators' moral evaluations are overruled, as they want to be entertained (105). The moral structure of antihero narratives is often dynamic, as the intended effect is to make spectators like and dislike the antihero (91, 93). As the antihero is a morally complex character having good and bad traits, it is hard to predict what he or she will do and this is interesting for spectators, as they like to be surprised by the unpredictability (104-105).

**Rape and Moral Disgust**

Rape plays an important part in antihero narratives, as antiheroes might be murderers, but they are never rapists (Vaage 127). Rape affects the sympathy structure of a film because it has two narrative functions. The first function is to mark the antihero as morally preferable to a raping antagonist, thus the antagonist who rapes is a contrast character, who is portrayed as morally worse than the antihero (127). The second function is to use rape as a justification for revenge. Spectators find the act of raping morally disgusting, so they wish that the perpetrator is punished, and applaud when he or she gets what they deserve (128). Rape and sexual abuse of women and children are seen as so unsympathetic and morally bad that spectators' intuitive reaction is to want revenge allowing almost anything to be done with the rapist, thus "we sympathize with the devil, when his opponent is a rapist" (129, 131).

The spectator's repulsion of rape is due to the difference between engaging with fiction and engaging in real life. In real life, murder is a worse crime than rape, as it is also punished harder, but in the fictional context, rape is worse, as spectators enjoy engaging with murderers, but not rapists (132). When spectators engage in fiction, they rely on moral intuition and emotions, as Vaage has argued, and they find murder more acceptable emotionally under some circumstances, like understanding the antihero's reason behind the murder, than they do with rape. In real life, spectators would make deliberate rational evaluations about murder and rape, where neither is ever acceptable. Thus, in engagement with fiction, rape is unacceptable, whereas murder is not (136).

The reason why rape is unacceptable in fiction, and murder is not, is because of moral disgust. Morality depends on three basic emotions which can be overstepped, these are: contempt, anger, and disgust. Contempt is the trespass of virtues of respect and hierarchy, anger is the trespass of virtues of individual rights and autonomy, and disgust is the trespass of virtues of natural order and pureness (137). This means that moral disgust is a violation that is seen as an unnatural act (137). The basic emotion of disgust has its origin in food rejection and protects people from contaminated food by making it repulsive, and moral disgust is derived from this core disgust and hence makes violations of morally wrong things like rape disgusting for the spectator (137). People are morally disgusted by actions that are sub-human and makes us aware that we are indeed animals (137-138). Rape is a monstrous unnatural act, as having sex with someone against their will is not normal, and it is a violation of a person's autonomy and triggers the moral emotions of anger and disgust, resulting in the spectator finding the rapist

disgusting (138). Hence, a sub-human and unnatural action like rape has an associative link to core disgust, and thus makes it morally disgusting (138).

A bloody murder can also be morally disgusting because flesh and blood is disgusting, and murdering is also an unnatural act. However, according to Vaage, not all murderers are seen as morally disgusting in the same degree as rapists are, as antihero narratives can make the murderous antihero seem morally preferable and that the victim deserves to be killed (138-140). On the contrary, antiheroes are not rapists, as it is hard to convince the spectator that a character deserves to be raped. The spectator is willing to accept murder because the reasons behind can be justified in the fictional setting, and anger is more context-sensitive than disgust is. Hence, spectators are more willing to make exceptions of moral trespasses that provokes anger than trespasses provoking disgust: "a murder can appear legitimate depending on consequences and circumstances. Moral disgust triggered by rape makes the rapist categorically repulsive" (140). Thus, it is more difficult for the spectator to find excuses for moral disgust, than it is for anger (141).

That murder is more accepted in fiction than in real life creates an asymmetry between real life and fiction. Thus, in the engagement with fiction, spectators use moral intuitions and emotions making rape seem worse than murder, whereas in real life they use moral rational evaluation which makes murder worse than rape, which is the main reason for this asymmetry between fiction and real life (146).

## Rape-Revenge

The following discusses rape-revenge as a genre using Allison Young's chapter on "Rape-revenge" in her book *The scene of Violence* (2010) and Claire Henry's book *Revisionist Rape-Revenge: Redefining a Film Genre* (2014). Rape-revenge is a hybrid genre that first came into existence in the 1970s when several films typified as archetypical of the genre today were made. The structure of the archetypical rape-revenge story is two-part and begins with a shocking gang rape scene, which is followed by several acts of violent revenge over each participant in the rape (Young 44, Henry 4). Conventionally, these films have one victim, who is almost always a beautiful, young, white female and who turns into a femme fatale wearing red lipstick and a fetish costume (Henry 4). The victim often becomes vulnerable and unsure about her identity and who she is after the rape (16).

Typically, the victim will try to seek legal assistance and fail, as society is pervaded by a culture that permits rape. The stereotypical view of rape is that it happens in a dark alleyway

where a woman is attacked by one or more perpetrators, threatened with weapons, and severely beaten. The result is that many rape cases, which do not live up to this stereotype of a 'real' rape, fail in the criminal justice system, leaving the victim without justice for the wrongdoing done to her (Young 44-45). Therefore, the responsibility is often unfairly placed on the victim, making it her responsibility not to get raped, and if she fails, it subsequently becomes her own responsibility to get justice (Henry 47). Thus, the victim sees no other way than to seek a revenge as brutal as the violence that was inflicted upon her.

Common themes in the rape-revenge genre are rape trauma, ethics of revenge and vigilantism (Henry 4). The victim-turned-vigilante takes pleasure in the rapists' pain and enjoys that moment when they find out who she is, and what she is going to do to them (15). The avenger believes that eye-for-an-eye revenge will restore order and make everything right (17, 143). This characteristic of revenge follows the principle of retribution, also called *lex talionis*, which says that "when the law is broken, punishment must be carried out no matter what, since the force of law cannot be restored unless punishment takes place" (Young 46). The revenge-taker is associated with the femme fatale of film noir, as she often uses her femininity to lure in the rapists (Henry 21).

Conventionally, there are also several rapists and onlookers, who the victim does not know, who exchange her among them, so a pattern of repetitive revenge acts can be stretched out over the film and built up to a climax (Young 45). The group dynamic between men can make some men take part in the rape, even though they would not as an individual, or at least not stop the actions of the other men in the group, but there is no moral remorse for these men no matter their age or mental capacity, thus the image of men is negative (Young 46, Henry 15).

Over time, some conventions surrounding rape-revenge have changed and Claire Henry categorizes these changes, or rather revisions, under the term 'the revisionist rape-revenge genre'. The first change is a moral ambivalence towards lethal revenge, as the victim feels a need for revenge, but an associate or accomplice is not convinced that revenge through *lex talionis* will achieve a sense of justice (17). This is seen in the climactic revenge scene which puts spectators in a dilemma, because they have typically formed an allegiance with the victim and take pleasure in her revenge, but they are also asked to question the moral line of acceptable revenge (17-18). Sometimes, the rapists are portrayed as victims and affective mimicry affects the spectator's sympathy with these characters (17). Some films use the force of the law or a third party, like a friend or family member, to gain revenge if the victim is not allowed or unable to take revenge, and this is called proxy vengeance (Henry 16, 45, Young 56, 66). This

can also lead to an examination of the collective trauma of rape and the collective response to rape (Henry 143). A newer convention is also the use of distancing devices like comedy or mixed modality to make the effect of violence more pleasurable to watch and offer relief to the spectator, who is protected from feeling implicated and from dealing too much with any ethical questions raised by the display of violence (37, 56).

A scene of sexual violence is an original characteristic of the rape-revenge genre, and it is often argued that the scene of sexual violence is necessary for the spectator to comprehend the gravity of rape and the consequences for the victim (Young 69). However, Young suggests that the inclusion of an explicit rape scene should always be questioned, as the spectator cannot objectively view the scene for informative purposes without being emotionally affected. Rather, Young proposes that "the automatic inclusion of a rape scene in rape-revenge film is unnecessary" (Young 70), because it is not needed to showcase just how reprehensible the act is, and it does not make the plot or characters have a less affective impact (70,72). She questions whether it is "possible to tell a story about rape without showing the audience the reality of rape as a crime" (72) and argues against many filmmakers who claim that rape scenes provide an educational and informational device "to communicate the empirical experience of rape", one of her main arguments being that the spectator simply does not enjoy watching such scenes (72). Also, the insistent inclusion of the depiction of rape implies that "rape must be seen before it can be condemned", which refers to an assumption about the rape victim's words or memories not being credible, once again placing blame on the victim (70).

## Testimonial Injustice and Silencing

The term testimonial injustice is coined by Miranda Fricker in her book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (2007), revolving around the notion that a speaker is afforded less credibility due to prejudices from the hearer than the speaker would otherwise have gotten (Fricker 4). In testimonial injustice, different concepts play important roles. The first concept is social power, which is both an agential and structural process, as human agents can exercise power over others, but it can also be structural where no agent is exercising it (11). This is exemplified in voting, where some groups are informally disenfranchised as they for some complicated reason are prone not to vote, and no social agent or agency is keeping them from voting, but their lack of voting is seen as an operation of social power (11). Thus, Fricker defines social power as "a practically socially situated capacity to control others' actions, where this capacity may be exercised (actively or passively) by particular social agents, or

alternatively, it may operate purely structurally" (14). Another form of social power is identity power, which is operations of power that depend on a shared collective imagination of social identity and concerns what it means to be a man, woman, black, gay, straight, young, or old et cetera (15). These collective imaginations of social identities often depend on stereotypes and can control people's actions even though they might not even believe in these stereotypes (16). Identity power and stereotypes affect testimonial injustice by either an epistemic dysfunction that results in a deflated judgment of the speaker's credibility, or ethical dysfunction where the hearer does something ethically questionable that undermines the speaker (18). Gender is one form of identity power where men can use their masculine power to silence women (16).

Two other important terms are credibility excess and credibility deficit which are effects of a prejudicial dysfunction. Credibility excess occurs when a speaker receives more credibility than he or she should have, and credibility deficit is when a speaker receives less credibility than he or she should have (18). As credibility deficit is often a disadvantage to the speaker, it is a primary characteristic of testimonial injustice (22).

Another characteristic relating to credibility, identity power, and stereotypes is prejudice. Fricker argues that in a case of testimonial injustice, the hearer can impose ethical poison on a speaker's credibility due to prejudices, and historical examples are the irrationality of women, black people's assumed intellectual inferiority to white people and so on (23). This is also called prejudicial credibility deficit. Testimonial injustice is also characterized by systematicity, which happens when the negative prejudices of a person's social identity follow him or her in many dimensions of social activities, like economical, educational, professional, sexual, legal, political, and so on (28), for instance prejudices against a black person resulting in fewer opportunities. This results in negative identity prejudice, which is related to identity power, as others' negative identity prejudice of a person can affect the credibility judgment (29). Thus, a speaker is exposed to testimonial injustice if and only if his or her credibility judgment results in credibility deficit due to identity prejudice, and thus "the central case of testimonial injustice is identity-prejudicial credibility deficit" (29).

If testimonial injustice is also persistent in addition, it can have severe consequences for the speaker, as he or she will be epistemically wronged. This means that a speaker is wronged in his or her capacity as a knower, which is essential to human value and is thus an intrinsic injustice (45). This is disastrous for the speaker, because the capacity to give knowledge is related to the capacity of reason, which is a distinctive value of humanity. Thus, the intrinsic injustice experienced by the speaker results in a degradation as a human being because the capacity to give knowledge, which is a human value, is insulted by the testimonial

injustice (45). When testimonial injustice is systematic and persistent, it can result in a cramped self-development and undermining of confidence, and this type of testimonial injustice is often oppressive (58-59).

Testimonial injustice can also lead to silencing. Fricker defines two kinds of silencing, the first one being silencing due to identity prejudice which leads to credibility deficit, and a tendency not to ask the person because of this (131). Thus, a person is silenced by pre-emptive testimonial injustice, because his or her word is not given any value (132). This form of pre-emptive silencing is highly context-dependent, so in some situations a person might be exposed to pre-emptive testimonial injustice, but not in others (131). The second kind of silencing is related to objectification, which is the difference between a person being treated as an informant, telling someone something, and as a source of information, for instance arriving with a wet raincoat indicates that it has been raining (133). When a person is treated as a source of information, systematic testimonial injustice can deprive him or her from sharing knowledge with others actively and is thus degraded from a subject to an object. This results in epistemic objectification, which is "when a hearer undermines a speaker in her capacity as a giver of knowledge" (133-134). However, the treatment of a person as an object is also context-dependent, and there is a difference between being treated as an object (in a context where a person is also seen as a subject) and being treated as an object only and denied any subjectivity (134).

Epistemic objectification is also related to sexual objectification through identity prejudice, as there is a possibility that sexual objectification creates testimonial injustice. When women are sexually objectified, they lose their subjectivity, and this can create a silencing where women are given so little credibility, and thus their lack of consent or a legal charge of sexual assault are not received as genuine testimony at all. Thus, when this type of testimonial injustice is persistent and systematic, it results in damaging consequences for women's psychology and practical life and ultimately silences the women (141, 146). Silencing is often connected with rape, as research shows that victims of rape experience prejudice, especially if they were dressed sexually and/or were drunk during the assault, resulting in credibility deficit and victim blaming (Jordan 258). Some instances that often contribute to silencing are the victims themselves due to shame and fear, the disbelief of police officers, court and trial processes, and support systems that fail to believe and understand the victims, thus creating a persistent and systematic testimonial injustice (259-269).

## *Promising Young Woman*

*Promising Young Woman* (2020) (henceforth *PYW*) is the first feature length film by writer, director, and actress Emerald Fennell, which will now be examined within the theoretical framework.

### The Vigilante: Hopefully You Feel Different by Now

The initial shots of the film show a club that is populated mainly by men who lecherously dance and grope their dance partners (figure 1, *PYW* 00:00:53-00:01:31). The medium- and close-up shots focusing on the men's dancing bodies around their genitals and buttocks doing humping motions (figure 2) demonstrate the randiness of men and implies that men are almost out of control with lust. At the same time, they are objectified through a female gaze established by the lyrics of the song *Boys* by Charli XCX: "I need that bad boy to do me right on a Friday. And I need that good one to wake me up on a Sunday. That one from work can come over on Monday night. I want 'em all, I want 'em all" (00:00:54-00:01:08).

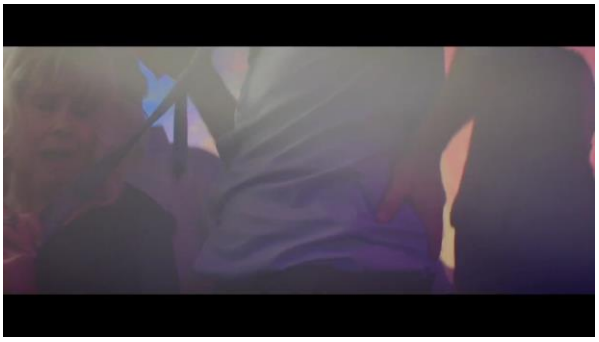

*Figure 1: (00:01:19)*

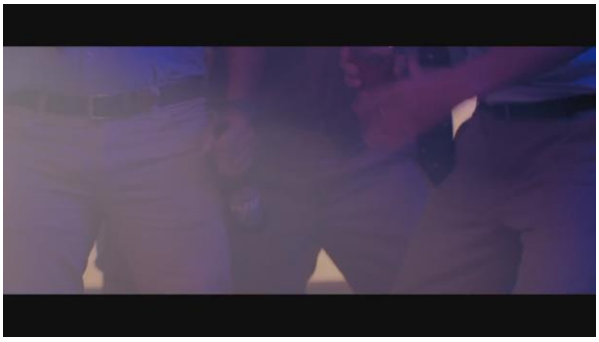

*Figure 2: (00:00:58)*

Thus, from the onset, the film seems to be about the objectification of men, however, this quickly turns out to be a deception, as the scene focuses on a conversation between three male co-workers at the bar, who establish women as victims of prey because "they put themselves in danger, girls like that" (00:02:09). This carries connotations to the concept of how toxic male sexuality victimizes femininity and women in alcohol-induced environments, and this notion sets the stage for the film.

The three co-workers notice an intoxicated woman sitting across from the bar, dressed in a white shirt with a black skirt and blazer, blond hair in a bun, and black high heels looking like a classic businesswoman which is typically associated with strong, independent women (00:02:08). This marks the first level of engagement, recognition, in relation to Smith's theory of character engagement. However, her intoxication has put her in a vulnerable situation and the wide shot highlights her vulnerability by emphasizing that she is alone (figure 3).

*Figure 3: (00:02:08)*

The fact that the female character is not yet established as the main character, by introducing her as an innocent bystander, emphasizes the notion that she is framed as someone who can easily be preyed on. However, the opening shots are mainly populated by men, which makes it significant that this is the first woman for the camera to focus on individually.

In the wide shot, the intoxicated woman's position resembles an angel or a crucifixion of a Christ-like figure symbolizing an act of sacrifice which foreshadows the impending plot of the film, as confirmed by the director Emerald Fennell (Apaydin). She is sitting in a position with her arms stretched out like a cross, and she is spotlighted and centered in the frame, directing the eye's attention towards her (figure 3). Her open arms signal an open body language, taking up as much space as she can to catch the attention of others, yet as her legs are closed, she is not inviting to anything sexual, but as will become evident, she is clearly trying to get attention. She is trying to sit up, revealing her white underwear presumably by accident to the three co-workers, who are objectifying her (00:02:26-00:02:33). She plays perfectly into the role as a victim of prey, as she is a single woman, alone in a club, too drunk to stand up, thus having made herself vulnerable and liable to victim blaming, making it her own fault if something is to happen, as she is not able to take care of herself.

Eventually, one of the co-workers, who the others call Jerry, walks over to the woman with the intention of helping her but ends up bringing her home (00:03:00-00:06:38). He starts kissing her before taking her to bed and begins to undress her while manipulatively saying "you're okay, you're safe," as she drunkenly objects (00:06:38-00:07:28), distracting her from

his actions. He continues to take off her underwear when she suddenly looks directly into the camera (figure 4, 00:07:33), breaking the fourth wall and drawing the spectator into the plot as her accomplice in whatever is about to take place. In relation to Smith's theory of character engagement, this is the beginning of the second level of engagement, alignment, which establishes the woman as the main character. The spectator is surprised and excited about what is going to happen when the woman looks into the camera, thus marking the beginning of a sympathetic allegiance with this character, which is Smith's third engagement level. With suspenseful music in the background, she sits up and asks him clearly and soberly, "what are you doing?", leaving him with a frightened look on his face (00:07:35-00:07:46), which is a clear sign that something bad is about to happen.

*Figure 4: (00:07:33)*

Afterwards, the title of the film *Promising Young Woman* comes flying in, written in pink, dripping letters (figure 5, *PYW* 00:07:46-00:08:00) to the soundtrack of "It's Raining Men" performed by DeathbyRomy, reminiscent of a title shot from a splatter-horror film, but the pink color establishes a feminine view on it; the innocence and playfulness of the bright pink color is juxtaposed with the camp, bloody horror font, and, as the spectator will soon come to find, perfectly encapsulates the essence of the main character's duality.


*Figure 5: (00:07:55)*

In the background, the businesswoman's legs appear with something red looking like blood running down her legs and arms, seemingly confirming the built-up suspense that she has done something violent to Jerry. However, as the camera pans up to show her upper body, it is revealed that she is just eating a hotdog with ketchup excessively dripping down from it (figure 6, 00:08:00-00:08:42). Doubting whether it is blood or ketchup makes the narrative engaging, as it builds up suspense but then surprises the spectator, establishing the woman as an unpredictable character and thus makes the narrative unpredictable.

*Figure 6: (00:08:05)*

She is walking down the street like an empowered woman devouring a hotdog, symbolizing the castration of a phallic symbol, signifying her as a ruthless, avenging femme fatale in a revenge narrative. Even though some construction workers call her out for taking a "walk of shame" home, she does not walk or behave like she is ashamed. Instead, it is the workers who represent this form of sexism, and she shuts them down by staring menacingly and intimidatingly at them until they become visibly and audibly uncomfortable (00:08:41-00:09:17). This behavior of an empowered and confident woman who is pleased with what she has achieved shows her confrontational behavior from the beginning of the film and marks her as a dangerous woman. As journalist Starner writes: "it definitely seems, at first, like she's murdering men without a second thought" (Starner).

This is the introduction to the main protagonist who will later be revealed to be named Cassandra Thomas but is called Cassie (*PYW* 00:10:45). She was a promising young woman who was going to be a doctor but is now a 30-year-old living with her parents and working at a coffee-shop, much to her mother's frustration (00:20:57-00:23:06). Throughout the film, she takes on different personas, especially when she goes out. She uses her femininity as a weapon and pretends to be heavily intoxicated to lure men in. She dresses up as sexualized female stereotypes to allure a certain toxic male attention and to attract different types of men. Her plans are always carefully prepared and well-executed, every little detail is thought through, especially in relation to her appearances, as exemplified when she is watching and meticulously following a tutorial on how to get "blowjob lips" and then smears it out to look more disheveled and intoxicated (figure 7, 00:13:50-00:14:23).

*Figure 7: (00:14:22)*

She wants to hide the fact that she is a femme fatale behind different sensual expressions of femininity, and when she catches a man in her trap, as he tries to take advantage of her, she reveals herself to be completely sober. She shows him that she is a femme fatale and not a vulnerable woman, as she confronts him with what he is doing, leaving him terrified, because her assumed intoxication was what initially drove him to target her, as exemplified by the instances with Jerry and later with another man named Neil (00:14:24-00:20:33).

The sexualized female stereotypes she takes on as personas are the business woman as demonstrated in the opening scene (figure 3), a contemporary boho-chic hippie sporting a leopard skirt with feathers and colored pieces in her hair (figure 8), a Kardashian dressed in a short, strapless dress with a high ponytail according to director Emerald Fennell (figure 9, commentary on DVD), and a stripper wearing a fetish doctor costume with red lipstick, red high heels, and a multicolored wig (figure 10). This last persona in a fetish costume and red lipstick fits the description of the typical avenger in rape-revenge films according to Claire Henry's characteristics of the rape-revenge genre, and it is also this costume Cassie is wearing when she confronts the rapist Alexander Monroe, henceforth Al.

*Figure 9: (00:18:38)*

*Figure 9: (00:54:44)*

*Figure 10: (01:24:46)*

While some of these outfits and personas are more obviously sexually oriented than others, one thing they all have in common is that they are representations of femininity displayed on a conventionally attractive white, blonde woman. In the context of the night club setting, this display of femininity is associated with vulnerability, physical weakness and naivety, and the

ability to take advantage of or overpower a petite, good-looking, intoxicated woman who does not have her wits about her seems an easy thing for an ill-intended man to do. That is exactly the premise that Cassie is trying to set up by dressing up as different types of women to attract all kinds of men. She is teaching them a lesson, and presumably simultaneously showing the spectator that sexually predatory behavior is not only prevalent in or limited to certain types of men, but even those least suspected can turn out to be monsters.

In her daily life, Cassie is almost always dressed in pastel colors or in girly clothes with some type of red flower on it and with a bow in her hair, looking like an innocent and pretty little girl (Figure 11-14). These color choices make her look young, fresh, and like a ray of sunshine, contrasting her mood and personality which are negative, sarcastic, and hostile at times, and she always has a threat of violence looming about her. Cassie's unfriendly demeanor is demonstrated in her brazen and rude treatment of customers and her only friend being her boss Gail, whom she keeps at an arm's length, not revealing what she is doing at night (00:10:21-00:11:07). In relation to Smith's concept of recognition, the spectator is always able to recognize Cassie through re-identification no matter the persona she takes on, because she wears a different pastel color on each nail throughout the film (figure 12), and her contrasting gloomy, vindictive personality is persistently re-identified as well.

*Figure 11: (00:11:44)*

*Figure 12: (00:40:59)*

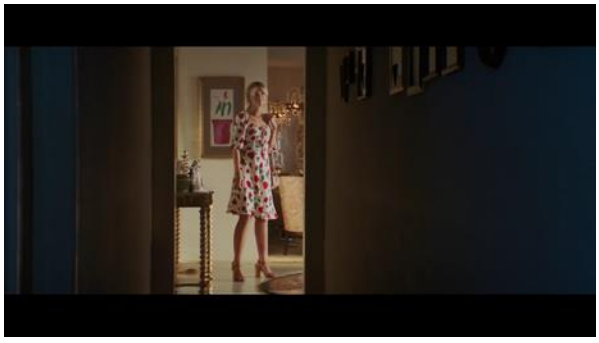

*Figure 13: (00:26:07)*

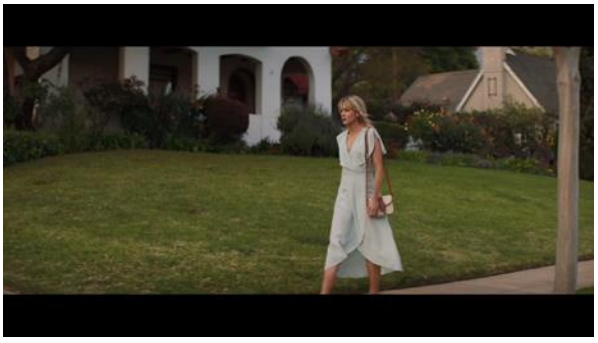

*Figure 14: (00:59:18)*

As a result, there is a contrast in Cassie's appearances between day and night where she dresses innocently in the daytime and dresses more sexually at nighttime, and also between her

appearance and personality and mood. The contrast symbolizes the double life she lives. In the daytime, she tries to divert the attention that falls upon her from anyone, by portraying the girl next door who looks innocent and feminine, and at night, she dresses as different sexualized female stereotypes, alluring men. This symbolizes the notion that Cassie is not one specific person, but she acts and takes on different personas throughout the aspects of her life to play a role. Her different personas indicate that the character of Cassie represents different stereotypes, showing that any type of girl can be taken advantage of. This is also confirmed by the make-up artist and hair-dresser on the film, who claims that Cassie's appearances were inspired by other women she knew had been in vulnerable situations (Renfro). This also suggests that Cassie is a woman on a mission, and everything she does beyond the mission is to pose as normal in order to be left alone to pursue her mission at night.

Besides the crucifixion position discussed earlier, Cassie is also often seen with something around her head, looking like a sort of halo. When she is sitting in her bed, it looks like she has a halo over her head and the light from the computer screen and the headboard also makes it seem like she has wings (Figure 15). She symbolizes an angel, but the darkness around her in the room indicates some troubledness, making her look like an avenging angel, who is planning her revenge. The portrayal of her as this dark angel makes her seem powerful and almighty, showing her thoughtfulness and righteousness. At one point, when Cassie is working in the coffee shop, she is standing in front of a light blue wall hanging, creating a halo around her head, while she is looking down, cleaning a mug (Figure 16, *PYW* 01:05:36). This brings biblical associations to mind and symbolizes Cassie as a saintly figure, as she looks like Virgin Mary with the light blue cloak around her head. As such, Cassie is portrayed as pure and innocent, and juxtaposed with the dark angel she is both powerful and vulnerable at the same time.

*Figure 15: (00:33:46)*

*Figure 16:(01:05:36)*

The interpretation of Cassie as a saintly figure is also illustrated by her martyrlike death, where she is suffocated by Nina's rapist Al. She sacrifices herself to get justice and for what she believes in. Her quest for justice is a holy one, as it turns out that she never does anything

nefarious, and she has only tried to make the world a better place by confronting rapists and reforming the discourse surrounding rape and rape victims. The interpretation of the religious images of Cassie also corresponds to the make-up artist and hairdresser of the film, who explain that she is supposed to look like Virgin Mary (Renfro), and also by the director Emerald Fennell, who says that she is made to look like an avenging angel with a halo around her head and something that look like wings behind her (Apaydin).

Although the film does not provide an in-depth introduction to Cassie's parents, Susan and Stanley, the aesthetics of their home and their short interactions with Cassie provide enough material to make up assumptions about the family dynamic and certain values that they embody. The interior design in the house is extravagant, but in a gaudy and outdated fashion, as it consists of Victorian furniture, fancy porcelain figures and pictures of dogs (figure 17-18). The house resembles an old high-class home, which gives the impression that Cassie's parents are somewhat traditional and old-fashioned and are holding on to family values and virtues that are behind the times.

*Figure 17: (01:09:32)*

*Figure 18: (01:14:18)*

This is emphasized by Susan, who lashes out at Cassie on her 30th birthday for not remembering it, for not having any friends, a boyfriend, or any plans for the future, almost blaming her for not being normal, while Stanley tries to calm her down (*PYW* 00:20:55-00:22:38). This implies a focus on conventional values and a desire to conform to the patriarchal world, instead of helping their daughter through the massive trauma and grief she is going through. Susan does not acknowledge that Cassie has been exposed to major trauma and is violently grieving, and Stanley seems afraid of confrontations by always downplaying Susan's reactions. This tension between Cassie and her parents, as well as the lack of understanding, apathetic expectations, and the disregard of the reason for Cassie dropping out of college and the emotional aftermath create a sense of familiarity, favoring Cassie in the eyes of the spectator in relation to Vaage's terms familiarity and partiality. Thus, Cassie's relationship to her parents makes her appear isolated, ignored, and misunderstood.

After Nina was raped and died, it appears that Cassie's life stopped because of the emotional trauma she experienced. Her appearances in the daytime looking like an innocent little girl wearing pastel colors combined with the aesthetics of her parents' home emphasize that she is stuck in time and has a hard time moving on. By the dining table in the kitchen, there is an old radio or some sort of intercom system from the 1970's installed in the wall (figure 19) and their otherwise Victorian furniture design marks a home that is frozen in time and a secluded world where they can ignore and refuse to face the realities of the world. However, the porcelain figures in the house symbolize the fragility of this secluded, ignorant life. Thus, Cassie seems to cope with her emotional trauma by the defense mechanism of regression, going back in time to when things were good, refusing to grow up and conform to society's norms of what she is supposed to be, but acts out at night, taking her revenge. According to director Fennell, it is also about control, where she is so much in control in her daily life that she needs some tension release at night (Dibdin).

*Figure 19: (00:22:36)*

In relation to Smith's second engagement level, alignment is created with Cassie throughout most of the film. The film forms an almost exclusive attachment with Cassie following one spatio-temporal path showing her actions and feelings until she dies. The spectator is also given the most subjective access to Cassie as long as the alignment with her is preserved. Sometimes, her facial expressions and the non-diegetic background music show her emotional state, further providing subjective access to her inner state. For instance, her facial expression almost looks painful when Al is mentioned and moderately alarming tones of music

are playing while Ryan, her love interest, talks in the background (figure 20, *PLW* 00:33:00-00:33:43), indicating that Al is a bad person who Cassie has some sort of history with. Also, when Ryan comes back to her, she slightly smiles and the music plays soft, uplifting tones of piano in a close-up shot (Figure 21, 01:05:37-01:06:27) showing that she is happy, but at the same time she tries to hide her smile until she gives in.

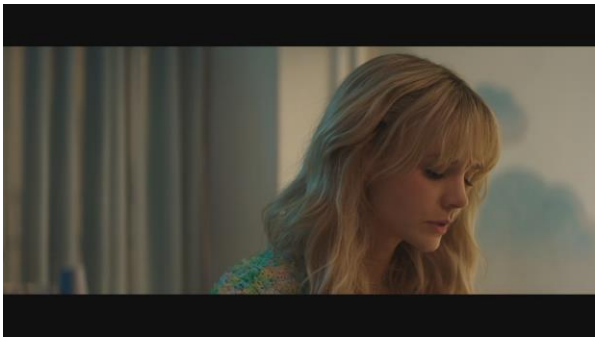

*Figure 20: (00:33:16)*

*Figure 21: (01:05:50)*

However, the subjective access given to Cassie borders on subjective opacity, because not a lot is revealed about her thoughts and feelings, and the facial expressions showing her mental states are few, rendering her unpredictable. This functions as a manipulative narrative device because the spectator does not know what to expect of Cassie, making it impossible to anticipate what she will do, as well as figure out what she has already done. This will be elaborated later in the thesis. Furthermore, the lack of facial expressions imply that she is disinterested in her daily life and only upholds illusions of a normal life to be left alone and puts minimal efforts in her work and interactions with other people besides her boss. This also suggests that she is not happy, she is grieving and just existing, and her only motivation is her self-imposed purpose to get revenge and lure out potential predators. Thus, the spectator never knows what is going to happen or what Cassie is going to do, and so the degree of subjective access to her is limited, besides following her perspective and actions.

Cassie uses her little notebook to write up the names and count the number of men who 'helps' her at a bar when she is supposedly drunk, using the unary numeral system and three colors, black, blue, and red, and also to write down her revenge plan. This book is filled with many units of five tally marks written in the three colors, suggesting that Cassie has been doing her scheme for a long time, perhaps even since Nina died. Hence, Cassie has devoted her life to this mission for revenge, implying that she left the notion of 'moving on' behind a long time ago. The spectator is shown both her encounters with Jerry and another guy named Neil, and the moment when she adds them to the notebook in black and blue, respectively (Figure 22-23

00:09:28, 00:20:43). However, Cassie is also about to make the line in red about an encounter that is not shown completely (figure 24 00:11:35).

*Figure 22: (00:09:28)*


*Figure 23: (00:09:35)*

*Figure 24: (00:20:43)*

The encounter with this unnamed man is only shown through alternating blurred shots of a bar and Cassie coming home and finding her notebook under the bed with pigtails in her hair, as he simultaneously and insinuatingly comments on liking her pigtails, offers her a drink and asks about her age, and she answers in a giggling girly voice while suspenseful background music is playing (00:11:08-00:11:36). The difference between the red, blue, and black writing is never explained, but because the encounter with this unknown man is not explicitly shown, suspenseful string music is heard in the background, and she draws a red line associated with blood to represent him, it is suggested that the red mark is for the men who turn out to be violent. The difference between blue and black is more difficult to determine. Neither encounter with Jerry nor Neil turns violent, but the biggest difference is that Neil wakes Cassie up before doing anything to her, whereas Jerry continues despite her drunken objections. Thus, a black line suggests a man who continues to take advantage of her despite her drunken state but without turning violent, whereas a blue line is for the more 'decent' men who at least "wake [her] up before putting [their] fingers inside [her]" (00:19:36).

In relation to Vaage's concept of pleas for excuses, partiality plays a huge role. Because alignment with Cassie is created throughout the film, the spectator becomes partial to her point of view. She cannot get over what happened to Nina and her death because Nina is Cassie's

chosen family, which is indicated by Cassie's father who says that Nina was like a daughter to him and Cassie's mother (01:11:26). Nina becomes Cassie's reason for revenge in everything that she does, creating partiality, because she is loyal towards those in her own group, albeit a two-person group. As a result, Cassie appears sympathetic, because loyalty towards those in your own group or defending those who cannot defend themselves is a positive character trait according to Vaage. This attachment to Nina is clearly shown in the necklace shaped like half a heart engraved with Nina's name that Cassie has saved and wears (figure 25). After her death, Cassie leaves the matching necklace engraved with her name to Gail (figure 26, 01:46:40-01:47:00), as something to remember her by, just as Cassie has been holding on to the matching necklace with Nina's name engraved and taken it with her to the grave (figure 27, 01:47:10), almost waiting there to rise from the ashes like a phoenix for the last revenge.


*Figure 25: (00:20:53)*

*Figure 26: (01:46:55)*

*Figure 27: (01:47:10)*

Cassie's reason for seeking vengeance becomes clear in her talk with Nina's mother, as Nina's mother reveals that Cassie was not present at the party where Nina got raped (figure 28, 01:00:49-01:01:35). Because Cassie was not there to defend Nina back then, she wants to defend her with every fiber of her body now if that is what it takes, and thus Cassie's relationship and loyalty towards Nina act as a plea for excuses. Especially because rape is seen as morally disgusting, the spectator understands Cassie's reasons for revenge, and this influences the moral evaluation of Cassie in a sympathetic direction. Furthermore, as established, Cassie's parents do not provide her with much help or support, and particularly

her father avoids talking to her, making Cassie appear alone and as the only one who remembers Nina and what happened to her. This is continuously confirmed when Cassie confronts their former friend, the dean of Forrester Medical School, Ryan, and especially the rapist Al, which will be further explored below. Thus, Cassie is the only one seeking justice, but she is also the only one who is not able to move on according to Nina's mother, who urges her to move on for everyone's sake (01:01:35-01:02:00).

*Figure 28: (01:01:20)*

In relation to Claire Henry's and Allison Young's definitions of rape-revenge, Cassie takes a proxy vengeance as Nina is not able to take revenge herself. Cassie follows the principle of retribution or *lex talionis* to make sure that a punishment is carried out since all other legal options have been tried. These cases of eye-for-an-eye revenge will also be explored further in relation to the characters implicated in her revenge plan below. As a typical rape-revenger in the context of the genre, she takes pleasure in some of her victims' suffering when she confronts them. For instance, this is seen in her encounter with the man Neil, who continues to claim that he is a nice guy despite trying to take advantage of her (00:18:39-00:20:27), and also before her death when Al finds out who she is and why she is at his bachelor party (01:29:06-01-01:33:31). Hence, Cassie and Nina were two promising young women who were going to be doctors, which are highly regarded by society, but dropped out due to the rape, and afterwards Nina died, and Cassie became a typical rape-revenger.

Concerning Smith's third engagement level, a sympathetic allegiance is formed with Cassie because of the alignment with her and an understanding of why she wants revenge, and

thus she is morally preferable to the other characters she puts on the spot. The film presents a dynamic moral orientation, because her moral values are suppressed, and she is unpredictable both to the spectator and other characters. This is seen in the film, when she exchanges her revenge plan for a relationship with Ryan, symbolically throwing her notebook away (01:02:55), and when she finds out Ryan was present at the rape of Nina, she resumes her plan of revenge again (01:19:36-01:20:51). The film also has a graduated moral structure, as Cassie performs both moral and immoral actions, and no other character in the film is entirely morally good or morally bad. However, Cassie is morally preferable to the other characters due to the others' varying degrees of complicity in Nina's rape and subsequent death, and she confronts them and punishes them if they do not regret their actions and the consequences those actions have had for other people. Also, the sympathetic allegiance with Cassie affects the view of other characters, as they are seen through Cassie's unsympathetic view as morally worse characters. This analysis is also corroborated by journalist Natalie Morin in her article on the film (Morin, N).

Cassie's relationship with Ryan plays a large part in the film. Right before Ryan is introduced, Cassie is reading a book called *Careful How You Go* (figure 29, *PYW* 00:11:54), which is also the title of director Emerald Fennell's short film from 2018 about three malevolent women (IMDb), intertextually and symbolically referring to the revenge plan Cassie will implement later in the film initialized by her reunion with Ryan.


*Figure 29: (00:11:54)*

When Cassie meets Ryan, her double life clashes, as her emotions are conflicted between seeking revenge and pursuing a relationship with Ryan. Her troubled past years of going out

and luring out predators has taken a toll on her, as she gets mad at Ryan when they end up in front of his apartment building on their first date (00:27:36-00:29:00). She goes from laughing to being mad, seeing Ryan as any other man who just wants to take advantage of women, and she kicks a trashcan to show her frustration when walking away. This further shows her troubled relationship to men and how she has a hard time believing they will not take advantage of her or women in general. She gives him a chance but is not able to let go of her old lifestyle, as Ryan catches her with another man (00:53:30-00:54:10). Also, Ryan becomes the initiator of her revenge plan, as he reminds Cassie about their common acquaintances from medical school, and she freezes up (00:30:40-00:33:43). She begins the planning of her revenge sitting in darkness thinking of Nina, as she looks at a computer with a point of view shot showing pictures of her and Nina (figure 30, 00:33:43-00:34:06), showing her conflicted state.

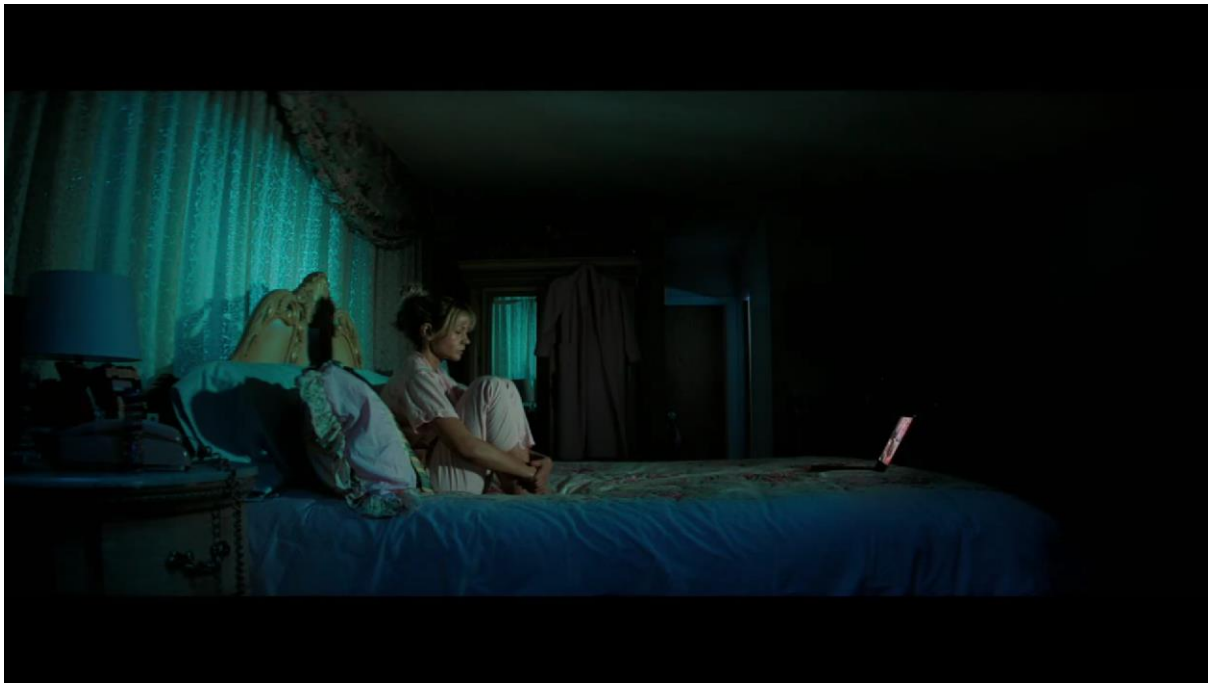

*Figure 30: (00:34:02)*

However, eventually, the two of them get together, and at this point in the narrative, the revenge genre is momentarily replaced by romantic comedy features. This is depicted in both the framing, lighting, setting and music of the scene, as shown in a montage sequence where they are flirting and dancing to Paris Hilton's "Stars are Blind" in a pharmacy and doing other stereotypically romantic things (Figure 31-33, 01:06:37-01:08:39)

*Figure 31: (01:07:18)*


*Figure 32: (01:07:51)*

*Figure 33: (01:08:21)*

The choice of the song by Paris Hilton seems to be a mocking of the romantic comedy genre. Together with the montage sequence, the scene appears very rosy and sugary in contrast to Cassie's life before, which was grayer and duller, indicating that she is blinded by this new love. Thus, the sequence and the choice of music passes a sense of parody, which is interpreted as a hint that the storyline will not ultimately develop as a romantic comedy because below the surface, Cassie's revenge lures to disrupt her newfound carefree happiness.

Another scene that also exemplifies some romantic comedy features is when Cassie brings Ryan home to meet her parents (01:08:39-01:10:46), indicating that he and Cassie are becoming something serious, as Cassie is usually secretive towards her parents. The dinner is sweet and awkward at the same time. Cassie's parents are socially paralyzed by the fact that she has finally brought someone home, and a doctor above all. Cassie's mother is so baffled that she makes some humorously stupid attempts at engaging in a conversation and she does not understand Ryan's rather simple jokes (Figure 34, 01:09:22-01:20:42). Furthermore, the romantic comedy element is ultimately established by Cassie and Ryan making doe eyes at each other while sharing inside jokes (Figure 35, 01:09:49-01:10:00).

*Figure 34: (01:09:33)*

*Figure 35: (01:09:51)*

The romantic comedy elements almost become a little nauseating, but also create emotional simulation in the form of happiness and thus empathy for Cassie, as is also claimed by feminist theorist Bonnie Honig (Honig). However, due to narrative desires, the spectator wants the narrative to move forward by the occurrence of something that will create suspense, as theorized by Vaage in relation to moral inversion of suspense. Reality comes crashing down when Cassie discovers that Ryan was present at Nina's rape and is heard laughing and cheering Al on in the video recording of the rape (01:17:42-01:18:08). She confronts him, and he makes excuses for himself on account of only having been a kid at the time and ends up speaking ill about Cassie (01:19:06-01:22:35); his lack of understanding and taking responsibility makes him less morally preferable than Cassie, as the sympathetic allegiance with Cassie affects how Ryan is viewed. This steers Cassie back on her revenge path.

Ryan is the first person that has been able to draw Cassie's attention away from her mission, but he is still related to it by association, and thus implies that Cassie was predetermined to carry out her revenge mission and that it was never possible for her to truly leave the past behind and move on. She knows that he is related to her past before they start dating, ultimately implying that she cannot let it go, and bears connotations to the notion that the past has a way of catching up to you. Thus, Cassie's short relationship with Ryan was only an illusion, and she is not able to move on and live another life, which is ultimately established when she ends her quest for revenge by sacrificing herself for the greater good.

Despite portraying a typical rape-revenger in relation to Henry and Young's definitions, Cassie can also be seen as a female antihero. Consistent with Vaage's theory, Cassie is a morally flawed protagonist with whom the spectator is encouraged to sympathize with despite her moral flaws, namely her thirst for revenge and inability to move on from Nina's rape and subsequent death. As a female antihero, her moral transgressions are minor compared to those of the typical male antihero described in Vaage's theory. Cassie does not murder, sell drugs, or is violent in a particular way, but she punishes people to prove a point, putting them in

situations where they think something awful may have happened to them, and then reveals that nothing has happened when they realize that they have been wrong in their previous convictions. The moral question is if it is alright to make someone believe that they, or someone they love, are being or have been raped. The answer to the question in a real-life situation would be no, but in the fictional setting, it becomes alright due to fictional relief and the spectator's desire for punishment. Thus, Cassie offers fictional relief, and her actions are accepted even though she should be morally evaluated in her actions and tests of other people. Even Fennell comments on this saying that "what we cannot abide is what Cassie does, which is actually … nothing. Really, she does nothing. She just gives people an idea" (qtd. in Dibdin).

After having initiated part of her revenge plan, Cassie is parked in the middle of the road with her head resting on the steering wheel, indicating that she is not feeling well, probably ridden by guilt. Several honks and a man yelling are heard in the background, before the man drives up besides Cassie's car and starts yelling at her, calling her a "stupid cunt" and other offensive phrases (*PYW* 00:50:04-00:50:23). Cassie gets out of the car, finds a tire iron in the back, and starts smashing the man's rear lights and windshield while dramatic classical music is playing until the man calls her "a crazy fucking bitch" and finally drives away (figure 36, 00:50:24-00:51:22). According to Vaage's theory, this is a reality check, as it is an excessive reaction to a man yelling at you for being parked in the middle of the road, and the first time Cassie turns to physical violence, symbolizing a loss of control. This reading is confirmed by Emerald Fennell in an interview for Harper's Bazaar (Dibdin). However, because of familiarity with Cassie, the sympathetic allegiance with her is not affected too much, and also, no information is given about the man or why he is in a rush to get by. Thus, because of familiarity, excuses are made on behalf of Cassie's immoral actions.

*Figure 36: (00:50:50)*

Suspense is created already from the beginning of the film when Cassie looks directly into the camera, as Jerry is undressing her, and the music turns dramatic and suspenseful, indicating something bad is going to happen, followed by the assumed blood running down her arm as discussed earlier (*PYW* 00:07:28-00:08:03). This is significant throughout the film, where the spectator is constantly concerned about what Cassie is going to do because of her unpredictability, which is corroborated by the sudden musical changes into dramatic and suspenseful string music. In the moments where she exposes someone to something unpleasant, like making the Dean of Forrester medical school think that her daughter is getting raped or threatening to write Nina's name with a scalpel on the rapist Al's stomach, suspense is created, as the spectator fears what is going to happen next and is surprised by what Cassie is capable of. However, explanations are always provided in the end, showing that she only made them think she was going to do it to give them a taste of their own medicine, get the desired responses, and to make them "think about it in the right way" (00:48:50). Especially in the scene with Al, she surprisingly seems to be turning to physical violence, but suspense is created because of affective mimicry when the situation takes a turn, and the spectator wants Cassie to get away before she is killed (01:33:09-01:36:45). Fennell corroborates this reading, as she questions why the spectator is so disturbed by Cassie essentially doing nothing, when they are not disturbed by physical violence (Dibdin).

Cassie is portrayed by British actress Carey Mulligan who is most famous for her roles in *An Education, Drive* and *the Great Gatsby*. In these films, she plays characters that highlight femininity as something fragile, which fits well into this film's introduction of her character as an intoxicated vulnerable woman, victimizing her and creating sympathy with her instantly. The connotations of the first scene are that she is vulnerable because she is a woman portrayed as prey (*PYW* 00:02:03-00:02:47), and thus the beginning of the film utilizes the traditional assumptions about gender roles. However, when she looks directly into the camera and assumes her position as the main character (00:07:30), she breaks these assumptions and reveals herself to be a dangerous woman, opposing the traditional gender discourse and extending a social critique thereof.

Outside of acting, Mulligan is concerned with topics of gender equality and equal pay, thus giving the choice of her as the actress portraying Cassie a political side which matches the gender criticism the film provides (Grady). Also, Mulligan is very selective about the roles she plays and has claimed that it is difficult to find characters that satisfy her, as many female characters do not have that much depth. She is interested in dark and difficult characters, as "We're all too used to only seeing women behaving really well" (Mulligan qtd. in Grady).

Thus, Mulligan also has an interest in portraying Cassie who is not the typical nice girl, but someone who can move assumptions about gender and female behavior.

To sum up, the spectator is aligned with and forms a sympathetic allegiance with Cassie. She is a typical rape-revenger who uses *lex talionis* to get revenge and dresses in fetish costumes. She is also a female antihero who is loyal to Nina and provides the spectator with fictional relief when her victim gets punished. She is morally preferable, because she does not use physical violence, and when she does, it functions as reality checks, making the spectator question his or her sympathetic allegiance with her. The allegiance with her affects moral evaluations of other characters, and this along with her role as a female antihero and rape vigilante will be further explored in relation to the characters implicated in her revenge plan below.

**The Victim: From Extraordinary to Silence**

In relation to Smith's theory of character engagement, Nina is a peripheral, linguistic character who is only mentioned in the film but never shown visually, except for some childhood pictures of her and Cassie (figure 37-38). In these pictures, she is white, blond, and young, and Cassie says that "she was fully formed from day one. Same face. Same walk" (*PYW* 01:31:51-01:31:59) indicating that Nina had some of the same characteristics as an adult, so presumably she fits the description of the typical rape victim in rape-revenge films that Henry lays out.


*Figure 37: (00:20:51)*

*Figure 38: (00:33:55)*

Because Nina is a linguistic character, the construction of her character is dependent on names, pronouns, and descriptions, so the spectator can elicit the person schema, as described by Smith, and assume that she had a body and is thus a fully-fledged character according to Smith's list of human agent capacities. Such descriptions are provided by Cassie, who throughout the film reminds people of the rape Nina experienced and describes the bruises she got afterwards (00:45:09), which mark the physical violence inflicted on Nina's body. Furthermore, Cassie describes Nina as a clever, strong, and confident young woman, who was

not afraid of confronting people (01:00:12-01:00:46). However, the spectator's ability to gain access to any of the three levels of character engagement in relation to Nina is severely impeded since she is never actually shown nor clearly individuated as a character and solely exists in the diegesis on the account of being talked about and referred to by the other characters throughout the film.

Nina is, however, an absolutely essential part of the plot, as her tragic fate constitutes the foundation on which the diegesis plays out. As will become evident in the analysis of Cassie's revenge plan, Nina was silenced and remains silenced even after her death by different characters as a result of systematic and persistent testimonial injustice as coined by Miranda Fricker. While still alive, Nina experiences victim blaming by her friend Madison, who blames Nina for being blackout drunk and promiscuous too often (00:39:00-00:39:28), undermining her as a speaker, which results in credibility deficit even after her death due to prejudice. The same thing happens with the Dean of Forrester Medical School, who blames her for drinking and not being able to remember what happened (00:45:47-00:45:53), further undermining her credibility. Al's defense lawyer Jordan Green also admits to threatening and bullying Nina until she dropped her case (00:56:37). Moreover, Al has denied the rape allegation, and none of his friends who witnessed it have spoken up. Thus, all these instances accumulatively and fatally silence Nina and undermine her credibility.

Thus, Nina has experienced systematic and persistent testimonial injustice from her friends, from the school as an institution, from the legal system, and not least from witnesses of the assault and the rapist himself, resulting in an ongoing silencing corresponding to Fricker's notion of testimonial injustice. As such, Nina is epistemically and sexually objectified and stripped of her subjectivity, as her account of the rape is given so little credibility that she is treated as someone who is incapable of giving knowledge. Nina's experience is undermined, because she is a woman, and her opponent is a man who has the social power of masculinity and is therefore given the benefit of the doubt, thus wrongfully affording him credibility excess at the expense of her. Nina is epistemically wronged and sexually objectified which, as Fricker describes in her theory, ends up having highly damaging consequences - the ultimate consequence, in fact. Nina's lack of consent and general testimony are disregarded, and she is instead victim-blamed for having been intoxicated and promiscuous, and this testimonial injustice is presumably what drives her to her death.

The systematic and persistent testimonial injustice and silencing have resulted in an undermining of confidence as, according to Cassie, Nina evidently changed after the rape and became unsure about her identity, which correlates with the victim in rape-revenge films

according to Henry. Cassie describes Nina as "extraordinary, so smart […] She didn't give a fuck about what anyone else thought apart from me. She was just … Nina" (01:31:28-01:32:20), but since the rape she changed and became Al's, implying that she simply became an object due to her support system and the legal system failing to acknowledge the traumatic experience she went through. Also, Nina was associated with Al and his name to the extent that eventually "it just … squeezed her out" (01:32:44), implying that Nina could not take the mistrust anymore and took her own life. Thus, the systematic and persistent testimonial injustice Nina experienced eventually led to no other way out for her than suicide.

Due to Nina's untimely death, she is unable to avenge herself, which is why Cassie takes proxy vengeance on Nina's behalf. The film does not follow the traditional two-part structure of rape-revenge films laid out by Henry and Young. Because Nina is a peripheral, linguistic character, the violent rape scene is never explicitly shown, the spectator only sees Cassie's reaction to watching the video recording and hears the sounds from it. The reaction is difficult to watch, as Cassie has a pained and tormented expression on her face and struggles to look at the video, especially once she finds out that Ryan witnessed the rape taking place and did not attempt to stop it (figure 39, 01:17:27-01:18:13). This scene appears rather late in the film, so the structure of the film is more focused on the revenge part. The scene functions as a narrative device that pushes the plot forward and builds suspense in relation to Vaage's classification of suspense.

*Figure 39: (01:17:39)*

In accordance with Smith's notion of affective mimicry, the spectator is also affected while Cassie is having a hard time watching the video, as the closeup of her extremely emotional, horrified, and painful reaction imparts a similar reaction in the spectator, who does not wish to see the rape either and is ready to look away if the video were to be shown, affectively mimicking Cassie's unwillingness to watch the assault. As Vaage has argued in her theory of the antihero, rape is morally disgusting, and so it suffices to watch a reaction of someone watching the rape to elicit the feeling of moral disgust in the spectator; Cassie's emotional reaction and the sound of the video relay the horror of the incident to the spectator without it needing to be shown explicitly. In her theory of the rape-revenge genre, Young discusses the necessity of a rape scene in rape-revenge film. She poses the question of whether it is possible to tell a story about rape without showing the audience the reality of rape as a crime. This thesis argues that *PYW* is such a story because the rape scene is not shown, but the spectator is still emotionally affected by moral disgust through Cassie and gets an understanding of the reasons behind the revenge in agreement with Vaage's theory.

Thus, because Nina is constructed as a linguistic character, and due to the actual rape scene being omitted, she becomes a representation of all rape victims. By not showing her, the spectator can imagine any person as the character of Nina, making the rape more real and horrifying as only imagination can draw the line. Furthermore, Fennell's decision not to show the rape scene is also a way of giving rape victims credibility, as it becomes an argument against the assumption that "rape must be seen before it can be condemned" (Young 70), because it is not crucial to graphically showcase just how reprehensible the act of rape is, to believe that it actually occurred.

**The Onlooker: A Poor Innocent Bystander**

In the film, a tall man enters the coffee shop Cassie is working at and orders a coffee observing Cassie (*PLW* 00:11:58-00:12:22). He recognizes her from Forrester Medical School and introduces himself as Ryan Cooper (00:12:22-00:12:37). In terms of Smith's first level of engagement, recognition, he is wearing a blue sweater and has light brown hair and blue eyes, and the overall first impression of him is that he appears to be an ordinary, friendly and nice guy (figure 40). Smith argues that names are important in relation to characters, as they can add information about nationality, gender, and the like, however, the name Ryan Cooper is a fairly common name and merely suggest that he is a male, and it is a typical white name, suggesting associations to patriarchy and privileged white men.

*Figure 40: (00:12:24)*

Throughout most of the film, Ryan is wearing blue, symbolizing trust, logic, and intelligence (figure 41-43). This fits well with Ryan's character, as he is a pediatric surgeon, so he is presumably trustworthy on account of his medical profession, and he cares for children for a living, further suggesting that he is a decent person. He makes a living by helping others and is likely an intelligent man, having gone through years of medical school, which are very likable traits. He is self-deprecating and portrayed as humble, while simultaneously talking about having gotten better (00:26:59-00:27:18), however, as it is said in relation to paying a compliment to Cassie, it does not come off as arrogant or overly confident. Sometimes he wears glasses (figure 41), which makes him look stereotypically clever and nerdy, as well as innocent and non-threatening. This corresponds well with the way he initially behaves and acts, which is kind, funny, and like the poster child for being a nice guy - that is until he feels threatened when Cassie blackmails him with the rape video of Nina (01:19:20-01:22:34).

*Figure 41: (00:24:15)*

*Figure 42: (01:03:24)*

*Figure 43: (01:05:53)*

Regarding Smith's second engagement level, alignment with Ryan is primarily created in relation to Cassie as long as she is alive, as he follows the same spatio-temporal path as her. Because Cassie is the main character, the attachment to her is more exclusive than it is to Ryan who is a supporting character, and he does not appear in scenes alone. However, he does appear in some shots alone, giving subjective access to his mental state, through his facial expressions, body language, and the like. Where Cassie's mental state is often reflected in the non-diegetic background music, the same is not true for Ryan, due to his role as a supporting character. An example of subjective access to Ryan is when Cassie does not show up for their date, and Ryan comes looking for her at her house (00:51:36-00:52:41). Her excuses do not add up which leaves him visibly puzzled and worried, knowing that she is lying. He mistakenly thinks that she is not interested, which is indicated by his sarcastically delivered answer "sure, great," (00:52:09) when she says that she will call him, and when he leaves with a sigh and scratches the back of his neck in confusion (figure 44, 00:52:36).

*Figure 44: (00:52:36)*

The worries both Ryan and Cassie possess about engaging in a new relationship portray the insecurities people often experience in the modern dating world, and thus Ryan becomes a representation of the average slightly insecure, nice guy on the dating market. He is easy to sympathize with because he comes across as genuine, well-intended and good-hearted; a highly sympathetic man in comparison to most of the other men in the film.

After Cassie's murder and the burning of her body, the spectator becomes fully aligned with Ryan. This alignment follows him on a spatio-temporal path at work while being questioned by the police (01:41:36-01:44:15) and at Al's wedding (01:44:55-01:48:33), and the spectator is also given subjective access to him through facial expressions, cinematography and the like, as mentioned before. Through his looks and behavior, Ryan is portrayed as a genuinely nice guy, the guy next door, whose only motive seems to be finding love. Because he is charming, treats Cassie nicely, and sincerely cares for her, the spectator feels sympathetic towards him, since the kind treatment of others is a positive character trait that initiates a sympathetic allegiance according to Smith's theory.

Cassie and Ryan's interactions with each other are often sarcastic and humorous, adding comic relief and a light element to an otherwise dark theme of rape-revenge. He often jokes and tells stories that make Cassie laugh, but also occasionally turns the conversation onto sexual topics (00:26:16-00:26:42, 00:26:43-00:27:35). Although he mostly appears nice and charming, the sexual references make him seem just as preoccupied with sex as the calculating men Cassie traps, and in conjunction with other dislikable traits such as having low thoughts about Cassie's job (00:12:38-00:13:02) or placing blame on Cassie for holding off on being physical with him (01:03:59-01:04:07), he also lends himself to being viewed in a less favorable way. That is, as a privileged white man in which outdated societal values have been instilled about how women are supposed to act and what they are expected to give to men, which foreshadows a much less sympathetic side of him than the one spectators initially see. Film critic A. A. Dowd from the A.V. Club corroborates this reading in his article "Promising Young Woman makes smart, devious use of Bo Burnham" (Dowd). Despite going back and forth after Ryan catches Cassie with another man, he decides to give her a second chance, walking into the coffee store and kissing her (figure 45, 01:05:53), which marks the beginning of their relationship as a couple and confirms the chemistry they have together.

*Figure 45: (01:06:16)*

Thus, Ryan becomes Cassie's love interest, and adds romantic comedy elements to the film. As previously mentioned, there is a montage sequence during Paris Hilton's "Stars are Blind" (01:06:36-01:08:37), where they are developing a relationship, perfectly encapsulating the romantic comedy elements that are present in the film on account of the budding romance between Cassie and Ryan. The dinner with Cassie's parents is also already mentioned as having romantic comedy elements, but his positive traits of being polite and funny, as pointed out by Cassie's father (01:09:40), are re-identified per Smith's concept of recognition, which allows the spectator to further establish a sympathetic allegiance with Ryan, since he is confirmed to be a pleasant and seemingly very sympathetic person. Thus, the sympathetic allegiance with Cassie affects the spectator's view of Ryan in a positive direction as seeing her happy with Ryan makes the spectator like him too, and as long as he is nice to Cassie, a sympathetic allegiance with Ryan is maintained.

However, when Cassie finds out that Ryan was an onlooker to Nina's rape who did not attempt to stop it and even laughed and cheered Al on, her view of him changes and so does the spectator's. She confronts him with the video clip, and he turns on her, becoming increasingly scared and angry while claiming his innocence (01:19:20-01:22:12). When Cassie mockingly calls him "poor Ryan, just an innocent bystander" (01:22:12), he retaliates by calling her a "fucking failure" while standing with the side to the camera in a medium close-up shot with a closed off, unwelcoming body language (figure 46, 01:22:25). The camera is slightly tilted upward, and his hands are in the pockets of his white coat, making him look

towering and threatening in the darkened room with very little reddish sunlight creeping in through the window blinds. His hostile, patronizing glare and posture are juxtaposed by the children's drawings on the wall behind him, creating an even starker contrast and making him seem even less friendly. Because of this threatening posture and his cruel treatment of Cassie, uncertainty is raised regarding his behavior up until this point; the sincerity and otherwise positive traits that the spectator has come to expect from Ryan until now are not re-identified but instead brought into question, threatening the sympathetic allegiance.

*Figure 46: (01:22:25)*

Ryan downplays the severity of his inaction and lack of interference when Nina was raped which is the biggest betrayal he could possibly commit towards Cassie, and he even claims that he does not remember being present at the assault. He seems to genuinely not remember Nina's rape, which only makes it worse because it renders Nina insignificant, and it also speaks to the normality and frequency of rape in college culture. The actor playing Ryan, Bo Burnham, also confirms this as he states in an interview that the film is about "The way rape culture often allows the perpetrators (and witnesses like Ryan) to move on with their lives, as the victims keep coping" (qtd. in Dowd).

Ryan's position as an onlooker who does not speak up can be attributed to the group dynamic between men, which Henry and Young argue is often present in rape-revenge films. By being an onlooker to Nina's rape, Ryan is placed in a group dynamic between several men where he is unwilling to speak up to maintain his reputation and place in the group. Since Cassie is unable to forgive him, there is no remorse for him, as there is no remorse for any of

the men who participate in a rape or passively watch it unfold according to Henry and Young. This group dynamic between men is also represented in the way Ryan talks about his friends from Forrester Medical School. He describes how he "can't shake them off" (*PYW* 00:32:29) and tries to defend them by saying, "they are not that bad" (00:32:34), while claiming that he is not close to Al, although they work at the same hospital (00:32:19-00:33:43). Ryan's attempt to distance himself from and diminish his relationship with Al and his group of friends, who, according to Cassie, are just as guilty of taking Nina's life as the rapist himself, is a testament to Ryan's awareness that their actions are toxic and far from morally defensible, and that he ought not to remain friends with them. However, the toxic masculinity amongst the friend group and Ryan's own shallow concern with his reputation does not allow him to fully acknowledge the incident as an actual rape and serious crime.

In the alignment with Ryan after Cassie's death, the sympathetic allegiance with him is further brought into question, as he becomes increasingly unsympathetic and thus places himself in a graduated moral structure beneath Cassie who is morally preferable as per Smith's theory. This is a result of Ryan not telling the truth to the police detective who questions him about Cassie's whereabouts (01:41:37-01:44:14). At this point, Cassie has been suffocated by Al, making the spectator thirst for justice, and Ryan could be a key to this justice and redeem himself by restoring his deteriorating sympathetic allegiance if he would tell the truth to the detective. Disappointingly, he lies to protect himself, making him seem even more unsympathetic (figure 47, 01:42:55-01:43:10).

*Figure 47: (01:43:13)*

Ryan is given a chance to do the right thing, and his lying is made worse when the detective praises him for being a pediatric surgeon and thanks him for "all that [he] do[es] for the community" (01:41:57), clearly giving him credibility excess in relation to Miranda Fricker's concept of testimonial injustice. Additionally, his lying further establishes the dynamic moral orientation of the film because he shows a less moral side to save himself from getting into trouble that could potentially ruin his life, or at least his reputation as a respectable doctor. According to Smith, this is because his moral values are not clear to the spectator, and these moral values change from what the spectator were initially led to think, thus undermining the moral structure constructed.

As a result, Ryan adds to the film's overwhelmingly negative portrayal of men. At first, he seems like a genuinely nice guy who sincerely cares for Cassie, establishing a sympathetic allegiance. However, when he is confronted with past mistakes of not speaking up when witnessing a girl being raped first-hand, he does not own up to the responsibility, shrugging it off as a minor thing and trying to excuse himself by claiming that he was just a kid while nervously biting his nails (01:20:07-01:22:28), which calls into question the sympathetic allegiance. When Ryan does not speak up to the police detective about Cassie's whereabouts, he also becomes an onlooker to Cassie's murder through Al's arrest, as this would probably have had a different outcome if he had spoken up about Cassie's whereabouts or even apologized to her for doing nothing when Nina was raped. Hence, when Ryan as an onlooker does not speak up, it has fatal consequences which is an extremely important lesson that the film conveys through Ryan's character development and suddenly rapidly shifting allegiance.

Ryan is portrayed by the American comedian Bo Burnham, who is famous for writing and performing humorous and intelligent songs. In his newest special *Bo Burnham: Inside,* he is very conscious about his social role as a white male in a capitalist society, considering what he can do about racism, climate change and similar issues, while also showing his deteriorating mental health, and thus a very vulnerable side of himself. As per Smith's theory, Burnham's star persona adds to the sympathetic allegiance, because he adds humor and wit to the film, but at the same time is aware about his responsibility as a privileged white man. Because Burnham is very much aware about social issues, he is assumed to be interested in the character of Ryan, because it showcases a problem in society. The same can be said about the construction of Ryan as a genuinely good guy who turns out to be more complex, because it suggests that all men, even the ones who view themselves as good guys, have a responsibility to call out toxic masculinity and need to be aware of the social power that comes with being male. Film critic A. A. Dowd confirms this reading of Ryan as he argues that "In the world Fennell has built

around her protagonist, there are no "nice guys" with clean hands. Even those who didn't participate are complicit for their silence, their justifications, their refusal to intervene." (A.A Dowd), and Burnham himself has said that he hopes the film will spark conversation between men (Mancuso). The spectator is surprised when the funny, loveable doctor turns out to be an ignorant, selfish bystander, and that is why Burnham is a secret weapon according to news editor Ryan Lattanzio at IndieWire; he claims that "[Burnham is] funny, not self-serious, handsome, charming [...]. Meaning, he's not the person you'd peg as an accomplice to a horrifying sexual assault, as his character Ryan is revealed to be" (Lattanzio). Burnham himself has stated that "I know for me, I sort of believe that whatever happened, Ryan genuinely does not remember it, which is probably worse than if he did remember it" (qtd. in Mancuso) and that "[Ryan] genuinely believes he's a good guy who has done nothing wrong in his life" (qtd. in Dowd).

**The Revenge Plan**

In relation to Vaage's concept of reality checks and fictional relief, the film uses reality checks initially in each situation of revenge to make the spectator believe that Cassie is a vengeful and merciless monster who punishes her targets in cruel ways. However, it is revealed that Cassie only confronts her targets about their past misjudgments, making them, and the spectator, think they have been exposed to horrible things. The fact that she proves to be a master manipulator can seem almost mitigating, and in a way encourages the spectator to find fictional relief in that fact, possibly leading the spectator to further sympathize with Cassie's revenge mission, because she never really hurts anyone physically. This will become evident in the following analysis, where the spectator is similarly deceived and manipulated, never knowing what is true.

**I The Friend: Crying Wolf**

The first revenge act is dedicated to Madison McPhee. She was a friend of Nina's and Cassie's when they went to medical school, and according to Ryan, the three of them were close (*PYW* 00:32:49). She is first introduced to the film peripherally through dialogue when Ryan talks about her, mentioning that she just had twins (00:32:38-00:32:45).

The beginning of each revenge act is marked by the appearance of a light pink roman numeral on the screen, which is juxtaposed with an off-screen ominous sound resembling a distant gunshot (figure 48). Cassie is waiting at a restaurant in a white shirt with straight hair,

which is a more mature, professional, and less girly look than she usually sports, before a waiter comes over with a bottle of champagne and a can of ginger ale (00:35:24). She pours champagne into Madison's glass and ginger ale in her own and hides the can, so Madison does not know that they are not drinking the same (00:35:31-00:35:50).

*Figure 48: (00:35:20)*

Madison arrives at the restaurant, but only her body is shown in a medium close-up shot (figure 49), possibly foreshadowing what is going to happen through the objectifying perspective on her body. She wears a classic white dress and a beige bag looking rather elegant and grown-up, compared to Cassie's youthful appearance in her daily life, confirming that Cassie has been stuck in time, whereas Madison has been moving forward.

*Figure 49: (00:36:02)*

They toast in what Madison assumes is champagne for both. When Cassie continues to drink, Madison tries to keep up (figure 50, 00:36:32-00:36:40), showing a competitive relation between the two, leaving the spectator with a feeling of a somewhat nervous tension. However, it can also be because Madison is on edge wondering why Cassie wants to meet up after seven years of not speaking to anyone from medical school, and to cope with this nervousness, she tries to follow Cassie's lead.

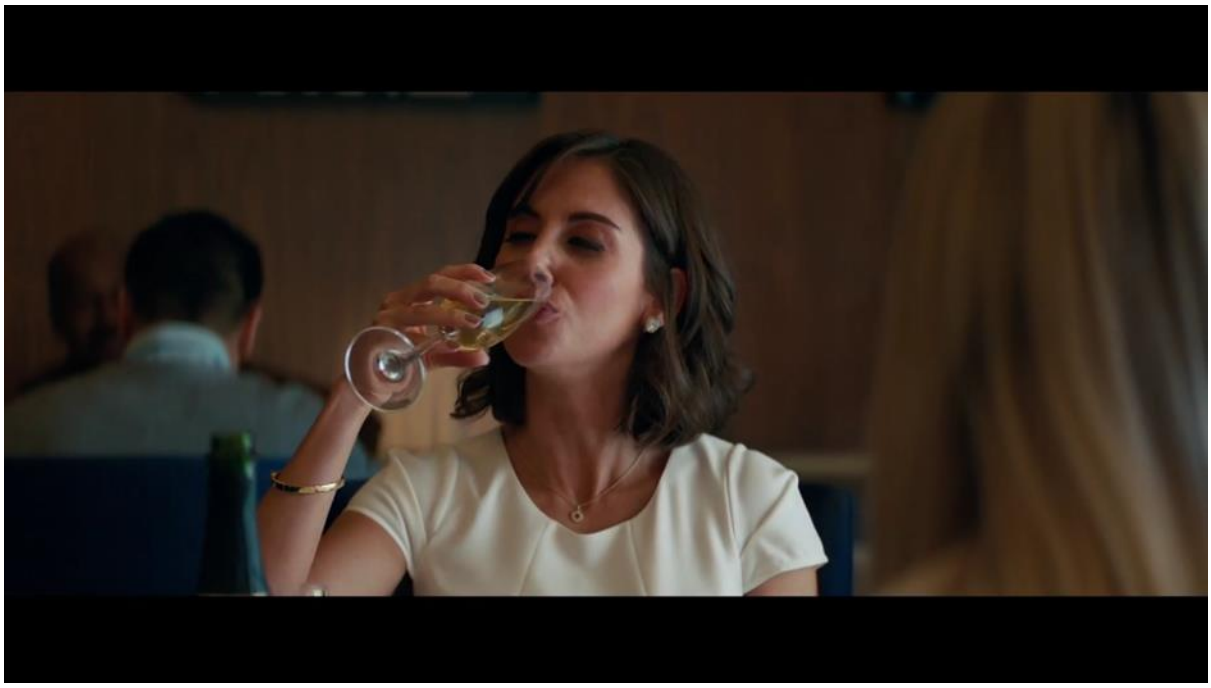

*Figure 50: (00:36:37)*

The next shot changes to a medium close-up shot zooming out to a medium long shot focusing on Madison's wine glass that is almost empty, whereas Cassie's is still quite full, indicating that Madison is rather intoxicated at this point (figure 51, 00:36:43). The conversation is also less tense and formal, and in her drunken state, Madison sounds like a teenager using acronyms like 'TBH' (to be honest) and giggling, and her intonation goes up, for instance when she says "I haven't been daydrunk in forever, so fun" (00:36:43-00:36:58). These observations make Madison seem immature and marks her as suspicious in relation to Cassie, because the sympathetic allegiance with Cassie affects the view of other characters as per Smith's theory.

*Figure 51: (00:36:43)*

Cassie confronts Madison with what happened to Nina and Madison's reaction to it. According to Cassie, Madison "roll[ed] her eyes behind [Nina's] back and dismiss[ed] the whole thing as drama" (00:38:51) and Fricker's theory of testimonial injustice indicates that Madison was silencing Nina, leading to a credibility deficit due to Nina's social identity as a woman who is causing drama. Madison becomes uncomfortable but still maintains and justifies her position by blaming society as "[she] do[es]n't make the rules, (…) when you get that drunk, things happen. Don't get blackout drunk all the time and then expect people to be on your side when you have sex with someone when you don't want to" (00:39:14-00:39:27), as if those are the unwritten rules of society to follow. She also blames Nina for being promiscuous by saying "if you have a reputation for sleeping around then maybe people aren't gonna believe you when you say something happened… I mean… It's crying wolf" (00:39:00-00:39:11). Thus, Madison is blaming Nina as the victim, placing the responsibility of getting raped on her, and thus undermines her as a speaker resulting in credibility deficit even after her death due to prejudices. By blaming society and Nina, Madison does not take responsibility for her past actions but rather defends them resulting in further testimonial injustice and silencing of Nina. As Madison was a friend of Nina, she would have been a part of Nina's support system but failed to believe and help Nina.

The above-mentioned quotes are examples of how the prevalent rape discourse is derogatory to women and prone to gender inequality favoring men. The quotes present an interesting and disturbing rape discourse implying that it is still consensual sex when someone

has sex with you even though you do not want to, because you were too drunk to say no, placing the blame on the victim. This in a way implies that being too drunk to say no is an invitation, and that women should take that into consideration when they get drunk. Thus, Madison's defenses of rape and her actions create a feeling of anger through emotional simulation as specified by Smith, and this makes her appear unsympathetic and not very likable, hence she is morally unpreferable compared to Cassie.

Cassie utters that she is sorry for Madison's sake for not having changed her mind (00:39:36), indicating that Cassie feels forced to punish her. In a medium closeup shot, Madison looks uncomfortable with the confrontation with a scared facial expression and taking deep breaths, looking nervously around trying to figure out the right thing to say (figure 52), marking a brief alignment with Madison. She tries to make things right by offering to get the check but knocks over her glass of wine (00:39:42-00:40:05), showing how drunk she is which both makes her appear guilty but also less sympathetic as if getting the check will set things straight.

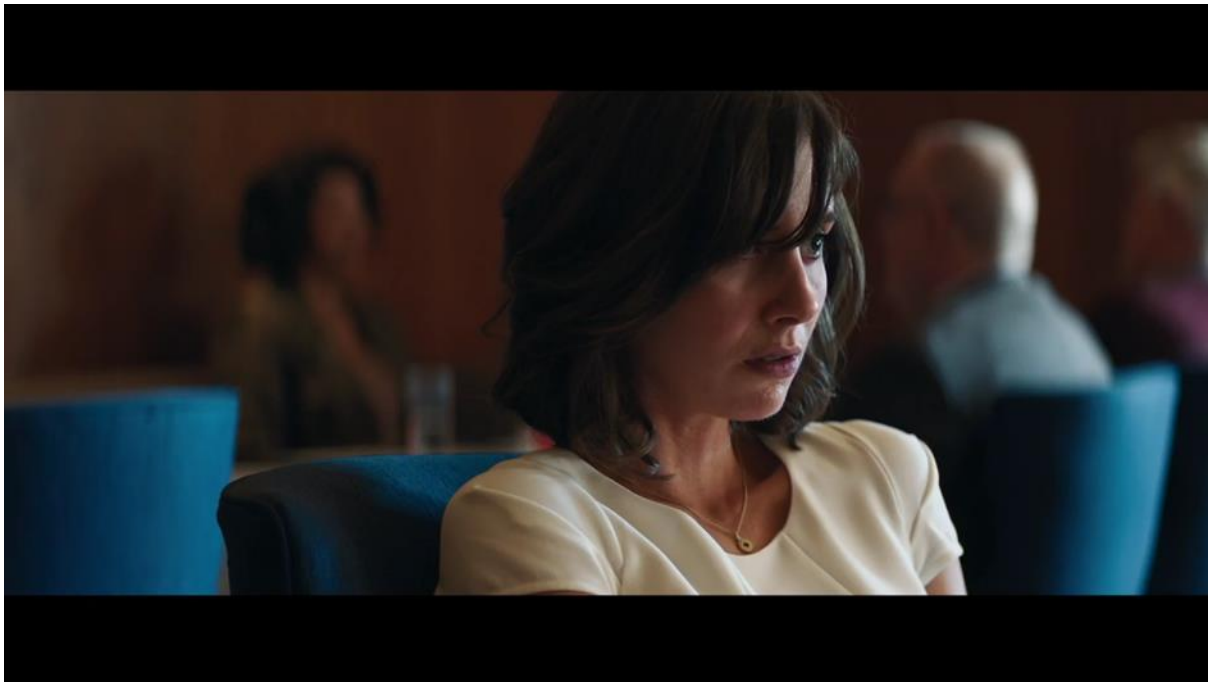

*Figure 52: (00:39:41)*

Cassie leaves a drunk Madison at the restaurant with the camera focusing on a hotel key and an envelope with money in a close-up shot (figure 53, 00:40:17-00:40:35), which Cassie gives to an unknown man on the way out. He takes the key, looking at a clearly drunken Madison, leaving the impression that he will take Madison to the hotel room and rape her, especially when he asks Cassie, "are you sure about this?" (00:40:29).

*Figure 53: (00:40:28)*

This impression is supported, when Madison calls Cassie 13 times the next day leaving messages about not remembering what happened and waking up with the man (figure 54). Cassie continues to punish Madison by not answering (00:40:44-00:41:31).

Madison is a minor contrast character, because she has no empathy for Nina, and hence makes Cassie morally preferable. The feeling of righteous indignation creates a wish for Madison to be punished due to pro-social punishment as Vaage claims, because spectators enjoy revengeful acts and watching contrast characters get what they deserve. However, rape is also morally disgusting as specified by Vaage, so the spectator is equally shocked that Cassie gives her this punishment resulting in a reality check questioning the sympathetic allegiance with Cassie and the moral line of acceptable revenge. Journalist Natalie Morin confirms this interpretation in her article "Let's Talk About *Promising Young Woman*'s Ugliest Scene" where she states that "[Cassie], who we've sympathized with up until now, exhibits her own ugly behavior here, exacting cruel revenge on Madison […] giving her a taste of her own toxic medicine" (Morin, N.).

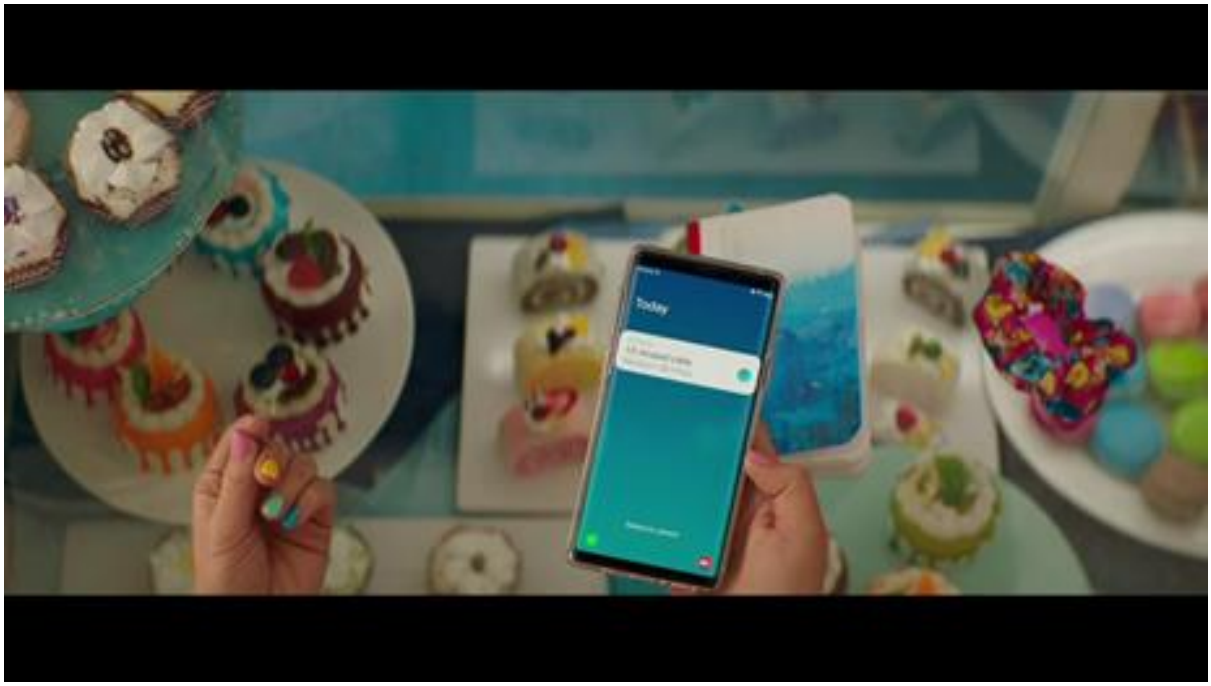


*Figure 54: (00:40:51)*

Later in the film, Madison comes by Cassie's house looking for an answer. Cassie tells Madison that nothing happened, and she was not raped (*PYW* 01:13:07-01:14:04), and because Cassie has put her revenge behind her at this point, there is no doubt that she is telling the truth. Madison is relieved and so is the spectator, resulting in Vaage's term of fictional relief, because the sense of moral disgust was wrong and the sympathetic allegiance with Cassie is reestablished. Madison gives Cassie her old phone with a video of the rape making her appear more sympathetic. By finding the video, Madison puts an end to her part in the testimonial injustice and silencing of Nina, because she seems to have gotten a new perspective after Cassie's punishment which is also indicated when she stands up with her arms folded and shamefully says: "I don't know how we all could have watched it and […] thought it was funny" (figure 55, 01:16:03).

*Figure 55: (01:16:05)*

However, she still makes excuses because “so much stuff happened back then, like, all the time” (01:15:39) providing evidence of a culture in which having sex with people who are too drunk to notice is normalized. Before she leaves, she furiously says “never fucking contact me again” (01:16:38) while clenching her hands down her side (figure 56) showing how angry she is about what she has been exposed to. Because of the sympathetic allegiance with Cassie, Madison is still less morally preferable than Cassie, because she is an accomplice to Nina’s tragic fate despite acknowledging her wrongdoing.

*Figure 56: (01:16:37)*

Moreover, it is unfortunate that Madison had to believe that she was raped and see a video of Nina’s rape again seven years later to change her views and to give Nina the credibility she deserves. Fitting with Young’s quote about the depiction of rape scenes “rape must be seen before it can be condemned”, Madison becomes a representation of how difficult it is for rape victims not to experience credibility deficit, ultimately resulting in testimonial injustice, according to Fricker. The fact that Madison is a woman only makes it worse, because if another woman does not believe a female rape victim and dismisses the whole thing as drama, then it is harder to imagine that men will believe rape victims. Thus, as Morin argues, “[Madison’s] attitude feels like a betrayal to women everywhere” (Morin, N).

**II The institution: Giving the Rapist the Benefit of the Doubt**

Before the second revenge act begins, Cassie has picked up a girl from a high school, asking for directions to the 'Castle Diner' pretending to be a make-up artist working on a music video for the band 'Wet Dreams'. The girl is a big fan of 'Wet Dreams' and insists on helping, offering her phone as collateral for not posting anything on social media (00:41:57-00:43:01). When she gets into the car, the camera focuses on the door lock in a close-up shot, and the girl looks down as it locks and the lyrics of the music in the background goes 'uh oh' (figure 57, 00:43:27). This makes the girl seem gullible, as it is foolish of her to get in a car with a stranger and creates suspense, as it is expected that something bad is going to happen.

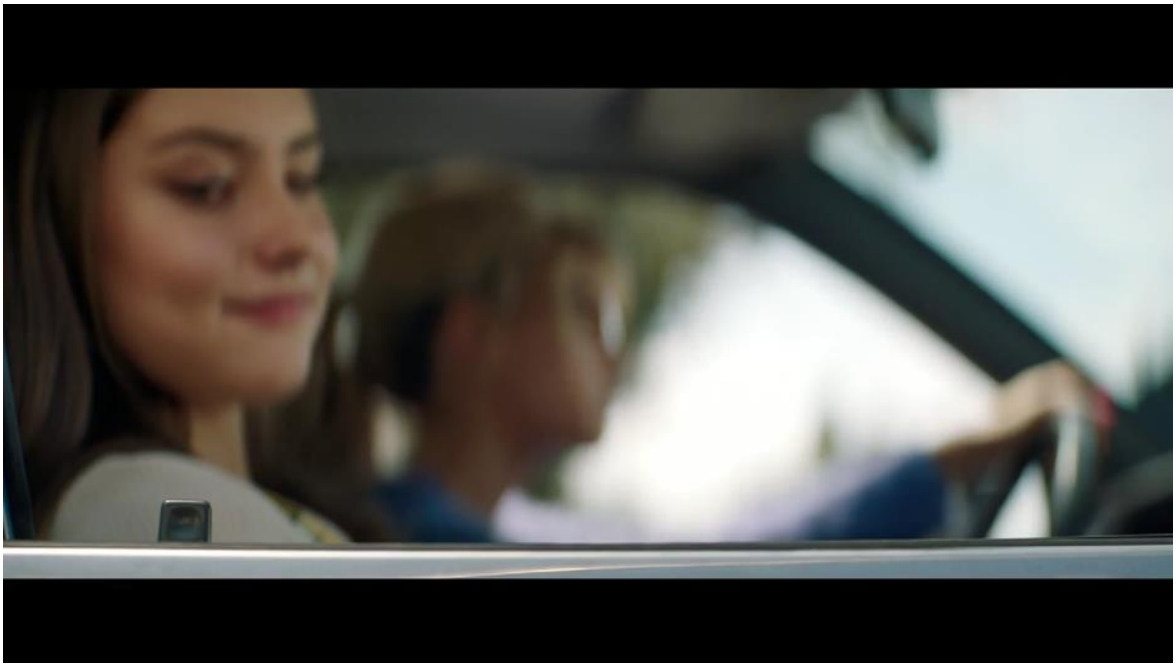

*Figure 57: (00:43:27)*

The second revenge act concerns the Dean of Forrester Medical School, Elizabeth Walker, and the girl Cassie has picked up turns out to be Dean Walker's daughter Amber. Cassie enters Dean Walker's office pretending to be a girl named Daisy who wants to resume her studies. She explains that she left school because of what happened to Nina, but Dean Walker only remembers Al and praises him (00:43:55-00:44:48). According to Cassie, Dean Walker dismissed the rape allegations involving Al, because she believed there was not sufficient evidence as it was a 'he said, she said' situation (00:45:23-00:45:30). Cassie stresses that Nina was covered in bruises which she calls "handprints" (00:45:08), and Al's friends were watching and laughing (00:45:43), meaning there were both physical evidence and eyewitnesses present, and thus it could not have been a 'he said, she said' situation. As a result, Dean Walker caused Nina to experience credibility deficit by not believing her account of things, and Nina was silenced by Dean Walker who represents the school as an institution.

Through the conversation, it becomes clear that Dean Walker represents a discourse favoring the rapist in such allegations and provides the rapist with credibility excess. She speaks in a soft voice that makes her seem calm and friendly, however, she also declares that the school receives rape accusations all the time, manifesting how this is a problem in the college setting; she does acknowledge it as a problem of the boys' behavior, but ultimately a responsibility of the girls. She argues that it is hard to handle such allegations, because "you know if she was drinking and could not remember everything," blaming Nina, but Cassie interrupts Walker and questions this claim (00:45:47-00:45:56) implying how unfair this view is, as it causes Nina to be in credibility deficit. Dean Walker's body language signals that she is carefully considering what she is saying lifting her hands as to defend herself but also to calm down the conversation and retracts her statement wanting to rephrase it (figure 58, 00:45:46-00:45:59).


*Figure 58: (00:45:46)*

She makes a long speech putting the blame on the victim as "none of us wants to admit when we have made ourselves vulnerable, when we have made a bad choice, and those choices, those mistakes, can be so damaging and really regrettable" (00:46:02), making it appear as if Nina made the choice to be raped, which is obviously not a choice. She represents a prevalent discourse pitying men, because she would "ruin a young man's life every time we get an accusation like this" (00:46:22), if she took the allegations serious indicating that she sees men's life as more important than women's, as she does not view believing the accuser as ruining a young woman's life. In terms of Fricker's theory, this is prejudices based on Nina's

social identity as a woman, where she is worth less than a man, and so is her word and thus her credibility. Walker gives the boys credibility excess based on them being young men, as she states that "[she has] to give them the benefit of the doubt […] because innocent until proven guilty" (00:46:30), and as Cassie puts it, she is "happy to take the boy's word for it" (00:46:28), implying how it is a prominent misconception in society that every rape accuser is a potential liar, as opposed to every rape accused being potentially guilty.

Cassie's viewpoint represents the unfairness and inequality in the way society tends to favor the accused and the doubt and blame are placed with the accuser and not the accused in such a way that the accused is exonerated due to potentially being innocent, and the accuser is condemned based on the potential of being a liar. Dean Walker is marked as another contrast character, because she is a woman who does not believe and support another woman, making her antipathetic in relation to Vaage's theory of antiheroes. Actress Connie Britton, playing Dean Walker, has talked about the fact that Dean Walker is an authority figure brought up by patriarchy, and thus suggests a favoring of men to conform into a male oriented world (commentary on *PYW* DVD).

Walker's opinions create a sense of righteous indignation, and the spectator wants Cassie to teach Dean Walker a lesson. Therefore, the spectator feels some pleasure due to pro-social punishment when Cassie reveals that she has picked up Dean Walker's daughter at her school and introduced her to the boys who currently reside in the room where Nina was raped (*PYW* 00:46:58-00:47:19). The boys have alcohol in the room, and Cassie states that she is "sure the boys will take good care of your daughter" (00:47:15) meaning they will probably assault Amber, because the school gets so many rape accusations. However, the spectator also questions the morality of subjecting an innocent girl to the possibility of rape to get revenge over her mother. The situation functions as a reality check as Vaage terms it, causing the spectator to briefly question the sympathetic allegiance with Cassie.

To confirm Cassie's claims, Walker calls Amber's phone which Cassie has. Walker asks what Cassie is doing, as Amber is a young girl and demands to know what room Amber is in, standing up behind her desk and yelling at her repeatedly (figure 59, 00:47:02-00:48:21). A similar question should have been asked to the young men assaulting drunk girls at parties, but whose side Walker chose to believe without question. Her body language and facial expression creates alignment with her, showing her mental state which is angry and fearful. In a close-up shot, Walker sits down looking beaten and despairing, saying Cassie is right. She pleads with Cassie to say where Amber is, looking sadly down on her desk, almost as if she is on her knees, begging, showing her desperate mental state (figure 60).

*Figure 59: (00:47:58)*

*Figure 60: (00:48:56)*

Cassie takes her time, punishing Walker for not remembering the room, looking at her while smiling like she enjoys the pain Dean Walker is going through (figure 61, 00:48:00-00:48:08). Finally, Cassie speaks up, pointing out how easy it was for Walker to change her mind, saying that she "just had to think about it in the right way. I guess it feels different when it is someone you love" (00:48:44-00:48:55).

*Figure 61: (00:48:00)*

At last, Cassie bursts out laughing urging Walker to relax and says "do you really think that I would do something like that? Luckily, I don't have as much faith in boys as you do," (00:49:09-00:49:18) and reveals that Amber is safe at the Castle Diner waiting for 'Wet Dreams' (00:49:10-00:49:50). Cassie leaves Dean Walker, who is sitting back looking worried and scared but also shameful because she has learned an important lesson. As a result, referring to Vaage's theory, the reality check is turned into fictional relief, strengthening the sympathetic allegiance with Cassie, because if no one gets hurt and someone learns from it, the spectator does not morally question Cassie's cruel mind tricks.

Consequently, in the educational setting Nina also experienced testimonial injustice and silencing, as her position as woman reporting a rape brings prejudices about being drunk, which results in a following of negative prejudices of a person's social identity, and thus the school as an institution also failed to help Nina find justice. In the end, Cassie is still morally preferable to Walker, because Walker is a woman who fails to stand in solidarity with her own sex and only changes her mind about giving boys the benefit of the doubt when it concerns her own daughter. As with Madison, Dean Walker had to be pushed quite far to have empathy with Nina and other potential rape victims, adding to Cassie's morally preferable standing due to her punishment being the catalyst for their changing views.

**III The Justice System: An Epiphany or a Psychotic Episode**

The third revenge act concerns Jordan Green who was Al Monroe's defense attorney. Jordan opens the door in a medium close-up shot, looking a bit confused, before Cassie tells him it is his day of reckoning, which he guiltily accepts and lets her in (figure 62, 00:55:32-00:56:00).

*Figure 62: (00:55:37)*

Nina tried to seek legal assistance and failed, as is evident from Cassie's confrontation with Jordan. According to Cassie, Jordan threatened and bullied Nina until she dropped her case and accusingly says that he will not remember her (00:56:37-00:56:40). Surprisingly, Jordan does remember Nina, making Cassie gasp and look shocked and frozen, because this was not what she expected (figure 63).

*Figure 63: (00:56:49)*

He jumps up from the sofa he is sitting on in a rash movement that startles Cassie and makes him appear threatening with a pointing finger, while he starts to explain that they were rewarded with bonuses for settlements out of court and dropped charges (figure 64, 00:57:43-00:57:52). Then in another rash movement in long shot, he rushes to his knees getting close to Cassie, who moves uneasily in her seat. The camera changes to a low angle showing how uncomfortable Cassie is, while Jordan apologetically spells out that they have an employee, hired only to go through the girls' social media accounts looking for compromising information, and to contact old friends and former sexual partners to dig up information or find drunk pictures that could make a jury opposed to the accuser (figure 65, 00:57:51-00:58:17). These two positions and the rash movements make him appear threatening, and the spectator fears what he is going to do as corroborated by actor Alfred Molina playing Jordan (Aurthur).

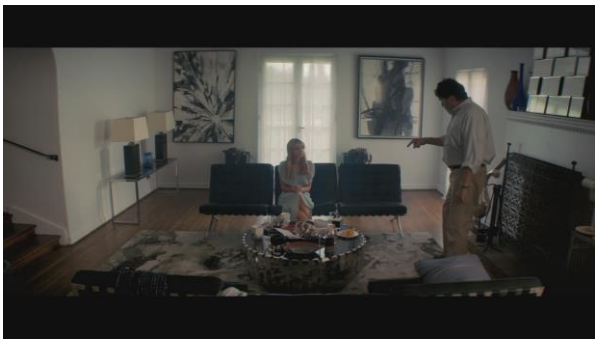

*Figure 64: (00:57:48)*

*Figure 65: (00:57:56)*

In relation to testimonial injustice as conceived by Fricker, this means that any compromising information they could find would be used to threaten the accuser to drop the case, meaning

that Jordan used his identity power as a man and lawyer to undermine Nina as a speaker and thereby silenced her into not taking any legal action. Thus, Nina also experienced testimonial injustice in the legal system.

In a way, this makes Jordan come across as unsympathetic, because he has done something morally wrong that undermined Nina as a speaker. However, he regrets his actions which he expresses through the epiphany he has experienced, but his doctors call it a psychotic episode that happened at work, leaving him on sabbatical (*PYW* 00:57:24-00:57:42). This indicates that the firm he is working at still believes that it is okay to bully and threaten accusers into dropping their charges, showing how ruthless it can be for rape victims in the justice system.

Jordan grabs Cassie's hands, scaring her, while he just wants to beg for her forgiveness, as he cannot sleep and cannot forgive himself because of his actions (00:58:18-00:58:49). He is a broken man who cannot find peace, but Cassie offers him some peace when she forgives him, putting a hand on his back and tells him to go to sleep (figure 66, 00:58:56-00:59:16).

*Figure 66: (00:59:07)*

Cassie sends away the man whom she has presumably hired to exact some form of punishment on to Jordan (00:59:25-00:59:53), and in combination with the comfort she gives him, an empathetic and forgiving side of her surfaces, as she can also be merciful to people who regret their actions, creating sympathy, as helping people is a positive character trait according to Smith.

As Jordan is the only one of Cassie's revenge targets who shows remorse, he symbolically ceases his silencing of Nina and the testimonial injustice, which makes him appear sympathetic and morally preferable to the other targets of Cassie's revenge. However, he is also a representation of the rare case of a man who regrets his actions and begs forgiveness of a woman, and actor Alfred Molina says that it is a very powerful scene, as he cannot "think of a scene where a man - a male character - has begged for a woman's forgiveness for a whole way of *life*. For being part of a whole system" (Molina qtd. in Aurthur). The interaction with Jordan also shows that Cassie can be merciful towards those who regret their actions and feel remorse, which shows a much warmer and more human side to her, in turn strengthening the sympathetic allegiance with her, as she can evidently be just towards those who regret their actions and will punish those who do not, providing a larger motive and intent behind every punishment she exacts.

**IV The Rapist: A Filthy Fucking Name**

The fourth revenge act concerns the rapist Al Monroe. A non-diegetic music track is playing while Cassie walks up to the cottage in which Al's bachelor party is taking place. The melody is Britney Spears' "Toxic" in the form of a slow and sinister violin composition, and Cassie is dressed in a fetish doctor costume, posing as a stripping act (figure 67, 01:23:05-01:24:18). The track is only instrumental, but due to the popularity of the hit song, many listeners will be familiar with the lyrics of the chorus, posing the question: "Don't you know that you're toxic?" In the context of the film plot, this question could both refer to Cassie, her devious revenge plan, and the sedatives she is quite literally planning to use on the men in the cottage, and to Al as a representative of toxic masculinity and white male privilege. The eerie music, which evokes associations to toxicity, coupled with Cassie's determined walk create suspense and suggest that she is walking toward her destiny: a showdown with toxic masculinity.

*Figure 67: (01:23:59)*

Up to this point in the film, Al has only been a linguistic, peripheral character who is solely realized through interactions between other characters. In these dialogues, a negative picture is painted of Al as an unsympathetic, entitled guy who can get away with almost any transgression, which is confirmed when Ryan says "Classic Al, you know, landing on his feet" (00:33:09), indicating that Al takes advantage of his white male privilege. This is also evident from the credibility excess he gets from Dean Walker and Madison, where his credibility is not questioned to nearly the same extent as Nina's is. On the contrary, he is awarded credibility simply on account of being a successful, well off, white man. These peripheral descriptions leave an impression of him as arrogant and selfish, and he is easily imagined to be a typical frat boy who thinks any woman would want to be with him - and should consider herself lucky to.

Suspense has been built up to the moment where Cassie knocks on the door and there is an expectation that Al will finally be revealed. A character played by Max Greenfield opens the door (01:24:20), fitting somewhat into the expectations of who Al may be based on Greenfield's role as Schmidt in the TV series *New Girl*, who is obsessed with sex and considers himself to be a God-given gift to women. However, this character turns out to be Al's good friend Joe, and when Al is finally introduced in the film, all these assumptions and ideas about him fall flat. He is dressed in a light blue polo and beige pants, almost looking like a suburban father (figure 68). He is expected to be this villainous, heinous person as the spectator is aligned with Cassie's abhorrence toward him, but then the mellow face of actor Chris Lowell is shown,

whose star persona is associated with the harmless, nice, morally good guy, whom he plays, for instance, on the shows *Veronica Mars* and *Private Practice*.

*Figure 68: (01:24:54)*

That the film toys with the stereotypical expectations of the visual and behavioral characteristics that make up a sexual predator is a general theme within PYW. On the one hand, it is impossible to know what a sexual predator may look or act like, and on the other, somehow Al and Cassie's night life targets do not conform to the identifying features that one may be envisioning when conjuring up an image of a rapist. This is also an important point the film makes: anyone could be a potential sexual predator, and due to the still largely dominating patriarchal values of the modern world and the social power that is intrinsically connected to the male gender, victims of male violence are rendered virtually powerless.

Cassie drugs all the men at the party except for Al in a distasteful scene objectifying the men, focusing on their facial expressions and bodies while their male gaze is directed at Cassie's stripper appearance (01:25:09-01:26:39). This scene evokes a degree of core disgust, as specified by Vaage, due to the focus on bodily fluids in the form of saliva and sweat when Cassie pours the drugged vodka into their open mouths (figure 69). Furthermore, the dim-lighted, red-tinted shots shift between close-up and extreme close-up framing, focusing on some of the men's eyes, mouths, and hands touching their genitals and Cassie unzipping her dress or sensually playing with the gum in her mouth, demonstrating an unappetizing, almost animalistic attention toward sexual allusions (figure 70-71). The men's sexual drives are indeed portrayed in an animal-like fashion, as if they are predators looking at their prey with intense,

hungry stares, licking their lips while waiting for a chance to pounce, which speaks right into the film's negative portrayal of men as potential sexual predators. As Vaage argues, spectators do not like to be reminded of their animalistic likeness and tendencies, and as such, this scene elicits feelings of not only core disgust, but of moral disgust to some extent, too.

*Figure 69: (01:25:29)*

*Figure 70: (01:25:43)*

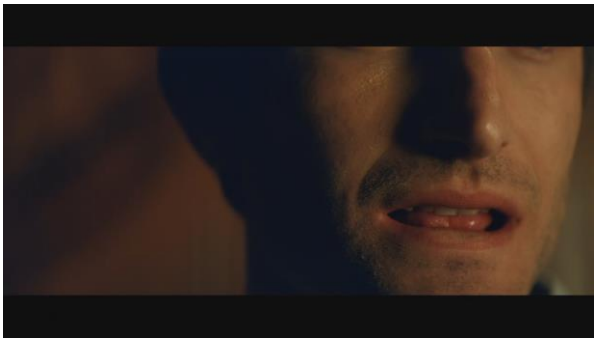

*Figure 71: (01:25:59)*

Also, the lyrics of the non-diegetic background music say: "I'm ready, come catch me," indicating that Cassie is there to lure them in, knowing the sexual effect she has on these men, and also that she is about to commence her revenge over Al.

Cassie brings Al to the bedroom upstairs and cuffs him to the bed, which makes him a little nervous, and so is the spectator, who is sitting on the edge of their seats, fearing what is going to happen. He asks what her name is, which she first says is Candy, a stereotypical stripper name which is also quite fitting to her sugary sweet daytime appearance, and when Al asks for her real name, she says Nina Fisher. Al gets upset thinking it is a joke and asks to be let go, before revealing that Nina is dead, meaning that he followed her life even after she dropped the rape allegations (01:27:52-01:28:22). Eventually, Al figures out who Cassie is, and she confronts him with the rape, but he still claims that he did not do anything, silencing Nina yet again. He tries to play the victim as he says "It's every guy's worst nightmare, being accused like that" (01:30:55) exemplifying the prevalent rape discourse, to which Cassie answers "Can you guess what every woman's worst nightmare is?" (01:30:58) implying how

it is a prominent misconception in society that every rape accuser is a potential liar, as opposed to every rape accused being potentially guilty.

In connection with Vaage's theory of the antihero, Cassie delivers a monolog about Nina functioning as a plea for excuses for what she is about to do due to partiality to Nina and provides insight into Cassie herself (01:31:28-01:32:20). Cassie's heartbreaking retelling of the person Nina was, might incite the spectator to find Cassie's mission to rectify the violent injustice that happened to Nina both righteous and justifiable in a way. This notion is further fortified as Cassie goes on to explain Nina's ruin:

> Suddenly she was something else. She was yours. It wasn't her name she heard when she was walking around. It was yours, your name all around her. All over her, all the time. And it just... squeezed her out. So when I heard your name again, your filthy fucking name, I wondered, when was the last time anyone had said hers? Or thought it even, apart from me? And it made me so sad because, Al... You should be the one with her name all over you (01:32:21-01:33:18).

Thus, Cassie describes Nina's psychological breakdown in excruciating imagery, implying that after the rape, Nina became Al's object when her victimhood was dismissed and blamed on herself, undermining her humanity as a subject and a speaker, and thus silencing her through testimonial injustice.

Cassie reveals a medical kit with scalpels and tells Al that she intends to cut Nina's name into his stomach, and the music builds suspense by using thriller tones that get increasingly louder, while Al is looking scared (figure 72, 01:31:23-01:33:31).

*Figure 72: (01:33:18)*

The plea for excuses results in righteous indignation and the feeling of a need for pro-social punishment. However, the scene is also a major reality check, as the spectator is forced to question the moral line of acceptable revenge, because of affective mimicry, as the spectator does not want to watch Cassie cut Al, since it is so different from the other paths of revenge Cassie has carried out so far; she appears to be about to perform actual physical violence and not merely threatening to. As a result, spectators are aligned and have formed a sympathetic allegiance with Cassie, up until the point where she is about to physically hurt someone. However, the conflicted sympathy which the reality check provides, is fully restored when Al strangles Cassie with a pillow in a long enduring murder scene (figure 73, 01:33:58-01:36:13), resulting in the ultimate silencing of Cassie and, by proxy, Nina. The spectator is left with the consideration of whether or not Cassie ever intended to use the scalpel on Al or just knew that the threat of violence would incite his murderous behavior. However, upon moral evaluation, due to the sympathetic allegiance with Cassie and the foreshadowing of Cassie's impending fate, the latter is the likely option.

*Figure 73: (01:34:52)*

Cassie's murder scene takes a little longer than two minutes, which is how long it takes in real life to suffocate a person (Dominguez), resulting in aesthetic appreciation of the murder scene, where the spectator appreciates the film and how it questions the sympathetic allegiance with the antihero according to Vaage. The spectator also experiences affective mimicry because they want Al to stop because of the long scene and feels emotional simulation, because of the shock by the turn of events and anger and disappointment that Cassie did not get her revenge over Al, which leads to a thirst for revenge, as Al should be punished for his actions due to pro-social punishment. However, the scene is also a quite real depiction of how the outcome is for women in violent confrontations, where it is often physically impossible for them to overcome men. Fennell has also explained that she wanted the scene to be as real as possible and wanted to depict Al as a nice guy who was fighting for his life (Aurther & Donnelly).

The alignment with Cassie shifts to an alignment with Al, as life is pushed out of her. The spatio-temporal attachment follows Al, and through his conversation with Joe some subjective access into his emotional state is given. He appears as a pathetic, puny human who sobs like a selfish child, as he is only worried about the consequences Cassie's murder will have for him, and not the fact that he actually killed another person. Joe convinces him to be a victim who has acted in self-defense, by continuously saying "it is not your fault" and jumping up in bed with him, carelessly moving Cassie's lifeless arm, and hugging Al and comforting him like a parent (figure 74, *PYW* 01:38:05-01:39:45).

*Figure 74: (01:39:39)*

Through the conversation with Joe, a somewhat antipathetic allegiance is also created with Al. Before meeting Al, the spectator feels morally disgusted by him, because he raped Nina and got away with it, but when he is introduced, he looks like a decent guy as mentioned. Also, he cares about his fiancée Anastacia and does not want a stripper because of her (01:24:57), and he is a doctor, so he must also be somewhat caring about the weaker people in society, which is a positive character trait according to Smith. Therefore, Al adds to the film's graduated moral structure, as he tries to be a decent man and cares about his fiancée Anastacia, but he is coerced by Joe into protecting himself, indicating that Al is not entirely bad and also not entirely good. He was made out to be a major contrast character and the antagonist of the film, but he is not a traditional antagonist who is evil for the purpose of being evil. After the murder of Cassie, Joe convinces Al to hide Cassie's body by burning it in the forest instead of owning up to his responsibility. Once again, Al appears as the weaker man as he is standing nervously biting his nails and is about to throw up, when Joe kicks Cassie's hand violently into the fire (figure 75, 01:40:05-01:40:54). Her hand is shown in a close-up where her pastel-colored nails are seen (figure 76), allowing the spectator to re-identify her and confirm that she is dead, so she will not come back and take a violent revenge as in the typical rape-revenge film.

*Figure 75: (01:40:55)*

*Figure 76: (01:40:35)*

Thus, despite trying to be good, Al is one of the least morally preferable characters in the film, as he turns out to have a violent disposition which previously resulted in rape and now in murder, and Joe convinces him to hide Cassie's body by burning it in the forest. Joe also appears particularly antipathetic because of the sympathetic allegiance with Cassie and how he treats her body by kicking her hand violently into the fire. He is a representation of toxic masculinity at its worst, and will do anything to help his male friends, and it is imagined that he helped convince Al that nothing out of the ordinary happened with Nina, besides they had sex, even though he taped it. Thus, toxic masculinity coupled with bromance proves to be deadly, and the film questions this kind of masculinity and loyalty through the negative portrayal.

**V The Final Revenge: Angel of the Morning**

The fifth and final revenge act takes place at Al's wedding. Initially, Al and Anastacia say their vows to each other, and Joe holds a speech as the best man, saying that Anastacia is "a solid catch" (01:44:46), as if she is an animal to catch, supporting the interpretation of Joe as a predator. Then the scene moves on to the wedding party, where Al and Anastacia are photographed and Joe talks to Ryan about a bridesmaid in an extremely sexist manner, further establishing him as a predator (01:44:53-01:45:24). In the scene, the spectator is primarily aligned with Ryan and connected to Vaage's concept of suspense, the spectator experiences shared suspense with Ryan in this alignment. The spectator does not know what is going to happen and is equally as surprised as Ryan himself is by the scheduled text messages Ryan receives from Cassie postmortem (01:45:24-01:48:31), and thus, the spectator has the same amount of knowledge as Ryan does, which, according to Vaage, is known as shared suspense.

As Ryan looks around confused, the shot shows the lawyer Jordan receive a package from Cassie with Madison's old phone with the rape video and a note telling him to deliver the letter and package to the police if she disappears (figure 77, 01:45:30-01:46:05), providing a chance for Jordan to help so he can redeem himself. Actor Alfred Molina even says "I thought

that scene was about a kind of redemption. It was a situation where I think if that scene had been a dialogue, I think he would have said something like, 'Listen, this is the least I can do'" (qtd. in Aurthur).

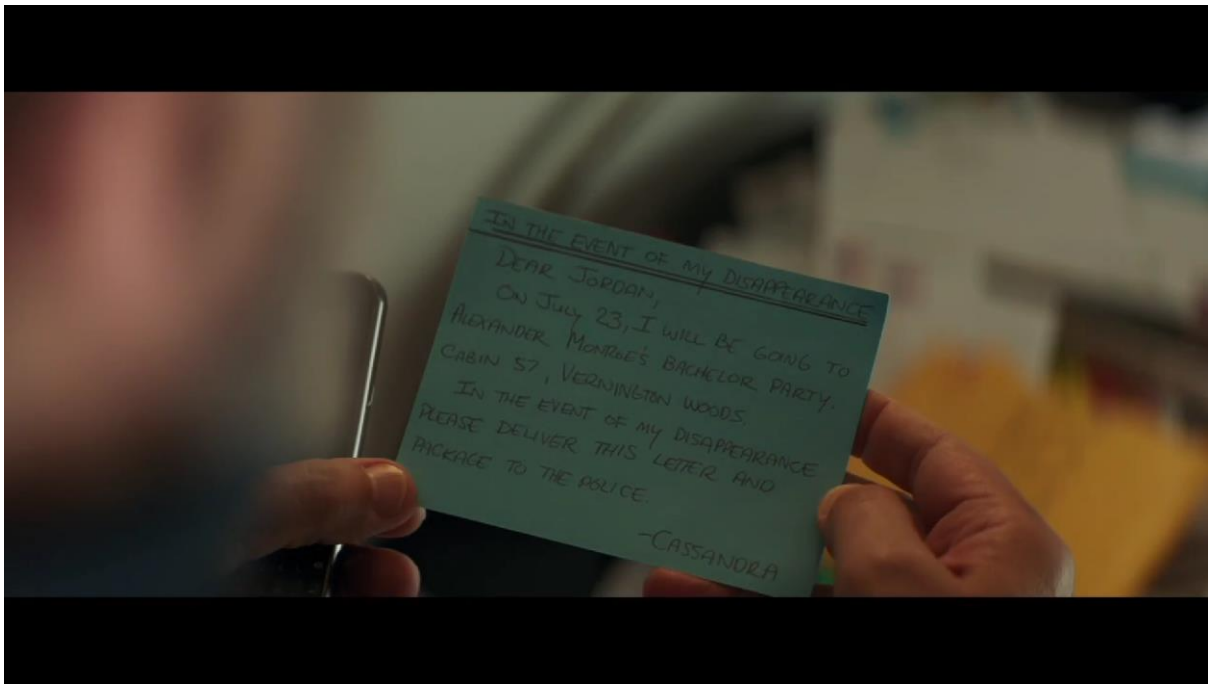


*Figure 77: (01:45:53)*

The first message is received saying "you didn't think this was the end did you?", while Juice Newton's "Angel of the Morning" starts playing non-diegetic in the background, again making religious associations to Cassie as an angel, and diegetic police sirens are heard approaching, and then the final revenge act commences with the number five appearing on the screen, but this time using the unary numeral system as opposed to the roman numerals, so as to match Cassie's counting method in her notebook (figure 78, 01:46:07-01:46:28).


*Figure 78: (01:46:23)*

Ryan receives the second text message saying “It is now” (01:47:22), as the police arrive, followed by another text saying “Enjoy the wedding!” (01:47:45). Ryan seems worried about the outcome and the consequences it will have for himself, as he slowly looks up from his phone with a concerned expression (figure 79, 01:47:22-01:48:21), thus making Ryan appear fully unsympathetic at this point in the film.

*Figure 79: (01:47:50)*

When Al is arrested, the spectator is relieved, as this is a welcomed plot twist that gives a feeling of righteous indignation because of the pro-social punishment Al receives. The last

text messages says “Love”, “Cassie & Nina” ending with a extreme close-up of a blinky smiley face (01:48:24-01:48:34), suggesting that it was all part of Cassie’s plan to get killed so Al could get caught, giving the spectator a sense of justice. Even though Cassie is silenced for good, her sacrifice gives Nina back her credibility and in turn lifts the silencing grip from her, and Nina’s voice thus rises like a phoenix from Cassie’s ashes, symbolized by Nina’s heart necklace lying in the ashes when the police find it (Figure 80, 01:47:00-01:47:20).

*Figure 80: (01:47:11)*

In this way, Cassie gets revenge from beyond the grave, although it is debatable how it can be classified as revenge when she is not there to witness it. However, through the sympathetic allegiance with Cassie, the spectator becomes an extension of her, reaping the emotional benefit of the revenge Cassie has so masterfully taken. The spectator is relieved and feels that justice is obtained on both Cassie’s and Nina’s behalf, as Al is presumably punished for Cassie’s murder and will finally be convicted for his crimes against Nina, too. The antiheroism suddenly borders on actual heroism due to Cassie’s martyrdom; an interpretation which is supported by Fennell: “She is heroic, even if that heroism is distressing in lots of ways [...] And it may not be right. But I do feel strongly that what she does was the only thing she felt she could do.” (qtd. in Aurthur).

Vaage argues in her theory on antiheroes about rape and moral disgust that there is an asymmetry between murder and rape in real life and in fiction, as murder is more easily acceptable than rape, which is a worse transgression in fiction. However, *PYW* showcases a very realistic portrayal of rape and murder, as Cassie’s revenge plan shows how hard and unjust

it is for rape victims to come forward and get justice. At last, Cassie has to be murdered for justice to be served, as murderers are more easily convicted than rapists are, and the film speaks into that issue.

## Discussion: Fennell's Spotlight on Rape Culture

In their accounts of the typical rape-revenge film, Claire Henry and Allison Young state that the vigilante seeks a brutal and violent revenge for the retribution of a violent rape. However, Cassie does not exact a violent vengeance on any of her targets, in fact as Fennell states that "what Cassie does [...] is actually … nothing. Really, she does nothing. She just gives people an idea" (qtd. in Dibdin). Similarly, Cassie is not the typical female antihero Vaage theorizes about. She does not murder, sell drugs or is violent in a physical way, but she does punish people through imagined violence to prove a point. She puts them in situations where they think something awful is going to happen to them, and then reveals that nothing is going to happen, when they finally admit their faults and realize they have been wrong in their previous convictions. This poses a tricky subject, because is it morally questionable to make someone think they were raped or otherwise in danger to prove a point.

As argued previously, in real-life situations the answer would probably be no, because it is a hard situation to put someone in and can be psychologically violent to the target. But in the fictional setting, it is interesting, because it fulfills the spectator's desire for punishment and gives a sense of fictional relief. In an article by Jack (former Judith) Halberstam titled "Imagined Violence/Queer Violence" (1993), he lays out the notion of imagined violence focusing on the representation in art and popular culture of subordinate groups committing violence against powerful white men (187). Halberstam argues that the representation of powerful white men using violence against women or people of color is "a standard feature [...] of almost every popular form of entertainment, and to a degree it is so expected that audiences may even be immune to it" (191). This may provide an explanation for the decision to not show Nina's rape, as spectators are so used to seeing white men committing violence against women who are unable to say no that this would not affect the spectator, and thus there is no reason to show it. However, this argument goes against showing Cassie's murder scene and contradicts Vaage's theory that watching rape elicits moral disgust in the spectator and is a major contribution to the justification of revenge, but the sheer imagination of it can still be argued to evoke moral disgust.

Many of the texts used to exemplify Halberstam's theory have been criticized for being a call to arms, to get minority groups, like blacks, gays, lesbians, and women to retaliate against their oppressors (188, 191, 196). However, this is wrong, and Halberstam argues that the power lies in the threat of the oppressors thinking that the minorities might retaliate. For instance, he asks, "how do we produce a fear of retaliation in the rapist?" (191). He argues that *Thelma and Louise* is an example of imagined violence that produces an unrealistic fear in potential rapists about their victims being able to retaliate. However, Fennell has stated that she has tried to make *PYW* realistic, because women using violence against men often ends badly (Dibdin), but this imagined violence Cassie uses against her targets creates a fear, which is exemplified in Ryan who does not "know if [he] can live with the threat of this hanging over [him]" (01:22:04), when Cassie is blackmailing him with Nina's rape video. The same fear is seen in the perpetrators' eyes when they realize that Cassie is not drunk, and Fennell tries to question why they react in this way if they are not doing anything wrong (Dibdin). Thus, imagined violence seems more dangerous, because it is more powerful to have a threat hanging over you, and as Halberstam states: "imagined violence does not stop men from raping women but it might make a man think twice about whether a woman is going to blow him away" (199).

The film is written and directed by a British woman with a British actress portraying the main character, but all the male actors are American, and the film takes place in an American setting. A reason for this could be that the college rape culture that is prevalent in America provides a setting for bringing up problems about rape and victim blaming, as is done in the film's critique of such a rape culture, white privilege and patriarchy. As American culture plays a key role in Western popular culture, placing the film in this setting could also make the film more comprehensible for a larger audience that would understand the film better. The title *Promising Young Woman* is a comment on a prevalent discourse that rape accusations are ruining young men's lives, as shown in the film by the confrontation with Dean Walker and Al Monroe. The title could be inspired by the case with Stanford student Brock Turner who was accused and found guilty of raping a woman. In his conviction the phrase 'promising young man' was used when the judge gave him a light sentence, as this incident should not ruin his promising future (Honig).

Although the film puts forth a lot of problems regarding rape, it still poses some problems, as Fennell has argued that she wanted to make it realistic, but statistically the stereotypical rape victim is a Native American, who is twice as likely to experience sexual assault compared to all races (RAINN). Thus, because a white woman is the rape victim, the role is not very representational. Nevertheless, culture writer Alessa Dominguez argues that

the film functions as a commentary on the racial and class politics of #MeToo and that its dark message is that "If it's this hard out there for injured cis white women, what hope is there for the rest of people cast out of power?" (Dominguez). Thus, the casting of a white woman might not be that unrealistic, as it just emphasizes the struggle to find justice in rape cases. However, it would be interesting to see a film problematize rape of women in minorities who do not have female white privilege.

Posing as a rape-revenge film, the film does not conform totally into the hybrid genre. Fennell has argued that she wanted to subvert the revenge thriller, so it contains all the typical elements; a female white victim violently raped by a man, onlookers to the rape, the justice system failing, and eventually revenge follows (Apaydin). However, the revenge is usually violent in rape-revenge films, but this is where Fennell subverts the genre and teases the spectator's expectation of what will follow. Thus, the film is not a traditional rape-revenge film, but it develops the genre into a more realistic representation of rape and the difficult process the victim has to go through afterwards. The film develops the genre by not showing the rape scene and refuses to fall under the notion that rape must be seen before it can be condemned, making room for more films in the future to focus on problematizing rape discourses in society.

## Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the use of revenge, sympathy, and morality to problematize rape culture and victim blaming in the prevalent discourses and a debate full of grey areas. The analysis focused on the different characters in the film using Smith's theory of character engagement, Vaage's theory of antiheroes, Allison Young and Claire Henry's characterization of the rape-revenge genre, and Miranda Fricker's notion of testimonial injustice combined with silencing.

The main protagonist in the film is Cassie who the spectator is aligned with and forms a sympathetic allegiance with. She is a typical rape-revenger who uses *lex talionis* to get proxy vengeance for her friend Nina while also being a female antihero who is loyal to Nina and provides the spectator with fictional relief when her targets get punished. She is morally preferable because she does not use physical violence, and when she does, it functions as reality checks, making the spectator question the sympathetic allegiance with her. Her moral flaw is the inability to move on from Nina's rape and death, which brings her on a path of revenge

where she makes her targets think they are being raped or are in danger to prove a point and then reveals they are not in danger when they have changed their minds.

Nina is the rape victim, who is not able to take revenge, as she is dead. She experienced so much testimonial injustice undermining her as a speaker due to credibility deficit resulting in a silencing of her that led to a cramped self-development and undermining of confidence. She is victim blamed by her former friend Madison, Dean Walker of the medical school, the defense lawyer, and the rapist Al Monroe, resulting in her assumed suicide. Her rape and subsequent death function as a plea for excuse to justify Cassie's revenge, as rape is morally disgusting.

Ryan is Cassie's love interest who appears sympathetic through the sympathetic allegiance with Cassie. He adds romantic comedy elements to the film, bringing a lightness to the otherwise dark theme. However, he turns out to be an onlooker to Nina's rape and in Cassie's confrontation he turns against her claiming no responsibility. After Cassie's murder the spectator is aligned to him, but he protects himself instead of telling the truth making him an onlooker to Cassie's murder through Al's arrest. This results in a shifting allegiance where he is seen as unsympathetic, and thus he contributes to the negative portrayal of men.

The five-act revenge plan shows the difficulty in getting justice as a rape victim. Madison and Dean Walker contribute to prevalent rape discourses of victim blaming by blaming Nina for sleeping around and being too drunk to remember what happened. Their punishments result in reality checks that are turned into fictional relief when Cassie reveals nothing happened to them. Through their punishment, they eventually change their mind, seeing the problem in their convictions, but because they are women who did not support another woman, Cassie appears morally preferable to them. Jordan Green was a defense attorney for Al Monroe, who shows the difficulty in the justice system. He played a part in silencing Nina by threatening and bullying her into dropping her case, but because he shows remorse, he is morally preferable to the other targets, and makes Cassie appear more sympathetic. Al Monroe is Nina's rapist. Throughout the film, he is built up to be an antagonist living on white male privilege, but when he is finally shown, he looks like a suburban dad, not living up to the spectator's expectations. In a long murder scene, he suffocates Cassie, but appears as a weak man showing fragile masculinity. Together with his unsympathetic friend Joe, they cover up the murder, and Al goes on to be married, creating an antipathetic allegiance. Through shared suspense with Ryan, Cassie rises as a phoenix from the ashes and takes her final revenge post-mortem, getting Al arrested to the relief of the spectator. The ending

provides a realistic view on the asymmetry between rape and murder in reality and fiction, as murder is easier to get convicted than rape is.

In the discussion, Cassie's revenge over her targets is discussed as imagined violence, which seems more dangerous, because it is more powerful to imagine a threat. Cassie's revenge thus questions why men are shocked and frightened when they discover she is not drunk when they are not doing anything wrong according to society. Moreover, the film is set in an American setting, because college rape culture is prevalent in The United State, making the film comprehensible for a larger audience, and criticizing this culture, male privilege, and patriarchy. Despite Nina not portraying the typical rape victim in the real world, the film emphasizes the struggle to find justice in rape cases even for white cisgendered women. This film develops the rape-revenge genre by not showing the rape scene, making more room to criticize rape discourses in society.

Thus, the study problematizes the general understanding that every rape accuser is a potential liar, as opposed to every rape accused being potentially guilty. By posing as an intoxicated woman and being taken advantage of by men who are shocked when Cassie is discovered to be sober, the film highlights gray areas of the rape debate, where it is often difficult to get a conviction. Thus, it comments on issues of consent, and how the burden is placed on the victim for proving that a crime has been committed towards them, while they experience silencing and victim blaming, as everyone sides with the attacker. As a result, the film provides a nuanced view into a difficult discussion.

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