

I'd Do Anything For You

The Commodification of Women in Today's Romance Thriller Media

Noel Seo, Stanford University '25

Abstract: Modern “romantic thriller” media and portrayals of chivalrous male leads perpetuate misogynistic notions and greater tolerance of acceptance of gender violence. This paper utilizes a cultural and feminist lens to compare the popular TV show “You” (2018-) and the movie “Gone Girl” (2014), as they present different genders of romantic antiheroes. Analyzing the implications of this gender swap in both storyline (motives) and portrayal (voiceover and narration style) suggests that both works objectify women in heterosexual romantic relationships in different ways, despite their original feminist intent.

Content Warning: This article contains sensitive content, including analysis of discrimination and sexual harassment against women. Readers are advised to take these into account before reading.

For the past several decades, audiences have been captivated by romantic comedy and true crime genres. From these genres rises the modern “romantic thriller” – a genre that merges mystery with the pursuit of love, illustrating the possibilities of acting like detectives in our relationships. But upon closer examination, our fascination with this media genre romanticizes dangerous behavior and perpetuates gender violence, such as stalking.

Stalking can range from more extreme stalking behaviors to seemingly innocuous and even positively regarded behaviors such as romantic courtship, which are prevalent in media. The gender gap and romanticized stalking depictions are problematic for women, who may misinterpret male persistent pursuit as desirability or love (Dunn, 2002). This dangerous misconception can influence women to behave in ways that inadvertently encourage male pursuers. Through a process called “self-commodification,” media portrayals encourage these behaviors by presenting stalking and unwanted sexual attention as signs of female desirability. As defined by Joseph E. Davis, a Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia, self-commodification is “the interest of maximizing our ‘exchange value’ or ‘market worth,’ [so] that we envision ourselves as marketable objects” (Davis, 2003). Using this framework of self-commodification, this paper investigates how the media’s portrayal of chivalrous men turns female love interests into markers of societal value and how this, in turn, reinforces harmful gender power dynamics in heterosexual relationships.

This paper analyzes the hit romantic thriller TV series “You” (based on the novel by Caroline Kepnes) and the film adaptation of “Gone Girl” (based on the novel by Gillian Flynn) through a cultural and feminist lens. Both works feature voiceover narration of the antihero, albeit in different styles, discuss similar themes, and have received significant media attention. However, the gender of this antihero is male in “You” (Joe) and female in “Gone Girl” (Amy). This gender swap provides a convenient avenue to investigate parallels and divergences in their romantic relationships. Through a comparison of character motives and narration styles, this paper demonstrates how both works perpetuate female objectification in heterosexual romantic relationships, despite their original intent.

How Society Commodifies Women Through Men

Sociologist Joseph Davis presents his theory of self-commodification, where we *are* the things we buy, and our personal lives are dictated by market forces (Davis, 2003). Brands such as Tommy Hilfiger and Nike skyrocketed to popularity with their metaphorical imagery and individualism, with the message that buying their brand will allow the consumer to experience greater liberation and enhance their self-image. Davis suggests that it is through these commodities designed to enhance the self that influenced us to market ourselves.

Like successful brands, we have to “get in touch with [our] skills, the ‘selling parts’ of [our] personalit[ies], and any and every accomplishment [we] can take credit for” to craft a distinctive and socially valuable persona (Davis, 2003). We must sell ourselves and self-brand relentlessly to beat the competition; we must monitor and reinvent ourselves to stay relevant in an ever-changing market of social influences (Davis, 2003). However, heightened self-awareness

comes at the cost of living in ignorance of how we are actually perceived by others. As a result, the illusion of self-commodification can veil gender disparities that pose real consequences for women.

For instance, self-commodification as portrayed in the media is to blame for falsely empowering women. Self-commodification assures women that they are more powerful than they are in reality. Feminist and cultural critic Susan J. Douglas coins this myth “enlightened sexism,” or

“a new, subtle, sneaky form of sexism that seems to accept--even celebrate--female achievements on the surface, but is really about repudiating feminism and keeping women, especially young women, in their place” (Douglas, n.d.).

Mainstream acceptance of enlightened sexism has increased the representation of women in media, but only in ways that highlight their utility for their male co-stars.

Enlightened sexism in the context of romantic relationships presents a disconnect, then, between trying to improve for oneself versus for a partner. Feminist Francesca M. Cancian asserts that “the feminine sphere of love and the family has been split off from the masculine sphere of self-assertion and work” and self-development (Cancian, 1987). Traditional gender roles portray women as dependent and loving, and incapable of meaningful action, and men as independent and competent individuals. But a major consequence of these gender stereotypes is that they not only imply that women need heterosexual love more than men, but also that as the “more emotional ones,” women are responsible for nurturing the relationship for both parties (Cancian, 1987). The myth that women are emotionally responsible for relationships excuses men from “naturally” failing to meet their partner’s needs. It condones inappropriate emotions on their behalf, such as disinterest or rage, as well as inappropriate actions that may arise from lack of control over emotions, such as stalking and domestic violence. In this regard, and in the following media examples, society commodifies women through men, feeding them uplifting messages of purchasing power that will ultimately be used against them.

“YOU”

Joe Goldberg (played by Penn Badgley) is a white, twenty-something bookstore manager in New York looking for love. One day, he meets a woman, Beck, in his bookstore, and falls in love at first sight. However, as his desire for Beck grows, he snoops into her private accounts online, sneaks into her apartment and takes her personal belongings, and kills her ex and her friends out of jealousy. Ultimately, he makes his life’s purpose to have her at any cost, including death. On top of this twisted psychological romance storyline, “You” is told almost entirely through Joe’s voiceover narration. For instance, in the opening monologue of Joe stalking Beck in the first season, audiences “hear” Joe’s thoughts and justifications for his immoral actions. Joe’s manipulative efforts transform him into the perfect guy for Beck, someone who knows her inside and out. Even as he eventually kills Beck in an unfortunate turn of events, he still does it in the name of chivalry.

In order to understand the unintended impacts of “You,” we must first understand how Joe’s narrative affects our viewer experience. The opening scene of the pilot episode is shot from Joe’s point of view, through both camera angle and voiceover. As he scans Beck through the shelves and uses the meticulous language of a scientist picking apart his specimen, the show literally and figuratively becomes the male gaze. He narrates, “Well, hello there. Who are you? Based on your vibe, a student. Your blouse is loose.” Though Joe’s monologues are unreliable, to buy into the rom-com fantasy and mystery story, audiences are inclined to suspend their disbelief. To buy into the story, we have to temporarily view opinion as fact and spend episodes in the subconscious of a serial killer nice-guy.

But the show is risky for keeping audiences in his voiceover narration for too long. The cultural implication of this repeated exposure is spreading the misconception that because men are heard more in society, their words hold more weight than those of women (Lakoff, 1973). Other implications of taking Joe’s words at face value are understanding Joe’s unethical logic and seeing him as a relatable and forgivable character when he is not. Women get so lost in the allure of Joe and buy his tale of enlightened sexism that they forget that they are not Joe. They do not share his motives and male entitlement in their own lives, or the license to be derogatory and chaotic at one’s will. Drawing from Cancian’s comparison of feminine love and masculine independence and self-development, the show sells an idea of Joe that simply does not reflect the realities of living as a woman. Why should the thought of being and empathizing with Beck cross our minds, if she is always referred to as “You?”

According to Doyle Greene, an independent scholar and co-editor of *Film Criticism*, the show’s focus on Joe reinforces the “firstness” of man and “secondness” of woman through the firstness of voice and high culture, and secondness of writing and mass culture (Greene, 2018). Greene demonstrates how Joe’s commentary itself emphasizes patriarchal high culture through his wit, depth of character and emotion, and “pathological profundity” (Greene, 2018). Despite superficially placing one woman on a pedestal, much of Joe’s mansplaining is sexist, even towards that woman:

“He tosses out ongoing commentary as quippy, seemingly stream-of-consciousness observations about Beck (‘you majored in Lit and minored in douchebags’); her friends (‘pointless...disloyal...Instagram-able lives’); and women in general (‘the dead-eyed bulimic housewives of Soho’)” (Greene, 2018).

Joe is disillusioned about mass culture and makes women the singular scapegoat. While both Joe and Beck are associated with writing (Joe, a reader and storyteller, and Beck, a struggling writer),

“for Joe this is a gateway to link him to the firstness of high culture and consign Beck to the secondness of mass culture, a relationship Andreas Huyssen argued is itself gendered: ‘mass culture as woman.’[3]” (Greene, 2018).

The show perpetuates this myth as well, by portraying Beck’s “counter-narrative” in the form of superficial on-screen text messages: “Follow your dreams-in the meantime mac and cheese!” One of the few instances where Beck uses her voice meaningfully is when she

drunkenly reads poetry at a night bar off her phone— and even then she is heckled by a man. By trying to highlight flawed human nature in Joe’s narration, the show silences Beck as a powerless and useless individual. It silences Beck indirectly as well, by keeping her in a bubble of ignorant bliss, oblivious to the problems around her.

By presenting Beck as an ignorant victim of mass culture and Joe as a cultured Romeo, the show has another opportunity to present Joe as a “savior” to audiences. Through Joe’s persistent investigations, he uncovers layer after layer of Beck’s problems. He discovers her abusive ex, unethical male therapist, predatory graduate school advisor, and estranged father (Dominguez, 2022). It is through his point of view and monologues that the audience learns to view Beck as a complex love interest. The natural conclusion is that Joe must be good for her. He understands her on a deeper level and accepts her despite her flaws —as “true love” should be, according to romantic stereotypes. To the audience, it is easy to focus on Joe. Joe is the main character. He is a kind person willing to love a broken soul and the show is about his efforts to do so. But what is the difference between Joe and her male therapist that pursues an affair with her?

Unlike the show, if we shift the focus back to Beck, it becomes apparent that Joe is part of the problem. Beck’s brokenness is a product of suffering from the men in her life. She has constantly been taken advantage of and manipulated by men with ulterior motives, and Joe is only adding to that list. Showcasing Beck as an unaffected, happy person hides the “range of negative psychological states, including anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicidality” experienced by real stalking victims (Lippman, 2015). Even in the rare instances where the show reveals Beck’s emotional suffering, it is not explicitly tied to her interactions with Joe. In addition, it is problematic that the show capitalizes on Beck’s trauma (Dominguez, 2022). There is something sinister about Joe’s obsession with Beck’s trauma and his trying to fix her life. There is something perverted about attempting to right the wrongs of his life with this new love interest and making commentary on every aspect of her life that he finds problematic. The pattern is repeated in later seasons, where his desire to protect and love extends to vulnerable non-white and younger women, such as a Latinx teenage orphan and an African-American single mother (Vincent, 2019). Joe’s motivations in pursuing these women are driven by male entitlement and his savior complex, aspects of today’s misogynistic mass culture.

Joe is oblivious to how he benefits from and perpetuates this misogynistic mass culture, which blinds female audiences to his harmful capacity. Several ironies in the show illustrate this fact. He frowns upon mass-produced, pop culture books and “the regime of ‘Dan Brown chasers’” who read them, despite these readers forming the basis of his living as a bookkeeper. Despite hating these books, one of his favorite books is *Don Quixote*, a mainstream book about chivalry: To Joe, “the simple message of *Don Quixote* is ‘Chivalry...treating people with respect: especially women.’” (Greene, 2018). Joe incorrectly takes this message at face value. He is disconnected from the common interpretation of *Don Quixote* as mocking chivalry and thinks it is praising it. Similar to female audiences who resonate with Joe, Joe empathizes with the

delusional Quixote that thinks he is saving the world. Consequently, when Joe masturbates outside Beck's window, assaults Beck's drug dealer, and kidnaps her boyfriend Benji, the show portrays a "perverted yet noble quest for true love in which Joe is not only Beck's romantic suitor but ordained protector" (Greene, 2018). A final irony is that the book *YOU* and TV show, and by extension Joe's life, is a carefully curated, mass-produced, romance thriller bestseller. "You" is really about Joe, a man who needs a woman to fulfill his self-conception as a man. So, the mass culture he proclaims to hate is in fact the ideal environment for him to present and view himself the way he wants and live freely without a conscience.

In this way, Joe markets himself and commodifies his female love interests. Across all seasons, he flaunts his good looks, appreciation for high culture, and kindness towards women and children, at least when he wants to. His narration is calculating and pragmatic, with intelligence that impresses and wit that charms. He feels that he deserves respect as a man taking upon himself to cultivate a successful romantic relationship. Echoing Cancian, society tends to place the responsibility of love on women's shoulders (Cancian, 1987). So Joe stalks and works incessantly behind the scenes to win Beck and us over. Ultimately, he hooks us with his dedication to those he claims to love. As Los Angeles-based TV editor Liz Shannon Miller puts it,

"He's not *stalking* her, you see — he just needs to know a little more about her so that he doesn't get hurt. And then he needs to help make sure that *she* doesn't get hurt by the people in her life, or by her own choices... and he's not afraid to do what it takes to ensure that" (Miller, 2018).

We learn to see him how he wants in the end, as a flawed individual with good intentions, by repeated exposure to his rationales and the willful ignorance of other characters in the show.

Some male characters in "You" validate Joe's romantic conquest and blatantly encourage stalking. For example, Joe's coworker Ethan fuels his interest in Beck by saying, "I'd be googling the hell out of her right now. You know her full name." The show sells stalking in a positive light by presenting alternative interpretations of resourcefulness, cautiousness, and again, dedication. Joe states, "I should have seen the signs. But we never do when we're in love," making viewers think that he is only trying to protect himself and the relationship. Moreover, Joe profiles first digitally, then physically. He follows Beck to her apartment often, uses multiple social media platforms to learn about her interests and friends, and hacks into her phone to read her texts. In one scene, Joe stalks Beck's location to a subway station and manages to save her from being hit by a train. These scenes that frame Joe as the savior lead audiences to permit his stalking because "he goes to the limit for her, not against her; it does not harm her, but 'for' her" (Carvalho, 2020).

But the reality stands: Joe's obsession with his reputation does not consider women and has terrible consequences for them. On his essay about seductive algorithms that capture our attention, Luis Carvalho writes that

"Joe constantly shows an intention to 'make Beck a better person' or 'make her life better,' saying that he will cook for her, take care of her books, set passwords on his

devices, or even ‘improve’ his friendships. Beck does not ask for it, not even figuratively” (Carvalho, 2020).

What does Joe actually do for Beck? He murders her ex and best friend only to murder her as well, once she rejects his love. From the first monologue, he commodifies her, observing her clothes and making judgments about her character. He attributes the failure of the relationship to Beck’s shortcomings and her unwillingness to reciprocate and understand his actions for her. The final stab in the back is that Beck was about to catch her big break— she wrote a book about her relationship with Joe, but didn’t live to see it published. Joe published it in her name, “fulfilling” her aspirations of becoming a successful writer and rising as her savior one last time. But the irony of Joe stripping Beck of agency in her novel and in the show suggests that she was merely a tool to build Joe’s brand, and thus, the show’s brand.

Some may disagree, claiming that “You” is a feminist show. In an interview with the New York Times, Sera Gamble, the writer and co-producer of the TV adaptation of “You” and Caroline Kepner, the author of the corresponding novel state that the purpose of the show is to uncover instances of toxic masculinity in rom-coms’ “fantasy mode of storytelling” (St. James, 2019). Gamble and Kepner drew from their personal experiences and the rom-coms they had grown up with to create the show:

“Our goal was, when you come in on that first scene [in “You”], you really do feel like you’re in a scene that, eight or 10 years ago, would have been a young Matthew McConaughey and Kate Hudson. They are both bright and thoughtful and intelligent, and have been hurt before, but they’re open to possibilities” (Berman, 2018).

The show plays on rom-com notions of entitlement to love and desire to force a happily-ever-after in its meta voiceover commentary: for instance, when Joe is almost caught sneaking into Beck’s apartment, he says, “I’ve seen enough romantic comedies to know guys like me are always getting into jams like this.” Although the creators purport that “You” warns viewers of “the disturbing reality of romance taken too far,” (Berman, 2018), letting viewers into Joe’s stream of consciousness have the opposite effect.

Just look at “You’s” ratings and viewership. It has a 92% “fresh” critic score and 81% audience score on Rotten Tomatoes (Rotten Tomatoes) and a 7.7/10 rating on IMDb (IMDb). Time after time again, the show has topped Netflix’s “Top 10” charts (The New York Times), and Netflix has reported that 72% of the show’s viewership is female (Insider). As it appears, female audiences crave season after season of twisted Joe Goldberg “charm.” There are a concerning number of genuine and vocal Joe fans. According to Penn Badgley (the actor who plays Joe), fans have sent him the following tweets: “kidnap me pls”; “I’m telling u it’s ur face that does it. Ur gorgeous. I can see past that crazy sh*t lol”; “Said this already but @PennBadgley is breaking my heart once again as Joe. What is it about him? ?” (Gawley, 2019). The shocking media response indicates that “You” is not nearly as subversive as it seems, and that glorified media portrayal of romantic men overshadows the creators’ feminist messages.

“Gone Girl”

In contrast to “You,” David Fincher’s “Gone Girl” features a female antihero. The film opens with an image of Amy Dunne, a white, affluent, picture-perfect blonde. “Amazing Amy” is a childhood star, Harvard graduate, and seemingly happy wife to Nick Dunne. As the first half of the film investigates Amy’s disappearance, Nick and Amy alternate voiceovers. Amy’s voiceovers are accompanied by flashbacks and journal entries, in which she details the timeline of their relationship. After they marry, they lose their jobs to the recession. Nick grows more distant from Amy, hitting her in a moment of passion, and having an affair. In the meantime, the police find evidence that implicates Nick for murdering Amy.

Halfway through the film, however, the film switches starkly to Amy’s narration without the diary, as she explains how she framed her husband for her murder. Everything from the diary to her pregnancy is revealed to be fake, a dramatic plot device to contribute to the story of Amy’s happily-ever-after: how she shapes her husband into the man she wants him to be. And though Amy felt justified in tarnishing her husband’s reputation, she had also planned to drown herself, as she saw nothing more to live for without him. While Nick lawyers up at home, Amy stalks him through TV news reports in an isolated campground in the Ozarks and moves into her ex’s place. But when she sees Nick’s public apology on national TV and his desire to make things right with her (despite this being a ruse to lure Amy home), she cultivates a story of how she escaped from her “abusive” ex to return to Nick and become the “perfect couple.”

Like “You,” “Gone Girl” has received significant media attention and praise. As Patrick Osborne, a literature professor at Florida State University states, it is an “ingenious and original take on the classic whodunit that consistently manipulates the reader with shocking plot-twists and unreliable narrators” (Osborne, n.d.). According to book editor Maris Kreizman, the domestic suspense novel is “marketed mostly to women (as always) as a dark-covered fast-paced thrill ride” but “feature[s] an anti-heroine (at long last), or at the very least a main character whose defining quality isn’t ‘likable’” (Kreizman, 2022). To Kreizman, “Gone Girl’s” feminine dark side is a plus for representation and liberation. However, these portrayals of female vengeance are controversial. In “You” we have seen how overly sympathizing with a character can cultivate inaccurate expectations for romantic relationships and self-perceptions. Is “Gone Girl” truly liberating, or is it another example of enlightened sexism in the media? And are Amy’s actions truly feminist, as a woman suffering under justifiable circumstances, or are she and Joe the same?

On the surface, “Gone Girl” is a reclamation of female power in a heterosexual relationship. However, a closer inspection of Amy’s motivations and nuanced depictions of female powerlessness tells a story of a woman who is corrupted by her husband’s physical violence and disrespect. Instead of being empowering, Amy’s erratic behaviors of stalking, blackmailing, lying and murdering are a reflection of desperation and inability to cope with her situation. To escape the suffering created by her husband and the patriarchal expectations that have commodified her into a trophy wife, she turns to these unhealthy and drastic coping mechanisms. Even after her revenge arc, it is clear that Amy is at the will of her husband: Nick pretends to love her on national TV. Amy returns to him with that superficial declaration,

realizing that society and herself only see and value her as Nick's wife. In this way, "Gone Girl" indirectly shows how expectations of romantic men (in the media, or in this case, in Amy's glorified diary entries and flashbacks) can cause lasting psychological damage to women.

Amy's backstory extends this narrative of female commodification. She has been relentlessly self-branding her entire life as the perfect daughter and wife (Kanjilal, 2016). Amy's perfectly scripted journal is the embodiment of her self-branding. Drawing from Greene's secondness of women through writing and mass culture, the directorial decision to depict a faceless Amy writing in multiple scenes highlights her inferiority. The effect is more pronounced given that her diary words are performative and insignificant compared to how Amy truly feels, which is revealed later on (Szarvas, 2018). She details her progressing romance with vapid entries like "I'm so crazy, stupid, happy, I met a boy. A great, sweet, gorgeous, cool-ass guy" and "We're so cute. I wanna punch us in the face." Diary Amy is femininity embodied. And this notion is not new—society is used to seeing women "express themselves" in diaries in rom-coms such as "Bridget Jones' Diary" (Szarvas, 2018). Furthering the point that Amy's identity is constrained to writing mediums, she is the subject of her parents' successful "Amazing Amy" children's book series. With book titles like "Amazing Amy: Meets Her Match" and "Amazing Amy: And the Big Day," Amy narrates that her parents essentially plagiarized her childhood: "The night begins with me, regular, flawed, real Amy, jealous as always of the golden child, perfect, brilliant, amazing Amy." She is also a personality quiz writer for women's magazines, an occupation that revolves around superficially helping women understand and brand themselves better.

Amy's writing parallels Beck's in "You" as a form of storytelling that fails to contribute real meaning to their lives. Remaining in this fantasy fiction world severely disillusioned both women to the point of death or insanity. As the latter, Amy attempts to force her expectations into reality through violent and unethical acts: "The things Amy fabricated for her diary are presently becoming true. There really is a baby now, and Nick really does push her" (Meyer, 2021). The women's vulnerabilities stand in stark contrast to their male counterparts. Joe clearly controls Beck's and his viewers' perceptions of him. Likewise, Nick is judged by his words. When the public thinks that Nick had an affair and killed his wife, Nick gives a speech in a nationally broadcasted interview. Nick's words alone shift public favor and trust back to him. This speech contrasts with scenes of Amy cutting herself, lying in a hospital bed, and walking out of a car wounded amid a sea of paparazzi. Whereas Joe and Nick's words speak for themselves, the film reduces Amy's identity to pointless writing unless she proves her worth through crazy actions (Szarvas, 2018). Her actions force her husband not only to fear her, but acknowledge her as a human (Kanjilal, 2016).

This is the key difference between Joe's and Amy's stories: Amy has been commodified by men and patriarchal institutions all her life, and as a result, she internalizes her experiences as self-commodification. Amy has been conditioned to be the perfect wife. She grows into a figure of femininity and then contorts her value to the market fluctuations of Nick, once he enters her life:

“Nick loved a girl I was pretending to be. “Cool girl.” Men always use that, don’t they?... Cool girl is hot. Cool girl is game. Cool girl is fun. Cool girl never gets angry at her man. She only smiles in a chagrined, loving manner, and then presents her mouth for fucking.”

But as director David Fincher comments, the film is about the resentment and dissonance that arises when one party in a relationship decides that they are done being the ideal partner (James, 2014). In many cases, this party tends to be male, and the pattern is no different in “Gone Girl.” Amy devotes herself to Nick only for him not to keep up his end of the bargain: he eventually cheats on her with Andie, who

“is submissive to Nick’s desires and grants him the entitlement he feels towards his hegemonic masculinity. She is easy to get along with, does not make demands, and never scowls at him. Such submission ultimately makes him believe true love is ‘*the permission to just be the man you are*’ (*Gone Girl* 204, emphasis in original)” (Osborne, n.d.).

Osborne’s statement falls in line with Cancian’s reasoning of male independence and feminine responsibility for love. Nick believes he is entitled to be himself and cheat with other women to fuel his masculine ego, while Amy believes she is the one who suffers the most in their marriage and has to fix it. And in this sense, Nick is detached from Amy’s suffering in marriage. Marital hardships are a blow to *her* competency, a reflection of her failures as a woman, and a dissolution of everything she was promised if she played wife (Kanjilal, 2016). For Amy, this realization shatters her illusion of love in marriage. Her reality is that marriage is about commitment: a partner that can provide a constant source of recognition, respect, and self-worth in a suffocating, patriarchal society.

Like Joe in “You,” Amy embarks on a journey to make her relationship work. But for Amy, it is destined for failure. She attempts to commodify Nick as he and society have commodified her all her life: “But I made him sharper, smarter. I inspired him to rise to my level. I forged the man of my dreams.” While Amy’s remarks seem to connote agency in the moment, they fail to be executed when looking at the film as a whole. Amy attempts to manipulate Nick and the public can be viewed as empowering, but in the end, Amy is reluctant to take any concrete action against him. She never harms Nick physically or financially. In contrast to Joe, when she says “I would never, ever hurt you,” she really does mean it. Amy also internalizes the relationship to a greater extent than Joe does. Joe’s fantasies, fulfilled or failed, live on in his mind. After Beck passes, Joe is able to move on with his life and chases other women. But without Nick or other people’s love and approval, Amy doesn’t see a point in living (Tsintziras, 2023). When Nick goes home to visit a sick relative, she says,

“I don’t know if he’s happy I’m with him. I feel like something he loaded by mistake. Something to be jettisoned if necessary. Something disposable. I feel like I can disappear.”

Gillian Flynn states that “Gone Girl” provides “a satirical response to violence against women perpetuated by patriarchal simulations in the media that construct idealized notions of love and marriage” (Osborne, n.d.). But this is a rare moment where Amy is honest with her reality, and the film is honest with the reality of most women. Hence, the title “Gone Girl”

emphasizes “the sense of identity of a girl had disappeared and in the end she became a woman who got into the man’s world and needed to follow the man’s standard of becoming a woman” (Aditya, 2016). Consequently, society views the woman as lost and crazy (Kanjilal, 2016). Whether told by a male or female narrator, the romantic thriller genre filled with satire, intellectual mind games, and dark humor are coping mechanisms. Presenting women’s realities in a more dramatic and twisted way diverts attention from their physical and psychological suffering. This latent discrimination ultimately puts women at an increased risk for inter-relational violence.

Conclusion

According to the U.S. Department of Justice’s National Crime Victimization Survey, 74% of 3.4 million Americans stalked annually were female and 68% of stalkers were male (Baum et al., 2009). More concerning is the fact that only “43% of college stalking victims who meet the legal criteria of ‘stalking’ do not identify their experience as ‘stalking’” (Stalking Prevention, Awareness, and Resource Center, 2021), which illustrates the far-reaching effects of cultural ignorance around gender disparities. Instead, female audiences are prone to internalize self-commodification and value themselves on their ability to attract sexual attention from men. The comparative analysis of “You” and “Gone Girl” demonstrates how media portrayals of romantic, independent men and vulnerable, superficial women result in disastrous consequences for women on-screen and in real life. Self-commodification and enlightened sexism blind women to the ways in which they make themselves vulnerable to stalking, sexual harm, and other forms of male oppression.

Ultimately, we must disconnect from ourselves, and shift our attention to the “you” and the “gone girl.” We must recognize that women matter on an individual and nuanced basis. Their stories are worthy of standing alone, showcasing the value of their identity and experiences, while also drawing attention to the patriarchal norms they are subjected to and betrayed by daily. Women need to be given greater agency in the ways they are perceived. Truly seeing a woman is seeing her in the ways that she wants to matter.

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