READING FILM

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# Mad Woman: David Fincher's Lens on Female Rage and Revenge

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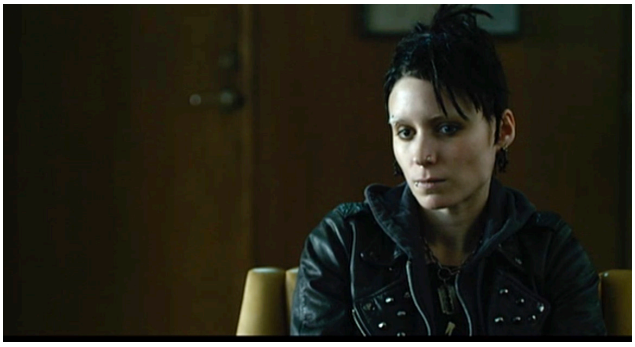
In David Fincher's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011) and *Gone Girl* (2014), the female leads pursue vendettas in response to being controlled and abused. The films provide two variations on a rape–revenge narrative that share one important trait: instead of heroizing these women, both stories confront us with the questionable morality of their methods, avoiding any simple redemptive message. Instead, they expose the hypocrisy of narratives that valorize violence only when it, in turn, valorizes men who use it to protect victimized women. They also make us aware of how ingrained such narratives are in misogynistic, patriarchal societies. Fincher's representations of angry, hurt, and vengeful Lisbeth Salander (Rooney Mara) and Amy Dunne (Rosamund Pike) reinforce the social commentary of the films by eliciting both disgust and sympathy for these characters' actions. In doing so, he encourages us to see these women not as simply violent, but desperate—desperate for power of their own and for purpose beyond what is expected of them.

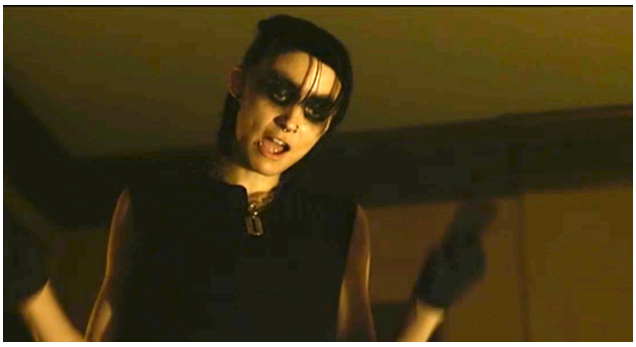
In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Lisbeth Salander's victimization at the hands of men and her explosive reaction to that victimization serve as an indictment of society's misogyny. As a ward of the state, declared mentally incompetent to "manage daily life," Lisbeth's subjection to patriarchal control couldn't be more complete. Early in the film, her guardianship is transferred from an apparently benevolent caregiver to a caseworker who holds her bank account hostage, reducing her to a sexual object under his observation and control. Lisbeth's forms of self-expression under these constraints paint a very raw and real picture of feminine experience and rage. If women are meant to be calm, moral compasses who present themselves as physically likeable to the male eye, Fincher portrays Lisbeth in the opposite way. For instance, she makes her living as an expert hacker, working on the fringes of the law. But her most obvious protest is to physically change herself, making herself almost unreadable within societal gender norms.

Fincher uses four escalating sequences involving Lisbeth interacting with her guardian, Nils Bjurman (Yorick van Wageningen), to show both the suffocating force of the misogynistic system and how she has come to see opposition as her only form of power. This subplot plays out as a rape–revenge structure, which mirrors the film's plot and invites us to sympathize more fully with its overall social critique. When Lisbeth first meets Bjurman, he is the image of an upstanding professional, with a well-ordered office and a photo of his family featured prominently on his desk. He quizzes her on



her job before asking her, "You think that thing through your eyebrow makes you attractive?" Lisbeth is framed against a dark and unfocused background, unsupported by any visual displays of normalcy. She doesn't respond, but looks away and swallows hard, seemingly processing the helplessness of her situation. In the second sequence, Lisbeth shows up obviously trying to look more like what Bjurman expects. This accomplishes nothing, as he pries into her sexuality under the guise of "regulations" and "health concerns," then forces her to perform oral sex in exchange for an allowance from her own earnings. The third meeting is at his apartment, where she goes expecting to have to do the same again. Instead, he brutally restrains and rapes her.

The rape sequence offers the most overt representation of how Lisbeth's experience as a woman has left her desperate to find some sort of power. In her fourth interaction with Bjurman, she takes revenge by enacting a very literal inversion of what she experienced, drugging, restraining, and sodomizing her rapist—even styling herself as a kind of masked avenger. This is among the most shocking moments in the film, but why? Because society has taught us to accept the abuse women go through every day, and because we're used to seeing it represented on film, Fincher knows this break from the norm will provoke us. Are we supposed to approve of this revenge? Do we find it justified? Fincher places this scene near the midpoint of the film and gives it very little follow-up. He neither heroizes nor demonizes Lisbeth for it. In this story, where literal and metaphorical layers of vengeance run deep, he offers no simple answer to the question of whether or when two wrongs make a right. Through his portrayal of Lisbeth Salander, however, he breaks conventional narrative patterns and gendered assumptions about violence, provoking us to reflect on the roots of our judgments.



*Gone Girl* takes a much more reserved and calculated approach to the traps of gender expectations. While Amy Dunne may appear psychopathic in her calculated actions, she is in fact another representation of a woman who adopts, adapts, and eventually takes explosive charge of her feminine


experience and the social roles that are defined for her. Early in the film, Fincher sets up a complicated origin story: many of Amy's life choices—and her vision of herself—are based on Amazing Amy, a book character created by her parents. At a party celebrating the "Complete Amazing Amy" with the publication of *Amazing Amy and the Big Day*, Amy reveals to Nick (Ben Affleck) how the books supposedly inspired by her had instead turned into instruction manuals for how to be a more perfect daughter. Dressed in black, she walks Nick down an aisle of posters offering a 25-year retrospective of the book series. Pausing in front of one poster, she explains that when she'd quit playing cello at age 10, "in the next book, Amazing Amy became a prodigy." The scene opens with a voiceover by Amy describing herself as "me—regular, flawed, really me—jealous as always of the golden child" who has now gotten married before she has. When it ends with Nick publicly proposing, we see how thoroughly both characters have projected themselves into the idealized and socially enforced narrative of a happy modern marriage.

In contrast to Lisbeth, Amy has in many ways benefited from these social conventions. With Nick, she finds herself in an idealized marriage and living a stable life that should leave her happy and fulfilled. She starts to see it differently, though, after they move to Missouri, which is not her decision, despite her being the main breadwinner at the time. The mundane and repetitive midwestern lifestyle gets to her in a way that her work-filled life in the city did not. It finally gives her a chance to slow down and take a look, from the outside, at the perfect life she believes she has made. She realizes she is now just following the manual for being a perfect supportive wife, while Nick, unemployed and feeling similarly denied the social privilege he thought he'd earned, ends up using her support and resenting her for it. Fincher captures multiple layers of this dynamic in a brief sequence where Amy, home from work, finds Nick sprawled on the couch playing a video game. She confronts him about his expenditures while tidying up his fast-food containers and beer cans. Nick, clearly annoyed by the interruption, responds, "you can give your parents $879,000 without talking to me about it, but god forbid I buy a video game without your permission." When he soothes his stereotypically wounded masculinity by having a stereotypical affair, she sets her elaborate revenge plot in motion.

As in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Fincher expects us to be shocked by her methods. He lures us into what seems a conventional husband-kills-wife story, then explodes everything we've assumed, leading us to see Amy not as the victim, but as the villain. At the same time, though, he lets us (visually and aurally) into her real thoughts and perspectives, which heightens the chance we'll sympathize with her reasoning. That reasoning has little to do with physical or sexual abuse—though she easily exploits social assumptions about exactly these things, swaying the court of public opinion toward Nick's guilt and staging a rape–revenge narrative with Desi to finally get her way. Instead, the story is an indictment of deeply ingrained gender codes and the social narratives that help reinscribe them. Amy literally gets away with murder simply by exploiting conventional assumptions about gender and violence against women. Fincher fittingly stages her reunion with Nick against a backdrop of paparazzi and concerned citizens, as her entire revenge plot has banked on them. All of this serves to make the social norms and stories the real target for reflection and critique. If we simply condemn or heroize Amy, we're missing the point.

Fincher shows that people react to injustice with injustice. The protagonists of these stories may be morally reprehensible at times, but it is because they exist within morally reprehensible societies. By asking us to reflect on how these fictional worlds mirror our own, he asks us to see the actions of Lisbeth and Amy less as those of calculated psychopaths and more as those of women controlled by gender expectations and knowing no other way to express their anger. We are expected and taught to look down on violence, except when that violence is condoned and normalized by society itself. These two women are beaten down by the norms of society both mentally and physically, yet when they respond in kind, we must ask ourselves why we feel they have acted immorally. Fincher's portrayal of these women allows the audience to not only sympathize with these specific stories, but also to understand how the social norms they're based on hurt and limit us all. ❦

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Fincher, David, director. *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo.* 2011; Sony Pictures, 2018. DVD.

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