



## When Resilience Fails, Vulnerability Wreaks Havoc

A Review of

*Gone Girl* (2014)

by David Fincher (Director)

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Reviewed by

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*Gone Girl*, directed by David Fincher, artfully weaves the tale of a missing person while unraveling the psychosocial chaos that eroded innocence and the unspoken promises of childhood, to lay bare the eroded ego of the antihero, Amy.

The first part of the film is similar to other suspense genre films in that it is filled with deception, duplicity, half-truths and infidelity. Nick's (Ben Affleck) perception of Rhonda Boney (Kim Dickens) as an inept detective provides an excellent foil for the mundane and unremarkable first half of the film that shifts between Nick's retelling of events and Amy's (Rosamund Pike) narrative recreations in her diary. The understated and reassuring manner of Rhonda Boney belies her investigative skills, only to reveal incredible deft in her acumen. Similarly, the film winds its way through a tale of a missing, selfless wife with all the ingredients pointing to an amazing woman who was egregiously wronged by her egomaniacal husband and used by her self-absorbed parents. As the carefully constructed public image of the heroine *Amazing Amy* devolves into the private machinations of the antihero Amy, the real quest for the missing wife, friend and daughter begins.

Amazing Amy, the creation of Rand (David Clennon) and Marybeth (Lisa Barnes) Elliot's fantasy child, was the perfect counterpoint for their flawed and imperfect Amy. Amazing Amy excelled where Amy failed, strengthened their marital and partner relationship, and provided them with wealth in a way that the real Amy never could. Amazing Amy, however, could not exist without flawed Amy to provide fodder. Consequently, when Amy was at her best—happy, in a fulfilled relationship—the rug of comfort was pulled out from under her to and helped revive "Amazing Amy" so that their empire could be recreated.

As infants, toddlers, and children, our psyche and sense of self is gently molded by our experiences that include redirection and appropriate socialization that frequently occur in the private realm. Early childhood nurturing experiences filled with a failure to parent and nurture, produced the Amy that is finally revealed. The absence of positive parenting experiences that develop social responsibility and accountability necessary for the development of a social being is dependent on the robustness of the individual's psyche (Hare, 2007; Lykken, 1995); such absence undermined the evolution of Amy's ego. Amy

received parental guidance in a very public arena that highlighted the dysfunctional parent-child dyad. Her parents' taciturn disapproval and failure to privately chastise Amy was replaced by the creation of the alter ego (Amazing Amy). Amazing Amy publicly remediated the shortcomings of Amy, creating the rift in the child (and later adult) that was never chastised in private, but humiliated in public. Thus, it is no surprise that Amy chose a very public arena to right these wrongs.

The film *Gone Girl* raises the issues of psychological resilience, or the ability to survive a stressor and avoid adverse life outcomes. Much of the debate on resilience has focused on how young children are particularly susceptible to the adverse effects of social stressors, increasing the vulnerability for those exposed to a higher combination of risk factors. Children demonstrate considerable variation in both vulnerability and resilience to chronic stresses stemming from impoverished (both material and psychological) environments that threaten development (Bradley et al., 1994). For most, resilience is ordinary, rather than extraordinary (Bonanno, 2004; Masten, 2001). Resilient children are those who resist adversity, manage to cope with uncertainty, and are able to recover successfully from trauma.

Resilience unfolds over the course of development, focusing on the human experience of adversity as pathways of risk and resilience. Amy's lack of resilience in addressing psychological stress becomes increasingly pronounced with each psychological insult, eroding her psychological health with each violation of her fragile ego. The undoing, or the underdoing, of the antiheroine presents the argument for a multipronged approach to resilience that addresses the biological and social trade-offs in human experience that includes timing, processes, and context to circumvent the deterministic outcomes on her yet-to-be-born child. Amy's ability to rely on her parents was tenuous and her psychological well-being was never addressed.

Although Amy had some of the theoretical underpinnings of resilience—high education and financial security—this was offset by bad parenting and unremitting stressful events. Neurological, physiological, and behavioral systems at key stages of human development on genetic expressions and epigenetic processes affect plasticity in response to social ecology (Fine and Sung, 2014; Karatoreos & McEwen, 2013), and at the same time, providing the necessary resources to the family/child/community at crucial periods alters the negative pressures of the social and physical environment on psycho-emotional outcomes (Ungar, Ghazinour, & Richter, 2013). Parenting, however, is the most insidious factor given the divide between public and private, raising the question as to what differentiates those who are resilient and survive the failures of the caregiving environment that are rife with neglect and abuse? Individual genetic traits to the same stressors have shown to provide protective responses and foster resilience in response to maltreatment and neglect (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2012), that is evidenced in differences between the egocentric Nick and his twin sister Margo (Carrie Coon), who provides the moderating voice of reason.

Nick explores the dilemma of childrearing in a hostile environment that questions the decision to leave or stay. Resilience of children of divorce is well documented with considerable evidence to indicate that positive parenting buffers the negative effects of divorce (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998). If collaborative and positive parenting after divorce is not a possibility, how does rearing within a hostile environment affect resilience? The question that lingers long after the film has ended is, "Why did he stay?" Nick argues that without him the baby does not have a chance with Amy as a mother. There

are mixed reviews on the impact of a dysfunctional parental dyad and its effects on the developmental outcomes of a child. Masten (2001) posits that negative social and emotional “risk gradients can be inverted,” when counteracting positive assets alter the trajectory of the risk. Given Amy’s psychopathology and the intensity of negative affect between Nick and Amy, the quality of the childrearing environment is at question, especially since maternal psychopathology is associated with higher levels of intimate partner violence and presents significantly worse adaptive outcomes on children (Insana, Foley, Montgomery-Downs, Kolko, & McNeil, 2014).

*Gone Girl* should be viewed by all those who rear children or interact with those that raise children. *Gone Girl* provides an insight into the divide between public and private, and leaves the viewer with an uncomfortable, vulnerable tension at the end, that forces one to look deeper into the machinations of interpersonal relationships. Viewing this film through the banal heuristic of a mystery thriller belies the psychological complexity that is skillfully woven by a master storyteller (David Fincher).

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