

A Guiding Light Through the Darkness: Female Voices in Dark Comedy

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The connection between dark humor and gender is not often discussed in society. Dark comedy has often provided a venue for people to voice their gripes with various groups in society. This paper will explore various opinions and examples of dark comedy, as well as the mental impact of comedy, first through the emotional impact of comedy and sexist comedy, then the role of women in dark comedy behind the camera, and finally through the lens of modern dark comedy and the Darkness. While some may argue that dark comedy is purely a space for hatred and vitriol, some scholars present an opposing opinion: that dark comedy is a space for women, to give a voice to their issues in a widely consumable, comedic light.

In a study performed by Dara Greenwood at the University of Michigan in the late 2000s, groups of sad and happy men and women watched multiple different types of comedies to see what they enjoyed more (Greenwood 232). The study found that no matter if they were sad or happy, men preferred dark comedies over women (Greenwood 243). So is there any benefit to women ingesting or producing dark comedies? Dark comedy is a genre that can be dominated by bigotry. According to a selection of studies done by a group of psychologists, “watching sexist comedy can impair women’s cognitive performance as compared with nonsexist comedy” (Weber et al.). Unfortunately, these sexist jokes tend to fester in comedy clubs as well. In a study done by Jared Alan Gray and Thomas E. Ford, it was found that “participants perceived that the local norm in a professional workplace was more prohibitive of sexist humor than the general societal norm, whereas the local norm of a comedy club was more accepting of sexist humor” (Gray and Ford). It seems as though in a genre dominated by men and filled with harmful sexism, there is no point to pushing dark comedy for women.

However, Nicole Richter’s “1990s Dark Comedy and the Female Screenwriter” takes a look at the role of female screenwriters in dark comedy in the 1990s. Towards the beginning of her piece, she states, “No article to date addresses the intersection of the dark comedy film and feminist humour” (Richter 151). Essentially, Richter is arguing that there is a lack of discourse on this genre of comedy. Richter goes on to argue that female screenwriters use dark comedy conventions against gender stereotypes and biases that are perpetuated by the male-dominant genre (Richter 152). She uses the theories of Wes Gehring, who wrote “American Dark Comedy: Beyond Satire” to inform her analysis (Richter 149). Even in a male-dominated space, women find a way to voice their issues. Throughout her piece, Richter highlights the importance of the female writer as a vehicle for female voices in comedy, even in a male-dominated genre. She concludes the essay by stating, “The socialisation of women into what they are ‘supposed’ to be is the ultimate absurdity of these films – a darkly comic joke” (Richter 163). This article serves to prove the underlying point that even in male-dominated darkly comedic spaces, the female voice shines through.

In conjunction with Richter's piece, Alena Wolfink offers more modern commentary on gender in dark comedy. Wolfink analyzes Natalie Wynn's YouTube video *The Darkness* in her piece and uses it as evidence of the fact that dark comedy, specifically *The Darkness*, can be used to honor and uplift marginalized voices. She writes, "What is enticing about dark comedy, according to Wynn, is its ability to offer a release from many of the traumas of living under oppression by turning them into generative sources of pleasure" (Wolfink 927). Not only is dark comedy a vehicle for marginalized voices, but it is also a method to voice issues for marginalized people. But there is a distinction between dark comedy defined by men and the darkness as defined by marginalized folks. Wolfink concludes her piece by stating, "As Wynn and Russ together demonstrate, the darkness is better suited to remedying unequal power relations than reinforcing them. The darkness is born out of experiences of trauma and marginalization, and cultivated as a survival tactic even as it offers a source of comedic richness. Yet it is not accessible absent experiences of trauma and marginalization: one cannot have real darkness without having had an experience of oppression" (Wolfink 945). So the "dark comedy" formed by men, and known by men, is not real Darkness after all. It is a misappropriation of a coping method for marginalized groups. Wolfink argues for the benefits of the Darkness as a destruction of harmful ideas and to give a voice to societal issues.

One such example of dark comedy for women done well is the 2020 film *Promising Young Woman*. Scholar Zsófia O. Réti discusses the film in her piece, "Film Genres after #MeToo: Promising Young Woman as a Rape-Revenge Film and a Rom-Com." The film follows Cassie as she struggles to deal with the rape and eventual suicide of her friend Nina (Réti 190). To scare "good guys" out of violating young women like Nina, Cassie goes out to bars, pretends to get drunk, and leaves with men who inevitably try to assault her, where she then reveals her sobriety, scaring them out of harming her, and potential future victims (Réti 190). The movie follows her as she takes out revenge on all the responsible parties of Nina's assault, ending with her dying at the hands of Nina's rapist, but not before she sets him up to be arrested for her murder (Réti 191). This film is an excellent example of a dark comedy that is aimed at a predominantly female issue. It is a dark twist on the romantic comedy with commentary on trauma, revenge, and rape culture. Réti finishes her piece by stating, "Promising Young Woman visibly capitalizes on the tropes of both rape-revenge and romantic comedy traditions...the integrity of urban, civilized, modern life is way more threatened by the way Fennell frames the ever-present, but often silenced or ignored phenomenon of rape with the genre of romantic comedy" (203). Using familiar tropes to make commentary on society is a staple of good dark comedy, or Darkness, and it is something *Promising Young Woman* succeeds in.

Dark comedy, having long been looked at as a tool for furthering marginalization and oppression, can be used to do the opposite. As presented by the essays and articles here, dark comedy has long been used as a mode to do such work. From the female screenwriters in the 1990s to *Promising Young Woman* to *The Darkness*, dark comedy is something that has come to be redefined by the work of these women and offers criticism to tired ideas, working joke by joke to deconstruct them.

Works Cited

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