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## Emerald Fennell's Promising Young Woman (2020): A Psychoanalytic Review of Masculinity and Rape Culture

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## Abstract

*TW: mentions of sexual violence and rape*

When it comes to the subject of sexual violence, there are systemic and cultural influences that prevent assaulters from being properly prosecuted. In the U.S., perpetrators of sexual violence are mostly heterosexual, white men (RAINN, 2022). In this article, I question the ways in which sexual violence and masculinity are interconnected. By conducting a psychoanalytic analysis of Emerald Fennell's 2020 film *Promising Young Woman*, the ideas of toxic masculinity and "rape culture" will be deconstructed regarding Cassie's—the protagonist—story. Theories by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung will be connected to real-life relations regarding society's attempts to justify the acts of sexual violence committed by men. Character analyses of major characters in the film will add further support that ties sexual violence to toxic masculinity, with psychoanalysis as its foreground.

*Keywords:* Masculinity, psychoanalysis, nice guy, victim blaming, rape culture

## **Promising Young Woman (2020): Psychoanalysis of Masculinity and Rape Culture**

Over the last few years, the film industry has not been afraid to address important social issues in a unique, entertaining, and respectful way, leaving viewers reflecting on its commentary. Prior to this, the topic of sexual assault was either avoided entirely or overly exploited in film. Now, there are films that can have sexual violence as their main premise without becoming a commodity that takes advantage of women in the industry. The rape-revenge subgenre can especially be a teetering matter, but in *Promising Young Woman*, Emerald Fennell provides a new take on the subgenre that never mentions the word “rape” or shows exploitative scenes of the act (Machado, 2021).

In this paper, I will analyze Fennell’s 2020 film, *Promising Young Woman*, using psychoanalytic techniques. With this specific method of analysis, sexual violence is discussed based on the social and systemic ideals about toxic masculinity and “rape culture.” Rape culture can be polysemic in some cases, but the standard definition is “the normalization of aggressive male sexual violence against women” (Kessel, 2021). There will be further discussions on the film’s actual characters and how the actions they perform, or do *not* perform, correspond with their mental functioning. Before getting into Fennell’s work, psychoanalysis needs to be broken down and defined.

### **Method of Analysis: *Psychoanalysis***

The concept of psychoanalysis was developed by Sigmund Freud and is defined as “a science concerned with the interaction between conscious and unconscious processes and with the laws of mental functioning” (Berger, 2019, p. 95). In this definition, a person’s mentality is equated with an iceberg: the things they are conscious

of are the small part of the iceberg that is visible above the surface, whereas the unconscious mind is the larger, hidden mass beneath the surface. Although Freud is the main developer of psychoanalysis, he and Carl Jung have additional theories that expand into specific mental criteria. It is these theories that will be used in the analysis of *Promising Young Woman*. The first of these is Freud's structural hypothesis of mental functioning.

### **Sigmund Freud's Structural Hypothesis**

To really dive into psychoanalysis, one must know Freud's structural hypothesis of mental functioning. His hypothesis is composed of three different "characters": the id, ego, and superego. Berger (2019) claimed the "id comprises the psychic representative of drives," which are typically unchecked desires surrounding sex and violence" (p. 109). Id can apply to fairly innocent desires like junk food, but it ultimately applies to unconscious sexual desire, pleasure, and self-gratification. The ego "consists of those functions which have to do with the individual's relationship to their environment" and "superego comprises the moral precepts of our minds and ideal aspirations" (Berger, 2019, p. 109). Superego is the morally sound part of the mind that unconsciously strives for the wellbeing of the self and others. Ego is the conscious mediator between id and superego, attempting to maintain balance. If one were to generically label each of these subjects, id would be the villain, superego would be the hero, and ego would be the middle ground that tries to reach a compromise. All three work together to form the human mind. It is important to have superego and ego as moral guides and mediators to keep the id from performing impulsive, dangerous actions. This structural hypothesis

will be applied to *Promising Young Woman* by observing how the id, ego, and superego was “embodied” within specific characters.

### **Jungian Theories**

Other necessary concepts for this psychoanalysis are Carl Jung’s theories of the collective unconscious and archetypes. Jung defines the collective unconscious as the idea that as a society, we all *collectively* share the same thoughts about certain things (Berger, 2019, p. 125). For example, we all have the same interpretation of fear — almost everyone would define it as an impulsive emotion that is caused by threatening scenarios. An archetype “is a universal theme found in works of art” (Berger, 2019, p. 125). One of the archetypes Jung discusses is the hero or the shadow element, good versus evil. According to Jung, everyone has a similar idea of what each one looks like. Archetypes are prevalent in media content like TV shows and movies, with typical stock characters like the jock, nerd, mean girl, etc.

Based in Jung’s ideas, I will discuss toxic masculinity as part of the collective unconscious. Toxic masculinity is an ideology that reinforces the idea that a “real man” is aggressive and dominant, yet can also include the “nice guy” archetype that is associated with rape culture in *Promising Young Woman*.

### ***Promising Young Woman***

#### **Characters**

It is important to point out that all the characters in this film are upper-class and white, reflecting the statistical demographic of sexual perpetrators (RAINN, 2022). The main character is Cassandra/Cassie Thomas, a thirty-year-old woman grieving over the loss of her best friend, Nina Fisher, coping with the situation by dropping out of medical

school and pretending to be drunk in bars to scare men who try to take advantage of her. Nina was a medical student, but after being raped at the medical university then villainized for reporting it, dropped out and later committed suicide. Although Nina is a vital character and her name is continuously brought up throughout, she never *physically* appears in the film. Our framed antagonist is the man who raped Nina, Alexander/Al Monroe, a well-respected member of society who never faced any consequences for his crime.

Along with Al are “micro” antagonists who played specific roles in Al getting away with the assault and Nina’s rape being ignored. There is Madison McPhee, Cassie and Nina’s old university classmate, who blamed Nina for her rape since she was heavily intoxicated when it happened. Ryan Cooper, a pediatric doctor who also attended the same medical university as the aforementioned characters, is initially framed as Cassie’s love interest, but a subtle plot twist later reveals that he was also a silent bystander when Nina was being raped. Elizabeth Walker is the dean of the medical university who dismissed Nina’s case, and Jordan Green was Al’s lawyer who harassed Nina until she dropped the charges filed against Al. One final character who will also be mentioned is Mrs. Fisher, Nina’s mother.

### **Plot Summary**

The plot of *Promising Young Woman* revolves around Cassie avenging Nina’s death by getting revenge on Al, who is living lavishly in anticipation of his upcoming wedding. Cassie also directly confronts everyone who played a subsequent role in Nina’s rape. As Cassie encounters Madison, Dean Walker, and Jordan, she makes them acknowledge their actions and responsibility. Later in the film, Cassie visits Nina’s

old house and sees her mother, Mrs. Fisher, who tells her to move on for Nina's sake, as well as her own. So, Cassie actually decides to stop her revenge plan and starts dating Ryan, until she later finds out that he was *also* involved in Nina's rape. She uses this new knowledge as leverage against Ryan to find out where Al's bachelor party is and pretends to be a stripper to gain access to the venue. When Cassie is finally face-to-face with Al, she restrains him and attempts to carve Nina's name onto his stomach with a medical tool. Before she can do so, however, Al breaks free from his restraints, overpowers and murders her. The film seemingly ends with Al reassuring himself that the murder "was not his fault," getting rid of Cassie's body, and then proceeding with the wedding. However, Cassie had anticipated her demise and prepared evidence that resulted in Al getting arrested for her murder at his wedding, ending on a questionably triumphant note since Cassie had to die to avenge her best friend.

### **Psychoanalysis of *Promising Young Woman***

#### **Id, Ego, and Superego**

In *Promising Young Woman*. Mrs. Fisher represents Freud's ego, Cassie represents the superego, and Al represents the id. No one is portrayed to be the villain more than Al, whose unchecked desire for sex and power led to his rape of an intoxicated woman. This act of sexual violence was ignored for years, and he was never punished for it. But when Al was confronted about it by Cassie, he claimed that he "didn't even do anything. [They] were kids" (Fennell, 2020). This claim of innocence by Al is also violence even though it "does not take the form of physical blows," as denying the harm caused by abuse *is* abuse (Dines, Humez, & Caputi, 2015). While Al is the most prominent example of id, one could attest that Ryan and the other men who

attempted to sexually assault Cassie are representative of id as well. They acted solely on their desire for sexual power and do not seem to consider how morally unethical their actions are. In Ryan's case, his desire was driven by having a clean reputation amongst his colleagues. Nevertheless, when each man was directly confronted by Cassie, their immediate response was blatant denial or aggressive defensiveness.

Although Mrs. Fisher is not a significant character in *Promising Young Woman*, her role showed the strongest form of ego. Just like Cassie, Mrs. Fisher continuously grieves over the loss of Nina. But rather than enacting revenge, she chose to move on from the incident as she knows it is not healthy for her. Mrs. Fisher's "mediator" role is expanded when she tries to convince Cassie to let go of all the hatred she has, too, and find a way to live for herself again. Mrs. Fisher has experienced the same type of pain as Cassie — if not more, since Nina was her daughter. While she may never forgive Al for his crime, Mrs. Fisher knows the damage that comes with not letting go. Her character takes on the ego's middle ground persona and attempts to configure a compromise between Al as the id and Cassie as the superego. Although her efforts to convince Cassie ultimately fail, Mrs. Fisher as ego represents the part of the mind that tries to find reasonable solutions for both sides.

Cassie's determination to expose all the people responsible for Nina's death is what makes her the superego. She is seen as an "avenging angel" throughout the film, having to grieve and avenge Nina by herself. She sees what is wrong with women who inherit internal misogyny and blame the victim, men who follow "the bro code" (Keith, 2009) and choose to stay quiet about the wrongdoings of their male friends, institutions that brush sexual violence under the rug, and a corrupt judicial system that prioritizes



money over justice. Cassie recognizes all of this and makes it her personal mission to confront each person's morals and have them take responsibility for their faults. These are qualities that the superego exhibits.

### **'Bro Culture' and Internalized Misogyny as Jung's Collective Unconscious**

Tied to Jung's idea of the collective unconscious as a socially shared understanding, often seen in tropes and archetypes (Berger, 2019), is "bro culture manhood," in which men justify for one another acts of sexual violence to the point where it becomes normalized and the damage it causes is diminished (Keith, 2009)—at least in their minds. Since collective unconscious is defined by Jung as a social construct wherein people unconsciously share the same beliefs (Berger, 2019, p. 125), it can be intertwined with the concept of bro culture and internalized misogyny. This idea of bro culture manhood—or rape culture—is portrayed in *Promising Young Woman* through Al and Ryan's relationship; Ryan knew Al raped Nina but chose not to say anything because they were acquaintances. Meanwhile, Dean Walker and Madison are examples of women socialized to this rape culture and have internalized its misogyny. When Dean Walker was confronted by Cassie for dropping Nina's rape charge against Al, she defended her actions saying "What would you have me do? Ruin a young man's life every time an accusation is made?... That wouldn't be fair" (Fennell, 2020). And Madison dismissed a video of Nina being raped by Al because "So much stuff happened back then. It was just one blackout after the next" (Fennell, 2020). Einhorn (2021) highlights an important quote by Margaret Atwood: "men are frightened that women will ridicule them, but women are frightened that men will kill them" (p. 488). The arguments made by Dean Walker and Madison show their collective view on rape, how

it is so common it is dismissible and how an accused man cannot be held responsible if they are a promising young man — forgetting the promising young woman who was the actual victim in the situation. Endless exposure to ideologies that reinforce bro culture and internalized misogyny creates a collective unconscious that justifies sexual violence. It takes acknowledgment of this flawed perspective to establish new ideologies and create a collective unconscious that holds sexual perpetrators accountable.

### **Archetypes**

There are many instances during the film of men trying to justify themselves when they sexually assault a woman by saying that they are a nice guy. One man who was confronted by Cassie after trying to sexually assault her — under the pretense that she was drunk — claimed, “I’m really high...I don’t know what I’m doing...I’m a nice guy” (Fennell, 2020). Also, when Al and Cassie finally meet in the third act of the film, Al insists that he is a gentleman and Cassie retorts, saying “You might be surprised to hear that ‘gentlemen’ are sometimes the worst” (Fennell, 2020). The nice guy archetype is a social construct made by hegemonic men to exempt themselves from being seen as rapists or sexual perpetrators. Because of toxic masculinity, there is a preconceived notion that sexual perpetrators are easy to spot since they are openly threatening, misogynistic, and extremely violent (Harrington, 2020). This gives “nice guys” the benefit of the doubt by the public since they present themselves as trustworthy. But *Promising Young Woman* intentionally cast male actors who were known for playing likeable characters prior to show that “anyone could be a predator, and anyone could be complicit” (Wittmer, 2021).

## Conclusion

This psychoanalysis of the characters in Emerald Fennell's 2020 film, *Promising Young Woman*, shed light on the idea that sexual violence against women is a serious topic that needs to be addressed, systemically and culturally. Internalized misogyny, toxic masculinity, the "nice guy" archetype, and victim blaming all play a part in normalizing this violence and each one specifically puts women in a subordinate position under men. The id of Al and the other men who performed acts of violence against women — or chose to stay silent, like Ryan — make up most of the problem. These are men that the general public would initially see as young, trustworthy, and promising, but the reality is that sexual assaulters have no definite description. In a psychoanalytic light, the unchecked desire to establish power and maintain social dominance through sexual violence is common amongst white, heterosexual men that wish to uphold social stratification. But Cassie, representing the superego in the film, challenges this mentality with psychological lessons that uphold the moral standard. By the end of the film, it feels pyrrhic since Cassie's plan was a success and Nina was avenged, but it was at the expense of her own life. It highlights an upsetting, yet realistic notion that most women don't live to see their abusers convicted. Overall, *Promising Young Woman* served as a substantial work to discuss through a psychoanalytic lens.

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