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The Rape-Revenge Film Lives On: *Promising Young Woman*

By Michele Meek¹

Film Information:

Promising Young Woman

Director: Emerald Fennell

Year: 2020

Length: 113 minutes

Genre: Drama

Abstract

Written and directed by Emerald Fennell, the film *Promising Young Woman* shows how an egregious assault is not so dissimilar from the ubiquitous less explicit assaults comprising what we often label “seduction.”

Keywords: Rape revenge, Sexual assault, Women filmmakers

“Revenge writing is a female genre,” says Frances Wilson. And when it comes to sexual assault, women have plenty to feel vengeful about. One in six women experiences rape or attempted rape in their lives, according to the Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (RAINN), and over 75 percent of sexual assaults are never reported, due to factors like feared retaliation and the futility of reporting (“Victims of Sexual Violence”). Out of 1,000 perpetrators, 995 walk free (“The Criminal Justice System”).

It’s no wonder that the rape-revenge genre that emerged full force in the 1970s with films like *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) is alive and well half a century later. Where there is little justice in reality, there can at least be retribution in our fantasies.

The sexual assault that propels the plot of *Promising Young Woman* is unambiguously wrong—medical student Nina Fisher is raped repeatedly by classmate Al Monroe to a cheering group of male colleagues as one of them records the experience to share for laughs later.

Despite such a clear-cut assault, justice eludes Nina. As we discover later in the film, Nina is not believed by the female dean who reviews and dismisses the case. As she puts it, such “he said-she said” situations happen all the time. And after being bullied and threatened by Al’s lawyer, Nina drops the legal case. Thus, both the university and the law work against her as a survivor. And if what Oscar Wilde once said is true, “Living well is the best revenge,” Nina also is unable to do that. The trauma leads her to drop out of medical school, and she eventually dies of suicide.

But the brilliance of *Promising Young Woman* is that while this clear-cut rape case underpins the plot, the film demonstrates how such an egregious assault is not so dissimilar from the ubiquitous less explicit assaults comprising what we often label seduction.

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Years after Nina's death, her best friend Cassie (played by Carey Mulligan), who also dropped out of medical school, has become addicted to her own form of vigilantism. Every week, she goes to a bar pretending to be falling down drunk and reels in an opportunistic man who takes her home where he attempts to get her to drink more or get high and then reassures her ("you're safe here" or "we're having fun here, aren't we?") while moving in for a sexual assault on the clearly unwilling Cassie. Her tactics, initially, employ no violence. In one encounter, she slurs, "What are you doing?" repeatedly as the guy takes off her underwear and runs his hand up her thighs until she sits up abruptly, looks him directly in the eyes and asks completely lucidly, "I said, 'What are you doing?'"

The men who take Cassie home believe they are "nice guys"—and we too can be fooled. In the opening scene, Jerry dismisses his male colleagues' offensive remarks about women, and when the others make fun of Cassie ("that is asking for it"), he instead goes to check on her. He seems earnest when he offers to get her home, so it is even more disturbing when we realize that for Jerry too, no means yes, and blatant intoxication does not invalidate consent.

Filmmaker Emerald Fennell plays on the audience's desire for a romantic plot with the character of Ryan (Bo Burnham), a former classmate at medical school. Ryan says and does many of the right things; for example, when Cassie says she wants to take it slow, Ryan responds, "I can take it slow. I can barely move." Yet Fennell offers us a few clues early on that Ryan plays by similar seduction rules. When Cassie gives him a fake number the first time they meet, he returns to the coffee shop where she works to convince her to go out with him, joking that they can have a "safe word," so she can leave lunch anytime. On their first date, as the pair are walking together, they suddenly appear in front of Ryan's apartment, exposing a clear setup on his part. Cassie opts to go home, and Ryan apologizes—seemingly sincerely.

For a moment, we think, maybe seduction is just too hard—maybe even earnest men don't know where exactly to draw the line. As Cassie begins to fall for Ryan, so do we as an audience. We start thinking perhaps she can leave behind her grief and vengeance and opt for a "normal" life with this quirky chap. And therein lies the bait and switch of *Promising Young Woman*; we too are seduced by the possibilities of the romantic plot, knowing full well that in the world of this film it's an impossible wish.

Many of the criticisms of *Promising Young Woman* take aim at how the film fails to provide a vision of female empowerment. Nina remains voiceless (does she even want this revenge enacted on her behalf?), and Cassie cannot both enact justice and live to witness it. But I would argue that the hopelessness of the ending is exactly the point. Spike Lee has been asked in Q&As how to "solve racism" to which he responds, "Man, I don't know, but I'm glad that the film got you to ask that" (Fagerholm).

Promising Young Woman does not solve sexual assault. The film does not try to be realistic. Of course not all men are actually predators. *Promising Young Woman* is an allegory that reflects back to us a deeply disturbing culture that talks up female empowerment while complicit men—and women—exploit, demean, and silence women. *Promising Young Woman* might be criticized for offering up a hopeless view of heterosexuality amidst rape culture, but what it gets right is that when you or someone you love has been assaulted, it often seems that there is no ready support system and no way out.

Thirty years ago, *Thelma and Louise* presented a similarly bleak vision of women after sexual assault. As much as we want to see the two women having eluded the law and sunning themselves on a Mexican beach at the film's conclusion, such an ending would have undermined the entire point of the film. As Sarah Projanksy argues in her book *Watching Rape*, "Thelma and

Louise's climactic flight into/over the Grand Canyon is both utopic, because it evokes women's freedom and pleasure, and dystopic, because it suggests that the assaultive male-dominated social order is so powerful the only way to escape it is to die."

Promising Young Woman presents a similar mixed vision—Al murders Cassie in a brutally long scene of suffocation. But the reckoning comes anyway: after a series of scheduled post-mortem texts, the police swoop in during Al's wedding ceremony. In other words, justice can and will come to bad actors. Eventually they too might have a "psychotic episode" also known as an epiphany that leads them to face their own horrible actions and become haunted by them. And those that don't also can be exposed and punished with the loss of their spouses, jobs, and more.

What is most unique about *Promising Young Woman* is that Cassie's vengeance takes the form of a wake-up call. Whereas most rape-revenge movies offer death, torture, and castration as suitable punishment, Cassie wants empathy. When Cassie turns the tables on the aforementioned dean, convincing her that her daughter is currently with a bunch of guys and some vodka in the room where Nina was raped, the dean finally realizes, "You're right" to which Cassie responds, "I guess you just had to think about it in the right way."

That's all she wants, after all.

Acknowledgement

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