

**"God bless your hands!" Rape, Revenge, and resolution in
I Spit on Your Grave (1978)**

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"God bless your hands!" Rape, Revenge, and Resolution in *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978).

"This woman has just cut, chopped broken and burned four men beyond recognition...but no jury in America would ever convict her." So, runs the lurid ad line on the original poster for Meir Zarchi's *I Spit on Your Grave*.

The rape/revenge sub-genre has always been regarded as controversial by both critics and audiences alike, and not least because of advertising like this. Films such as *Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972) still have the power to elicit extreme responses, but none more so than *I Spit on Your Grave*. This film, which features an extremely graphic, violent and protracted gang rape prior to an equally violent revenge, is usually considered reprehensible, misogynist exploitation. Few academics have been prepared to defend it, and on the face of it this is an appropriate response. However, it must be noted that so-called 'exploitation movies' can often approach difficult subject matter in surprisingly complex ways.

This paper, therefore, will present a close analysis of the film and it will also consider how the film articulates a particular position on the subject of rape and revenge. Notably, the film was originally released as *Day of the Woman* - a title which more precisely flags up the real nature of the film. Using a range of cinematic devices, Zarchi ensures that the spectator is always positioned with the female protagonist - a crucial factor in terms of how the eventual revenge is

presented. Equally significant is how this revenge is shown to be necessary in order for her to achieve a physical and psychological resolution in the aftermath of rape.

Before presenting my analysis of the film, it is necessary to contextualise the film regarding its problematic history.

Revenge narratives have been with us for thousands of years. In cinema, they have existed in a variety of forms since its inception, for example, genre pictures such as Westerns, Gangsters, and Horror films often have revenge as a key theme. Equally, the rape/revenge narrative was nothing new, but it became far more prominent in the 1970s and 1980s – partly due to a relaxation of censorship regulations in the 1960s. In the early 70s, films such as Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* and Wes Craven's notorious, low-budget *Last House on the Left*, featured graphic rape scenes and the subsequent violent revenge. In both films, however, the revenge is played out via the husband (in the former) and the parents (in the latter). The film *Lipstick*, released in 1976 does feature a woman who has been raped eventually taking revenge herself, but only after the law has failed her which leads to her sister being raped by the same man. *I Spit on Your Grave* shifts the focus onto the violated woman and her need for personal retribution and removes the traditional institutions of law and the judicial system altogether. This film, as noted by feminist film theorist, Carol Clover, recognises and actively supports the *lex talionis* - the law of

retribution/an eye for an eye - as the only possible course of action under the circumstances.

The film originally had a limited release in the US in 1977 under its original title *Day of the Woman* and received almost no attention. However, when re-released in 1978 under the more exploitative title, *I Spit on Your Grave*, the film became subject to reviews which completely vilified it and feminist pickets outside cinemas where it was being shown. During the “Video Nasties” moral panic in the UK in the early 1980s, *I Spit* was deemed to be one of, if not the most vile and appalling film featured on the DPP list of banned videos. Most of the problem stems from two things – firstly, the unflinching and horribly realistic portrayal of the gang rape and, secondly, the gory revenge by the female protagonist, Jennifer Hills.

The out and out condemnation of the film and, indeed, the misrepresentation by critics regarding its themes and how they are played out, inevitably led to the film being banned in the UK and elsewhere. Furthermore, the alleged misogyny, and the graphic representation of the act of gang rape cemented the film's notoriety and engendered an unwillingness to even mention the film, let alone view it as worthy of serious academic consideration. Even today, the film is still not available on DVD in the UK in a completely uncut version.

In 1984, an article entitled 'J. Hills is Alive' was published in Martin Barker's edited collection *The Video Nasties*. The article by Marco J. Starr was the first

(and for many years, the only) attempt to reconsider *I Spit on Your Grave* and to unpick the serious issues at the heart of the film. It wasn't until almost a decade later that Carol Clover presented a more detailed analysis and reappraisal of the film in a chapter entitled 'Getting Even' in her own book on gender in the horror film, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*. In her discussion she highlights the fact that over time, *I Spit* had come to be regarded more positively and some critics, including feminist critics, have called it a radical feminist film. Interestingly she notes that, "one male viewer found it such a devastating commentary on male rape fantasies and also on the way male group dynamics engender violence that he thought it should be compulsory viewing for high school boys" (p.116).

Notably, in more recent years other film theorists have used Clover's work to inform their own textual analysis which compare the original film with the 2010 remake – Natalie Ingrassia in 2011 and Laura Mee in 2013 both consider the revenge as a key factor in whether or not the film can legitimately be read as a feminist text.

As we can see then, *I Spit* has finally been reclaimed as a text which functions as far more than straightforward 'exploitation', but there is still more to be said in relation to the film, its primary theme of revenge, and how Meir Zarchi represents Jennifer Hills and the male antagonists.

Zarchi has stated on several occasions that his inspiration to make the film came from helping a young woman who had been brutally gang raped and terribly

beaten, but was then treated appallingly by the authorities when reporting it. Regrettably, this appears to be a fairly common experience. In Home Office research from 2005, Liz Kelly considered the under-reporting of rape cases. She asserts that:

“Rape is a unique crime, representing both a physical and psychological violation. More than with any other crime the victim can experience reporting rape as a form of re-victimisation.”

This point is crucial in terms of the narrative Zarchi created and why Jennifer behaves the way she does after her rape, torture and humiliation at the hands of four men.

The film begins with Jennifer Hills leaving NYC to spend Summer in the countryside cabin writing her first novel. The close-ups on her face as she drives off immediately create alignment with Jennifer, an alignment that remains constant throughout the film. On arrival at a small, country garage we are introduced to the owner, Johnny, and his two sidekicks, Andy and Stanley. As Jennifer stretches her legs, Johnny observes her closely. She is friendly in her conversation, but no hint of flirting. On arrival at the cabin she is delighted at the woodland setting by a river and goes skinny dipping. Notably, Zarchi does not hold the shots of her naked body at all – in fact the scene is mostly in long shot and she is barely visible in the water.

Later, when Jennifer unpacks, she discovers a hand gun in a drawer. A loud knock at the door signals the arrival of the fourth member of the male group, Matthew, who is presented as a simpleton. She is friendly with Matthew but in no way flaunts herself at him. However, when he goes to join Johnny, Andy and Stanley, he immediately objectifies Jennifer claiming "I saw her tits". He is desperate to be a part of this male group even though they make fun of him.

When the men go fishing their banter turns to the subject of women and they make fun of Matthew again because he's a virgin - "Not for long, we're gonna fix him up with a broad" says Johnny. The conversation ends with them all agreeing that "chicks are just looking to get laid". The whole scene clearly represents a group bonding session where the language they use reinforces their negative attitudes toward women. It shows the importance of peer approval and how this can lead to forms of behaviour which individuals would not consider. This is significant later on when we see how the men react to each other when they attack Jennifer, and indeed, why she takes revenge in the way she does.

As the narrative progresses Jennifer enjoys her surroundings, lying in a hammock, and beginning to write in a notebook. The camera focuses on her hands writing as we hear her internal voice-over of the same words. The sound of an outboard motor interrupts the peace and a small boat appears in long shot. When Andy and Stanley shout to her, she smiles hesitantly and waves back. As they get closer their shouting and the outboard's drone disrupts Jennifer's

concentration. She attempts to continue writing but the voiceover disappears as though her thoughts and ideas have been arrested by the din. Frustrated and irritated by the intrusion she leaves. Importantly here, Zarchi is privileging Jennifer's experience – in particular the intellectual disturbance which is created. This is reinforced later when, after typing up her notes and reading in bed, she is disturbed again by the sound of whistling and shouting outside. Clearly, the harassment and invasion of her privacy is for no other reason than to exert some sort of psychological power over Jennifer, prior to her physical violation.

The next 25 minutes or so focuses on the controversial gang rape. Despite the horrific and genuinely upsetting nature of these scenes, they are absolutely necessary – not just to show the sickening reality of rape, but also to position the viewer with Jennifer in such a way that her violent revenge can be understood as her only course of action. As Jennifer enjoys the sun lying in a canoe, the mood is shattered when Andy and Stanley appear again in the motor boat. This time they begin circling the canoe and Jennifer raises the oar in defence as they grab the mooring rope and drag her off. She yells at them to stop but they whoop and holler loudly, enjoying their power game. They drag her to shore, but still she fights back. Despite her best efforts however, it soon becomes clear that this has been planned when Johnny appears and pushes her to the ground. The low angled shot of Johnny from Jennifer's POV shows again

that Zarchi is reinforcing our position with Jennifer. The shots are rarely from the POV of the men.

The assault proper then begins. Johnny rips off her bikini top and the others help to pin her down. The camera reveals how Jennifer is already covered in mud, scratched and bruised, but this is in no way gratuitous – she is treated as a spectacle by the men, but certainly not by the camera. Stripping off her bikini bottoms he shouts Matthew - “The broad is all yours.” This is notable because it is the first indication that they are going to persist in deflecting guilt from themselves, using the excuse of capturing Jennifer so that Matthew can lose his virginity.

Jennifer is horrified when Matthew joins in, but being part of the group and participating in their actions shows that being accepted by his peers is more important to him than she is. Eventually it becomes clear that he cannot in fact “perform” in front of them and so Johnny takes over in his position as leader of the group. Jennifer screams “Stop it!” to no avail as he rapes her. At no point is Jennifer shown to be remotely compliant – she is in pain and overpowered, yet she still struggles desperately. The shots emphasise this and in no way support the male or group view here.

Afterwards she attempts to crawl away, sobbing. Still the men goad Matthew “You wanna be a man don't you?” This recalls the conversation on the fishing trip, that women are basically asking for it. Ergo, in order to be a man you have

to not only have sex, but it's perfectly legitimate to have it against the person's will.

Jennifer staggers off while they laugh and shout. The camera remains focused on her and does not waver from her experience. Zarchi is careful to show shots of her bloodied, bruised feet, for example, or keeps her body in full shot – at no point is her body sexualised here despite the claims made by some critics. This is crucial because it makes sure that a consistent position is maintained towards Jennifer at all times.

On reaching a small clearing, the horror continues for Jennifer as she is recaptured. The group still persist in saying it's all for Matthew's sake, continuing to displace their own involvement in the revolting proceedings. The men pin her face down over a large rock, enjoying her screams. As noted earlier, functioning as a group allows them to behave in ways they wouldn't otherwise. This time Andy takes on the role of violator and anally rapes Jennifer. As she lets out an agonising scream he punches her on the head much to the delight of the others, completely uninterested in her agony and humiliation.

Afterwards they walk away leaving Jennifer slumped across the rock. The shot is held for around 20 seconds and in silence until her fingers gradually start to move. Again, the camera does not follow the men. We are forced to witness the aftermath of this abominable cruelty and to consider what consequences this will have. It is not meant to be comfortable to watch and it serves to highlight

exactly why Jennifer does what she does in the final act of the film. This image does not need words or sound. As research into gang rape suggests, certain key factors are evident:

- 1) That gang rape is performed by a close knit peer pressure group who encourage each other.
- 2) That gang rapes are often more violent, and the sexual and non-sexual injuries are often more severe. And,
- 3) The gang will typically dehumanize the target victim before and during the rape.

All of these points are in evidence during the on-going attack on Jennifer, and the effect of these characteristics of gang rape will be of great importance later on.

When the men leave in the motor boat, dragging the canoe away, Johnny throws Jennifer's bikini into the river. Significantly, rather than following the men, the shot remains on the garment. Here, again, we are still positioned with Jennifer even in her absence.

In the final section of this 25 minute nightmare, Jennifer, utterly traumatised somehow struggles back to the cabin. As she attempts to call the emergency services, the phone is suddenly kicked away. The group have still not finished with their torture. However, Jennifer summons the strength to bite Stanley's leg

and then throws a small table at him. Strangely, Clover refers to Jennifer as a “passive victim” who becomes an “aggressive avenger” and yet Jennifer is never presented as passive. She constantly tries to fight back despite being outnumbered and badly beaten and, arguably, this reveals an inner strength which allows Jennifer to survive and reap her revenge.

Matthew attempts to rape Jennifer while Andy discovers her manuscript and reads from it in a mocking tone as the others laugh. He makes a point of saying “New York broads fuck a lot” and then rips the manuscript up. Here we have the ultimate intellectual violation on top of the physical and psychological trauma. Finally, it is Stanley's turn as he says, “Total submission. That's what I like in a woman”. He violates her with a bottle while thrusting his crotch in her face yelling “Suck it, bitch!” Slapping her violently until she finally passes out, it is apparent that Stanley views women as nothing more than objects to be used and abused.

The following sequences focus on Jennifer's slow physical recovery and it is apparent that underneath her almost impassive expression she is contemplating how to recover psychologically. Crucially, the turning point seems to come when she gathers up the pieces of the torn up manuscript, tapes them together, and then retypes it. She effectively reclaims her intellectual property before setting about physical retribution.

In the final act Jennifer visits a church to ask forgiveness from God before setting about her plans for revenge. Furthermore, it is revealed that Johnny has a wife and family which seems to harden Jennifer's resolve to “get even”. Once the train of events is set in motion, there is no stopping her and she is shown to be resourceful, skilled, and determined. She seduces Matthew then hangs him from a tree and throws his body in the river. More tellingly she pretends to flirt with Johnny before pulling the hand gun on him and ordering him to disrobe. With bravado he says “I don't like women giving me orders” to which Jennifer replies with a well-aimed shot between his feet. Suddenly backtracking, he begins to place blame on Stanley for the gang rape. It seems that Jennifer is going to shoot him, but then he delivers the most significant dialogue in the film where he attempts to justify what happened:

“The thing with you is a thing that any man would have done. You coax a man into doing it to you. A man gets a message fast. Now look, whether he's married or not, a man is just a man. First thing you come into the gas station and you expose your damn sexy legs to me walkin' back and forth real slow, makin' sure I see 'em good. And then Matthew delivers the food to your door. He sees half your tits peekin' out at him - tits with no bra. And then you're lyin' in the canoe in your bikini just waiting – like bait.”

The reason for quoting in full is because this sums up the attitude shown by the men throughout the film. He not only shifts blame onto Jennifer arguing that she

was flirting and encouraging their behaviour, but he claims (spuriously) that it's something any man would do, thereby exonerating himself because he cannot help his maleness. Furthermore, he focuses on the way Jennifer was dressed as if this was an invitation – the term “bait” being used pointedly – as if she wanted to catch them. Importantly here, Zarchi's script, simultaneously articulates and condemns the attitude often encountered in real life in regard to rape victims, even from the law itself – the idea of “asking for it”.

Jennifer appears to acquiesce to Johnny and allows him to throw the gun away and takes him to the cabin for a hot bath. It is a trap which he willingly falls into, bizarrely believing that Jennifer could forgive what they did to her. As she massages his shoulders, and then masturbates him, he repeats “God bless your hands!” Jennifer reaches for a concealed knife and proceeds calmly to castrate him. She leaves, locks the door, and sits in a rocking chair listening to an opera recording while he screams and bleeds to death. Her facial expression is fixed and impassive. There's no suggestion that she is enjoying it merely that this had to be done. The fact that Johnny justified the rapes by twisting the blame onto Jennifer seals his gory fate – Jennifer knows better - shooting him is not an equal punishment to fit the crime, so she removes the very thing which violated her. Ironically, it seems that God had indeed blessed her hands in order to carry out the *lex talionis*.

The final sequence is a replay of how Jennifer's assault commenced. She manages to take charge of the motor boat from Andy and Stanley, dispatches Andy with an axe, and then circles round Stanley. Moving in close she stops allowing him to hold onto the outboard – he blames Johnny for engineering the assault “Johnny made me do it!”, and cowardly begs her not to kill him. Jennifer again knows better and revs the motor into his torso chopping into his flesh spitting out his own words "Suck it, bitch!"

As she zooms off in the boat the mere hint of a smile crosses her lips.

Importantly, the final shot is of Jennifer's hand on the steering lever. Natalie Ingrassia asserts that this shows, symbolically, that via the act of revenge Jennifer has been able “to regain control and agency of her life.” It would appear that this is precisely the case. Despite the fact that there are numerous quotations on revenge which are the equivalent of Gandhi's “An eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind” there are those who recognise that this may not always be possible. In the case of Jennifer Hills, the systematic rape, torture and humiliation are too far beyond the remit of forgiveness or the laws of the land in her mind, thus she can only achieve personal resolution via personal retribution. Because we have been positioned 100% with Jennifer throughout the film via a range of cinematic devices, our allegiance also lies with her. Although this could be seen as problematic - effectively asserting that recourse to the law is pointless and revenge is sweet - it leaves no doubt as to

where Zarchi's sympathies lie, and why the original title *Day of the Woman* encapsulates perfectly what lies at the heart of the film.