

RECYCLED TROPES, SUFFOCATING STEREOTYPES, OR HOPE FOR FILM  
HEROINES

by

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to Shayne Wegner-VanDale. A woman who taught me how to be resilient and dedicated, to always empower the women around me, and, above all, to never give up. Thanks for everything, Mom.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The Hollywood film industry has relegated most female characters to a long list of limiting tropes that almost always function as what Laura Mulvey calls “a signifier for the male other,” where woman is the “bearer” not the “maker” of meaning (15). Whether she is the final girl or a woman in a refrigerator, the supporting female character is usually doing just that—*supporting* the male hero of the narrative. A strong, autonomous female lead who is in tune with her own sexuality or uses her own voice and power to get what she wants continues to be an anomaly. Powerful female characters are often vilified or punished for expressing their female sexual desires. In addition, when a woman exhibits rage, violence, depression or emotional imbalance, she is labeled as hysterical or unhinged. Given the scarcity of female directors and screenwriters, most male-centered narratives subject female characters to the male gaze. Men create some of the most beloved female characters, but they circumscribe how women express their emotions. Men continue to decide whether women are rewarded or punished for their actions on screen. Even when a woman portrays an unconventional female, she may primarily serve to process her own patriarchal suppression in the narrative, failing the Bechdel test for having women talk to each other about something other than men. Tropes surrounding female characters are ingrained in how women view themselves and often seep into their own writing.

In light of how the film industry has favored male perspectives for so long, the MeToo movement calls for analysis of how films have solidified, perpetuated, or broken out of the patterns that have relegated women to stereotypical roles. Beginning with two films from the 1960s, Elia Kazan's *Splendor in the Grass* (1961) and Roman Polanski's

*Repulsion* (1965), and considering links to feminist theory, this thesis will explore how tropes of punishing female characters for expressing sexuality or un-ladylike emotions have grown or morphed into new variations that nonetheless continue to stifle contemporary female characters. Using foundational work of Laura Mulvey, Molly Haskell, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, I will analyze films from the 1960s to 2020 to determine how films reaffirm the male gaze and stereotypes or—alternatively—occasionally escape this trap in their depiction of female characters.

Anchoring the start of my analysis in the 1960s—during the evolution of second wave feminism—I will explore whether the cultural context of the time reinforces female characters confined by labels that further a division between “housewife” and “independent woman” or allows them to escape this dichotomy. This study will analyze how particular patterns persist, progress or regress throughout the following decades by focusing on representative examples. Not only do the films chosen generally demonstrate the evolution of female starlets, but they show a transition from common archetypes. This analysis will look at such tropes as the hysterical woman and the virgin/whore dichotomy in *Splendor in the Grass* and *Repulsion*; the manic pixie dream girl in Michel Gondry’s *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) and Marc Webb’s *(500) Days of Summer* (2009); and how the femme fatale in Paul Verhoeven’s 1992 film *Basic Instinct* transforms into the monstrous feminine and vagina dentata in Mitchell Lichtenstein’s *Teeth* (2007) and Karyn Kusama’s *Jennifer’s Body* (2009); and, finally, the rape-revenge narrative that shifts to a new paradigm where real progress in female depiction actually emerges in Emerald Fennell’s *Promising Young Woman* (2020).

In order to examine how female tropes in cinema are products of misogyny and



the status-quo, I examine where these tropes are reinforced as well as challenged.

Ultimately, this analysis provides a direct critique on hegemonic patriarchal ideologies, male paranoia, female sexuality, and rape culture. The aim of this study is to expose how damaging misogynistic visual culture can be and to encourage audiences and future cinematic producers to seek out and develop more empowering roles for female characters.

## II. CHAPTER ONE: SPOILED WOMEN

The 1960s was an era of transition. Emerging from the '50s—when gender roles had been so starkly defined that the era can hardly be reflected on without an image of a June Cleaver-esque housewife popping up—the decade spurred equal rights movements across the Western world. After enduring centuries of a solidified gender hierarchy that gave the upper hand to hegemonic white, heterosexual men, women finally started to stand up for equal pay, sexual and reproductive health, and autonomy. Women's voices threatened the hetero-centric American dream that so many white-, middle- and upper-class men were striving toward. The male fear of insubordinate women, especially those who stray from their heterosexually defined roles, is particularly apparent in the gender misrepresentation that plagues Hollywood cinema during this era (and continues to do so well into present-day cinema).

Laura Mulvey discusses Mary Ann Doane's "The Economy of Desire," describing how "the female subject is, *par excellence*, both consumer and consumed in a complex chain of commodity exchanges" (Mulvey 22). Doane argues that the "film frame functions...as a quite specific kind of window—a shop window" (Doane 24). With the combination of the Hays code (revoked in 1968, with remnants that still trickle through Hollywood today) and in the name of hegemonic morality, male-led films still manage to sell their ideal image of women to female viewers. As Doane puts it, "The female spectator is invited to witness her own commodification and, furthermore, to buy an image of herself insofar as the female star is proposed as the ideal of feminine beauty" (25). Not only is ideal feminine beauty proposed to women viewers, but it is also fetishized as the ideal of female sexuality.

This chapter will discuss this concept of the projected, ideal feminine character and female sexuality within two films released in the first half of the 1960s: Elia Kazan's *Splendor in the Grass* (1961) and Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965). These films present the image of a woman being either spoiled or pure on the basis of her sexual autonomy. Both directed by males, these narratives feature female protagonists who are subject to stereotypes that stifle women defined through the lens of the male gaze. According to Mary Ann Doane's "The Economy of Desire," Hollywood films are able to sell a model image of how women should look and act. My goal is to examine *Splendor in the Grass* and *Repulsion* to see how each film sells a particular preferred vision of women to their viewers and whether the films reinforce or challenge feminine stereotypes in cinema through lighting, camera angles, and specific imagery.

#### Part One: I'm Not Spoiled, Mama!

*Splendor in the Grass* follows the adolescent plight of Deanie Loomis, played by iconic Hollywood starlet Natalie Wood, as she matures from girl to woman. Although released in 1961, the film is set in rural Kansas in 1928 right before the Great Depression, indicating an underlying theme of nostalgia for simpler times. This longing for simplicity is reflected in the pressures put on Deanie to remain pure by resisting the sexual temptations and desires she feels for her boyfriend, Bud Stamper (played by Warren Beatty). Deanie is tormented by what Simone De Beauvoir describes as a woman's socially constructed transition through puberty. De Beauvoir writes that a girl's "youth is consumed by waiting. She is waiting for Man" (*The Second Sex* vol. 2, ch. 2). Man, essentially, will swoop in to protect her and give her the occupation of wife and mother.

As Deanie's womanhood develops, along with her sexual appetite, her overbearing mother has conditioned her to believe that there are only two types of women: good ones and spoiled ones. This preposterous binary plagues Deanie as she struggles to find peace with her inner turmoil.

To young women viewers of the early 1960s, Deanie's predicament would be familiar. They, too, would have to live up to the societal standards directing them towards the path from chaste virgin to monogamous, faithful wife. Young girls who had seen Natalie Wood in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) would fill the seats of the theater to view a significant mainstream American drama that drew in four million dollars at the box office, indeed also turning the film frame into a shop window. Doane explains how *Splendor in the Grass* sells the crushing weight of Puritanical American values that have left an imprint on the ideal image of women. It is not surprising that the production of the film is male led, with the screenplay written by William Inge and the film directed by Elia Kazan. The product is an overt exploitation of female sexuality. Although the film feels ironic at times, this nuance might be lost on the average viewer. Even if the men behind the film's creation intended to give their commentary on the dangers of sexual repression, Doane argues that it translates as more of a warning for female viewers to avoid sexual agency and it perpetuates "a certain image of femininity," simultaneously vulnerable, child-like, and highly sexualized (Doane 29).

The film opens with Deanie and Bud making out in his car parked next to a collection of rushing waterfalls. The camera cuts to different shots of the water, falling in aggressive, roaring streams. Juxtaposed with Bud and Deanie's hot and heavy behavior, the water mimics their rush of hormones and functions as a not-so-subtle sexual stand-in

for male orgasm. The camera cuts back to the car, where Bud is on top of Deanie and pleads with her, evidently asking her to go all the way. She responds with “Bud, I’m afraid,” and eventually “Don’t, Bud. We musn’t, Bud.” Even though Deanie exercises her right to say no, the response of “I’m afraid” suggests a lot about Deanie’s perception of sex. Outside of the physical pain that often comes with a woman losing her virginity, Deanie is afraid of her reputation being tarnished. The way Bud reacts, throwing a fit and aggressively exiting the car, also gives Deanie good reason to fear that Bud will not want to continue to be with her after having sex. The first two minutes of the film set up the conflict that will plague Deanie for the remainder of the narrative: to be a good girl by repressing her sexuality or to give in and be “spoiled.” After 2017, the MeToo movement renewed a dialogue about what consent means. Viewers in 2021 may read this scene entirely different than viewers of the 1960s. For any decade, Deanie’s ability to say no is commendable. In 2021, Bud, in the midst of his temper tantrum, is the one who looks worst in this scene where Deanie comes off as brave for voicing her fears about sex.

Immediately after this scene, the audience is introduced to Deanie’s overbearing mother, shown eavesdropping at the front door as Bud drops Deanie back home. The camera provides an intimate look into Deanie’s homelife. Deanie’s mother follows her around and orders her to “drink her milk,” infantilizing her to some degree. While Deanie is in the bathroom brushing her teeth, the camera stays on Mrs. Loomis in a static, medium close-up as she lectures Deanie about how “boys don’t respect a girl they can go all the way with. Boys want a nice girl for a wife.” After this, she creaks open the bathroom door, but the audience does not see Deanie. Mrs. Loomis asks, “Wilma Dean, you and Bud haven’t gone too far already, have you?” and then shuts the door quickly

before Deanie can answer, as if she doesn't want her daughter to respond honestly. This short moment demonstrates the divide between Deanie and her mother, illustrated here by the barricade of the bathroom door. On the hidden side of the door, the viewer only hears Deanie's voice accompanied by the running tap she is using to brush her teeth. The sound of rushing water ties back to the waterfalls that were shown only moments earlier and, again, insinuates the rush of sexual hormones Deanie is feeling as she becomes a woman. The other side of the door, the only side visible to the viewer, conveys the Puritanical values of purity that Mrs. Loomis has hammered into Deanie. After opening the bathroom door and reassuring her mom that she has not gone all the way with Bud, Deanie heads for her bedroom. Mrs. Loomis follows her and begins turning down her bed for her, again showing her controlling and infantilizing behavior towards her daughter. Deanie walks into the doorway, behind Mrs. Loomis, and begins to ask, "Is it so terrible to have those feelings about a boy," but walks back into the bathroom while asking it. The viewer can only see Mrs. Loomis as Deanie's question lingers in the air, disconnected from her body. Each woman poses a question to the other about sex and then turns away before they can receive an answer. Their disjointed way of communicating conveys their discomfort about the subject in addition to their inability to properly connect with one another. Mrs. Loomis responds to Deanie's question with, "No nice girl does," explaining that she only had sex with her husband after they were married "because a wife has to." She emphasizes that "a woman doesn't enjoy those things the way a man does." Her answer solidifies the dichotomy between "good" and "bad" girls with the difference being chastity and sexual agency. Good women aren't allowed to have sexual pleasure like men and are only meant to have sex as part of their occupation

as wife in order to bear children.

Probably one of the bluntest illustrations of the “good” versus “bad” woman binary in *Splendor* resides in the contrast between Deanie and Bud’s sister, Ginny Stamper, who acts as a foil. Even before Ginny is introduced to the audience, Bud’s father labels her as “a disappointment” because she refuses to conform to the role of a chaste wife. Instead, she dresses like a flapper, dyes her hair, and wants to pursue art school—all of which her father disapproves of. When the viewer first meets her at the Stamper breakfast table, she expresses how everyone in town thinks she’s a “freak.” She is alienated for attempting to live her life with agency. Carole Zucker describes Ginny as “the Cassandra figure of the film. She is cursed with knowing and telling the truth, but no one will listen to her” (22). Her outbursts are a direct result of the expectations placed on her to be a pure, subordinate woman. A few scenes later, Mrs. Loomis walks into her house to tell Deanie of the gossip she heard about Ginny. She tells Deanie that Ginny met a man in Chicago that “put her in the family way” and that Mrs. Stamper had to “take her to a doctor...to have one of those awful operations performed,” obviously insinuating that Ginny had to have an abortion. From then on, when the viewer sees Ginny she is with a different man, singing what seems to be her unofficial theme song: “She’s a tease, she’s a flirt, you better watch out or you’ll get hurt.” She undoubtedly identifies with the lyrics, since that is her reputation around town. Ginny further inhabits the “bad” aspect of the “good” versus “bad” girl binary when she says pulls Deanie by the hand and says, “Why don’t you quit trying to pretend you’re so pure and righteous?” With no choice but to embrace the reputation society has given her, Ginny takes on the role of a ruined woman, leading the audience to view her as “bad” and Deanie as “good.”

At one point, when Bud tries to stop Ginny from going out with a married man on Christmas day, she impulsively slaps him across the face with force three times in a row while exclaiming through her teeth “Get out of my way!” The camera shows Bud from a low angle shot and then switches to Ginny from a high angle shot. Although Bud is meant to be seen in a place of power from the camera angles, Ginny is the aggressive one in this scene. Bud becomes a vessel for Ginny to take her frustrations out on. While speaking only to Bud, it would seem that she is telling off all the men in her life who have tried to define her and hold her back, rather than him in particular. Her physical aggression towards Bud thus functions as cathartic for the viewer.

Perhaps one of the most heartbreaking scenes of the film follows Ginny and Bud’s confrontation. At the Stamper’s New Year’s Eve party, Ginny excitedly kisses her father on the mouth in a moment of excitement. Disgusted with her, Mr. Stamper makes a scene in the middle of the party and embarrasses Ginny. In response, she quickly drinks two alcoholic beverages and proceeds to go around to different tables asking men to dance with her. It is clear that Ginny must be trying to seek validation from these men in order to feel better in the moment. In a painful sequence, each one turns her down. Ginny can only measure her worth through the men that want her. After stumbling around the party, she runs into the men’s restroom and returns with a flask. The camera follows as different men stare at her. They watch her next move and keep her under their gaze. Here, Ginny exemplifies Laura Mulvey’s “Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look” in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Mulvey describes the pleasure in looking:

In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that



they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease...she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire. Mainstream film neatly combines spectacle and narrative. (19)

Ginny's character is both displayed and looked at by the men at the party, the men behind the camera, and the men in the audience. She is scrutinized by the male gaze and consumed by her label as sexual object. Juxtaposed with Deanie, Ginny appears to be the erotic spectacle. The harsh division between the two women is dangerous because it tells the audience that there can only be two types of women—those that give in to their sexual urges and those who do not. The film warns against female promiscuity as if it brings about the downfall of all women. Or, to offer a more hopeful outlook, Kazan and Inge could be showing the cruel and judgmental behavior of men and are encouraging viewers to feel sympathetic embarrassment for Ginny. Both interpretations lead viewers to look at the harmful repercussions of misogynistic culture.

Furthermore, as the New Year's Eve party continues, Mr. Stamper tells Bud to "go get" his sister and take her home, suggesting that only a man can rescue Ginny from her own behavior. Ginny aggressively protests as Bud takes her outside. The camera cuts to a group of men, smoking and sitting in chairs in the shadows, who watch as Bud tries to control Ginny. Throughout the entire party, then, Ginny cannot escape male voyeurs. The camera cuts back to Ginny and Bud, staying on the back of Bud's head and focusing on Ginny in a medium close-up with a sliver of light cast upon her face. She is half in the shadows, half illuminated. Some of the most honest dialogue of the film comes out of Ginny's mouth as she tries to throw Bud off of her. She exclaims "If you weren't my

brother, you wouldn't even come near me. You're a nice boy, you're nice! I know what you nice boys are like. I know. You only talk to me in the dark!" The camera cuts back to the group of men watching her from the shadows, confirming what Ginny's rage stems from. She is the type of girl that her dad had told Bud to use a few scenes earlier in order to get out his sexual frustrations—the type of girl that Mr. Stamper says boys “never even mention in the same breath” as chaste girls. As her frustration builds, Ginny flings open the door to the party, coming out of the shadows, fully illuminated from the light of the ballroom. She screams “In the dark!” into the party. The camera cuts to the party guests dancing, who acknowledge her briefly, but never stop dancing. Ginny's disruption demonstrates society's refusal to acknowledge the pressures it has put on women to behave a certain way. Ginny's rage is on full display, but instead of being heard, she is turned into a spectacle.

Bud drags her back outside into the shadows and leaves her behind. The camera cuts to a long shot of Ginny, back in the alley, left alone in front of six or seven men waiting in the shadows. The viewer can only see the backs of the men, all of their heads turned towards Ginny, observing her. These men wait for her, like lions wait for prey. Ginny leans against the wall, slats of light falling down on her, the long shot making her look small, fragile, and helpless. Her white dress contrasts the black suits of the men, emphasizing the dichotomy between light and dark, good and bad, purity and unchastity. She takes in her surroundings and decides to submit to her fate since it is the path that has been paved for her. Throwing her arms up, she runs into the group of men, beelining towards one named Joe while calling his name. The men surround her, each groping her and kissing her neck, sharing her with one another. She says, “Let's go, Joe,” and Joe

takes her to the front yard where all the cars are parked while all of the other men follow. In the driveway, more men wait and surround Ginny, further treating her as a spectacle. She pushes Joe off, weakly falls onto the front of a car, and says “Leave me alone. I’m dizzy.” Clearly overwhelmed by the crowd of men watching her and her family’s choice to prioritize their reputation over her safety, the only words Ginny can vocalize are “I’m dizzy.” Joe comes up from behind her and gropes her breast as she softly mutters “No,” clearly articulating her lack of consent. At the same time, she is aware that she won’t be able to fend him off. A few moments later, Bud pulls a man from inside a parked car where he is raping Ginny. The camera shows Ginny, small and crumpled up on the dark car seat, slats of light, again, falling onto her face. The contrasted lighting suggests that there are two sides to Ginny, but Kazan and Inge refuse to give the audience any more information on her. She is typecast only as a fast girl. Instead, the mixture of shadows and light falling on Ginny illuminates the duality of women exhibited throughout the film—the Madonna and the whore. Both exist within Ginny. They exist within every woman. As Bud beats up the rapist, the other men around scream “It wasn’t his fault,” placing the blame on Ginny for being promiscuous. Ginny, upset that she is unable to defend herself and that the blame has been placed on her, angrily starts the car and drives through the crowd of men and out of the film forever. The audience later learns through dialogue that she has been killed in a car accident, to which Deanie’s mom utters, “No surprise there, that’s what happens when a girl goes wild.”

Ginny’s rage is justified. She is limited by her community to her role as “bad” girl and given no other choices to pursue. Instead of redemption or progress, her character is disposed of, off screen. She simply functions as the girl who is “asking for it”—a

warning to all other women who are tempted by their sexual desires, especially Deanie. As Gilbert and Gubar mention in their acclaimed work, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, when women are “told often enough that they are the source of sin, [they] may well begin feeling guilty as they accept necessity for penance. Taught effectively enough that they are irrelevant to the important processes of society, women begin to feel they are living invisibly” (426). The New Year’s Eve party proves Ginny’s feelings of invisibility. Told enough that she is a living sin, Ginny is shunned and continues to punish herself by seeking male attention. Trying to seek validation through her revolving door of men, Ginny doesn’t feel seen by anyone and measures her worth through the men that want her sexually. She communicates this over and over again, most poignantly when she mentions that she is only spoken to in the dark. Autonomous female sexuality often lives in the dark, repressed, and society continues to shame liberated women. If, as Mary Ann Doane argues, a film frame functions as a shop window, then *Splendor in the Grass* is selling two types of women to its viewers. Although Kazan may be critiquing male aggression and broaching sensitive topics for the 1960s, such as rape and female sexuality, the film still does not necessarily succeed in opening a dialogue about toxic misogyny because most audiences would not understand due to the deep indoctrination of patriarchal culture.

Opposite Ginny, Deanie is forced to live an existence of purity by her overbearing mother. She continues to repress her desire for Bud, which eventually drives her to madness. After the New Year’s Eve party, Bud breaks up with Deanie because he can no longer tolerate her unwillingness to sleep with him. Being a nice girl thus breaks Deanie’s heart. Upon hearing about Bud’s recent sexual encounters, Deanie has a panic

attack during English class and is dismissed from school.

Leading up to this moment, the audience sees how much Deanie worships Bud. In the first minutes of the film, the camera shows Deanie kissing different portraits of Bud that she has arranged in a shrine before falling to her knees and praying. A few scenes later, Bud and Deanie are alone in her living room. In the midst of kissing her, Bud says “You’re nuts about me, aren’t you? You’re nuts about me,” which arouses his ego. He tries to grope her bottom, but she pushes his hands away, softly muttering “No, Bud.” Aggravated by her unwillingness to submit, he puts his hands on her shoulders and aggressively pushes Deanie to her knees. He says, “At my feet, slave.” Deanie protests and says, “Bud, don’t. Bud, you’re hurting me.” He refuses to let up, ordering her to tell him that she loves him and can’t live without him. This moment reads as borderline abusive. Deanie is clearly uncomfortable, asking him to stop, but he ignores her pleas. She finally submits, pleading, “I’d do anything for you.” Bud releases his hands and Deanie stays kneeling in front of him, her head hung down as if she is praying at his feet. The camera stays at a long static shot, positioned from another room, framing Bud and Deanie inside a doorway. The viewers are eavesdropping on a private moment. The audience becomes a voyeur to this heightened sexual moment. In addition to Deanie’s nightly ritual of praying by her shrine of Bud, this scene emphasizes how Bud remains at the center of Deanie’s world. Deanie views him as godlike. For the women in this film, men are the axis around which they revolve. If they fail to submit to the roles men determine for them, they are disposed of off screen, like Ginny. Yet, for the men, women are relegated to the trope of virgin or whore—the kind of woman men marry or the kind they have sex with.

*Splendor's* oversimplification of the impossible binary between pure and spoiled women reaches its climax during the film's infamous bath scene. Until this moment, Deanie has been obedient and quiet—she hasn't had much of her own voice or agency. She has been the prototypical, submissive good girl. Soon after her panic attack over Bud's newfound sexual escapades, Deanie takes a hot bath to calm down. Steam rises out of the tub and sweat drips across her brow as if she is trying to boil out the chaos inside of her. Mrs. Loomis comes in the bathroom and sits next to the tub to try to figure out what is going on with her daughter.

At first, Deanie speaks softly and breathily like a little girl, but when Mrs. Loomis suspects Bud has something to do with Deanie's unusual behavior and threatens to call him, Deanie's tone instantly switches. For the first time in the film, Deanie raises her voice. She yells, "Don't you dare!" over and over at her mother and follows it up with, "If you do something like that, I'll do something desperate!" Concerned over her frantic reaction and suicidal insinuation, Mrs. Loomis suspiciously asks, "How serious have you and Bud become...Did he spoil you?" Her choice of words implies that premarital sex abhorrently ruins a girl. In Deanie's world, a woman with sexual agency is a symbol of disgust. Mrs. Loomis's reaction sets Deanie off. She dunks herself under the water completely and when she emerges, she shouts, "No, Mom! I'm not spoiled...I'm as fresh and I'm virginal like the day I was born, Mom!" All of the turmoil Deanie has felt from societal pressures finally bubble to the surface. She stands up, naked and soaking wet in front of her mother, vigorously waving her arms and exclaiming "I'm the lovely virginal creature who wouldn't think of being spoiled! I've been a good little girl!" There is an implicit baptism happening in this moment. Deanie reemerges from the bathtub at her

breaking point. No matter how long she soaks in the tub, she will not be able to cleanse herself of Eve's original sin and her words communicate this to her mother. Finally, Deanie vocalizes the sexual confinements restricting her from living her life freely.

The bathtub scene is powerful because it gives Deanie an avenue to express the tension she has been feeling inside of her, while straightforwardly addressing the ridiculous virgin/whore dichotomy. For a moment, *Splendor in the Grass* directly highlights the perils of limiting a female character's sexual agency. Through Deanie's explosive reaction, the film voices the limited view of femininity developed by men, and in the case of Deanie's mother, Christianity as a whole. For the female viewer in 1961, it is cathartic. Deanie loosens the valve of patriarchal standards and releases the rageful steam most women are trying to subdue. Deanie's assertion gives hope that the film might challenge the one-dimensional trope of good girls versus bad women. However, the rest of the film fails to follow through. *Splendor* perpetuates the idea that women have further to fall than men.

As Bud is free to act on his impulses, sleep with as many women as he'd like, and follow his dreams without hesitation or judgement, Deanie continues to unravel. She allows Bud's friend, Toots, to take her to the school dance. Trying to establish an identity, she tries on a Ginny-style flapper ensemble along with the loose-girl persona. Just like Ginny, tucked away in the dark, Deanie hits on Bud at the dance and tries to lure him into the dark of his car. The camera frames her on the car seat, shadows cast over her as she tries to seduce Bud, just like shadows cast over Ginny at the New Year's Eve party. The lighting insinuates the motif of suppressed female promiscuity. Bud labels her again as a "nice girl," to which she replies, "I'm not a nice girl." Again, Deanie becomes

restricted to the film's oversimplified dichotomy of femininity—it has become redundant at this point, for both the viewers and the female characters. After she is rejected by Bud, she uses Toots (another man) as a way to escape, but he nearly rapes her in the process. Pushed to her limit, Deanie runs away and tries to drown herself in the same falls that are shown in the opening scene. Deanie finally succumbs to the water imagery that has appeared numerous times in the film and serves as a metaphor for sexuality and sin. Instead of illustrating Deanie as coming to her senses and saving herself, the film has a couple of men chase and pull Deanie out of the water, furthering the cliché that women cannot save themselves.

The next scene cuts to a hospital, where Deanie lays in a nearly catatonic state. Her male doctor suggests that her parents admit her to a mental institution. Her father makes the final decision, where she stays for a long two years and six months under the care of another male doctor. After her time is up, she leaves the hospital to marry a male patient she met during her stay. Although this may be Kazan's attempt at delivering an acceptable, or "happy," ending to audiences by providing Deanie with a safety net, it still takes away from her development as a female character. Deanie's agency, for the entirety of the film, is directed by men. Men are the only characters that move the plot forward. Instead of Deanie making her own choices, things just happen to her. Deanie's fate, outside of being a wife, is to either drown in the falls or be committed for hysteria. The choice to place Deanie into a mental hospital conveys the message that women who try to develop an identity outside of the film's preposterous binary will either be committed or killed off—very reminiscent of "The Yellow Wallpaper." Likewise, the film portrays the idea that a woman's sexual urges are something to be cured rather than something to



embrace. Deanie Loomis exemplifies de Beauvoir's musings about a pubescent girl waiting to become a wife. Her character stays confined to the trope placed on her and other women in the film, leaving little hope or room to grow.

*Splendor in the Grass* fails to empower its female characters and provide a path of development for them outside of the limitations of the projected ideal feminine. Although Deanie is the main character, her actions revolve around Bud and his choices. She is not offered room to act on her own impulses and, instead, is subjected to the stereotype of the hysterical woman. The film hammers in the ridiculous binary of pure versus spoiled women, leaving little space for the women in the film to exist outside of it. Each time a woman is either tempted or gives in to her sexual desires, she is punished. Ginny is outcast, raped, and killed off screen. Deanie becomes suicidal and is committed to a mental ward. Under Doane's "The Economy of Desire," *Splendor* sells an unrealistic version of womanhood to its female audiences. Women are far more complex than the virgin/whore dichotomy the film sets forth. This motif that declares that there is a "right" type of woman can still be traced through depictions produced by contemporary culture, some of which will be discussed in later chapters including *Basic Instinct* (Verhoeven, 1992), *Jennifer's Body* (Kusama, 2009), and *Teeth* (Lichtenstein, 2009). Often, women are pitted against one another for entertainment, labelling one the slut and the other the virgin. The vital difference is how each female character drives the plot and whether she has any autonomy—something that *Splendor in the Grass* lacks.

## Part Two: Suffocating Disgust in Polanski's *Repulsion*

Mrs. Loomis's use of "spoiled" to describe a deflowered virgin associates any woman who does not adhere to heteronormative standards with a form of disgust. The stifling parameters of disgust for unconventional femininity close in on Carol, the protagonist in Roman Polanski's 1965 psychological thriller, *Repulsion*. Played by bombshell French actress Catherine Deneuve, Carol is a young Belgian girl living in London with her sister, to whom she has an extreme attachment. Not only does Carol suffer from the fear of abandonment, but she also appears to have an overt repulsion towards men—men's objects, men touching her, etc. She fails to live her life as a heteronormative woman waiting to be a wife because of her disgust of males. Left alone in the apartment while her sister is on vacation, Carol's mental state unravels as the pressures to assimilate to the hegemonic view of femininity burden her. Like Deanie and Ginny in *Splendor in the Grass*, Carol becomes trapped by her inability to conform and is imprisoned by madness as a result. Polanski's artistic style allows for a more complex depiction of Carol's madness and offers an open vehicle that leaves the viewer to contemplate why she is so repulsed by male sexuality. *Repulsion*, like *Splendor in the Grass*, demonstrates a typically male-centered depiction of female sexuality and hysteria, connecting, overlapping, and reinforcing the trope of the hysterical female.

*Repulsion*'s opening credits begin with an extreme close-up of Carol's eye. The audience is deep within the dark pupil as it slowly zooms out and comes into focus in black and white. A beating drum accompanies it. The credits appear on top of her cornea. It is a jarring way to start a film. The spectator is held under Carol's gaze for almost two entire minutes. Although the film is directed by a male, Polanski-led camera, the gaze is

reversed here. As her pupil minimizes and grows, the spectator grows uncomfortable. They are being scrutinized by her single eye, just as the male gaze often examines the female form for pleasure. Laura Mulvey argues in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* that:

“conventional close-ups of legs (Dietrich, for instance) or a face (Garbo) integrate into the narrative a different mode of eroticism. One part of a fragmented body destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative; it gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon, rather than verisimilitude, to the screen.” (20)

The extreme close-up of Carol’s eye does portray a fragmented body, but instead of eroticism and flatness like Mulvey argues, it gives Carol a chance to communicate with the viewer. By gazing onto the audience, or *into* the audience, she is giving insight to her psychological state. She is gazing back upon a society that has built the image of an ideal woman and has told her to assimilate to the hegemonic views of femininity. Her gaze moves around a bit, almost frantic. Not only is the viewer uncomfortable, but Carol is too. After almost two minutes, the camera zooms out to show Carol’s entire face, staring off into an unknown distance. She is in the beauty salon where she works in an archetypal feminine career. The opening credits are just a prelude to the uncomfortable feelings that the spectator will grapple with as the film unfolds.

Carol’s uneasiness is reflected in the viewer’s experience, as Tarja Laine writes in her article “Imprisoned in Disgust: Roman Polanski’s *Repulsion*.” She claims that this “film shows how a powerful cinematic event can become an overwhelming – or rather an overwhelmingly disgusting – experience, as the film’s affective influence...overweighs

the spectator's emotional agency" and that "the disgust that Carol feels is not merely disgust towards men, but disgust towards the world in general" (37-40). *Repulsion's* emphasis on Carol's disgust reverberates through each scene of the film and lingers long after the end credits roll. The film first dives into Carol's repulsion towards men when Colin, a man pursuing her romantically, drives her home after finding her sitting on a city bench and staring deeply into a crack in the sidewalk (indicating that her mental state is starting to crack). Awkwardly, they sit in his convertible while parked outside Carol's residence. Colin tries to kiss Carol to which she grimaces and turns away. After a moment, she turns back to him and allows him to kiss her except she fails to move her lips and continues to keep her eyes open, staring past his head and disassociating from the act. Carol knows that kissing a man, and not avoiding his advances, is what a heteronormative society wants from women—this is the role she is supposed to play. However, she cannot shake off her disgust for men in order to comply. As Laine writes:

"Carol's disgust can be seen as a symptom of unsuccessful refusal to commit to what Judith Butler terms a gendered cultural identity. In other words, Carol's reluctance to enter into heterosexual relationships is thoroughly entrenched in her body in the form of disgust." (39)

After the kiss, she runs out of the car and is called a "Crazy bitch!" by a male cab driver. His derogatory slur further illuminates how women are undervalued by society, especially those that fail to adapt to hegemonic culture like Carol. She tries to wipe it from her lips in the lift up to her apartment. The camera hovers closely to her, invading her personal space, signifying that her feelings of repulsion are always near, always suffocating her. She runs straight to the bathroom and compulsively brushes her teeth—

just as she is seen cleaning in other scenes to cope with her mental condition—attempting to sanitize her mouth and get rid of the taste. She looks up and sees the toothbrush and razor of Michael, her sister's boyfriend, in her glass. Repulsed by all the male effects around her, she angrily throws them into the wastebin. Chaotic music accompanies the scene, with loud horns and a rapidly beating drum, reflecting Carol's mental state. Later, Carol finds Michael's undershirt on the bathroom floor, and after smelling it, runs to the toilet to vomit. Her abhorrence for men only develops as the film progresses and pulled into Carol's psychosis, the spectator witnesses as she tries to survive the stifling expectations of hegemonic sexuality and is labeled as a hysterical woman. The contradiction of how Carol is viewed by the male world and her true mental state is amplified by these moments.

Carol's behavior is depicted as childlike, caught somewhere between girlhood and womanhood. She often walks around aimlessly, with a dazzled, doe-eyed look on her face, unsure of her surroundings. *Repulsion's* moments of dialogue are sparse, and few come from Carol, illustrating that she has not yet found much of a voice. When she does speak, it is soft and simple like a child. Even the lamp on her bedside table has little wooden giraffes on it and resembles an accessory one might find in a nursery. In an early scene while alone in the apartment, she walks around the flat while getting ready for work. The camera films her from behind, focusing on her unzipped dress, while she puts multiple sugar cubes in her coffee—something a child might do in order to stomach the acidic beverage. She walks into her sister's room while zipping up her dress and examines the objects on the vanity as if they are foreign to her. She picks up a hairbrush and mimics the feminine behaviors that she has observed from her sister, suggesting that

she is like a little girl playing dress up in her mother's closet. Carol is aware that this is how women are supposed to behave, yet it does not come naturally to her. Laine mentions that the distorted reflections Carol sees of herself in the film insinuate that "that Carol has failed in making the transition to heterosexual adulthood" (38). Carol's childlike and mimetic behaviors are further evidence of this. Her failure to adjust to womanhood stifles her from fully developing mentally and leaves her in a constant state of fear—a fear of male intimacy, a fear of patriarchal gender norms, and a fear of herself. Although the film can be viewed as progressive from its ability to cinematically demonstrate the crushing weight of performative gender roles, it stifles Carol's growth and traps her within the trope of the madwoman instead of coming to terms with her identity and allowing her to fully express herself. Therefore, it suggests that women who fail to assimilate to their gendered roles will eventually fail at the basics of adulthood and be driven to insanity, further perpetuating the dangerous combination of female sexuality and hysteria.

As Carol's mental state further unravels, her attempt to perform feminine gender roles becomes more exaggerated. In the introduction to her book *Feminist Film Studies: Writing the Woman into Cinema*, Janet McCabe discusses Simone De Beauvoir's account of the Woman as Other. She quotes de Beauvoir, who makes the case that women are conditioned to be feminine, rather than born so:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. Only the intervention of someone

else can establish an individual as an *Other*. (3)

McCabe follows this with, “The eternal feminine myth emerges as nothing more than a patriarchal construction, representing both everything and nothing, ideal and monstrous” (3). Since Carol could never successfully assimilate to heterosexual womanhood, her feminine conditioning becomes a sense of paranoia that overwhelms her psyche. The pressures of the feminine myth weigh so heavily on Carol’s mind that they manifest in different male figments around the apartment, lurking in corners, and eventually raping her in a hallucination. When Colin comes to check on her, her psychotic break turns violent, and she murders him. Unable to cope with reality, Carol turns into a caricature of the feminine myth that would, undoubtedly, be perpetuated by the cultural images of the 1960s housewife. The scene after she (impressively) moves Colin’s body into the bathtub shows Carol in an armchair, humming and muttering to herself while mending a piece of embroidered clothing. She survives her worsening condition by subconsciously occupying herself with the menial tasks of a housewife, things that do not come naturally to her. The camera pans, capturing flies buzzing around, as the rabbit that her sister had intended to cook in an earlier scene rots away in the corner of the living room. The rabbit continues to decay just like Carol’s mental state, which brings new significance to the term “spoiled” that is tossed around in *Splendor in the Grass*. In *Repulsion*, Carol’s sanity is quite literally spoiling, just like the rotting rabbit. Carol’s hyperbolic mime of the ideal feminine reoccurs in a later scene, after Carol murders her landlord who attempts to force himself on her. As if she is waiting for her imaginary male intruder, Carol parodies what she must think is a good housekeeper. Yet, the “most obvious visual signpost of time passing in Carole’s private hell is the increasingly rotted state of a rabbit carcass from the

butcher, a metaphor for her failings as a housekeeper” (Brayton). In a frenzied attempt at housekeeping, she irons one of Michael’s undershirts with an unplugged iron, she sits at her sister’s vanity and haphazardly applies lipstick, and then she lays lifeless in bed, awaiting his arrival. This time the camera draws the spectator’s attention to sprouting potatoes, again metaphorically capturing Carol’s corroding mental health. *Repulsion* clearly demonstrates that Carol’s phobias are caused by male intrusion, yet the plot gives her no room to heal or seek help. Instead, due to her failure to conform to the feminine myth, her femininity is purely performative and stereotypical. Just as she is suffocated by the confines of her apartment, Carol’s character is relegated to the trope the hysterical woman, lacking any authenticity or voice.

Additionally, Polanski artistically entrenches the spectator in Carol’s mania. Carol’s mental state is reflected cinematically through sound and mise-en-scène: being filmed in black and white, the lack of a musical score, the focus on sounds such as a faucet dripping or clock ticking, and cracks in the walls and pavement. Each cinematic effect results in the viewer growing more uncomfortable as Carol reaches the brink of insanity. Besides black and white being a cheaper option for a budding director in 1965, Polanski’s choice of film color adds to the bleak tone of *Repulsion*. The contrast created by black and white film makes the shadows more drastic which accentuates the claustrophobic nature of Carol’s apartment. In this way, Polanski uses the apartment to personify Carol’s paranoia, lack of control, and distrust of men. He further does this throughout the film by focusing on a clock ticking or a faucet dripping in total silence. Sounds that would stereotypically drive anyone mad are the soundtrack of Carol’s life, situating the spectator in just how unstable Carol is by creating an overwhelming feeling



of anxiety and suspense. Likewise, Laine discusses how these cinematic choices come together to create an emotional event:

*Repulsion* not only expresses disgust and madness, but...it also embodies these affects, as an overwhelming aesthetic system. For cinema is an emotional event that offers itself to be engaged with by means of its aesthetic system that is inextricably interwoven with the spectators' affective experience of the film. And in this sense *Repulsion* is an emotional event that seeks to overwhelm, to undermine the spectator's share in that affective interplay. (43)

Additionally, Polanski often accompanies the progression of cracks in the walls of the apartment with a loud, disjuncting bang followed by a POV shot (from Carol's perspective). The unexpected and startling bang jolts the viewer just as much as it does Carol and as the cracks in the walls become deeper and larger, so does the spectator's understanding of Carol's illness. Her sense of reality is literally crumbling around her. The boundaries of the hetero-domestic sphere are unable to hold her or protect her from her paranoia.

Furthermore, Polanski turns Carol's apartment into an analogy for her phobias and instability by making the walls come alive. Laine aptly describes this as a division between the self and the non-self:

The boundaries between the self and the non-self, the subjective and the objective, the inside and the outside get dissolved in Carol's apartment. The fleshy, porous walls turn the apartment itself into a body. Better yet, the apartment is a lived body in the Merleau-Pontyan sense: it is both a physical (architectural) and a mental (conscious) structure with an agency and intentionality of its own, aiming

to drive Carol insane. Furthermore, by inviting the spectator to participate in Carol's insanity from the inside, the film touches on the fear of our mind and body being taken over beyond our control, thereby asking us to live through the effects of agatheophobia, the fear of insanity. (40-41)

The viewers first see the porous, fleshy walls right after a loud crack in the wall disrupts Carol from staring dazedly at family photos. She runs and stumbles, clutching the hallway wall for support. As she pulls her hand away, she realizes that the walls are impressionable, like clay or wet cement, leaving an imprint of her hand. She tests the wall again, leaving another imprint of her fingers. As Laine says, the apartment becomes a living structure to Carol, and reflects her inability to gain control over her mental illness. She is leaving impressions of her insanity wherever she wanders in the flat. Later, after she has murdered Colin, she wanders into the bathroom where his body decays in the bathtub. The bathroom becomes elongated and in an *Alice in Wonderland*-esque fashion, everything looks miniature in comparison to Carol, demonstrating her warped perception of reality. Overwhelmed, she leans against the hallway wall, to which a male hand appears through the plaster and tries to grab her. She runs away and falls against a wall opposite of where the first hand had protruded, from which more male hands break through, groping her, pulling her hair, and finally grabbing her breast. The apartment sexually invades Carol, just as every man she has encountered. She is denied an escape from her fears because she is forced to live within them as her terror attacks her on a constant basis. In the last twenty minutes of the film, *Repulsion* reaches the climax of Carol's breakdown. After the third visit from her imaginary rapist, Carol becomes completely detached from reality. The living room is shot with a wide-angle lens which

makes the apartment look much larger than it had before. It stretches around Carol and becomes vast and all-encompassing with harsh lighting creating suffocating shadows. Furniture lays in disarray with the two rotting corpses and the decaying rabbit. It has swallowed her. In arguably the most famous scene of the film, Carol walks towards the hallway and with a loud, startling bang, male hands begin to protrude from the walls. Unlike the ones shown earlier, these hands are inescapable. They completely line the hallway while reaching for Carol. She submits, falling to her knees, while the male hands caress her face and pull her hair. The camera fades to black. This is Carol's last active scene and her final submission to her illness. She succumbs to the crushing psychological repercussions of repressing her true sexuality. Unable to align with the feminine myth, Carol lets patriarchal standards overtake her. Ultimately, she loses at the expense of male hands.

For Carol there is no grand transformation. She is left in a state of paralysis, frozen forever by her fear and disgust of the world that has failed to accept her. She is "rescued" from her apartment by the very source of her insanity—Michael, a male. The irony lies in Michael's unawareness of the pain that his touch causes Carol. The outside world permeates the apartment as neighbors flood in and surround her, judging her and looking upon her with disapproval. Like Deanie in *Splendor in the Grass*, Carol is only offered escape from her situation by the hands of a man. She is carried out in a catatonic state and, presumably, will be committed to a mental hospital. Her character is not offered an alternative. She has no agency in the manner and is reduced to a voiceless woman, disposable in the hands of a male-centered society. She becomes typecast as a hysterical woman, with no ability to grow or transform outside the stereotype, and is

subject to the harsh judgement of men, like the cab driver who labeled her a “crazy bitch.” In *Repulsion*’s case, the monster wins and allows patriarchal anxieties to continue to dominate. The film concludes with a close up on a photograph that depicts Carol as a child amongst family. Just as the opening credits begin with an extreme close up of Carol’s eye, the camera zooms in to her eye in the photograph as a child, creating a full circle moment. Comparative to the first moments, ending the film like this suggests that there lays some insidious childhood abuse in Carol’s past. Indeed, “The first lines, practically, are the accusation that Carol is absent-minded because she’s in love, and the final shot practically dares us not to assume that there’s some deep dark molesty secret in her past (though it cleverly refuses to *insist* on that reading at all),” further illuminating the contradiction of the ideal feminine and all-consuming trauma that plagues Carol throughout the film (Brayton).

If both *Splendor in the Grass* and *Repulsion* were to be read through Mary Ann Doane’s lens of “The Economy of Desire,” each film would fail to represent an honest version of womanhood to viewers. Instead, the films perpetuate a one-dimensional view of women, leaving the female protagonists’ characters flat and voiceless, while using hysteria as the only other alternative to homogenous sexuality. If the film frames function as a shop window, they each sell an unrealistic, simplified version of the feminine myth. For young female viewers of the 1960s, the underlying message of these films would be to conform to patriarchal standards for fear of being outcast or labeled as hysterical. Even if these films serve as a warning to society to ease up on the patriarchal pressures on women, neither woman is offered a transformative ending in which she grows and develops autonomy. Instead, each woman is taken out of her dire situation by the hands

of a male. This does not mean that every film about a woman's life has to have a happy ending—but neither *Splendor in the Grass* nor *Repulsion* give their female characters a chance to stand on their own two feet. Both women are plagued by a misogynistic culture that is the status-quo and is out of their control. Neither character is actively defying patriarchal confines, but instead, allows them to consume her. The films leave the future rather bleak for both Deanie and Carol: one trapped by housewife-dom and the other trapped by the insanity caused by her repulsion of men.

While the women in *Splendor in the Grass* are relegated to the virgin/whore dichotomy and Carol in *Repulsion* succumbs to the paranoia caused by heterosexual norms, both films use hysteria as an excuse for women who fail to submit to patriarchal standards. Both Deanie and Carol become hysterical when they can no longer assimilate to the feminine ideal that is expected of them. Although it is important for cinema to explore mental illness, it is dangerous to use it in the fetishized way that each film portrays. Instead of allowing each protagonist to live authentically, they each become trapped within a stereotype that continues to be perpetuated through Hollywood. They create a caricature of mental illness that is unfair to those who suffer in real life. As viewers see in *Repulsion*, the term “crazy bitch” is thrown around far too often from the mouths of men onto women and painting exaggerated views of the mentally ill allows those stereotypes to exist in life off of the screen. *Splendor in the Grass* and *Repulsion* create the image of the “spoiled woman” and cinema continues to recycle it more often than not.

### III. CHAPTER TWO: THE ETERNAL MANIC PIXIE DREAM GIRL: ACTIVE REJECTION OF THE 'PASSIVE/FEMALE' IN *ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND* AND *(500) DAYS OF SUMMER*

Beginning in the early 2000's and carrying on past 2010, a nascent phenomenon began to pop up in film. As Hollywood churned out quirky, indie films, a new female trope within their narratives started to grab the attention of film critics and popular culture: the Manic Pixie Dream Girl (MPDG). The MPDG stereotype was formed around an eccentric, free-spirited female character—usually with colorful hair and wardrobe—who appears in a male protagonist's life during one of his (most likely one of many) existential crises in order to remind him of the whimsical wonders life has to offer, pushing him to embrace his true passions and assert his masculinity. The term was first developed by film critic Nathan Rabin after watching Kirsten Dunst play opposite Orlando Bloom in *Elizabethtown* (Crowe 2005). Rabin defines the MPDG as existing “solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures.” In *Salon* magazine, Rabin says of the MPDG “It's an archetype, I realized, that taps into a particular male fantasy: of being saved from depression and ennui by a fantasy woman who sweeps in like a glittery breeze to save you from yourself, then disappears once her work is done.” Although Rabin coined the term around 2007, the MPDG was appearing in films long before that, for example, in Audrey Hepburn's colorful and peculiar Holly Golightly in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Edwards, 1961) or Diane Keaton's quirky Annie Hall in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977).

Intriguingly, the trope closely follows Laura Mulvey's analysis in “Visual

Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” of the “active/male and passive/female” wherein which “the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (19). Although the term is tossed around often in film criticism, not many academics have analyzed the trope and followed whether the female character stuck within the confines of the MPDG is actively trying to escape her predetermined passivity. For instance, two cult-followed films that were created in the 2000’s feature a strong female counterpart to their male protagonist: Summer Finn in Marc Webb’s *(500) Days of Summer* (2009) and Clementine in Michel Gondry’s *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004). Both Clementine and Summer remain in cinematic conversations as the pinnacle for the MPDG. By comparing these two supporting female characters from the early aughts, I will argue that although they are restricted by the MPDG trope, they are both actively working to assert their power and reject the “passive/female” binary set upon them.

Marc Webb’s *(500) Days of Summer* opens with an aggressive message to the audience. On a black screen, the text appears: “AUTHOR’S NOTE: The following is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.” That note is followed by “Especially you Jenny Beckman,” which then cuts to another black screen with just the word “Bitch” displayed. It lingers in the air like smoke after a fire, stinging the viewers’ eyes. It is a loaded opening that sets the tone for the rest of the film. Immediately, the audience knows that the women in the film are going to be vilified because, clearly, a scorned male character has set up this narrative as revenge against the fictional Jenny Beckman. Disturbingly, the film is comfortable with calling its entire female viewership “Bitch,” as the word brands the screen. The extra-diegetic narrator

begins to speak, giving backstory on the main characters: Tom and Summer.

Immediately, Tom is typecast as a hopeless romantic who listens to artsy, tender music like The Smiths. Major elements of his identity—the music he likes, the films he watches—are summed up in a couple seconds. On the other hand, Summer is portrayed as cold and calculating. She is portrayed as a young girl who “since the disintegration of her parent’s marriage, she’d only loved two things. The first was her long dark, hair. The second was how easily she could cut it off and feel nothing.” The narrator goes on to warn the audience: “This is a story of boy meets girl. But you should know up front, this is not a love story.” In the first two minutes of the film, the protagonist is framed as a male romantic, women are vilified with the term “Bitch,” and Summer is portrayed as a heartless girl who can easily destroy people and things she loves supposedly because of psychological, childhood trauma. Presumably, Tom’s heart will be caught in the crossfire of her destructive behavior. Dividing the sexes from the start, *(500) Days* fails to avoid the “active/male and passive/female” binary that Mulvey says exists in Hollywood cinema. Mulvey quotes Budd Boetticher in her article, in which he says:

What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance. (19)

Boetticher’s quote is an early predication of the MPDG trope. Just as he claims, Summer’s presence in the film is used solely to reinvigorate Tom’s passion for architecture. The heartbreak he feels as a result of Summer not fitting into his ideal projection of women is what causes him to quit his job and, eventually, apply for a job in



a field he is passionate about. Summer's character inspires Tom's journey—the audience doesn't get to learn about Summer's journey.

Additionally, from her first appearance in *(500) Days*, Summer is an example of Mulvey's claim that a woman's visual presence in film "tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (19). Tom first meets Summer, who works as an assistant at his workplace, when she comes into a meeting to deliver a message. Their boss can barely remember any crucial facts about Summer besides her first name, indicating that most women are replaceable to him. Her entrance is filmed from a POV shot from Tom's perspective. The camera focuses on her, just as Tom does. Then the camera cuts to Tom, who stares longingly at Summer with romantic, romantic music beginning to play. The narrator chimes in: "There's only two kinds of people in the world. There's women, and there's men," again drawing a dividing line between the sexes (not to mention how this line is an insensitive reduction of gender). This moment does exactly what Mulvey claims a woman's visual presence does: it freezes the flow of action for erotic contemplation. Summer becomes an erotic "signifier for the male other" and an object upon which the males around her can impose their erotic fantasies. (15)

Right after this segment, Summer is more thoroughly introduced by the narrator through something labeled the "Summer effect." Shot in sepia tones, as if a vintage educational film, the film's images are narrated by the young male protagonist, who explains that Summer has an extraordinary effect on everything she does in life—particularly, in her effect on men. Summer, naïve to her impact, is just living her life—working a summer job, renting an apartment, commuting to work. However, in each

instance, the men around her gawk and gape. As she boards the bus, the narrator tells the audience that “her round-trip commute to work averaged 18.4 double takes per day,” while the male passengers stare at her as she takes her seat. The camera follows her from behind, objectifying her by focusing mainly on her figure. Again, Summer is the erotic signifier for the male other—both the male characters, the male-led camera, and the male audience. Tom, and the other males in Summer’s life (even the ones she doesn’t personally know), project their erotic fantasies on to her. It isn’t so much the effect she has on them, as the narrator claims, but rather how hetero men decide to view her. They romanticize her and compartmentalize her as representing various pieces of their fantasies about ideal women—much the way Tom does throughout the entire film.

In contrast, the first moments of Clementine in Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* are not as extreme or reductive as Summer’s, but her figure is still romanticized through the perception of the socially awkward Joel (Jim Carrey). The first shots are significant in establishing how the film is using her character in relation to the narrative. After Joel sees Clem on the beach, the audience gets a first close-up of her. She is pouring gin into her coffee mug in a Montauk diner. Joel sits down across from her, a few empty booths away. The camera cuts from Joel, to Clem, and back to Joel again, establishing that there will be a connection between the two of them—almost as if a conversation has already begun but without words. A medium closeup show Joel nervously gazing at her, obviously intrigued. Clementine returns the look with a cheers gesture from her mug to which Joel looks bashfully down and smirks. The audience hears his inner monologue in which he asks himself, “Why do I fall in love with every woman I see who shows me the least bit of attention?” Since this takes place within the first five

minutes of the film, all the audience knows at this point is that Joel has ditched work to go to Montauk—there is no indication that he and Clem were in love before this. This scene apprises the audience of vital information about Joel's character: that he romanticizes every woman who makes eye contact with him. At first glance, Clementine not only fits the MPDG trope because of her blue hair, bright orange sweatshirt, and eccentric day-drinking, but also because of Joel's immediate instinct to fall for her without even knowing her name. Lucía Gloria Vázquez Rodríguez argues that:

By immediately marking the female characters from Indiewood rom-coms as MPDG through clothing and superficial behavior, film directors are already predisposing the viewer to make sense of these characters through a set of generalities and typifications, telling them what to expect not only from the characters themselves, but also from the film as a whole in terms of its narrative and stylistic conventions. (170)

Like Summer's first scenes in *(500) Days of Summer*, the film is encouraging viewers to confine their view of Clem to seeing her as a signifier for Joel and the journey he is about to take. She appears here as a colorful, mysterious guide onto which Joel will project his own insecurities and fantasies. Even though her colorful appearance is a trademark of the MPDG, Brenna Claire Williams claims that:

*Eternal Sunshine* opens on the morning following Joel's procedure and situates him and the audience in his bleak apartment and life, both devoid of the color Clem brings to them. Here, the film adds a visual component that works with the nonlinear narrative structure in order to signal to the audience how important Clem is in the film. The colors are neutral until Joel sees Clem in Montauk, which

signals her as a strong visual and narrative element since she stands out from across a desolate beach. (45)

The colorful component that the MPDG trope carries is flipped here to show Clem's dominance in Joel's perspective. Although Joel clings to Clem's brightness in hopes that it will rub off on him and save him from his gloomy nature, the film still illustrates her assertiveness over the narrative. The trope may be forced upon Clem and the audience, but the power her colorfulness brings to the screen proves that she is defying the confines of the MPDG.

Immediately following their moment at the diner, the train scene in which Joel and Clem first share dialogue highlights Clementine's attempt to challenge the projection of the MPDG trope that men like Joel place upon her. Clem takes control of the scene by speaking first. It is she who forwardly asks if she can sit closer to Joel and it is her persistence that furthers their conversation, demonstrating that her agency and unconventional actions drive the plot forward. Clem defies Boetticher's claim that "[i]n herself the woman has not the slightest importance" because without Clem actively engaging Joel the plot would stand still. Additionally, Clem challenges the male instinct to push preconceived ideas about her character onto her. After Clem tells Joel, "I apply my personality in a paste," he responds with, "Oh, I doubt that very much." She curtly replies, "Well you don't know me, so...you don't know, do you?" Clem makes it clear that Joel is projecting his ideas of her, and likely most other women, onto her without even knowing her. The conversation ebbs and circles back. Again, Clementine tells Joel, "I'm a vindictive little bitch, truth be told." He responds, "Gee—I wouldn't think that about you." Clem asks, "Why wouldn't you think that about me?" Their verbal exchange

is a game of cat and mouse where Clem is actively challenging Joel's instinct to assume things about women before getting to know them. Although the conversation may be labeled as quirky banter, it stands out as a protest against the MPDG trope being thrust upon Clem and the audience. This scene touches upon Lucía Gloria Vázquez Rodríguez's argument that:

...the importance of analyzing the MPDG can hardly be contested, for there is indeed an underlying common pattern in the construction of the female protagonist of many indie rom-coms produced during the 2000s insofar as their quirky liveliness is only exploited in order to help develop their male counterparts. (170)

Since this interaction happens so early on in the film, Clementine's boldness and hostility fights against Joel's exploitation and romanticization of her eccentricities that follows throughout his memories.

Before Summer gets the opportunity to assert herself as Clem does, Tom and his friend, McKenzie, establish a narrative about Summer without her input. Summer is chastised by the men in the office for not complying with their ideas about her. While discussing her, McKenzie says to Tom that he hears she's a "bitch." He goes on to say that "Patel tried to talk to her in the copy room. She's totally not having it." When Tom tries to justify it (because his perfect crush cannot be a bitch!), McKenzie further insults her by saying "And maybe she's an uppity, 'better than everyone' superskank." Just because Summer does not want to engage with a man at the office, and that man has his feelings hurt, she is labeled as "a bad object" (Vázquez Rodríguez 192). Tom responds with the query: "Why is it that pretty girls think they can treat people like crap and get

away with it?” To which McKenzie replies, “Centuries of reinforcement,” demonstrating the heavily ingrained misogynistic tones of their conversation. They both place the blame on the woman, claiming that because men have *allowed* or “reinforced” specifically pretty women to reject their advances, the women are the ones in the wrong. As Vázquez Rodríguez writes, “When Woman refuses to be for the Other, to house the lack in his ego and wear the female mask” she is punished for it (192). To overhear their conversation, one might think that Summer had done something terribly wrong instead of just pushing off male attention. Again, as in the opening of the film, Summer is vilified for her lack of interest in men. Because the film is directed by a male with the narrative presented from only Tom’s perspective, it is impossible for Summer to develop a voice. Strictly, (500) *Days* tells Summer’s story in a way that is structurally overshadowed by male perceptions of women. The male characters’ ability to freely throw around the derogatory terms “bitch” and “skank” when a woman fails to fit into a submissive feminine role illustrates the harsh judgements that Summer is up against.

Nonetheless, relative to Clementine, Summer gets the chance to finally assert her agency and challenge male assumptions about women during her first real conversation with Tom outside of work. Although Clem is more aggressive in her interrogation of Joel’s expectations, Summer still thwarts the MPDG trope and inquires against Tom and McKenzie’s biased view of women. When asked if she has a boyfriend, Summer replies to their prying by saying she doesn’t want one—an answer the men refuse to believe. She retorts, “You don’t believe that a woman could enjoy being free and independent?” Her response demonstrates how Summer is actively working against their preconceived ideas that women cannot exist outside of being a signifier for the male other. Of course, this

goes over the boys' heads, as McKenzie further underscores male ignorance with his question, "Are you a lesbian?" Summer being a lesbian is the only justification he can land on since, in his mind, women are always lusting after men and are incomplete without a male counterpart.

Again, Summer defends herself by declaring that "relationships are messy" and explaining that she wants to have fun while she's young, thus pushing against the MPDG archetype that defines woman as only a prop for man's desire and also declaring her need for sexual freedom. The men then flip from the "lesbian" justification to "Oh my god, you're a dude," which turns Summer into the "phallic girl," a term coined by Angela McRobbie (Vázquez Rodríguez 188). In her article, Vázquez Rodríguez discusses McRobbie's "phallic girl," describing the post-feminist term as something that:

...endows women with the capacity to be symbolic phallus-bearers 'as a kind of licensed mimicry of their male counterparts,' giving the impression of having won equality with men without critiquing masculine hegemony. For example, when Summer claims that she is the Syd Vicious of the relationship, or when she states that she might as well have fun while she is young without committing to a relationship, the men in the film automatically mark her as 'a dude.' The phallic girl understands sex as light-hearted pleasure, as a recreational activity, while she also adopts other habits of masculinity such as heavy drinking (particularly in Clementine's case), swearing, consuming pornography and so on...but without relinquishing her own desirability to men. While the postfeminist masquerade undercuts women's increasing independence and power by encouraging them to adopt the mask of feminine submission, the phallic girl constitutes a more

assertive alternative, being able to take up some of the traits of masculinity. (188)

Although Summer is expressing her sexual agency, she still becomes trapped within the viewpoint of the “phallic girl” by McKenzie and Tom. The standard MPDG figure can be sexually aggressive at times, so Summer is doubly trapped by the limitations of the MPDG and the phallic girl. Her attempt to challenge the limiting labels that men are inclined to place on women in order to understand them as a male other is short lived. Vázquez Rodríguez claims that the MPDG’s “performance of traditional and cute femininity renders her liberated sexuality unthreatening for men” because men fail to believe that a woman has any other end goal than marriage (188). This is proven when Tom follows up Summer’s declaration of sexual freedom with “What happens if you fall in love?” Summer’s efforts to show the men at the table that she, too, can have a liberated seat among them without being relegated to wife or girlfriend, fall on deaf ears. They cannot accept that a heterosexual woman does not have the ultimate objective of finding a romantic, male partner.

On the other hand, an interesting reversal happens with Summer’s entrapment between “phallic girl” and MPDG. Tom becomes feminized, which gives Summer sexual power that is typically masculine in films. Following Mulvey’s “active/male and passive/female” binary where man is bearer of the look, and therefore holds the power, Summer flips the binary during the copy room scene. For most of the film it is Tom, the camera, and other men gazing upon Summer, but in this scene, Summer watches Tom as he makes a copy. She walks towards him, without speaking, and leans in to kiss him. The first move, typically reserved for leading males, is initiated by a woman. Summer fights against the lack of sexual agency that the MPDG usually has and acts on her own sexual



impulses, in turn, feminizing Tom. The film also positions Tom as a hopeless romantic which sets Summer up to be the heartbreaker, another role that stereotypically goes to men. It is within these moments that Summer is fighting against the MPDG trope the most. Equally, Vázquez Rodríguez agrees that “Tom is positioned as a ‘feminized’ character in his search of true love while Summer can unapologetically enjoy casual sex without romantic attachments” (179). Continuously, Summer tries to set boundaries with Tom. She begins their relationship by saying she wants to keep it casual. She says, “I just want to tell you that I’m not really looking for anything serious. Is that okay?” Although she is voicing her priorities and asserting her freedom of choice, Tom still manages to close her into a box, failing to believe that a woman could want casual sex like a man. Within these moments, Summer tries to escape the one-dimensional characteristics of the MPDG, but instead of being lionized for it, as a man would be, she is vilified. Ultimately, because of not wanting to have a long-term relationship with Tom, she is called “an evil, emotionless, miserable human being” and “a robot.”

However, for most of both films, each woman is confined to the nurturing, supportive role of MPDG reliant on the male protagonist’s feelings. Joel flutters back and forth between infantilizing and maternalizing Clementine. For instance, the film, which mostly takes place in a Joel’s mind, never shows any overtly sexual scenes between Joel and Clem. As a cisgendered male, his mind might be expected to be depicted as overrun with sexual imagery. Instead, in most of the coital related scenes both characters are portrayed as childish. When the film flashes back to Joel’s memory of himself and Clem lying underneath the blanket together, the scene is reminiscent of two children hiding in a blanket fort together. In this same moment Clem starts talking about her childhood and

her ugly girl doll. The sexual intimacy is replaced here by Clem's childlike vulnerability, which undoes any of Clem's sexual agency. Joel chooses to remember this memory because it makes him feel heroic and important in relation to Clem. The reimagining of Clem as fragile works in accordance with the MPDG trope in the sense that "[i]n order for the male protagonist to regain a sense of masculinity and reassert their ego, they must also be imperfect and 'messed up enough to need saving, so the powerless guy can do something heroic'" (Vázquez Rodríguez 169). Joel lessens Clem's dominance and chooses to remember her as helpless in order to better his self-image. However, when the memory becomes erased Joel is pictured crawling on his hands and knees in the blanket tunnel, grasping at the blankets, shadows concealing most of the frame. He is begging, "Please let me keep this memory," and looks small, like a child pleading for attention. He relies on Clem to feel in control and without her he reverts to a childlike fearfulness. Therefore, it is really Clem who holds the power in this moment.

Likewise, later on in the film when Joel hides in the memory of him being bullied by a group of little kids yelling at him to hit a bird with a hammer, Clem acts as a maternal savior, swooping in and saving him from the mean little boys. With Joel in tears, Clem walks up and takes the small child form of Joel by the hand. The film cuts to another shot where they exit the fenced area, both in their child form. The film then cuts to a different angle, where they are both shown as adults again. In his chapter "Return to Innocence: *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*," James Walters claims that the:

ambiguity of ages here succeeds in encapsulating Joel and Clementine's more general suspension between adult and child states, as observed previously in their real lives remembered by Joel. His reinventing Clementine as an active character

within his past allows them to be both adults and children together, as if they had known each other all their lives. (97)

As Walters says, Joel reinvents Clementine, omitting the sexualized pieces of her and leaving the childlike or maternal qualities that either make him feel strong or safe. Both are forms of reassurance that he needs in order to cope. Since he romanticizes Clem as both childlike and maternal, it makes sense that he rejects the idea of her becoming a mother during the fight at the flea market that spurs their initial breakup. He cannot picture Clem as a real mother because he needs her to focus that supportive energy on his own insecurities and anxieties. Walters claims that the memories that function as a return to innocence highlight Joel's "resistance" to adulthood (97). However, Joel resists not only adulthood but also adult intimacy, thus hindering him from having a full relationship with Clementine while allowing her to be a completely developed woman instead of a romanticized MPDG.

At the same time, Summer is also relegated to the supportive confines of the MPDG's main purpose of reinspiring the male protagonist. Tom uses Summer as both a figurative and a literal canvas onto which he can project his desires. While in the park, Tom draws a skyline in black marker on Summer's arm. Since Summer ultimately inspires him to quit his job and follow his dreams to be an architect, he is directly using her as a springboard for his reinvention. Additionally, his pen strokes on her skin symbolize his wishes to mold Summer into the perfect woman for himself. This is first demonstrated when Tom turns Summer into a caricature of herself. During a POV shot in the first fifteen minutes of the film, the camera captures her in a softly lit bed, dressed in white, demonstrating that from Tom's point of view, Summer is pure and virginal—her

intimate, sexual moments reserved for only him. The camera shows fragments of her body in extreme close-up—her eyes, hair, knees, and neck. She is shot from above, looking down on her as she lies in bed and licks her lips while staring into the camera, seducing it. This aligns well with Mulvey's exploration of "scopophilia" or "pleasure in looking," which Freud associates with "taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* 16). Tom takes Summer as an object and, in his mind, flattens her out to fit into his cookie-cutter ideal of a woman. He gives her a theme song, "She's Like the Wind" by Patrick Swayze—a ballad famously featured on the soundtrack of *Dirty Dancing* (Ardolino 1987)—that he hears whenever he thinks of her. Tom shapes her into a romantic movie heroine instead of a real woman. He controls the image of her within his mind, setting their relationship up to fail. During this little inflated montage of Tom's version of Summer, he says "I love how she makes me feel. Like anything's possible. Like life is worth it," exemplifying how he is using his idea of Summer to fill a void. It is not about how he makes *her* feel, but about how she lifts his spirits and moody feelings of depression. This is an unrealistic expectation to put on any person, let alone a romantic partner. Vázquez Rodríguez explains Tom's inability to see Summer as a real woman when she says:

...due to the fact that what the loving one (Tom) sees in the beloved (Summer) is something that she cannot give, for she does not possess it – she is not the quirky life muse Tom fantasizes about, but a real woman with real problems. The MPDG is a masquerade whereby Woman submits to the conditions of the Other's love in order for man's fantasy to find 'its moment of truth,' his inspiration in her (Soler, 2006, p. 79). These films show what Woman is for the Other, not as a Subject, for

spectators are never allowed to see her but through the always already gendered gaze of the protagonist, the director/scriptwriter, and the camera; woman-as-woman, as Claire Johnston (1975) denounced, 'is absent from the text of the film.' (192)

Against all her attempts to escape it, Summer is entirely trapped within Mulvey's "active/male and passive/female" binary. Her presence appears to function only as inspiration for Tom to turn his lack of motivation into aspiration after she shows him the whimsy of life.

As Tom and Summer's relationship begins to unravel, Summer tries to reiterate that she is not a materialization of his inner desires but a real and complex person. After trying to set boundaries with Tom for the third time in the film, Summer tells Tom that she likes him, but still does not want to commit to a relationship (an action most men do, especially in films, time and time again and are not penalized for it). An angry and frustrated Tom storms out only to have Summer show up at his door hours later. Summer apologizes for making Tom upset, to which he replies, "Look, we don't have to put a label on it...I just need some consistency. I need to know that you're not gonna wake up in the morning and feel differently." Summer responds, "I can't give you that. Nobody can," reminding Tom that women are not simple one-dimensional creatures that he can control. The two of them stay in his darkly lit doorway, Summer halfway in the hall and halfway in his apartment. She is teetering on the brink of Tom's warped perception of reality. The version he wants her to be is inside his mind, while the real version of her stands on the threshold trying to fight against the Tom's idealization of her. They kiss while completely covered in the shadows of Tom's dark apartment, exemplifying that,

although Summer has tried to have a breakthrough with him, Tom remains unenlightened about his unrealistic expectations on women.

Summer is not the only woman who actively rejects the MPDG trope in the film. The other women in Tom's life also remind him of the unfair limitations he puts on the women he wants to be romantically involved with. His little sister, Rachel (who can't be all but nine years old), attempts to get through to him twice. First, she says "Just 'cause some cute girl likes the same bizarro crap you do, that doesn't make her your soulmate, Tom." Vázquez Rodríguez writes on this moment in *(500) Days*:

This is particularly relevant when analyzing the personality of the MPDG, who acts as a white board for the male fantasies...and is never defined for what she is for herself, but through weak taste markers that generally coincide with the male protagonist's own tastes. As Tom's sister astutely points out, the MPDG's interiority is never explored any further than what the man likes to see. (186)

Rachel challenges Tom to confront the image he has created of Summer in his head. While discussing if Tom should ask Summer where their relationship stands, she brings it up a second time, saying "You're just afraid you'll get an answer you don't want, which will shatter all the illusions of how great these past few months have been." Rachel is aware that Tom molds the women he is interested in into a fantastical version of the woman he wants them to be and when he realizes that they cannot conform to his expectations he sinks into a depression. In addition to Rachel, when Tom is set up on a blind date with a woman named Alison, she reminds him that Summer is not the villain he thinks she is and that she was just trying to set boundaries. She asks him, "She never cheated on you? Did she ever take advantage of you in any way? And she told you

upfront that she didn't want a boyfriend?" Tom replies "No" to each of these questions yet fails to see that Alison is showing him that Summer did everything she could to fight against the MPDG's trait of being a white board for male fantasies. The women in the film consistently fight against the MPDG trope. Nevertheless, the men fail to alter their perception of women as anything but a manifestation of their idealizations.

(500) *Days of Summer*'s ending is uninspiring, demonstrating that Tom has had little growth throughout the film. In the last twenty or so minutes of the film, the audience learns that Summer has become engaged to another man after she and Tom break up. In Summer's last scene, Tom says to her, "You never wanted to be somebody's girlfriend, and now you're somebody's wife," demonstrating that, according to the male perceptions in the film, women only have two categories that they fall into: girlfriend and wife. Because Summer ends up leaving the film tied to another man, the audience is left to wonder if she successfully escapes the limitations of the MPDG or if she continues to live under the expectations of another man. She spends her last moments still urging Tom to believe in the whimsy of life, still fulfilling her role as MPDG. She encourages Tom to continue searching for romance when she tells him that he was right about true love, it "just wasn't me you were right about." As for Tom, the movie ends with him setting his eyes on another woman during an interview at an architect firm. Her name, cleverly, is Autumn, insinuating that this is just a different season of women for Tom to project his idealizations onto. On one hand, the film concludes without any signs of growth from Tom and the assumption that he will just continue to trap each woman he has a relationship with in the MPDG trope by using them as a vehicle for his own fantasies and inspiration. But on the other, the ending also works as an open vehicle for viewers to

ruminate on whether Tom has learned his lesson or not.

Although *Eternal Sunshine* seems to end on a happy note, full of open possibilities for Clem and Joel's next try at their relationship, it is tinted with connotations that Joel will once again project his fears and insecurities onto Clem while trying to fit her into his fantasy world. When Joel chases after Clem in the hallway after hearing the tapes from Lacuna and begs her to wait, the camera shakily hangs on Clem in a medium close-up as she begins to cry. Focusing on the film's camera techniques, Vivien Silvey discusses how the camera throughout the film looks like a handheld but is actually a Steadicam, which she says produces the effect of "the camera seeming to move and breathe along with the characters, accentuating the tenderness of their interactions." In this shot, when Clem begins to cry, the camera definitely moves and breathes with her, as Silvey says. The shakiness of the camera emphasizes her anxiety over committing to a relationship that will most likely limit her agency and fail again. She says, "I'm not a concept, Joel. I'm just a fucked-up girl who's looking for my own peace of mind. I'm not perfect." Much as in the beginning scenes on the train, Clem is again warning Joel that he cannot project his ideal fantasy woman onto her and hope that she fits the mold. Joel throws up his hands and responds, "I can't see anything I don't like about you," to which Clem answers, "But you will." This exchange is Clementine's final effort to combat the MPDG trope and remind Joel that she is a real woman with flaws, emotions, and a purpose outside of bringing light to Joel's existential dread. She cautions Joel that he will eventually realize that she cannot be neatly defined by an archetype meant to save him from himself.

The final moments of *Eternal Sunshine* conclude with the couple accepting their



inevitable repetitive fate and chasing each other on the snow-covered Montauk beach where the film begins, solidifying the circular nature of their relationship. Walters describes the concluding moments in his book:

The repetition of the sequence demands that we attend to precisely what the pair are engaged in. He runs away from her but slows to look back at her, grinning. She pursues him but never speeds up when he slows in order to catch him. In other words, their running has no purpose or product: he never escapes, she never catches him. (100)

Although Walters analyzes their running as Joel never escaping, it is actually the other way around. Clem will spend their relationship trying to escape the MPDG limitations Joel sets upon her, never to fully break free. Additionally, the soundtrack of the film is subtle. Quirky sounds and instrumental background music accentuate how the audience reacts to each scene. However, there are hardly any songs on the soundtrack with lyrics, so the Beck song playing over the concluding scene is purposeful and poignant. Silvey writes of the choice to include the Beck cover:

The song 'Everybody's Gotta Learn Sometime' (Beck's cover of a 1980s pop song by the Korgis) suits the movie's themes perfectly. The tone of the song is sad, and the chorus lines 'need your loving/like the sunshine' call to mind both Joel's need for Clementine's love and the 'sunshine' of ignorance created by the memory erasure. The next line 'Everybody's gotta learn sometime' thematically answers the idea that ignorance is bliss. It implies, as does the film, that people need to learn from the memory of their mistakes in order to hold on to love.

There is not much implication that Joel will learn from the memory of his mistakes since

they have been deleted by Lacuna, which makes the inclusion of Beck's cover even more melancholy. Joel will eventually understand that Clem is not the answer to his depression and is not an amalgam of the idyllic qualities he hopes to have in a girlfriend. Once he has that realization, their relationship will fail again as Clem suffocates under the pressure he puts on her. As the final scene burns out to white before the credits roll, the tone of the film contains hope for a new beginning for the couple. Unfortunately, since they reject the knowledge of their failed relationship that they gleaned from the Lacuna tapes, their destiny as a happy couple is tainted, a situation that the lyrics of the song further solidify. Although her future is now subject to a different man from Tom, like Summer, Clementine's narrative future is still tied to Joel and the MPDG trope.

In 2014, Rabin published an article in *Salon* magazine titled "I'm Sorry for Coining the Phrase 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl.'" After Zooey Deschanel became the face of the MPDG, Rabin claims the trope spun out of control through the power of the internet. In this article, Rabin admits that "[t]he trope of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl is a fundamentally sexist one, since it makes women seem less like autonomous, independent entities than appealing props to help mooney, sad white men self-actualize." Although Rabin may be giving himself a little too much credit since the "active/male and passive/female" binary in cinema has been around since a man could put a pen to script, he is correct that the trope of the MPDG is inherently misogynistic. However, it is the misogynistic factors of the trope that divulge its importance to film criticism. Without identifying the unequal balance that comes from the heteronormative stereotypes placed on female characters and tracing how they function within film, it would be impossible to break the mold and experiment with fresh ways to give women autonomy in film. The

MPDG trope needs to be traced and studied in order to realize its fantastical and unrealistic expectations. Lucía Gloria Vázquez Rodríguez says it best:

Woman can never be made to fit Man's preconceived fantasy of her, she does not house the lack of his ego and cannot confirm his subjectivity through her desire of him, because she is also a being with subjectivity, desires of her own, insecurities, and private fantasies. (193)

Both Clementine and Summer are subject to the "active/male and passive/female" binary that sets forth the MPDG trope yet they each continue to actively work against it.

Through their dominance, return of their gaze, and other actions, the women do their best to undo the male troping that confines them. Each of these woman characters draws attention to the unrealistic archetype of the MPDG and the masculine definition of ideal femininity.

#### **IV. CHAPTER THREE: VIOLENCE, RAGE, AND VAGINAPHOBIA: EXPLORING THE FEMME FATALE, VAGINA DENTATA, AND THE MANEATING SEDUCTRESS**

The post-World War II era of American cinema gave way to a new kind of erotic melodrama that has since been replicated in modern films known as film noir. Film noir characteristics such as low-key lighting, plots derived from crime fiction, and moody jazz are frequently seen recycled in contemporary cinema, giving a not-so-subtle nod to the golden age of Hollywood. However, film noir also infused new life into an age-old feminine archetype by recreating her as the infamous lethal woman, better known as the femme fatale.

Although most closely associated with film noir, the femme fatale holds roughly the same characteristics no matter what era she appears in. She is conventionally and undeniably beautiful, seductive and mysterious, and on the prowl to manipulate someone—usually a man who will give her what she wants. Because of this final trait, her actions occasionally lead to violence or death. Some have hypothesized that the femme fatale's origins lay in the Greek mythological siren with the claim that the siren's call can be equated to the femme fatale's alluring charisma. The study, "Femme Fatale 101: The Basic Characteristics of the Femme Fatale Archetype," explains that "even though the men know that a liaison with a femme fatale will be destructive in the end, they are driven towards her, like a moth to a flame," just like Greek sailors were to sirens (ÖZDİNÇ 178). Likewise, the study muses on why the femme fatale is turned into a villain instead of celebrated for her power and sexual agency:

Although sexually prone and powerful women existed on earth since its creation,

when patriarchy started replacing female power, the powerful woman figure who had been worshipped for thousands of years in the archaic period turned into a bad woman figure, to be despised. (185)

Due to male paranoia of powerful women usurping them, the femme fatale becomes villainized by male characters. The archetype is often violent or murderous which leads it to sometimes be confused or interchanged with the “monstrous” woman. Barbara Creed was one of the first scholars to thoroughly explore the monstrous feminine. She claims that what makes the feminine monster different from the male monster is that “[a]s with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality. I will adopt the phrase ‘monstrous-feminine’ in this chapter, because it emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity” (9).

Although some argue that the two aren’t synonymous, the femme fatale does have characteristics of female monstrosity since she is a source of fear for male protagonists. Female monstrosity then becomes monstrous feminine sexuality as males dread the femme fatale’s sexual prowess. The archetype extends outwards, morphing and folding in on itself as the femme fatale becomes the monstrous woman and the monstrous woman metamorphosizes into the folklore of vagina dentata—all of which are rooted in a man’s fear of emasculation at the fear of being swindled by a woman’s sexuality.

In this chapter, I will explore how the femme fatale trope is recycled and reimagined through four contemporary films. Using Paul Verhoeven’s *Basic Instinct* (1992) as a touchstone for the contemporary femme fatale figure, I will compare how the combination of male desire and fear creates a catalyst for feminine stereotyping that evolves throughout thriller films during the next two decades. In Karyn Kusama’s

*Jennifer's Body* (2009), the femme fatale turns into the monstrous woman. However, directed and written by women, *Jennifer's Body* reclaims the male-crafted stereotypes that are depicted through a male-led lens in *Basic Instinct*. Additionally, Mitchell Lichtenstein's film *Teeth* (2007) uses the monstrous woman stereotype in the form of vagina dentata to subvert patriarchal control and abuse of women's sexuality through a rape-revenge narrative. Lastly, a very recent film directed by Emerald Fennell, *Promising Young Woman* (2020), uses the rape-revenge narrative as a cathartic release for the redundant and dismissed male harassment women face on a daily basis. Each of these films deal with female rage, violence, and male paranoia of feminine emasculation. Additionally, the films also deal with feminine queerness, presenting both through male and female perception. In other words, one from a place of fear and one from a place of celebratory curiosity. The goal of this chapter is to examine which films reinforce dangerous stereotyping (that can often be traumatic for female viewership) and which films manage to reclaim power over male-created tropes.

#### Part One: "Magna-cum-laude Pussy" and the Fatal Woman in *Basic Instinct*

Catherine Tramell, played by Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct*, has an undeniable confidence. Incredibly comfortable in her sexuality, she flaunts this freely in front of whomever she pleases. In the film's most famous scene, Catherine, dressed in white and sitting across from a room of male policemen, crosses and uncrosses her legs, revealing, ever so slightly, a lack of underwear. The scene has gone down in pop-culture history as the "vagina-shot," and Paul Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct* does anything but shy away from vagina talk.

Overtly sexual in tone, *Basic Instinct* portrays Catherine Tramell as a powerhouse woman going toe-to-toe with men trying to convict her of murder. However, on closer inspection, the film is filled with masculine crises, and it portrays the male fear of female sexuality and control. Although Catherine is reluctant to submit to patriarchal confines, she is nevertheless restricted by the femme fatale trope, which implicates her as a monstrous and lethal woman. *Basic Instinct* is filmed through the male protagonist's perspective. Played by Michael Douglas, the poster boy for erotic thrillers that vilify women, Nick Curran is an outsider in the police force. He is nicknamed "Shooter" for killing innocent bystanders while on the job and is seeking therapy for an anger problem. It is Nick's (as well as the other male characters') paranoia and fear of emasculation that limits Catherine from being able to escape the femme fatale stereotype and her label as a monster. Released in 1992, *Basic Instinct* serves as a touchstone for the femme fatale trope in thriller movies that has since evolved, and in some cases, has been subverted.

Erotic thrillers like *Basic Instinct* constitute a sub-genre that is still very popular in contemporary cinema. Closely related to its cousin genre, horror films, the erotic thriller reconfigures the monster figure that occupies the role of villain. Instead of a gruesome and gory slasher or demon, most erotic thrillers play into the subconscious and latent fears of the American middle-class, much like film noir did after WWII. Since *Basic Instinct* is from the male subjective, the murderous femme fatale villain is a product of man's fear of powerful women and emasculation. In his article, "The Margins of Pleasure: Female Monstrosity and Male Paranoia in *Basic Instinct*," Celestino Deleyto discusses the psychosexual hysteria happening in the film. He claims:

The monstrosity of the women along with the fragmented nature of Tramell's

narrative delineation are the film's hysterical contribution to the current backlash of male victimization in the face of women's gains in equality—the social fact that more and more women are supporting their families and slowly reaching positions of economic and political power—and, although not as centrally as in *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle or Single White Female*, the increasing “visibility” of female homosexuality. (32)

Although Deleyto's article was published in 1997, it can be argued that with the recent MeToo movement in 2017 and the survival of the Trump Administration from 2016-2020, the fear of women gaining equality and using their voice—or better yet, usurping power from men—is still a relevant undercurrent of American paranoia. Looking closely at how Catherine Tramell's character is portrayed is an important exercise in judging future female stereotypes.

Staying true to its gratuitous sexual nature, *Basic Instinct* opens with a reflected shot of a couple having sex. The mirror is on the ceiling, which distorts the audience's view of reality. Eventually, the camera focuses on the real couple (not the reflection), where the faceless blonde woman sits on top of the man and ties his hands to the bed with a white scarf. Beginning the film like this, after the fragmented and broken mirror-like opening credits that Deleyto discusses in his article, creates a disorienting sense of reality, akin to a funhouse. The mirror imagery warns the audience that the women in the film, particularly Catherine, might not be what who they seem—bracing viewers for their manipulative nature. On the other hand, this imagery can convey Nick's inability to escape his underlying fears of emasculation that will plague him throughout the film and effect his perception of Catherine (since the woman is blonde and it is hinted that it is



Catherine) and other women. Likewise, the woman is in a dominant position, straddling a man and blinding him with sexual pleasure, securing the subsequent femme fatale motif. The man tied to the bed (later identified as fictional Rockstar Johnny Boz) is in a vulnerable and weak situation. At the mercy of the woman, he initially does not find her a threat, until she pulls out an icepick from between the sheets and murders him. This scene establishes distrust of women early in the narrative. It situates the male characters as victims of female sexuality and dominance, afraid that if they get lost in their carnal desires, they might lose their lives. Immediately, the villain is a man-murdering seductress, fortifying the fear of the femme fatale.

From the moment the audience is first introduced to Catherine Tramell (not just her supposed reflection), she is subject to the male gaze. Deleyto emphasizes Mulvey's claim that "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (19). Multiple scenes show Nick gazing upon Catherine's naked body. True, Tramell does not shy away from nudity. She often leaves doors open while changing and walks nude in front of her windows, highlighting how she deliberately displays her body to men, as if she knows someone is watching her. Perhaps, Verhoeven presents her in this way in order to titillate heterosexual male viewers, further proving that even though Catherine may be using her nudity as a form of control, she is still subject of the gaze of both the males in the film and the males in the audience. As Gus, Nick's partner, and Nick drive Catherine down to the station, he gazes at her through the review mirror. In the most famous scene of the film, where Catherine is being interrogated, she is gazed upon by a room full of men. Knowing well that they are judging her, Catherine plays into

their desires. What makes the interrogation scene so interesting is Catherine's determination to not be boxed in by patriarchal assumptions. Although the men are bearing the look, Catherine undertakes the power from them and returns their gaze, flipping Mulvey's "active/male and passive/female" binary. Even during the lie detector test, she looks directly at them through the television screen that they are observing her through. They are not observing her so much as she is observing them.

During the interrogation scene, the policemen in the room cannot seem to grasp that a woman would only have sex for pleasure, like most men. Catherine uses this to her advantage. She says, "I like men who give me pleasure." When asked about Boz, she says, "I wasn't dating him. I was fucking him," implying that there was no romantic relationship between them, it was purely physical. Shortly after, she flashes the room with the famous "vagina-shot." She is using her power here to seduce an entire room of men with her sexual agency. Rather than submitting to the men, she has control over them. Of course, this feeds into the femme fatale trope. She is dazzling them with her undeniable, sexual charisma. However, she is using it to have some freedom inside a male-dominated environment. For most of the movie she is vilified by men, but this scene demonstrates her power and her ability to *perform* her sexuality. Deleyto touches on this in his article, claiming that Catherine's "nagging reluctance to be totally contained or punished by patriarchy, open[s] up a space for a freedom only glimpsed, never acknowledged, let alone supported by the film" (36). *Basic Instinct* has plenty of chances throughout the story line to show Catherine as empowered, but instead it traps her in the femme fatale stereotype and portrays her as a manipulative danger to men. Another key element of the interrogation scene is that *Basic Instinct* does something unexpected and

later on puts Nick in the same position. The scenes are strikingly similar, with the almost the same lighting. Nick sits in the same chair as Catherine did, a room of his fellow detectives staring at him. He even repeats Catherine's same lines when told that there is no smoking in the interrogation room: "What are you gonna do? Charge me with smoking?" Nick's masculinity is on display. He is under the microscope by the same patriarchal eyes that form Catherine into the femme fatale. Conversely, Nick does not have the same effect on the officers as Catherine does. He lacks the power that Catherine was able to create with her sexual confidence—or her "magna-cum-laude pussy" as Gus puts it.

Nevertheless, one must question why these juxtaposed scenes exist. Could it be that the director wants to portray Nick as so intimidated by Catherine's power that he attempts to act like her in order to take his own, masculine power back? More likely, the pairing of these two scenes demonstrates the unconscious hysterical male phobia of female sexuality—the notion that women can use their bodies to swindle men and can find sexual fulfillment independent from men, whereas men lack this independence. Overall, the scene portrays an emasculates Nick. Not only does Beth—the therapist he is having an affair with and, as the audience later learns, had an affair with Catherine in college—step in and save Nick; he also gets put on leave from his job. Catherine is able to save herself with her sexual prowess, while Nick relies on the help of a woman and must leave, stripped of his title. Miranda Sherwin discusses erotic thrillers and female sexuality:

In these films, the substitution of values such as visibility, money, power, lesbianism, and revenge for heterosexuality provides the psychosexual backdrop

from which masochism will emerge as a featured desire, in addition to narrativizing female polysexuality. As Luce Irigaray notes, male sexuality has traditionally been defined monolithically, in relation to the penis, but female sexuality, “always at least double, goes further: it is *plural*” (28; emphasis in original). Sexual plurality, like the polysexuality depicted in *femme fatale* films, suggests that men and heterosexual intercourse are not necessary to fulfill female desire. According to Irigaray, man is dependent on an other for sexual satisfaction, while woman is autoerotic and therefore needs no one. This, in addition to castration anxiety, is what woman represents for man: autoeroticism, sexual independence. (177)

According to Sherwin, Nick’s parallel interrogation scene is a manifestation of his insecurities. He cannot independently manipulate his way out of it, as Catherine is able to. This scene further represents Nick’s fear of being obsolete and his constant need to be sexually dominant, traits viewers witness when he rapes Beth in her apartment. Sherwin aptly reiterates this point when she explains that “*femmes fatales* in these films are fatal because they do not really need men. Even if they engage in intercourse with men, they are notoriously sexually liberated, emphasizing other non-genital forms of pleasure such as bondage and sadomasochism” (177). Nick’s attempt to mimic Catherine’s confidence is his way of personally testing whether he is as dominant as she is. Unfortunately for him, he fails.

Furthermore, Catherine’s queerness is another layer to the male fear of female sexuality. Throughout the film, Catherine is in what appears to be an open relationship with Roxy, another beautiful blonde woman. However, whenever the women are shown

together it appears to be more of an erotic spectacle for men to drool over (particularly Nick), rather than an authentic queer relationship. Later on, audiences learn that Catherine had a sexual relationship with Beth, Nick's therapist, whom he was sleeping with while in college. This relationship spurs obsessive jealousy between the two women and serves as the root of Catherine's ambiguous past. The choice to include lesbianism and bisexuality in Catherine's story line further illustrates the male paranoia that women can wear heterosexuality as a mask, using it to manipulate men in order to take power. Sherwin writes, "That Curran only appears to control the action or to hold her desire suggests that male control of the look or of the action has always been illusory and something that patriarchy must fight to maintain," demonstrating that female queerness poses a threat to patriarchal control (177).

Catherine's bisexuality plays into Nick's sexual insecurities. He appears to take pleasure in competing with Roxy for Catherine's affection, but he also seems hung up on the idea that a woman could enjoy being with another woman as much as she enjoys being with a man. In order to justify Roxy and Catherine's relationship, he masculinizes Roxy by calling her "Rocky." Before bragging about his and Catherine's "fuck of the century," he says, "man to man," again misgendering Roxy in order to feel more secure in his masculinity. This little bit of dialogue demonstrates the male fear of being expendable, of being challenged as the sexual status quo. Sherwin writes about Tramell's bisexuality, claiming that she is writing "a feminist script that reveals the threat that an independent, working, bisexual woman represents to man, as well as the fragility of the control that man can exert over her" (178). However, *Basic Instinct* fails to uphold this idea of sexual empowerment and, instead, disposes of Roxy. Nick kills her in a car chase,

an action movie tactic usually reserved for male heroes, which allows male heterosexuality to win. Arrogantly, Nick assumes that he can fill the void in Catherine that is left by Roxy's death. As a result, Catherine goes from sexually liberated woman back to the femme fatale and male viewers can rest assured that their masculinity will not be threatened by lesbian desire.

Finally, part of the femme fatale trope that seems to be repeatedly recycled is the "maneater" element. For Catherine, this means turning Mulvey's "castrated woman" into the "castrating woman" (14). Her weapon of choice, the icepick, is phallic in nature, which associates her with the phallic woman. Yet, it is used to murder her male lovers while in the throes of sexual pleasure, which turns it into a version of the vagina dentata—the myth that a woman's vagina contains teeth that will castrate male lovers unless they are able to conquer her and remove the teeth before sexually engaging with her. It is a terrifying fantasy for men. Of course, the film never explicitly states that it is, indeed, Catherine wielding the icepick and not Beth, but Catherine does write about the icepick as a weapon in her novels and the icepick makes an appearance in the ambiguous final scene.

After having sex, Nick—all too confident that he has won Catherine over with his masculine sexual magnetism and that his detective skills are so sharp that Beth is surely the killer—professes his patriarchal American dream to "fuck like minks, raise rugrats, and live happily ever after" with Catherine. Catherine responds, "I hate rugrats," while the camera pans with her hand reaching for something under the bed. The music is dramatically suspenseful as Catherine pulls her hand out from behind a pillow, but instead of an icepick, she pulls Nick towards her and they embrace in a kiss. The scene

fades to black, and on first thought, the movie appears to end with this domestic ending. The only trace of Catherine's rejection of Nick's patriarchal desires is her dislike of children. However, the camera fades back into Nick and Catherine making out on the bed and then tilts down to a shot under the bed, revealing the icepick, the last image the audience sees before the end credits roll.

*Basic Instinct* leaves its audience with only two choices for Catherine: she is either the man-murdering femme fatale or a domesticated woman, in which case, Nick has successfully trained her into becoming his wife, rather than a killer. Neither option is a good one. Yet, the icepick still lingers there as a symbol of the fear of the castrating woman. Deleyto discusses Barbara Creed's study of the monstrous feminine, explaining that "The construction of woman as monstrous is related to male psychosexual anxieties and textualized through patriarchal representations of women as abject or as castrators. It is this second figure—woman as castrator—that appears relevant for an analysis of *Basic Instinct*" (33). The man-eating element of the femme fatale often materializes in myths as the vagina dentata—where the female sexual organ grows teeth and devours man's member amidst the ecstasy of orgasm. This turns Mulvey's castrated woman, within which she claims that women's desire is "subjugated to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound; she can only exist in relation to castration and cannot transcend it," into the castrating woman (14). Men's fear of the powerful and deadly vagina projects this bleeding wound back onto them through the vagina dentata. Deleyto goes on to support this claim with Barbara Creed's study:

In a brief analysis of *Basic Instinct* Creed identifies the icepick as a metaphor of the *vagina dentata*, the threat associated in our culture with the lethal genitals of

woman. This irrational fear attributes to women a universal desire for revenge, a desire which, in this film and other texts, is never explained or justified. “The message of the film appears to be that for the unsuspecting man, caught in the throes of orgasm, death may come at any time.” Yet the attitude to the castrating woman is ambiguous: she arouses fear of castration but also a simultaneous masochistic desire for death, pleasure, and oblivion. (33)

Catherine Tramell’s character definitely inspires both fear and pleasure in her male lovers. Remarkably, the femme fatale trope metamorphizes into the monstrous, man-eating woman. Although Catherine finds moments of freedom from the patriarchal confines happening within *Basic Instinct*, ultimately, she remains limited by male stereotyping of the femme fatale.

Male paranoia wins in this film, narrowing the femme fatale trope to only be a manifestation of man’s fear of powerful and sexually liberated woman. However, the trope morphs into that of the monstrous, man-eating woman with hints of the vagina dentata. It is this version of the femme fatale that pops up in more recent cinema, where female characters are able to find some wiggle room within the stereotyping and take back their power. The following section will continue this discussion while focusing on the films *Teeth* (2007) and *Jennifer’s Body* (2009) and how they have recycled and reclaimed the man-eating woman trope.

## Part Two: She’s a Maneater: The Monstrous Feminine Body in *Teeth* and *Jennifer’s Body*

A lot of campy horror films came out in the late aughts, but two similar ones stand out: Mitchell Lichtenstein’s film *Teeth* (2007) and Karyn Kusama’s *Jennifer’s*



*Body* (2009). Both films deal with the monstrous feminine—a woman who uses her sexual prowess to mutilate and kill unsuspecting men with their abject and horrendous female bodies. As the last section discussed the evolution of the femme fatale trope into the monstrous woman focusing on *Basic Instinct*, this section further explores how the monstrous woman is depicted as the castrating woman and vagina dentata within these two contemporary films. Although both films continue to demonstrate male paranoia and fear of female sexuality by turning the female body into a lethal monster, both monstrous women, Dawn and Jennifer, use their newfound deformities to execute their power. Just as Catherine Tramell uses her femme fatale sexuality to control the patriarchal society around her, Dawn and Jennifer use their monstrous feminine bodies to defy the homogenous patriarchal order and seek revenge on men who take advantage of them. While *Teeth* is more of a rape-revenge tale, *Jennifer's Body* reverses the gender roles of a slasher film, turning high school boys into “final girls.” Neither film is perfectly feminist—a label that in itself is not a monolithic, one-dimensional entity, but a theory with branches that are ever evolving—in their depictions of woman’s agency. The male paranoia of the “maneater” trope makes the central female figures hardly endearing or sympathetic to viewers. Certainly, killing boys and castrating men does not automatically make a feminist horror heroine. However, there are delicious moments when Dawn and Jennifer manage to subvert their stereotypes and find some freedom in a male-dominated genre.

Because both *Teeth* and *Jennifer's Body* portray female sexuality as an evil entity that undoes unsuspecting men, they may be read as messages about the abhorrence and immorality of the wicked female body. Since both women appear to survive only through

their sexuality, and nothing else, they may be seen as entrapped in the man-eater stereotype. However, in exaggerating how women have been the subjects of masculine exploitation, violence, and sexualization for so long, the monstrous feminine trope in both films can be viewed as a rejection of patriarchal ideologies and female oppression that offers a cathartic release as viewers watch Dawn and Jennifer reassert power over their own bodies.

*Teeth* tells the story of Dawn, a high-school abstinence warrior who is afraid of her own body because of the monster hiding between her legs: a literal version of Freud's famous vagina dentata. As men try to take advantage of her, rape her, or hurt her, she realizes that her castrating power is something she can control and use as a survival tactic. Dawn becomes more comfortable in her sexuality, taking control of her monstrous feminine mechanism and using it as protection, revenge, and power. The opening scene shows Dawn and her older stepbrother, Brad, as children. They are sitting in a kiddie pool in their front yard. Brad takes out his penis and says to Dawn, "Let's see yours now." The camera cuts to their parents while Brad screams in pain offscreen. The tip of Brad's finger has almost been completely bitten off, insinuating that he has stuck them where they don't belong—inside of Dawn. Opening the film with this scene illustrates that Dawn has been the victim of sexual abuse since she was a child. A few scenes later, a teacher at Dawn's high school is explaining the evolution of the rattlesnake. She explains that in order to avoid being stepped on by large mammals, diamondback snakes developed a "rattle-like mutation." Including this scene shows the Christian hegemonic view of the students who denounce evolution, and it also draws a direct correlation between the venomous snake and Dawn's vagina dentata. Under the constant threat of

rape and sexual abuse, in this world, some vaginas grow teeth in order to protect against unwanted intruders. This connection is further illustrated throughout the film as Dawn learns about her own sexual mutation. Her vagina only seems to clamp down on unwanted visitors such as Tobey and the gynecologist. She finds pleasure with Ryan and realizes that she can control who she castrates. It isn't until after Ryan admits that having sex with Dawn was a bet between him and his friends that Dawn castrates him with her vagina dentata. Like the rattlesnake striking potential enemies, Dawn's body grows protection against the physical invasion of violent and aggressive men.

*Teeth* situates the rattlesnake analogy between a couple other plot devices that demonstrate hegemonic ideologies that keep women oppressed. For example, the healthcare system is symbolized by a misogynistic gynecologist and a censored health textbook. When Dawn discovers that her body can castrate men, she turns to the doctor for help. Instead, he sexually abuses her by sticking his fingers in her without a glove on, commenting on how she is "tight." Additionally, during health class, Dawn's high school board has ordered the diagram of the vagina to be covered in their textbooks while the diagram of the penis remains unhidden. These moments draw attention to the belittlement and repressive nature of medical institutions. Likewise, Dawn is extremely involved in her church. She acts as a spokesperson for abstinence and surrounds herself with friends who abide by strict Christian values. Chastity and purity are major tenets in Dawn's core belief system, exemplifying how deeply rooted misogyny is in a society built on chastising women. She begins to masturbate to the image of her in a wedding gown, but before she can explore her own body, she stops and chants "Purity" over and over. Casey Ryan Kelly claims that by "using rape culture, the abstinence-until-marriage movement,

and the subjugation of women by the scientific and medical establishment as themes, the film identifies the popular ideologies that breathe new life into the image of woman-as-monster” (88). The film’s establishment of the constant oppressive nature of patriarchal and Christian ideologies demonstrates how ingrained the repression of female sexuality is in Western, hegemonic culture. In other words, even though Dawn is the monster in this horror film, the real villain is the male-controlled environment that she must fight in order to survive.

Similar to *Teeth*, *Jennifer’s Body* takes on hegemonic ideologies through the monstrous feminine. While *Teeth* portrays Dawn as utterly alone, *Jennifer’s Body* shows a relationship between two female best friends: Anita, or “Needy” Lesnicki and the eponymous Jennifer Check. Throughout the film there are hints that their relationship goes beyond friendship and borders on a queer relationship. In the beginning of the film, a classmate says about Needy and Jennifer’s relationship, “You’re totally lesbi-gay.” Their undefined queerness is especially demonstrated during an erotic scene between the two girls, where Jennifer kisses Needy in an extreme close-up of their lips touching. Like Catherine Tramell and Roxy in *Basic Instinct*, characters who exhibit bisexuality in the plot add to the male characters’ paranoia of female sexuality and emasculation. The narrative is told from Needy’s perspective, making the film different from other horror films in that it captures the intimate relationship between two high school girls.

One night, Jennifer and Needy go to see Low Shoulder, an indie rock band, play at a bar in their small hometown, Devil’s Kettle. Upset with their lack of instant fame, the band uses Jennifer in a virgin sacrifice in order to gain success from satanic magic. Unfortunately, Jennifer is not a virgin—which she had claimed to be in order to avoid

getting raped—and the sacrifice goes awry. Instead of dying, she is possessed by a man-eating demon and uses her new body to prey on unsuspecting boys. The virgin sacrifice element of *Jennifer's Body* brings up the virgin/whore dichotomy, a motif also apparent in *Teeth*. Before Dawn takes control of her sexuality, she is burdened by the fear of being impure. Including this element in the monstrous feminine trope works as a double-edge sword. Ben Kooyman discusses how “Jennifer is victimized doubly – she’s singled out for sacrifice... because she is presumed to be a virgin, and then is eternally damned to demonhood because she is not” (190). The same goes for the virgin/whore dichotomy. Some men pester or criticize women for their chastity, while others criticize them for their uncontrolled sexuality. Such impossible contradictory standards placed on women, along with male fears of the female body and emasculation, create a dreadful predicament for women who cannot freely experience their own sexuality. As a result, the monstrous feminine trope functions within these films to seek revenge on unfair sexual biases and take back control.

In Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s canonical book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* there is a chapter titled “The Parables of the Cave.” In this chapter, Gilbert and Gubar explore Plato’s parable of the cave and describe how:

a cave is—as Freud pointed out—a female place, a womb-shaped enclosure, a house of earth, secret and often sacred. To this shrine the initiate comes to hear the voices of darkness, the wisdom of inwardness. In this prison the slave is immured, the virgin sacrificed, the priestess abandoned. (Ch. 3)

In both *Teeth* and *Jennifer's Body*, transformation to a monstrous feminine form happens

within a cave-like setting, which, according to Gilbert and Gubar, is a feminine place. Jennifer is tied to a rock and stabbed to death by Low Shoulder at the top of Devil's Kettle, the waterfall that their town is named after. Vaginal imagery is represented in the way Devil's Kettle falls, in between divot rock that similarly resembles a woman's open legs. The water flows into an unexplainable cenote-like hole from which nothing emerges. Devil's Kettle symbolizes the treacherous and lethal vagina—a hole that men may enter alive but exit from mutilated or dead.

Dawn becomes aware of her castrating abilities inside a swimming hole that leads to a cave that locals use as a make-out spot. Here, Dawn meets Tobey, a new boy at school to whom she is attracted. Scared of being impure, she tries to repress her sexual feelings towards Tobey. However, in the swimming hole they begin to kiss, and Dawn becomes excited at the idea of being intimate with Tobey. She swims into the cave hidden behind a waterfall and climbs up on some moss-covered rocks. Tobey follows and eventually rapes Dawn on top of the rocks, who castrates him in the process. Eventually, Tobey dies, and his body is later found in the swimming hole. Both Dawn and Jennifer are violated by men in a cave setting, a place that Gilbert and Gubar claim emits feminine energy. Further in their chapter "The Parables of the Cave," Gilbert and Gubar explain how the cave can also be a place of dominance:

Yet the womb-shaped cave is also the place of female power, the *umbilicus mundi*, one of the great antechambers of the mysteries of transformation. As herself a kind of cave, every woman might seem to have the cave's metaphorical power of annihilation, the power—as de Beauvoir puts it elsewhere—of “night in the entrails of the earth,” for “in many a legend,” she notes, “we see the hero lost

forever as he falls back into the maternal shadows—cave, abyss, hell.” (Ch. 3)

For Dawn and Jennifer, the cave serves as their place of transformation and, therefore, their discovery of new power, but it also symbolizes the vagina dentata—a place where men are lost forever, and a woman finds her “power of annihilation.” Although both suffer traumatic events within the cave, the cave also becomes a locus of empowerment for the two women, allowing them to take some control back over the monstrous feminine.

Kelly also makes note of the vaginal imagery within the cave in *Teeth*. He analyzes the cave in a similar way:

The cave’s exterior, however, is adorned with jagged rocks and stalactites that not only make the place appear treacherous but symbolize the threat of castration to those who enter. While most men escape unharmed, the eventual castration of Tobey (Dawn’s rapist) in the cave symbolizes the punishment administered by nature (the feminine) for those who violate her sanctity. It is the site where Dawn discovers her “teeth” and acknowledges her vulnerability to the brute force of patriarchy. The cave is also a vaginal setting that symbolizes Dawn’s inner strength. By contrast, the cave also reveals Tobey’s hidden malevolence. The simultaneous natural beauty and treachery of the cave suggests that castration, the evisceration of the masculine, is a consequence of violating the feminine. (94)

Kelly’s analysis of the cave can also be applied to Devil’s Kettle in *Jennifer’s Body*. The waterfall and mysterious cenote serve as symbols for revenge against misogyny and male violence directed at women. Although Jennifer’s victims aren’t the men who harmed her, they represent a system that encourages men to feel entitled to sexual gratification from

women, even if it hurts women in the process.

*Teeth* reaches its pinnacle of rape-revenge and subversion of the femme castratrice trope when Dawn gets revenge on Brad, her stepbrother. Brad is an all-around bad guy, representing the evil undercurrents that exist within a misogynist system. He has sexualized Dawn since childhood and refers to women as “bitches” and “cunts.” Because of the memory portrayed in the opening scene where Dawn almost severs his finger, Brad has a fear of vaginas evidenced by his avoidance of vaginal sex. His girlfriend says to him after anal sex, “I do have a perfectly good pussy,” which accentuates Brad’s (and by extension, hegemonic society’s) vaginaphobia, and also suggests the misogynist idea that there are “good” or “bad” vaginas. After Brad ignores Dawn’s dying mother to have anal sex with his girlfriend, the mother passes away at the hospital. Dawn blames her death on Brad and decides to seek revenge on him. Because he eagerly tries to have sex with Dawn earlier in the film, she uses this to her advantage. She insists that they have sex, and although Brad attempts to avoid her vagina, he eventually gives in. The camera shows a close-up on Dawn’s teeth, inferring Brad’s fate. Dawn castrates him, standing up and dropping his severed penis to the ground. His dog, fittingly named “Mother” to bring his Freudian issues with women full circle, eats Brad’s castrated member. Brad is completely destroyed by the feminine.

Kelly claims that through Dawn’s newfound power “the film denaturalizes feminine passivity and indicts the cultural assumptions that support male sexual aggression. Dawn’s strategic use of her mythical adaptation rewrites the fable to call on a heroic *woman* to conquer the monstrosity in *men*” (100). The last scene shows Dawn in the car of an elderly man who picked her up while hitchhiking out of their small town. At



a rest stop, he locks her in the car and makes animated, sexual faces at her indicating that he is about to sexually assault her. Dawn, in a camp and darkly comedic way, looks at the camera and slyly winks, illustrating that she is now going to use her power to give this man what is coming to him. Kelly writes on Dawn's acknowledgement of the audience, claiming that "With the audience caught looking, Dawn's look invites them to confront the transparent fantasies constructed for their pleasure, or what Mulvey identified as the stable, masterful subjectivity of Hollywood cinema" (101). Likewise, Dawn is also inviting the audience to critically think about the masculine subjugation placed on women's bodies.

While Dawn's subversion of male tropes is a bit more clear-than Jennifer's, *Jennifer's Body* still allows her to have control over the monstrous feminine. In *Teeth*, Brad is the ultimate personification of misogyny, a role that Low Shoulder takes on in *Jennifer's Body*. When Jennifer is in the van on her way to her sacrifice (unbeknownst to her), she quickly becomes fearful for her life and asks, "Are you guys rapists?" to which Nikolai Wolf, the front man of the band, replies "Oh, God, I hate girls." Jennifer's abduction represents a very real fear for women. Just as Tobey feels entitled to sexual gratification from Dawn even if it is through rape, Low Shoulder feels entitled to Jennifer's body in order to secure his own success. Jennifer's body then becomes a stand-in for every woman's body under the constant threat of a misogynist society. Emily Jacobson writes that Low Shoulder's attack on Jennifer is "a clear metaphor for the way that women's bodies have been sexualized for decades, which usually results in violence being used against them. This makes Jennifer's new form come off as a satisfying turn of events. Jennifer, who was the victim, now holds the power to exact her revenge on the

ones who have wronged her and those happen to be men” (*Film Daze*). Jennifer’s reclamation over her newly demonic body, consuming men for sustenance, subverts the man-eating monstrous feminine trope by providing a vengeful catharsis for women viewers who have felt threatened by male violence or patriarchal standards every day of their lives.

However, unlike Dawn’s newly developed power, Jennifer’s empowerment comes at a cost. Without her male victims, her beauty withers. Jennifer grows ill without men to eat. In a cruel twist, Jennifer relies on men for survival, even though they are the ones that took her life away. On prom night, while Needy and Chip (Needy’s boyfriend) are taking pictures with their mothers, Jennifer is shown sitting in front of her vanity mirror. Clumps of her hair fall out as she combs it, her skin is sallow, and she has dark bags under her eyes while they well up with tears. She piles on globs of makeup to hide her weakened state. Next to her vanity is a picture of herself before the possession, smiling and full of life like an average teenage girl. Even though she is the villain in the film, this is a heartbreaking scene. While Jennifer finds ways to take back her power through her demonic possession, she still is a victim of trauma. Low Shoulder didn’t just take her body, they also took her life. Any chance of having the experience of a teenage girl has been robbed from her. Jennifer’s possession is a metaphor for rape victims who live with their trauma every day. Trauma becomes inescapable as it possesses victims, affecting every part of their lives, like a demon. Reading *Jennifer’s Body* in this manner makes for a more depressing, yet realistic, interpretation. Unfortunately, it is not Jennifer who gets to have the ultimate revenge on Low Shoulder. Instead, Needy seeks revenge on her behalf.

After fully giving in to her animalistic impulses that accompany the monstrous woman, Jennifer kills Needy's boyfriend, Chip, in a fit of uncontrolled jealousy. This scene takes Jennifer from a sympathetic villain to a monster who needs to be stopped. Eventually, Needy kills Jennifer, stabbing her in the heart with a box cutter. During the process, some of Jennifer's demonic powers transfer to her. Needy is locked up in a psych ward—again, another patriarchal response to women who cannot be controlled—until she eventually escapes with her demonic strength and seeks out Low Shoulder. The final scenes of the film, as the end credits begin to roll, show Low Shoulder (now a famous rock band as a result of Jennifer's sacrifice) murdered in their hotel room. Although it is not Jennifer who gets to take revenge on her assaulters, Needy still gives viewers the satisfying revenge they crave throughout the entirety of the film. Jennifer's death is avenged and Needy is able to enact a victorious retaliation towards the men that stole her best friend from her. Ending the film in this manner show that, ultimately, at the heart of *Jennifer's Body* is the tale of a female relationship and the message that women need to look out for one another—even if their best friend becomes a man-eating demon. It is only through the support from other women that the suffocating and dangerous repercussions of patriarchal standards can be dismantled.

Overall, both *Teeth* and *Jennifer's Body* are successful in challenging the stereotype of the monstrous woman and the vagina dentata. These films turn the patriarchy into the monster, while the monstrous feminine becomes a vehicle for revenge against stifling stereotyping and hegemonic ideologies. Both Dawn and Jennifer use their vilified tropes, and versions of the vagina dentata, to find control over their bodies and assert their power. By allowing Jennifer and Dawn to develop agency within their lethal

sexuality, or femme castratrice, the films draw attention to “the dangerous implications of the monstrous-feminine as a cultural axiom that men frequently express their dread of women through violence” (Kelly 99). Furthermore, Kelly writes that “the vagina dentata is not monstrous but a natural defense mechanism that gives women the ability to survive rape culture,” which is demonstrated in the storylines of Dawn and Jennifer (99).

Underneath the camp, the films illustrate the dangers of rape culture and give their horror heroines a cathartic space to feel, for once, liberated and in control.

### Part Three: Taking a Tire Iron to Rape Culture: Possible Hope for Film Heroines in *Promising Young Woman*

The rape-revenge film is not a new concept. Rape culture—the concept that our hegemonic, patriarchal society further enables rape to be normalized and often dismisses sex crimes, leaving them unpunished and victims further traumatized—is metaphorically skirted around in *Teeth* and *Jennifer’s Body*. It even serves as the status-quo in *Basic Instinct*, glorified in a scene where Nick Curran rapes Beth over her loveseat. Thus far, all three female characters discussed in this chapter are victims of sexual assault that has been made dismissible by misogynistic ideologies. However, although all three films can be seen as an attack on the patriarchy, only *Teeth* and *Jennifer’s Body* gently touch on the rape-revenge narrative through the femme castratrice and monstrous feminine tropes. Often, rape culture is approached artfully in cinema without ever straightforwardly addressing the deep-rooted problems with a white, male-centered society. That is what makes Emerald Fennell’s *Promising Young Woman* (2020) so radical—it directly comments on a society that perpetuates rape culture, letting victims slip through the

cracks, and sweeping rape committed by white males under the proverbial rug.

Fennell's film waves rape culture in the face of its audience. It hangs between the screen and the viewers, inescapable for the entire duration of the picture. *Promising Young Woman* is not a comfortable movie by any means, nor is it a perfect commentary on rape culture. However, it does what a lot of other films do not: it tries to bring attention to a very real injustice that women face every day. The protagonist, Cassie, crafts a revenge mission on behalf of her best friend, Nina, who was raped at a party during their time in medical school and, the film insinuates, eventually committed suicide because no one believed her accusations. Nina's rapist is never persecuted because he is deemed a promising young man by the judicial system. Cassie drops out of medical school and, sometime later, vows to avenge her best friend's death. She works at a coffee shop during the day and at night, pretends to get debilitatingly drunk to seduce men in order to call out their rapist behavior. She does not murder them, eat them, or castrate them, in contrast to Catherine Tramell, Jennifer Check, and Dawn O'Keefe. However, it may be argued that her character transforms the femme fatale trope into a modern-day, vigilante seductress who offers a cathartic release for women who have felt silenced by patriarchal systems.

*Promising Young Woman* establishes how hetero men uphold the status-quo through its first spoken words on screen, "Fuck her." At what appears to be a work party, a bunch of dorky men in khakis get drunk and dance. Three of them surround a bar and the first bit of dialogue introduced is one of the men saying, "Fuck her." The audience does not know who the man is talking about, but the words ring familiar. They extend beyond the plot and radiate outwards, critiquing a society that throws this phrase around

often, usually in companion with “bitch” or “cunt.” This first line illustrates that dismissing women is the regular and casually accepted. After determining that the woman the men are talking about is a coworker who is upset that they are doing business without her at a male-only golf club, the conversation is cut short when the men catch a sight of Cassie, pretending to be severely inebriated. The dialogue then changes to lines like, “Why don’t you get some dignity, sweetheart?” and “You know, they put themselves in danger, girls like that.” This occurs in the first two minutes of the film. In a short amount of time, Fennell determines the villains for the audience: a society against women that heterosexual men have normalized. Viewers witness men dismissing women, excluding them in the workplace, and then, the age-old cliché of “she is asking for it” when a woman has too much to drink. Female viewers are well-acquainted with this type of behavior because most have lived it. (Ironically, the man out of the group who decides to pick Cassie up and take her back to his place is played by Adam Brody, the same actor who plays the murderer, Nikolai Wolf, in *Jennifer’s Body*.) This opening sequence sets the tone for the rage Cassie feels towards a society of men who ruined her best friend and provides a welcomed catharsis for women viewers.

At the end of the opening sequence, Cassie has been taken back to the apartment of a man named Jerry (one of the men from the group of three). She never consents to going back with him, she never consents to allowing him to kiss her, and she certainly does not consent to him taking her to bed. To Jerry, she is clearly very drunk. It isn’t until after Jerry has taken off her underwear that she snaps out of her drunken act. The camera shoots her from above while she lays on her back on the bed, she makes eye contact with the camera, letting viewers in on her secret motivation, with her arms spread out like

Jesus on the cross. Although Cassie is not necessarily a savior, the mise-en-scène positions her as one. The shot represents her own internal feelings about her vigilante mission, that she is doing this not for herself, but for Nina and all other rape victims. The music grows suspenseful as she speaks in a normal voice. She sits up and says to Jerry, “Hey, I said, ‘what are you doing?’” A high-angle POV shot shows Jerry’s frightened face between Cassie’s legs with her underwear around her ankles before the screen cuts to black and the opening credits roll. Cassie looks down on this small, vile man. Her confidence towards woman’s number one predator is inspiring. She holds the power and control after Jerry was so sure he was about to take that away from her. She takes the man-eating seductress trope and modifies it for contemporary times—she becomes an angel of revenge.

Of course, there are things amiss in *Promising Young Woman*. There is a big missing component in the absence of Nina, the original rape victim who the story revolves around. Nina is dead, she is not pictured on the screen, and her voice is never heard. Cassie, although the victim of a misogynistic culture, is not a known rape victim. She absorbs the voice of those who cannot speak for themselves. It can be argued that this is noble, but it also begs the question as to why Fennell did not make Nina the main character. In her article “On the Disempowerment of *Promising Young Woman*,” rape survivor, Mary Beth McAndrews argues that:

Every move Cassie makes is in memory of Nina. Every punishment is enacted because of Nina. *Everything* is about Nina. But Nina’s voice is never heard. She’s a ghost, silently floating at the periphery, talked about, not to. Yes, this is a film about Cassie’s grieving process, but that comes at the price of a sexual assault

survivor being stripped of her personhood. There is a statement to be made about how that was already done by the entire patriarchal system; no one remembers her name, a man was prioritized over her well-being, the list goes on. But without any further introspection from the film about that idea, the construction of Nina becomes flimsy. She becomes an idea that Cassie has based her entire identity around rather than a full human being. (Roger-Ebert)

McAndrews's argument is valid. A voiceless Nina does render a feeling of emptiness in viewers who have undergone similar trauma. On the other hand, Nina's absence is quite realistic in its portrayal of how sexual assault victims are treated in the justice system. Too many cases have ended with women taking their own lives after not being believed or having their assaulter not be fairly prosecuted. Cassie's choice to take on the system and seek revenge on the behalf of others may not equate to martyrdom—she is doing this to process her own guilt and grief, after all—but it certainly does play into reality. Nina's voicelessness is representative of all of the voices lost to a biased society that, all too commonly, does not offer justice. Choosing to place Cassie as the protagonist allows Fennell to pull back the curtain on the injustices women face daily in a system not built for them. Furthermore, Nina's rape is never shown. Omitting the violence of the sexual assault removes the entertaining spectacle that other films have been guilty of turning rape scenes into (such as the one in *Basic Instinct*) and centers on the crime rather than the physical act of rape.

Fennell includes multiple scenes throughout *Promising Young Woman* that offer catharsis for female viewers and demonstrate Cassie's reclamation of her power in a society that marginalizes women. There are two scenes in particular that leave a lasting



impression. The first comes during the opening credits as Cassie walks home from her recent stint at Jerry's apartment. She boldly eats a jelly donut as the jam runs down her arm and onto her leg as she walks barefoot in the street during sunrise. She carries her shoes and purse in the other hand. Male construction workers whistle and catcall at her—a scenario almost every woman has endured—yelling things like “Walk of shame,” “Get yourself some Plan B,” and “How much?” She stops and stands on the opposite side of the street, staring at them. Her confrontation makes them uncomfortable. Their comments turn from degrading her for her sexuality to degrading her for having the gall to return their gaze: “Can't take a joke?” and “Come on, why don't you give us a little smile?” Stoically, she stands there, defiantly staring back at them. The men, clearly not used to having a female gaze upon them, tell her to stop staring, and eventually say, “Fuck you!” as they walk away. Behind Cassie, a crane loudly drops heavy garbage on top of a pile of junk, representing her attempt to break down a system that objectifies her by glaring back at these men.

Cassie's unwavering gaze takes back control over “sadistic scopophilia,” a concept that Despoina Mantziari writes about in her article titled “Sadistic Scopophilia in Contemporary Rape Culture: *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010) and the Practice of ‘Media Rape.’” Mantziari defines sadistic scopophilia as:

a term invoking the psychoanalytic focus of 1970s film theory [that] combines together terms Mulvey uses—i.e., sadistic voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia (1975)—to analyse classical Hollywood modalities of gendered visual pleasure... The sadistic aspect of scopophilia is thus premised not only on the physical distance between onlooker and object, but on the emotional distance as well,

which renders the object's willingness to be looked at unnecessary and even undesirable. (400)

Women are the object of sadistic scopophilia daily, constantly under scrutiny and objectified by the male gaze. Cassie's bold choice to stand firmly and stare back at the men who are objectifying her puts them in the uncomfortable position of being unwilling objects of critical scrutiny. This is similar to some of the scenes in *Basic Instinct* earlier discussed in this chapter, in which Catherine Tramell uses her gaze to gain control and empowerment in male-controlled environments like the investigation room. These cinematic moments put the viewer in the woman's position, which, for once, becomes the point of view of the one who looks and therefore holds the power in the scene.

Another scene that leaves a lasting impression and delivers catharsis to viewers occurs after Cassie has confronted the dean of her former medical school for not following through with punishing Nina's rapist, Alexander Monroe. The dean does not remember Nina, but she remembers Al Monroe, who she describes as a "really nice guy" and recently gave a talk at the university. Dean Walker's ambivalence towards Nina's assault and praising comments about Al reinforce Cassie's frustrations with a system that believes rapists over victims. The following scene shows Cassie sitting in her car that is parked in the middle of an empty road with her head pressed up against her steering wheel. Offscreen, a male driver honks his horn at her, yelling "Get out of the fucking road!" He pulls up next to Cassie's window, but remains out of focus. Cassie is clearly in a state of distress—no normal woman is just parked in the middle of an intersection. Instead of asking if Cassie is alright, the man proceeds to yell at her. The focus stays on Cassie as the blurry man says things like "How did you get your license? Did you blow

the entire DMV?” This man does not even know Cassie, yet he immediately starts to make comments on her sexuality, because to men, women must use their bodies as currency for every aspect in their lives. When she does not acknowledge him, he claps his hands and snaps his fingers at her, degrading her as if she is a dog, and says, “Look at me, you stupid cunt.” The music becomes dramatic as she steps out of her car and walks around to the passenger seat while the man continues to berate her. She grabs a tire iron out of the passenger window, walks behind the man’s truck, and begins to smash his brake lights. He calls her “Psycho” and tells her to “Calm down,” two phrases that men often use in moments of conflict with women—neither of which ever sit well. The music builds as she takes the tire iron to his windshield. She then walks up to his driver’s side window as he calls her a “Crazy fucking bitch,” to which she replies, “Excuse me?” as he drives off. The theatrical music continues to belt out as the camera does a 360-degree pan around her. She stands in the empty road with the tire iron dangling from her hand, shattered brake lights around her, as she shakes with adrenaline.

Cassie’s rage in this scene is palpable. Although completely irrational, her violent outburst extends beyond just the man in the car. He represents every man who has ever degraded women. As he continues to spew demeaning comments towards her, Cassie takes a tire iron to misogyny. With each swing, the audience feels her anger and frustration with a society that continues to dismiss and debase women. It is a striking scene that leaves a long-lasting example of Cassie’s revenge mission. In her article “Unpacking the Exploitative Violence of Rape-Revenge Films,” Cate Young discusses why the rape-revenge genre grabs audiences’ attention. She explains:

In a world where sexual violence is routine, vigilante justice is not only

inevitable, but satisfying. The women at the center of these stories, once violated, lose their humanity, becoming villains who enact disproportionate violence on their assailants. “[These] films use women’s trauma to justify stereotypically male pleasures of hyperbolic violence,” Noah Berlatsky writes in *The Establishment*. ‘Rape[-]revenge fits feminism into male genre narratives that Hollywood can embrace.’” (76)

*Promising Young Woman*’s tire iron scene is a satisfying example of a woman taking power over hyperbolic violence that is often included, and encouraged, in male narratives. It is important to note that the scene before this shows the higher education system (and by extension, positions of authority) reinforcing rape culture because the rapist is a successful man. At this moment, Cassie has reached a breaking point with her rage. Up until this, she has not been shown being violent. The tire iron functions as a symbol of every woman’s rage towards a male-centered system that continues to silence them and disservice them.

The toughest criticism that *Promising Young Woman* received was about its unsatisfying ending. In her final revenge mission, Cassie pretends to be a stripper dressed as a sexy nurse at Al Monroe’s (Nina’s rapist) bachelor party. However, after she drugs the men at the party, which is at a secluded cabin, and handcuffs Al to the bed in order to enact her vengeance, her plan goes awry. In a moment of struggle, Al breaks free from one of the handcuffs and pins Cassie down, violently smothering her with a pillow under his knee—in slow, silent, and agonizing scene—until she dies. His best friend, who also helped Al escape punishment for Nina’s rape, finds Al with Cassie’s lifeless body the next morning and they burn her in the woods. Cassie is reduced to a pile of ash. In a

fantastical twist and what, supposedly, Fennell had planned to be a “gotcha” moment, Cassie predicts that she may lose her life on her revenge mission and leaves a paper trail, including texts to her ex-boyfriend who attends Al’s wedding, to ensure that Al is arrested for her murder.

Fennell’s choice to kill her angel of revenge is disappointing. Another woman falls victim to male violence and, in particular, a woman who spent an entire film trying to break down the system of oppression. McAndrews claims that:

Fennell undermines any semblance of empowerment she built up for Cassie by brutally murdering her. All the film does is remind the audience that women’s trauma is nothing and that trying to heal from trauma can only end with death...

Cassie’s death is a hollow exhibit, a moment played primarily for shock value.

The message feels like one big shrug, displaying that searching for empowerment is useless, the system is in fact broken, and there’s not much to do about it. There is no glimmer of hope or meditation on consequences for your actions. (Roger-Ebert)

While McAndrews has a point, Cassie’s death does not take away from the empowerment that she demonstrates throughout the film. She still manages to confront multiple men about their rapist behaviors, hopefully (although not likely) deterring them from future acts of abuse. In spite of Cassie’s death, Fennell’s film is successful in providing catharsis for women’s trauma. Cassie’s character functions as a radical exploration of rape culture and brings attention to the real problems within misogynistic ideologies. Of course, it would have been more satisfying to see Cassie’s character deliver justice on her own and live to tell the tale, but her death also speaks volumes to how rape culture

operates. It is an insidious being that often wins. The inclusion of Cassie's death critiques and exposes how deeply rooted male violence is in hegemonic society by laying out all the ugly parts of rape culture for viewers to see. Acknowledging the wicked acts of violence that men regularly carry out on women is not comfortable, but it is necessary in order to move forward. Unfortunately, there is no realistic scenario where a woman shows up to pick a fight with a cabin full of men and comes out unscathed. Cassie's death is the finale to her martyrdom, a motif established from the crucifix-like shot in the opening sequence. *Promising Young Woman*'s ending does not provide the neatly wrapped ending of other rape-revenge films, but it does still provide revenge. Al does get arrested and is going to be put away for murder—she is successful in her mission to avenge Nina's death, even if she lost her life in the process.

Ultimately, *Promising Young Woman* is a radical film, transforming the man-trapping femme fatale trope into a critique on rape culture and misogyny. Cassie's role as angel of revenge provides a cathartic release for female viewers who have felt victimized by a system that continues to enable male violence, degradation, and assault. Emerald Fennell's film exposes the ugly and brutal reality of rape culture while still carrying through with the rape-revenge genre. Cate Young speaks on rape-revenge movies, claiming that they must:

...always center the victim rather than the physicality of her pain. There are meaningful stories to be told about women seeking to punish the men who harm them, but if those stories are to have a positive impact, they must avoid reducing women's bodies to faceless receptacles of male savagery. (77)

Although Cassie does die at the hands of male savagery, she is not faceless. Her character

leaves a lasting impression long after the end credits have rolled. *Promising Young Woman*'s mere existence proves that there is hope going forward in cinema for female heroines. Cassie's character may not be perfect in her plight to seek revenge on a broken system, but it is definitely an inspiring start.

## V. CONCLUSION

This thesis concerns the different male tropes that have been used to suppress female characters, how female characters manage to subvert these stereotypes, and which films recycle or reclaim tropes for the purpose of female empowerment. The goal of this research is to identify how the practice of limiting a female character's growth or plot development is diminished or stopped when female characters can challenge stereotypes. The film then provides a radical message about female empowerment. Although not all of the films I discuss are successful in achieving complete stereotype subversion, most of them offer moments of freedom where their female characters really shine. Tracing different feminine archetypes reveals how film makers need to be cognizant of how damaging it can be to limit heroines to such stifling roles. Further reinforcement of these restrictive tropes results in poor female representation in the film industry and an endless cycle of second-rate female characters that lack voices. Likewise, by exploring how female characters can defy stereotyping, the oppressive nature of hegemonic, patriarchal culture comes into focus. Seeing how this system of rape culture and misogyny directly impacts women on the screen brings attention to how it continues to marginalize women.

I began this analysis by discussing two films from the 1960's: Elia Kazan's *Splendor in the Grass* and Roman Polanski's *Repulsion*. This first chapter establishes the motif of 'spoiled' women and how this grows out of the virgin/whore dichotomy. Under the pressure of the projected ideal feminine, protagonists Deanie and Carol lose touch with reality and their mental health is severely affected. Using Mary Ann Doane's "The Economy of Desire," this chapter examines how both *Splendor in the Grass* and *Repulsion* portray, fetishize, and 'sell' the idea of the ideal feminine through the film



screen. Additionally, this chapter discusses the societal obsession on female purity and sexuality and what this does to the female characters' psyches. This chapter concludes that the women in both films suffer from the repression of female sexuality and are not given a chance to develop a voice. Beginning with this chapter establishes how far back suffocating feminine tropes go in Hollywood history and serves as a touchstone for the following chapters.

Subsequently, the second chapter examines the limitations of the manic pixie dream girl trope focusing on two secondary female characters: Summer in Marc Webb's *(500) Days of Summer* and Clementine in Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. This chapter compares and contrasts the two female characters and how they are both ultimately confined in the manic pixie dream girl trope by the male protagonists. Using Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," I explore how both women are actively working to assert their power and reject the "passive/female" binary set upon them. A newer stereotype that popped up in the early aughts, analyzing the manic pixie dream girl trope is vital to understanding how indie films project their own version of the ideal feminine: a woman who exists solely to inspire the men they are romantically involved with. The manic pixie dream girl trope is one of many that has managed to hop off of the screen and into real life, influencing men to seek out eccentric women who show them the whimsy of life. Breaking down this stereotype and closely examining how Summer and Clementine challenge it provides important insight on why limiting stereotypes can be so damaging.

Lastly, the third and final section of this analysis traces how the femme fatale trope metamorphosizes into different versions such as the monstrous feminine, vagina

dentata, and rape-revenge narratives. Focusing on four contemporary films, this chapter begins by establishing the femme fatale archetype and how it transforms into the monstrous woman in Paul Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct*. This section searches for ways in which Catherine Tramell subverts the trope for her own empowerment and control and examines how the trope is born out of male paranoia and fear of emasculation. Further tracing this transformation, the second section compares Mitchell Lichtenstein's *Teeth* and Karyn Kusama's *Jennifer's Body* and how the monstrous feminine takes form in the vagina dentata and femme castratrice. Both films work as a rape-revenge narrative and have moments where the monstrous feminine, Dawn and Jennifer, subverts the stereotype in order to reclaim their power. The final section of this chapter focuses on the future of feminine film through the analysis of the newly released *Promising Young Woman* by Emerald Fennell. *Promising Young Woman* adapts the femme fatale and rape-revenge narrative to expose the unjust system that upholds rape culture. All four of these films use age-old tropes like the femme fatale and the monstrous feminine, originally created out of male fear of emasculation, to air the uncomfortable areas of hegemonic and misogynistic culture providing a catharsis for female viewers and hope that women's trauma will continue to be heard and told on the big screen.

All three chapters of this analysis serve as important expositions of how hegemonic ideologies are damaging to women and when they are often repeated in film, women viewers begin to believe they are lesser than. Exploring these tropes provides an imperative critique on the status-quo and sheds new light on the ways in which cinema can learn from films of the past and try to do better in the future.

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