

# WHY PAINTING RAPISTS AS MONSTERS PERPETUATES RAPE CULTURE

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## Rapist. When I say this word, what do you think of?

A monster? A villain? Are they light-skinned or dark-skinned? Do their eyes tell the stories of all their victims? Many of us, particularly individuals socialized as women, grew up with society telling us we should be afraid of being raped. Those of us socialized as women are told never to go anywhere at night alone, are gifted pepper spray by loved ones, and are told by friends to “text when you get home so I can make sure you got there safe.” These messages create an undeniable fear that limits us in many ways that we may not even be consciously aware of. One way it limits us is by minimizing our exposure to certain places and people, at certain times in the day.

This narrative, coupled with our view of rapists as monsters and villains, is not based in any kind of science, actually what science tells us is that rapists are most likely to be “normal” people we know (maybe even love) and that rape is most likely to occur in or near the victim’s home. So why the wonky narrative, if science tells us otherwise? Couple of reasons – First, many of us do not trust science, often for very valid reasons based on the oppressive history of science (e.g., Tuskegee Syphilis Study), and second, for those of us who do trust science our narrative of rapists being monsters keeps us feeling safe (i.e., if rapists are monsters then I can, and those I love can, just stay away from monsters and never be hurt).

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Problem is feeling safe doesn't actually make you safe, in fact it can do the opposite. Viewing rapists as monsters might actually help rapists get away with their behavior. If we believe that rapists are monsters, then a nice, well-educated kid from a good family could never be a rapist. This sentiment might sound familiar, as it is frequently used to defend rapists. For example, this argument was used frequently following Brett Kavanaugh's supreme court nomination to discredit credible claims that he attempted to sexually assault Dr. Christine Blasey Ford. Similar to racism, we have demonized the word and idea of rape, but not the act. Therefore, if we want to stop rape we need to acknowledge that rape is about power and control, not about monsters and villains. Rape is very real and engrained in our culture.

To clarify, stating that something is ingrained in our culture does not excuse the act of rape; it merely places it in context. Rape exists in a context, or culture, that normalizes violence. Ironically, our villainizing of rapists perpetuates this norm. Rapists are humans who have committed a violent act (potentially acts), they deserve consequences; however, dehumanizing them through statements such as, "They'll get what they deserve in prison" only reinforces the idea that rape is justifiable in certain circumstances. Further, another form of dehumanization common within the criminal justice system is the lack of emphasis on and opportunity for rehabilitation. Recidivism is assumed and as such rapists are placed on sex offender lists, which limits the possibility of rehabilitation. This again might sound familiar, as a statement for why not to convict rapists; it will ruin their lives. This sentiment is often followed by statements such as, "Survivors lives are already ruined" another sentiment I hope we can move away from. As a rape survivor myself, and a psychologist who has worked with both survivors and perpetrators, I have seen the amazing resilience of people and the potential for growth when presented with the opportunity. Thus, if we truly want to prevent rape, we need to examine how our culture normalizes violence both through our treatment of survivors and rapists.