

*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo: A Feminist Critique of Lisbeth Salander*

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## INTRODUCTION

Hailing from Sweden, the first installment of Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* trilogy, *Män som hatar kvinnor*, literally translates to "Men Who Hate Women." Before making its way to American audiences the overtly misogynistic title was changed to adopt a much more neutral semblance. In 2011 the American film adaptation of Larsson's bestselling crime novel premiered in theatres as *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Although the American title makes an unassuming impression, director David Fincher maintains the original misogynistic essence of the plot. Within the film audiences are presented with a collection of patriarchal messages that perpetuate the ongoing subjugation of women in the workplace and within interpersonal relationships. The film's protagonist, Lisbeth Salander, a brilliant computer hacker and social outcast, rejects all stereotypical conventions of the female heroine. Throughout the film audiences are captivated by her cunning bravery to seek revenge against those who abuse their power. A supposed vigilante for women's rights, Lisbeth soon finds herself struggling to maintain her solitude as she develops feelings for her coworker, Mikael Blomkvist. In the American film version of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Lisbeth seemingly defies all societal expectations and gender norms; however, upon closer examination it is clear that her character successfully fulfills the objectified female role as prescribed by the male gaze.

Since its publication in 2005, the crime novel series has achieved great success selling more than 60 million copies in over 50 countries (Stieg Larsson). An instant international phenomenon, Larsson has been praised by many as being the greatest Swedish author since Astrid Lindgren wrote her famous children's story *Pippi Longstocking* in 1945. After receiving numerous awards and reigning atop the best-sellers list the novel was soon adapted to screenplay in its native Sweden in 2009. Capitalizing on the success of the Swedish film and the best-selling

series, an English film version was quickly adapted to suit American audiences. In 2011 the American film version of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* premiered in theatres with much anticipation, grossing over \$230 million dollars worldwide during its theatrical run (Box Office Mojo). With the highly sought-after Daniel Craig, famous for his role as James Bond, starring as Mikael Blomkvist and newcomer Rooney Mara making a sinister portrayal of the highly disturbed Lisbeth Salander, the film and its stars have become household names. Today, the immense popularity of this highly sexualized narrative of corporate corruption, violence, and murder is proof that audiences will continue to devour these types of messages despite their hegemonic ideologies. The danger with this film is that Lisbeth's savage revenge is glorified in a way that promotes not only a tolerance, but an expectation, for violence as a way to seek retribution. The message, it seems, is that the institutional powers in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* are established within deeply rooted patriarchal ideals and the only way to relinquish oneself from this hold is by taking the problem into your own hands. A more effective method to relieving the problem would be to lift the veil of oppression in order to expose the dominations of power at work.

The film opens with an eerie phone call between two men discussing the delivery of a package, a framed nature display. The audience is unaware of who these men are; however, it is evident through their conversation that this is a regular occurrence as they are both able to finish each other's sentences. Following this eerie scene, we are introduced to Mikael Blomkvist as he exits a courthouse bombarded by reporters. Mikael, the co-owner of *Millennium* magazine, is an investigative finance and politics journalist who has been convicted of libel. Mikael's conviction is a central theme throughout the film as he works to prove his innocence against the charges pressed by Hans-Erik Wennerström, a very powerful and influential businessman. Following the

recipe for a classic “locked room mystery,” a sub genre of literature in which the purported crime occurs under seemingly impossible circumstances, the relationship between these characters begins to unravel as the identity of the man who received the nature display is revealed. In regard to locked room mysteries, it is important to take into consideration an important tenet of the genre as postulated by the British Broadcasting Corporation: “writers of locked room mysteries are not interested in the psychology of the killer, or the drink problem of the detective. What fascinates them is the thrill of setting up a fiendish crime, and challenging the reader to solve it.” Adhering to this tenet, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* challenges the audience throughout the film to solve the mystery by making connections between characters.

The man who received the package in the opening scene is Henrik Vanger, former CEO of Vanger Industries, one of the most prominent and profitable family-owned conglomerates in Sweden. For the past 40 years Henrik has received a framed nature display from an anonymous party whom he believes is the murderer of his grandniece, Harriet. Tortured by the unsolved disappearance of his grandniece, Henrik recruits Mikael to help him solve the cold case. As an incentive Henrik shares with Mikael that Wennerström was a former employee of his and promises to provide damning evidence that Mikael can use to appeal his innocence. With his reputation discredited, Mikael sees no other option than to help Henrik solve the missing persons case. Henrik summons Milton Security looking to hire their top surveillance agent to help assist with the investigation.

Arriving to Milton Security for a meeting with Henrik’s attorney, Lisbeth makes a bold entrance via motorcycle. Dressed in all black, a stark contrast to her pale skin, Lisbeth draws strange looks as people stare at her Mohawk hairstyle and multiple facial piercings. Dragan Armansky, CEO of Milton Security, appreciates Lisbeth’s talents and has provided her with

great flexibility in the workplace, making her a rare sight in the office. In the film, Dragan expresses compassion towards the troubled Lisbeth and is a beacon of hope for equality. Dragan forewarns the attorney that he may find her peculiar, stating that, "I'm concerned you won't like her. She's different." When the attorney asks, "in what way?" he responds simply and quite accurately, "in every way." Despite her hostility during the meeting, Lisbeth's extremely detailed report is so impressive that she is offered the job with Mikael. This assignment will ultimately change both their lives and take them on a whirlwind adventure solving a crime much larger than anyone could have ever anticipated.

Unfortunately, having died from a massive heart attack a year before the *Millennium* trilogy was published, Larsson never lived to see the impact that his novels would make in popular culture. Born in Skelleftehamn, Sweden, in 1954, Larsson spent his early years under the care of his maternal grandparents. His grandfather, who he would later cite as one of his greatest role models, was a political activist and had spent time in prison for opposing the Nazi party (Karl Stig-Erland Larsson). After the death of his grandfather at the age of nine years old Larsson moved in with his father; however, his early exposure to extreme politics forever left a mark on him and he would later make a career for himself as a journalist writing in support of various left-wing extremists. In a website devoted to the author it is noted that, "before his career as a writer, Stieg Larsson was mostly known for his struggle against racism and right-wing extremism" (Stieg Larsson). Growing up during the Vietnam War, politics remained a mainstay in Larsson's life even after moving in with his father. Larsson's father recalls that the two "discussed politics at some length at the dinner table. When Stieg was fourteen I found myself losing an argument in a discussion with him. He just had better arguments than his mother and I" (Karl Stig-Erland Larsson). Larsson's life-long interest in politics is echoed

throughout *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* as he brings forth topics of gender inequality and questions of hegemony through the construction of characters and social institutions.

Audiences who are familiar with the original Swedish take on *The Girl with The Dragon Tattoo*, directed by Niels Arden Opley, seem to be on the fence about the American version. Both movies tie with an 86% approval rating on Rottentomatoes.com with some critics praising Fincher for an extremely well executed adaptation and others criticizing him for a lack of creativity separate from the original version. FoxNews.com critic, Justin Craig, applauds both Fincher and screenwriter Steve Zaillian for their collaboration stating, “Steve Zaillian’s script trims some of the novel’s fat, keeping the film a lean, mean and frightening beast.” Others, however, note the challenges of creating a remake, acknowledging that fans of the original version will often times have much stronger sentiments against drastic changes. In his article, “‘Tattoo’: Raw, Rousing and Rather Redundant,” critic Joe Morgenstern makes a negative comparison between Opley and Fincher, arguing that the Swedish portrayal of Lisbeth is much more emotionally charged compared to the American Lisbeth who is meek and “recessive.” In pointing out the drawbacks of recreating the Swedish film, Morgenstern claims that the American remake “may leave fans of the original feeling alienated.” Morgenstern makes the argument that the remaking of a foreign film is not meant to appeal the original fans; rather, the film is adapted with the goal of gaining a new following. Referring to Fincher’s American adaptation Morgenstern makes the assertion that the “fans of the original are not, to be sure, the remake’s main target audience. Americans don’t turn out in massive numbers for foreign-language films, even when they’re as popular as this one was.” The retitling of the film from “Men Who Hate Women” to *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* is a clear indication that the

English version is altered to conform specifically to the accepted social establishments of American audiences.

## METHOD

In his influential article, “The Ideological Turn in Modern Criticism,” Philip Wander discusses the necessity of ideological criticism. Wander recounts the history of “ideology,” crediting French revolutionaries with first using the term to refer to the critical study of ideas (Wander 77). Marxism is also commonly associated with ideological critics because of its method of analyzing the way powers benefit dominant institutions. The distribution of products in a Communistic fashion has led some Marxist critics to believe that ideological forms have developed into far more than just abstract concepts such as values and beliefs but are also tangibly grounded, stating, “they have a material existence and are embodied in cultural institutions such as schools, churches, and political parties and in artifacts such as paintings, novels, and speeches” (Foss 212). This claim extends the pervasiveness of ideological powers from a philosophical realm into real world establishments, placing even greater control over subordinated groups. Today, the advent of technology has allowed ideologies that are detrimental to women to flourish in cinema.

Sonja Foss gives a concise definition of the word “ideology” in her book *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. “An ideology is a pattern of beliefs that determines a group’s interpretation of some aspect(s) of the world. These beliefs reflect a group’s ‘fundamental social, economic, political or cultural interests’” (209). Both Foss and Wander agree that ideologies are rhetorical mechanisms that may work to support or perpetuate the interests of dominant institutions while subverting the authority of minority groups. Foss writes, “a dominant ideology controls what participants see as natural or obvious by establishing the



norm” (210). An important term Foss associates with ideological criticism is hegemony. Foss explains how multiple ideologies may be present within any given culture; however, when certain ideologies are repressed and others privileged, a hegemonic ideology is developed. Hegemony is the privileging of the ideology of one group over that of other groups, thus, creating a form of domination (Foss 210). Patriarchy is a pervasive ideology found within many socio-political institutions and rhetorical artifacts. Patriarchy is rooted in feminist theory and is the privileging of male power over women, children, and property. Dimensions of patriarchy can be observed across many different levels of the public and private spheres ranging from social constructions to the prevailing practices of political institutions. Although issues of gender equality are at the forefront of patriarchy, women are not the only group affected by this ideology. Feminist theorist David Richards extends the definition to other groups stating that patriarchy is an unjust social system that enforces gender roles and is oppressive to both men and women (143). In this sense, patriarchal ideologies can be detrimental to minority groups, including men, who deviate from the traditional Eurocentric ideal of the white male. Women, racially ethnic minorities, and the handicapped are all groups that are vulnerable to patriarchal domination.

In terms of hegemony and patriarchy, when taking issues of power into consideration one must also consider the ways in which gender is being constructed. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell writes about the oxymoronic relationship between the rhetoric applied in the women’s liberation movement and gender construction. In “The Rhetoric of Women’s Liberation: An Oxymoron,” Campbell makes a startling conclusion about the contradiction found in the construction of feminism and the ideologies that the women’s liberation movement is supposed to represent. Campbell argues that, “the sex role requirements for women contradict the dominant values of

American culture – self-reliance, achievement, and independence” (563). Analyzing the incoherency of the movement, Campbell states that the women’s liberation movement is more accurately defined as a “state of mind” rather than a “movement” because it is primarily a rhetorical manifestation (562). Campbell’s critique of female sex role requirements proposes the question of the amount of agency afforded to them. Agency is the amount of freedom afforded to an individual to make decisions. The argument Campbell makes is that women have historically been denied basic human rights. The notion that “men are male *humans* whereas women are human *females*” has limited the amount of agency women have in pursuing goals outside the traditional household and childrearing sectors (Campbell 564). In order to begin unraveling the complexities of powers at work within *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, one must take into consideration the construction of agency in regard to the way gender roles have been portrayed women in the media and, more specifically, in film.

In her landmark essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey uses a psychoanalytical approach to understand the reasons why cinema has evolved to become predominantly phallogentric. Basing her postulations on the work of Sigmund Freud, Mulvey explains how representations of female characters in cinema perpetuate pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have molded them (Mulvey 833). Preexisting patterns of fascination can be summed up by Freud’s idea of scopophilia, the taking of other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze (Mulvey 835). Scopophilia, Freud argues, is a compulsion initiated during childhood that later has the potential to develop into an extreme narcissistic fixation on the viewing of others as objects for sexual pleasure. Freud’s notion of scopophilia is a key

mechanism that facilitates patriarchal ideologies and will be essential for analyzing the relationships between the characters in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.

In addition to scopophilia as a driving mechanism behind patriarchy, Mulvey's notion of the *male gaze* will also serve as a key concept in understanding the construction of gender roles in the film. The male gaze was a term published by Mulvey in 1975 that has since been regarded as one of the most pivotal arguments in feminist film theory and media studies. The defining characteristic of the male gaze is that the audience is forced to see an artifact through the perspective of a heterosexual male, denying women of their agency and positioning them as mere objects (Male Gaze). In the section titled, "Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look," Mulvey analyzes the presence of women in mainstream films only to conclude that their purpose in film is to satisfy the fantasy projected on to the female form through the male gaze. The male gaze, thus, is essentially the reason why women in mainstream films are traditionally styled in ways that elicit an erotic "to-be-looked-at-ness." Depicting women as sexual objects has become a normalized and indispensable element of mainstream films that is not only accepted by society, but expected, in order to appease audiences and succeed in the box office. Mulvey writes that traditionally, "the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium" (Mulvey 838). Further analyzing female characters in popular films, Mulvey finds a common theme: "she is isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualized" (Mulvey 840). The subjugation of women in this way has had negative repercussions on the development of women as respected and viable members of society and, in the case of Lisbeth, on female characters that do not adhere to the traditional "male gaze." Instead, masculine or androgynous characters such as Lisbeth are most often times ostracized and denied the opportunity to emerge victorious.

The residual affects of these limitations have also had a negative affect on the way women view themselves as viable members of society. The patriarchal composition of American society has left women with negative self-concepts, using words such as “uncertain,” “anxious,” and “nervous” to describe themselves (Campbell 565). The seriousness of this problem extends much farther than just low self-esteem; instead, it places drastic limitations on women’s ability to act as potential agents of change (Campbell 565). If women are blinded from their potential to enact change then the current patriarchal ideology that constitutes much of society will continue to prevail. In order for change to be given an opportunity to develop, it is crucial that one take a critical approach to criticism as postulated by Wander. Wander states that modern criticism takes an ideological turn when it recognizes the existence of powerful vested interests, when we realize that we search for alternatives and that the situation is being constructed, and, most importantly, when it considers the existence of crisis (92). The gender inequality that has left women and minority groups subordinated to white male power is a crisis to say the least, and issue that must be addressed. Furthermore, the current social construction of gender roles generates great criticism against those who do not act accordingly, such as in the case of Lisbeth who rejects all societal expectations.

In the film, androgyny is used as a powerful tool to flatly reject societal expectations. The *Encyclopedia of Popular Culture* recounts the history of androgyny in the media, tracing its roots to as early as the 1930s when German movie star Marlene Dietrich starred in a seductive photo spread wearing men’s suits. Shocking audiences of the time, the blurring of the sexes has since become a mainstay in popular culture, gaining extreme popularity especially amongst gay and lesbian audiences. The 1960s was the pinnacle of androgynous celebration in American pop culture with artists such as David Bowie and Elton John pushing the costuming limits to an

extreme complete with vinyl pants, feather boas, and heavy stage make-up. The glam scene flourished for decades well into the 1980s with bands such as Poison and Motley Crue acting as oxymoronic agents of androgyny by cross-dressing and wearing make-up yet performing derogatory lyrics against women. Peaking at number 12 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 in 1987, Motley Crue's single, "Girls, Girls, Girls," is an ode to hardworking strippers stating: "Long legs and burgundy lips/ Girls, girls, girls/ Dancin' down on the Sunset Strip." These lyrics clearly place women within the male gaze yet ironically the music video shows the men wearing heavy eyeliner and teased hair. Audiences seem to have accepted androgyny in this extreme fashion as entertainment; however, figures who express themselves in subtly androgynous ways have found it hard to find acceptance because despite the great success of the "glam" scene, male and female cross-dressing has often been given unequal weight and meaning in American cinematography (Fentner 86). For these characters, including Lisbeth, resistance to the male gaze has ostracized them as "the Other."

The Other, a term studied by psychologist Edward E. Sampson, is a notion that attacks Western culture's centuries-long preoccupation with a contained, individualistic, monologic Self and its fearful suppression of all that is Other – all that is experienced as different from the implicit, self-affirming white male standard (Sampson 207). Sampson claims that this view places a greater emphasis on the protagonist, or in other words, the male gaze, making the Other service his own interests, desires and fears, than on others as viable people in their own right (Sampson 207). Similarities between Mulvey's notion of the male gaze and Sampson's the Other can be drawn in that both ideologies dominant interests are vested in white males while Others, including women and racial minorities, are constructed to serve these interests. Frances E. Macias-Lees also analyzes the concept of the Other in her essay, "The Other as Fetish," claiming

that “the obsessive use of the ‘other’ reveals fetishism... for the term takes on its contemporary meaning only when it is understood as part of a pair, self/other” (Mascia-Lees 339). This may explain the cause for audience’s widespread interest with Lisbeth’s character despite her failure to adhere to the traditional sense of the male gaze. Analyzing our culture’s obsession with the Other, Macias-Lees claims that, “a look at numerous contemporary texts in critical theory – whether in anthropology, literary criticism, or cultural studies – reveals this fixation” (Macias-Lees 338). The claim that the Othering of subordinate groups cannot stand without involving the Self speaks to Western culture’s concern to maintain autonomy, making the acceptance of minority groups difficult.

Recently, postfeminist scholars have tried to combat this issue by addressing social constructs that facilitate patriarchal ideologies. In his essay, *Representative Men: Unfreezing the Male Gaze*, Sam B. Girgus expands on Mulvey’s essay arguing that the “patriarchal male gaze governs all elements of cinema from production and presentation to viewing, reception, and discourse” (215). Unlike Mulvey, however, Girgus uses the work of other postfeminist scholars to address rigid ideologies of masculine dominance and female passivity, advocating the need to break down barriers that place women in compliant positions. To provide background for this argument Girgus notes that for the past two decades film criticism in academic and scholarly centers has focused on feminist issues and questions (215). Girgus argues that presuming that women’s experiences are subservient to the male gaze actually causes more harm by perpetuating the patriarchal relationship. Instead, he suggests a new discourse on masculinity and male subjectivity that equals the playing field in what Pam Cook calls “a genuinely hybrid film culture.” According to Cook, this new hybrid culture would refuse to define subjectivity according to prescribed and rigid notions of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity (Girgus 216). Using

the work of postfeminist scholars may be the key to discovering the reasons why *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* garnered so much success.

For this analysis, I will combine feminist and ideological methods to reveal the power structures at work in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. The process will involve first identifying the way gender is constructed and the analysis of the presented power structures. I will then analyze what these elements suggest about the way female characters in the film are treated differently according to their adherence, or defiance, to gender roles. Postfeminist ideologies will serve key in understanding how Lisbeth's unconventional persona helped make this film an international success and what that says about the future of American cinematography. This analysis will then show how patriarchy is both resisted and supported in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.

## ANALYSIS

In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Lisbeth's character goes against conventional ideals of femininity. At a glance, it seems that Lisbeth's total rejection of the traditional "glamorous" image as described by Mulvey releases her from the conventions of the male gaze, however, upon analyzing the relationships within the film it is clear that her character is undoubtedly subjected to the male gaze or not. This section of the analysis will examine how the male gaze pervades across a wide spectrum of feminine images, regardless if a character is in accord with Mulvey's description of beauty. Analyzing how the male gaze is exerted onto Lisbeth's character will reveal important implications about women in cinema and how power structures work to continually objectify them in subtle and dangerous ways. Uncovering the male gaze in this unorthodox context will allow audiences to be aware of how women can be objectified even if they are presented in a way that denotes empowerment.

Lisbeth is fiercely independent, almost to the point of a recluse. She is extremely intelligent and is powerfully aggressive in her own quiet way. Aside from her personal characteristics, Lisbeth's physical features are also contradictory to the conventional female protagonist image that is so often embodied by women such as the voluptuous Scarlett Johansson. In stark contrast to her jet-black hair, Lisbeth's eyebrows are so light they are almost undistinguishable from her ghostly white face. The choice to portray her in this way is indicative of the director's attempt to cast Lisbeth as a mysterious and questionable character.

Psychologists from New York University published a study in the *Journal of Neuroscience* suggesting that "the brain automatically responds to a face's trustworthiness before it is even consciously perceived. The results are consistent with an extensive body of research suggesting that we form spontaneous judgments of other people that can be largely outside awareness" (Spencer). Eyebrows are important facial features that indicate emotions and the absence of them can lead audiences to make negative assumptions about a person. In this regard, Lisbeth is forced to work in order to gain the trust and respect of others in the film as well as audiences worldwide. Her slender, boyish frame makes the 24-year-old look pre-pubescent and her pale skin is enough to make audiences question her health. Throughout the film we witness Lisbeth engaging in unhealthy habits including chain smoking and consuming a diet of microwavable food and soda, affirming health speculations.

Despite being positioned as strange and grungy, Lisbeth's character has been promoted as a sex icon. One poster distributed by Columbia Pictures depicts Rooney Mara, topless, with Daniel Craig standing with his arm grasping her, simultaneously covering her breasts. The release date "12-21-11" and caption, "Evil Shall with Evil Be Expelled," stretched across the width of the poster invites a provocative inference of what may be yet to come, increasing



audience anticipation. Juxtaposing a character who, in the film, is positioned as an outcast, as a sex object for promotional purposes reveals the true significance that sexuality has on the success of a film. However, despite the fact that Lisbeth is not overtly sexualized in the film, her apparent lack of sexuality is compensated by her promiscuity with both men and women alike.

In the film, Lisbeth has two significant consensual sexual partners. Halfway through the film we are introduced to Miriam Wu, a sultry, tattooed Asian woman, at a nightclub. She approaches a lone Lisbeth at the bar and within minutes the two are kissing passionately against a wall. Miriam slips something, presumably some sort of drug, into Lisbeth's mouth, then the subsequent scene shows the duo's naked bodies tangled in Lisbeth's room. The condition of the women following a drug fueled night leads audiences to infer that the women certainly engaged in some sort of sexual activity. Lisbeth's bisexual promiscuity is reflective of third wave feminism and has led authors Donna King and Carrie Lee Smith to posit, "the Salander character illustrates what scholars are calling a *postfeminist* paradigm" (129). For them, the postfeminist paradigm is an ideology that represents a refusal against the constraints set by popular culture. Lisbeth emulates the postfeminist paradigm and third wave feminist ideals by embracing her sexuality and refusing to conform to societal expectations of behavior and appearances.

It is also within this scene that Lisbeth and Mikael first meet. Arriving with breakfast in hand, Mikael knocks on Lisbeth's door, startling her. Immediately Lisbeth tells Miriam that she needs to leave as she places a Taser in her back pocket. As Miriam puts her clothes on she asks if Lisbeth wants her to stay, an offer Lisbeth declines, and walks Miriam to the front door where the ladies exchange a drawn-out kiss. Miriam's concern for Lisbeth and the nature of their kiss indicates that this is not the first time the two have met and that they care for one another on a personal basis. The initial meeting between Lisbeth and Mikael is tense as she is unsure how he

has found her. Interestingly, another subtle indication of the tension can be taken by Lisbeth's tattered t-shirt which reads, "FUCK YOU, YOU FUCKING FUCK." Despite their initial apprehension, the two become partners in uncovering the mystery surrounding the disappearance of Harriet Vanger and eventually become sexual partners as well. This oscillation between men and women reflects a change in social tolerance for homosexuality.

Just as men in successful glam bands embodied feminine qualities, Lisbeth is characterized by an androgynous style that puts her on the edge of feminine and masculine. Although the homosexual community has made great strides towards equality in recent history, homosexual relationships are still uncommon in mainstream media. Television shows like *Glee* have helped facilitate conversation about homosexuality within mainstream outlets, however, the topic has been faced with much adversity. In a debate titled, "Is TV Too Gay?" Bryan Fischer of the American Family Association openly antagonized *Glee* for posing what he considers a psychological threat to young audiences stating, "What these television programs are doing are glamorizing homosexual behavior... which carries enormous psychological and physical risks to those who engage in it. It's just not a lifestyle. It's not behavior that ought to be glamorized or presented in a way that makes it 'idealistic'" (Skarda). Arguing for the defense, Ray Hill, a gay rights activist, shot back stating, "I don't really understand why this conversation is even being held... We're here, we're queer, you may as well get used to it" (Skarda). The debate over whether same sex couples should be featured in mainstream productions is a current issue that still garners mixed reactions; however, unlike in *Glee*, who's leading gay persona, Kurt Hummel, is an outgoing, in-your-face fashionista, Lisbeth exudes a much darker aura. In her master's thesis, Elise Riedlinger writes, "Lisbeth often defies societal constraints and breaks down gender stereotypes as she demonstrates strength, sexual confidence and mathematic genius while driving

a motorcycle, kick-boxing and seeking revenge on her rapist.” Her androgyny may have, in fact, made her relationship with another woman easier for audiences to accept. The fact that Lisbeth clearly embodies masculine qualities while Wu, on the other hand, is feminine allows audiences to maintain a sense of order within the relationship while walking a fine line between the socially accepted and not.

In, “The Social Construction of Gender,” written by blogger Rachel, it is argued that gender is a social construction that starts at birth when a baby is pronounced “boy” or “girl.” It is at this point that the socialization process begins to teach the child how to act according to their physical sex. This article argues that feminine and masculine ideologies are so deeply rooted into societal expectations that the majority of the population acts accordingly without question. Unfortunately, for others like Lisbeth, gender, “as it is viewed and practiced in our culture, is not only uncomfortable for many people, but a tool of oppression” (Rachel). In the film, Lisbeth exhibits masculine characteristics in her personal life as well as in the workplace. She is highly intelligent, able to hack into computers, and displays a level of prowess in conducting Mikael’s background check that leaves her counterparts impressed. Even Mikael is so astounded by the level of detail in her report he tells her, “I’m the guy you know better than my closest friends do.” The audience is made aware of Lisbeth’s technical prowess and photographic memory; however, despite her talent, those who interact with her seem to instantly pass judgment about her competency. In a meeting with her legal guardian, Nils questions Lisbeth about her work, finances, and also brings up past legal violations, including assault. After he chastises her, Nils concludes his reproach by asking her, “Do you think that thing through your eyebrow makes you attractive?” It is clearly suggested that Nils is making negative assumptions about Lisbeth based on her appearance. Furthermore, by portraying Lisbeth in such an extreme manner, the film

means to suggest that Lisbeth's choice of wardrobe and expression of individuality *invite* this sort of criticism Campbell argues that prejudices like these are a result of concepts which have evolved to determine 'masculinity' and 'femininity' noting, "the woman who strives for the kind of success defined as the exclusive domain of the male is inhibited by norms prescribing her 'role' and must pay a heavy price for her deviance" (564). Unfortunately, Lisbeth ends up paying the ultimate price for emulating masculine qualities as she suffers from abuse at the hand of her guardian.

Questions regarding socially prescribed gender roles are at the forefront for many postfeminist scholars, including Sam B. Girgus, who argue that examining cinematic artifacts through a feminist lens is detrimental to women. In "Representative Men: Unfreezing the Male Gaze," Girgus argues that by using feminist ideologies, film critics perpetuate constructs that objectify women, stating, "in the classroom, the processes of cinematic signification are described through terminology, conceptual constructs, and structures of perception and understanding that pertain particularly to feminist experiences and sensibility" (Girgus 214-5). This method of analysis restricts women to being passive participants of masculine dominance while simultaneously denying them the opportunity to own their actions. In the film, Lisbeth's resistance against traditional gender constructions ostracizes her from society and, in certain circumstances, such as in the case with her legal guardian, Nils, discredits her intelligence. This deferential treatment is reflective of American society in which assertive women at work are perceived negatively in comparison to male counterparts. In an article, "Gender Perceptions at Work," differences in perceptions between men and women in the workforce are analyzed. According to BJ Gallagher, a contributor to CareerBuilder.com, some differences include, "A male boss is aggressive; a female boss is pushy. A male boss is attentive to details; a female boss

is picky” (Balderrama). In general, a man’s outlandish behavior at work has been normalized to be a sign of passion and power while women who act in similar ways are generally seen as being emotional and unprofessional.

Placing a character such as Lisbeth under the control of a man like Nils works to perpetuate the message that women who are assertive in the workplace are faced with negative repercussions. As a ward of the state, analyzing the relationship between Lisbeth and her guardian sheds light on the patriarchal nature of the political powers that presides over minority groups. Patriarchal ideologies are clearly presented in the way that Nils sits behind a desk with all of Lisbeth’s records available at the turn of a page. Lisbeth looks small and powerless sitting across the desk as she is interrogated about irrelevant personal information such as past sexual relationships and drug use. Nil’s first sexual assault on Lisbeth unfolds as follows:

Nils: Have you ever had any sexually transmitted diseases? And when was the last time you were tested for HIV? How many partners have you had in the last month, and how many of those were men? (Lisbeth looks at him in astonishment) It’s regulation, I have to ask these things. It’s a health measure.

Lisbeth: Write what you want.

Nils: And why do you need such an expensive computer?

Lisbeth: For work.

Nils: Making copies, sorting mail?

Lisbeth: I shouldn’t even have to ask, I should have control over my money.

Nils: And you will once you learn to be sociable. Get along with people, hu? Can you do that? Why don't we start with that now. Why don't we start with me? You do something for me, I do something for you. It's what normal people do.

At this point Nils walks from behind his desk, positioning himself directly in front of Lisbeth. He is a towering man and Lisbeth is petrified as he caresses her face. The scene quickly escalates as he simply demands, "Unzip it," and the ultimate act of misogynistic dominance and institutional betrayal ensues. Within this scene, audiences are presented with the longstanding struggle women have faced due to construction of patriarchal institutions. Here, Lisbeth is at the mercy of a man who has complete power over her life, physically and financially, and she knows that she has no way to fight back because his credibility is greater than hers.

Nils' power to review all her records at a whim is symbolic of the much greater history of repression which women have been subjugated. This sort of behavior presents questions regarding the surveillance of women in American society. In an article, "Sexual Surveillance of Women is a Consequence of Conservative Norms," by Soraya Chemaly, she argues that, "It is a powerful and sad truth that the only place men are subjected to the levels of surveillance and sexual assault that women live with is *in prison*." Throughout history women have consistently been the object of patriarchal dominance. At the heart of the article is the case of a renowned leader of a prominent synagogue in Washington D.C who was charged with secretly filming women as they undressed for a ritual bath. The case garnered national attention as it shed light on how even the most trusted institutions can prove to be infiltrated by repulsive individuals. This case also has darker implications of the increasingly voyeuristic nature of our culture and our obsession with objectifying women for pleasure and entertainment. As a ward of the state,

Lisbeth's life is under constant scrutiny and is subject to total observation. In her first meeting with her new guardian, Nils, he outlines his policy stating, "starting now you will be given a monthly allowance, you will provide me with receipts for your expenses and if the numbers don't balance I will have to assume the difference is going to drugs." Despite the fact that Lisbeth has taken care of herself since she was ten years old and never had any issues with her previous guardian, Nils imposes these restrictions in order to assert his power over her and to relish in dominance.

Another male character asserting dominating power over women is Martin Vanger, brother of the missing grandniece, Harriet. We are introduced to Martin after Mikael moves onto the island where the Vanger family resides in order to begin his investigation on the disappearance of Harriet. Over dinner Martin, his wife, and Mikael talk about the project he is working on but there are yet to be any apparent signs that Martin is a misogynist. Later in the film, however, the mystery surrounding a slew of unsolved murders is connected back to Martin and his true sinister character is revealed. Mikael is at a standstill with the investigation until his daughter, on her way to a Bible camp, visits and makes a comment about the Biblical passages posted on his desk. Until this point, Mikael and previous investigators were unable to make a connection of five names and numbers found in Harriet's diary. As it turns out, the passages are from the Book of Leviticus describing the torture and murder of women in a manner that closely resembles the murder of a former Vanger Corporation employee. The methods are barbaric, one passage reading, "A woman who is a medium or a sorcerer *shall* be put to death by stoning." Using the Bible passages as a starting point, Mikael begins to believe that Martin committed the murder of countless women. His hunch is affirmed when he is forced, at gunpoint, into Martin's underground torture chamber that is complete with sterile white tiles, drains, and a harness to

hold victims in place. A camera records as Martin explains to Mikael how he and his late father are both murderers but that his father was a “sloppy technician.” Going into great detail, Martin shares with Mikael the “art” of murder and how one must be well attuned to the thousands of details from start to finish.

Although in this instance Mikael is the victim of such violence, throughout the film it is women who are consistently the victims of systematic brutality at the hands of men. Later in the film it is revealed that Harriet is alive and well, living under an assumed identity. She explains how she was repeatedly raped by her brother and father and ran away to escape them. Embedded within the relationship between Harriet and Martin is violence, rape, and incest presenting audiences with yet another prominent male character who abuses his power over women. Knowing how evil they are, Harriet never made an attempt to return but continued to send a framed, dried flower to her beloved uncle every year. Despite the very close relationship she had with her uncle, the unfortunate message being sent here is that Harriet was still unable to confide in him for protection and the only avenue for escape she believed she had was to run away.

Harriet’s decision to run away led to a number of negative consequences including distressing her family, specifically her uncle, whom Martin said, “Everything changed after that, not just the family but the company as well... It broke Henrik’s entrepreneurial spirit and his art.” In addition, because Harriet ran away from the problem rather than address it, her brother and father were able to continue to commit murder for next 40 years until Mikael’s investigation uncovered the truth. Unfortunately, the message that this storyline sends is that women have no agency or ability to stand up against perpetrators. Henrik describes Harriet as bright, curious, and beautiful, a “winning combination,” yet her cowardice does not correspond with such a respectable character. Although movies are constructed to build suspense, the mystery of



Harriet's disappearance would have been more productive for young audience members if she were to have fought back against her abusers.

Although women are generally the minority group, Anna Stenport and Cecilia Alm make an interesting observation noting that, "although Sweden consistently ranks as one of the most gender equal countries in the world according to the "Gender Equality Index" and achieved the top position in 2008, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* repeatedly addresses discrepancies between practice and official policy." What the researchers claim is that despite Sweden ranking as one of the most gender equal countries, the film still capitalizes on misogynistic themes and the objectification of women. This is illustrated in the discrepancy between power and policy in the way Nils abuses his authority over Lisbeth by threatening her with institutionalization if she does not comply. Concluding their first meeting Lisbeth lets out a bloodcurdling scream as she leaves the office, knowing that she has no power to fight back against this injustice.

In contrast to Lisbeth, who is denied all agency of her sexual freedom, Erika Berger, is positioned in much grander light and is given complete autonomy over her life and sexual affairs. Erika, editor-in-chief and co-owner of *Millennium* magazine, maintains a very unorthodox relationship with Mikael. Erika fulfills Mulvey's classic image of the beautiful blonde businesswoman, poised and assertive. As one of the only other prominent female characters in the film, she bears a much different background than Lisbeth, having an upper-class background with an international pedigree. However, similarly to Lisbeth, Erika participates in non-conventional sexual relations and has an extremely accepting outlook on bisexuality. Stenport and Alm describe Erika's extramarital affair, stating, "with Mikael she has both an intense professional and sexual relationship while affirming her acceptance of her husband's bisexuality (just as he accepts her polyamorousness)" (167). One may conclude that Erika represents a

strong female character; however, with closer examination, it becomes apparent that the significance of portraying Erika in this light conceals a much more sinister message. Erika's unconventional sexual relations suggests that the film's structure implies, "that to be a successful female independent media publisher like Erika Berger one cannot fit into a normative construction of a one-partner heterosexual woman" (Stenport and Alm 167). The argument made here is that to have a married woman, in a traditional monogamous relationship, in charge of running a business would violate patriarchal ideologies in which the man is the primary breadwinner.

When comparing Lisbeth and Erika, it is apparent that the women's greatest dissimilarity comes from their outward appearances. The gender construction in this artifact is posited in a way that grants power to those who adhere to prescribed gender roles and victimizes those who do not behave accordingly. With the representation of Lisbeth as the heroine, this film resists patriarchy to an extent; however, with characters such as Erika, the film also helps perpetuate longstanding ideologies. The conclusion of the film offers another insight as to how this film supports patriarchy. After solving the mystery of the missing grandniece, Harriet, Mikael and Lisbeth return to Stockholm and resume back to regular life. Having engaged in sexual relations and spending much time with Mikael, Lisbeth returns home with intentions of pursuing a more serious relationship with him. She goes through the trouble of having his favorite leather jacket replicated and plans on giving it to him for Christmas. As she pulls up to his home, she is left heartbroken with the sight of Mikael and Erika strolling hand-in-hand, entering a taxi. The message being sent here is that stereotypical beauty prevails. It says to audiences that even if you are smart and caring, if you wish to get the man you must fit a very narrow image. Dismayed,

Lisbeth throws the jacket in the dumpster and drives away on her motorcycle, out casted once again and left a victim of hegemonic ideologies that inform what is viewed as desirable.

## CONCLUSION

Taking the aforementioned scenarios into consideration, audiences must critically analyze this film in order to emancipate themselves from the ideologies being addressed. The first ideology suggested in the film is that women are at the mercy of men. Lisbeth falls victim to her guardian and although she seeks retribution in a tortuous fashion by assaulting him and tattooing his body with the phrase “I AM A RAPIST PIG,” that method is not beneficial to society. What would serve more beneficial to minority groups would be to change the construction of patriarchal institutions by exposing corrupt behaviors. The construction of Erika’s character, as well, must be noted as serving a patriarchal function. She is not liberated, as it may seem at first glance; instead, she is co-dependent on Mikael. In order for audiences to realize that women are still being subjugated to male authority, we must expose how films such as this one work to perpetuate harmful messages.

The second ideology formed is that there is a very narrow image of what constitutes beauty. In the film, the notion of desirability is manifested in the traditional male gaze as described by Mulvey, a slender white woman portrayed by Erika. For audience members who do not fit this mold, this image can lead to devastating psychological effects. Researcher Kasey L. Serdar concludes that, “Mass media's use of such unrealistic models sends an implicit message that in order for a woman to be considered beautiful, she must be unhealthy.” Repeated exposure to characters like Erika will only contribute to the negative self-concepts women may have and, in turn, can lead to them having less agency. Lisbeth spends the entire film devoid of emotion and, finally, when she decides to take a risk to develop a personal connection she is told once

again that she does not fit the mold. She is rejected of the opportunity to experience love because she is different from everyone else. As a critic we must take a stance and acknowledge that this prevailing ideology is wrong.

What we must also acknowledge is that Lisbeth is fulfilling the male gaze in her own way despite being portrayed as a woman who defies all stereotypes. The film objectifies her body and takes advantage of her pre-pubescent appearance in a perverse way by allowing men, such as Nils, to completely abuse their power over her. Through violent acts of retaliation, the audience is led to believe that Lisbeth is acting as a heroic feminist, however, this method of retribution is not the answer to stopping the patriarchal institutions that have halted woman's advancement in society. Furthermore, by uncovering the truth about Lisbeth's supposed heroism, audiences will gain a better understanding about how the Othering of minority groups works to serve the traditional heterosexual white male. Lisbeth has undoubtedly been cast as a bizarre character not to be interacted with, yet it is the very fact that she has been ostracized that has allowed men in this film to dominate her. In fact, it can be argued that Lisbeth's very own refusal to conform to society, the attribute she is most praised for by audiences, has contributed, in part, to the pervasiveness of her abuse. As unfortunate of a circumstance it is to say that to be different is to invite abuse, Lisbeth's character in this film supports the claim that when deviating too far from normal one may be cast as inept. What would serve as a powerful resolution would be if audiences could see Lisbeth in a sequel more integrated into society where she can find the love she longed for with Mikael.

The story of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* has enthralled audiences on an international scale. The storylines found within the movie are representative of common patriarchal and hegemonic ideologies ranging from the subordination of women to the established practices of

political institutions. The analysis provided here reveals the negative consequences of perpetuating these messages in mainstream pop culture. The aforementioned examination shows that in order to be capable of making informed judgments about the construction of gender in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, one must be enlightened about the underlying messages. As Foss observed, hegemonic ideologies are constructed in society in a way that “provides a sense that things are the way they have to be; it asserts that its meaning are the real, natural ones” (210). With this notion in mind, it is evident that women who continue to view these kinds of messages will continue to see their helplessness as part of the norm for being female.

To resist such detrimental ideologies, I refer to Wander and his idea of the ideological turn. As audience members, we are given a level of agency that allows us to accept or reject the messages presented to us. I believe that it is in our vested interest to choose a side, whether it is good or bad, depending on our beliefs, and advocate our reasoning to others. Wander rejects the idea that critics must remain unbiased and that they must be careful entering political debates because this is, in fact, exactly what must occur in order to make a change in the world. We must engage ourselves actively and politically in rhetorical artifacts that affect the way power systems are sustained. In analyzing this film, I believe that Lisbeth is an unsuccessful representation of true female empowerment. Her actions are not constructive in improving the social conditions of which she is victim to. Her love affair with Mikael and subsequent rejection sends a negative message to those who are out casted as being different from the mainstream feminine stereotype. Although *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* provides a thrilling experience for the viewer to watch, the wait for a true feminist ideal continues.

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