



Victims and Survivors in the Rape-Revenge Narrative: A Comparison of *Black Christmas* (2019) and *I May Destroy You* (2020)

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Abstract

The rape-revenge narrative is fertile ground to explore and contextualize the experience of sexual violence and its aftermath. While typically viewed a trope in genre films seen through the male gaze, female filmmakers are reclaiming this narrative and advancing the genre. Two recent entries from female filmmakers into the canon of the rape-revenge are the 2019 horror remake *Black Christmas*, and the 2020 HBO drama series *I May Destroy You*. This article will compare the ways that these two examples construct characters who experience rape, and how their personality traits and behaviors are infused with the cultural perceptions of "rape victims" or "rape survivors." This analysis will be grounded in ongoing feminist discourse around the use of the term applied to those who experience rape, and how this impacts our understanding of these characters.

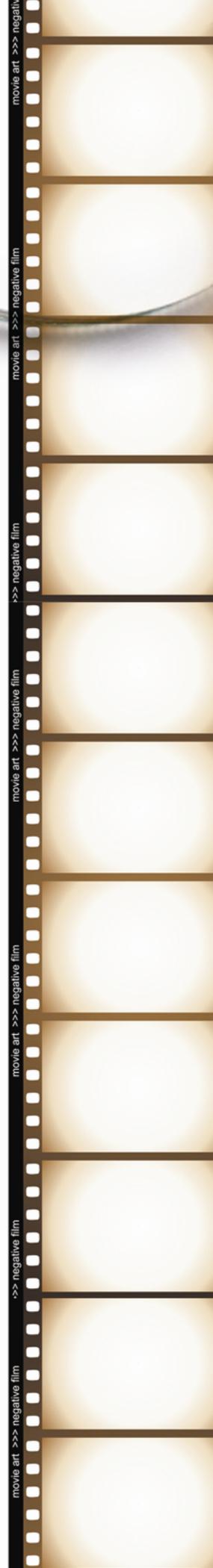
Keywords: rape-revenge; victims; survivors; *Black Christmas*; *I May Destroy You*; feminism



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Victims and Survivors in the Rape-Revenge Narrative: A Comparison of *Black Christmas* (2019) and *I May Destroy You* (2020)

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Introduction

Whether as mainstream films that garner critical accolades and commercial success, or B-movies and exploitation films with a cult following, rape-revenge films are a mainstay in global cinema.

While the theme of seeking revenge is a ubiquitous storytelling device that appears in some of the earliest films, the 1970's is often considered the decade where rape-revenge films began to gain notoriety and popularity. Several film scholars attribute its origin in this period to a combination of the easing of censorship restrictions on filmmaking, greater public discourse on sexuality, and a response to second-wave feminism's fixation on rape and pornography (Ferreday 2017; Heller-Nicholas, 2011; Henry, 2014; Hockett & Saucier, 2015; Projansky, 2001; Schorn 2013). As film and television continue to visit rape-revenge themes with each passing decade, it is important to consider these texts not only as part of the cultural landscape but part of a unique genre.

Film scholars have engaged in analysis of rape-revenge films since the 1990s, but there is not yet a consensus on where they fit within genre studies. Earlier scholars like Carol J. Clover (1993) interprets rape-revenge as a sub-genre within horror, while Jacinda Read (2000) and

Sarah Projansky (2001) interpret rape-revenge as a story-telling device or narrative structure that is not representative of its own genre. Though unwilling to name rape-revenge as a genre, this earlier scholarship is integral in establishing that these depictions of rape and sexual violence are not only shown for exploitation or titillation (Robson, 2021). More recent scholarship by Claire Henry (2014) seeks to expand the understanding of rape-revenge as its own genre worthy of study. Codifying rape-revenge as a genre, which Henry (2014) describes as a political act, expands the concept of genre studies in ways that can be more inclusive of texts that are outside the traditional androcentric or heteronormative scope.

Identifying rape-revenge as a genre acknowledges that there are thematic and technical tenets under which these films are made. Rape-revenge films follow a structure described by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas as “a rape that is central to the narrative is punished by an act of vengeance, either by the victim themselves or by an agent” (2011, 3). Where and how these assaults occur generally follows the myths associated with a stranger-rape scenario- unknown assailants attacking women on darkened streets or empty rural areas, or during the commissions of other crimes like a home invasion (Young, 2009). Police or other officials may be sought for assistance, but these interventions are ineffective leading victims take revenge into their own hands, either on their rapists or on those who commit the same crimes (Young, 2009).

While the structure of rape-revenge films follows a predictable format, they also present highly dynamic themes that change over time in its examinations of who perpetrates violence, who seeks revenge, and the lens through which all of this is viewed. Earlier films like *Straw Dogs* (1971), *The Last House on the Left* (1972), and *Death Wish* (1974) share these stories from the perspectives of male avengers and largely through the gaze of male filmmakers. While the androcentric approach to rape-revenge persists, including modern remakes of all three classic films listed, since the late 1970s it is more common to see the rape victims themselves given the chance to enact revenge.

From the rape-revenge classic films like *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) and *Ms. 45* (1981), to modern entries like *M.F.A.* (2017), and *Revenge* (2017), the centering of female perspectives, voices, and experiences advances the genre. More recent changes beyond the plot are the addition of women writers, directors, and producers bringing a more female-centric approach to filmmaking. Notably, within the last five years several female filmmakers have added brutal, thought-provoking, and even critically acclaimed entries to the genre like Jennifer Kent's *The Nightingale* (2018), and Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman* (2020).

The genre will continue to evolve as new generations of filmmakers of all genders grapple with responses to sexual violence, but it is important to consider the foundations on

which the genre rests. While the social discourse on rape and sexual violence continues to change, the rape-revenge genre continues to rely on some outdated notions of victimhood to tell a compelling story. Using two recent examples from the female filmmakers April Wolfe and Michaela Coel, this analysis will discuss how the identity of a “victim” and a “survivor” are used in the genre. Exploring the ways characters in Wolfe’s *Black Christmas* (2019) and Coel’s *I May Destroy You* (2020) inhabit these identities can shed light on how modern female filmmakers are reinforcing and subverting the tenets of the genre.

Victims and Survivors:

One of the most important aspects of the rape-revenge genre is the position of those who experience sexual violence as either victim or survivor, and what each of these identities portrays to the audience. Sociologists, psychologists, criminologists, and feminists have widely discussed the use of these terms to describe a person who experiences rape or sexual violence, but there is no consensus on which is preferable. Often, the circumstances that led to the violent act, or a person’s response to their victimization inform which title is used. Studies reveal that when confronted with the term “victim,” the association is with passivity and weakness, and “survivor” is associated with resistance and recovery (Boyle & Clay-Warner, 2018; Hockett & Saucier, 2015; Lamb, 1999; Papendick & Bohner, 2015).

In feminist discourse, the terminology used for those who experience sexual violence is inextricably tied to their sense of agency, autonomy, and in many cases feelings of blame and shame. The debate over the use of the term victims and survivors is about more than just rape, and during the 1980s and 1990s feminist scholars began to balk at the idea that all women were “victims” of patriarchal systems. The problems with this concept were not an argument against the ubiquity of oppression, but rather with the meaning implied by the use of the term “victim” (Loney-Howes, 2020). First, this notion turned victimhood into a monolithic concept that did not reflect the reality of intersectional experiences of oppression, or the wide-ranging ways in which individuals respond to oppression or violence. Second, the notion of victims as passive was found to be disempowering, and as though recovery was not possible. Thus, the use of the term survivor to describe those who experienced gender or sexual violence or oppression became the preferable term.

However, in rape-revenge narratives that center the experiences of women, both identities are necessary as their transformation from one to the other is an integral facet for the progression of the plot. Characters in these narratives undergo an act of extreme violence in which they become a victim whose life is drastically altered, and then grow into a survivor through an act of vengeance (Heller-Nicholas, 2011; Young, 2009). Both identities are essential

to the development of the character and the story, with the victim visibly representing the trauma of their experience, and the survivor representing the violent catharsis needed to heal.

Filmmakers rely on the audience's preconceived notions that a "victim" is an idealized identity, coded with the traits of a damsel in distress- weak, fair (often meaning literal whiteness), and pure or virginal- and thus someone blameless and worthy of saving or avenging (Fredriksson, 2020). The rape-revenge genre positions the audience to side with women who are raped by making them witnesses to the act of sexual violence (most commonly from the victim's perspective) and then the mental and physical consequences she experiences in its aftermath. By this process, these narratives not only construct the ideal victims worthy of audience sympathy, but also an ideal offender who is so vile as to be deserving of violence or death (Clover, 1993; Fredriksson, 2020; Lamb, 1999).

These perpetrators can take the form of masked rapists like those in *Ms. 45*, or counter-cultural vagrants like in *Death Wish* or *The Last House on the Left*. With *Lipstick* (1976) as their predecessor, more recent films like *Descent* (2007), *Black Christmas*, and *Promising Young Woman* push back against the stereotypes of what constitutes a real rape by bringing acquaintance rape into the genre. Though the person who commits the assault is known to the victim, they become unrecognizable through their act of violence. Whether these villains are faceless, reflective of the societal anxieties about youth culture and crime, or an unknown side of

someone familiar they are all portrayed as irredeemable. This allows the audience and the character to both find catharsis through seeking revenge, often through extremely violent means that are reflective of the violence they experienced (Henry, 2014; Schorn, 2013).

The two texts selected for this paper, *Black Christmas* and *I May Destroy You*, are not conventional choices, but each have interesting insights into the growth and development of the genre. While there is not much overlap in plot when comparing this horror remake to the HBO drama series, both texts were written and directed by women, all of whom were interested in sharing stories that reflect the commonality of the experience of sexual violence (Schorn, 2013; Wolfe, 2020). While these stories are vastly different, *Black Christmas* and *I May Destroy You* both show the lasting trauma of rape and the pathways individuals explore for potential healing. One commonality between these texts is they both introduce seeking revenge through an act of public shaming alongside the more traditional physical violence that is the cornerstone of the genre. This addition indicates that the genre is responsive to the ongoing dialog of the post-MeToo era where seeking justice and perpetrator accountability are largely shared in a public forum.

Earlier versions of *Black Christmas* from 1974 and 2006 reside exclusively in the slasher genre, but the most recent iteration of the film moved into the rape-revenge genre. The main

character is a senior in college still dealing with the repercussions of a drug-facilitated acquaintance rape that happened during her first year. Over the course of the film, she seeks revenge on her rapist first by outing his crime to his peers and community, and then violently assaulting him and other members of his fraternity. *I May Destroy You* takes a different approach to the rape-revenge narrative, and explores the challenging healing process of a character grappling with the reality of multiple types of assaults inflicted on herself and her close friends. Throughout the series, revenge is enacted by publicly outing rapists, and then moves into familiar genre territory with elaborate fantasies of violent revenge. Each of these texts will be examined for the ways that they construct their characters either as victims or survivors, and assess the acts of vengeance that are integral parts of their character growth.

Black Christmas:

April Wolfe's *Black Christmas* remake is unlike the 1974 horror classic or its 2006 remake where women in a sorority house are attacked by an individual slasher as the college campus empties for winter break. This most recent entry contains a convoluted plot involving the use of women as human sacrifices to engage with supernatural powers that will be able to restore the male supremacy to the college campus. While there is much to explore in the plot about the backlash against "woke" or politically correct education on college campuses, this analysis will review the plot line focusing the arc of the main character, Riley. When the audience meets

Riley she is shown layering on baggy and androgynous clothing, obscuring her feminine form. As Riley begins to interact with other characters in her sorority house, most of whom follow the more stereotypical feminine appearance of a sorority girl, the audience learns that Riley used to be more like her sisters. She once performed at fraternity talent nights, wore revealing clothing, and was generally more engaged with her sisters and university life. When one of her sorority sisters attempts to return a borrowed revealing red dress, Riley replies "keep it, I never wear that anymore." Throughout the first act, friends continually ask her to consider taking part in the holiday festivities, insisting that she should return to activities that she loved, but Riley politely declines. All of these scenes establish that something happened to Riley and now there is a barrier preventing her from living a happy and normal life she once enjoyed, thus identifying her victimhood (Projansky, 2001).

The changes in Riley's behavior are evidence of the process that psychologist Sharon Lamb (1999) identified as pathologizing the victim. In this process, it is assumed that the psychological distress caused by incidents of sexual violence or abuse will have long-term consequences that lead to an "altered state of mental illness" (Lamb, 1999, 110). For Riley, the consequences of her experience of rape go beyond the violence of the moment, and extend into a "social victimization" that derives from being disbelieved by authorities and peers in her campus

community (Hockett & Saucier, 2015, 2). In pathologizing the victim and focusing on the trauma these events are assumed to have caused, it emphasizes the powerlessness of Riley as a victim. (Lamb, 1999). Riley's assault is only revealed as brief flashes in her memory, where she is seen in the red dress that her sister borrowed, drowsily being restrained by a white male. There is no violent sexual assault shown, so the film relies heavily on audience understanding that her deeply altered personality is evidence of a brutal rape.

Throughout the film, supporting characters encourage Riley to move beyond a passive victim, and to become an active survivor. Riley's sorority sister Kris consistently berates her for "disappearing," and "shrinking." This is both metaphorical through the loss of her identity to victimhood, and literal as Riley's physical form is obscured by baggy clothing and she is shown hiding behind a counter when her rapist, Ryan Huntley, returns to campus. Kris encourages her to reassert herself and regain her sense of autonomy by telling her to "rebuild yourself, bitch." During the first act of revenge in the film, Kris urges Riley to face her rapist by reminding her that "you used to be a fighter, time to be a fighter again." One of the key perceptions that separates victims from survivors is that the latter is thought to have engaged in resistance, and *Black Christmas* leans into the necessity of fighting, both literally and metaphorically, for Riley to make her transition (Lamb, 1999; Papendick & Bohner, 2017; Boyle & Clay-Warner, 2018).

In her first act of revenge, Riley and her sorority sisters publicly shame her rapist's fraternity by performing a song that exposes the prolific nature of sexual assault on college campuses. Initially, Riley has no intention to participate on stage, and her androgynous appearance clashes as she stands amongst her sorority sisters dressed in their sexualized Santa Clause costumes. As the women pose for a photograph, Riley stands out from her carefree and hyperfeminized sisters. This brief scene serves as a visual representation of the statistic that one out of every six women will experience sexual violence in her lifetime, and the ways Riley is dressed and presents herself, the audience can immediately identify her as that victim (Smith et al., 2018). When one of her sorority sisters becomes ill and can no longer perform, Riley steps out from behind the curtain and into the spotlight, beginning her transformation from victim to survivor. Like Jennifer Hill in *I Spit on Your Grave*, Thana in *Ms. 45*, and Noelle in *M.F.A.*, Riley adopts a hyperfeminine appearance and sexualized performance to enact her revenge. In evoking the dominatrix or seductress persona, Riley like many revenge heroines before her, weaponizes their femininity in a defiant resistance to those who exploited them.

Riley and her sorority sisters perform their version of "Up on the Housetop" with the lyrics changed to call out the ambiguities that are often cited when campus rapes go unpunished or unreported:

Up in the frat house, me and you
And we know what I'm there to do
We're drinkin' and kissin' and what comes next?
You and I have S-E-X

Ho ho ho, I wouldn't know
Ho ho ho, I wouldn't know
Up in the frat house, there's one true fact
That is that I got attacked

Up in the frat house, things went down
And I'm tellin' everyone in town
Didn't see your face, for goodness sake
Couldn't have, 'cause I was not awake

Ho ho ho, I didn't know
Ho ho ho, I didn't know
'Cause up in the frat house, click, click, click
What you guys do in here is really sick

There's no more of protecting you
No he said, she said, what was true?
Don't say what you did was all my fault
'Cause what you did is called assault

Ho ho ho, I didn't know
Ho ho ho, I didn't know
'Cause up in the frat house, click, click, click
You slipped me a roofie and then your...

The crowd reacts explosively along gender lines with the women clapping and cheering and the men, most of whom are fraternity members, reacting with disbelief and disgust. The audience reaction again highlights the understanding and even expectation of college campuses as sites of

sexual violence for which women must be prepared to defend themselves. As Riley exits the stage she joyfully exclaims “maybe that will teach Ryan Huntley not to rape another girl.” This exchange between Riley and Kris is caught in a video that is shared widely and receives thousands of views, widening the scope of shame for Ryan and his fraternity.

Riley is immediately empowered and relieved by this act, and the audience sees the discomfort and embarrassment of the fraternity members as an act of revenge. While Riley does find catharsis in this act, it is immediately overshadowed by the threat of violence that transpires in the following scenes. The survivor status that Riley gained by standing up to those who did not believe her is lost when she and her sisters are victimized by violent attacks by the fraternity pledges. While Kris urged her to fight for her survival in a metaphorical sense by taking to the stage during the first revenge act, Riley is required to literally fight for her survival against masked and cloaked attackers in the second revenge act. When Kris suggests that they go to the police Riley expresses concern that they will not be believed, just as she was not believed about her rape. The inability to trust law enforcement or their unwillingness to act is a common factor in many rape-revenge texts, and their disinterest and inaction leads characters like Riley to decide that revenge must be taken into her own hands (Robson, 2021; Young, 2009).

Riley returns to the frat house where she experienced her assault three years earlier, and where she enacted her revenge the night before. She finds Ryan and his fraternity brothers engaged in a ritual that will "restore the balance of gender power" by returning women to their subservient place below men. Riley is again physically assaulted by members of the fraternity, further earning the act of violent revenge that this genre promises. When Riley is joined by Kris and women from other sororities who were similarly victimized by fraternity pledges, a battle along gender lines ensues. While this scene had the potential to be a moment of empowerment, the filmmakers instead show that Riley draws the strength she needs from seeing other women brutalized, not from a feeling of solidarity and sisterhood.

As Riley wrestles on the floor with Ryan the scene flashes back to her rape years earlier, but this time she actively resists her attacker, an act that aligns her again with the identity of survivor. "You took everything from me" Riley screams as she slams Ryan's head against the floor, avenging her own pain and victimhood both in the moment and over the last three years.

As Riley literally fights for her life, she recalls the metaphorical words of Kris as she acknowledges "you were right, I should have been fighting this whole time." While the stakes of the film have increased to a battle to save all the women on campus, for Riley, the revenge is still personal. After setting the fraternity house on fire with Ryan and the other men inside, Riley and the other women escape. In the final scene of the film, a blood-covered Riley stands outside the

fraternity house, which is now engulfed in flames, and smiles at the destruction. With the act of revenge concluded, her transformation is complete and the pervasive threat of the frat house as a place of sexual violence is destroyed.

I May Destroy You:

In the HBO drama series audiences follow the experience of the main character, Bella, as she starts to understand the complexities of consent and the violations that occur in the course of everyday life. In a show where multiple types of assaults, victims, and perpetrators are explored, for this study only Bella's experiences will be examined. Unlike a traditional rape-revenge narrative, Bella's rape is revealed to the viewer slowly over the course of a 28-minute episode, with the full reality of the rape realized in subsequent episodes. This is an effective way of demonstrating the abrupt and disjuncting nature of the experience of sexual violence. The audience sees Bella live her life normally until the last 4-seconds of the first episode, "Eyes Eyes Eyes Eyes," where the violent assault is revealed through a flash of images showing the perpetrator committing the assault viewed from Bella's perspective.

The audience meets Bella as she leaves an extended work trip in Italy where she is supposed to have finished a draft of her second book but has not completed the task. When she arrives home, Bella engages with her roommate and friends and it is apparent that she is a warm

and enthusiastic person who is beloved by those in her life. In an attempt to meet her deadline, Bella decides to focus on writing for the night, but she struggles with concentration as she finds new ways to procrastinate. Ultimately, Bella decides to take a one-hour break to meet up with friends before returning to work. As she sets a timer on her phone, she and her friends decide to go to the bar Ego Death. There, Bella takes several shots with a group of people, two of whom are strangers. As she stands at the bar, she begins to get woozy, stumble and nearly collapse into the doors of the bar. The scene abruptly cuts to Bella sitting at her computer in the early morning light, emailing the draft to her editors and preparing to meet with them. Bella now has a visible wound on her forehead, and a spot of blood on her shirt, but it is still unclear what happened to her. Only when she returns home, the audience and Bella are shown a brief but horrible glimpse of sexual violence that cannot be contextualized.

In the following episode, “Someone is Lying,” Bella is aware of a black out in the previous night’s events but can’t fully square the images flashing in her head with what she understands to be her experience. It is only when she decides to go to the police after concluding that she was likely drugged, that she is confronted with the reality that she has been raped. Over the course of the interview with investigators Bella balks whenever the officers refer to the images in her head as memories, or describe the image as an act of sexual violence. In a departure from the traditional rape-revenge genre where law enforcement is commonly depicted

as disinterested, callous, and retraumatizing, the two female investigators are sensitive to Bella, and believe her story without judgement. By literally naming Bella as a victim, the character and the audience see that she is now transformed into a new identity that is separate from the character in the first episode. As Bella struggles with this knowledge, she begins to exhibit her trauma in the form of heightened agitation, withdrawing from her life and friends, and compulsive behavior. These traits not only point to her altered mental state, but also the barrier between her past normal life and her current victim identity.

While she attempts the process of healing through the support of her friends, Bella again finds herself in the position of victim as she is violated by a consensual sexual partner in the episode “That Was Fun.” While having intercourse with Zain, a fellow writer helping Bella finish her book, he removes the condom without her consent and then later pleads ignorance at her lack of approval. While she is shocked when she finds out what happened, she accepts his explanation of “I thought you knew” as miscommunication in the moment. Later, Bella becomes aware of the violation as two women on a podcast she is listening to describe the act of removing the condom without consent as “stealthing” and using Zain’s words verbatim as a common excuse used to deceive sexual partners. In the following episode, “It Just Came Up...”, Bella spirals further into victimhood as she drastically alters her appearance by shaving her head and

abandoning the more feminine wigs she wore prior. As with her first assault, it is during a conversation about her ongoing investigation that the same two police investigators inform Bella that Zain's actions are considered rape, even if the sex started with consent. "The problem is when people don't know what is a crime, and what isn't a crime they don't report it. And then people get away with it," the investigator informs Bella, inspiring her to take matters into her own hands.

As Bella's hurt tips over into anger, she makes her first transition toward the identity of survivor. With the emphasis of this identity focused on action, Bella's quick decision to take revenge on Zain serves to restore some of the control that was lost first during her violent assault, and then through his violation of deception. Armed with the knowledge that Zain's actions are a crime, Bella decides to out him in front of his mother, his publishers, and an audience gathered to hear each of them read from their respective upcoming books. Bella calmly and coolly tells the audience of her assault:

Zain Sareen is a rapist. He took a condom off in the middle of having sex with me, he placated my shock and gaslighted me with such intention that I did not have a second to understand the heinous crime that had occurred. I believe he is a predator. One woman has come forward and informed me of the same experience, so I'm not the first. If I don't

take this opportunity to say this now, I certainly will not be the last. He is a rapist, not rape-adjacent, or a bit rapey. He's a rapist under UK law.

This moment of public humiliation culminates when Bella's friend Terry blocks Zain's exit and records his reaction, insisting that "nah, you're gonna feel it," as he squirms under the lights and cameras of the audience. Through this act of revenge, she exposes Zain to shame and humiliation that spotlight his guilt and force him to reckon with his acts of sexual violence in a public forum. Although this is not the same as the humiliation of castration which is found in many rape-revenge films, Zain's life is still significantly altered through public rejection and the loss of his livelihood when his book deal is cancelled. Bella is empowered by this experience and begins to develop a persona both amongst her friends and in her growing online community as a survivor.

Unlike other narratives in this genre, there is not a linear progression from victim to survivor. Bella transitions from victim to survivor and back again over the course of the series. As Bella begins edging into the territory of survivor following her revenge on Zain, she becomes a less sympathetic character that is more difficult to stand behind as her behavior becomes more militant and erratic. In later episodes Bella starts alienating her friends and further damaging her career as she goes deeper into her social media world where she is persistently surrounded by the rage of other survivors. With this survivor identity, Bella exhibits more anger than hurt, and that

negatively impacts her likability as she moves away from the ideal victim identity (Lamb, 1999; Hockett & Saucier, 2015; Boyle & Clay-Warner, 2018). It is only when she begins to portray victimhood again following the disappointment of learning her rapist has not been caught and that her book deal is falling apart that she becomes a sympathetic character again.

The long-form storytelling of a series allows for a more nuanced approach to story development and lends itself better for a deeper exploration of the process of trauma and healing. As a result, Bella's experience is fully fleshed out in ways that reveal the reality that women who experience sexual violence "sometimes experience themselves as victims, sometimes as survivors, sometimes as both, and sometimes as neither," and can inhabit multiple selves and multiple realities (Hockett & Saucier, 2015). In the final episode of the series, "Ego Death," Bella fully grasps these multiple identities and realities as she imagines three separate scenarios for the end of her book that would present a conclusive ending to her story.

In the first revenge narrative, Bella recognizes her rapist, David, when he returns to the bar where she was first assaulted. When Terry asks what Bella is planning to do, she simply replies "hurt him." She reveals to Terry that she spent the months since her attack devising an elaborate plan where she will allow herself to become his victim, feign being drugged, then use his same drugs to incapacitate him. In this ending, and recalling the legacy of previous avengers, Bella appears as a dominatrix in a tight black dress, using her sexuality as a weapon to disarm

her rapist. Things do not go according to plan though, and David flees the bar leaving Bella and her friends to stalk him until he passes out. Once he is unconscious on the sidewalk, Bella says "I want to see his penis," and perpetrates her own sexual assault on David. When David stirs and begins to struggle, Bella and her friends beat and strangle him to death with her panties. While riding the train home with his lifeless and bloody body, Bella sits with a small smile of peace and satisfaction on her face.

When she arrives home, she puts his corpse under the bed, but begins to consider whether this is really the ending she wants. As David's blood starts to ooze out from under her bed, she decides that this is not a satisfactory ending to her story. There is no sense of catharsis received from this narrative, and the overwhelming feeling of this scene is of anxiety and dread. This departure from the rape-revenge format can be found in other films like *Descent*, *The Nightingale*, and *Promising Young Woman* which all show ambiguity as to whether the act of vengeance can bring catharsis, and ambivalence toward how the commission of violence revenge changes these characters.

In the second revenge narrative, when Bella recognizes her rapist, it is Terry who reveals that she has a plan for revenge. This removes the responsibility for violence from Bella, and allows her to remain in her role as a passive victim. No longer the femme fatale, Bella is a more

awkward and intoxicated version of herself with a shaved head and androgynous clothing. In this scenario, the plan goes awry when she confronts David and he responds with cruelty rather than shock or remorse:

Get over it princess...there's wars going on in Iraq, and what? You're making a big old drama because some bloke slipped a pill in your drink and wants to fuck your brains out in nightclub? Stupid bitch...Fucking silly little princess. Fucking self-entitled whore.

As Bella starts to see that she is not a perfect victim, David too is no longer a perfect perpetrator either. David begins inserting his own name into the barrage of insults, referring to himself as a "dumb, stupid, little whore" as he weeps. It is in this moment that Bella realizes that David's actions are a product of his own experience with sexual violence and trauma.

As with the first ending, Bella brings David home and they sit on her bed while they discuss his past history with sexual violence and he shares that he is "not used to people being nice to me." David expresses deep fear of being left alone and she comforts him while the police come in to take him away. Again, Bella considers this ending to her story and finds that shifting the blame from David onto a history of violence does not honor her own experience as a victim. Catharsis is still not achieved here, as the existence of previous violence and systemic oppression does not lessen the individual experience.

The final revenge narrative is unlike any in the rape-revenge canon, in that there is no violence. Bella erases their past history of sexual violence and pretends she is meeting him at the bar for the first time. Bella and David flirt, with her in the dominant and more masculine role, buying him a drink and pursuing further physical contact. As with the previous two endings, the two return to her apartment but this time they have consensual intercourse with Bella maintaining the dominant role. When she awakes in the morning, David is still there and wonders if she expected him to leave during the night. He tells Bella "I'm not gonna go unless you tell me to," to which she replies with a single word- "go." David smiles and leaves her room happily, followed by the bloodied corpse hidden during the first ending climbing out from under her bed and walking away. Revenge here is not in violent retribution, but in removing the existence of violence and replacing it with personal autonomy. This is the ending where the audience sees Bella fully empowered, and finally able to move on from the trauma of her experiences. Instead of through a violent act, the audience finds catharsis in the idea of taking control of the narrative, and deciding to let go of the harmful or frightening things Bella experienced through her trauma.

Conclusion:

Studying and understanding texts in this genre will continue to be a rich vein for understanding trauma, identity, and feminism in popular culture. While the argument for the legitimacy of the rape-revenge genre will remain ongoing, so too will the question of responsibility that filmmakers bear when telling these stories. Just as the concept of ideal victims is problematic for getting attention and resources for victims of crimes in real life, the reliance on this same idea of damsel in distress victims in films perpetuates the idea that there are right and wrong victim descriptions, attitudes, or actions (Fredriksson, 2020). By basing rape-revenge character traits so closely to the social understanding of who is affected by sexual violence and how, films in this genre risks perpetuating dangerous rape myths that privilege whiteness, high socioeconomic status, and heteronormative and cis-normative identities.

While Riley and Bella are united by their experience with sexual violence the two characters are constructed in vastly different ways. *Black Christmas* fits in more with classic rape-revenge films by developing Riley's character to be as sympathetic as possible. She is an orphan, a nurturing older sister to younger members of her sorority, and does not engage in the promiscuous behaviors displayed by her peers. In juxtaposition, *I May Destroy You* is representative of films in the revisionist rape-revenge films that portray characters that are more emotionally complex and not always likeable. Bella does not fit neatly within the structure of an ideal victim and is much more representative of average people. She is a recreational drug user,

she was a bully in high school, she procrastinates in her work, and engages in casual sex. The subtlety of Michaela Cole's writing, directing, and acting show that despite these character traits, Bella is still deserving of consent, bodily autonomy, and justice. By including greater variation in who is shown to experience sexual violence and to be deserving of justice, the harmful perceptions of what constitutes a real rape, or a real rape victim can be eroded.

The ways that perpetrators are portrayed too shows significant differences in the nuances of the experience of rape and sexual violence. *Black Christmas* presents a world where rapists are smug, unempathetic frat boys, or attackers that are literally faceless male forms. The time taken to demonstrate that Riley is an ideal victim then creates an ideal villain that is monstrous, violent, and purely evil. *I May Destroy You* has many examples of victims and perpetrators that shows the frightening reality of how ubiquitous the experience can be, and how those who commit crimes are not immediately identifiable by an inherent visible evilness. This is a significantly more complex approach to who the genre typically depicts as perpetrators.

Though rape-revenge can seem purposefully exploitative and provocative, there is much that can be learned by thinking of these narratives as artifacts that can "help to reveal and interrogate the meanings of rape and the political, ethical, and affective responses to it" (Henry, 2014, 3). The newer additions to the revisionist rape-revenge genre are engaging with the world

in which these films are made and are expanding the ways that victims, perpetrators, and even revenge can be portrayed. Both texts introduce the element of public shaming as an act of revenge, thus showing that the genre is responsive to the larger discourse around sexual violence. While publicly outing and shaming perpetrators is becoming more common in the post-MeToo era, and it can provide a sense of catharsis and satisfaction, it does not guarantee the realization of justice. However, moving away from the physical violence and toward the social violence of shame, stigmatization, and trauma, these female filmmakers are finding contemporary ways to provide their victims with additional means for catharsis and transformation that may have a powerful impact on audiences.

Filmmakers exploring the rape-revenge narrative should be mindful of what Monica Thompson referred to as the "Victim-Survivor Paradox." In this paradox, when a person adopts the title of victim, the perception that the person damaged means that the severity of the experience of sexual violence can be believed and taken seriously (Thompson, 2000). On the other side, if a person adopts a survivor title, they are expected to cast off the trauma of the sexual violence in order to show that they are healed. What Michaela Coel achieves with the character of Bella is to show that within the structure of rape-revenge these identities can be nonlinear while still resulting in the transformation of a character into an avenger.

The rape-revenge genre's reliance on the victim and survivor identity continues to focus on the issue of sexual violence as one that needs to be solved by those who are directly impacted. The perpetrators are brought to justice by a violent act, but the violence and trauma is still carried by the victim after revenge is enacted. With the turning point of rape-revenge narratives hinging on this transition through cathartic violence we risk blinding the audience to the reality of rape culture and the epidemic of sexual violence. When those who experience sexual violence are persistently viewed through the lens of their trauma induced mental state, rape becomes a mental health issue, rather than a social problem. The time spent in these films examine the lingering effects in the aftermath of sexual violence, but rarely glimpse the underlying issues in rape culture that allow for these crimes to continue to occur. As the genre progresses, there may be more room to explore the roles of perpetrators and the responsibility that society bears for creating a world in which justice for sexual violence may only be found through violent revenge.

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