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The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo: Forensic Psychiatric Perspectives

Screenplay by Steven Zaillian, based on the novel by Steig Larsson. Directed by David Fincher. Produced by Scott Rudin, Ole Søndberg, Søren Staermose, *et al*. A Columbia Pictures, Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, Scott Rudin, Yellow Bird Films production. Released in the United States December 20, 2011. 158 minutes.

Every once in a while, fiction provides us with a character who is so original, so extraordinary, that she captures our imaginations and won't let them go. Lisbeth Salander, anti-heroine of Stieg Larson's *Millennium Trilogy* of novels,[1–3] is one such character. So enamored are we with Ms. Salander that both Americans and her Swedish countrymen created film adaptations of her debut novel, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. The Swedish film was directed by Niels Arden Oplev.[4] David Fincher, director of several films worthy of psychiatry movie club analysis (*Fight Club*, *Seven*, and *Zodiac*), directed the American film.

Ostensibly, the main character of *Dragon Tattoo* is Swedish journalist Mikael Blomkvist. Blomkvist is the publisher and main writer for *Millennium* magazine. He has made a name for himself by uncovering financial crimes. After penning an exposé on industrialist Hans-Erik Wennerström, he is sued for libel. Blomkvist loses the legal case and most of his life savings. The future of *Millennium* becomes uncertain. While awaiting the results of an appeal, he gets an intriguing offer from Hendrik Vanger, retired Vanger Corporation CEO. Under the guise of writing the Vanger family history, Blomkvist is asked to investigate the 40-year-old disappearance of Harriet, Blomkvist's childhood babysitter and Hendrik Vanger's favorite great-niece. Vanger agrees to pay the now savings-depleted Blomkvist handsomely. More enticingly, Vanger promises to give Blomkvist solid evidence regarding the financial crimes perpetrated by Wennerström. As the Vangers and Blomkvist become further enmeshed, the Vanger Corporation becomes the financial savior of *Millennium.*

In the course of the Vanger family investigation, Blomkvist decides he needs a research assistant. The family lawyer recommends Milton Security investigator Lisbeth Salander. The mysterious Salander is a proficient computer hacker and has a myriad of other specialized skills, including a photographic memory and good marksmanship. In fact, the Vangers had used her abilities to investigate Blomkvist thoroughly before deciding to employ him. Salander knows Blomkvist better than his own friends and family do. Because of her own complex back-story, Salander's involvement in the mystery is assured when Blomkvist tells her that he is looking for "a killer of women." Together, they uncover Nazis, pedophiles, and worse in their quest. The mystery of Harriet's disappearance culminates in a violent showdown with someone very well-known to the Vanger clan. Ultimately, instead of the hero's saving the damsel in distress, it is the damsel who saves the day. Not only does Salander rescue Blomkvist from death, she uses her computer skills to ruin Wennerström and resurrect Blomkvist's journalism career.

Pages and pages have been written comparing and contrasting Oplev's and Fincher's movies. A significant portion of those reviews have focused on the pivotal role of Lisbeth Salander. The *New York Times* book review describes Fincher's movie as follows:

> The story starts to fade as soon as the end credits run. But it is much harder to shake the lingering, troubling memory of an angry, elusive and curiously magnetic young woman who belongs so completely to this cynical, cybernetic and chaotic world without ever seeming to be at home in it.[5]

In the Swedish film, Salander was played expertly by Noomi Rapace. In the American film, she is portrayed brilliantly by Rooney Mara, previously recognized for her small but memorable role as Mark Zuckerberg's (Facebook CEO and creator) girlfriend in Fincher's Oscar-winning *The Social Network*. Rather than attempt to summarize the many reviews written on the movies, we will instead focus on the character of Lisbeth Salander, described by Stieg Larsson as an adult Pippi Longstocking,[6] and what she has to offer to forensic psychiatry. The films and novels raise several diagnostic, as well as bread-and-butter, forensic questions regarding Salander that can be assessed and enjoyably debated: traumatization, violence risk, professional malpractice, ethics-related misconduct, and guardianship.

To quote Winston Churchill, Lisbeth Salander is "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." She is a walking bruise, a human pincushion whose armor consists of black spiked leather, piercings, and body art. In the first half of the film, small pieces of her story unfold parallel to Blomkvist's professional disgrace and the onset of his new investigation. The audience sees Salander working for Milton Security, fighting back against a would-be purse snatcher, and becoming involved sexually with another woman. We learn that Salander has a guardian-of-person, Holger Palmgren. The reasons for this are detailed in the later films and novels. Palmgren had permitted Salander to manage her own affairs; however, he becomes incapacitated by a stroke and is replaced by Nils Bjurman. Bjurman expects a *quid pro quo* relationship with his new ward. For example, to get some of her money for a new computer, Salander must first perform fellatio on Bjurman. Rather than let Bjurman get the upper hand, Salander decides that she will use a hidden camera to capture the next time her guardian wants her to be "sociable" with him. In one of the most shocking scenes of the movie, Bjurman horrifically rapes Salander, and the whole ordeal is captured on film. Salander later uses this film to get violent revenge and to secure for herself some freedom to manage her own affairs.

Initially, Salander's character comes across as antisocial, even psychopathic. She is physically violent and seemingly without empathy or remorse. There appear to be no real relationships in her life, causing some viewers (and Blomkvist himself) to wonder if she has Asperger's syndrome. Her lack of interpersonal relationships and odd persona have suggested schizoid personality disorder to some. Salander, as her hacker alter-ego Wasp, willfully and frequently violates the law in her work as an investigator for Milton Security. As *Dragon Tattoo* unfolds, however, it becomes apparent that Salander does in fact have a strong moral code. Foremost in her code is her intolerance of abuse against women, illustrated by her seeking her own brand of justice after being raped by Bjurman. Her violence and violations of the law always have a purpose, with material self-gain usually low on her list of motivations. She is usually aggressive for self-protection, vengeance, or a desire to assert her free will. Although she materially benefits from her computer hacking, increasing her own wealth is not what drives her. Salander's ability to feel connected with other people is revealed in the movie through her nursing home visits with former guardian Holger Palmgren. He cannot even communicate with her, yet she returns again and again. Salander's ability to love is further shown through her relationship with Blomkvist. She even tells Palmgren that she has made a friend (Blomkvist), a startling declaration for the isolated woman who trusts no one.

Dragon Tattoo's original Swedish title translates as *Men Who Hate Women*, which perfectly describes the human makeup of Salander's universe with rare exceptions, such as Blomkvist and Palmgren. Without giving too much away from installments 2 (*The Girl Who Played with Fire*) and 3 (*The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*) to be released soon, Salander's backstory involves repeated traumas beginning at an early age.[2,3] The people she cares about are stripped from her by violence (her mother, a girlfriend) and illness (Palmgren). The mental health system heaps further abuses on young Salander through the work of Dr. Peter Teleborian, a Dr. Evil of the first degree.[7,8] Teleborian, a secret sadist and pedophile, heads the psychiatric hospital where Salander was committed in childhood. Long beyond any clinical involvement in Salander's life, Teleborian misuses his power as a medical professional to try to restrict her freedom, both literally and figuratively.

By the end of the third film and novel, we understand the foundations for Salander's personality and behavior. It also becomes clear that posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a more appropriate diagnosis for Salander than antisocial personality disorder or psychopathy. One forensic psychologist author completed the PCL-R and asserts that Salander's score would be 14, well below the cutoff for psychopathy.[9] Asperger's and schizoid personality disorder can also be dismissed based on her capacity for love and connection. Salander's emotional remoteness, hypervigilance, and intrusive memories of her traumas are all suggestive of PTSD.

In a previous article,[7] we discussed how popular culture has the power to influence public perception of psychiatrists and mental illness. With a character as indelible as Lisbeth Salander, it is important to be mindful of how her film presence shapes public perception of psychiatric subjects and of gender roles. Salander, although not conventionally beautiful, spends much of the film scantily clad and her tattooed form is lit and displayed like art. She is a modern and extreme version of the quirky, nonconformist female protagonists who have populated a special niche in films for

decades. Although we have some fears that Salander's character may heighten the public perception that traumatized or mentally ill individuals all have the potential to be very violent, we also feel she may represent a new type of fictional role model.

From the opening credits of the American adaptation reminiscent of recent James Bond films, to the final scene of our anti-heroine riding off on her motorcycle, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* belongs to Lisbeth Salander. She is a Batman-esque superhero for this millennium. As is true of other movies centering on a dark hero, the film is rich in examples of psychopathology and forensic questions.

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Flight: The Descent of Addiction

Written by John Gatins. Directed by Robert Zemeckis. Produced by Laurie MacDonald, Walter Parkes, Jack Rapke, *et al*. A Parkes & MacDonald and ImageMovers production distributed by Paramount Pictures. Released August 8, 2012, 139 minutes.

Flight presents a dramatic story line and graphic action that maintain audience interest through the more than two-hour film. The film examines an anguished man caught in the grip of addiction and the consequences of a misguided life. As the film begins, a strongly atmospheric scene foreshadows coming events, as powerful weather and personal turbulence intersect during the flight and crash of a passenger airliner. While the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigates the incident, the audience experiences its own challenge in defining responsibility for the failure of the flight. How should one make sense of this man, his life, and his actions?

Director Robert Zemeckis uses a rich set of literary allusions and visual images to illuminate *Flight*'s thematic content of determinism and choice, accountability and redemption. The leitmotiv of inversion informs not only the physical movement of the airplane, but also the pilot's life and the functioning of the legal system. The director is masterful in creating a feeling of turbulence that encompasses both the action and our assessments. The visual excitement of the film combines with a powerful and destructive personal story for a compelling viewing experience.

Flight captain and former Navy pilot Whip Whitaker is skillfully played by Denzel Washington. Whip's extensive use of alcohol and cocaine before the doomed flight may have contributed to the crash or may have been its salvation. In the military, pilots have been given stimulants in the recent past to improve performance. The complex presentation of drug abuse and gifted ability in flying make it difficult to decide clearly on his individual culpability. What is clear is that Whip's personal life has been in a descent that has alienated him from his former wife, his son, and some of his flight crew.

Whip survives the crash of his plane which occurs after an evening of drunken excess with his flight attendant Katrina. To compensate for his alcohol intoxication and lack of sleep, he prepares himself for the flight by snorting cocaine. He stumbles around the plane during his preflight assessment, but despite his compromised appearance, the other flight crew members do not stop the flight from taking off. He then makes a bold and frightening ascent through a storm, ultimately reaching clear skies and demonstrating an unusual ability to find a path through the turbulence. When he achieves a safe altitude, he pours himself a drink from the in-flight alcohol bottles and places them in the trash.

Later in the flight, the plane develops a critical handling failure because of a catastrophic event in the plane's flight mechanism. In short order, Whip