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## Female Rage, Revenge, and Catharsis: The "Good for Her" Genre Defined in Promising Young Woman (2020)

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Female Rage, Revenge, and Catharsis: The “Good for Her” Genre Defined in *Promising Young Woman* (2020)

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Spring 2022

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## Introduction

What began as an internet meme of Lucille Bluth from the television show *Arrested Development* unapologetically stating “good for her” in response to a young mother releasing her car’s emergency brake, sending her and her children into a nearby lake, has evolved into a genre recognized by internet culture. This genre defines the complex representations of female rage and catharsis in film. Lucille’s initial comment, though met with shock by her son in the scene, was seen as humorous to female audience members, particularly mothers, because even though the subject matter was dark, Lucille said and did what they were thinking, or what they wished they could, hypothetically. As more and more users on the personal blog site, *Tumblr*, attributed Lucille Bluth’s morally gray cathartic response to a tragedy to films, television shows, and books that crafted a similar response, the “Good for Her” genre developed. As the meme spread to *Twitter* and evolved into a slideshow of screenshots from notable female-lead films along with the Lucille Bluth quote, the characteristics of the genre continued to evolve. Now, the “Good for Her” genre has reached the “For You” pages of both amateur and professional film critic *Tik Tok*, spawning countless discussions and debates on the true nature of the genre, its defining characteristics, and its relationship to horror film genres and subgenres.

The image of Lucille Bluth, a character from the television series *Arrested Development*, is a screenshot from the episode “The Cabin Show” which aired in September 2005, pictured below.



Image 1

It was not until the mid-2010's that the image of Bluth stating "good for her" became a meme circulated on the blogging website *Tumblr*. The image was passed through blogs regarding true crime, then turned into memes (example in Image 2), particularly those about women who exacted revenge against their abusive or cheating husbands.

**Image 2**



The sarcastic yet celebratory tone of Lucille's original utterance was maintained through this variant of the meme. On August 7, 2020, the *Twitter* account @cinematogrpxphy combined the implication of the Bluth meme as championing the immoral actions of female rage with popular films that exemplified this quality, resulting in the genre-defining tweet (Image 3).

**Image 3**



The films referenced in the tweet are, in descending order from left to right: *The Witch* (2015), *Midsommar* (2019), *Us* (2019), *The Invisible Man* (2020), *Knives Out* (2019), *Gone Girl* (2014), *Ready or Not* (2019), and *Suspiria* (2018). This tweet made the theory of the “Good for Her” genre viral. Debates on what films fulfilled the genre, how the genre is defined, and the existence of the genre as a whole ensued online. This theory has since inspired online discourse in published magazine articles and blogs, both personal and professional, on the genre. Charlotte Gaffney, a writer on the pop culture blog *The Culture Sift*, finds that

The meme’s lasting effect is because it represents to audiences the feeling of satisfaction felt when a female character realizes their desires and/or receives a fulfilling conclusion. This idea is commonly seen in movies which center around a belittled and traumatized woman who regains her autonomy. They are mostly the female equivalent of a rags to riches story, where the rags are trauma and the riches are unusual means of coping/eradicating the trauma (“What is the ‘Good for Her’ Genre?”).

Women characters regaining autonomy, often through nefarious or immoral means, inspires the audience to state cathartically, “good for her.”

The “Good for Her” genre is most commonly attributed to horror and thriller films, which ironically in years past are defined by their commodification of female trauma and gratuitous representations of male rage. Though this is not a recently emerging genre in horror, as indicated by its representations in past films such as *Carrie* (1976), *Suspiria* (1977), and *Heathers* (1989), it is becoming more popular due to its cultural relevance and the internet discourse surrounding the nature of the genre. This genre has emerged in recognition and popularity at the tail end of the Trump presidency, an era tinged with lasting effects upon women’s rights and weaponized misogyny, which popularized the “#MeToo” movement against systemic sexual harassment and

assault. This sociopolitical context prompted a desire for vicarious cathartic revenge upon the patriarchal system of oppression. Though most of the films referenced in this paper were released before Trump's presidency, they are being recognized for their cathartic response as a result of the revenge enacted within them. This genre is being discovered, developed, and defined via internet culture in response to the misogyny emboldened by the Trump era.

By analyzing relevant cultural contexts to the popularity of the "Good for Her" genre, such as the "#MeToo" movement, the Trump presidency, and the resurgence of conservatism in the United States, the development of the genre and its impact can be made clear. Given the genre's development through social discourse on social media, it has become a universal and collaborative representation of liberation from oppressive experiences under patriarchal society. The lead women in these films give those who experience patriarchal oppression a reprieve and an opportunity for catharsis they would not typically get in a male-led, male-focused film. The genre reinforces and builds upon the works of feminist film theorists such as Carol Clover and Laura Mulvey by offering a more contemporary evolution of Clover's "Final Girl" through the combination of slasher and Final Girl to create the "Good for Her" films' "victim-villain" and Mulvey's theory of the "male gaze" by subverting and satirizing the typical female objectification of the old-school horror genre.

After defining the genre and its characteristics within a theoretical context, I will complete a case study of a film that appears quite frequently among social media and internet forums regarding this genre and seems to illustrate the genre the best, Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman* (2020). There are, as evidenced by the divisive discourse surrounding "Good for Her" films, two interpretations or perceptions of the genre. There are the films that lean heavier on the victim side of the "victim-villain" protagonist, who is often acting out of

self-preservation, and the films whose main female character leans more towards the villain side, who outright commits crimes and could be considered the antagonist at times. This developing genre is significant primarily in the fact that it is widely represented in countless films, but rarely with a female lead. There are countless films depicting male leads seeking revenge, committing immoral actions for the sake of that revenge, and the audience rooting for them every step of the way. A few examples of these male-led revenge films would include the *John Wick* Franchise (2014-2019), *Taken* (2008), *The Equalizer* (2014), and the novel with its many film adaptations, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. It is only when a female character conducts themselves in a similar manner to these aplenty vengeful male protagonists, that there is hesitancy on the audience's behalf to remain complicit in her actions, which can only be attributed to a certain degree of misogyny. "Good for Her" films intentionally portray their female protagonists conducting revenge as a means of voyeuristic and vicarious catharsis for its viewers, and this revenge is often through immoral actions, as male protagonists do. However, the "Good for Her" genre subverts this through its catharsis that is targeted to those who experience patriarchal oppression, thus making the double-standard appear to be all the more rooted in misogyny. *Promising Young Woman*'s lead Carey Mulligan comments on this double-standard between male-revenge protagonists, and female-revenge protagonists. In an interview, describing Cassie, the female protagonist set on revenge, she says "I do think that Cassie is a very particular person, and blokes go on these dangerous missions—revenge missions—all the time and no one minds. But when women do, people are frightened by it" (Blythe). Regarding the criticism Cassie, as well as the film, receives for its depiction of trauma and revenge, Mulligan recalls

"The other day, someone said, 'Yeah, but is she just crazy at the end? Has she just gone mad; has the grief driven her mad?'"... "The point is that we have countless films about

men who go on crusades on behalf of their loved ones and we never say they're crazy or that they've lost their minds from grief. They're going around having shootouts and ninja fights in every scene. That is objectively insane. What Cassie's doing, by comparison, is fairly mild. It's just an interesting reaction because there's a huge amount of logic, actually, to what she's doing" (Blythe.)

*Promising Young Woman* is a definitive example of a "Good for Her" film because it subverts the typical expectation for a revenge film by not only having a female lead exact vengeance, but by providing commentary on the criticism towards female-led revenge plots in which immoral actions occur, just as male-led revenge plots portray. This is not to say villainous representation is a feminist end goal nor are all iterations of the "Good for Her" genre inherently feminist, but rather that this genre represents an evolution of female characters that lean towards complexity and contain multitudes. They no longer have to be good or bad, feminine or masculine, hero or villain. This is a small step in the direction of diminishing the many binaries society has created for women and the representation of women in media.

In this paper, I plan to contextualize why this genre has emerged in prevalence at this particular moment in history, evaluate the relevant feminist and film theories that contribute to the societal understanding of the genre, define the characteristics of the genre, and finally complete a case study of a film commonly attributed to the genre. I argue that the "Good for Her" genre's significance is rooted in the evolution of the horror genre as social commentary on the resurgence of conservatism and its ramifications towards women. *Promising Young Woman* acts as a crucial representation of the reality of rape culture, while depicting a sense of voyeuristic and vicarious revenge and catharsis against the systems of patriarchal oppression that exist within the United States.

## **Sociocultural Context**

The “Good for Her” genre is being defined retroactively through internet discussion and emerging in popularity as a result of multiple sociocultural factors, such as how the Trump Era and the corresponding resurgence of conservatism cultivated a misogynistic environment and fostered rape culture to allow events like the Brock Turner case to occur. Each of these major historical events has a hand in a culture of increased misogyny or calling attention to misogyny, and a desire for media that validates the oppressive experiences of women and the rage they feel as a result of these events. The “Good for Her” genre offers a temporary safe and fictionalized space to explore the valid fears and rage that accompany existence as a woman in a patriarchal society. In this section, I will discuss how the rise of conservatism and rape culture, along with the Trump Era and Brock Turner case contributed to a culture of misogyny that warranted female-led vengeful and cathartic media like the “Good for Her” genre.

### **Rise of Conservatism and The Trump Era**

Many of the films attributed to the “Good for Her” genre emerged in the late 2010s, particularly around when Donald Trump was elected President of the United States in 2016. Alongside his campaign and election came a resurgence of far-right conservative culture and an environment of gender discrimination. Anna Misiak for *MAI Feminism* states the rise in depictions of hyper-masculinity in films “were intrinsically tied to the rise of white masculine identity and its impact on social and cultural hierarchies, as well as gender debates. When Hollywood cinema put the narrative of the powerful, white male on the map, intentionally or not, it reinforced collective anxieties surrounding feminist criticism” (Misiak). These consistent representations of hypermasculinity have emerged once more in the 21st century alongside the rise of conservatism in the era of Donald Trump. A renewed culture of hypermasculinity

surrounding Trump reinforces a system built for men to succeed despite their misogynistic tendencies. Chauvinists can ascend to the highest leadership position in the United States. In addition to the dominance of the superhero film through the respective DC and Marvel universes, most of which are entirely male-led, it is unsurprising that female-led films depicting female rage and gender commentary such as the “Good for Her” genre have emerged in prevalence as well. A desire for female representation is a counterreaction to privileged hypermasculine media. When faced with misogyny in reality, female-led films, such as the “Good for Her” genre, depict a fantastical vengeance upon symbols of hypermasculinity can be cathartic for viewers.

With a rise of conservatism and the correlative focus on hypermasculinity and misogynistic oppression, Donald Trump, a known chauvinist, was allowed to take office. With characteristics emblematic of the most sexist aspects of society being displayed by the country’s leader, the “Good for Her” genre emerged as a form of cathartic response and a reprieve from reality. Jill Filipovic’s Time article “Our President Has Always Degraded Women – And We’ve Always Let Him,” recounts the many alarming misogynistic comments former President Donald Trump has made to women or about women, and how they were seen as inconsequential by his supporters when running for the presidency, as well as during his four-year term. Filipovic’s lamentation at the start of her article summarizes the exhausted rage many women felt not only during Trump’s run for the presidency as his misogynistic actions became scrutinized in media, but the lack of consequences, once again, for a man in power when acting outrightly discriminatory. The most damning statements, at least in the eyes of Trump’s opponents, came in the form of a tape of a conversation between Trump and *Access Hollywood* host Billy Bush, during which Trump said “I don’t even wait. And when you’re a star, they let you do it, you can do anything... grab them by the pussy” (qtd. In Filipovic). As Filipovic remarks, it was not only

the use of “pussy” that was vulgar, but the outright objectification and dehumanization of women encapsured in a single statement were appalling, especially from the mouth of a man who was running for president. Democrats and Trump opponents were certain this would not stand and would certainly prevent him from claiming the presidency. We were wrong. This statement, among many others cited by Filipovic, revealed that the former president of the United States, the representative of the 51% of the female-identifying population, saw them as sex objects, as less-than-human. Filipovic summarizes the reasoning behind the rage that followed the lack of consequences for Trump, stating “his misogyny was encouraged, enabled and even glorified by his business associates, the entertainment media and the press more generally. All of that helped to set the stage for a crass misogynist to ascend to the highest position in the country.” The lack of consequence only reinforced the existence of misogynistic rape culture, this time upheld by the president. When the very president, the leader of the country, can say these words without remorse or consequence, what keeps the rest of the male population from doing the same? If a man can claim success all the way to the White House, in a system built for him to succeed, other men can do it as well. This reinforcement of misogyny and chauvinism is reflected in another instance of epitomized rape culture, the case of Brock Turner.

### **Rape Culture and The Brock Turner Case**

“Good for Her” films are an offshoot of rape-revenge films, or can even be described as rape-revenge adjacent. Many of the films portray not only the harmful realities of rape culture, which is foundational to a misogynistic society. Seeing rape culture depicted in the “Good for Her” genre is both reaffirming in that it validates women’s reality, but also offers catharsis in that typically the female protagonist exacts revenge upon a system or symbol of misogyny, including rape culture. Rape Culture, as defined by Amanda Taub in an article from *Vox* media, is “a

culture in which sexual violence is treated as the norm and victims are blamed for their own assaults. It's not just about sexual violence itself, but about cultural norms and institutions that protect rapists, promote impunity, shame victims, and demand that women make unreasonable sacrifices to avoid sexual assault" ("Rape Culture Isn't a Myth"). This culture is an inherent part of a patriarchal system intent upon maintaining a cycle of oppression against women. Women are taught to prevent sexual and physical violence against themselves, while the recognition of what is causing this repeated violence in the first place is not addressed whatsoever. It is a culture intent on fixing the symptoms, rather than the disease itself. It places what Taub calls "personal responsibility" upon the women to prevent any and all violence perpetrated against them, as if they are the issue at hand and not those actually committing the crime. A culture such as this allows for men to act without impunity, blaming it on their natural urges or masculine existence upheld by societal gender roles, all the while blaming the women for not preventing the crimes themselves, which can result in a great deal of rage that requires catharsis, which the "Good for Her" genre satisfies. It offers a method of vengeance against rape culture which may not be available in reality. Rape culture reinforces misogyny and chauvinism, and teaches men they can act however they please, because it is simply "not their fault."

The most significant historical event to not only capture but epitomize the misogynistic culture of the late 2010s that crafted a need for media like the "Good for Her" genre is the Brock Turner case. In January 2015, Brock Turner sexually assaulted Chanel Miller while she was unconscious behind a dumpster outside of a fraternity house (Golshan). He was stopped by two passing graduate students and apprehended by law enforcement. The resulting court case seemed like a moment of hope for victims of sexual assault everywhere when Turner was found "guilty of assault with intent to commit rape of an intoxicated person, sexually penetrating an

intoxicated person with a foreign object, and sexually penetrating an unconscious person with a foreign object” (Golshan). This hope was rapidly destroyed when now-recalled Judge Aaron Persky sentenced Turner to only six months in jail, as opposed to what should have been a two-fourteen-year sentence in state prison (Golshan). Persky found that a longer sentence would “have a severe impact” on Turner and that he “[took] him at his word,” meaning he thought Turner felt remorse. This resulted in nationwide outrage and an unfortunate indicator of how the justice system is built to benefit and protect the privileged rapists, rather than their victims. The “Good for Her” genre offers a vicarious cathartic response. Women protagonists on screen exact revenge upon a hypothetical and symbolic representation of a person, or even an entire justice system, built to oppress them. Through examples such as the Trump Presidency and the Brock Turner case affirming that men, in particular white men, can act and say whatever they please, in any manner of physical or social violence, and they are socially spared by it, their privilege is reinforced. They do not face the same threat of danger as women. They do not even face the same repercussions. They are allotted more time, energy, and forethought than their victims. These events have taught women that their right to bodily autonomy, their right to exist without the threat of physical or sexual violence, and even the justice system’s role in “protecting” them, is virtually meaningless in a misogynistic society. More than ever, as the reality of misogyny is affirmed over and over again through politics and media, the “Good for Her” genre offers a reprieve to those craving catharsis and escape from this harsh reality. The genre offers viewers a hypothetical opportunity to consider what it is like to be on the other side, to have the privilege of revenge, and to be a predator instead of prey.

### Defining & Contextualizing the “Good for Her” Genre

The “Good for Her” genre can be thought of as an equation that ultimately ends in catharsis. It entails:

*(weaponized femininity+white privilege= “victim villain” main character)+traumatic catalyst+a shifting sense of morality and rage=vicarious revenge plot against a symbol of patriarchal oppression+bittersweet voyeuristic catharsis+sometimes self-destruction*

“Good for Her” films are in conversation with and contribute to the horror genre in that they comment on the horrors of patriarchal oppression, act as an adjacent genre to the horror-led rape-revenge genre, as well as expand upon feminist film theory. By contextualizing and defetishizing violence against women, a known criticism of the horror genre, “Good for Her” films offer a more evolved perspective of not only female rage, catharsis, and revenge, but a complex representation of female villainy in response to patriarchal oppression and the horrors of existence as a woman. The genre offers a perspective of a larger conversation regarding how genre develops and evolves in the internet age of discourse, while providing commentary on the sociopolitical context in which the genre has emerged. After considering the sociopolitical context that allowed the “Good for Her” genre to be defined and thrive in popular media, I will next look to film and feminist theory, and how they assist in defining the “Good for Her” genre.

#### **Stoicism, Rage, and Hysteria**

The key aspect of the “Good for Her” genre is female rage and the manner in which it is displayed and received. It must be taken seriously, at least through the lens of the film, not written off as hysteria. This is what separates the “Good for Her” genre from stereotypical male-led revenge films. Rage is taken seriously through the perspective of the camera lens, and has consequences; it is not dismissed as hysteria like most female rage is in media. Even so,

some criticisms of the “Good for Her” genre classify the lead female character’s rage as unwarranted, illogical, or not correlative to the wrongdoings or trauma she has experienced. Viewers may struggle to empathize with or understand these lead characters because they try to apply logic to their actions when there is no logic to self-destruction and rage. Their rage and revenge can be procedural, but it is unlikely to be logical.

The “Good for Her” genre subverts the gender normative perspective in reality that women are fragile and hysterical, and when they have an overt display of emotions, their experiences are invalidated. By depicting female rage as a result of patriarchal oppression in film, “Good for Her” films offer a cathartic display of validating hysteria, relatable to women by showing how they wish they could act. A significant part of female gender roles is stoicism, or the ability to silently bear pain, a trait is often misattributed to men. Women are expected to be silent, meek, and present themselves as pleasant at all times while men can display a multitude of emotions, such as anger, fury, and rage. These aforementioned emotions are common displays of masculinity and are, in fact, encouraged through social gender roles and various forms of media such as television, film, and comic books. In her novel, *Feminist Film Theorists*, Shohini Chaudhuri refers to Betty Friedan’s groundbreaking book *The Feminine Mystique*, stating it “reiterated how women were defined only in sexual relation to men -- this time as ‘wife, sex object, mother, housewife’-- and never as people defining themselves by their own actions” (17). They must remain complacent in their status in life as these four expected roles, all of which are defined by the woman’s relation to the man. Through this objectification and oppressive limiting of women’s existence to these four roles, women are expected to maintain an image of stoicism and not release any form of outward emotion as their male counterparts are permitted, in both

reality and film. The “Good for Her” genre subverts this gender expectation by overtly depicting female rage.

The “Good for Her” genre of films allows women viewers to witness a character release their rage, as well as experience a vicarious catharsis of rage for themselves. Alannah Link describes representations of female rage in her article, “Introducing the 'Good for Her' Cinematic Universe,” in which she finds that more often than not, female rage is coded as destabilizing, dangerous, and hysterical, removing all agency and forethought from any action they may take as a result of their rage (Link). Cecily Devereux, in her article, “Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender Revisited: The Cause of the Second Wave” she finds that hysteria is “a term used not only in relatively recent medical and psychiatric discourse but for centuries as a dramatic medical metaphor for everything that men found mysterious or unmanageable in women” (20). Female rage is depicted in the “Good for Her” genre as cathartic for the female viewer, and may often be misunderstood by the male viewer, since they do not experience the oppression and micro-aggressions from which the rage stems. This catharsis acts as the foundation of the genre and the main character’s rage, along with a desire for revenge, function as the driving force of the plot. The rage depicted in the genre is a reaction to the banality and desensitization to female trauma at the hands of less-nuanced horror films, notably the Rape-Revenge Genre.

### **Complicating the Rape-Revenge Genre**

Within a “Good for Her” film, trauma is not glorified or commodified, which is what sets this genre apart from “rape-revenge” films. Though the protagonist may be assaulted, raped, or experience a similar form of violence, the difference between “Good for Her” films and rape-revenge films is that they do not have the same exploitative tone, nor do they fetishize female trauma. They are regaining the autonomy and agency they may have lost, but it is not

regained in the usual manner conveyed in rape-revenge films, which, again, sets this genre apart. Often, the protagonist regains their autonomy through means that are morally gray or even fully immoral. The lead female character is more likely to exact her revenge through what is considered to be feminine attributes: controlled rage and psychological warfare. They will manipulate and orchestrate any number of people to exact their revenge. This is not to say physical violence does not exist in this genre, but rather it does not function as the leading manner of revenge as it would in a male-led revenge film. This genre battles the numbness that surrounds violence against women in media through the catharsis achieved by the end of the film.

The “Good for Her” genre is not limited to the horror and thriller genre but does predominantly exist within that sector of film. In relation to the foundational theories and theorists of horror films, the “Good for Her” genre functions as an extension of horror. Beginning with the “rape-revenge” genre of horror and thriller films, which is closely related to the “Good for Her” films, both types of films center on female trauma, rage, and triumph. However, the rape-revenge genre can appear exploitative and has roots in fetishizing female trauma, often centering on the parents, namely their fathers, a significant other, or anyone else besides the victim themselves, as seen in Wes Craven’s genre-defining *Last House on the Left* (1972). Isobella Austin, in her article “‘Rape-revenge’ films are changing: They now focus on the women, instead of their dads,” recognizes the recent shift in the genre and how the films that defined the rape-revenge genre decentered victims entirely. She finds that the genre “depict[s] the crime of rape as it affects the fathers of the victims, showing fathers dishing out violent retribution” (Austin). This poses the question, who is the genre truly for, and who is it serving? “Good for Her” films display certain characteristics of rape-revenge films, and may even follow

a rape-revenge plot, but the pivotal difference between rape-revenge films and “Good for Her” films is that the latter centers the women as they tell their own stories of trauma, rather than filtering the experiences through their fathers. “Good for Her” films lean more heavily into the wish-fulfillment aspects of rape-revenge films, encouraging a stronger cathartic reaction by the female viewer and a more bittersweet retributive sense of justice at the film’s conclusion. However, regardless of the existence of catharsis at the conclusion, a necessary component of a “Good for Her” film is a traumatic catalyst that causes the need for revenge, which could be seen as furthering problematic depictions of violence against women.

A criticism of the rape-revenge genre and even the “Good for Her” genre is the question of whether or not the violence against women depicted in the films is necessary at all, and whether they perpetuate the commodification of female bodies. There are critics that find both genres to be exploitative of female trauma and do little to nothing for their representation of trauma. The “Good for Her” genre does often depict female trauma and violence against women, but the representation differs vastly from the rape-revenge genre. “Good for Her” films are intended to be a realistic depiction of misogynistic oppression, including violence against women, while offering a fantasy revenge scenario to prompt catharsis in the viewer, not trauma. In her book *Intimate Violence*, Laura Tanner finds that “the act of reading a representation of violence is defined by the reader’s suspension between the semiotic and the real, between a representation and the material dynamics of violence which it evokes, reflects, or transforms” (121). Though Tanner is only referencing text, her findings can be applied to representations of violence in film as well. Tanner is saying that readers are suspended between the representation and reality of violence. This can create a more apathetic viewing experience and diminish the effect of the violence being displayed. The “Good for Her” genre does often depict some form of

violence, either physical, sexual, or social, against women, but the point of the genre is that the protagonist overcomes the violence in a retaliatory manner that provides the audience a cathartic response. The revenge the protagonist takes is the fantasy aspect of the genre, and the catharsis as a result prevents the desensitization that often follows violence against women onscreen by forcing the audience to ally themselves with the protagonist prevents the apathy from setting in. If the viewer vicariously experiences both the violence and the catharsis of revenge alongside the protagonist, they are more likely to feel empathy towards the character, since they are acting as an extension of themselves.

### **The Protagonist as a Voyeuristic Vehicle for Hypothetical Revenge**

The protagonist, or object of vicarious catharsis, in the “Good for Her” film, is typically female, conventionally attractive, extraordinary, and even a little absurd, and most importantly she weaponizes her femininity and her whiteness. Many of the female characters associated with this genre are white and the genres (horror and thriller) are dominated by white female characters. Often the protagonists are conventionally beautiful white cisgender women who weaponize their femininity and especially their whiteness in order to exact revenge. This character exemplifies the flaws of non-intersectional feminism and displays the inherent privilege of existing as a white woman. She can conduct her revenge, likely committing acts of immoral and possibly law-breaking violence. The drastic actions they take to exact their revenge would have vastly different outcomes if they were women of color, and they would not be allowed the same degree of leniency. The “Good for Her” genre deviates from male-driven revenge films in the way it defines revenge. Often, revenge films with male protagonists conclude with the protagonist eliminating their enemies and triumphing. Their lives are rarely ever ruined through this rampage of violence, nor do they face repercussions for their actions. It

is the only realistic aspect of the “Good for Her” genre that the women are not allotted the same leniency for violence that their male counterparts are. The male revenge protagonist is lauded as a hero, while the female revenge protagonist can be described as a villain. The “Good for Her” genre exists in the intermediary space between the two, questioning the existence of the binary. The protagonist contains elements of both Final Girl victim, and slasher villain.

The protagonist is a vehicle for female viewers to experience and release their rage in a manner they likely would not be able to in reality. This is where the revenge aspect is so pivotal. Though the protagonist can exact revenge in a multitude of manners, from emotional manipulation, to flat-out murder, the protagonist allows the viewer to act in a manner they could not in reality. The film offers a fantasy to female viewers who need a release from the reality of existence in a patriarchal society, the microaggressions they face, and the very real violence they endure. The protagonist may take drastic and extreme measures to reclaim their agency, which may appear absurd and unrealistic to the viewer, but that is the nature of fantasy. One must suspend their sense of reality in order to experience vicarious revenge through the protagonist and achieve catharsis. There are cases, as will be discussed in the Case Study section, where “Good for Her” protagonists are “women once devoid of power defeating their abusers,” as portrayed in *The Invisible Man* (2020) or *Revenge* (2017) (Shunyata). The female leads are both victimized by their respective antagonists, but the manner in which they fight back is a bit different. The Final Girl acts out of pure survival instinct and a desire to avenge those lost around her while maintaining this image of purity juxtaposed with the face of evil, while the “Good for Her” protagonist acts out of self-preservation, potential self-destruction, and revenge, embodying the dynamic qualities of both slasher and victim. Though the protagonist seems to be more

defined, a conventionally attractive white woman filled with rage, the object of her rage varies greatly, from a singular person, to a symbol of the entire system that wronged her.

### **The Fantasy of Revenge**

There is a fantastical element to the revenge plot in “Good for Her” film, in that it is unlikely to occur in reality, yet is believable as a cathartic response in today’s culture “Good for Her” films offer either a small glimpse of a crack in expected female stoicism or full-out rage. This is also why some male viewers often may not “get” this genre and why it offers a more profound sense of catharsis to female viewers. When the protagonist of a “Good for Her” film exacts her revenge, either physically, psychologically, or socially, there is an object of her revenge, or antagonist. This antagonist could be one character, a group of characters, or an entire oppressive system. The antagonist, often a male character, has committed some kind of wrong against the protagonist rooted in misogyny and gendered violence. This could be physical violence, emotional violence, manipulation, oppression, objectification, or some other slight in which the protagonist feels they must retaliate. Especially if the antagonist is a male character, they are quite realistic depictions of men juxtaposed against the fantastical and absurd nature of the protagonist. They are typically overwhelmingly average and common, thus acting as a self-insert character for viewers to extend their vicarious revenge and cathartic response. Often it is not the protagonist the female viewers can recognize, but rather the men who have committed the wrongdoings. The female viewers likely have experienced trauma or met a man like the “antagonist” or had an experience similar to the protagonist, therefore can see past the immoral actions of the protagonist for the sake of catharsis. They can picture themselves as the protagonist seeking revenge upon those who have wronged them, placing their own oppressors in the shoes of the antagonist. The actions of the antagonist are rooted in very real traumas that

women experience, which is why when the protagonist exacts her revenge, it crafts a cathartic response. Though there is a fantastical element in the vengeful actions of the protagonist, the rage and oppression she endures are very real.

A “Good for Her” film offers a reprieve from a reality and society systematically designed to oppress them through normative gender roles and rape culture. It is through viewing this genre that viewers can confront the unfortunate realities of a patriarchal society and defeat them in a hypothetical fantasy. In his essay, “Return of the Repressed,” Robin Wood describes the fantastical, and sometimes nightmarish, nature of horror films. He reflects upon “[t]he old tendency to dismiss the Hollywood cinema as escapist always defined escape merely negatively as escape *from*, but escape logically must also be escape *to*” (Wood 26). The “Good for Her” genre exists within an intermediary space of escape *from* and escape *to*, as Wood describes. Much of film-viewing can be seen as a form of escapism, a means of disregarding the banality of reality for ninety minutes, or a method of leaving behind the traumas of the real world. The genre allows viewers to escape *to* a fictional place where women are able to not only see the traumatic realities of existence as a woman represented onscreen, but also be given the opportunity to accompany the protagonist on a quest for revenge against representations of patriarchal oppression. The “Good for Her” genre gives the viewers a chance to fantasize about what it would be like to seek and implement revenge upon those who uphold oppressive systems such as rape culture, or provide them a means to vicariously release their repressed rage, and thus reach catharsis.

### **The Ending, Bittersweet and Cathartic**

The end of a “Good for Her” film is typically unsettling and unexpected. The ending of the film is often bittersweet and may end in tragedy. The final shot of the film is, more often than

not, the “Good for Her” protagonist’s face, a trope within the genre. It typically reveals the grotesque nature of the actions she has taken towards her revenge, and juxtaposes the beginning of the film and how she has morphed into a villain. It is triumphant in a way that may not be intended, while the protagonist still experiences a form of loss and trauma. As it is with trauma, the protagonist may be mourning the loss of the person they once were before the trauma occurred. They may be mourning who they have become as a result of their quest for revenge. They may lose their sense of self, security, or even their lives along their path to revenge. The majority of these films do not have happy endings and typically end with either the protagonist losing their life, or destroying their lives completely. Their path to revenge consumes them since the price to pay for revenge is often one’s morals or even one’s life. Often, the ending of a “Good for Her” film is bittersweet, ending in a form of catharsis that may also accompany the ruination of the lead female character whom the viewer was rooting for. However, the ruination varies depending upon the degree of privilege the character wields. This may entail true justice on behalf of her vengeful endeavors, or simply recognition of the wrongs imbued upon her, but regardless, the actions she exacts to reach this conclusion often epitomize her white privilege within her respective society.

Despite the tragic ending, the feeling of catharsis remains. The female protagonist still has a form of triumph, though it may not be in the manner she expected from her revenge plot. The ending gives female viewers the kind of vicarious retribution we can only fantasize about. They have bested their antagonist, which often symbolizes a form of patriarchal oppression, in a manner that is likely neither lawful nor moral. These films reclaim the underlying message of horror films for women, which is usually lost behind the misogyny and misrepresentation that horror is made for a male audience. The “Good for Her” films tell female audiences “Your reality

is horrific. Society is inherently misogynistic. Your rage is valid, and you deserve freedom.”

They can experience this form of voyeuristic rage that validates their own alongside the protagonist, which crafts the catharsis at the end. The catharsis exists due to the fact that the plot of these films is inherently fanciful and clearly fictional. They are impossible and represent a perfect reality in which women dominate and “win,” somewhat and likely not in the way they expect, in a patriarchal society. Chaudhuri comments on the voyeuristic nature of horror films, as addressed by Barbara Creed:

“The abject terrifies us but fascinates us all the same. Horror films attest to the audience’s desire to confront ‘sickening, horrific images’, to witness the taboo, which is what provokes shock and terror; then once we have taken our fill, ‘to throw up, throw out, eject the abject’...The depiction of the abject allows the spectator to indulge vicariously in taboo forms of behavior from the safety of [their] seat, before order is finally restored: this is the horror film’s central appeal” (Creed qtd. In Chaudhuri 94).

The audience must rectify exactly what degree of immorality they can comply with in order to accompany the protagonist in this immoral revenge plot. Horror often forces its audiences to consider exactly what they are comfortable empathizing with, let alone watch. However, it also allows the viewer, as both Creed and Chaudhuri suggest, to partake vicariously in the taboo and immoral behaviors they would otherwise not be able to, which is the core appeal of “Good for Her” films, particularly for female viewers. It allows them to confront the horrors of their reality as they are depicted in the film, such as rape, assault, other forms of violence, and oppression, and vicariously experience their desired response to it through the protagonist.

“Good for Her” films craft a particularly complex cathartic sensation for the female viewer through the protagonist’s quest for vengeance against a patriarchal system or symbol of

misogynistic oppression. In Laura Mulvey's 1977 essay "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,'" she argues that the female viewer "may find herself secretly, unconsciously almost, enjoying the freedom of action and control over the diegetic world that identification with a hero provides" (29). Since much of film centers a male lead as the hero, the female viewer must therefore seek identification with the male hero, vicariously and cathartically experiencing the freedom and privilege that comes with existence as a man in a patriarchal society. In her original essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey describes how "the presence of [a] woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a storyline, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (809). However, the female-centered narrative of a "Good for Her" film offers a deviation from the typical feminine erotic spectacle, to a representation of a character that is both hero and villain.

The "Good for Her" genre combines immoral methods of revenge with a bittersweet ending, thus crafting a contradictory response that can be both satisfying and demoralizing. Typically, horror and thriller films center on a male protagonist, using female characters as mere plot devices, or even going as far as to commodify female trauma through these female characters without giving them agency. "Good for Her" films place female trauma and the female protagonist in the center, thus forcing the audience to accompany her on a quest for revenge, often bypassing what could be considered as a traditional sense of morality. For victims of misogyny or even patriarchal violence, the "Good for Her" genre offers catharsis by the end because the traumas and scenarios confronted in the film are often all too real, though the revenge plot itself is rooted in privileged fantasy. It offers the viewer the opportunity to vicariously enact revenge upon the systems of oppression that exist within reality from the safety

of the movie theater or their homes. Further reflecting on the effects of Mulvey's essay, Chaudhuri finds that Mulvey's aims were "iconoclastic: to break the codes and destroy narrative pleasure" (Chaudhuri 39). While not all narrative pleasure is destroyed in "Good for Her" films, the traditional satisfaction at the close of a rape-revenge film is complicated in "Good for Her" film and made more perplexing through the use of a character that is morally gray.

### **The Spectrum of Morality & The Monstrosity of Immoral Women**

The revenge and actions the protagonist of a "Good for Her" film takes may cause a cathartic response but still be questionable in a moral sense. These films may also not be feminist and should not be celebrated for their morale, but do bring a sense of satisfaction to female viewers or any viewers that have been oppressed by patriarchal strictures. Alannah Link describes the cathartic effect of a "Good for Her" film, stating

"I didn't like these movies because they were feminist or politically correct. They definitely shouldn't be praised for their morale. I just think there is something *satisfying* about watching a scorned woman get what they want. Kind of like being entranced by a flame that emblazes everything around it."

These films are not meant to be lauded for their morality, or praised for their realism, but rather for the fantasy they provide. Viewers get to imagine themselves as both the villain and the hero through the protagonist. The female protagonists are almost always villainous in some manner or at least commit villainous acts. There are some critics of these types of female characters that consider their gray morality to diminish the audience's emotional alliance with the character, therefore making their revenge plot more polarizing and less sympathetic. Female characters can and should be flawed in order to be fully developed, realistic, and three-dimensional. They do not have to be moral pillars and liberate all of oppressed society under the patriarchy. Male

characters are warranted the ability for growth and development, as often is their only plotline, particularly when the central plot of the film is revenge. In the “Good for Her” genre, the audience is meant to align themselves with this morally gray protagonist, which may cause them to redefine their own moral parameters and consider what it is they are willing to look past in order to accompany this character on their quest for revenge. This also may cause the audience to question what it is they are willing to watch and be a part of as an empathetic viewer, which calls into question the scopophilic nature of sympathizing with a villain on-screen when their actions are somewhat “justified.”

The “Good for Her” genre offers a rare representation of a victim’s descent into immorality and villainy, yet when female characters follow this arc, they are often demonized for it or seen as especially villainous. Media detailing a male protagonist’s Lucifer-esque fall from grace, a hero-to-villain transformation, are plentiful and celebrated as indicative of the duality of man, such as lauded antiheroes Walter White of the television show *Breaking Bad* and titular character John Wick. However, if similar character development is displayed with a female protagonist, it does not receive nearly the same amount of esteem. Male characters are awarded a certain amount of latitude on a spectrum of morality, while female characters are deemed villainous for displaying similar complexities in their thoughts and actions. The “Good for Her” genre often highlights a morally gray female protagonist that forces audiences to question exactly what amount of immorality they can get behind and still root for the main character while accompanying them on their quest for revenge. The morally gray protagonist in a “Good for Her” film embodies the repressed characteristics of a typical horror monster, such as rage and a desire to seek retribution against those that have wronged them. Chaudhuri states:

“In the horror film, the return of the repressed is enacting in the form of the monster, who not only turns society’s dominant norms upside down but also embodies what is repressed in us. The monster is our own and society’s ‘Other’...The monster changes its shape through history, attiring itself in the prevalent fears of the day” (Chaudhuri 92).

The monsters of horror symbolize a societal “Other” and epitomize a relevant and generational fear for the cultural context of the film. Concerning the “Good for Her” genre, it begs the question, why is a morally gray, victim-villain protagonist repeatedly emerging, what fear does she symbolize, and whose? Not only does the “Good for Her” genre epitomize and display the fears of existence as a woman in a patriarchal society, but through the morally-gray protagonist, it could also represent the fears of male viewers, and what could occur if they are held accountable for their actions and the way in which society is built to maintain their privilege and power. Their fears are personified through the female protagonist who drops the feminine stoicism and gives in to the “hysterical” and rage-filled woman she is taught to deny.

### **Gender Expectations of Violence and Redefining the Final Girl**

Clover’s Final Girl, though revolutionary for her time, appears retrospectively as an easy proxy character through which the typically male audience of horror films could feel empathy and relate to a female character. Clover even states that “The Final Girl is, on reflection, a congenial double for the adolescent male. She is feminine enough to act out in a gratifying way, a way unapproved for adult males, the terrors and masochistic pleasures of the underlying fantasy, but not so feminine as to disturb the structures of male competence and sexuality” (Clover 21). The “Good for Her” protagonist is an evolution of the Final Girl in that the Final Girl remained safely and uncontroversially relatable to the adolescent male viewer, whereas the “Good for Her” protagonist weaponizes her femininity against the antagonist who often

resembles the stereotypical male viewer of the horror genre. The “Good for Her” film expands upon the slasher genre that implements the Final Girl in that it simply is not intended for male audiences. They can absolutely function as omens of warning of the dangers of misogyny and reflect the misogynistic tendencies the audience may themselves harbor, but ultimately it is intended for audiences that can understand and relate to the protagonist, their trauma, and therefore experience the cathartic response at the close of the film. The Final Girl was crafted with male audiences in mind, whereas the “Good for Her” protagonist was crafted for female audiences, or those who understand the trauma of the protagonist.

The vast majority of films are depicted through the male gaze, rarely offering a perspective that does not further commodify the female body, but rarely considers the female existence in a patriarchal society. In her book, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, Carol Clover discusses the nature of the female gaze in horror for her coined “final girl” archetype. She states:

When the Final Girl assumes the ‘active investigating gaze,’ she exactly reverses the look, making a spectacle of the killer and a spectator of herself. Again, it is through the killer’s eyes (I-camera) that we see the Final Girl at the beginning of the film, and through the Final Girl’s eyes that we see the killer, often for the first time with any clarity, sometimes around the middle of the film and toward the end increasingly. The gaze becomes, at least for a while, female. More to the point, the female exercise of scopic control results not in her annihilation, in the manner of classic cinema, but in her triumph; indeed, her triumph depends on her assumption of the gaze (Clover 60).

As Clover describes, typically the audience sees the Final Girl through the killer’s eyes, often through a lens of victimization, at the beginning of the film. She appears more innocent, helpless, and tormented as those around her are killed one by one. The more that she triumphs over the

killer, the more the gaze shifts to her and we witness the humanity and mortality of the antagonist. This “female exercise of scopic control,” as Clover defines it, shifts to the audience as well, whose allegiance almost always lies with the Final Girl. The “Good for Her” genre both uses and complicates Clover's idea. The Final Girl could be described as a victim-hero, whereas the “Good for Her” protagonist is often a victim-villain, a convergence of the Final Girl and the Slasher. The protagonist is a form of the Final Girl who does experience trauma, and the gaze is through her eyes as she exacts her revenge, but the scopic control and the audience's compliance is muddled when the immorality of the protagonist's actions sets in. The audience is forced to reckon with just how much they are willing to get on board with, how much they are willing to empathize, or even watch. Though the immoral protagonist's perspective forces the audience to comply to a certain degree because they do not have a choice in the matter, it still raises a complex reaction through the gaze of a character that is both victim and villain. A core attribute of the “Good for Her” genre lies in the end, during which the audience, regardless of what the protagonist has done, feels a sense of catharsis at the end, often causing them to think, “good for her.”

Where the “Good for Her” genre subverts the gendered horror standard as defined by Clover, is that typically the female protagonist in a “Good for Her” film is both victim and villain, and weaponizes her femininity rather than using masculine characteristics to exact her revenge. Clover also finds that one of the “main donations to horror...is the image of an angry woman -- a woman so angry that she can be imagined as a credible perpetrator...” (Clover 17). The “Good for Her” genre is rooted in female rage and revenge. Much of horror is about a female victim being antagonized and traumatized by a male villain before finding her strength through masculine displays of violence and anger and eventually overcoming the male villain.

The “Good for Her” genre’s treatment of female rage differs, as previously mentioned, in that the female protagonist weaponizes her own femininity and typically the root of her rage stems from oppression and misogyny. Typically, “angry displays of force may belong to the male, but crying, cowering, screaming, fainting, trembling, begging for mercy belong to the female. Abject terror, in short, is gendered feminine” (Clover 51). In “Good for Her” films, however, women operate within an intermediary space in the binary of gendered emotional expression Clover defines and weaponizes whatever emotional response best suits their vengeful endeavors. If a masculine and angry display of violent force best suits the situation, they implement it with little to no hesitation. If displaying a weaker and cowering exterior benefits their plot in order to exploit whoever is the recipient of their revenge, they will implement that as well.

Masculine or feminine, the actions of women leads in “Good for Her” films are typically morally gray in nature and elicit a complex response from the audience. Clover points this out, stating “female killers are few and their reasons for killing significantly different from men’s.... their anger derives in most cases not from childhood experience but from specific moments in their adult lives in which they have been abandoned or cheated on by men” (Clover 29). Though this is a generalization and makes the patriarchal marginalization women face seem diminutive by boiling the trigger for female villainy down to being neglected or cheated on, rather than being caught in a cyclical system of oppression. The “Good for Her” films tend to have a bit more agency in their messaging, having a bigger stake in social commentary beyond being slighted by an individual man, but rather by the patriarchal system that is built for their oppression. The “Good for Her” genre is universal in that, though it may speak more to a feminine audience, all audience members have been harmed in some way by patriarchal

standards and gender roles, and the vicarious manner in which they can exact revenge upon those structures through the protagonist crafts a cathartic response, regardless of one's background.

### ***Promising Young Woman* as the Quintessential “Good for Her” Film**

The criteria with which I plan to analyze *Promising Young Woman* that I find represent significant aspects of the genre include female rage and revenge, voyeuristic catharsis and scopophilia, the morally gray protagonist, and the object of her rage and revenge acting as a representative of patriarchal oppression. These elements are what define the “Good for Her” genre and differentiate it from the closely related “rape-revenge” genre of horror films. Though there are varying iterations of the “Good for Her” genre, many of which may not follow the characteristics of the genre to an exact degree, *Promising Young Woman* exemplifies the most significant aspects of the genre, which most notably includes a representation of female rage and a cathartic response.

In the next section, I will apply the definition of the “Good for Her” genre to the film that I have found to be prevalent among internet discussion and within articles regarding the genre, as well as the film that epitomizes the genre in my opinion, Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman* (2020). *Promising Young Woman* includes a protagonist filled with feminine rage regaining her autonomy by striking back through revenge at a system of oppression as well as a singular person who embodies misogyny and rape culture, and ends with a cathartic response after which an audience cannot help but state, “good for her.”

I analyze *Promising Young Woman* based on its adherence to my interpretation of the defining characteristics of the “Good for Her” genre: Cassie as a female victim-villain protagonist that weaponizes femininity, depictions of female rage as a result of a traumatic

catalyst, and social commentary on patriarchal social structures, namely rape culture, a quest for vengeance through means of social warfare and sometimes physical violence, a certain degree of self-destruction as a result of her journey to revenge, and an ending with a bittersweet sense of vicarious catharsis for its viewers. *Promising Young Woman* displays the subset of the “Good for Her” genre which entails a more villainous female lead that may not even be considered a protagonist depending upon one’s interpretation. Her revenge includes elements of both psychological warfare and physical violence. The morality of her actions is absolutely called into question and, as a result of her self-destructive quest for revenge, she is consumed by her endeavor, altering her previous life entirely until ultimately losing it altogether.

I selected the film *Promising Young Woman* due to the fact that it is not only chronologically situated during the most significant sociopolitical events that contributed to the development and definition of the “Good for Her” genre, but it is also lauded for its revenge plot and relatability to women in the manner it addresses the systemic existence of rape culture, and how it affects not only victims of assault, but their loved ones as well. The title itself is a callback to the Brock Turner case, during which he was called a “promising young man,” as a justification for his diminished sentence of 6 months. The judge thought his future should not be altered as a result of one night’s events, while Chanel Miller’s life and future were not discussed nor seen as relevant to sentencing. *Promising Young Woman* teeters the line between a painfully realistic depiction of what occurs after a loved one is assaulted and just how the justice system, and society itself, fails victims of assault, and a fantastical representation of revenge and what viewers and survivors of assault wish they could do. Though not an outright horror film, *Promising Young Woman* certainly employs elements of horror for all viewers, through its moments of forced self-reflection regarding the viewer’s compliance or cognitive dissonance to

rape culture, and the unfortunate reality of violence against women. Through its hyper-femme neon aesthetic, *Promising Young Woman* crafts a damning indictment of rape culture and just how the justice system exists to demonize victims on behalf of rapists, and just how far a woman is willing to go to attain justice.

### *Promising Young Woman*

*Promising Young Woman* (2020), directed by Emerald Fennell stars Carey Mulligan as Cassie, a young woman seeking revenge on behalf of her best friend since childhood, Nina, who was raped and committed suicide. The film follows her quest for vengeance first against predatory men in general, then against those specifically who facilitated and covered up her best friend, Nina's, sexual assault. It acts as a satirical dark comedy/thriller that provides social commentary on the nature of rape culture and how patriarchal society fails to hold supposed "nice guys" accountable for their actions. The trailer and promotional materials are crafted in a misleading way to suggest that Cassie kills the men, thus subverting the typical predator/prey dynamic established between men and women in horror or thriller films. *Promising Young Woman* addresses the violence the female audience feels is justified, expected, and by the end of the film, craved.

### **Weaponizing Femininity to Subvert the Male Gaze**

The hyper-femme neon aesthetic crafted by cinematographer Benjamin Kračun is used to display such a dark subject matter illustrates the expectation of a patriarchal society and the duplicity of women in this genre. Cassie fulfills the expectation of a hyper-feminine physical gender performance, while subverting the normative expectations of a feminine personality, namely acting meek and subdued. Every aspect of the film is coated in neon pastels, from the set

pieces, such as the coffee shop where she works, to Cassie's clothing, which is often varying shades of pink or floral patterns.



The bold color scheme of the film casts a fantastical and almost child-like lens upon it. This contributes to not only the fantasy of revenge as enacted by Cassie, the protagonist, but also the innocence lost by every person who falls victim to the systemic nature of rape culture, the main subject of commentary in the film. Due to the aesthetic of the film, one cannot be sure if Cassie is a reliable narrator, or if this is all being told through her lens of fantasy revenge.

The aesthetic of the film adheres to patriarchal expectations outwardly through its highly feminized appearance and adheres to the male gaze, yet for Cassie, this is a mere mask to hide her predatory nature, intent upon revenge. *Promising Young Woman* displays a feminization of the rape-revenge genre, which is typically fetishized, grimy, and crafted for an audience that is decidedly not women, such as male horror fans, or fathers who crave a vicarious sense of catharsis through imagined violence. Cassie, our victim-villain protagonist, and the film itself, weaponize femininity against the predators. Cassie is the weapon in question, and the hyper-feminine gender presentation she displays acts as the allure for the “nice guys” who seek a gender-normative feminine woman they can take advantage of and feel no remorse about it.

Cassie's perfectionist demeanor and physical appearance balance the line between patriarchal expectation and subversion. Cassie displays physical elements that men find attractive such as her femme manner of gender presentation of clothing and makeup, often donning pastel colored clothing and light makeup to make her appear quite feminine. Her demeanor and personality, however, are seen as off-putting to men, making her character both satirize female heroines in thriller movies while simultaneously subverting them. Cassie weaponizes her femininity as a form of revenge. She fulfills the expectations the "nice guys," or targets of her revenge, have of her. Cassie intentionally acts suggestively and affirms their preconceived ideas of gender roles, or predatory/prey roles, yet in reality, she is displaying these hyper-feminine attributes often rooted in misogyny to her advantage. It is a ruse to force the men to address their expectations regarding women and what informs those expectations. Despite her crafted physical appearance to be appealing to the male gaze, Cassie is intentionally characterized as *not* nice. Women are expected to be complacent, kind, and meek, therefore they shall inherit the Earth, hypothetically. Cassie's character is definitively not for a reason. She is not meant to be likable, nor does she try to make her personality appealing. She dons a hyperfeminine outward appearance and gender presentation to prove the fact that these men whom she meets in bars and clubs are not seeking an emotional connection with her, but rather they objectify her entirely, basing their interactions on physicality. She is also appealing to the male gaze not only through her physical appearance and hyper-feminized clothing, but in the way she is consistently depicted as apparently having an oral fixation. She is constantly eating, chewing, or having something in her mouth. This perfectly normal and innocent action could be misconstrued as inherently sexual to a predatory viewer. Her intentionally appealing to the male gaze when conducting her instructional ruse is made all the more evident when she follows a YouTube

makeup tutorial titled “Blow Job Lips Makeup Tutorial” (14:05). She knows what appeals to men from a visual perspective, but does not outright seek them out when she is looking for men to “instruct,” but rather they always go to her in every single instance.

The opening scene, scored by “Boys” by Charli XCX, sets the satirical tone immediately and outright by offering a montage of gyrating male bodies in a club that directly mimics what would usually be a scene of objectified female bodies and a leering male gaze from the camera lens. The camera, at this moment, is depicting what the male gaze looks like, but upon an unexpected subject, men, which makes the result appear all the more ridiculous, but is the reality for women in film. The shot pans over a sea of male crotches while they dance in slow motion, emphasizing in a predatory scopophilic manner the way their bodies move. It is this first subversive act that foreshadows the nature of the film entirely, and its intention to force the audience to question why they are surprised by this, and if the scene depicted women in the same manner, would they have noticed at all? The casualty of misogyny and the normalization of objectification are immediately called into question in this first scene. The men, clad in their business casual button-ups and khakis are the focus of the leering camera, meant to look like a sea of “average” men in a bar. The very first words spoken by a character in the film are “fuck her,” which is repeated three more times by the other men in this focalized group at the bar, which automatically insinuates the “bro” hypermasculine culture of the setting. The audience does not even see the lead, Cassie, until the two-minute mark, to which she is introduced with the line “Would you look at that” (2:04). Not her, but *that*, automatically dehumanizes Cassie from the start through their perspective. The gaze of the camera, switching to a standard, rather than subversive, male gaze matches the gaze of the men, looking her over from across the bar in a blatantly predatory manner. The exposition dump and commentary of rape culture occur within

the first five minutes of the film, during which the men in the bar are commenting on Cassie's supposedly inebriated and likely blacked-out state. They make remarks such as "Why don't you get some dignity, sweetheart?" (2:07) and "You know, they put themselves in danger, girls like that" (2:09), which simultaneously recognizes the danger Cassie is in and the violence that could occur against her, yet blames her for the existence of the potential violence. These first two minutes of the film situate the audience that is both entirely too normal through the machismo culture of the bar, while also having an element of fantasy through the subversive satirized male gaze, foreshadowing the tone of the rest of the film.

*Promising Young Woman* lays bare its social commentary on rape culture very early on without Cassie having to say a single word, which is that women's inaction and inability to remove themselves from a dangerous situation, or being in a dangerous situation, is more to blame than men's action or creation of the dangerous situation. The focal group of men in the club even say, "If she's not careful, someone's going to take advantage. Especially the kind of guys in this club" (2:10-2:13), that she is "just asking for it" (2:29). These lines are significant because it states the difference between Fennell's film and most others that comment upon the existence of rape culture. Often, society sees rape or rape culture to be perpetuated by predatory strangers in darkened alleyways, when in reality it is often the everyday man that is the most predatory due to the fact that he does not see himself as a predator or an integral tool in upholding this culture.

This opening scene places a mirror up to the "nice guys" of the world who view themselves as bystanders or not participatory in rape in the slightest, and reflects their predatory nature to them. As illustrated with Jerry, most, if not all of the other male characters, and most importantly Ryan, Cassie's love interest, the "nice guys" are instrumental in upholding rape

culture despite perceiving themselves as innocent. They think that if they are not actively participating in rape, they are faultless, blameless, and distinctively *not* part of the problem. *Promising Young Woman* indicts these “nice guys” by displaying just how much their inaction contributes to the culture that protects and validates rapists, that they must be *anti*-rape culture, rather than laud themselves for “*not*” committing sexual assault.

Jerry, the first man the audience sees Cassie conduct her instructional revenge upon, initially goes to her to see “if she’s okay,” (2:50) donning the white knight role of the “nice guy” while his friends are winking and encouraging him to take advantage of Cassie, the very thing they were just admonishing and assuming the other predatory men, “not like them”, would do, but because they’re “nice” and “helping her,” they do not see it as wrong. Jerry’s true predatory nature is made clear when he does not wait for Cassie to outright say yes to coming over to his apartment, immediately revealing his lack of recognition of consent. When she is acting extremely inebriated, stating she may not throw up in the cab, he sees that as an opportunity that she is “sober” enough for sexual intercourse, based on the fact that she is still conscious and talking, yet, again, still not outright consenting. He also tries to differentiate himself from his “friends at the bar” calling them “assholes” (5:31), as if he is not currently trying to ply her with more alcohol in order to commit what he does not view as assault, but absolutely is, due to his “nice guy” status.

Even as he begins to kiss her, Cassie is not reciprocating or even moving her mouth, a clear indication that she is still not consenting, yet Jerry refuses to see anything except an outright verbal confirmation of the word “no” as a refusal of consent, another nuance of rape culture. As he continues to kiss her and touch her, she even says “Wait” (6:55) to which he shushes her and states “You’re safe” (6:57) because he truly does not see what he is doing as

assault or predatory in the slightest. As he pulls her underwear off and Cassie is slurring, but slowly becoming clearer stating “What are you doing” (7:16), Jerry still refuses to see the violence of his actions. It is only when Cassie, whom he finally realizes is fully sober, sits up and clearly states “I said, what are you doing” (7:34). It is at that moment that shock and shame take over Jerry because he realizes she is fully aware of his actions and cannot be taken advantage of in the same manner he thought she could, that he has been caught in an act he usually gets away with.

The scene plays out like a horror film, at least for Jerry, with the increasing string music in the background followed by the beat of Cassie opening her eyes fully, no longer playing the role of intoxicated helpless girl-in-a-bar, laying with her arms flat out, the first of many religious iconographies of the film regarding Cassie. This is ironic because Cassie is displayed as a sort of savior character. She sees herself as a champion for women, but specifically Nina, through her acts of instructional revenge upon predatory men.

### **The Catalyst for Revenge**

Beginning in these early scenes, the film asks the audience to grapple with their own perceptions of women within the context of violence, and to what degree one believes they are capable of it. It forces the audience to contemplate the narratives we know and expect, their cognitive dissonance towards violence against women, and rape culture, specifically. The audience must consider the narratives of violence we are comfortable with and our preconceived notions of how these appear in film. The film immediately subverts expectations following Cassie’s encounter with Jerry. After the title card, the close-up shot pans up Cassie’s leg, which has what appears to be blood dripping down her leg and on her shirt, until the audience sees it is actually ketchup coming off of a hot dog. This deceptive shot leads the audience to believe

Cassie killed Jerry for his actions, but in reality, she did not. The audience is forced to reckon with what degree of violence they will accept from the main character and whether her actions for the sake of revenge are justified based on their own moral spectrum. If her actions are outside of the realm of plausibility in correlation to the crime or wrongdoing, she may lose the audience's sympathy.

What makes Cassie's revenge plot so significant is that the catalyst for her revenge is a story everyone has encountered. Cassie's traumatic catalyst that begins her revenge plot is her best friend, Nina's, rape. Cassie describes Nina's assault in her own words during her encounter with Dean Walker, "He took a girl, Nina Fisher, the one you don't remember, back to his room, where he had sex with her repeatedly and in front of his friends while she was too drunk to have any idea what was going on. She was covered in bruises the next day. Handprints, I guess you could say" (44:52-45:13). Afterward, her peers in the medical college as well as the administration participate in victim-blaming and covering up the assault, which drives Nina to suicide.

Losing her best friend that she grew up with as a sister is what drives Cassie's rage. She witnesses social situations that could end like Nina's every single time she goes out, thus beginning her quest for instructional revenge against rape culture and the patriarchal social dynamic that allowed for these so-called "nice guys" to not only assault Nina but take her life. She intends to make the "nice guys," of the world, like Nina's rapist, see just how they contribute to violence, and to catch them before they hurt someone else, to strike into them the fear of being caught as a rapist and shatter the "nice guy" image they have of themselves. This action also puts Cassie in danger, since she is intentionally placing herself in potentially violent situations.

Cassie giving her entire life and self to avenge Nina is made evident in the scene with her parents on the morning of her 30th birthday. She is already barreling towards self-destruction and the scene foreshadows this. Fennell is displaying the degree of drastic action necessary to receive justice for a sexual assault in a system that privileges and protects rapists. Her mother asks her (21:57-22:17), “Do you know how strange this is? You, you’re still living here at home. Working in that stupid coffee shop since you and Nina dropped out of med school. You’re out all night doing God only knows what. You don’t have a boyfriend. You don’t have any friends.” It is clear that Cassie has foregone all other aspects of what makes life enjoyable or any semblance of her life before Nina’s rape and suicide, in favor of her vengeance plan in Nina’s honor. As Siddhant Adlakha, a film reviewer for *Observer* states, “Cassie is trapped in a cycle of second-hand trauma. She’s unable to find closure, and the closest she comes to actually confront this trauma is coming within inches of re-enacting a painful moment from the past — not her own past, but Nina’s, as she intentionally places herself in the path of sexual predators behind closed doors.” She is putting herself at risk for experiencing the same trauma Nina did to validate the second-hand trauma she experienced as a result and to reckon with her survivor’s guilt. She is barreling toward self-destruction in this cycle of trauma, and the only reprieve she gets from this cycle are those evenings of instructional revenge. Though Cassie is driven by trauma, *Promising Young Woman* does not commodify or fetishize Cassie’s trauma, nor Nina’s trauma, as a rape-revenge adjacent film within the “Good for Her” genre.

The director, Emerald Fennell, intentionally chooses to not show Nina’s assault as most rape-revenge films do. The audience only hears the events on the video of Nina’s assault and sees Cassie’s response to it. Most rape-revenge films’ treatment of the assault feels fetishized and poorly researched, often catering to the male gaze. An inherent part of rape-revenge films, as

defined by notable genre contributors such as *Last House on the Left* (1972), and *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978), is the commodification of female trauma, often showing the rape scene in gratuitous graphic detail that can be triggering for survivors of sexual assault. *Promising Young Woman*, though not officially a rape-revenge genre film but rather a proxy revenge film as a result of a rape, never shows a single moment of the assault on screen in order to avoid being triggering for survivors. *Promising Young Woman* illustrates how an act of rape affects not only the survivor, but their loved ones as well, and how American culture privileges protecting rapists rather than victims. An evident flaw in the film where it continues a harmful trope of its rape-revenge predecessors is that it does only offer the perspective of a loved one, rather than the survivor. Cassie is committing these acts on behalf of Nina, yet Nina is no longer alive to state whether or not this is what she desires. Similar to rape-revenge films of the past that depict fathers seeking revenge on behalf of their daughters, Cassie's quest for vengeance is similar. Where *Promising Young Woman* deviates from this premise is in the fact that Cassie is a victim culture as well and represents a universal female experience in a patriarchal society, while the fathers of rape-revenge films merely depict hypermasculine proclivities for violence for the sake of their daughters. Though the content of the film is obviously dark and could still be triggering, this directorial choice acts as a sign of respect and recognition to all sexual assault survivors while calling attention to the flaws of the genre's predecessors. The film offers the cathartic quest for revenge without the fetishization of a typical rape-revenge film, which is indicative of how the "Good for Her" genre has expanded upon rape-revenge films.

### **Cassie's Rage Channeled Through Instructional Revenge**

Cassie's rage remains focalized and contained for much of the film, displaying the female stoicism expected of a woman, lest she is depicted as "crazy," "manic," or "hysterical" in her

quest for revenge and the audience deem her even more unlikable. This, again, reinforces how she outwardly presents herself as reinforcing normative gender roles and hyper-femininity, but how she has also internalized this idea of stoicism in order to complete her revenge. The only instances where she releases a bit of that rage is when she kicks the trashcan after Ryan foreshadows his true nature a bit when he invites Cassie up to his apartment on the first date, insinuating that he is not truly the “nice guy” he appears to be, after which Cassie kicks over a trash can out of rage. The second is after the altercation with Dean Walker when Cassie blocks the middle of an intersection and a man screams obscenities and sexist comments at her for it, so she shatters his brake lights and windshield with a crowbar while a symphony plays in the background. The final example is during the climactic scene with Al when Cassie raises her voice at him after he refuses to admit he raped Nina, during which she yells “Wrong!” at him (1:29:48). Cassie’s rage subsides after she visits with Mrs. Fisher, when she is encouraged to let go of Nina and move on. Though she is ultimately overcome by her need for revenge, her rage is taken seriously in the film, as it should in a “Good for Her” film. The audience understands the reason behind her need for revenge, as well as her rage. Though Cassie is not representative of all “Good for Her” protagonists in the display of feminine rage, Cassie’s rage does stand out in that it adheres to ideas of psychological warfare and a rage that is very much rooted in misogynistic experiences as a woman.

Most rape-revenge films push their female protagonists towards outright brutal physical violence as a form of processing their trauma. *Promising Young Woman* does not do this, thus immediately subverting the rape-revenge films and, once again, denying the expectations the audience may have of what they think this film is. Cassie is frozen by the trauma of Nina’s rape and suicide and attempts to process it through a realistic form of revenge, her method of

instructional revenge against the “nice guys,” who function as proxies for Al, Nina’s rapist. Her goal in her instructional revenge is for all involved to have some form of accountability for their complacency in upholding this oppressive system. Cassie as a protagonist is coping with her trauma in a manner that is not deemed “acceptable,” endearing, or likable to a patriarchal society, which is intentional. Her revenge plot is not physically violent towards others, as depicted in a standard rape-revenge film, but more so emotionally violent towards others and herself. Her own self-destruction is the byproduct of giving all of her time and energy to vengeance for Nina. She uses it as righting the wrongs enacted upon not only Nina but the countless other women with stories similar, if not identical, to Nina’s. During her interaction with Neil, the second “nice guy” in the film, Cassie outlines her methods of instructional revenge, “Every week, I go out to a club, and every week, I act like I’m too drunk to stand. And every fucking week, a nice guy like you comes over to see if I’m okay... You want to fuck me still?...Hm...No one ever does” (19:54-20:25). This moment states her protocol outright, but also references the fact that the men are only interested in her when she appears too inebriated to consent, rather than when she is sober. They do not see themselves as predators because they think they are the “nice guys” protecting her from the predators, when in reality how they act is outright predatory.

### **The Shift in Cassie’s Revenge from Systemic to Specific**

Cassie’s methods of revenge shift from being directed towards predatory men in general, to the perpetrators of Nina’s rape and subsequent cover-up. Al Monroe, Nina’s rapist, is the central figure of revenge in the film, and all of the men upon whom Cassie enacts instructional revenge are proxies for Al. This is revealed when Ryan, Cassie’s love interest, mentions that he is still friends with him from medical school, scored by a tension-building horror score in the background, foreshadowing that Al’s name is clearly significant to Cassie. This is the major shift

in Cassie's revenge narrative, from a general instructional narrative for predatory "nice guys" to a focalized revenge plan against Al and all of the accomplices in Nina's assault, subsequent cover-up, and silencing which led to her suicide. Cassie's utmost goal in her revenge is not physical harm, but rather for the perpetrators to admit their role in Nina's death and an entire system that ultimately failed her. She either exacts a form of instructional revenge upon them in which she reflects their wrongdoings against Nina to them, or offers them an opportunity for redemption by admitting their part in contributing to Nina's suicide.

Ironically, Cassie's methods of pretending to be drunk in order for predators to drop their guard works just as well with Madison, a former medical school classmate played by Allison Brie, the character who epitomizes internalized misogyny and acts as an accomplice and bystander to Nina's rape, much like the "nice guys." She views herself as innocent, even insinuating that she is what "all guys want...a good girl" (37:28). Similar to the men Cassie teaches to see their predatory ways, Cassie's instructional revenge upon Madison shows her just how much her inaction contributed to not only Nina's assault, but her continued trauma as a result of the assault. Madison participates entirely in victim-blaming and upholding rape culture, saying Nina had a "reputation for sleeping around" and was therefore to blame when people did not believe her when she accused Al of rape, likening it to "crying wolf" (39:02). The scene is foreshadowing Cassie's retaliatory instruction when Madison says Nina should not have been "blackout drunk all the time and then expect people to be on your side when you have sex with someone you don't want to" (39:25). Cassie makes Madison believe exactly this scenario has occurred to her, orchestrating and manipulating Madison to believe she got blackout drunk at brunch and, too drunk to consent, was consequently raped by a man she met there.

This scene has been contested and stated to have lost a few audience members' sympathies for Cassie, insinuating she has taken her revenge plot "too far." This is what sets *Promising Young Woman* apart from other rape-revenge films, or rape-revenge adjacent as this film is. She emotionally manipulates them and engages in a form of social warfare, as most protagonists in Good for Her films do, but the physical violence is nonexistent. This is when the villainous nature of Cassie becomes apparent. She is willing to allow another woman, albeit one who may deserve it, to believe she encountered the same trauma and violence as Nina. She is gaslighting Madison to show her what it was like for Nina, and how damaging psychological violence can be in the form of not believing those who are victims of sexual assault. The revenge plot with Madison is wildly intentional in that all she gives her is an idea. She was safe the entire time and in no danger at any moment. Adlakha, in her *Observer* article, describes Cassie as "more of a prankster than a vigilante," which somewhat diminishes Cassie's intentions and the psychological damage she causes, but does contextualize the trivial nature with which she views her orchestrations. An idea is what Madison had of Nina and reduced her to, which is what makes Cassie's revenge so psychologically orchestrated.

Another instance when the audience may lose audience sympathy is the plot with Dean Walker and her daughter, Amber. Like Madison, all Cassie offers is an idea. Both Madison and Dean Walker uphold their internalized misogyny and participate in victim-blaming, both in the past and present, regarding Nina's assault. They are indicative of the "personal and structural" ways women can uphold rape culture and contribute to survivor's trauma (Adlakha). It is through the gaslighting and psychological violence Cassie enacts upon these two women that the audience may lose their empathy for her. Cassie is replicating and mirroring Nina's experiences back at them, but because rape culture is so normalized, the audience may see Cassie's actions as

“too far.” When Cassie manipulates Dean Walker to think her daughter has been taken to the same room Nina was assaulted in and with men the same age as Al Monroe was, she is reflecting the experiences of Nina that were brushed off by the Dean back to her. Cassie’s plan forces the Dean to recognize the dangers of predation that were a reality for Nina and are now a hypothetical potential for her daughter, though this is an entirely false situation since Amber is safe, alone, and at a diner.

The scene with Dean Walker also highlights the role of colleges in their consistent decisions to side with the assaulter, rather than the victim. This is evident when the Dean fails to remember Nina’s full name at all, but immediately recognizes Al’s name since he, an accused predator, was invited to speak on behalf of the school as a representative of their medical program. The Dean even goes as far as to call him a “really nice guy” (44:41) knowing full well he has at least one assault allegation, again reinforcing the film’s theme of rapists and supposed “nice guys” being rewarded for their actions and failing to be held accountable. When Cassie outlines the events of Nina’s assault, the Dean follows protocol and asks if it was reported, to which Cassie states, “Yes, to you” (45:18), highlighting the trivial manner in which The Dean brushes off the serious nature of the accusation, stating they happen all the time and the college receives “one or two a week,” but rather than questioning why there is such a sheer amount of accusations, the Dean participates in upholding the systemic rape culture of the collegiate system by victim-blaming and assuming they are false accusations (45:40). The core of Fennell’s criticism towards the collegiate system is summarized by the Dean’s comment, “What would you have me do? Ruin a young man’s life every time we get an accusation like this?” (46:25). This scene acts as a direct reference to the case of Brock Turner, and how the justice system demonized Chanel Miller, the survivor, in favor of Turner, the rapist, simply based on their

genders. No one considers the ramifications for the victim, the promise her life has, or how the assault affects her, only how the accusation affects the rapist. Like Dean Walker says, the college “[has] to give him the benefit of the doubt” rather than outright believing victims because the boys accused are “innocent until proven guilty” (46:28-46:35). Yet, the victims are immediately questioned and treated as liars, embellishing their trauma. Cassie weaponizes the trauma of sexual assault against both Madison and Dean Walker. As with many assault cases, most people fail to show empathy for the victim until it is made personal to them. This is what Cassie displays to the women, that they should have shown the same care, understanding, and urgency for action towards Nina as they did in these situations.

The third recipient of Cassie’s revenge plot, specific to Al and Nina, is Jordan Green, Al’s lawyer who knowingly ran smear campaigns against rape victims and threatened them to get charges dropped, which he did to Nina as well. As with the other altercations, Cassie goes into this with the intention of exacting revenge, yet finds Green to defy her expectations and be entirely remorseful with full memory of Nina, as well as a recognition of what he has done to not only her, but many victims. He is haunted by his actions and is willing to do what he can to right his wrongs, which is why he is the only perpetrator that does not receive revenge from Cassie. He does the only thing she asks of those who she seeks revenge against, admitting his role in what happened to Nina and a sense of ownership over his actions. Cassie’s goal in her quest for revenge is never physical violence, but for those responsible to simply admit what they have done and how they contributed to the death of Nina. She does not orchestrate a situation in which anyone is in physical harm, aside from Al. They do experience emotional and psychological distress, but the end goal for her revenge is just for them to see the consequences of their actions

and admit to her what they did, to see just how systemic this problem of rape culture is and how each perpetrator failed Nina, despite whether or not they see themselves as complicit.

Ryan exemplifies the role of the “nice guy” bystander who fails to take action whatsoever to dismantle rape culture, stop Nina’s assault, or commit an assault himself, which is the only action he would actually see as egregious. Ryan is introduced as one of Cassie’s previous classmates in medical school, who knew of both her and Nina before they dropped out as a result of Nina’s assault and lack of justice from the school. At first, Cassie is not interested in a romantic attachment because she is intently seeking vengeance on behalf of Nina against the “nice guys” she encounters during her evenings of instructional revenge. Ryan eventually convinces her to give him an opportunity to explore their connection. At first, he does seem like an outlier and a subversive representation of a man when compared to all other “nice guys” of the film. Ryan and Cassie’s romantic relationship and his character cater to the female gaze by juxtaposing Ryan with his hypermasculine friends at the bachelorette party, the “known” predators. This is to prove all men benefit from misogyny and rape culture, even the “nice guys.” They are either actively working to dismantle rape culture, or they are upholding it, and Ryan as the bystander who did not rape Nina but did not take a single action to stop it, contributed to Nina’s tragic outcome. The romantic comedy interlude and corresponding montage that follows with her and Ryan is a stark contrast to the dark subject matter previously addressed in the movie. Though the highly feminized neon aesthetic remains constant, the audience cannot help but wonder if this could all be true, with 45 minutes left in the film. Unfortunately, Cassie has been instructing the audience and herself, whether consciously or not, that there are no “nice guys,” Ryan included. Despite the fantastical nature of the aesthetic of the film, the content and ending of the film are painfully realistic, including the reveal of Ryan as complicit in Nina’s

rape. This action is not only an intense betrayal to Cassie, but to the audience as well. They vicariously experience Cassie's grief and reinvigorated rage alongside her, lamenting the fact that rape culture is systemic and inescapable.

### **The Path to Self-Destruction is a Rigged Game**

Cassie has lost herself in this quest for revenge and is on a clear path to self-destruction, which is solidified once she realizes Ryan's compliant role in Nina's rape and is foreshadowed in the scene with Nina's mom, Mrs. Fisher. Mrs. Fisher outright tells Cassie (1:01:00-1:01:10) "You need to stop this. It isn't good for Nina. It isn't good for you" and that she needs to let it go. Cassie says she is "just trying to fix it," (1:01:18) but, as Mrs. Fisher states, this is a childish and naive quest for revenge. No amount of vengeance upon those who facilitated Nina's rape will bring her back. This moment reveals that there truly is not a clear path for revenge or vengeance for women within a system built to oppress them. The system of patriarchy and rape culture is inherently built for women to lose, and having to simply exist in this reality forces women to be collateral damage as a result, Cassie and Nina included. Cassie almost accepts the loss of Nina, but the rage remains, until it is revealed that Ryan was present and an active bystander during the rape. This reinvigorates and solidifies Cassie's plan to seek revenge upon Al, Nina's rapist.

The catalyst for Cassie fully giving herself to her revenge plot in defense of Nina is the moment when Madison brings forward the tape of Nina's rape. Retroactively, Madison says "I don't know how we could've watched it...and thought it was funny" (1:16:13). This statement further reinforces how ingrained rape culture is in patriarchal society, and how carelessly assault is treated. When Cassie watches the video, relives the horror Nina endured, and discovers Ryan's role in Nina's rape, she accepts her path of self-destruction for the sake of revenge against Al. The pervasive nature of rape culture is reinforced when Ryan's role in Nina's rape is revealed. In

the video of the assault, the audience can hear him saying “Don’t film me” and half-heartedly asking Al, “What are you doing?,” while laughing the entire time (1:17:52). He unquestionably knows that what is occurring is assault. Ryan knows that this video is evidence of a crime and knows it is not only immoral but illegal, which is why he asks to not be on film while failing to take any direct action to stop it. He thinks that if he is a bystander, he is not partaking in the assault and therefore cannot and should not be held accountable. When Cassie confronts Ryan with the video, he claims he does not want to watch this, to which she replies “You were happy to watch it back then” (1:20:06), condemning his role as a bystander who allowed an assault to happen. He claims he “didn’t even do anything” (1:22:10). At this moment, the audience is encouraged to feel Cassie’s rage and betrayal alongside her, as we have been betrayed by Ryan too. We are along for the journey towards revenge and self-destruction with no end in sight. Ryan’s betrayal is Cassie’s breaking point and the catalyst that sends her towards an ultimately fatal spiral to self-destruction.

The voyeuristic cathartic ending begins with Cassie’s trip to Al’s bachelor party. The audience is anticipating the physical violence they have been denied the entire film, which again forces the audience to reckon with the degree of violence they will be compliant with, and why. Scored by a haunting violin and strings cover of Britney Spears’s “Toxic,” another nod to the toxicity of rape culture and a pop culture reference to a woman depicted as hysterical by society, Cassie’s descent into fully vengeful “villain-hero-vigilante” is complete. She has been failed by the criminal justice system to bring Nina’s perpetrators to justice, so she must do it herself, clad in a rainbow wig and nurse costume to complete her disguise of sex worker, thus buying her entrance into the cave of machismo that is a bachelor party. Cassie hits her peak of weaponized femininity at the bachelor party, intentionally offering innuendos and zipping her shirt lower to

expose her cleavage. It is all a manner of manipulation in order to get Al alone so she can exact her revenge upon him. She is playing into every misogynistic idea of who the men of the bachelor party expect her to be. Even the fact that this scene takes place at a bachelor party reinforces the juxtaposition between the hypermasculine environment and Cassie's weaponized femininity. The men are feeding off of the expectations of how they should act in this context, which is the epitome of hypermasculine culture. It is the tone of the opening scene increased tenfold, with the danger maximized as well. Once Cassie gets Al alone upstairs after drugging all of the men downstairs, she handcuffs him to the bed, "for her safety" as she tells him. She states the theme of the film, that "gentlemen are sometimes the worst," alluding to her knowledge of who Al is and what he is capable of (1:27:17), thus setting the scene for her final showdown of vengeance.

### **Denial of Catharsis, For Now**

Like all of the other conquests of Cassie's revenge, she only wants one thing, for them to say what they did, to admit their role in Nina's death. The epitome of how rape culture is internalized is captured when Al says "I was affected by it too. You know it's every guy's worst nightmare getting accused like that" (1:30:57). It is every man's worst nightmare to be accused of rape, and every woman's worst nightmare to be raped and killed. The discrepancy between the two is baffling, and yet still upheld in rape culture through men like Al. As illustrated in Cassie's revenge upon Al, the survivors are forgotten, forever associated with the trauma they endured and their classification as victim, which is why Cassie chooses to cut Nina's name into Al's skin so he will bear the mark of what he has done and never forget it, thus ensuring Nina's legacy will remain. Cassie's final scene is brutal, horrific, and a direct manifestation of a woman's worst nightmare. It is easily the most violent of the film, and in a horrific subversive manner, gives the

audience the physical violence they have been expecting all along, but far different from what they were expecting. The staging of Cassie's final scene mimics a rape, though it is a murder. Al says throughout the entire scene, "Stop moving" and "You're making me do this" (1:33:58-1:36:31). The scene of Al suffocating Cassie takes place over the course of two full minutes, the actual length of time it takes a person to suffocate to unconsciousness. There is no sound other than the sounds of Cassie's struggle and Al's self-assurance that he is justified in his actions, that it is Cassie's fault, again mirroring a rape scene. This is when the film reaches its pinnacle of horror. The audience have been on a voyeuristic and vicarious journey alongside Cassie for revenge, and when she is murdered over the course of an agonizingly long two minutes, the audience is forced to feel that, too, alongside her.

The following morning, the scene between Al and his best friend Joe is identical to a scene between a rape victim and a loved one offering support. Once Joe realizes that Cassie, as the nameless sex worker, is dead, the first words he says are "Al, this is not your fault," exactly the words one would say to a rape victim, except this is clearly subverted since Al is both a rapist and a murderer (1:38:54). It is the darkest form of satire that this exchange is occurring between two men who have participated in and upheld a system that allowed them to commit such crimes as rape and murder without consequence. Joe leaps over Cassie's body to comfort Al, as her face remains obscured by a pillow for the entirety of the scene, dehumanizing her completely, symbolically illustrating what happens to rape victims in favor of the perpetrators in a system that privileges their safety and future over their victims. The final scene in which we see Cassie is when Joe and Al are burning her body. Just as they erased Nina and their actions towards her, they are doing the same to Cassie. They find themselves blameless, putting the fault entirely on the women. This is the moment when many audience members turn against the film. At this

moment, they feel they are being robbed of the catharsis of Cassie's revenge against Al. They may even feel rage towards the film, as well as a similar rage to what Cassie felt as a result of the crimes against Nina. The film acts almost as indoctrination to the audience members that allow themselves to feel the rage this ending provokes, the same call to justice that Cassie felt. Cassie is now Nina, and we, as the audience, are Cassie, full of rage and a desire for violence. It is an injustice that Cassie is murdered, and her body desecrated by these two men who have never been held accountable for anything. Though the cathartic ending is denied, for now, *Promising Young Woman* captures the rage of existence as a woman in an oppressive state and reflects it back to its audience by forcing them to experience it vicariously through the film. Regardless of one's experiences with gender-based oppression, if an audience member allows themselves to be empathetic toward Cassie's mission, the scene of her murder will garner outrage at not only the events, but what occurs after, the justification of the men, and the manner in which the justice system treats her "disappearance."

In the scene with Cassie's parents speaking to the police officers regarding her disappearance, the blame is once again placed upon the victim. As a middle-class white woman, the police do immediately investigate her disappearance, though consider that it is a matter of mental instability. Cassie is characterized as mentally unstable and hysterical, and they think she has willfully disappeared. It is depicted to be her fault from the perspective of law enforcement. This, once again, plays upon the trope of a "hysterical" woman, failing to take her desire for revenge and her rage regarding Nina's death seriously. Her actions are disregarded as those of a mad and unstable woman, as though anger and trauma invalidate her actions. Though the ending of the film is bleak, and Cassie does follow her path of revenge to self-destruction, catharsis is achieved through her final vengeful task beyond the grave. Though she did not appear to go into

the bachelor party intending to lose her life, she is an intelligent woman who knew the odds of entering a party with a large group of men and leaving unscathed were not in her favor. Her plans for revenge were always realistic, and therefore her contingency plan in the event of her disappearance proves to pay off at the close of the film.

### **Cassie's Final Act of Revenge**

The ending shows Cassie's desperation for a form of justice. She had a contingency plan because she is a small vulnerable woman going into what is essentially a frat house with many large men and known rapists, but it was not a suicide mission. She is not actually seeking "revenge" in the expected rape-revenge trope manner, filled with brutal violence and gore, but truly just an acknowledgment of the injustices enacted upon Nina, that the event happened, and for those involved to recognize their wrongdoings. After the many religious iconographic shots of Cassie as an angel of revenge, always with a circular figure behind her head like a halo, it makes sense for her final act of revenge to be scored by "Angel of the Morning" by Juice Newton. She offers Jordan Green, Al's previous lawyer, an opportunity for redemption by accompanying her in her plot from beyond the grave. He delivers her letter to the police, and thus all the crimes the men have committed are aired. This moment does illustrate not only Cassie's cunning, but also her immense privilege, knowing that her wishes will be carried out and that her disappearance would at least be moderately investigated by police. Her first scheduled message to Ryan from beyond the grave, "You didn't think this was the end, did you?" (1:46:13) appears to break the fourth wall to the audience, foreshadowing the catharsis ahead, and that her death was not in vain. As the police take Al away in handcuffs, disrupting his wedding, for Cassie's murder, it is absolutely a "Good for Her" moment, that even after death, Cassie got her revenge. It brings the bittersweet absolution that is the hallmark of a "Good for

Her” film. It offers a fantastical voyeuristic means of revenge to satiate the viewer’s rage regarding the very reality Cassie sought to condemn, that more often than not, these privileged men will not pay for their crimes. In the case of *Promising Young Woman*, the ending offers the fantasy of, what if they do?

Above all, this story is a dark satire and critique of rape culture. The ending is realistic in that women with a weapon in a room full of men, based on the history of violence against women, statistically do not survive. This is not to say it is impossible or improbable or to encourage submission to what may appear inevitable, but Fennell is rather making a more realistic choice than most horror/thriller films and particularly rape-revenge films, which is that most people do not have the capacity for physical violence and the most pervasive violence is committed by men and is often of a sexual nature. Does the ending block the catharsis for the female viewer which we are normally granted? Yes. But maybe this is an instance in which the catharsis was sacrificed and purposefully withheld for the sake of painful realism and the lesson to be taught to those who need to hear it. Cassie’s painfully realistic death is juxtaposed with the fantastical ending, in which the perpetrators are caught and arrested for their crimes, which hardly ever happens in cases of violence against women. The ending offers the pain and realism of rage from the viewer's standpoint, but also voyeuristic catharsis through the rapist finally serving justice in the end. In *Promising Young Woman*, the intentional undercutting and subversion of the female rage trope is a deeper critique of patriarchal society based on its realism. Director and writer Emerald Fennell gives the female viewers the catharsis of an arrest at the end, but also undercuts the catharsis through Cassie’s murder and unknown epilogue/possibility of a lessened sentence or “not guilty” verdict, as it is with many privileged white male offenders in the American judicial system. Cassie is attempting a systemic vengeance

against the system of rape culture, rather than a traditional individual revenge story, and she cannot win in a system built for her to lose.

### **Conclusion**

The “Good for Her” genre is not new. There have always been films with female leads that resulted in catharsis, but now the genre is being redefined within the context of horror and the sociopolitical climate of the 21st century. Female rage, however, is not a 21st century phenomenon, nor is the desire to have one’s fantasies reflected on screen. The “Good for Her” reflects upon feminine revenge and catharsis as it is rarely represented in film. It depicts an unhinged protagonist no longer inhibited by patriarchal strictures who has simply had *enough* and decides to exact revenge upon the system as a whole. With masculine quests for revenge and male villainous representation abound, this genre gives viewers a new form of representation that tromps all over the spectrum of morality. It does not represent goodness or evil, nor does it represent reality or fantasy, but an intermediary ground in which the viewers can determine for themselves whether they find it cathartic or not. Seeing female oppression and the fetishization of female trauma depicted onscreen is a prevalent part of film history, in the horror and thriller genres in particular.

However, revenge against that oppression has become increasingly relevant due to the sociopolitical culture of the 21st century. With the resurgence of conservatism and the reoccurring reinvigoration of rape culture, the “Good for Her” genre is a cultural necessity for victims of gender-based oppression at the hands of the patriarchy. It offers viewers a cathartic method of revenge through vicarious means. Stephen T. Asma, a monsterologist, offers his theory of moral imagination and the role monsters in horror films play in reaffirming or adjusting our moral compasses as viewers. He states

In a significant sense, monsters are a part of our attempt to envision the good life or at least the secure life. Our ethical convictions do not spring fully grown from our heads but must be developed in the context of real and imagined challenges. In order to discover our values, we have to face trials and tribulation, and monsters help us imaginatively rehearse. Imagining how we will face an unstoppable, powerful, and inhuman threat is an illuminating exercise in hypothetical reasoning and hypothetical feeling (3).

The “Good for Her” genre offers these “real and imagined challenges” Asma describes. These films both reaffirm the reality of rape culture and patriarchal oppression, while giving viewers the opportunity to “imaginatively rehearse” how they would handle these situations, if they have not already. The vicarious aspect of the “Good for Her” genre involves not only rehearsing how one would manage the traumatic incident that the protagonist encounters, but also imaginatively experiencing the coinciding revenge as a result of that traumatic incident. The “Good for Her” genre lets the audience experience the hypothetical scenarios of both victim and villain, slasher and Final Girl. The opportunity for hypothetical and vicarious revenge results in catharsis.

Viewers can cathartically experience revenge upon an oppressive system they would not otherwise have in a realistic and legal setting. It lets us wonder, “what if I *could* do that, would I?” As Asma states, monster stories and films, which could arguably include the “Good for Her” genre, force the viewer to establish their values and moral spectrum, to consider what degree of monstrosity and violence they are willing to contemplate and voyeuristically carry out alongside the protagonist as well as the villain. The “Good for Her” genre gives viewers the unique opportunity for both at once, to contemplate victim and villain, and to see just how far they are willing to accompany the protagonist on their journey for revenge.

The “Good for Her” genre represents the monster within all of us, and what one could do if given the opportunity to exact vengeance upon patriarchal oppression, as well as those who uphold that oppression. The importance and validity of this cathartic experience lie in the social and cultural context of these films. With misogyny rampant in our society, it is no wonder the genre has become as prevalent in public discourse and media as it has. It serves as a necessary outlet for rage in the face of oppression, as well as a hopeful symbol of more comprehensive female representation in film as complex and flawed individuals coping with misogyny. By examining the “Good for Her” genre of thriller and horror films, the prevalence of the commodification of female trauma in media, rape culture, as well as the stifling of female rage, becomes more apparent. We can only hope that a continued voyeuristic representation of vengeance against patriarchal oppression spurs discourse on how society can best combat this oppression in reality and render the traumatic events of the “Good for Her” genre to be entirely fantasy, rather than indicative of harsh reality.

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