

Absorbing Loathing

A review of the film



The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo

(2009)

Niels Arden Oplev (Director)



Reviewed by

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The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo strains against its Swedish title, *Män Som Hatar Kvinnor* (Men Who Hate Women). With many characters who seem more like props than people, the story is about two juvenile females emerging into adulthood 40 years apart. Both have been brutalized: raped, beaten, abhorred. One has been missing since 1966. The other—in her 20s in 2007—has been assessed as mentally incompetent to manage her own affairs and has a state-appointed guardian. The film is not about men who hate but about women who are loathed.

Based on the late Stieg Larsson's mystery novels, the Millennium Trilogy films expose troubling themes in contemporary Swedish culture, including classism, sexism, and lingering Nazism (Dargis, 2010). A delicate, blond young woman, Harriet Vanger, was repeatedly beaten and raped by her Nazi-sympathizing father in the 1960s. He bragged to her that he raped and murdered women, and he taught her brother to rape her and to murder other women without being caught. When her father was in an inebriated rage, Harriet pushed him away. Upon falling backward and into the lake near their family home, he drowned.

Because her act of self-defense could free her from him, Harriet failed to call for help. She watched as he drowned but was, unfortunately, not freed from her brother's raging violence. Subsequently, Harriet plotted her flight. Assisted by her cousin Anita, Harriet disappeared on September 22, 1966, and was presumed dead after an unproductive police investigation. The lack of leads seems puzzling, considering the Vanger family's rich resources.

Lisbeth Salander is a 20-something investigator in 2007 who uses her considerable knowledge of computers and the Internet to ferret out missing people and elusive information. She works as an investigator for a private firm. Her secluded existence and abrupt manner are a shield that protects her secrets.

Abused in childhood, Lisbeth is further victimized by her appointed guardian, who commandeers her bank account in order to dole out her paychecks in exchange for sex. After tying her up and sodomizing her to the point of injury, he consents to give her one third of the funds she has requested for a new computer. But Lisbeth does not flee from abuse as Harriet had in 1966. In wild contrast, Lisbeth plots revenge, returns, and delivers it.

The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo is not a story about abusive men. It is a story about two women who have been beaten, raped, and forced to absorb pathological loathing. Each has exhibited defensive aggression: with Harriet's one episode of self-defense leading her father to drown and Lisbeth's defensive reactions defining her (about defensive aggression in humans, see Feshbach, 1997).

Their stories comingle in a mystery about women who have been raped and murdered in disparate locations around Sweden over a span from 1949 to 2007. As the story develops, Harriet is presumed to be the victim of a serial murderer, whereas Lisbeth sleuths the clues toward a denouement. Their reactions to abuse are different.

Why did Harriet take flight, while Lisbeth calculates revenge? Research on trait anger might predict the difference between them (with trait anger being one's tendency toward anger; Spielberger et al., 1985). Although we know less about Harriet, reporter Mikael Blomkvist's memories of her (as his babysitter) lead us to believe that she was very gentle—perhaps exhibiting low trait anger (LTA; Tafrate, Kassinove, & Dundin, 2002).

In contrast, Lisbeth seems to be impulsive, demanding, judgmental, and easily frustrated—indicating high trait anger (HTA; Tafrate et al., 2002). That Lisbeth would aggress in response to anger might be predicted, given that people with HTA self-report significantly more acts of verbal and physical aggression in response to anger than do those with LTA (Tafrate et al., 2002).

Considering aggression associated with revenge, Gollwitzer (2007) claimed that the choice to avenge is influenced more by context than by trait anger. The circumstances of Lisbeth's guardian withholding her hard-earned paychecks for sexual favors might have led to "motivational cornering" (Rasa, 1987, p. 7). In nonhuman animals, fleeing predation is less likely when there is something to protect (e.g., a hen protecting her chicks from a fox; Rasa, 1987). In humans, staying to fight when there is something to protect is usually

described in terms of the person's higher order goals (Averill, 1983; Bushman & Anderson, 2001).

Lisbeth's job and wages (i.e., the little independence she enjoys) depend on her computer. After her laptop was destroyed by muggers, her guardian could blackmail her—meting out small amounts of money for sex and stringing her along as she works toward buying a new laptop.

Lisbeth estimates that power can be redistributed, thereby lessening her avoidance of the guardian and increasing her approach (i.e., back to his apartment for revenge; Dollard & Miller, 1950; Miller 1959). She aggresses—allowing her to regain control of her bank account and to be released from sexual abuse. For Harriet, whose family appears to have been oblivious to the crimes of her father and brother, it might have seemed that seeking revenge would not lead to a redistribution of power or to justice. Thus, she fled.

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of revenge is the avenger's expectation that the message of retribution will be understood by the other party (Gollwitzer & Denzler, 2009). Following harrowing scenes of Lisbeth's rape, the portrayal of her revenge would support an assertion that her message was received. After she leaves her guardian, she seems to be on to the next thing, maybe even perceiving that the issue has been resolved.

That she seems to move on is consistent with an idea that revenge is satisfying when the avenger perceives that (a) the punishment fits the sin and (b) the one who has been punished appears to have comprehended the message (Gollwitzer & Denzler, 2009). Whether the film's final scene indicates that Lisbeth has finally fled, the viewer is left to discern.

As to issues about whether 40-year-old photos can reveal the vector of a person's gaze among a sea of faces, can show a license plate or windshield sticker, or can make obvious a blue cardigan in a crowd of parade onlookers—I leave it to other critics to decide. Whether most companies keep original receipts from business trips for four decades, I have doubts. About the quality of the film as a rendition of the book's story, readers will debate. My only reason to view the film again or to see its sequels would be to consider Noomi Rapace as Lisbeth: Unforgettable.

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