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MaRey Sue: Perpetuating Mary Sue Stereotype in the Star Wars Trilogy

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MAREY SUE: PERPETUATING THE MARY SUE STEREOTYPE IN THE *STAR*

WARS TRILOGY

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ABSTRACT

MaRey Sue: Perpetuating Mary Sue in the *Star Wars* Trilogy

by

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My Plan B thesis addresses the gendered portrayal of the female character Rey in the

most recent three *Star Wars* films released between 2015 and 2019. The latest trilogy is

comprised of *The Force Awakens, The Last Jedi,* and *The Rise of Skywalker*. These films

present the character Rey, who brings many firsts to the series. She is the first woman to

be the central character in a *Star Wars* trilogy, she is the first woman to use the Force,

and she is also the first woman to wield a lightsaber. Despite her firsts, Rey still draws

criticism for her gendered portrayal. Fans and critics have called Rey a "Mary Sue"

character in the first two films. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* a Mary Sue

is "a type of idealized female character, typically a young woman, unrealistically lacking

in flaws or weaknesses." My argument builds on this recent criticism of Rey as a "Mary

Sue" character and challenges it by exploring *The Rise of Skywalker,* which was released

in 2019 after scholars' criticism appeared. *Rise* took two approaches with creating

conflict in Rey in response to criticism from scholars and fans alike. The first approach is

that Rey becomes the Angry Woman, whose rage must be contained in order for her arc

to be considered complete. The second approach is in the Ultimate Evil Mary Sue.

Because the *Star Wars* fans haven't seen this transition from Mary Sue to Angry Woman,

is Rey still ultimately a Mary Sue throughout *Rise?* The answer is that she is at once

Mary Sue and Angry Woman. As another form of scholarly critique, it is discussed what

Star Wars fans are saying on various social media sites. Fans echo what the scholars are

saying, but are also challenging Rey's status at a Mary Sue. Rey can be used in later *Star*

Wars materials as a stepping stone for even more well-rounded female characters in the

franchise's future.

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Samantha Wiser

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INTRODUCTION

Between 1977 and 2005, Lucasfilms Ltd released the *Star Wars* saga, a six part movie

series that changed the face of science fiction and popular culture forever. The latest *Star*

Wars movies took the world back to a galaxy far, far away with the release of three new

films: *The Force Awakens* (2015), *The Last Jedi* (2017), and *The Rise of Skywalker*

(2019). These films present the powerful female character Rey, who brings many firsts to

the series. She is the first woman to be the central character in a *Star Wars* movie trilogy,

she is the first woman to use the Force, and she is also the first woman to wield a

lightsaber. Thus she steps away solidly from the traditional feminine roles previously

defined by Leia and Padmé of the other *Star Wars* films. Rey is almost always in the

spotlight in the new trilogy and was featured on the first poster of *The Rise of Skywalker.*

She breaks the passive female stereotype in other respects, with her modest, simple garb

that is practical for her many action scenes as she rescues both herself and her

companions on numerous occasions.

Despite her many firsts, Rey has come under fire from scholars who deem her a

"Mary Sue" in their essays and books. My argument builds on this recent criticism of Rey

as a "Mary Sue" character and expands it by exploring the final film, *The Rise of*

Skywalker, which was released in 2019 after scholars' criticism appeared. It is evident

that *Rise* tries to adapt a new gender role for Rey, no doubt in response to criticism of

both audiences and scholars alike of Rey's portrayal. *Rise* took two approaches with

creating conflict in Rey. The first approach is that in creating a new emotional arc for

Rey, the film instead falls into another stereotype: that of the Angry Woman, whose rage

must be contained in order for her arc to be considered complete. Rey is unable to escape

her role of being a Mary Sue in *Rise*, something that *Star Wars* fans have noticed. Fans

are too hung up on Rey as Mary Sue to recognize her progression into the Angry Woman

role. Because the *Star Wars* fans haven't seen this transition from Mary Sue to Angry

Woman, is Rey still ultimately a Mary Sue throughout *Rise?* She is at once Mary Sue and

Angry Woman. This leads to the second approach *Rise* takes into creating conflict in

Rey: the Evil Mary Sue character, seen in Dark Side Rey. The film, much like the fans,

also realizes that Rey is still a Mary Sue at her core and expands on it with the creation of

an Evil Mary Sue to challenge Rey. This Evil Mary Sue is the counterpart to Angry

Woman Rey while also being even more perfect than Mary Sue Rey.

  The popularity of the *Star Wars* series is not to be ignored. The use of social

media has given fans the opportunity to voice their frustrations or praises on a scale

unlike anything that has come before. This is empowering for the fans, allowing them to

voice their concerns that were previously unnoticed by film makers. In the case of *Star

Wars,* fan comments on social media have gone so far as to change how certain

characters are portrayed. Scholars who have commented on Rey as a Mary Sue are not so

much forging new critical ground as they are emphasizing and reflecting what the fans

are already saying. In this way, fans are functioning as film and literary critiques and

their comments are worthy of study. Therefore, as there is a scholarly gap right now in

commentary on the final film, we can turn to fans' commentary to see what they are and

are not noticing. Many fans frequently mention that Rey is a Mary Sue character, some

with seriousness and others with over-the-top sarcasm to voice their displeasure with

Rey. Other fans disagree and push back against these accusations, pointing out that many male characters are also Mary Sue stereotypes. These discussions on Rey's character reveal the fans' sophistication and analysis of Rey—the fans are careful in what they write and how they back up their reasonings.

PART ONE: REY SUE OR MARY SUE

Fans and critics alike have called Rey a "Mary Sue" character in the first two

films. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a Mary Sue is "a type of idealized

female character, typically a young woman, unrealistically lacking in flaws or

weaknesses." The term first appeared in 1973 issue of *Menagerie,* a *Star Trek* fan-based

magazine, and was written by Paula Smith, the magazine's editor. Called "A Trekkie's

Tale," the fanfiction was a satirical piece that revolved around the character Mary Sue. In

an interview, Paula Smith says that she and fellow editor Sharon Ferraro "began doing

LoCs—letters of comment—and reviews of zines in other zines. Anyway, because this

was still the early 1970s, there were still a ton of these stories coming out. So, when we

wanted a shorthand to refer to them, Sharon and I began to call them "Lieutenant Mary

Sue" stories" ("Conversation with Paula Smith"). The term Mary Sue continued to appear

over the next 40 years. The term has now become so familiar that with a Google search

of "Mary Sue," it produces the second option that appears: "Who is a Mary Sue in Star

Wars?" followed by "Who is a Mary Sue in Harry Potter?"[i]

Critics argue that Rey is a "Mary Sue" in the first two films. Valerie Estelle

Frankel writes that a Mary Sue in a character who "is basically perfect" (177). Frankel is

the author of *Star Wars Meets the Eras of Feminism,* and continues with her analysis of

Rey: "The problem is how perfect she is at everything: scavenging, rappelling and

climbing, shooting, flying, operating and repairing ancient ships" (177). This perfection

makes Rey unrelatable to audiences, who typically connect with characters that achieve

growth through challenges and struggles. In trying to create a strong female character, the

films actually create a character that is unbelievable due to her wide range of talents and her effortless mastery of new skills. Much of the criticism about Rey in the latest scholarship was written during and after the release of *The Force Awakens* (2015) and *The Last Jedi* (2017), well before *The Rise of Skywalker* (2019) was even given a teaser trailer. Frankel writes that in the first two films of the trilogy, Rey "needn't deal with consequence or failure, as she never makes a bad decision and never has serious negative repercussions for her decisions" (177-78). Other scholars also emphasize the "Mary Sue" aspects of Rey without using the term "Mary Sue." For example, Jeffery A. Brown's article "#wheresRey: feminism, protest, and merchandising sexism in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*" explores Rey's character strengths, pointing out her perfection. In addition to being "an exceptional pilot, mechanic, strategist, and incredibly strong with the mystical Force, Rey also rescues herself after she has been taken captive by the villain Kylo Ren (Adam Driver) and in the film's finale she bests Ren in a light sabre duel" (340). While Brown does emphasize Rey's agency and active role, he also exposes Rey as being too perfect.

In my own observation of the first two films, I notice many moments of Rey being too perfect. In *The Force Awakens* (2015), Rey's piloting skills of the *Millennium Falcon* allows her to lead her new friends to safety. After Kylo defeats Finn, a trained Stormtrooper, Rey calls the lightsaber to her and defeats Kylo in Finn's place. In *The Last Jedi* (2017), there are several low points for many characters. Supreme Leader Snoke harshly scolds both General Hux and Kylo Ren for their failures. Finn and Poe, a skilled pilot—and later Rose, a mechanic—end up on a mission of disaster that puts their

Resistance allies in grave danger. While the beginning of Rey's journey begins with the shocking scene of Luke Skywalker carelessly tossing away his lightsaber and refusing to train her, Rey overcomes that by training herself. Her telekinetic connection with Kylo Ren, apprentice to Snoke, goes mostly unpunished. When Luke discovers their connection and attempts to disrupt it, Rey turns on him and even goes so far as to turn his own saber against him in her anger. There is no repercussion for her actions. She surrenders herself to the First Order, confronts Snoke, joins forces with Kylo Ren in a spectacular duel against Snoke's Praetorian Guard, and leaves the ship mostly unscathed. While the Resistance is running on fuel reserves and is eventually cornered on the planet Crait in the Outer Rim, Rey swoops in at the last moment to help them sneak away with the help of her newer Force abilities. Many of Rey's small failures are through no fault of her own and have little impact on her allies, unlike Finn's disastrous mission, which was completely brought on by his own actions that almost wiped out the entire Resistance.

Rey's status of being the perfect Mary Sue is the prominent focus of social media. Users have been and continue to be quite vocal about their discontent in the direction that *Star Wars* has taken, and many have strong opinions about Rey's character. To narrow the massive scope of information and opinions, I have limited my study to a single thread on the website Reddit and the Facebook comments on the official Facebook *Star Wars* page. It is necessary that I limit my scope to a few threads because there are thousands, if not tens of thousands, of comments in hundreds of threads. In the span of these two platforms, I have also taken the comments I have found and limited them to three separate categories: the comments mentioning Rey as a Mary Sue, the comments pushing

back specifically against the complaints, and comments praising Rey. I have chosen these

two sites, Reddit and Facebook, for several reasons. Facebook is one of the more popular

sites, allowing an ease of users to read and respond to comments and plenty of source

material that is easy to access. Facebook also has a convenient search bar, allowing users

to easily look up old posts based on date or topic. However, Facebook is regularly

censored, by both administrators and users. While Reddit lacks the massive amounts of

comments that can flood a Facebook post, the website has not been subjected to

censorship on more controversial topics. This makes Reddit a valuable social media

source, as it has not been censored like Facebook has.

Similar to what the critics and scholars are saying, fans also use the term Mary

Sue to describe Rey in the first two films. They are noticing what the critics notice and

even more so, using Mary Sue as criticism of the character. In fact, it could be suggested

that the critics are borrowing from fans' comments and that these fans are also serving as

film and literary critics. Most of their comments stem from frustration about how the first

two films of the trilogy (2015 and 2017) made Rey too perfect in everything that she

does. A Twitter post, for example, by screenwriter Max Landis on December 18, 2015

reads, "they finally did it they made a fan fic movie with a Mary Sue as the main

character" and includes a picture of Rey. This is the earliest reference I have found that

calls Rey a "Mary Sue" on a fan site, and it appeared only one day after the film was

released.[ii] Not long after, Reddit user Every_Geth writes, "Jedi or no, she's stupidly good

at everything she attempts, to the point where she doesn't come across as human... she's

still an unrelatable Mary Sue." Another Reddit user, with the username

user_for_14_minutes, blames the producer of the film for Rey's perfection: "This reeks of Kathleen Kennedy's doing. I'm convinced she's the one who pressured this whole Mary Sue nonsense." A deleted user writes that Rey is "a textbook Mary Sue…because she's immediately good at literally everything." These comments stem from users' frustrations about Rey either acquiring new skills too quickly or being too perfect in how she handles the events of the first two films.

PART TWO: ANGREY SUE VS. EVIL REY SUE

The filmmakers were clearly aware of the rumblings of social media unrest after the release of *The Last Jedi,* transforming Rey's character arc and changing her from Mary Sue to Angry Woman. The character Rose Tico is a primary example of the influence social media has on a film. While her story and character arc in *The Last Jedi* use a considerable amount of the film's run time, many fans feel that Rose is a needless addition to the story and that Rose is merely a distraction to the more interesting parts of the movie. After the many criticisms of Rose's character arc—with fans so angry and hateful that Kelly Marie Tran who played Rose deleted her Instagram account (Faierman)—her role is dramatically and pointedly reduced in *Rise.* Rose swiftly declines to join Rey and Finn on their mission in the beginning of the film, and only shows up for a few moments in the film's climax, where she is urged by other characters to leave them behind. Fans hated Rose and the *Star Wars* franchise responded by drastically reducing her character's screen time and narrative.

Of course, scripts are shaped by a number of people besides fans—directors, screenwriters, producers, etc. *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi* had two different directors, with Rian Johnson directing the latter, and J. J. Abrams' directing the former and returning later to direct *Rise of Skywalker.* These differences in directors' styles alone are enough to shift the course of the plot of a trilogy. Although they are becoming more influential and vocal thanks to social media, fans are by no means the sole influencer of what occurs in the plot of a film.

The question is, how did the *Star Wars* franchise respond to the Mary Sue character? The general grumblings online were in agreement that Rey is too perfect. I believe the *Star Wars* franchise tries to produce more of a story arc that involved conflict, dirt, and struggle in *Rise of Skywalker*. In this film, Rey journeys through emotion—in this case, anger—as a path to self-discovery, which is quite typical of films centering on female leads. Sarah Montgomery discusses how women are portrayed in films and their differences from male-leading films. Her article, "Women's Women's Films" argues that women-centered films focus on identity and self-discovery, while male-centered films focus on stopping a villain and completing a mission. This is true of Rey, as her journey throughout her trilogy is not about saving her friends or even stopping the evil Palpatine, but to discover who she is and her place in the galaxy. After Rey has discovered who her family is, her journey later shifts into her learning to control her anger in *Rise of Skywalker*. Although this article was written in the 1980's, the ninth *Star Wars* film hasn't progressed past the first. Rey is still tied into a stereotypical role of a woman who is focusing on her own identity and self-discovery.

But even in her journey as Angry Woman, Rey still holds powerful notes of Mary Sue in *Rise* that are difficult to ignore. This idea of the Angry Woman has been discussed in recent scholarship, but under a more intersectional portrayal—the trope of the Angry Black Woman. For example, in the article "Aggressive Encounters & White Fragility: Deconstructing the Trope of the Angry Black Woman," Trina Jones and Kimberly Jade Norwood explore how in recent television Black women "who [push] back against [their] marginalization" (2044) are forced to conform to the stereotype of the "'Angry Black

Woman.' Loud. Erratic. Uncontrollable. Full of attitude" (2044). In television, this woman is depicted as "out of control, disagreeable, overly aggressive, physically threatening, loud (even when she speaks softly), and to be feared. She will not stay in her 'place'" (2049). While Rey demonstrates many characteristics in common with the Angry Black Woman trope, her whiteness prevents her from embodying that position for long stretches of time. Whereas if a Black woman had been cast in Rey's role might be forced to remain angry, loud, and aggressive, because Rey is white, she is expected to retreat from her anger. Still, her expressions of anger and rage are more dominate in *Rise of Skywalker* than in the previous two films to the point where the final battle depends on Rey keeping her anger under control. While Rey is allowed to inhabit Angry Woman in several scenes, none of these moments of anger have serious or permanent consequences. She is allowed to be angry, but never too angry. Fans, however, responded to Rey once again and claim she is still a Mary Sue character. Because the *Star Wars* fans haven't seen this transition from Mary Sue to Angry Woman, is Rey still ultimately a Mary Sue throughout *Rise?* She is at once Mary Sue and Angry Woman. She is AngRey Sue— Mary Sue meeting Angry Woman.

It is important to note that in the *Star Wars* universe, the emotion of anger is much talked about. Learning to avoid anger is a premise to many of the lead character's arcs in *Star Wars.* Temptation to give in to anger is required part of the path of the Jedi leads in the previous six *Star Wars* films. Controlling anger is critical. Those on the Light Side control their anger. Those on the Dark Side give into their anger. Luke Skywalker had key moments where he was angry, but he overcame and rose above his anger. His

father, Anakin Skywalker, did not overcome his anger, which transformed him into the fearsome Darth Vader, one of the most iconic villains in film history. The journey of a Jedi demands confrontation of anger and either triumph or fail. Rey is no different than the other leads of the previous *Star Wars* trilogies in that she must face, overcome, and control her angry emotions if she wishes to remain on the Light Side.

There are several key scenes in *Rise* where Rey is more of an Angry Woman than Mary Sue. However, in these scenes, she is still unable to shake off the echoes of a Mary Sue. Rey is first Angry Woman and then she is Mary Sue, thus my term of AngRey Sue. The first in her opening scene of *Rise.* The second is where Rey unleashes Force lightning. The third is the appearance of Dark Side Rey, the Ultimate Evil Mary Sue, inside the ruins of the Second Death Star.

Rey's opening scene in *Rise* is full of failures, something a true Mary Sue rarely experiences. Her meditation in an effort to communicate with the Jedi of the past are unsuccessful. She moves onto the training course, where her encounter with the training droid furthers her anger. The droid swerves around her, dodging Rey's lightsaber strikes while hitting her with its laser beams. Her frustration and anger builds with each failed swing of her weapon. She throws her lightsaber at it like a boomerang, and while it slices through many trees, it does not hit the droid. She calls a sturdy tree branch to her hands with the Force and slams the branch into the droid, destroying it. She hears a few sad beeping noises, but they are coming from BB-8, her droid companion throughout *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi.* In her anger to get at the training droid, Rey's lightsaber sliced through several trees and one of these trees fell on top of BB-8, trapping

him. However, Rey's moment as Angry Woman is undercut by a Mary Sue event: BB-8 is not seriously injured, even after having a large tree fall on top of him.

Rey using Force lightning is another critical scene of AngRey Sue in action, being both Angry Woman and Mary Sue. Chewbacca the Wookie is captured by the First Order and taken away on a ship. Rey channels the Force to stop the ship from leaving, her face twisting at the effort. Kylo Ren, who then comes onto the scene, also channels the Force to pull the ship toward him instead. The ship is caught in a Force tug-of-war. Rey's fury builds and finally erupts, with blue Force lightning arching from her fingertips, which blows up the ship that Chewbacca is trapped on. *Star Wars* canon strictly reserves Force lightning for Dark Side Force users, who use their anger and hatred to channel the Force. Rey as Angry Woman has caused another casualty—Chewbacca. Mary Sue, however, dampens the impact of Angry Woman—the beloved Wookie is later revealed to be on another ship entirely and is safe from harm at Rey's hand.

During the film, Rey has a brief encounter with a more evil version of herself. Dark Side Rey is a Rey who has mastered her rage, a version of Rey who is the ultimate Mary Sue. She is Evil Rey Sue, giving the audience a glimpse of what would happen to Rey if she fell to the Dark Side. At the beginning of *Rise,* Rey has a vision of her standing on the throne of the Sith with Kylo Ren, and in this vision, a glimpse of Dark Side Rey is seen. It is safe to assume that this Dark Side Rey or Evil Rey Sue is the Rey who stands with Kylo Ren, having surrendered to the Dark Side.

There are four ways that Dark Side Rey is Evil Rey Sue: her physical appearance, the nature of her dialogue, her weapon, and her time spent in the film. With the *Oxford*

English Dictionary definition of a Mary Sue as, "a type of idealized female character, typically a young woman, unrealistically lacking in flaws or weaknesses," this Dark Side Rey is the ultimate embodiment of it as an Evil Rey Sue. She has even more perfection than Rey does.

The first way Evil Rey Sue is a Mary Sue is that her physical appearance boasts of her perfection. She is able to have a flashy new outfit that does not get in the way of her fighting. She is also able to duel AngRey Sue—who is sweaty and grunts with effort with each swing of her saber—without getting winded or tired. Evil Rey Sue is in a clean, black hooded cloak, similar to what Palpatine is seen wearing in pervious *Star Wars* titles. Rey sports her white, form-fitting outfit that has dirt on it. Evil Rey Sue's face is smooth and flawless by heavy make up, in sharp contrast to Rey's sweaty, dirty features. Evil Rey Sue's new outfit, despite it being the opposite of Rey's, does not get in the way of her movements.

The second way Evil Rey Sue is the Ultimate Mary Sue is the terseness of her dialogue. While Evil Rey Sue has only one line, she glosses over AngRey Sue's fears and dismisses them. AngRey Sue wrestles with the frightening details that the family she spent three movies searching for is none other than the evil Emperor Palpatine. AngRey Sue is understandably afraid of sharing a link with man responsible for nearly every single antagonistic event in *Star Wars.* "Don't be afraid of who you are," coos Dark Side Rey with a small shake of her head and slight smile. This is an echo of General Leia's words to Rey earlier in the film, but it has a different meaning. Leia's words were meant to remind Rey of her faith in herself. Evil Rey Sue, however, is reminding Rey of her

shared connection with the evil Emperor Palpatine and to not be afraid of that connection. Part of Evil Rey Sue's perfection is also linked to what she does not say—she does not waste time verbally gloating about her superior power. Silence is her weapon here. She is the quiet, good-looking woman, something valued by the patriarchy. Evil Rey Sue is mostly a silent woman, meant to be seen and not heard.

The third way Evil Rey Sue is the Ultimate Mary Sue is in her weapon. Evil Rey Sue's weapon is a lightsaber, a saber long established in *Star Wars* as a perfect weapon, capable of dispatching enemies, slicing through solid obstacles, and even deflecting laser blasts. Evil Rey Sue takes this perfect weapon's blade and unnecessarily doubles it. Her lightsaber has not one blade but two, a marriage of Rey's quarterstaff from *The Force Awakens* and a lightsaber, with the two blades able to fold on each other like a switchblade. The color is red, a common lightsaber color of Dark Side Force users. Evil Rey Sue wields this double-bladed lightsaber in her duel with Rey, using the hinge action of her lightsaber to trap and ensnare Rey's blue saber in between her two red blades, rendering Rey unable to use her weapon. No other weapon in the *Star Wars* movies has so thoroughly countered a lightsaber before. Evil Rey Sue turns to slowly look at Rey, knowing that she has the Angry Woman trapped, and hisses. This startles Rey enough that she stumbles backwards and falls to the ground, deactivating her saber. Evil Rey Sue vanquishes the Angry Woman, forcing Rey to return to her role as a Mary Sue. Rey never gets a rematch with Dark Side Rey.

Lastly, as Mary Sue's are considered perfect characters, this Evil Rey Sue is punctual and effective at defeating Rey. She does not waste valuable screen time—she is

only in the film for 24 seconds. Unlike many grandiose *Star Wars* villains, Evil Rey Sue

lacks triumphant speeches boasting of her own strength, snide remarks to her helpless

opponent, or evil cackling at her assured victory. Such actions are how many villains are

defeated—Supreme Leader Snoke in *The Last Jedi* is killed in the middle of a boastful

speech—as they give an opponent time to strike, and as a perfect character, Evil Rey Sue

does not allow her opponent any time to take advantage of such actions. Evil Rey Sue

does not need unnecessary actions to do her job, nor does she allow herself to stoop to

such means, as they do not help her finish her task. She swoops in, wearing her dark

cloak and wielding a flashy lightsaber, soundly defeats Rey, and leaves just as quickly as

she came.

With the defeat of Angry Woman at the hands of Evil Rey Sue, Rey finishes the

rest of the film as a Mary Sue. This shedding of the Angry Woman stereotype is

important when examining Rey's grand confrontation with Emperor Palpatine. Emperor

Palpatine tempts Rey into returning to her status as AngRey Sue, trying to lure her back

to her state of anger. Rey has much to be angry about—she is the granddaughter of the

evil Emperor, and he arranged the execution of her parents, leading to her abandonment

on the desert planet Jakku. It would only be natural for her to want revenge against the

man who threw her life into turmoil. Palpatine begins by addressing her as "Empress

Palpatine," a title that suggests that she is his equal. This feels almost too ideal, too

perfect: the main antagonist of six *Star Wars* films is welcoming her with open arms with

his first words to Rey: "Long have I waited for my grandchild to come home." Palpatine

continues, his words slow and careful as he reveals what he truly desires: "Your

hatred…your anger… You want to kill me? That is what I want. Kill me, and my spirit will pass into you. As all the Sith live in me. You will be Empress. We will be one." He tempts her into returning to the Angry Woman, to strike him down in anger, and to turn her from a scavenger nobody into an empress. His line of "We will be one" implies that Palpatine will still have his own consciousness once his spirit has passed into her. He will shed his frail body and take control of her younger body to extend his own life. "All you want is for me to hate but I won't. Not even you," Rey says. She stands strong and refuses to give in to her anger or return to AngRey Sue.

A perfect character such as a Mary Sue does not need to rely on her friends to help her fight her battles and defeat her enemies. Rey finally hears the voices from the past Jedi, a task she failed to do in the beginning of the film, and they encourage her to fight back against Palpatine. Rey sheds her Mary Sue status in this fight. She is not alone in her battle against the evil Emperor—she has the voices of the past Jedi and their encouragement at her side. Using the lightsabers of both Luke Skywalker and General Leia, Rey deflects Palpatine's Force lightning back onto him. The effort is the last of her strength and while she has defeated Palpatine and saved the galaxy, it ends her life as Rey Palpatine. She has lost her role as Angry Woman and as Mary Sue.

Rey, however, does not get a fairytale, perfect Mary Sue ending where she exits the film with a newly redeemed Ben Solo and they fly off into the sunset on an X-Wing to begin a new life together. Instead, a weakened Ben Solo limps to her aid, where he transfers his life force to Rey to resurrect her. They share a kiss. Ben sacrifices his own life to save hers, his body becoming one with the Force. Rey flies away from the

Emperor's throne room in her fighter jet, covered in sweat, dirt, and blood. She is reborn as Rey Skywalker, free to start a new life without being constrained by either Angry Woman or Mary Sue.

Rise ends with Rey being neither Mary Sue nor Angry Woman, despite her spending a lot of the film doing both. This ending of Rey being a new character with a new journey can give her growth for a television spin-off series later on. Perhaps as the years pass, the fans' intense dislike for Rey will settle and attitudes will change. Nostalgia could set in and what was once criticism could soften to an understanding. Already, Rey is ahead of other female characters in *Star Wars* in regards to her development. She has broken some ground and pushed boundaries beyond what other female characters have done. Future *Star Wars* projects could learn from the criticism that Rey currently faces and apply this criticism to the characters in the newer *Star Wars* ideas. Rey could be used as a stepping stone to further advance a fully-developed female character in *Star Wars.*

After *Rise* (2019) was released, the official *Star Wars* Facebook page remained (and still remains) quite active, and Rey continues to be a topic of conversation. While *Star Wars* has moved on from *Rise* and is more focused on their new television show, *The Mandalorian* (released in November 2019), fans still frequently harp on what they perceived as shortcomings of Rey's character. However, during the months that I have been writing this thesis (January-March 2021), Facebook page managers and Facebook itself has censored negative points of view. As I acquired a collection of screenshots of these Facebook comments, I have discovered that several of these comments have since

been deleted when I tried to return to them for more details for citation. Some of these now-deleted comments are used in this thesis. Many of the previous negative comments that initially flooded the *Star Wars* Facebook page, especially those that negatively speak about *Rise* after its release, have been removed from the comments. The website Reddit has experienced no such cleansing, allowing users to be more open with their strong negative feelings.

While my own examination of *Rise* found Rey shifting from Mary Sue into Angry Woman, fans disagree. Multiple comments on the official *Star Wars* page since the release of *Rise* in December 2019 demonstrates that fans have not recognized the shift from Mary Sue to Angry Woman. A majority of the negative comments focus on Rey as a Mary Sue. Some fans praise her as a strong character or as a good female role model, but there was no acknowledgement to Rey's path as an Angry Woman. Even now, posts on *Star Wars* in general hold a few angry comments from fans on Rey's character as a Mary Sue.

At the time of writing this thesis, it is still too early for many scholarly articles examining *Rise* to be published. However, while several articles have focused on Rey, they do not comment if she is a Mary Sue character or not. The 2020 article "Girls Being Rey: Ethical Cultural Consumption, Families and Popular Feminism" is a study analyzing young girls and their families. In this article, Rey is seen as a role model for young girls to mimic in their roleplaying. The girls were interviewed and asked about how they feel when they are pretending to be Rey. Most responded with positive, empowering comments. While the 2019 article "En/gendering Trouble with J. J. Abrams's Rey in the

Force Awakens: Re-subjecting the Subject to a Performative Subjectivity" discusses

Rey's character, it does not address her status as a Mary Sue. Rather, the article describes

her as being gender neutral and lacking in stereotypical feminine characteristics. *Star*

Wars fans and their access to social media, however, give users an immediate platform to

voice their opinions. And they have not been shy at all in their displeasure. Whereas

many fans continue to argue that Rey is a Mary Sue, others praise her as a strong

character, and still others push back against the Mary Sue narrative. What I notice in my

study of the fans' comments is that they generally can be categorized by three different

opinions about the film and how the fans voiced their concern. Something is happening in

their comments, showing that they have developed and evolved in their criticism since

the release of *Rise.*

The first way is to voice their frustrations and criticism: these fans still see Rey as

Mary Sue in an overwhelming way. This is either because Rey is still trapped into the

role of Mary Sue or Rey's character as Mary Sue in the previous films has influenced the

fans' viewing of *Rise,* leaving the fans unable to let go of Mary Sue. Fans recognize Rey

as Mary Sue, they seem to strongly dislike it, and they poke fun at it. As Facebook user

Edwin Lindley writes, "the ultimate Mary Sue of the galaxy, Rey," suggesting that Rey is

not just a Mary Sue, but an "ultimate" example of the stereotype. Another user, Jimmy

Fontana, comments that "She is a Sue Mary with no problems." Fontana suggests that

Rey has nothing to struggle against and "no problems" to face. Joe Nathan writes that

there is "Nothing to be afraid of when you're a Mary Sue." Nathan is suggesting that Rey

does not have a lot of character development or tension to work with. Several users are

sarcastic in their criticisms. User Anthony Hereld pokes fun at Rey's name with their

comment: "Rey Mary Sue Palpatine-Skywalker is my favorite." Chad Allen Lucas

combines Rey and Mary Sue into a nickname with their comment of "The power of

MaRey Sue!" Shane Hendricks was also sarcastic, using over-the-top language to mock

Rey: "She can stop saber strokes now with the Force? The Amazing Wonder Rey!! The

bestest [sic] Jedi ever." Shawn Porter demonstrates their knowledge of the Mary Sue

stereotype and applies it to the current events of the time as they write: "I am surprised

she didn't just announce she cured covid [sic]. But I guess Disney doesn't have that kind

of Mary Sue power." This could be a jab at Rey's newfound healing abilities in *Rise* and

combined with the perfection of a Mary Sue, Porter jokingly suggests that Rey's Mary

Sue powers are so great that they could cure a worldwide pandemic. Devin Cohen begins

a small string of comments with their remark of "Mary Sue through and through even

down to her perfect hair." User Erik Gadman writes immediately under it, going along

with what Cohen is stating, with their comment of: "Perfect nails and white teeth after

having lived alone in a hard day-by-day survival existence since childhood." Aleksander

Vidakovic responds to Gadman with, "Nah, the only thing that was tangled was her

character. Her character got tangled in scripts and never got out of them." While Gadman

and Cohen point out that Rey's flawless appearance could prove that she is a Mary Sue,

Vidakovic instead comments on Rey's character development, calling it "tangled" instead

of referring to her physical appearance as such. Other fans have various reasons why they

dislike Rey's portrayal in *Rise,* many of them centering around Mary Sue without using

the term directly. User Mitch Hazel writes that Rey "didn't earn her power at all" in the

film, that Rey seems to just naturally be gifted. John Anderson explains in more detail why they did not like Rey, as they felt like "[h]er character development was trash. Her motivations were almost non existent [sic]. And her plot armor was to [sic] over the top." Anderson's comment on "plot armor" is calling Rey a Mary Sue, implying that the aspects of the plot keeps her protected from serious harm like armor. James Green complains that "we don't see rey [sic] struggle at all every lesson she master [sic] with little to know [sic] effort." A lack of struggle and easy mastery of complicated skills is very much a Mary Sue trait.

The second way fans view Rey after the release of *Rise* is more positive, but contains some push back against the Mary Sue status. These are viewers and fans who knew what they wanted—a strong, female role model—and got what they wanted in the films, and expressed their pleasure at their expectations being met. These fans like that Rey is a strong character. They like her character development and her status as a strong woman. These posters tend to have female identified names on the username or they speak of female family members. Barbara Workman suggests that Rey's character is compelling for young girls to join the *Star Wars* fanbase in their comment, "And because of Rey my daughter is finally a Star Wars fan." Workman suggests that Rey's abilities are to be admired, not criticized, and that Rey is a good role model for children, bringing in new fans to the *Star Wars* series. Victoria Ashton was also positive with their support of Rey and enjoyed her so much that they wanted a more material with Rey in their remark, "I love Rey, I really hope you continue her story." Robert Olinski, one of the few male-identified voices who was in support of Rey's character, supports both Rey and the films

she was in with their comment: "Rey was awesome. The movies were awesome." Olinski is satisfied with Rey's character and the movie she stars in. Unlike many other viewers on Rey's character, Olinski chooses to voice their praise of Rey and go against the constant stream of negativity.

The third view of fans viewing Rey's character directly pushes back against the Mary Sue narrative. Even at the time of writing this thesis, a year after *Rise* was released in theaters, there are a tremendous number of Mary Sue comments from fans online. While some fans defend the term Mary Sue, others nuance it, and still others debate if Mary Sue is a sexist term. Others introduce the idea of the men in *Star Wars* functioning as Mary Sues, or even "Gary Stews," the lesser-known masculine equivalent. Joe Lipscomb points out that Luke's character was turned into a Gary Stew character, being too perfect, and *The Last Jedi* (2017) gave Luke human struggles and flaws that shattered fans' expectations of him that had gone unchallenged over the decades. Lipscomb further touches on the idea of the male characters as also "Gary Stews" when they write, "people said it [i.e. the Star Wars franchise] was ruined in the 90's, and after TFA [*The Force Awakens*], before Johnson touched it. Adults crying because movie Luke isn't the space Paul Bunyan that the comic books and fan-fics turned him into." Some fans grow tired of the constant complaining about Rey being a Mary Sue. When Chad Allen Lucas comments, "The power of MaRey Sue!", user Gregory D. Guerra retorts to Lucas directly with "the power of overused jokes and buzzwords! Everyone in star wars (sic) is a Mary Sue/Gary Stu." Here, Guerra is also recognizing that most of the main characters in *Star Wars* can be seen as Mary Sue and Gary Stew, not just Rey. Similarly, George Muller IV

points out that "Action heros [sic] are mostly Mary Sue dude. Rey is no more so than Anakin or Luke was." Muller's comment specifically brings up previous leading roles in *Star Wars* to strengthen their argument, noting that Rey is no different from these male leads. User David Myers gives a good comeback to these complaints, drawing attention to details that are mentioned in the film both directly and indirectly, with their comment of, "Her Palpatine bloodline explains her immediate receptiveness to the Force and how to use it, and Leia is clearly training her. Whether you agree with the direction the character went or not those two things eliminate the Mary Sue designation." Rey learns new skills by training and working hard, whereas a true Mary Sue would naturally be accomplished at new skills without any training. Her opening scene in *Rise* shows her running—and failing to complete— a training course. Emperor Palpatine is the most accomplished Dark Side Force user in *Star Wars*. It is only natural that as his granddaughter, Rey inherits some of those powers. While the idea of Rey being related to Palpatine feels almost too ideal and too perfect in regard to how she got so much power, Rey solidly rejects her ancestry and refuses to assist her grandfather in his plans of galactic domination. She denies her only blood family, something that she has spent three movies looking for, in order to save her friends.

Some fans push back against the Mary Sue narrative in other ways, questioning why male characters who exemplify the Mary Sue stereotype are not put under such scrutiny. Reddit user ElectricOyster tries to explain the gendered difference about Rey, writing, "I think she is a Mary Sue. But I feel bad for not recognizing male characters who are also Mary Sues (or the male equivalent). No one really seems to care when a

male character is overpowered/without weakness." There were eight likes on this

comment, signaling that several users agree with the statement. By stating that they "feel

bad for not recognizing" that male characters can be Mary Sues, ElectricOyster suggests

viewers should be noticing that the Mary Sue stereotype is not limited to the female lead

characters only, and that it is important to call out the stereotype in the male characters as

well. User joyyfulsub follows the same thread with their comment:

> That's not exactly true. Infallible, super over-powered male heroes have been popular in pop cinema since the days of the pulps. They were a genre unto themselves in the 80s, and made action stars of Van Damme, Stallone and Seagal (seriously – watch *Hard to Kill* or *Under Siege* and tell me the main characters aren't Mary Sues). Female leads had to be more believable – less action heroes and more "action survivors" like Ripley and Sarah Connor. It's only recently that the character you're describing fell out of favor, but they still exist.

Here, joyyfulsub points out female leads are not given the same pass to perform

unbelievable acts like their male counterparts are, and instead must have something else

in addition to their actions sequences and character arcs to flesh out their character in

ways that male characters are not expected to meet. With the character of Mary Sue

"[falling] out of favor" in recent times suggests that audiences are becoming more aware

of the stereotype and calling it out, even when male characters are being Gary Stew. The

fans give a sophisticated analysis of the current gender roles and are challenging each

other to look at the events and Rey's character differently.

CONCLUSION

As the leading character of the latest *Star Wars* trilogy, Rey comes under a lot of fire from fans and critics alike. Her Mary Sue portrayal haunts her throughout the three films she leads. While many fans are quick to point out her Mary Sue status, there are several who are pushing back against this Mary Sue characteristic. Fan voices are a powerful influence, with social media at their fingertips to voice what they like and dislike. Filmmakers have listened to some of the fans' complaints and adjusted characters in their films in regard to what fans are saying. Would *Star Wars* movies avoid casting more female leads after the backlash Rey has received? As time goes on, will the nostalgia of those who enjoyed Rey and her journey overpower those who were critical? The fans' analysis of the movies and characters are not to be ignored. The fans are sophisticated, educated, and passionate in their views, defending and challenging both each other and the filmmakers to do better. With the immense presence of social media and its power, fans are empowered like never before to voice their likes and dislikes, allowing filmmakers to consider a new point of view when creating films.

This empowerment of the fans and their access to online forums can give them the power to influence scripts and filmmakers. *Rise* clearly responded to the criticisms made online and to what audience wanted. Paying attention to online forums and observing how fans can shape scripts with their comments is critical in upcoming films, *Star Wars* or otherwise. What will happen if the loudest voices are the most sexist voices? The most antifeminist voices? The most prejudiced voices? The power of fan culture can shift and

shape entire film story arcs, as seen in Rose's character development between *The Last Jedi* and *Rise.*

It will be interesting to see if the scholarly critics' reviews of *Rise*, once they are released, cast Rey as a Mary Sue or if they push back against her Mary Sue status. Will the scholars and the fans see eye-to-eye on their analysis of the film? Will they differ? *Star Wars* has moved on from this trilogy of movies already, creating television series about many other characters from other *Star Wars* movies that fans love. The *Star Wars* universe is far from being wrapped up with *Rise of Skywalker,* giving filmmakers plenty of avenues to explore new characters and how they grow onscreen. While Rey was miles ahead of the other female characters in *Star Wars,* she still falls into stereotypes of female characters. Filmmakers could learn from Rey's mistakes and use this as an opportunity to flesh out their female leads even more. The trilogy is still new and fresh on fans' minds. Attitudes can change over times. Newer fans can join the fan base, adding a more diverse set of voices and expectations that filmmakers could rise to meet.

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APPENDIX

Angry Woman	A woman who is expressing her anger in unconventional ways defined by the patriarchy.
AngRey Sue	Angry Woman meets Mary Sue in Rey. An Angry Woman expressing her rage, but the consequences of her outbursts are softened by moments of Mary Sue.
Evil Rey Sue	The Mary Sue character of Rey who has fallen to the Dark Side. Also known as Dark Side Rey.
Mary Sue	A young woman character who is basically perfect, lacking in flaws and weaknesses in such a way that her perfection makes her unrealistic.

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[i] Googled on March 8, 2021.
[ii] This post was a screenshot of the original post, which was deleted on Twitter.