

16 Candles: How Feminist Psychoanalysis Can Help Explain The Female Narrative

The concept of psychoanalytic feminism was coined by Freud and adopted for further analysis by authors such as Mary A. Doane and Laura Mulvey, both of whom worked toward engaging critical thinkers to understand the patriarchal order and how the oppression of female individuals stems from our society's own psyche. As put by "POSTFEMINIST VARIATIONS WITHIN MEDIA AND FILM THEORY" in the book *Postfeminisms*, feminist film theory strives for, "a demystification of the assumptions of classical narrative cinema and concludes that the goal of feminist cinema, and presumably feminist film theory, is to destroy the forms of pleasure associated with classic Hollywood cinema." The text we will be analysing is the 80s cult classic *16 Candles*, by applying Mulvey and Doane's articles to the films characters and narrative.

The film *16 candles* follows the Hollywood classical narrative that Thomas Bordwell discusses in his article *Classical Hollywood Cinema*. To start off, Bordwell says that "the spectator comes to a classical film very prepared" (Bordwell 28). Within just brief moments of the opening scene at the Baker household, there is a sense of urgency in the air. As the mother of the house rushes the kids to get ready for school, the spectator learns that Ginny's wedding is the next day and the idea of rushing into love is foreshadowed throughout the continuation of the film. This foreshadowing is something that Bordwell says is done for "avoiding surprises later on" (Bordwell 30). While rushing towards school or work, the Baker family forgot Sam's sixteenth birthday.

When Sam and her best friend Randy talk about this complete dismissal of her of her birthday, the spectator learns of Sam's virginity of her infatuation with senior Jake Ryan. When

Sam gets to school and is given a quiz built around sex questions that the average teenager may have, Sam realizes through the anonymity she can be honest about her confusions on sex and of her wish to lose her virginity to Jake Ryan. After a failed attempt to pass her quiz to her friend, Jake Ryan who also happens to share the same gym class with a sophomore, got ahold of her note and learns that she has interest in him. Jake Ryan is a senior who was idolized for being good looking and he had an equally beautiful girl named Carolyn. Within ten minutes of this film, the spectator starts to understand the time frame of this film. They are in a suburban town, going to a high school, and looking for love. Bordwell points out that the spectator “can see it as the crowning of the structure, the logical conclusion of the string of events, the final effect of the initial cause.” (Bordwell 21). We can infer that Sam and Jake will end up together, because both characters not only have feelings for each other, but are also searching for something that is missing in their lives because Jake has a girlfriend and money, but isn’t happy.

The subplot of this story also follows a similar double structure and Bordwell discusses the cause and effect of the plot and the subplot intertwining and resolving at the end. At the dance, the side plot of the story opens with a geeky freshman named Ted begin drooling over girls at the party until Ted sees Sam and confesses that Sam is the one for him. Ted tries to flirt with Sam and fails miserably, and out of a weakness of forced masculinity, Ted tells his friends that he will end up with Sam’s underwear by the end of the night. Ted then embarrasses Sam to the point of where she runs out the gym and cries in the hallway. Ted is then approached by Jake and tells Ted of his feelings for Sam. Ted agrees to help Sam and finds Sam in the auto shop. Bordwell also points out that “heterosexual romance (boy/girl, husband/wife), the other line involving another sphere-work, a mission or quest, other personal relationships. (Bordwell 19).

Ted is later asked to look over Jake's very drunk girlfriend, Carolyn. Ted uses her as a trophy and the spectator feels empathy for his pathetic attempts at being popular.

When the movie finally comes to a close, the spectator is left with no ambiguities. Jake is going after Sam and Ted is with Carolyn. In the film, after they realized they had sex last night and Ted was no longer a virgin, Carolyn realizes that there are still innocent boys left in this world and they both immediately fall in love and kiss as Jake pulls in and parks right behind them at the church. This break-up scene was put here to tie up all the loose ends and ambiguities between the plot and subplot of this film. Bordwell says that "the need to resolve the plot in that provides "poetic justice," becomes a structural constant, inserted with more or less motivation into its proper slot, the epilogue." (Bordwell 21) When Sam comes out the wedding and sees Jake waiting for her, they embrace and confess their feelings to each other and wave goodbye to their parents as Sam drives away with senior Jake Ryan.

In both of these theorists work, they highlight voyeurism and how men, taking on the role of the "active looker", have their gaze prioritized, which often focuses on the object of desire -women. A woman is a passive looker whose point of view is censored and controlled by her socially disciplined role of subservience until proven to be of greater use (such as motherhood)

Doane's literature elaborates even further by delving into the fluidity of gender expression women experience. She compares to the ease with which women can wear masculine clothing without repercussions, being described as "more bisexual than the man". If men perform in what is socially considered to be a feminine matter, it's considered comedic. This power balance is because it can easily be imagined that a woman would want to assume the power and authority of a male role, however there is nothing to gain for a man to assume a female role. It is

nearly impossible for women to be the subject of the gaze because their very purpose in society is to serve men as best they can.

Language is another important aspect Mulvey focuses on, as she considers it to be a form of regulations governing how our society communicates and that it is its very form that makes addressing patriarchy complicated. Doane also discusses the use of femininity as a mask for performance - a masquerade. She differentiates between this and "Transvestitism", stating "Masquerade is not as recuperable as transvestite precisely because it constitutes an acknowledgement that it is femininity itself which is constructed as a mask- as the decorative layer which conceals a non-identity" (138).

There are paradoxical aspects of the male gaze as well. Mulvey explains how men are socialized to expect a female partner who is "classy", quiet, subservient, yet desire an overtly sexual look that caters to their desires (consider strip teases, pornography, or the overall "to-be-looked-at-ness" role women play on the screen). This creates a scopophilia that is based in finding pleasure in looking at erotic objects. Furthermore, there is a dichotomy in cinematic pleasure. On the one hand, we gain pleasure in watching a character without them knowing or acknowledging our spectatorship. However we also gain pleasure from identifying with the displayed character as our most ideal selves. Mulvey describes this as the "gendered division of labor", which means that women are assigned the job of being the object of desire for the benefit of scopophilic pleasure and the man is the gaze for which this objectification is catered to.

Mulvey's work dives into the concept of narcissism and how, because the female image on screen is created for the male gaze, female characters participate in the objectification of each other's body's by affirming an "ideal beauty" to strive for, which their sole purpose is to attain

this image for themselves. An example of this is when Sam and her friend see Caroline in the showers. The shot cuts to locker room showers and a “boing” sound and we see the lighting illuminate the room in bright, almost “heavenly” lights with a medium shot of Caroline showering, her breasts revealed to evoke shock from the audience. Sam and her friend stare in admiration, finally Sam sighs and states that she’s going to kill herself because she Caroline is going to the Dance with Jake Ryan and she doesn’t have a body like Caroline. The implied conclusion she comes to is that she isn’t worthy of Jake’s attention because she doesn’t have a body she desires. It is because the other female characters confirm this and the overtly sexual yet humorous cinematography of the scene that the audience accepts this masquerade of femininity and gender roles.

When looking back at our film *16 Candles* as we compare it to the works of Mulvey and Doane, it’s important to focus not only on what the characters physically do but their prospects and goals within the film. When looking at the main character of the film Sam (a teenage girl), her goals are to be recognized (to go even further be beloved and popular) by her peers and family and to claim the attention and pursue a relationship with a popular boy, Jake Ryan. The interesting part of Sam’s longing to be recognized and known by all, especially Jake, is her lack of speech and communication throughout the film. Instead, the camera often captures Sam’s gazing upon Jake as Jake also gazes upon her, leaving her to not further the plot of the movie until Ted “the Geek” is introduced, and acts as a guardian angel type that communicates and furthers the plot for her. Even with Sam being the main character, her lack of communication with Jake, her family and friends and her goal to solely “be with” Jake by the end of the film and to receive the cliché kiss above her birthday cake, objectifies her and makes her character

construct weak. This, in turn, proves Mulvey's theory about the woman only being relative in relation to a man, specifically "the meaning of a woman is sexual difference, the absence of the penis is visually ascertainable... Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified." (Mulvey 64) To further this fact of Sam not only have a lack of speaking roles and overall narrative value, her value itself comes directly from the recognition of Jake at the end of the movie. It is when Jake invites her over is the first time we see Sam in a happy state compared to the rest of the film, expressing Mulvey's theory of the female significance only coming from the male.

To argue another woman's character development solely being valued through a man in this film besides Sam's, we can look at both Sam's sister Ginny and Jake's ex-girlfriend Caroline. Ginny is seen as the crowning achievement of Sam's family due to her upcoming marriage. Ginny from the beginning of the movie was instantly seen was more valued due to her marriage, so much so that Sam's birthday was forgotten in the process. Therefore, Ginny's character in the film only exists in relation to the wedding or her being married to her future husband, making Sam feel devalued since her own male exploits as a high schooler are not going as she anticipated. This relates to Mulvey's idea that "woman's desire is subjected to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound, she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it." (Mulvey 58) As for Caroline, she only existed in the narrative as Jake's girlfriend (specifically one that Jake was not fond of due to her controlling attitude which contrasts with Sam's servile attitude) and at the end of the film as Ted's love interest. Specifically for Caroline, when she is intoxicated and thrown into the Rolls-Royce that Ted is supposed to drive her home

in, she becomes a physical object to be gazed upon when Ted decides to drive to his friend's house and have them take a picture of the two of them in the back seat without her own consent.

Stemming from the lack of narrative and objectification of women, Doane touches upon the idea of "Men seldom make passes at girls with glasses", the opposing type of female character compared to the common, passive female characters. Due to the woman's repressed sexuality and the stereotype of a glasses wearer having a desire for knowledge and vision, the intellectual woman is seen as undesirable on screen (Doane 140). With this, the intellectual woman in turn poses a threat to the entire patriarchal system because she is an active looker instead of the one being looked upon, forces herself beyond her assigned position and into the other side of the spectrum (Doane 140). When taking Sam's character into account, she is not seen with physical glasses, but we can take Doane's idea into consideration when we compare Sam's appearance and personality to her peers. Her school outfit involves a modest top and skirt paired with a hat, covering up most of her body besides her arms that are seen always carrying books, crossing her arms in front of her body which adds to her closing herself off¹. Her insecure and quiet demeanor add to her closed off appearance and generally make her unnoticeable, forgotten, and ultimately undesirable. ²This can be contrasted with her outfit at the end of the movie, which is much brighter and places flowers in her hair, bringing attention to her face as opposed to the shielding hat. This outfit is also arguably more feminine, making her more appealing to suitors as opposed to her drab skirt and top. The wedding outfit itself can also make the audience compare Sam and Jake to Ginny and her husband. not only does she look like an

¹ (See picture in Appendix A)

² (See picture in Appendix B)

eligible bride, but when Jake whisks her away from the reception and takes her home with him, we can compare this to a husband and wife leaving on a honeymoon.

Besides her outfit choices, Sam's main way (and arguably the only way) of furthering the plot is how Jake noticed her in the first place. When filling out the student written quiz inquiring Sam about saucy topics about masturbation and if she's had intercourse, the note falls and is eventually retrieved by Jake. This is the first time Sam is vulnerable and open in the movie, even though the note is supposed to be anonymous, she writes down information that can not be spoken out loud but written down in a private closed manner. This fulfills the woman's role of being seen as a sexual object but not a verbal sexual being with desire. This can be contrasted by Ted's character, who is very upfront in multiple scenes with his feelings toward Sam, attempting to win her over in a multitude of situations and talk about sexual topics with her that Sam, in turn, rejects. For example, his speech and his body language compared to Sam's in the bus scene is much more open and assertive³, he put his arm behind and in front of Sam while she stays small and closed in, being forced to listen to his questions. Even with her yelling from him to move away, Ted labels her as "hostile" and states that "I'm a boy, you're a girl. Is there anything wrong with me trying to put some relationship between us?" Ultimately, this relates to both Mulvey and Doane's theories of male sexual expression versus female sexual repression.

16 Candles can be used in many ways to demonstrate feminist psychoanalysis not only by the ultimate goal of the majority of the female characters lacking a solid narrative, but how the only validation these women receive is from having a relationship with a man (Sam and Jake, Ginny and her husband, Caroline and Ted). It is the seeking of validation and the desire to be

³ *(See picture in Appendix C)

wanted by the opposite sex is what makes these women desire to be objects themselves, and to be held with pride by a man in order to feel loved. It is exactly this objectification that Mulvey and Doane surround their work around in order to convey the theory of a woman solely as an image and not a demanding, sexual being. So much so that their “castration” complex and needing to fill the void in turn makes them crave the wanting to be gazed upon, which is well illustrated in this film due to the many scenes of Sam longing to be acknowledged by Jake and seen as desirable woman even with her lack of sexual experience and identification as a virgin. It is within films like *16 Candles* that glorify the teenage female longing to be gazed upon and taken by a male that defines how young females should value themselves for their body image and , eventually, their child that they will bear.

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Appendices

Appendix A



Sam dressed in her school outfit (*16 Candles*, 1984)

Appendix B



Sam in her bridesmaid outfit (*16 Candles*, 1984)

Appendix C



Ted talking to Sam on the bus (*16 Candles*, 1984)

Essay Responsibilities

Narrative Analysis and Segmentation- Sapphire (1/3)

Reading Analysis and Prezi Design- Adia (1/3)

Readings compared to the film and Introduction/conclusion- Ashley (1/3)

MACS 361 FINAL PROJECT

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Female Narrative

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