Original Article

The limits of plot: Accounting for how women interpret stories of sexual assault

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Abstract Although scholars have argued that plot is key to narrative's effects, no one has studied empirically how people interpret stories told along different plotlines. This has left unexamined an important puzzle: how do time- and place-specific beliefs intrude on the operation of plot genres in shaping narrative's meaning? On the basis of a survey and focus-group study of how women interpreted first-person stories of an acquaintance rape told along different plotlines, we argue that what stands in the way of adapting old stories to new purposes is less plot than character. The same events can be inserted into different genres of plot to yield quite different moral messages. But audiences' expectations of characters are more rigid. Time- and place-specific ideas about how people properly behave – about how ambitious women should be, for example, or how emotional men should be – limit audiences' ability to imagine them playing the roles associated with different plots. Plots are transposable; characters are less so.

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Introduction

Much of sociologists' fascination with storytelling rests on the presumed power of generic plots. Plot is the structure of the story, the thread that connects the events recounted into a meaningful whole (Brooks, 1984; Ricoeur, 1984; Miller, 1990; Somers, 1994). As we read a story, we gradually recognize events as part of a David and Goliath story about the little guy triumphing over the big guy or a Pride Before a Fall story about the little guy biting off more than he can chew (Brooks, 1984). Plots are familiar to us from stories we have heard or read before (Frye, 1957; Miller, 1990; Somers, 1994; Davis, 2002; Smith, 2004). Generic plot both explain events and evaluate them: they project a moral future (Frye, 1957; Kane, 2000; Davis, 2002; Jacobs, 2002; Alexander, 2003).

For many sociologists, generic plot account for stories' enabling and constraining character. People can win legitimacy and power by casting themselves as the hero in familiar stories of overcoming (Kane, 2000; Smith, 2004; Jacobs and Sobieraj, 2007) or exodus and return (Walzer, 1986). By the same token, however, storytelling is ineffectual when there is not a generic plot for the story one wants to tell. For example, the prominence of the up-by-your-bootstraps Horatio Alger myth makes it difficult to tell a story in which the penniless person gets a leg up from a welfare agency. Dominant genres favor the existing in a way that rules out alternatives (Somers, 1994; Maines, 2001; Davis, 2002).

The argument is compelling. But we simply do not know whether people read along the lines of generic plot. As a result, we do not know how much one can modify a familiar plot and still convey an intelligible story. For example, could one not put a poor person in a classic tale of heroism, in which the poor person battles the forces of bureaucracy and indifference with the help of a sympathetic bureaucrat? Could not such a story communicate at once the virtue of the individual bureaucrat and the importance of the institution of welfare? What stands in the way of adapting old stories to new circumstances? More generally, how do time and place-specific beliefs shape stories' interpretation?

We argue that they do so by way of character. In other words, narrative does limit people's capacity to imagine alternatives to the status quo, but not by way of canonical plots. The same events can be inserted into different genres of plot, whether heroic or tragic, comedic or ironic, to yield quite different conclusions. But audiences' expectations of character are more rigid. Time- and place-specific ideas about how people properly behave – about how ambitious women should be, for example, or how emotional men should be – limit audiences' ability to imagine them playing roles associated with different plot genres. Plots are transposable; characters are less so.

We base these conclusions on a survey- and focus-group based study of how people responded to stories told along different plot. Readers, we found, interpreted stories following what we call a 'two logics' approach. If the main characters in the story matched dominant expectations about how people of that status typically behaved, then readers relied on a logic of genre in evaluating the characters, filling in missing parts of the story and extracting a moral from the story. If the main characters did not match those expectations, then readers interpreted the story in line with conventional beliefs about how people of that status behaved. In short, dominant status expectations did not preclude a genre-based reading, but they did set the conditions for one. As we show, this poses real difficulties for those who would use stories to challenge the status quo.

A Genre-based Account of Narrative Persuasion

Preachers, advertising executives and politicians have long attested to the power of a good story to change people's minds. Communication scholars recently have shown why. People cognitively process stories differently than they process other kinds of messages. Unless they have a personal stake in the issue, people tend to process messages 'peripherally', absorbing the message casually rather than scrutinizing it and judging it less by its content than by the appeal of the speaker or by the mood they are in at the moment (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Slater and Rouner, 2002). Peripheral processing may lead to attitudinal change in the moment but it does not last. By contrast, people process stories by immersing themselves in the story, striving to experience vicariously the events and emotions that the protagonists do. They suspend their proclivity to counterargue, to raise doubts about the veracity or relevance of the information they are hearing. Crucially, this is true whether or not they have a stake in the issues featured in the story (Green and Brock, 2000; Slater and Rouner, 2002). Readers suspend disbelief, in a way that has lasting effects. The attitudinal change brought about by stories tends to persist or even increase over time (Appel and Richter, 2007).

In line with this insight, 'entertainment-education' initiatives have used stories to promote contraceptive use, AIDS awareness, organ donation, mammography use and responsible drinking (Slater and Rouner, 2002; Hinyard and Kreuter, 2007). Research has documented changes in resulting opinions and behavior, showing, for example, that televised dramas involving contraceptive use increased visits to family planning clinics in Tanzania (Vaughan *et al*, 2000) and that American women who heard first person stories about breast cancer were more likely than a control group to have mammograms (Erwin *et al*, 1999).

Undoubtedly, however, how a story is told affects readers' response. Events recounted in one way might lead audiences to sympathize with the protagonist, in another way to blame the protagonist, and in still another way, to sympathize with the protagonist but without feeling any need to change their own opinions or behaviors (Jacobs, 2002; Polletta, 2006). Indeed, entertainment education researchers have found that stories have no effect if their message is too explicit (Slater and Rouner, 2002; Slater *et al*, 2006). That is not surprising: readers want the events recounted in the story to yield their own meaning. But as narrative theorists since Aristotle have recognized, events in a story never yield their own meaning. We evaluate, even understand, what is happening in a story by reference to stories we have heard before. Stories are *structured* in ways that allow us to recognize a new story as some version of a pre-existing one (Miller, 1990)[1] .

Narrative theorists make two broad claims about such structures. One is that they are evaluative as well as explanatory. Stories both recount particular events and draw a larger meaning from them. Narrative structures give stories a moral (White, 1980; Davis, 2002; Smith, 2004; Polletta, 2006). To be sure, stories rarely announce their moral explicitly. Rather, events seem to yield their own conclusion. A particular story of a failed marriage says something general about what marriages require to succeed, or about the impossibility of truly successful marriages, or about marital happiness as a matter of chance.

The second claim is that narrative structures are structured as well as structuring. The repertoire of narrative forms or tropes or plots is limited (White, 1980; Bruner, 1986; Maines, 2001; Smith, 2004). We cannot tell any story we want (Somers, 1994). To be sure, narrative structures are complex and capacious, admitting of variation. But stories departing too far from the familiar risk seeming awkward, untrue or not stories at all (White, 1980). Likewise, characters are recognizable from stories we have heard before (Fisher, 1987, p. 47).

Although literary critics have tended to see narrative structures as universal and timeless (Frye, 1957; Levi-Strauss, 1963; Propp, 1970; Miller, 1990), sociologists have not. Instead, they have emphasized the historical character of narrative repertoires and, often, the relations of power that stand behind accepted ways of telling stories (Somers, 1994; Maines, 2001; Loseke, 2012). Two hundred years ago, a story about a woman whose quiet forbearance allowed her to suffer the indignities of poverty, abuse and injustice without complaint might have been heard as a story of heroism. Today, 'Patient Griselda' is likely to be interpreted as a story of abject and pathetic victimhood. This suggests that stories are interpreted in terms of contemporary beliefs.

Yet sociologists also tend to accept the notion that familiar narrative forms can be turned to new purposes. There is subversive power in the transposability of narrative structures (Kane, 1997; Fine, 1999; Jacobs and Sobieraj, 2007). This suggests that it is possible to identify story structures that have some meaning beyond the historical, institutional context of their telling. It suggests that we can hear stories in line, not with contemporary ideological beliefs, but with expectations that are intrinsic to the genre.

People undoubtedly draw interpretive resources both from familiar plots and from dominant ideologies (Jacobs and Sobieraj, 2007, p. 30). One might argue, too, that just as familiar plots are intrinsically ideological, dominant ideologies are intrinsically narrative; that is, they are reproduced in and through familiar stories. But one can acknowledge a deep and dense relationship between narrative structures and ideological beliefs while at the same time granting each one analytic autonomy. Doing so should help to shed light on just what the relationship between the two is. The alternative would be to see them as so mutually constitutive that the notion of structures' transposability would be meaningless. It makes sense, then, to ask how time- and place-specific beliefs interact with the operation of narrative structures such as genre in producing a story's message.

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[1] Scholars have conceptualized this aspect of stories in multiple ways: they have referred to story models (Davis, 2002), genres (Jacobs, 2000; Alexander, 2003; Smith, 2004; Jacobs and Sobieraj, 2007), templates (Smith, 2004), functions (Propp, 1970), clause-based functions (Labov and Waletsky, 1967), schemas (Ewick and Silbey, 2003), formulas (Loseke, 2001; 2012) and plotlines (White, 1980; Miller, 1990; Kane, 2000; Maines, 2001; Polletta, 2006).

Competing Accounts: Genre-based, Status-based and a Two-logics Account

We propose that one way they do so is by way of *characters*. Characters have received little scrutiny by narrative theorists. To the contrary, theorists have tended to subordinate character to plot (Chatman, 1978; Toolan, 2001). From Aristotle on, they have treated characters as the combination of traits that are required to enact the actions that make up the narrative. Characters are, as Chatman puts it, 'participants or *actants* rather than *personages*' (1978, p. 111). Sociologists of narrative, for their part, have tended to treat plot and characters as distinct components of narrative (Somers, 1994; Kane, 2000; Maines, 2001; Davis, 2002). But they have either focused on plot in accounting for narrative's effect (Kane, 2000, p. 316; Maines, 2001) or have theorized character structures as a function of plot structures (Smith, 2004; Jacobs and Sobieraj, 2007).[2]

Rather than subordinating character to plot (or plot to character, with what happens in the story simply a technique for revealing layers of a character's personality) in accounting for narrative's effects, we argue that character and plot are both important but are shaped by different logics. Chatman observes, 'Characters do not have "lives"; we endow them with "personality" only to the extent that personality is a structure familiar to us in life and art …. Even fantastic narratives require inference, guesses, and expectations according to one's sense of what *normal* persons are like' (1978, p. 137). For our purposes, the key here is readers' idea of what '*normal* persons are like' – understanding normal in its descriptive and evaluative sense. This is where standard role expectations, stereotypes, prejudices, social biases, and dominant ideologies come in. Believable, sympathetic characters are shaped by prevailing beliefs about how people in those circumstances should behave.

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[2] In their historical examination of the stories told by Congressmen about voluntary organizations, Jacobs and Sobieraj (2007) show that the ideological climate of the Cold War, with its emphasis on exposing subversive organizations, made possible the invention of a new character: the philanthropic 'false heroes,' who were masquerading as helpmates of the disadvantaged but were in fact out for their own gain. The story was old but the character was new. This suggests that character structures may be shaped by a different logic than plot, but the possibility is not explored.

Here, we can draw from expectation states theory (Wagner and Berger, 1997; Ridgeway and Bourg, 2004) a logic about how characters should behave. According to the theory, where particular statuses are salient (gender, race, class and so on), people attribute higher levels of skills and resources to the historically advantaged group (Webster and Foschi, 1988). For example, in mixed-gender groups, participants are likely to see men as more instrumentally competent and they are likely to behave accordingly (Eagly and Mladinic, 1994). Women, by contrast, are typically seen as more expressive than instrumental (Eagly and Mladinic, 1994); as oriented to the group rather than to themselves (Ridgeway, 1982); and as submissive rather than assertive (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin, 2006). Women who act assertively and who 'violate the niceness prescription' are evaluated negatively by men but even more negatively by women (Rudman and Glick, 2001).

This perspective yields expectations that run counter to those associated with a genre-based account of narrative interpretation. In a genre-based account, stories that conform to familiar plot will yield the normative messages associated with those plots. In particular, the moral evaluation that audiences make of the story's main characters will depend less on characters' 'objective' behavior or than on audiences' genre-based expectations. Audiences will fill in missing causal links in the story in line with what usually happens in stories of this genre. For example, in a tragic story, the main character's assertiveness may be blamed for her downfall. The same assertiveness will be appreciated and endorsed when it appears in a heroic story. Indeed, that assertiveness may be cited by audiences as the reason for liking or identifying with the character.

By contrast, an approach to narrative that privileges dominant status beliefs emphasizes the difficulty of making women the protagonists of classically heroic stories. Tell a story in which a woman responds to a threat assertively and instrumentally, and readers will probably not like her or identify with her. They will not derive from her story the message that, if they are in a similar situation, they should behave in the same way. They will hear a different story: one not about heroism but about the dangers that women face or the dangers that foolish women face. Dominant gender norms trump the power of genre in shaping readers' interpretation and evaluation of what happens in the story.

If people read stories *only* along the line of dominant status beliefs, then they will fill in missing parts of the story, anticipate the story's ending, and derive a moral message from the story based solely on dominant expectations about how people of that status typically fare in the situation described in the story (see Table 1). We want to offer a third possibility. In our 'two logics' perspective, people read along the lines of genre *if* the main characters fit dominant expectations about people of that status. Again, plots and characters operate according to different logics. When the main characters fit with dominant status

Table 1: Three approaches to how people read

	How readers read	*Readers' view of tragic protagonist*	*Readers' view of heroic protagonist*
Genre-based approach	Readers interpret stories in terms of familiar storylines.	Because in tragedies, the protagonist's downfall is a result of her tragic flaw, readers will blame the protagonist for her fate and will dislike her.	Because in heroic stories, the hero must act to save innocents, readers will admire the protagonist for her courage.
Status norms-based approach	Readers interpret stories in terms of common beliefs about how people like the main characters typically behave.	Because women are expected to be less assertive and instrumental than men, readers will like the protagonist for her submissiveness and expressiveness and will not blame her for her fate.	Because women are expected to be less assertive and instrumental than men, readers will dislike the protagonist for her assertiveness.
Our two logics approach	Readers interpret stories in terms of familiar storylines only when the main characters behave in conventional ways.	If the protagonist is submissive and expressive, readers will read along the lines of genre. They will blame the protagonist for her fate and will dislike her despite her submissiveness.	If the protagonist is assertive and instrumental, readers will read along the lines of dominant status-expectations. They will blame the protagonist for her assertiveness and will dislike her.

expectations, readers will read along the lines of genre. When the main characters do not fit with dominant status expectations, readers will read along the lines of those status expectations (see Table 1).[3] This is important because it points to the contingent power of storytelling in challenging the status quo. One can put a woman or a poor person or a person of color in a classically heroic story, but if she or he exhibits the assertiveness, confidence and instrumental orientation of a classical (white male) hero, the story will not be read as a heroic one.

Rape Stories and Reporting Rates

We sought to appraise these competing theoretical accounts by having respondents read first-person stories of acquaintance rape told along different plotlines. We chose this issue because stories have been seen as central both to the problem of acquaintance rape and to its potential solution. Despite growing public consciousness of the problem of 'date rape', sexual assaults against women continue to go largely unreported. Studies show that as few as 2 per cent of sexual assaults of college women are reported to authorities (Fisher *et al*, 2003). There are several reasons for victims' unwillingness to go to police. In some cases, women fear retaliation by their rapist or fear that they will be socially stigmatized by their peers for having reported the rape. But research also shows that women often see themselves as having been responsible for their rape (because they sent 'mixed signals', or were intoxicated, or had put themselves in a risky situation) or believe that the assault they experienced was not 'serious' enough to be reported as a real rape (Du Mont *et al*, 2003; Thompson *et al*, 2007).

The problem, as numerous observers have pointed out, is that pervasive myths about rape shape how victims respond to their experience (Burt, 1980; Du Mont *et al*, 2003). Rape is committed by strangers, goes one myth. Another is that women often say no when they mean yes, or call an episode of consensual sex rape after the fact because they feel guilty about it. It does not count as rape, goes another myth, if the woman 'led the man on' sexually. It is not rape if the rapist does not use a weapon or the woman does not physically resist. None of these myths is formally supported by the law but their pervasiveness influences how rapes are prosecuted, influences those who perpetrate rapes and influences how victims respond to rape.

How can one debunk myths such as these? The research on narrative persuasion that we cited earlier seems to offer empirical support for a strategy that is commonly used in rape outreach efforts. Books, articles and other materials that are aimed at preventing rape, encouraging women to report their rape and helping victims to recover from their rape routinely include victims' stories of their experiences. But do these stories do what they are supposed to do? Feminist scholars have speculated about the disempowering effects of the storylines that dominate contemporary discourse about sexual assault. Such storylines rely on images of the victim as 'pure, innocent, helpless' and the perpetrator as 'monstrous and all powerful', they write (Lamb, 1999, p. 118; see also Ronai, 1999, p. 140; Marececk, 1999). Common in therapeutic discourse as much as in popular culture, stories like these may lead women to believe that their own experiences do not qualify as rape because they were not completely 'innocent' or the perpetrator was not unequivocally 'evil'. Or women may not report their rapes because they are unwilling to see themselves or have others see them as the pathetic, passive character portrayed in the story (Bumiller, 1988; Lamb, 1999, p. 119).

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[3] Higgins and Brush (2006) show that women welfare recipients who sought to tell their stories in heroic terms were not effective. The heroic genre requires that the protagonist be superhumanly strong, the authors argue, a standard that no one can approximate. On the account that we propose, it is specifically women on welfare who could not be seen as approximating that standard.

In our reading of the literature aimed at preventing acquaintance rapes and helping women to recover from them, we found this storyline but also another one.[4] The storyline feminists criticize, in which an innocent woman is destroyed by an evil man, fits what literary critic Christopher Booker (2004) refers to as a 'gothic' variant of tragedy. An innocent and virtuous young woman is subjected to the escalating depredations of an unqualifiedly malign antagonist. The stories that we found in the date rape literature were often closer in form to classic tragedy. In classic tragedies, as in the gothic variant, bad things happen to the protagonist. But in classic tragedy, the protagonist is in a sense responsible for his or her fate. S/he suffers from a 'fatal flaw' (Booker, 2004, p. 329; Hogan, 2007): perhaps, irresolution (Hamlet), naiveté (Icarus) or romanticism (Anna Karenina). Presented with an object of desire that seems to fulfill his or her unmet needs, the tragic hero makes what the audience recognizes as a 'pact with the devil'. At first, during the 'dream' or 'anticipation' phase, the hero seems to experience only good fortune. Then, during the 'frustration' phase, things begin to go wrong. The hero willfully ignores danger signs. S/he is isolated from supportive family and friends. Then the 'nightmare' phase begins. Events spiral inexorably downward. Hamlet is killed, Icarus is burned by the sun, Anna Karenina throws herself under the train. Insofar as the protagonist is responsible for his or her fate, he or she must pay for it.

Stories appearing in books with titles like *The Date Rape Prevention Handbook, Date Rape*, and *I Never Called It Rape*, usually in a chapter or section titled 'One Woman's Story', reproduced the dream, frustration and nightmare phases characteristic of classic tragedy. Most began with the protagonist flattered by an attractive young man's attention. 'Jim and I met during college', Helen

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[4] Our sample of books is not comprehensive. We used various search engines to identify books about date rape that were aimed at a general audience. We were able to secure about 20 of them. Some did not have stories, and some of the stories did not hew to the genre that we describe above. However, more than half of those that included stories did.

recounted in one. ‘He was running for student body president, and I was one of the people in his campaign. He was enormously popular, and I guess I was as impressed as every other girl who was with him’ (Lundquist, 2000, p. 16). ‘I never believed in love at first sight before, but after I met Paul, I knew that what I felt was a new, intoxicating first love’, another wrote (Kim, 1995, p. 118). After the protagonist accepted the man’s invitation to a date, or in the early stages of their relationship, there was often some indication that the man was dangerous. But the protagonist ignored or dismissed such information, often because of her narcissistic pride at being connected to an attractive man. One woman described her date’s sexual aggressiveness and her decision to keep dating him: ‘I liked what Jim represented – an older boyfriend at another school with exciting friends’ (Walden, 1995, p. 128). Sometimes the narcissism led the protagonist to avoid seeking help from family or friends. In other cases, the woman’s isolation from her friends was rendered as unsurprising to her, as somehow inevitable (‘Why did I go in? When we got upstairs, of course there was no one there, I knew it!’ (Lundquist, 2000, p. 21)). Once the woman was isolated, as in classic tragedy, the nightmare phase began. The woman was raped.

The rapes were often portrayed as brutal, the rapist as remorseless, and the protagonist as profoundly, and often enduringly, harmed by the rape. There was never any indication that the victim ‘deserved it’. Still, in line with the genre-based theory of narrative interpretation we described, the tragic form of the story may have indicated to readers that the protagonist’s fate was unavoidable. Once the protagonist had missed or ignored the rapist’s cues, her demise was a foregone conclusion. The message of such a story might be that women should avoid being swept off their feet by handsome men, not that they should respond to their experience as they would to a violent crime.

Of course, this conclusion remains speculative in the absence of empirical research on readers’ responses. Our project aimed to investigate just this. We also wondered, however, whether stories of acquaintance rapes told along different plotlines might elicit a response that favored reporting rapes to police. Could one tell a story of an acquaintance rape in which the protagonist was both victim and hero, appealing enough that readers could imagine modeling their own behavior on hers and assertive enough that that behavior would include reporting an assault to police? Consider what literary critic Booker calls the ‘Overcoming the Monster’ storyline – and we will refer to as a classically heroic plot – which underpins narratives ranging from *Jack and the Beanstalk* to *Dracula* to *James Bond* movies to *Star Wars*. The hero battles a monster that is predatory, cunning and malevolent. The monster is often human-like but is fundamentally threatening to humanity. The hero’s battle is long and hard-fought. Crucially, it is not selfish: at some point, it becomes clear that the hero fights the monster because the monster threatens the community. By vanquishing the monster, the hero saves the innocent. Imagine, then, a story in which the victim confronted her attacker as a monster. Imagine, too, that she knew that by reporting the assault, she would help to save other young women from the same experience. Told effectively, such an account might be both realistic and motivating.

If a genre-based account is correct, then readers would (1) evaluate the protagonist and her behavior; (2) fill in missing causal links in the story; (3) anticipate the story's ending; and (4) extract a moral message from the story in tune with the conventions of the genre. Respondents reading the tragic story would blame the protagonist for her predicament. They would use negative personality descriptors to characterize her. They would not imagine the protagonist reporting her rape to authorities, and they would not take away the message that rapes should be reported. By contrast, respondents reading the heroic story would see the protagonist as both assertive and admirable. They would like and identify with her. They would anticipate her reporting her rape to authorities as a way to help other women. And they would take from the story the message that rapists should be reported and prosecuted.

If people do not read at all along the lines of genre but rather in tune with dominant gender expectations, respondents would like the tragic protagonist more than the heroic one, because the latter departed from conventional gender norms of submissiveness. But if people read along the lines of genre when dominant status norms are not challenged, respondents would dislike both protagonists. Although readers might imagine the heroic protagonist reporting her rape to authorities, they nevertheless would not recommend her story for an outreach effort.

We want to mention one more possibility. Entertainment education scholars have argued that people's similarity to characters in the story shapes the message they take from the story (Slater *et al*, 2003; Hinyard and Kreuter, 2007). Readers like protagonists who are similar to them, in this view. They appreciate stories that are like their own and they draw lessons from stories that support their own beliefs. Sociologists have been generally wary of the notion that one can separate experience from culture – whether one conceptualizes culture in terms of canonical plotlines or dominant status norms (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). Indeed, the mark of a good story might be precisely whether readers see themselves as similar to what another observer might see as thoroughly dissimilar characters.[5] It seemed plausible, however, that respondents who knew someone who had been raped would draw on that experience more than on the story they read in predicting what they would do in that situation, as well as in judging which story would be most effective in an outreach effort. Accordingly, respondents' evaluations of the stories would be patterned by whether or not they knew someone who had been raped.

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[5] And indeed, as entertainment education researchers Slater and Rouner (2002) and Moyer-Gusé (2008) point out, researchers often confuse several quite different dynamics when they talk about 'identification': homophily, identification, wishful identification and parasocial identification.

Data and Methods

Students in several psychology courses at a midsize public university in California were offered course credit to participate in a study about how people respond to stories of sexual assault. The study was restricted to women because of our focus on the sexual assault of women by men. Repondents' mean age was 20 years. A total of 180 respondents began the survey and all but two completed it. Respondents identified ethnically as Asian (56 per cent), White (31 per cent), Hispanic/Latino (16 per cent), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (8 per cent), Black/African-American (2 per cent), and Multiracial or other (3 per cent).[6] Of the sample, 37 per cent reported knowing someone who had been sexually assaulted.[7]

When respondents arrived in the lab, they were set up at a computer where they completed the survey. They were asked to read three short stories about a sexual assault and to answer questions about each one. The researcher explained, 'We're interested in what you found believable or not, how you felt about the characters, which story you liked more, and so on'. All respondents read the tragic story, titled 'The Perfect Guy'. All respondents also read a story titled 'Loss'. This one matched what we referred to earlier as a 'gothic' storyline, in which the victim is so innocent, so naive and so abused by an evil predator that it would be difficult to blame her. But we expected that respondents would have difficulty identifying with her and they would see the story as unrealistic. They would not recommend her story for use in an outreach campaign aimed at getting women to report their rapes to authorities.

In addition to the tragic and gothic stories, half the respondents also read the heroic story, titled 'They Didn't Scream'. The rest of the respondents read a story whose plot came from classics such as *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*. In this 'rebirth' storyline, for much of the story, the protagonist is in a death-like immobilizing sleep. The climax of the story occurs when the protagonist is brought back to life as a result of someone's love. A version of this storyline appears in published women's accounts of the aftermath of their rape. The death

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[6] The high proportion of respondents who identified as Asian is consistent with the demographics of this particular university, but it is not typical of American universities. Several studies have found that Asian Americans hold more negative views of rape victims than do whites, and are more likely to see the victim as responsible for her rape (Lee *et al*, 2005). For that reason, we compared the responses of students who identified ethnically as Asian with those who did not. We focused on the students' views of the gothic and heroic protagonists: both whether they identified with each protagonist and whether they could imagine being friends with each protagonist (we created binary variables for each). These were the stories that elicited the strongest views of the victim as either 'innocent' or as in some way responsible for her rape, so we expected that differences based on ethnicity would be evident here. However, regression models showed no significant relationships (results not shown; available upon request). This makes us confident that our findings reflect the views of college women more generally.

[7] This is somewhat lower than Dunn *et al*'s (1999) finding that 52 per cent of 500 female college respondents knew someone who had been raped.

in life is produced by the woman's rape: for months and often years afterward, she is incapable of fully experiencing life. At some point, however, she awakens to her own worth and to her desire for life (for example Carosella, 1995: ch. 8). We wondered whether the storyline might be compressed. Could the woman wake up to her own self-worth, and to the imperative of acting in line with that self-image, soon enough after her rape that the awakening would lead her to report her assault to police? If so, we expected that respondents would like and identify with the protagonist and would imagine her reporting her assault.

The order in which respondents read the stories was varied to discourage responses based on ordering. As a check, we also analyzed respondents' assessments of protagonist and story for only the *first* story they read. This allowed us to make sure they were not assessing the first story and protagonist more positively or negatively simply because they read the story first. The stories were all short but research has shown that even brief narratives have persuasive effect (Escalas, 2004; Green, 2008).

The four stories were written by Polletta. They were in the first person and recounted the same basic structure of events. The protagonist/narrator went to a party with a friend or friends. She drank enough alcohol to feel somewhat intoxicated but not out of control. She met a young man who was an acquaintance and agreed to go back to his room alone with him. In his room, she reciprocated his initial amorous advances, but made clear that she did not want to have intercourse. The young man raped her (the rape itself was not described). The story ended with the protagonist leaving the man's room. (The stories are available via the following link, http://www.palgrave-journals.com/ajcs)

The stories differed in the point of view expressed by the protagonist; how the protagonist responded to events as they unfolded; and how the story's climax was represented. We tried to provide enough in the way of genre cues to communicate to readers that the story was of a certain genre (tragic, heroic, gothic or rebirth) while leaving the ending open enough that readers would have to actively mobilize genre expectations. In the tragic storyline, the protagonist's tragic flaw was her romantic idealism. Her narcissistic fantasies about finding an ideal partner led her to ignore warning signs and to voluntarily isolate herself from her friends. In the heroic storyline, the protagonist was portrayed as dominated by a hostile and aggressive man. The climax of the story was not the rape itself but the protagonist's discovery that the man had raped other women before her with impunity. In the gothic storyline, the young woman was portrayed as innocent, naive and malleable. She was persuaded to go to the party because her friends wanted to go and was persuaded to go to the young man's room because she was trying to be nice. She reacted to her rape by thinking that in losing her virginity, she had 'lost one of the most precious parts of herself'. Finally, in the rebirth storyline, the protagonist was portrayed as experiencing the rape in something like a dream state. After it, however, she suddenly recalled her mother's love for her and was jolted out of her passivity.

After reading each story, respondents were asked a series of closed and open-ended questions designed to assess: (1) how they judged the protagonist of the story; (2) whether and why they identified with the protagonist of the story and whether and why they could imagine being friends with her; (3) whether they believed that the story was credible; (4) what they would do after they left the rapist's room if they were the woman in the story. After reading three stories, respondents were asked to compare the three stories and, in particular, to decide which one would be most effective in an outreach effort designed to encourage women to report sexual assaults.

In analyzing the open-ended questions, Polletta, Ebner and Trigoso looked for patterns in respondents' explanations for why they did or did not identify with the protagonist of each story; and why they could or could not imagine being friends with the protagonist. We grouped words and phrases that appeared frequently in the responses for each of the stories (for example, 'good girl', and 'sweet girl' in respondents' explanations for why they would be friends with the gothic protagonist, 'too open', 'moves too fast', 'drinks too much', in respondents' explanations for why they would not be friends with the heroic protagonist). We coded whether respondents referred to similarities with themselves in accounting for why they identified with or could imagine being friends with the protagonist. In reading respondents' explanations for why they would recommend one story for an outreach effort aimed at getting victims to report their assaults to police, we looked for patterns in what respondents saw as most important in the story (for example, the protagonist's likely appeal to young women; the message the story sent about avoiding rape; and the message the story sent about reporting rape). For answers to the question asking respondents to imagine themselves in the protagonist's shoes, we coded for the person or people to whom respondents imagined the protagonist revealing her assault ('authorities', 'friends', 'authorities and friends', and several others). We coded independently and discussed the relatively few discrepancies in our results.[8]

In the second phase of the research, six focus groups read and discussed the stories. The focus groups were composed of undergraduate women who were recruited in the same way the survey respondents had been. Focus group participants matched the survey respondents in terms of age and white/non-white ethnicity. However, a greater proportion of the focus group participants identified themselves as 'multiracial' than the survey respondents (23 per cent compared to 3 per cent); and a smaller proportion identified ethnically as Asian (38 per cent compared to 56 per cent) and Hispanic (9 per cent compared to 16 per cent). A greater proportion of the focus group participants (51 per cent) also said they knew someone who had been raped. Groups had between three and eight participants (with 35 in total), and were moderated by Adams. Participants read and discussed each story in turn (again, the order was varied). Adams asked similar questions to those on the survey. In addition, she invited participants to compare and discuss their responses. She also asked new questions designed to probe participants' reasons for recommending one story rather than another for an outreach effort and to see whether and how participants were linking the stories they read to stories they had read before. With respect to the latter, we asked respondents explicitly about the stories that each story they read reminded them of. We also paid close attention to the stories that respondents brought up spontaneously in the discussion.

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[8] Many respondents described reporting the rape to 'police'. However, some respondents referred instead to 'authorities'. As at different colleges, students are encouraged to report their rape to different agencies (for example, local police or campus rape prevention and response agencies), we use the broader category of 'authorities'.

Results

Overall, respondents found all the stories realistic. In fact, only the rebirth story was rated as realistic by less than 90 per cent of readers. In the following, we focus first on participants' responses to the tragic story and the heroic story. Though we rely mainly on the results from the survey portion of the study, we draw on the focus groups for evidence about the kinds of stories that respondents saw as similar to the ones they read. We then turn briefly to the two other stories read by our survey respondents, the gothic and the rebirth stories. Our findings on how respondents interpreted those two stories were less clear, if nevertheless suggestive.

The Tragic Storyline and the Power of Genre

Answers to several questions suggest that respondents read the tragic story in line with the conventions of genre. In tune with the notion of a tragic hero brought down by a fatal flaw, respondents found the tragic protagonist more blameworthy than the protagonists of the other stories. The tragic protagonist received far more negative assessments than did the protagonists of the other stories (see Table 2). Respondents characterized the tragic protagonist, variously, as immature (48 per cent of respondents), insecure (76 per cent), naive (86 per cent) and stupid (37 per cent). None of these labels was attached so often to any of the other protagonists. Fewer respondents chose positive personality descriptors for the tragic protagonist than for the other protagonists (5 per cent of respondents found her brave; 4 per cent found her smart; 3 per cent found her strong; and 1 and 2 per cent, respectively, found her assertive or mature).

As Table 3 shows, respondents had mixed feelings about the tragic protagonist: 45 per cent did not identify with her at all. This is significantly higher than the

Table 2: Characterizations of the protagonist, by type of story, as percentages of readers

	Annoying	*Assertive*	*Brave*	*Immature*	*Insecure*	*Mature*	*Naive*	*Smart*	*Strong*	*Stupid*
Tragic ($N=180$)	14	1	5	48	76	2	86	4	3	37
Heroic ($N=90$)	11	41	16	24	31	16	58	17	27	36
Gothic ($N=180$)	2	4	8	21	59	13	76	14	11	20
Rebirth ($N=90$)	5	5	25	14	30	21	43	26	25	23

31 and 28 per cent who did not identify at all with the gothic and rebirth protagonists, respectively (although *t*-test comparisons show that it is not significantly different than the 52 per cent who did not identify at all with the heroic protagonist). Of our sample, 24 per cent could not imagine being friends with the tragic protagonist. Again, this was a significantly higher proportion than was true of the gothic and rebirth stories, but not the heroic story.

Open-ended responses to the question of why respondents did or did not identify with the tragic protagonist revealed a frequent characterization of her as not ‘in tune with the real world’, ‘always in her fantasy world’, ‘stupid’, ‘daydreaming’, ‘ignorant to what’s going on’, ‘waiting for their prince charming’, as someone who ‘can’t tell the difference between reality and fantasy’, who ‘spends way too much time away from reality’, ‘immature’, not ‘realistic’, and over, and over again, as ‘naive’.[9] Respondents also characterized the protagonist of the gothic story as naive, but they did so in their explanations of why they *did* identify with her. This suggests that similar personality characteristics were evaluated differently through the lens of tragic and gothic plotlines. While a status expectations-based perspective might have expected that readers would like the tragic protagonist on account of her conformity with norms of feminine submissiveness, this was not the case.

Asked what they would do next if they were in the protagonist’s shoes, only 26 per cent of those who read the tragic story wrote that they would report the rape to authorities. This was the lowest percentage for any of the stories, and was significantly lower than the 58 per cent of respondents who imagined the heroic protagonist reporting the rape (Table 3).

Further support for the idea that respondents read *The Perfect Guy* through the lens of the tragic genre comes from their explanations for why they would use the story in an outreach campaign aimed at getting rape victims to report their rape to police. The largest category of respondents – 45 per cent – said that there was no difference among the stories, but the rest gave a variety of rationales for favoring one story or two stories over the others: because it was (or they were) the most realistic, because it was likely to speak to the kind of woman who was unlikely to report her experience to police; because it was ‘dramatic’. However, the 14 per cent of respondents who favored the tragic storyline over the other three for an outreach campaign often gave a rationale that was given only rarely by those who chose one of the other stories: the story would prevent young women from being duped by men. As one respondent put it, ‘This story was probably the best because it will help tell girls that some guys are just trying to charm you and despite how good looking he is or the things he’s saying to you like how beautiful your smile is, sometimes things aren’t as they seem. Bad things can happen’. Given the fact that the question was about an outreach program

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[9] In reproducing respondents’ comments, we have corrected for grammar or spelling only where not doing so would make the comments difficult to read. We have put all changes in brackets.

Table 3: Story responses by type of story, as percentages of readers

	Tragic story (N = 180)	*Heroic story (N = 90)*	*Gothic story (N = 180)*	*Rebirth story (N = 90)*	*t-test comparison of gothic and heroic stories*	*t-test comparison of tragic and heroic stories*
Identified somewhat or strongly with the protagonist	55	48	69	72	3.57**	1.07
Imagined being friends with the protagonist	76	72	91	93	4.16**	0.705
Preferred this story for an outreach effort	14	16	11	16	−1.18	−0.44
Described the protagonist reporting rape to authorities	26	58	32	39	−4.19**	−5.38**
Of those who described the protagonist reporting the rape to authorities, also described the protagonist reporting the rape to an intimate.[a]	50	25	44	31	2.1*	2.63**

[a] Percentages in this row are of readers who described the protagonist of the story reporting the rape to authorities.

***$P<0.01$, *$P<0.05$.

aimed not at helping women to avoid being raped but at helping them to report a rape to police, responses like this one seem off-point. But they are consistent with a tragic genre in which the disastrous ending is inevitable from the moment of the protagonist's initial act of poor judgment.

In their explanations for why this story should be used in an outreach effort, some readers argued that the woman's unrealistic desire to find the perfect man was in part responsible for her rape, either because it clouded her judgment or led her to take a risk she should have done. For example, one woman recommended the story 'mainly because we do put ourselves at risk to find "the perfect guy" '. Another wrote, 'I think a main issue is assuming that the guy you meet is the "perfect" one, and that, more than anything else, might give a woman enough false confidence to let a man enter her space and do whatever he wanted'. The protagonist 'dreams he is the perfect guy and lets that take over her better judgment', one reader observed; and another: 'They wanted to be noticed by a guy and that consequently got them into trouble'. These respondents did not directly blame the rape on the protagonist, but the moral they extracted from the story was not about reporting the rape to police but about avoiding trusting certain kinds of men. '*The Perfect Guy* is suitable for those girls who are misled to believing that guys are nice, and trustworthy. They may be, but not complete strangers'. The story 'would open [girls'] eyes to see that even the guy you thought you could trust, you can't'. It would 'Encourage women not to fall for the guy who seems perfect and not to go for him just because he is deemed as cool. That happens so often with girls acting in that way just to fit in'. This again suggests that respondents were reading the story in line with a familiar tragic genre, in which the protagonist's eventual downfall is attributed to her narcissistic refusal to see the object of her desire realistically.

Can we be sure that respondents were reading the tragic story in line with the conventions of genre? In our focus groups, we probed this issue. Participants described The Perfect Guy as familiar from movies and TV shows. The shows that they cited were sometimes about rape, for example, episodes of the TV shows *Special Victims Unit* (Focus Group #1; hereafter focus groups are referred to by their number) and *Degrassi* (#5), and the movies, *For Colored Girls* (#1), *No One Would Tell* (#1), and *Speak* (#4)). But the shows were often about other issues. For example, *Enough* was a movie about a woman who was beaten by her husband (the participant who cited this movie pointed out that, unlike the rape story they had just read, the woman eventually learned to fight back and killed her husband (#5)). *Hostel Part II*, according to another participant, featured a character who was swept off her feet by a handsome man ('they're going to be in a relationship; they're going to be married, she thought') and then murdered by him (#5). *Jennifer's Body* featured a girl whose friend got all the attention, and she desperately wanted it (#2). The commonality was not the issue but the plot type. Participants labeled this easily as the story about the girl's 'hopeless romanticism' and they filled in the rest of the story – what happened next – in line with a tragic form. ‘I would tell my roommate, “I thought this was the perfect guy. I thought he was the one” ’ one respondent said, quoting the victim (#3). ‘She thought he was the perfect guy’, this respondent went on. ‘She was so into this situation, so into the daydream. And then, after, she was just hurt. “My fantasy is turning into a nightmare. He raped me. He wasn’t the right guy” ’. In this example and in others, respondents adopted the voice of the victim, imputed feelings to her and gave dramatic renditions of her coming to grips with her own naivete. Another participant said, ‘I just envision her crying and then throwing up and then writing about it – trying to get it out and away. And maybe eventually telling someone. But I don’t think she would initially … . When you write to yourself, you’re getting things out but you’re still living in your mind’ (#1). Together, these responses suggested that participants were indeed reading the story along the lines of a classic tragedy and had taken from the story a moral message in tune with that genre.

The Heroic Storyline and the Power of Gender Expectations

The fact that respondents evaluated the main character, filled in portions of the story, anticipated the story’s ending and drew a moral lesson from the story in tune with a tragic genre suggests that one could communicate a different message by inserting similar events into a different genre. In the heroic genre, again, the protagonist must act against an evildoer not only to save him/herself, but also to save innocents. In our heroic story, the protagonist learned in the story’s climax that other young women had been raped by the young man. If a genre-based perspective on interpretation is correct, this would convey the message that reporting the assault to authorities would save other young women from the same fate.

However, respondents did not seem to read this story in line with the expectations of genre. Respondents certainly saw the protagonist of the story as assertive but they did not see her as heroic. Far more respondents described her as assertive than they did any of the other protagonists (41 per cent compared to 1, 4 and 5 per cent for the tragic, gothic and rebirth stories, respectively) and more described her as ‘strong’ than they did any of the other protagonists (27 per cent compared to 3, 11 and 25 per cent for the tragic, gothic and rebirth stories, respectively). However, most respondents also described the heroic protagonist as naive (58 per cent) and 36 per cent described her as stupid.

Respondents tended to see the heroic protagonist reporting her rape to authorities (58 per cent). In their explanations for why she would do so, respondents often referred to the protagonist’s assertiveness. They did so in a way that suggested that they could project themselves into such a stance: ‘[I would] call the cops and definitely made sure this guy would never be able to do this to someone else again'; 'I would want justice for what he did'; 'I would make it public and have him regret what he has done so he cannot do it again'; 'I would have called the cops on his ass'; 'I would call the police!' 'I would go down and find anyone that would listen to my story and tell it'. 'I would be fuming mad. I would probably call 911 or go straight to some agency and report the rape'. 'I would have slapped him and probably screamed for help and called the police'. 'I would definitely tell authorities. I would take the legal process into trying to convict this guy and make sure he doesn't get the chance to do it again'. 'If I was her, I'd probably go straight to the police. She wasn't afraid to accuse him of rape'. 'This girl would report what he had done'.

In comments like these, our respondents seemed to rate the protagonist's assertiveness positively as well as to imagine her acting assertively. Of course, we do not know if they were imagining *themselves* acting assertively, as the question asked what they would do if they were in the protagonist's shoes. But in surveys and in focus groups, participants frequently used the pronoun 'I' to describe what the protagonist would likely do ('I probably would go to the police. Because I told him no. He should be taught a lesson' (#1)) and used an assertive tone in their descriptions. 'I was mad when I read that story', said one participant, and another put in, 'I was too!' (#1). Respondents saw the protagonist reporting her assault to authorities and they seemed to admire her for doing that.

However, respondents were not enthusiastic about using the story in an outreach campaign aimed at getting young women to report their rapes to authorities. Again, the largest proportion of respondents (45 per cent) did not see any story as better than the others, and 15 per cent saw two or more stories as equally effective. Of our respondents, 16 per cent recommended the heroic story over the others for an outreach campaign. As Table 3 shows, this was not significantly higher than any of the other stories. In other words, despite the fact that the heroic protagonist was the only protagonist whom a majority of respondents envisioned reporting her rape to authorities, respondents were not more likely to recommend her story for an outreach effort aimed at getting women to report rapes to authorities.

Why was this the case? Despite what seemed their admiring characterizations of the heroic protagonist, many readers did not identify with her. As Table 3 shows, she was the only protagonist with whom a majority of respondents (52 per cent) did not identify 'strongly' or even 'somewhat', a significantly higher proportion than felt that way about the gothic protagonist. When it came to liking her, fully 28 per cent of respondents could not imagine being her friend. This was a much higher per centage than those who could not imagine being friends with the gothic or rebirth protagonists (9 and 7 per cent, respectively), although it was not significantly different from the percentage who could not imagine being friends with the tragic protagonist (24 per cent). When respondents explained why they would not be friends with the heroic protagonist, they often invoked stereotypically negative views associated with assertive women. The protagonist 'like[d] attention'; she was 'shallow', 'conceited', 'too much into the way she looks'; she was 'bossing [people] around'; she was 'too open', 'loose', she 'move[d] too fast'; she 'put [herself] in a position for this to happen'; she was a 'party girl'. In these characterizations, an assertive woman is variously overconfident, domineering or provocative. Set against comments that seemed admiring of the heroic protagonist's bravura, these characterizations suggest that our respondents were ambivalent about assertiveness. Assertive women were viewed as at once admirable and at risk of being unfeminine.

Assertive women may also have been seen as disloyal. A number of respondents could not identify with the heroic protagonist because she left her friends. One respondent wrote, 'I dont get tipsy and i really stay with my group'. Another: 'i would have listened to my friends warning'. Another: 'Because me and all my friends have this pac[t] that no one is ever left alone. Even if one of them wants to sleep with the guy, he has to come over to one of our houses where one of the other girls (without a guy) will be'. 'My friends and I always go together just in case', a respondent explained, 'and specially if its the guy we met at the party, we'll go together'. In these comments and others, respondents faulted the protagonist for not doing what friends should do. Sometimes, their point was that the protagonist was foolhardy for leaving her friends. But often, the point was rather that she was morally wrong to leave her friends.

This concern with the protagonist's relationship with her friends did not come up nearly as often in responses to the other stories. What is interesting is that the heroic protagonist was the only one of the four protagonists to make a point of telling her friends that she was leaving the party with the young man. Arguably, she showed more consideration for her friends than any of the other protagonists did. Perhaps, then, the protagonist's disloyalty to her friends was connected to her assertiveness. Respondents may have seen assertiveness as coming at the expense of loyalty to one's friends. Women who are confident and assertive enough to go to the police also tend to be self-interested and socially detached people who just 'go off' without their friends. They lack the kinds of female social bonds that women value. Assertiveness may have been devalued not for being inappropriate or unfeminine but for coming at the price of isolation.

A pattern in the open-ended responses supports this interpretation. We noted earlier that when asked what the respondent would do next were she in the protagonist's shoes, 58 per cent of respondents imagined the heroic protagonist reporting the rape to authorities. By contrast, only 26 per cent of respondents imagined the tragic protagonist doing so. But, as Table 3 shows, 50 per cent of the respondents who saw the tragic protagonist telling authorities also had her telling a friend or family member. In most cases, respondents imagined the protagonist telling an intimate and then being fortified enough by the intimate's support to go to authorities. By contrast only 25 per cent of those who saw the heroic protagonist telling authorities also had her telling an intimate – half the proportion of respondents who had the tragic protagonist doing so, and a statistically significant difference. Respondents seemed to see the heroic protagonist as making her decision to go to the authorities autonomously, without the input or support of friends or family. Again, the assertive protagonist was imagined as being more socially isolated – though we could see no evidence in the story that that was the case. Respondents seemed to be filling in portions of the story based on dominant gender norms rather than plot type.

Further support for the notion that respondents read the heroic story through the lens of standard gender expectations rather than through the lens of genre comes from their explanations for why the protagonist would likely report the rape to authorities. Recall that a key feature of heroic stories is that the protagonist must act to save innocents. In the story respondents read, the rapist revealed that he had raped other young women. The story implied that the rapist would rape again if he was not stopped. And yet, only seven survey respondents (less than 8 per cent of those who read the story) and two focus group participants (less than 6 per cent) attributed the protagonist's willingness to report the rape to the fact that she would thereby prevent the rapist from raping again. Instead, they cited the protagonist's personality, her anger or her determination to get back at the rapist. The fact that so few respondents mentioned the motivation of saving others suggests that they were not reading the story as a heroic one. When we asked focus group members to think of stories that this one reminded them of, they cited stories with assertive female characters, whom they described as 'outgoing' (Brook on the TV series *One Tree Hill* (#3)), as 'enjoying partying' (characters in the TV series *Gossip Girl* (#1)), and as someone 'who wanted the attention and forced it' (a character who was raped on the TV series *Degrassi* (#2, #5). None of these stories followed a heroic plotline.

Gothic and Rebirth Storylines

So far, our findings suggest that respondents read along the lines of genre – but only when the main characters did not defy status expectations. Before elaborating on the implications of this finding, we want to discuss briefly the two other stories respondents read. In the rebirth story, the protagonist awoke from her state of numbness during her rape to recognize her self-worth. We expected that respondents would identify with the protagonist and would rate her positively. They would imagine the protagonist reporting the assault to authorities.

They would find the story realistic and they would recommend the story for use in an outreach campaign. As Tables 2 and 3 show, respondents did describe the protagonist in positive terms and they did identify with her. But they did not recommend the story for an outreach campaign. While most respondents found all the stories realistic, 10 per cent of the respondents who read this story found it unrealistic, which was the highest percentage for any story.

We had been concerned that telescoping the woman's rebirth into such a short space of time might seem narratively awkward – unlike the more familiar stories in popular discourse about rape in which a woman's recovery from rape only occurs much later. Readers' open-ended comments suggested that it was awkward. When they referred to specific elements of the story that seemed unrealistic, it was usually the transformation experienced by the protagonist. 'The image about her and her mom's view of her was too dramatic', one said. Another: 'the mirror part was kind of weird'; and a third: 'her realization of waking up occurred to quickly, I dont feel she could change in like 10 minutes'. One way to interpret these comments is to say that the unfamiliarity of the plot rendered the account either unrealistic or simply not comprehensible. This would explain why so few respondents recommended the story for an outreach effort.

We had anticipated that the gothic protagonist would be described negatively. She would not be blamed for her fate because, unlike the tragic protagonist, she had no fatal flaw. But we expected that her naiveté and passivity would be emphasized and that respondents would not identify with her, find her or her situation especially realistic, or imagine her going to authorities. For these reasons, too, we expected that respondents would not recommend the story for an outreach campaign aimed at encouraging victims to report their rape to authorities.

In line with our expectations, most respondents did *not* imagine the gothic protagonist going to authorities. Despite that, a not insignificant number of readers recommended her story for an outreach effort aimed at getting women to report rapes to authorities. In fact, of the 68 per cent of women who did not see the gothic protagonist as likely to report her rape to authorities, 29 per cent still recommended the gothic story as the best choice for an outreach effort (results not shown; available upon request). Why? Because, it seems, respondents liked and identified with the gothic protagonist: 69 per cent identified strongly or somewhat with her (Table 3). Only 9 per cent of readers could not imagine being friends with the gothic protagonist.

In their open-ended answers, respondents frequently attributed their feelings about the gothic protagonist to the fact that she was like them. They 'also come from sheltered upbringing'; they 'also have been called a prude'; they 'also are uncomfortable in party situations'; 'also are good listeners'. Clearly, we erred in thinking that the gothic protagonist's innocence, extreme discomfort with party situations and malleability would make her seem unrealistic. To the contrary, 98 per cent of respondents judged the story realistic.

These responses suggest that respondents read the story in line with their own experience. They liked and identified with the gothic protagonist because she was objectively like them. Because they liked and identified with her, in this perspective, they may have recommended her story for an outreach effort despite the fact that they did not imagine her reporting her rape to authorities. However, we did not find that students who identified somewhat or strongly with the gothic protagonist were statistically more likely than those who did not identify with that protagonist to recommend the gothic story for an outreach effort (results not shown; available upon request).

Further complicating an experience-based explanation, the similarities we just cited – being 'sheltered', being sexually conservative, being a good listener – are all also consistent with standard gender norms. It is possible that respondents saw themselves as 'just like' the character who was the most stereotypically feminine. And indeed, respondents who could imagine being friends with the protagonist of the gothic story often described her in conventionally feminine terms. She was a 'nice girl', a 'good girl', 'really sweet'. Respondents emphasized the protagonist's innocence, and indeed, her naiveté, as a reason for liking her and/or identifying with her. She was a 'good, innocent girl', 'innocent and naive', 'naive and trusting', a 'nice girl, innocent', a 'nice girl, naive' and so on.

Recall, by contrast, that many respondents drew attention to the naiveté of the tragic protagonist as a reason for not identifying with her. Earlier, we interpreted this as evidence that it was not personality traits alone that led readers to identify or not identify with a character but rather how those traits were worked by the story genre into a sympathetic character with familiar motivations. But on a gendered roles account, it would make sense that women are ambivalent about naiveté, seeing it as attractive insofar as it associated with innocence but unattractive insofar as it is associated with stupidity.

In sum, responses to the gothic story do not allow us to adjudicate between an experience-based account and a gendered-roles based account. We had hypothesized that if respondents read mainly along the lines of their own experience, we would see differences in how respondents interpreted the stories based on whether the respondent knew someone who had been raped or not. We did not see any such differences. This does not mean that people do not draw on their experience in interpreting stories. It only suggests that knowing someone who had been raped did not lead to obvious patterns in interpretation. We return to this point below.

Discussion: The Limits of Plot

We turn now to the implications of our main findings. Respondents' views of the tragic victim as blameworthy and their belief that her fatal flaw lie in her willingness to trust an attractive man suggest that they extracted a moral message from the stories they read based on the conventions of genre. Respondents' views of the heroic victim as brave but unappealingly unfeminine and their reluctance to endorse the story for use in an outreach effort suggest that their interpretations owed more to conventions of appropriate womanhood than to those of genre.

Reconciling these two readings depends on separating the logic of plot from that of character in accounting for how people interpret stories. Contrary to structuralist theories that have subordinated character to plot, we have argued that character and plot operate along different logics. Plots make sense in terms of previous plots, in terms of genre. Characters make sense in terms of standard role expectations, stereotypes, prejudices, social biases and dominant ideologies. Believable, sympathetic characters match prevailing beliefs about how people in those circumstances should behave. This explains why our respondents seemed to follow the conventions of genre with the tragic story but not with the heroic one. The character in the tragic story fit with the story; the one in the heroic story did not. To put it another way, people read along the lines of genre when the characters fit with dominant status expectations. They do not when the characters defy such expectations.

This creates a dilemma for those who would tell stories of sexual assault as part of outreach efforts. A key aim of such stories is to get audiences to see the story's protagonist as blameless. Whatever she did or did not do, she did not deserve to be raped. However, the tragic form often taken by such stories risks leading audiences to a different conclusion: either that the woman did deserve to be raped or that her rape was somehow unavoidable. Neither conclusion is likely to instill or strengthen in readers the belief that rapes should be reported to authorities. Stories can be told in ways other than classical tragedy. But this is where the constraints that we have identified come into play. Tell a story of a young woman who is sheltered, shy and insecure – unlike the tragic protagonist, blameless – and an audience of college women will like the woman in the story and identify with her but will find it hard to imagine her reporting her rape. Tell a story of a woman who is confident and assertive and the audience will imagine her reporting her rape to police but will not identify with or like her. As researchers have shown that identifying with characters is essential to stories' achieving their behavioral effects,[10] this presents a real problem.

More generally, we have argued that those seeking to use stories to challenge hegemonic beliefs may be constrained less by the limits of plot than by the limits of character. This has implications beyond the case. It may help to explain why men can often tell victim stories more successfully than women. When women

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[10] To say that readers must identify with a story in order for the story to have behavioral effects does not imply anything about the basis for identification. As we noted, people may identify with people who are like them or people whom they like (but who are not like them). See Moyer-Gusé (2008).

appear in stories of victimization, their fates are attributed to features of their personality that are associated with women, namely, passivity and pathos. When men appear in stories of victimization, the emphasis is rather on their struggle and the odds against which they struggle. For example, battered women who have struck back at their abusers have often been unsuccessful in their efforts to claim that they acted reasonably to defend themselves (Schneider, 2000; Polletta, 2006). Either they are seen as victims but hardly rational or as rational but hardly victims. Men, by contrast, are seen as people who had to fight to save their lives. The stories are the same – a person is threatened by a more powerful adversary and must fight back – but readers focus on different parts of the story depending on whether the protagonist is a woman or a man. It is easier to insert the same events into different storylines (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009) than it is to insert different characters into the same storyline.

This conclusion raises a number of questions. We have argued that plot and characters are interpreted along different logics. Does this hold for statuses other than gender? Are plot and characters' interpretation always structured by different logics? Can a really well-told story get readers to view characters in tune with the expectations of genre rather than those of dominant status beliefs? If so, what counts as well-told? We suspect that it is possible to tell a heroic story with a woman protagonist, and indeed one in which a woman behaves assertively and instrumentally. However, to be believable and sympathetic, she would have to seem properly feminine. Authors would have to use 'softeners' to make the protagonist's instrumental behavior not appear a bid for status (Rudman and Glick, 2001; Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin, 2006). They would have to balance her apparently instrumental orientation with evidence of a powerfully expressive one. In the case of stories about rape, we wonder whether one might capitalize on respondents' orientation to the protagonist's relationship with her friends in order to emphasize the heroic protagonist's loyalty to her friends. That might provide enough evidence of the protagonist's expressive orientation to allow her to be also assertive.

Another set of questions concerns the role of personal experience in narrative interpretation. We said earlier that our findings were mixed. While respondents explained their identification with the gothic protagonist as a function of the similarities of their personalities and lifestyles, we noted that the similarities they described also fit dominant gender norms. More generally, the fact that there were no obvious patterns in the responses of those who knew someone who had been raped compared to those who did not know someone who had been raped suggests that respondents were not drawing exclusively or mainly on their own experience in interpreting the stories. This is not to say that they did not draw at all on their own experiences, of course. To the contrary, a key question is how personal experiences, genre structures and status norms interact in reading. On our two logics approach, readers with personal experiences of successfully defying status expectations, or who knew people who had successfully defied status expectations, would be more likely to read along the lines of genre. But this demands further investigation.

Each of these lines of inquiry is motivated by the belief that in subordinating character to plot, literary critics have missed an opportunity to explore the ways in which time- and place-specific beliefs interact with more lasting narrative structures. Given their knowledge of how beliefs about status shape people's perception of each other, sociologists are well-equipped to integrate a theory of character into existing theories of narrative. The result will be a better understanding of how people read stories and act on them.

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