

# A Case for Amy: Sociopathic Rage in the Era of the Marketing Personality

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*Warning: This article contains plot spoilers for the film Gone Girl.*

Erich Fromm, the psychoanalyst and social philosopher, presciently identified a character structure that by 2014 has become ubiquitous within Western society: the marketing personality. This is the person who lives his life feeling more like a commodity to be bought or sold than a living animal with initiative and vitality derived from a sense of subjective reality. Nowhere is this more apparent than on our Facebook profiles, Snapchat feeds, and Instagram photos, which act as self-generated attempts at packaging ourselves to *look* alive, enviable, and, most importantly, worth something.

For Amy (Rosamund Pike) in the film *Gone Girl* (2014), the commodification comes not in the form of a social networking platform, but in the comparatively quaint premise of a children's book series written by her well-intentioned yet narcissistically inclined parents. The book series' titular character, *Amazing Amy*, is like Amy the real girl, only not. In short, *Amazing Amy* is perfect (read: perfectly marketable). She also represents the pseudo-person Amy's parents needed her to be in order for them to feel good about themselves. In this way, the books are the metaphorical translation of Amy from an authentic human into a commodity, meant solely for consumption and the gratification of others' needs.

It's no wonder that Amy, like so many of us, comes to see her felt needs and longings as nuisances to be suppressed in favor of taking on the carefully adapted personas most likely to attract the attention and purchasing power of those around her.

Amy's hyperattentiveness to the desires of others takes on an almost superpower quality. When she meets her eventual husband, Nick (Ben Affleck), it takes but one quick, flirty exchange for her to deduce what package to put herself in to attract him. For Nick, she will be the woman who pals around with the guys, who is never a "shrew," and, most of all, who simply lets him be (the birthright she was never afforded). In exchange, she could at least count on his love and would never have to fear him leaving her.

But the thing about our most deep-seated internal longings is that they can never really be completely extinguished. Amy's hope that something real inside of her can be truly appreciated is rekindled when, on their impromptu first date, Nick takes her to the back alley of a sugar factory. The sugar permeating the air creates a wondrous snow-globe moment for the pair, who lean

in to kiss—but before they do, Nick brushes away some of the sugar on her lips as if in an attempt to get to the real Amy through the saccharin artifice that she's worked so hard to construct. Therein lies a glimmer of hope that maybe Nick wants Amy. Not *Amazing Amy*. Just Amy.

For the rest of us: not the liked selfie with the perfect lighting, nice arm candy, and good hair, but the one that shows us disheveled and, for once, actually enjoying something in the moment. But the selfie, being a selfie, is always an appeal for approval from the outside: an outside that inevitably disappoints. And who could be expected to gracefully endure a blow from the outside on which you've based your whole identity?

Somewhere around the four-year mark of their marriage, Nick cheats. He breaks their tacit commodity-consumer contract in favor of a younger, presumably more amazing Amy. Betrayal—not only at the hands of her husband, but also those of her parents, who had promised her a substantial legacy fund based on the profits of the *Amazing Amy* books, but who ultimately ask to keep that money to save their troubled publishing company. So, it would seem that only *Amazing Amy* had worth after all. Real Amy was gone.

When Amy fakes her own murder in an attempt to frame Nick, it is a concrete acting-out of a felt experience; that of her true self being killed off repeatedly by those she loves the most. This is a woman who, given a specific set of formative experiences in a specific cultural milieu, never gained the capacity to believe that life could be anything other than an exercise in self-sacrifice. Likewise, Amy's subsequent framing of an ex-boyfriend for her kidnap and rape speaks directly to the emotional experience of being perpetually controlled by some overpowering force. A force that is primarily a psychological relic from her childhood experiences, but that gets repeatedly played out interpersonally because, to believe in her own suffering, she needs to see it and have it be seen in objective reality.

Subjectivity, after all, is almost a moot point in the era of the marketing personality. Validation for our very existence is increasingly sought based on the objective activity of a fan following that communicates through "likes" or a high viewer count on our latest YouTube video. Aspiring for celebrity status, even through a meagerly viewed blog, is perhaps our best attempt to feel real by knowing someone is watching.

Amy's subjective, internal experience is so lost on her that she is impelled to resort to literally forcing a foreign object into herself,

as if by rape, in order to prove to herself and others that her experience of being intruded upon is real. Amy may go to the concrete extreme by using a high-end bottle of wine to sodomize herself, but we're all grasping for something fancy to fill the void. The consumer-centric ideal passed on unwittingly by our parents and lovers promises worth through material gain but ultimately thrashes our nature and leaves us feeling dreadfully empty.

Ultimately, Amy, in all of her sociopathic rage, slits the throat of her alleged raper—the ex-boyfriend who comes to represent the exploitative oppressor who she could never seem to escape. What Amy sadly never grasps is that the oppressor lives in her psyche—it is the little voice who tells her that she is not, nor could she ever be, real.

In an interesting turn, the highly scrutinized and media-exploited experience of being Amy's suspected murderer results in Nick coming to intimately understand Amy as a person: one who only exists to fulfill others' fantasies and who is made up of projections from the outside rather than an inner vitality. In this way, somewhat paradoxically, Amy's true internal experience is finally felt and understood by someone she loves.

To the befuddlement of the *Gone Girl* audience, Nick stays married to Amy after her ceremonious return to their paparazzi-littered home in a dress soaked in her victim's blood. But of course they would stay together. Albeit a subjective experience consumed by hate and dread, Nick and Amy still shared something intensely real together. Nothing in life, especially in the modern marketing life, is quite so precious.

Commodification of the human experience is a debilitating and life-threatening cultural disease. The rage buried within us for being taught to mute our realness finds release in Amy's acts of destruction. But it is important to note that Amy is both victim and aggressor and that there is an expansive distance between destructive fantasy and destruction committed. Diminishing the possibility of the latter relies on accepting the former as real within us; even homicidal rage is a fundamentally human trait. Feeling into the subjective veracity of our own hatred alleviates us from the urge of acting it out recklessly with those around us. If it is real to us, we do not have to *make* it real to everyone else in the way our marketing culture would have us believe. The best hope for all of us Amys is that we find the courage to look inside of ourselves and live in fulfillment of our true nature, which is beautifully imperfect and inspirationally idiosyncratic. ■