

Rebecca Raymond (Word Count: 1,781)

Dr. Carolyn Kelley

WST 3930

March 25, 2015

*Rosemary's Baby* and the Rape-Revenge Genre

As described by Alison Young, the rape-revenge genre has become normalized in the world of film (43). In the supernatural or horror film, however, the typical rape-revenge plotline can be exaggerated further because the rape and revenge occur in a realm of fantasy wherein the limits of the audience's reality are not applicable (Heller-Nicholas 94). *Rosemary's Baby* is one of these supernatural films which extends the rape into a fantasy realm, but paradoxically uses this extension not to amplify Rosemary's revenge story, but instead to diminish it. *Rosemary's Baby* reinforces patriarchal rape culture by making Rosemary a passive observer to her rape and barring her from taking any revenge which gives power and control over to her rapist and to the voyeurs who participated in the rape.

Young describes the generic structure of the rape-revenge film as having a number of characteristics. The rape-revenge film has an early shocking scene of gang rape followed by episodes of violent revenge (Young 44). There is normally one female victim of the rape and she seeks revenge on her rapist or rapists after the legal system fails her in seeking justice (44). Her experience is so traumatic that her revenge against the rapists is justified and this revenge cycle is balanced against the brutality of the rape (Young 45). A film which follows this rape-revenge structure is *I Spit on Your Grave*, in which a female victim is brutally gang raped by a number of men at the beginning of the film and she then seeks revenge on each one of these men in order to gain justice for the crime. The rape scene against her is so violent that her actions against her

attackers are completely justified in the realm of the film (Young 46).

Rosemary's rape-revenge narrative in *Rosemary's Baby* shares many of these typical attributes of the rape-revenge film. Firstly, she is the victim of an early scene of gang rape by the satanic coven. Although Rosemary is only physically, sexually violated by one abuser – Satan – the members of the coven (including Minnie, Roman, and Guy) take part in the rape by initiating and observing the act. This early scene also echoes the myth of the “real rape” which Young discusses – a gang rape in a dramatic scenario (45). However, the rape in *Rosemary's Baby* does differ from the myth of the “real rape” because instead of only strangers participating, Guy, Minnie, and Roman also take part. Furthermore, in Rosemary's version of reality, Guy is the only one who raped her; she perceives her memory of the rape as a dream and Guy admits that he raped her while she slept in order to have a child. “Real rape” is also depicted as being met with violent resistance from the victim and in Rosemary's case, she does not resist (Young 45). Rosemary places the blame entirely on herself and even asks for forgiveness in her dream state. Although this is not the reality of the rape, this is the reality in Rosemary's eyes (or the reality that she wishes to believe). Also going along with the typical rape-revenge structure, Rosemary is the only victim of the rape and her experience is traumatic enough to justify violent revenge. This is where *Rosemary's Baby* distinctly departs from the rape-revenge structure: Rosemary takes no violent revenge for the crimes against her. The rape experience is traumatic for Rosemary as she wakes up and is angry at both her dream of demonic rape and at Guy for his “necrophilic” rape, but she complies with him and the members of the coven hoping that it will lead to a child.

Rosemary's compliance in the aftermath of the rape takes up the majority of the film. She first forgives Guy for raping her in order to have a child and begins to focus on the prospect

of becoming pregnant. Once she is pregnant, Rosemary makes no attempt to take control of her pregnancy, just as she made no attempt to resist her rapists. She allows Minnie, Roman, and Guy to dictate who her doctor will be, what medicines she will take, and how much pain she can endure. Though Rosemary's pain continues for months, she does nothing but listen to her doctor and friends who offer still no explanation for the pain. Only when she is surrounded by another group of non-satanic friends is Rosemary convinced that something is wrong with her body; she still listens only to the advice of others. However, as soon as the pain ends, Rosemary completely forgets and forgives her friends for their treatment of her and once again focuses on the child. Rosemary's compliance in her own rape and in her rapists' control of its aftermath place Rosemary under control of the patriarchy by normalizing rape culture (an environment in which rape and sexual violence against women is normalized by society and popular culture). Instead of condemning and punishing her abusers, Rosemary accepts that her rape is justified because she believes it was committed by her husband and it resulted in her pregnancy, reinforcing the normalization of sexual violence against women in rape culture.

Rosemary's only revenge story comes when she is given a book by her male friend, Hutch, who convinces her that Roman and his friends are a coven of witches. (Still, Rosemary can only be convinced of something if prompted by another.) Rosemary doesn't attempt to take any violent revenge when she learns this fact and instead simply attempts to leave them behind by seeing another doctor and wanting to move out of the Bramford. However, she is, unknowingly, attempting to achieve a form of revenge in this case – depriving Roman and Minnie's coven of the satanic child. Rosemary does not succeed in this revenge, and instead enters into a second scene reminiscent of the demonic rape scene: her labor.

Rosemary's labor is more reminiscent of the mythical "real rape" scene as it has all the

same elements of the initial rape, but is accompanied by violent resistance from Rosemary. In the first rape scene, the audience was placed alongside Rosemary as a victim, with the camera taking on her point of view looking up at the coven members. Conversely, in the labor scene the audience is given the role of a rapist. The faces of the abusers are never seen, only the backs of their heads, and the camera shakes as Rosemary resists as if it were another rapist responding to Rosemary's resistance. In this way, Rosemary is granted the opposite of revenge for her rape – she is punished. In the realm of the rape-revenge film, this scene is even more traumatic than Rosemary's rape at the beginning of the film because it complies more with the mythical "real rape." Rosemary's labor scene is a punishment for attempting to take revenge against her rapists; by attempting to leave with her child, she is punished with a second rape. Here, Rosemary again becomes a victim of rape culture by being punished for speaking out against it. The rapists are given complete control over Rosemary in the labor scene, reinforcing that it is the rapists who are given power and control in society.

After this second rape scene, Rosemary is once again given the opportunity to take revenge against her attackers. She breaks into the Castevets' apartment holding a knife, but when she happens upon a party in their home, she stops in her attempt at revenge. In this final scene, Rosemary sees her demonic child for the first time and is appalled, backing away from it and dropping her instrument of revenge – the knife. Shortly thereafter, however, Rosemary is convinced by Roman that the child needs her as a mother; he states that she doesn't have to be a part of the coven, but that she has a responsibility to be a mother to her child, no matter what the child may be. Rosemary then becomes, once again, a part of a scene similar to her initial rape scene: the coven members gather voyeuristically around her to watch her soothe the child (and one takes pictures of the event).

In this third voyeuristic scene, Rosemary is not being punished for attempting to take revenge, but being glorified and rewarded for her passivity and compliance with the rape and its aftermath. The rapists have paradoxically become Rosemary's saviors, going from participating in Rosemary's rape to facilitating her relationship with her son. Though Rosemary is now aware of the reality of her satanic rape, she still forgives her rapists because they have given her the greatest gift – a child. Rosemary has been focused on motherhood since the beginning of the film and in giving her this child, Roman, Minnie, and Guy have given her what she most desires. Rosemary is able to forgive them and becomes a passive object in their story, rather than the heroine of her own revenge story. She is a victim of rape culture not only in the sense that her suffering has been marginalized, but also because she accepts this marginalization because the rape resulted in a child. This forces the audience to ask the question: is every woman destined for motherhood, no matter the circumstance?

*Rosemary's Baby* continually places control of Rosemary into other's hands, making her a passive observer to her own life, beginning with her rape. During the rape, she did not resist, and even after Guy takes the blame, she does not take revenge against him. She places control of her body in Minnie and Dr. Saperstein and allows herself to be guided by them as well as Roman and Guy. Rosemary attempts no revenge and places all her trust in them despite the enormous pain she feels. The differences between Rosemary's rape and the myth of the "real rape" help reinforce not only Rosemary's passivity, but also rape culture in general society. As Rosemary perceives Guy to be the real rapist for much of the film, and she does not act out against it, the film is stating that this "rape" by Guy is no rape at all. *Rosemary's Baby* implies that real rape only exists as a myth; whether committed by one's husband while asleep or by a large group of people in a kidnapping, rape is not "real" enough to merit a response. Even if one does respond

with an attempt to attain justice for an act of sexual violence, they will simply be punished more intensely than before until they accept the rape as a normal act. In *Rosemary's Baby*, neither Guy's rape nor the satanic rape merits a violent revenge response from Rosemary and this departure from the true rape-revenge film structure places power and control into the hands of rapists and a patriarchal system of rape culture.

Works Cited

- Heller-Nicholas, Alexandra. "The Rape Revenge Film Across Genres." *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011. 60-102. *Google Books*. Web. 22 March 2015.
- Rosemary's Baby*. Dir. Roman Polanski. Perf. Mia Farrow, John Cassavetes, Ruth Gordon, and Sidney Blackmer. Paramount Pictures, 1968. *Netflix*. Web. 19 March 2015.
- Young, Alison. "'Don't you fucking look at me!' Rape and cinematic revenge." *The Scene of Violence: Cinema, crime, affect*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2010. 43-73. *University of Florida Libraries Course Reserves: ARES*. Web. 22 March 2015.