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English 3000

20 November 2016

### Wanting to Be Raped

Any short story that focuses on rape is sure to be a divisive one, and any story that focuses on the rape of a woman by a man is sure to attract the attention of many a feminist scholar looking to use the fictional story to help illustrate or reinforce his or her own ideological viewpoints. Personally, I believe that feminism promotes numerous goals and beliefs that are important, or at least perfectly healthy, for a developing society to consider. On the other hand, I am reluctant to accept any preexisting set of beliefs and ideals as completely true without first questioning and thinking critically about them. This viewpoint of mine is shared by Margaret Atwood, an author who has often written on female oppression but does not shy away from criticizing feminism. It is for this reason that her short story, "Rape Fantasies," is so wonderfully full of character and nuance – despite the best attempts of feminists to fit it into their ideological box.

"Rape Fantasies" is briefly discussed in the doctoral dissertation of Mary Anne Franks. Franks offers her own interpretation of the story that focuses on what she sees as a certain utility of the work. While discussing the topic of rape, Franks brings up the argument of Slavoj Žižek. Žižek claims that women sometimes desire to be "taken roughly" during sex, and that this is a "rape fantasy" (Franks 20). Franks rebuts this by describing a scene from the fictional short story. In the scene, several women describe their personal "rape fantasies," which all involve

attractive men suddenly arriving to ravish them. Then, the narrator points out that none of these fantasies are actually rape fantasies, as the women are all consenting to the hypothetical sex, and rape by definition involves a lack of consent. Franks uses this example because it illustrates and elaborates on her point that rape and rough sex are not the same. Thus, Franks highlights the utility of Atwood's story in clarifying a common misconception about rape.

Atwood's short story is also analyzed by C. J. Hribal in "The Scene Beast is Hungry," which is printed as a chapter of the book *Bringing the Devil to His Knees: The Craft of Fiction and the Writing Life*. Like Franks, Hribal uses "Rape Fantasies" to illustrate a concept. However, the concept he illustrates is one that relates to the art of writing. This concept is the "implied scene," a scene that is hinted at in a story but never directly shown to the reader. Because his focus is on the technical aspects of writing, Hribal points out details such as the informal inflection of the narrator, which implies her narration is actually a spoken monologue, and the fact that she addresses her audience as one singular person, implying she is giving this monologue to somebody in particular. Hribal points out how the story misleads the reader into thinking the coworkers' rape fantasies are the main focus of the story, when in actuality the main focus is the narrator's, Estelle's, rape fantasies. By abruptly shifting to Estelle's stories, an expectation is created that the coworkers' rape fantasies will be returned to later on. This never happens, creating unsatisfied curiosity in the reader – the titular "scene beast."

Eventually, the story reveals that Estelle's listener is a man. Because Estelle constantly refers to this man as "you," Hribal argues that the reader is forced into the role of a man. Hribal speculates that Estelle has likely had too much to drink, explaining why she would be so open with a stranger. The constant discussion of a troubling yet sexually titillating topic in such a nonchalant manner is meant to invoke the same feeling in the reader that the unnamed male

would feel from listening to Estelle's monologue. Hribal wonders if Estelle has done this "to forestall something from happening or to encourage its happening but in a 'safe' way" (Hribal 154). The something Hribal alludes to, is, of course, the rape of Estelle by her male audience. Estelle, according to Hribal, is essentially asking this man, and by extension the audience, how he could go through with raping her now that she has been so humanized to him? Thus, unlike Franks, Hribal does not merely use the short story to illustrate a concept, but also to use that concept to infer hidden details from the story's subtext.

A third interpretation of "Rape Fantasies" is given by Jai Young Park in his essay, "Margaret Atwood's 'Rape Fantasies': A Dissimulated Confession of a Rape." As hinted by the essay's title, Park offers a different interpretation of the subtext than Hribal. Park points out that one of Estelle's rape fantasies is noticeably different from the others. This fantasy includes specific and unusual details. The fantasy takes place in the house of Estelle's mother, implying it is happening when Estelle is younger. Estelle specifies that she remembers only the shoes of her would-be rapist, which is consistent with the experiences of certain real-life rape victims. Most tellingly, Estelle expresses real concern over her mother's coal chute, imply she truly believes a rapist can enter from it.

Park explains that throughout the short story, Estelle trivializes rape to a far greater degree than her peers. He speculates that this could be because Estelle was once traumatized by rape and uses humor as a means to cope with and avoid the subject. Park also shares his concerns that the story could be seen as a defense of rapists. In the seventies, when it was written, rape was considered to be an inherent behavior of men, and thus women were solely responsible for preventing themselves from being raped. Thus, it could be interpreted that Estelle is at fault for "tantalizing" her male audience with the prospect of raping her.

Park next talks about a different interpretation from Nancy Workman, which inferred that one of Estelle's coworkers, Sondra, was in fact raped before. However, Park says that Workman's interpretation focuses on irrelevant details, and instead the true focus of the story is on Estelle. Park says that the two rape fantasies of Estelle's coworkers reveal that they have not experienced rape and do not understand its violent and damaging nature – a mindset that Park blames on an “androcentric,” or male-dominated, society. Park explains how Estelle's fantasies all re-empowered her and place her in positive female roles – a maid, a mother, a religious figure, and so forth. The fourth fantasy, though, is noted to be “scarier” than the others. Park also points out that, if Estelle was indeed raped in her mother's house, it would explain why she moved to a city all alone – to escape from the traumatic memories associated with her mother's house.

Estelle's behavior towards her male audience has been interpreted by some as enticing or provocative, which would seem to be counter-intuitive to the idea that Estelle does not want to be raped. Park accounts for this by insisting that the idea that women are in any way responsible for being raped is a fallacy. Of course, rape is no less despicable a crime simply because the victim knowingly put him-or-herself in danger, but Park takes a more extreme interpretation that women should not take measures to avoid being raped *at all* because they have “rights to practice freedom” (Park 79). Park ends the essay by claiming that the purpose of “Rape Fantasies” is that it “triggers a problematization of the wary topic (of rape)” (Park 82). To put it in less postmodernist terms, the short story's purpose, according to Park, is to make the reader see the concept of rape as a problem as opposed to a harmless fantasy.

All of these past interpretations of the work are insightful and have proved valuable in shaping my own interpretation of “Rape Fantasies.” However, I do not believe all of the points

raised are entirely correct, and some of them, as might already be evident from my tone, I find to be entirely wrong. Before going any further, it is important to note that, when it comes to exploring the concept of rape fantasies, as the title of Atwood's work seems to promise, neither the short story itself nor any of this analysis of it manages to paint a complete picture of the issue. The major shortcoming is that so far, the concept of rape fantasies has been explored only from a specific angle – that of powerless women who fantasize about being “raped” by powerful men. There has been no exploration of if men also have rape fantasies, if people attracted to the same sex have same-sex rape fantasies, if any people have *rapist* fantasies in which they are the ones doing the raping, and so on and so forth. Any one of these possibilities would add valuable context to the story.

Unfortunately, this context is nowhere to be found, both because this short story was written in the seventies, when western society was much more heteronormative and gender roles were stricter, and because much of the analysis discussed thus far has come from a strictly feminist viewpoint. Feminism is an ideology that focuses primarily on women who are disempowered by men, and as a result, the analysis has treated rape as a crime inflicted on women by men, when in reality rape is a universal evil that can be and has been experienced and enacted by any people regardless of gender. To put it bluntly, the ability to be raped requires only that a person has a sex organ or a sufficiently large orifice, and thus being female is not a prerequisite. It is important to bear in mind that Margaret Atwood has stated that she is not a feminist writer, and thus there is no reason to expect anything she writes to perfectly conform to feminist ideology.

For the most part, the analysis of Atwood's short story has been unobjectionable. However, there is one subject that causes a striking disagreement regarding the interpretation. As

noted previously, there is evidence to suggest that the story carries an inherent dramatic irony to it – Estelle clearly does not want to be raped, and yet her behavior is putting her in great danger of being raped. As Hribal pointed out, Estelle’s narration is addressed towards a specific man who by all evidence is a stranger to her. The rambling and at times strikingly personal nature of Estelle’s speech towards this stranger suggests that Estelle is drunk, which would presumably mean the frame story is taking place at a bar or other public location. Being drunk in front of a stranger is a scenario that could easily lead to rape. Estelle is not being careful at all to avoid this. In fact, if her audience was indeed a rapist, all of Estelle’s sexualized talk of rape could provoke him, and on the off chance he was not already planning on raping her to begin with, Estelle would at the very least have planted the idea in his head.

As previously noted, Park found this interpretation of the story to be particularly objectionable. Park asserts that it is unreasonable for women to take any responsibility in preventing their own rape because they have “rights to practice freedom,” and thus the responsibility of ensuring that women do not get raped rests solely on the shoulders of men – though again, the possibility that men can be raped or that women can be rapists remains unaddressed (Park 79). To coin a phrase, Park’s philosophy here triggers a problematization of the idea of rape prevention. Park essentially asserts that it is the responsibility of the criminal to ensure no crime is committed. It is a pleasant-sounding ideology to be sure, but in practice the honor system is generally ineffective at preventing crimes. For example, imagine a woman parks her car in a neighborhood known for its high larceny rates, rolls the windows down to feel the nice summer air, falls asleep, and then awakens to discover her purse is missing. The woman has the right to do this, but if she is interested in not having her purse stolen, she might want to think twice about it. It does not mean that the thief who stole her purse is any less despicable or that

the woman deserved to have her purse stolen, but at the end of the day, the woman's purse was stolen, and she failed to do everything in her power to prevent it from happening. Not only does shoving the complexity of Atwood's work into a feminist ideological box strip the story of its nuance, but it makes Estelle come across as a hapless victim rather than a proactive force in the narrative.

My own interpretation of the "Rape Fantasies" is quite different from Park's, and the situational irony that Park so quickly dismisses is of tantamount importance to it. Estelle is indeed putting herself into a situation where she is likely to be raped. She is even, I believe, doing this intentionally, which to Park would surely be an unthinkable possibility. After all, the entire purpose of the story is for Estelle to stand on her soapbox about how women never want to be raped, is it not? How could Estelle be guilty of such hypocrisy? However, Estelle's actions do make a twisted sort of sense if seen from a certain point of view.

Imagine that Estelle was an innocent girl living with her mother. One day, a rapist broke into her mother's house through the coal chute and raped Estelle. For Estelle, this was nothing short of traumatic. Although she never told a soul of her experience, it affected Estelle so deeply that she could no longer bring herself to continue living at her mother's house, and so she moved far away to a strange new city where she proved unpopular and gained a reputation as "the office worry-wart." In effect, the rape had completely altered every aspect of Estelle's life. In a way, it controlled her, stripping Estelle of her agency. Then, one day, the subject of rape fantasies began appearing on every women's magazine cover. This upset Estelle, but she refuses to victimize herself and learned to deal with her feelings through dry humor meant to belittle her problems. However, when her coworkers began enthusiastically sharing their own sexually thrilling "rape" fantasies, it proved too much for Estelle. She was alone. Nobody else around her understood

what she had been through, and now they had the nerve to make light of it? To wish it upon themselves merely because it seemed thrilling and exciting?

Estelle found herself at a bar, drinking too much. A strange man approached her, and Estelle realized that he likely found her sexually attractive. It crossed her drunken mind that he might attempt to rape her. Unfortunately, Estelle was not acting completely rationally at the moment, so she did not prioritize her own safety. At this point, Estelle was sick of allowing her fear of rape to rule her life. She wanted to reclaim her agency, her power, and so she intentionally placed herself in a situation where she ran a serious risk of being raped. But Estelle had no intention of becoming a victim. Rape had become a demon to her, and she needed to confront it. Instead of meekly allowing the rapist to have his way with her, Estelle began to talk to him. She shared with him intimate details about her past, her experience with her coworkers, and, most importantly, her own rape fantasies. In Estelle's rape fantasies, she always found a way to humanize herself in her rapist's eyes, such as by helping him with his acne problems or by revealing that she had a terminal disease. And now, Estelle was attempting to make her fantasies a reality. She was trying to prevent a rape by forcing the rapist to see her as a human being. She was trying to see if rapists really are mindless animals driven by impulse, or if they still have humanity within them.

Estelle's final lines of the story are a challenge to her potential rapist: "Like, how could a fellow do that to a person he's just had a long conversation with, once you let them know you're human, you have a life too, I don't see how they could go ahead with it, right? I mean, I know it happens but I just don't understand it, that's the part I really don't understand" (Atwood). Yes, Estelle was intentionally risking her own rape, but she did not do it because she was stupid or



because “the patriarchy” forced her to. She did it because, to her, it was worth the risk. She needed to understand.

At least, that is my own personal interpretation. I have no way of knowing Atwood’s true intentions. It is also important to note that this is a fictional story, and that in real life, intentionally risking being raped simply to glean some insight about human nature is a terrible, terrible idea. Being a proactive protagonist and being safe are not at all the same thing.

Works Cited

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