Men Writing Women: Internalized Misogyny and the Objectification of Women in Media

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Master's Thesis

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Abstract

Depiction of women in popular media has always been a prevalent topic of discussion. Inadequate and unfavourable depictions of women have been widely seen as having negative consequences and being misogynistic. Often, these depictions are produced by men in media spaces. John Green's *Looking for Alaska* (2005), Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element* (1997) and *Anna* (2019), David Ayer's *Suicide Squad* (2016), and Yorgos Lanthimos' *Poor Thing* (2023) fall into the category of women written by men in literature and film. Women characters in the afore-mentioned selected works fall into several tropes and stereotypes that have been considered as having had a negative impact on the depiction of women in media. These stereotypes and tropes are: the "Manic Pixie Dream Girl," the "Pick-me Girl" the "born sexy yesterday" trope, and the *femme fatale.* The aim of this thesis is to explore these women characters in the works written by men and the ways in which they exploit the female characters in their stories, as well as to showcase what is behind the selected tropes and how they can negatively impact women.

Keywords: John Green, Luc Besson, misogyny, sexism, tropes, stereotypes, objectification

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Introduction

Women in media have generally been relegated to being the side-characters, love-interests or plot devices, rarely taking the center stage, and overshadowed by their male counterparts. In turn, this same media has influenced how women are perceived outside of it, bleeding into the real lives of women and their daily interactions with others. The great hero stories dating back to the ancient times have always been about men, with women as instigators of war or wives waiting for them to arrive home as in *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Female characters who are well-written and developed within the story appear to be somewhat of a rarity, calling for a phenomenon where their interactions with one another need to be tested in order to see if they are genuine. This test was created by a cartoonist named Alison Bechdel in 1985 as *The Rule*, and was later popularized and named after her (Light). In order to satisfy the Bechdel test, the piece of media must satisfy three things: it must include at least two women, they must have at least one conversation, and that conversation must be about something other than a man (Light). The test was inspired by the way women were only seen "in relation to men" (Light) and rarely as having an interest outside of them. While seemingly simple on the surface, there are many movies and books who do not pass this test, such as, according to the Bechdel test movie list: *Oppenheimer* (2023), *The Avengers* (2012), *Avatar* (2009), and The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–2003). Seeing that the likes of Christopher Nolan, Joss Whedon, James Cameron, and Peter Jackson could not pass this test even with all of their writing and directing experience, it stands to reason, then, that there are plenty other men in media that also struggle with writing women.

This thesis deals with several examples of women written by men and the tropes that they fall back on. The first is the novel by John Green *Looking for Alaska* (2005), which deals with the story of Miles Halter's coming of age story in which he moves schools and meets Alaska. Alaska is a quirky yet sad individual who ends up dying, setting Miles in a quest to find out what actually happened to her and if it was just an accident. The second example is that of Harley Quinn, a popular character in her 2016 rendition, directed by David Ayer. The movie *Suicide Squad* (2016) deals with a group of misfits and prisoners who set out to complete a mission for the government despite it being extremely dangerous. Within the parameters of the plot, Harley Quinn appears as one of the main characters though her depiction is sexualized and her development tied to her relationship with one of the movie's villains, the Joker. Following are two of Luc Besson's movies, *The Fifth Element* (1997) and *Anna* (2019). The first movie is

a science fiction story with the overarching plot of the destruction of the world, which the main character Korben Dallas is trying to prevent. Along with Dallas, the movie's main female character is Leeloo, an enigmatic and freshly created being new to the world who is predestined to save it. Together, they fight their way out of all kinds of trouble and end up finding love. The second of Luc Besson's movies, *Anna,* deals with the titular character who is a previously-abandoned and impoverished Russian girl that trains to be a spy. While the plot revolves around her and her actions, she seems to have very little agency over her own actions as she fights for her freedom from the KGB and the CIA. The last example is Yorgos Lanthimos' *Poor Things* (2023), a narrative about a *Frankenstein*-esque girl called Bella Baxter who is learning to be human. Bella starts the story with the mind of an infant and throughout the movie's two hour run, she slowly gains agency and coherence, realizing that the world is a dangerous and corrupt place in which she has to fight for her agency and her rights. On the surface, all of these seem to be stories about the empowerment of women or about love, however, these stories also represent tropes and stereotypes seen as harmful or demeaning. Namely, Alaska is a depiction of the "Manic Pixie Dream Girl" trope, Harley Quinn is a perpetuation of "Pick-me girl" culture, Leeloo and Bella are depictions of the "born sexy yesterday" trope and Anna is a modern rendition of the classic *femme fatale.* The characters and tropes listed fit into the aim of this thesis, which is to explore the ways in which men represent women in media, and the ways in which they exploit their presence in the plot. Additionally, the thesis also looks at why these stereotypes and tropes are harmful and whether/how these depictions are based in misogyny.

The first chapter provides a theoretical framework through which these stories will be analyzed. It offers definition to terms such as the "male gaze," objectification of women and internalized misogyny, and sexism. It deals with the perception of women, the representation of women, and the misogyny they face. Explaining the theoretical backings to the later analysis, the opening chapter looks into Laura Mulvey's paper on visual pleasure and Bearman, Korobov and Thorne's research on internalized sexism among others.

The second chapter introduces the concept of standing out and being different from the crowd, depicting the perceived importance of being unique especially when it concerns women and how they see themselves. This chapter familiarizes the reader with the concept "not like the other girls" and how it manifests itself in online spaces but also in media. This chapter is divided into subchapters. The first deals with the "Manic Pixie Dream Girl" trope seen in John Green's novel *Looking for Alaska* and briefly goes over some of the most famous examples of the trope while also explaining why this depiction is a negative and shallow portrayal. The

following subchapter deals with the “Pick-me girl” stereotype and its depiction found in the character of Harley Quinn, comparing the harmful mindset of girls who put other women down to David Ayer’s 2016 portrayal of the character. The third subchapter explains the “born sexy yesterday” trope, dealing with popular examples and the apparent nature behind it. This subchapter’s trope is exemplified by two cases, Leeloo from *The Fifth Element* (1997) and Bella Baxter from *Poor Things* (2023). Each example is analyzed through the lens of the plot they find themselves in. In Leeloo’s case, it is Besson’s own personal preferences and when it comes to Bella the idea of virginity and purity. Lastly, the fourth subchapter deals with the *femme fatale* trope, providing a brief overview and history of the trope, and with Besson’s 2019 movie *Anna,* using her as an example of taking an attractive actress and objectifying her for the sake of the viewer.

1. The Three Pillars of Oppression: the Male Gaze, Objectification of Women, and Internalized Misogyny

Being a woman often means being confronted with a myriad of concepts that frame their existence in everyday society: “Ideas about masculinity and femininity are to be found in all areas of societal relations; they are part of the actions which go to make up the patriarchal structures” (Walby 90). Cultural notions of what is considered masculine and feminine permeate every aspect of a woman’s life, including her view of herself and how she is presented in the media by others. Walby defines these two concepts through the lens of the socialization theory as follows: “Masculinity entails assertiveness, being active, lively, and quick to take the initiative,” and “[f]emininity entails cooperativeness, passivity, gentleness and emotionality” (91). From her definition, it is obvious that these two concepts are opposite in most ways and that the adjectives associated with the feminine are not as “admirable” or positive as the ones associated with masculinity. Walby talks about studies on socialization of children that further these ideas, but also about how these ideas about the differences between the genders occur on television as well: “Advertising usually shows women as either sexually glamorous or as wives and mothers, while men occupy positions of power” (92). Along with advertisements, there are also Hollywood movies that perpetuate this idea of a woman being subservient to the man, or breaking norms only to end up subjugated in the end (Walby 92). Subjected to this rigid dichotomy of male versus female, the woman finds herself faced with the consequences of being considered as passive.

Our lives have always been occupied by books, television ads, magazines, and movies with dames in peril. Often, this media has promoted a rigid idea of femininity, which has left an impact on all those who have viewed it. As Carroll puts it when discussing the image of women in film: “The investigation of the image of women in film begins with the rather commonsensical notion that the recurring images of women in popular media may have some influence on how people think of women in real life” (355). She introduces the concept of a “paradigm scenario” that cause the viewer to relate what they see with some aspect of their life, basing their perception of the viewed scene on their emotions relating to their personal experiences (356). Taking these paradigms into consideration, it is then not out of the question to say that society often projects opinions and feelings onto inaccurate or unrealistic portrayals of women. As such, these paradigms present a “potential source or resource for sexist behavior” (Carroll 357). This potential for sexism and misrepresentation is taken further when negative portrayals of women in media create these responses in the viewer rather than allowing them to

relate what they are seeing to their own experiences (Carroll 357). The cause of these sexist views and negative paradigms is helped along by the existence of the "male gaze," which helps in objectifying women through a male-dominated lens. The consequence of such prevalent and pervasive male-centered point of view is misogyny. In addition to the widespread general negative views on the feminine, women often suffer under the weight of internalized misogyny as well.

1.1 The Male Gaze and the Objectified Woman

In their discussion of contemporary cinema, Mulvey and Beugnet touch on the topic of visual pleasure: "Feminist film theory has demonstrated how the objectifying power of the camera gaze was, in mainstream cinema, typically put in the service of a male point of view, taking the female figure as its object of investigation and consumption" (*Film, Corporeality, Transgressive Cinema* 195). In addition, in her paper on visual pleasure and narrative cinema, Mulvey employs psychoanalysis in order to introduce the viewer to the dangers of the male gaze and the political background that hides behind it. In this essay, Mulvey notes that the patriarchal society was the one to shape and structure the film form, calls it "phallocentric" and dependent on the castration of women: "the function of woman in forming the patriarchal unconscious is two-fold, she first symbolizes the castration threat by her real absence of a penis and second thereby raises her child into the symbolic" (*Visual Pleasure* 57-58). This image of the woman as either the one lacking a penis or being the one to bring it into existence through a child translates into the woman as being the man's "other" (Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure* 58). Mulvey further asserts that visual pleasure is one of the key motifs in cinema and that it had been twisted over the years: "Unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language dominant patriarchal order . . . [causing] the interweaving of that erotic pleasure in film, its meaning, and in particular the central place of the image of the woman" (*Visual Pleasure* 59).

The first problem that Mulvey tackles is the media's fascination with the human form: "There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at" (*Visual Pleasure* 60). Mulvey paraphrases some of Freud's ideas, such as the voyeuristic nature of subjecting someone or something to the curious gaze of the spectator (*Visual Pleasure* 60). Furthermore, she likens being a viewer in the auditorium to being a voyeuristic observer due to the indifference of a movie to the presence of the audience: "Moreover, the extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium (which

also isolates the spectators from one another) and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation" (Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure* 61). When writing about this exhibitionism, Mulvey uses the term "projection of the repressed desire on to the performer" (*Visual Pleasure* 61), which can be connected to the aforementioned paradigm scenarios that essentially function on the same principle.

Continuing with the theme of the gaze, Mulvey discusses active and passive participants in the action of observing. She calls men the "bearer of the look" and delves into the dynamics between them and women who are labeled as "the image": "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy[1] on to the female figure which is styled accordingly" (Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure* 62). Put in the role of the passive participant in the act of observation, the woman is then coded in visual media to represent something alluring: "Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Bubsy Berkely, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire" (Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure* 62). While there for the viewer's visual pleasure, the woman in the narrative rarely serves much of a purpose in the plot itself: "her presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure* 62). The objectified woman, as Mulvey states, appears to function on two levels: "as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium" (*Visual Pleasure* 62). Due to the woman being the one objectified and the nature of the structure that revolves around the man, Mulvey points out that the man cannot be the one to "bear the burden of sexual objectification" because he is the one that "controls the film phantasy" (*Visual Pleasure* 63). One of the reasons behind this inability to be perceived as sexualized lies in the fact that the main male character is supposed to be a stand-in for the viewer. Instead of the underdeveloped female character, the male lead "demands" more: "In contrast to the woman as icon, the active male figure (the ego ideal of the identification process) demands a three-dimensional space" (Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure* 63). The use of the adjective "three-dimensional" alone reveals the truth about the female icon; she is just that, something to be looked at and displayed without delving into her character or psyche. Years after the publication of the *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,* many of these ideas

[1] Taking into account that Mulvey is pulling from Freud's psychoanalysis as a source, the word "phantasy" then holds the alternate meaning rather than the one of "fantasy" which is, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary: "the power or process of creating especially unrealistic or improbable mental images in response to psychological need."

still seem to hold true in Mulvey's opinion: "And I would still hold on to this critique: that images of women circulate at the heart of the society of the spectacle as objects of consumption, not only in cinema but also in other media, performance etc." (*Film, Corporeality, Transgressive Cinema* 196).

1.2 Misogyny and Internalized Misogyny

One of the aforementioned problems that women deal with is misogyny, therefore there exists a need to first define the concept before delving further into its shapes. Merriam-Webster defines misogyny as "hatred of, aversion to, or prejudice against women" and lists the etymology of the word as coming from the Greek roots of *misein* ("to hate") and *gynē* ("woman")." In her paper "The Philosophical Roots of Western Misogyny," Christia Mercer examines the works of ancient philosophers and medical practitioners in order to explain some of their views why the woman's body is imperfect or malfunctioning (185). She introduces the concept of "hierarchical difference," which she defines as "the view that female bodies are imperfect compared to male bodies from which it is supposed to follow that women are morally inferior to men" (Mercer 185). She asserts that the theory of difference is the reason why, in the past, it was easy to justify the mistreatment of women: "hierarchical difference (HD) made it easy to justify (1) that women needed to be treated differently than men and (2) that the health and well-being of society—and the women and men within it—depended on the correct form of differential treatment" (Mercer 185). Mercer's use of the works written by Plato, Aristotle, the Hippocratic medical theorists, and Galen shows that misogyny could have, and has, found its roots in the writings of the past. For example, when speaking about the Hippocratic corpus, she lists their theory of fluids as one of the "scoff-worthy" theories that had subsequently influenced how women were treated in society. Mercer writers: "These first gynecologists saw the flourishing of every single woman as bound up with her reproductive organs and related fluids, so that her own health and the well- being of her society depended on subjugating herself to procreation" (191). Due to the theory propagating that a woman's health is tied to her reproductive organs, it was easy to conform women to the patriarchal way of thinking: "By such means, the Hippocratic authors placed women in bondage to their procreative powers and so (given cultural commitments to heterosexual marriage) to their husbands, initiating a longstanding strategy in western thought of using women's bodies as a means to justify differential treatment" (191). Mercer, in her conclusion, also suggests that it would be just as

easy to propose a different set of theories and opinions on the woman's body had it not been subjected to the men's way of thinking for so long:

> Why shouldn't the production of children be considered the best possible way to support human flourishing? Given the precarity of life in the ancient world, might that not have seemed obvious? Why shouldn't menses be celebrated as a sign of fertility and its related symptoms a kind of sacrifice for the good? (Mercer 204).

These questions bring to attention that self-affirmative words like these are still scarce in the world. That women still go about their lives considering their menses a curse (Mercer 204) and are led to believe that the problem is within them.

Faced with such scathing views and led to believe that they are lesser than men and hated by men, women often tend to redirect that hate onto themselves. To internalize something, according to the Merriam-Webster, means to "incorporate (values, patterns of culture, etc.) within the self as conscious or subconscious guiding principles through learning or socialization." By interacting with views such as those of the ancient philosophers, but also men who echo their sentiments, women seemingly tend to take on their thoughts and opinions. In their paper on internalized misogyny, Syzmanski et al. write: "The personal is political posits that sexism is likely to contribute to women's mental health problems directly through experiences of sexist events and through the internalization of negative and limiting messages about being a woman" (101). Before delving into internalized misogyny, it is pertinent to look at the bigger picture once again and that is: internalized sexism.

In their paper on internalized sexism, Bearman, Korobov and Thorne, beginning with the definition of sexism, discuss some of the consequences of day-to-day sexism that women deal with:

> For instance, women and girls may learn to have low expectations of their capabilities, may be subtly channeled by teachers or parents into gender normative fields and away from traditionally male-dominated roles, may lack female role models in professions of interest, may be treated as if they need to be taken care of, may paradoxically be expected to be caretakers, to serve men, and put the needs of others before their own, may be criticized or ostracized for being assertive, visible, or outspoken, may find their opinions discounted, may be disliked as leaders unless they fit female stereotypes by

> acting nurturing, may be valued and appreciated primarily for their looks, bodies, or sexualities... (11)

Further, they state that this type of sexism is often unintentional due to it being so deeply rooted in society that neither the target nor the aggressor are aware of it happening (Bearman et al. 11). Furthermore, their definition of internalized sexism is then: "women's incorporation of sexist practices, and to the circulation of those practices among women, even in the absence of men" (Bearman et al. 11). Bearman et al. also explore a situation in which a conversation is being held with no men present, and yet there is sexist speech used (12). Words such as "chick" and "bitch" find themselves in the said conversation without any male-lead provocation: "The existence of sexist talk amongst women when no men are present poses important questions about the nature of sexism. Why would women say and do to one another the hurtful things that men say and do to them? . . .Why do women hurt themselves and each other in seemingly sexist ways?" (Bearman et al. 12-13).

Bearman et al. also write about internalized oppression and how women experience the power difference between them and men, quoting Jackins and the belief that wherever there is difference between people, group divide will be justified as will be oppression (13). They define internalized oppression as consisting of "oppressive practices that continue to make the rounds even when members of the oppressor group are not present," giving an example of girls growing up hearing harmful messages that then they begin to believe about themselves (Bearman et al. 13). Internal sexism, despite not only being exacted upon women by women themselves, does help with maintaining sexism in place, using a "system of social expectations and pressures enacted between women" (Bearman et al. 14).

In media but in their everyday lives as well, women perform these practices of internalized sexism often without even being aware, as stated earlier. Some of these practices are strongly linked to the way they speak about, but also to each other, and the way they are spoken about by men. Bearman et al. list the most common occurrences of internalized sexist speech patterns and practices, one of them being "[f]eelings of powerlessness and incompetence" (15). This particular practice relates to strong women often being less represented or validated specifically in the sciences, giving girls "fewer female role models," which then leads to lowered expectations and opinions on their abilities (Bearman et al. 15). Another common practice is "competition between women" (Bearman et al. 16) that is seen as "competition for limited resources, such as favored social positions, desired male partners,

regard, worth and other forms of social capital" (Goodwin and Underwood qtd. in Bearman et al. 16). Bearman et al. also note that this practice is often perpetuated through "malicious gossip, social exclusion, comparisons, and women putting one another down" (16). The objectification of women is another ever-present practice that seems to follow women on the daily basis:

> Due to the omnipresence of media images of women, and through the direct gazes of men, women are immersed in social environments in which they and other women are regularly looked at, evaluated on the basis of their appearance, and treated as if their bodies and looks represent something essential about their personhood. (Bearman et al. 16)

The last practice Bearman et al. write about is "invalidation and derogation" through language: "Language can help to maintain the power imbalance between groups by keeping the targets of oppression feeling bad about themselves and devaluing their experiences of the world" (17). In their words, derogatory language helps create a stigma that the victim then internalizes and perpetuates, causing the women to then invalidate their thoughts, opinions and feelings as a result (Bearman et al.17).

These practices and perpetuations of internalized sexism can result in "diminishing women's belief in their ability to do or get what they desire" (Bearman et al. 26), but they can also result in that very same hatred of women being directed inwards by the women themselves. Calling back to the topic of misogyny, Szymanski et al. make a distinction between this hatred and sexism in general: "Results indicated that internalized misogyny was related to, but conceptually distinct from self-objectification and passive acceptance" (101). Taking into consideration what has been written so far on the topic of internalized feelings, and specifically internalized sexism, it is safe to conclude that internalized misogyny is then this: hatred of the characteristics associated with the performance of the female gender by women directed towards other women or inwards. Things such as liking the color pink, wearing make-up or dressing feminine become demonized because they are connected to the "lesser" gender and deemed unacceptable, and those women who wish to employ these gender performing practices tend to be judged harshly for it.

2. The Burden of Being Different

Individualism is a desirable trait seen as a virtue. It comes with the stipulations that a person is self-reliant, dependent only on their own morals and sense of judgment. It also implies a sort of "otherness" that makes the person stand out from the masses as opposed to conforming to the crowd, which is seen as objectionable. Conformity often means succumbing to peer pressure, it can lead to the bystander effect, it can limit one's perspective and it can lead a person to commit acts they would not otherwise do just because there is safety in numbers (Cherry). Taking into account that differentiating oneself from everyone else is seen as a positive thing, it then follows that those who are unique are interesting while those who are not, are boring. Many tropes in literature and media rely on this in order for their plots to identify with; take, for example, the trope of the "chosen one." Franchises such as *Harry Potter* or *Star Wars* rest on the idea that there is a singular individual who is the main character and that their "otherness" is the reason why he will defeat the antagonist in the end. The "chosen one" trope promotes the idea of being unique: "This trope plays into people's needs and desires to feel special. We like reading or watching a character who has been annoyed out of the ordinary, or preordained to do something great" (Hellerman). While the idea of being original and unique seem to be something to strive for, it can often lead to undesirable side-effects or consequences such as the occurrence of misogyny when it concerns young girls and women. This idea can be exploited in order to further objectify and ostracize women. Already having a tendency to put one another down in the name of competition, and adding onto that the idea that they need to be starkly different from one another to be liked, women find themselves in situations where this idea of individuality perpetuates the sexism they face. The need to be different infects the woman's existence, their work life, their home life, and their image of self. Namely, when it comes to women vying for male attention, something that has been dubbed the "not like the other girls" phenomenon occurs, bringing with it several offshoots both in literature and media at large.

Related closely to internalized misogyny mentioned above, the term "Not like the other girls" or *NLOG* for short, is not a new occurrence. In her video on the topic, Jordan Theresa catalogues the occurrence of this particular type of differentiation on social media through the years, starting with 2010. Theresa defines the *NLOG* as a girl who believes she is different from the others due to the fact that she: does not go to parties, likes reading books, wears only black or masculine clothing, listens to music considered old by contemporary standards and does not wear any makeup (00:03:59–00:04:27). Theresa starts off the video by showing several photos

that could be found circulating *X* (formerly *Twitter*) around the year of 2010. In these images, there is a theme of two or more women put into opposition where one is concerned with things such as romance, makeup, clothing, gossip, pop music, and the other states that she is the opposite to that; she instead likes books, comics, eating good food, anime, cheap clothing (00:04:50–00:06:20). Following this, Theresa then defines who this "other girl" is, saying: "The other girl typically fits modern beauty standards. In particular, these beauty standards were very much the beauty standards of the early 2000's… Thin, tanned, long blonde hair, lots of makeup . . . short skirts, high heels, low crop tops . . . typical dumb blonde, and are promiscuous" (00:05:34–00:05:52). The other girl is the stereotype based on what was modern and popular at the time, and the way that girls were socialized. Theresa also mentions this socialization, referring to gendered items such as clothes, toys and colors as being forced upon children growing up (00:06:43–00:07:02). As Walby states: "Socialization proceeds with a set of rewards and punishments, ranging from change in tone of voice to physical chastisement" (91) for breaking these unspoken rules of socialization, which then leads to later rebellion. Theresa states that women push these stereotypically feminine things away due to hatred (00:07:22), which could then be assumed is this act of rebellion against what is considered the norm. This hatred, claims Theresa, then leads to the association of "girly things" being bad and undesirable. In addition, Theresa states that movies have also contributed to the negative portrayal of the other girl, listing movies such as *She's All That* (1999) and *Ten Things I Hate About You* (1999) as the examples of films where the main antagonist (or bully) is the popular, well-dressed girl (00:08:00–00:08:13). Theresa points out that these types of narratives often revolve around the male gaze and the main love interest, literally uttering the words "you're not like the other girls and that's why I like you" (00:08:00–00:08:50). Seeing this type of representation in popular media often leads to biases and, mentioning again Carroll's "paradigm scenarios," to women aligning themselves with the protagonist who is not like the one portrayed by the movie as "bad." Theresa also mentions insecurity as being a theme in these "not like the other girls" posts (00:10:37–00:10:39), but that a lot of them do not inherently put other women down (00:06:00–00:06:22). However, Theresa does list two statements that display internalized misogyny and biases against the "other girls." The first being: "I have no idea how you girls wear so much makeup, I never wear makeup, I prefer being natural" (00:22:48), implying that wearing makeup is not natural and that it is said in order to impress men (00:23:17). The second being: "I prefer hanging out with guys, girls are too much drama" (00:25:24), in which the woman saying it is distancing herself from other women due to the perceived stereotype of women being prone to gossip.

While the *NLOG* phenomenon itself is not outwardly misogynistic, there are tropes that heed from it perpetuating sexist ideas and harmful stereotypes. The aforementioned archetypes and tropes that are offshoots of the *NLOG* are: The "Manic Pixie Dream Girl" or the *MPDG* for short, the "Pick-me" girl, the trope "Born Sexy Yesterday," and the *femme fatale.* The themes of the male gaze, female objectification, and internalized misogyny are deeply rooted in these tropes and can be found in everyday media. Each of these tropes is represented in one form or another, and behind most are male writers who seek to take advantage of the need to be different and to be liked.

2.1. Alaska Young, the Manic Pixie Dream Girl

The term "Manic Pixie Dream Girl" was first coined by film critic Nathan Rabin in his essay about the movie *Elizabethtown* titled "The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: *Elizabethtown*" in 2007. In the year 2014, Rabin writes an article called "I'm Sorry for Coining the Phrase 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl'" in which he then describes his thought process behind the term and about it becoming popular. According to Rabin, the *MPDG* is a "fantasy figure who 'exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures'." He calls the *MPDG* an archetype, writing: "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." He closely relates the *MPDG* to the male protagonist and his own place in the movie.

In her video on the topic of the *MPDG* trope, Ana Isabel discusses the "death" of the trope and how it is presented in media. She describes these characters as being quirky and eccentric, as "having it all together" despite also having "reckless tendencies," and as having "unconventional philosophies on life" (00:01:42–00:02:01). Isabel also mentions that the goal of this character is to "[t]each the main character, and by extension the audiences, how to live life to the fullest" (00:02:03–00:02:10). She calls them the "romantic ideal," stating that they are "flawless and intelligent, and full of inspiration" (00:02:10–00:02:17). Characters such as these tend to be paired with a duller male companion, someone who is cold and stoic and lacks the exuberant nature that the *MPDG* has. A video on the trope by *The Take* lists some famous examples of the character: Sam from *Garden State* (2004) portrayed by Natalie Portman, Clementine from the movie *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) played by Kate

Winslet, Summer played by Zoe Deschanel from *500 Days of Summer* (2009), and Ramona Flowers portrayed by Mary Elizabeth Winstead in *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (2010).

Another example of this archetype is Alaska from John Green's award-winning novel *Looking for Alaska*. While *The Take* video points out that Green is against ascribing this label to female characters (00:06:08–00:06:11), there is a case to be made for him perpetuating this trope. The story focuses on Miles Halter, a high-school junior who moves from Florida to Alabama in order to attend the Culver Creek boarding school. The novel is written from the first person point of view, the story being told from Miles' perspective. It is split into two parts: before and after, with each chapter referring to a certain day before or after the incident such as: "Eighty-four Days Before" (Green 83) or "Fourteen Days After" (Green 198). The "before" and "after" referring to the death of Alaska Young (Green 167). Miles first meets Alaska while with his roommate and new friend Chip who prefers going by the name "the Colonel" and who awards Miles the nickname "Pudge" (Green 21). Immediately, Miles notes that Alaska is attractive: "I barely heard him because the hottest girl in all of human history was standing before me in cutoff jeans and a peach tank top" (Green 22). He observes her as she is retelling a humorous story that happened to her over the summer, captivated by the way that she speaks and looks: "I stared, stunned partly by the force of the voice emanating from the petite (but God, curvy) girl and partly by the gigantic stacks of books that lined her walls (Green 22). Alaska, showing her spontaneity, pulls Miles' baggy shorts down, embarrassing him in the process (Green 23). Happening during their first meeting, this incident sets a precedence for how Alaska will act and be described throughout the novel. During their second meeting, Miles takes the time to observe her more, noting her appearance again: "She had the kind of eyes that predisposed you to supporting her every endeavor. And not just beautiful, but hot, too, with her breasts straining against her tight tank top, her curved legs swinging back and forth beneath the swing, flip-flops dangling from her electric-blue-painted toes" (Green 27). The first sentence in particular shows Miles ascribing attributes to Alaska within only a couple of hours of knowing her, based solely on the first impression and her looks. Alaska is also described as "moody" (Green 39), coming into Miles' room to wake him up with loud yelling and then leaving abruptly as if it never happened (Green 44 -45). Miles calls her unpredictable, unsure what to make of her behavior: "I didn't know whether to trust Alaska, and I'd certainly had enough of her unpredictability—cold one day, sweet the next; irresistibly flirty one moment, resistibly obnoxious the next. I preferred the Colonel: At least when he was cranky, he had a *reason*" (Green 93). She is shown exhibiting self-destructive tendencies such as smoking or drinking

excessively, and driving recklessly (Green 65). At one point, she tells Miles: "Y'all smoke to enjoy it. I smoke to die" (Green 57). Alaska takes Miles around the other students' rooms, breaking and entering despite it being against law (Green 105-08). She cheats on her boyfriend, kissing Miles (Green 158), and eventually she gets into a drunk driving accident, causing her own death (Green 169).

In comparison, Miles is seen as passive and introverted, stating that he was a "regular shit" (Green 21) in his old high-school. Miles even calls himself a "drizzle" to Alaska's "hurricane" (Green 109). Meeting Alaska had seemingly helped Miles, but he ends up idealizing her instead of trying to know her in depth. Miles claims to love her but Alaska is adamant that he does not know her:

> "Okay," I told her. "It's okay." I didn't even know what she was talking about anymore. One vague notion after another. "Don't you know who you love, Pudge? You love the girl who makes you laugh and shows you porn and drinks wine with you. You don't love the crazy, sullen bitch." (Green 117-18)

He clings on to the version of her that he has constructed in his head, motivated by his grief to move forward. He feels the loss keenly, and while the Colonel screams in sorrow (Green 169), Miles denies her death, stating that she is pulling a prank on them (Green 169). Miles cannot let go of her, driven instead to seek out the truth behind her accident, which the part of the book titled "after" is about. Miles states: "I thought: *That is the fear: I have lost something important, and I cannot find it, and I need it*" (Green 173), equating Alaska to being that "something important" and feeling entitled to his grief over those of their classmates (Green 190). In the end, Miles did not know her and he never will due to her tragic passing (Green 252), asking instead: "Did I help you toward a fate you didn't want, Alaska, or did I just assist in your willful self-destruction?" (Green 252).

Is Alaska a *MPDG*? In short, yes. She is a purposeful mystery, her origins fleshed out and told in half-drunk stories (Green 145) and spontaneous rants. She lived her life impulsively due to her grief and her disappointment in society, the self-destructive nature of the *MPDG* coloring her every action. Was the point of the story to make her a Manic Pixie Dream Girl? No. John Green had set out to write a coming of age story about a boy who is put into a new situation and is experiencing the joys of a high-school crush for the first time. So, while Alaska perpetuates the trope, the thought behind her is not the same vapid one as behind the character of Claire in *Elizabethtown*. Had Alaska been described through the perspective of any other

character rather than a boy who was infatuated with her, it is possible that she would have outgrown the title. However, as Miles is the narrator, the reader sees Alaska through his eyes and through what she displays. Miles himself states: “She didn’t leave me enough to discover her, but she left me enough to rediscover the Great Perhaps” (Green 252), making her death a part of his own journey of self-discovery and betterment. While there is hidden depth to her character, the fact that the reader rarely sees is renders her shallow. She is a mishandled character used as a prop, a tragic story turned into a cautionary tale against drinking and driving.

In her article “The Manic Pixie Dream Girl Still Feeds on Insecurity,” Ashley Wu writes about another John Green’s characters, Margo from *Paper Towns.* Wu recalls how being compared to Margo had made her feel special, stating:

> it completely altered the way I saw myself. Margo wasn’t like other girls — she was cooler. She went on quirky adventures, was weirdly seductive for a teenager and spit out aphorisms like it was nothing. She seemed to be complex and enigmatic, though she didn’t actually harbor any complexities.

Wu calls Margo a “plot device” due to the fact that she is in the story only to help the protagonist learn how to have fun before disappearing from his life: “To the men in *Paper Towns*, Margo’s disappearance is as crucial to her appeal as any aspect of her personality — it protects them from the intricacies of actually getting to know her.” Much like with Alaska, Wu points out that the character of Margo is idealized without her problems being taken seriously or considered as anything more than one of her quirks: “Furthermore, the manic pixie dream girl is intrinsically tied to the romanticization of female mental illness. Her attractive spontaneity goes hand-in-hand with depressive episodes that are designed to be easily solved with love.”

Condensing a woman’s appearance in a story down to an oblique idea is demeaning. Being shown so often in media that it became integral to many people’s upbringings, the MPDG trope has created an unrealistic image in some people’s minds. Laurie Penny thus asserts in *The New Statesman*: “Men grow up expecting to be the hero of their own story. Women grow up expecting to be the supporting actress in somebody else’s.” She recounts her own experiences with the trope, explaining why it influenced the way in which she tailored her own life to fit the trope: “Women behave in ways that they find sanctioned in stories written by men who know better, and men and women seek out friends and partners who remind them of a girl they met in a book one day when they were young and longing.” Penny also points out that the one consistent thing about the *MPDG* trope is that the story is never told from her perspective:

"She's never a point-of-view character, and she isn't understood from the inside. She's one of those female tropes who is permitted precisely no interiority. Instead of a personality, she has eccentricities, a vaguely-offbeat favorite band, a funky fringe." This sort of shallow, misinterpreted depiction of traits that women outside of fiction have often leads to people viewing women in a superficial and biased way. Not only is the trope misogynistic, but as Rabin himself states, it is often misused: "I remember thinking, even back then, that a whole list of Manic Pixie Dream Girls might be stretching the conceit too far." Rabin closes out his article with an apology, stating that he "calls for the death" of the *MPDG* trope: "Let's all try to write better, more nuanced and multidimensional female characters: women with rich inner lives and complicated emotions and total autonomy, who might strum ukuleles or dance in the rain even when there are no men around to marvel at their free-spiritedness."

2.2. "Pick-me, Choose-me" – the Curious Case of Harley Quinn

The World Wide Web is a metaphysical space that is daily occupied by millions of people. It connects people, it delivers readily available news and it continually entertains. Whether this constant availability of such large quantities of information is beneficial to those who use it or not, remains to be seen. However, the existence of such a place that is available to most people comes with its downsides as well. This web of information can have negative effects on those who use it. One such example is the concept of "doomscrolling" in which the individual, according to Merriam-Webster, has the "tendency to continue to surf or scroll through bad news, even though that news is saddening, disheartening, or depressing." While it was often used in the context of the global pandemic, the term is also used in a more general sense. Another such occurrence is the cyclical nature of trends on the Internet, namely the resurgence of the renewed interest in the "pick me" trend.

The name "pick-me girls" or simply "pick-mes" is, as described by Dictionary-dot-com, a slang word for "a woman who obsessively desires male approval and validation, often at the expense of other women. Despite the word 'girl' being used, the term pick-me girl is almost always used to describe an adult woman." Though very similar in nature to the "Manic Pixie Dream Girl," the "Pick me" differs due to the focus of the stereotype on outward misogyny and not just the internalized one. In her article for *Study Breaks*, Gaudenau claims that a "Pick Me Girl tries to distinguish herself from other women by subverting traditionally constructed femininity to impress and attract men" while, as previously stated, the MPDG is only a vessel

for the male protagonist's wishes and hopes. In her article, Gaudenau also explains how this type of mindset can be harmful to the girl in question as much as to other women due to promoting unhealthy dynamics and views.

Not only do they promote submission to men, but they also reject the need for feminism – precisely because they do not believe in gender equality. Some of the "Pick me" staples are as follows: "prides herself as different from other women, not overly needy or feminine, constantly seeks validation from others (particularly men), wants to be known as a cool girl who can hang with the guys, is low-maintenance, easy-going or chill, and downplays her achievements and interests" (Chan). In addition, Tara Mooknee notes that unlike the wider stereotype of the NLOG, "Pick-mes" disparage other women on purpose and consider themselves morally and intellectually superior (00:02:30–00:03:25). She notes that they also focus on romantic relationships and interactions between men and women excessively. Mooknee also claims that they promote unrealistic standards, which they then project onto all other women, claiming superiority in that aspect as well. Mooknee describes them as "NLOGs on steroids" because they take the concept of "being different" or "not fitting in" and add onto it, making themselves out to be better than the "other girls" and asking to be chosen for it (00:03:45–00:05:15). Mooknee also points out that the name "Pick-me" was originally part of African-American vernacular that has been appropriated and popularized by the Internet at large and calls to attention that it had its first spike in popularity with a trend on *X* under the hashtag "tweetlikeapickme" (00:07:11–00:07:20). This humorous online movement making fun of the women who would be considered "Pick-mes" shows what the rest of the user base views them as. Mooknee shows the viewer several tweets that can be found under the hashtag, such as: "My ma likes football so I like football. His team is my team and I am HAPPY to be with him even though he's been unemployed for the last 2 years and isn't looking," or "I am not like girls in this generation, I take CARE of my man, I cook for him everyday, chew his food, spit into HIS mouth and tell him he's my king" (00:07:39–00:08:16). These exaggerated examples parody the lifestyle behind the "Pick me," but there is some truth in these jokes and as Mooknee states: "There are women that channel this energy unironically" (00:08:40). Mooknee then proceeds to list several categories of the "Pick-mes" and their subtle differences: "Wifeys" who support traditional views of what a relationship between a man and a woman should be (00:08:41–00:11:23), "Nice Girls" who upon facing rejection become bitter with themselves and the world (00:11:30–00:13:30), the "Pick-mes" who shame other women for wearing revealing outfits or

for being promiscuous (00:13:33–00:17:50), and the "antifeminists" who reject feminism and believe women have no need for things such as "the right to vote" (00:17:58–00:19:34).

That being said, there is also the issue of how harmful the label of "Pick-me" can be. In her article "She's not a Pick Me, You're a Misogynist," Aubrie Cole notes that the general public is obsessed with labeling women. She argues that "[b]oth men and women alike have begun using the term far more liberally and loosely than necessary, preying on insecure young women rather than self-important, misogynistic girls," pointing out that this term, which could have once been a well-intentioned label calling out women putting down other women, has now become a new, acceptable form of misogyny. As a result, Cole points out that there has also been a reactionary "anti-pick-me" movement that calls out this form of sexism, but has once again gone too far: "As a girl you must like the things historically associated with the basic woman, like pink and Taylor Swift, otherwise you are a pick-me girl. It's interesting that we've just roundabout-ly created another way to put women in a box from a term that was originally coined to call out internalized misogyny." This new wave brings problems of its own into the discourse and as Sara Youngblood Gregory emphasizes: "what started as an earnest critique of power, gender, and identity quickly became a catch-all for any woman or girl deemed too annoying, too attractive, or too friendly." She brings to the forefront this new "meta" of the anti-Pick-me girl, writing: "a girl who insists she is definitely not like other Pick Mes, but still revels in the same put-downs against other women. Except this time, it's in the name of feminist empowerment rather than male attention," bringing the whole movement in a circle and starting from the beginning yet again.

It is clear that the "Pick-me" stereotype finds its basis in misogyny, internalized or otherwise, and that women all over the world have strong emotions about it. The stereotype can most often be found on the Internet as Mooknee and Youngblood Gregory cite *X* and *TikTok* as their examples, but the stereotype can also be found in other media, if not in such an explicitly stated way. An example of this stereotype that will be examined is the character of Harleen Quinzel or Harley Quinn in the movie *Suicide Squad* (2016) directed by David Ayer, featuring a star-studded cast including Will Smith, Margot Robbie, Viola Davis, and Jared Leto. Harley is a character that has been depicted in many iterations over the years; from her introduction in a 1992 episode of *Batman: The Animated Series* (Plummer) to her most recent appearance in the new *Suicide Squad Isekai* (2024) anime by Wit Studio, she has become one of DC Comics' most popular reoccurring minor villains. Upon her first appearance, she is introduced as a henchman: "She's a simple yes-woman at this point, though significantly brighter than the male

henchman in the gang" (Plummer), but considering her many appearances following her debut and her solo projects, she has become much more than that. When it comes to her character design, in some iterations such as the 2016 one, she is designed to fit the *MPDG* trope: blue and pink hair tips, bright or smeared makeup, mismatched or unusual clothes that replace her jester-like black and red outfit from the animated series, and a myriad of "quirky" mannerisms, her design speaks of whimsy. Aside for her outward appearance, her character is also considered very dangerous and possessing a certain sex appeal for it (traits found in the *femme fatale* trope). She is described as being smart but crazy: "here's a woman who was a very intelligent and very manipulative doctor. We're trying to play up that quality. She is crazy, but there is something behind the madness" (Glass qtd. in Richards). This depiction of her is also what the 2016 Ayer movie draws from heavily, objectifying her with the help of the camera lens and the observers on the big screen and those outside of it.

Harley Quinn's 2016 iteration, played by Margot Robbie, is introduced to the viewer with wide-angle shot of her hanging upside down in a cage in the middle of a prison cell while the song *You Don't Own Me* by Lesley Gore plays in the background. She appears to be pale, scantily-clad and heavily tattooed (00:01:40–00:02:29). Harley is shown swinging from a makeshift swing, showcasing her agility already, and when accosted by the guards, she responds to their warning about "keeping off the bars" by licking the metal seductively in front of the men (00:02:30–00:02:41). This particular depiction relies heavily on Harley's visual appeal and coy mannerisms, showing her as an unpredictable seductress who is "in a bad way upstairs" and has already hurt some of the guards (00:02:49–00:02:53). The language she uses to ask the guards to "play" with her also adds to the image that the director is trying to give her: an air of innocence despite her being in a high-security prison (00:02:45). Upon being shocked by an electric current for disobeying the guards, the viewer is shown scenes from Harley's time at the prison, depicting some form of abuse and force-feeding after which Harley knocks herself out to presumably stop the memories (00:03:05–00:03:32). Seeing her on the ground, the main guard speaks the words: "A whole lot of pretty and a whole lot of crazy" (00:03:35), giving the viewer a brief glimpse into Harley's character for most of the movie's duration.

The movie's plot revolves around a team of villains conscripted out of prison for a mission that is very dangerous by a woman named Amanda Waller (Viola Davis), this team would later be dubbed the "suicide squad." Being already briefly introduced to Harley, the audience is now shown a more in-depth view of her character and backstory (00:09:08–00:14:54). The short character montage begins with Harley getting her mug shot taken while

the song *Super Freak* by Rick James plays in the background She is shown in the hazy light of a club, dancing seductively and laughing while the words "accomplice to the murder of ROBIN" and "TOTAL WILD CARD" appear in frame (00:09:15–00:09:17). The scene cuts even further back into her past and shows the gates of Arkham Asylum while Waller informs the audience and her collocutor that Harley used to be a psychiatrist (00:09:19). The angle of the following shot is low as it depicts the footsteps of a pair of black stiletto heels before panning up the bare legs of doctor Quinzel (00:09:20 – 00:09:25). Waller as the narrator of the backstory tells the audience that Harleen had been assigned to "the clown himself," known better as the Joker (Jared Leto), and that she "thought she was curing him" but had instead fallen in love with him (00:09:21–00:09:48). It is implied that doctor Quinzel had been manipulated into helping the Joker escape, the "Pick-me" aspect of her character shining through as she allows for the massacre of the asylum staff in order to ingratiate herself to the Joker. The following scene then shows the audience that the Joker tortured Quinzel by electrocuting her brain and even though Quinzel told the man that she could "take it" if he hurt her, she suffers greatly from the inflicted injuries (00:11:22). The scene then switches back to the golden atmosphere of the club from earlier where Harley is once again dancing in a very short dress and high heels for the people watching her, evoking the movements of an exotic dancer (00:12:00). The Joker and another man are speaking and as they observe Harley, the man says "You're a lucky man. You've got a bad bitch" (00:12:00–00:12:03). There are several layers of the objectification of Harley Quinn in these two statements. The first being the implication that the Joker owns her ("you have got"), treating her as property. The second being the sentiment of calling Harley a "bad bitch," thinly-veiled misogyny disguised as a compliment. After a brief theatrical intermission, the Joker calls Harley over with a whistle, supporting the earlier comment of her being a "bitch" by treating her as if she were a dog (00:12:29) and when she arrives, he passes her off to his guest as a "gift" (00:12:50). Waller's parting description of Harley is: "She's crazier than him, and more fearless" (00:13:42 – 00:13:49) before telling the viewers that she had been captured by the Batman (portrayed by Ben Affleck in this iteration).

The next time the audience sees Harley, the plot has fully developed into the superhero action movie narrative and it is finally time for her to join the action with the rest of the "suicide squad." The main anti-heroes are given time to suit-up, getting ready to head out into battle and Harley is given a box of her possessions, which she is excited about (00:45:10). As she gets dressed, the camera once again pans up Margot Robbie's body, showing that she has dressed for the mission in fishnets, high heels, shorts and a cut-off shirt, and that everybody had stopped

to stare as she took her clothes off and re-dressed (00:47:05–00:47:12). This particular bit of the scene is played off as a joke, having Harley react with an innocent "What?" as everyone continues moving abruptly but the humor of it comes across as cheap. The humor of it is supposed to ridicule the barely-there clothing but it is diminished by the fact that this is the costume she wears for the rest of the movie.

Harley Quinn is shown to be a capable fighter (01:00:00 – 01:00:17), but the narrative does not linger and instead shows the viewer the rest of Harley's backstory. The scene switches to another flashback where doctor Quinzel appears to be chasing after the Joker on a motorbike and while she seems to be vying for his attention, he utters an annoyed-sounding grunt in return, ignoring her attempts (01:05:20–01:05:35). Quinzel crashes her bike in order to get him to stop his car, shouting "You're not leaving me!" while the Joker rolls his eyes at her (01:05:45–01:05:55). She claims to have done everything he asked of her and that she loves him, taking a gun and shooting a man that had interrupted them without hesitation and then threatening the Joker himself (01:06:01–01:06:56). The scene plays on Harley's seeming fear of abandonment, her desperation to be loved back and her need to have the Joker's validation, showcasing how far she will go for him. This moment of vulnerability where Harley Quinn is remembering an emotional part of her past is once again undermined by the scene switching and the third camera pan-up from her heels, up her bare legs, moving into showing the wide shot of the street and everyone else (01:07:29–01:07:32). The shot also showcases the jacket she is wearing, which has embroidered on the back a sign reading "Property of the Joker." In the same vein, the audience is introduced to the last part of doctor Quinzel's backstory, the scene switching to her and the Joker in a factory setting. He asks her if she would die for him and she affirms without hesitation to which he then amends his question by asking "would you live for me?" (01:15:37–01:15:56). This change in question implies a loss of autonomy, calling back to the times the audience had seen her being treated as his property, making it seems as if it was her choice to become such from the start. She jumps off of a ledge and into a vat of chemicals and is shortly followed by a reluctant Joker while *Gangsta* by Khelani plays in the background (01:16:40–01:16:45). The song is significant because of the lyrics that can be heard clearly in the background while the scene plays out: "I'm fucked up, I'm black and blue // I'm built for it, all the abuse" (00:00:36–00:00:42), driving home the idea that she is doing these things willingly and glossing over the manipulation and the abuse she has endured so far. After a failed escape attempt and a helicopter explosion (01:24:37 – 01:24:45), Harley rejoins the main "squad" wet

from the rain and with smeared makeup, hiding her sorrow at the Joker's apparent death behind a sunny smile (01:27:43).

Entering the last twenty minutes of the movie, Harley encounters the main villain of the story, an ancient enchantress played by Cara Delavigne who claims to know what Harley wants (01:45:29). The scene switches to an image of Harley in a pink tracksuit with big curlers in her hair, in her arms she is holding a baby and kissing her on the cheek is the man who Joker would be if he were not the Joker, another baby sits off to the side in a highchair (01:46:03–01:46:18). Harley's wish is a normal life and a loving family, her staying home to be a mother and a housewife while the Joker wears a suit and has a respectable job, and this time the moment is not undercut by an objectifying shot of Margot's body. The last shot of Harley in the movie shows her back in prison, reading *Between the Sheets* by Molly O'Keefe and drinking an espresso, fully clothed for the first time since she was Harleen Quinzel (02:02:28). After a brief glimpse into the other "squad" member, Harley gets rescued from her cell by the Joker whom she welcomes back with her open arms (02:0348).

When in a review of the 2016 *Suicide Squad* movie for *IndieWire*, David Ehrlich writes: "Volatile, rambunctious, and sexualized to such an extreme that she feels like she wandered out of the film's XXX parody, Robbie's take on the iconic sidekick is a spellbinding bit of bubblegum savagery, a caricature of male fetishism," it is obvious that the objectification of Harley Quinn had not gone unnoticed by the masses. Harley Quinn has always been viewed as an extension of the Joker or a thing to be observed rather than a character, and for the most part, her writers have been men; David Ayer, Paul Dini, Bruce Timm, and Jimmy Palmiotti to name a few. This characterization has always been something that the critics and fans seemed to take note of: "Over the course of Harley's 30-year existence, her origins—as a villainous sidekick, as a superpowered woman, and as an object of sexual desire—have persistently been the source of dismay for feminist fans and critics" (Langsdale).

It is only in recent years that the character had been granted a new framing as an anti-hero and a "feminist success story" (Langsdale). However, Ayer's 2016 depiction is not one of the works that allow Harley the agency of being a character rather than an "image." Ayer's insistence on keeping Harley barely clothed, in high heels despite all the fighting that she is doing, and subjecting her to the voyeuristic gaze of the viewer and the other characters results in the movie painting a demeaning picture of the character. With the creative freedom given to him by the studio that hired him, he had also made rewrites to her backstory: the aforementioned

scene of her transitioning from Harleen into Harley. As Hassan asserts, "Harley is then pushed into a vat of chemical solution, thus Harley Quinn is reborn again. What is disturbing about this change is that it is done against her will, which ultimately takes away her agency." This makes it clear that she is a victim and that their subsequent relationship is toxic and abusive, which makes her the "psychotic monster" that she becomes (Hassan). In Ayer's version, however, Harley willingly jumps into the vat of chemicals (01:16:40–01:16:45) in order to prove her devotion to the Joker, performing the sacrifice in order for him to "pick her." Ayer's depiction of Harley channels the energy of the "Pick-me" and exploits the very real problems with self-worth and identity that women in society are faced with, depicting them as attractive through the interactions of Harley and the other characters. Ayer seems to have taken a beloved, light-hearted if unpredictable character that has been moving away from being objectified and transformed her into a parody of herself, using the camera lens to fetishize her trauma and her insecurities.

2.3. The "Born Sexy Yesterday" Trope

Found somewhere at the intersection of the *MPDG* and the *femme fatale,* the trope "born sexy yesterday" emerges as a motif that had remained unnamed until recently. In his video from 2017, *The Pop Culture Detective* talks about how he had been the one to coin the term, listing several examples to further support this newly-named trope (00:00:33–00:00:40). As his first depiction of the trope in question, he points out a character from the movie *TRON: Legacy* (2010), stating that the other (male) characters in the movie refer to her as "profoundly naïve, unimaginably wise." He calls attention to the fact that these are descriptors that one would use when talking about a child, bringing into question the nature of the trope itself (00:01:15). As Sampson puts it: "Born sexy yesterday (BSY) is the common sexual fantasy depicted in films and television shows (created by men and for men), around female characters that exude sex appeal, but other than their physical aesthetic, they mimic the behaviours, intelligence and attitudes of a young child." Having the trope explained in plain terms such as these allows for insight into the more insidious nature of these depictions themselves.

BSY is a trope that elevates the male character from someone who is by all standards "unremarkable" to the "smartest, most amazing guy in the universe" (*Pop Culture Detective*) just by nature of this man being the only one close to the female character (00:06:23–00:06:40). These female characters are almost exclusively the love interests of male protagonists. As seen

in the video, “Born Sexy Yesterday fetishizes the stark power imbalance between a wiser more experienced man and a naive inexperienced woman” (*Pop Culture Detective* 00:09:45), meaning that it hinges on a dynamic where the female character is often considered “lesser” to the male protagonist in aspects such as intellect, “worldly” experience, sexual experience, etc. This is also why the *Pop Culture Detective* points out that it is almost never the other way around. This, predominantly science fiction, trope appeals to the male audience and, as the narrator of the video notes, “[p]erhaps that’s because most grown women don’t find the idea of dating an inexperienced adolescent boy all that appealing” (00:13:40–00:13:46). The examples of the BSY trope can be traced to the beginnings of Hollywood in movies such as *Born Yesterday* (1950) or *The Time Machine* (1960), which are the two movies mentioned in the video as well. Some other examples of this trope are characters Leeloo from *The Fifth Element* (1997), Ava from *Ex Machina* (2014) and Bella Baxter in *Poor Things* (2023), two of which will be examined further in the text.

Alongside their naiveté, they also lack understanding when it comes to existing in the world around them. When put under a microscope, the dynamic between many of these “couples” becomes alarming. As the *Pop Culture Detective* states: “Born Sexy Yesterday is a science fiction trope that’s designed specifically so male heroes get to automatically be the most extraordinary man in a woman’s life. Again because they’re basically the ‘only’ man to have ever been in her life” (00:16:05–00:16:15). The *Pop Culture Detective* also brings up an interesting point when referencing this trope in regards to science fiction specifically, which is that these women are often somehow physically gifted or advanced in some way. On top of already being brought into the man’s life as a stunning, fully developed woman, she is often a master of martial arts, is incredibly adept at learning, has enhanced strength or is a capable fighter in general. These traits can most prominently be found in Leeloo who is described as being created “perfect.”

2.3.1. Leeloo, *The Fifth Element*

The movie *The Fifth Element* is a 1997 science fiction action film and directorial work of Luc Besson. It stars Bruce Willis, Gary Oldman, Ian Holm, Milla Jovovich, and Chris Tucker who find themselves involved in a plot to save (or destroy) planet Earth. The movie follows all of the classic beats of a science fiction flick such as: the “conflicts between science and technology, human nature, and social organization in futuristic or fantastical settings, created

in cinema through distinctive iconographies, images, and sounds often produced by means of special effects technology" (Hall). Moving past the opening shots, which establish the plot of the movie and the lore behind Earth being in danger, the audience is introduced to the main character who is located in a futuristic version of New York (00:16:49–00:17:10). The movie shows the still-nameless protagonist going about his day, waking up, answering a phone call from a friend. This is where the viewer finds out a little more about him: he used to be a Major in the military, he was once married, and he seems to be pining over his ex (00:17:20–00:18:03). When his friend suggest that there are other women "out there," he responds that he does not want just any woman; he wants "The perfect one" (00:18:04). This early interaction coupled with the motif of the movie's romantic subplot itself gives the viewer insight into what kind of a romantic partner the protagonist is looking for. Despite his history with the military, the protagonist appears to be enjoying a civilian lifestyle at the present, telling his friend that he "drives a cab now, not a space fighter" (00:18:30). He gets into an altercation with a man trying to rob him and, having just been told about his military past, the audience gets to see the protagonist outsmart the lowly robber (00:19:19–00:20:15). The mysterious protagonist is introduced as Mr. Dallas (Bruce Willis) by an automated voice upon him entering the taxi cab he drives, giving audience another piece of the puzzle (00:20:23). The audience is led to conclude that this man is down on his luck, that he yearns for a connection after having been cheated on by his wife, and that he is mostly "unremarkable."

As opposed to Dallas, the female protagonist of the movie is immediately described as "a weapon to defeat evil" and as a "supreme being, the ultimate warrior created to protect life" (00:21:31–00:21:42), lending her great importance to the plot itself. *The Fifth Element* is a literal example of the BSY trope due to the fact that Leeloo is "born" the very same day that she meets Dallas. Her creation is shown to the audience, making them the witnesses to her coming into the world via process of reconstruction, ending in the revelation of a prone, naked female form inside the chamber and the word "perfect" uttered by one of the scientists (00:26:00–00:27:09). Played off as a joke is also one of the military men saying that he would like to take "a few pictures" for their "archive" (00:27:32). These words are then followed by Leeloo taking her first breaths as her body gets reanimated, trashing and mimicking a panic of somebody who does not understand what is happening around them or why they are confined in a glass tube. She slams her hands on the walls around her, uncomprehending, before speaking in a language unknown to her gawking observers (00:27:33–00:28:36). The men obviously find her fascinating even though they flaunt the idea of freedom in her face as conditional: "If you

want out, you'll have to develop those communication skills" (00:29:00–00:29:05). Even though she was just born, she is unnaturally strong and therefore manages to escape the facility that had sought to confine her in a sequence showcasing her survival instincts and skill. This part of her introduction eventually ends with her crashing through Dallas' cab's roof, literally "falling into his lap" (00:29:35–00:32: 31).

The music slows from the frantic pace of a chase scene score to something slower, more romantic, as their eyes meet. Though Dallas had been incensed at the damage done to his vehicle, he immediately loses sight of that upon realizing that there is an attractive, young woman in the back of his cab now, greeting her with a soft "hi" (00:33:00–00:33:03). He asks after her wellbeing and she smiles, immediately setting off on a rant that he cannot understand, leading them to having a conversation in noises and gestures rather than actual words (00:33:17–00:33:58). Dallas seems amused by her babbling, tracing her features in a mesmerized way rather than attempting to help her with her explanation. Reluctant as he is, Dallas ends up helping Leeloo after she manages to teach herself the words "please help" (00:35:30–00:39:20). The movie's framing of Jovovich's character Leeloo is done in such a way that the audience is supposed to find her charming and attractive despite all of these childlike traits in her, making sure to remind the viewer that she is going to be the love interest. Leeloo asks for a priest and upon finding him, the audience is shown Dallas holding a passed out Leeloo in a bridal carry while the man in question responds with "The weddings are downstairs, my son. Congratulations" (00:39:58–00:40:11). The priest, Vito Cornelius (Ian Holm), calls her the "fifth element" and "mankind's most precious possession," once again reaffirming the narrative that she is the perfect being (00:41:29–00:41:31). Dallas decides to wake her up with a kiss, foregoing consent, and apologizing only when Leeloo points a gun at him (00:42:00–00:42:35). They introduce themselves to each other in a sort of *Tarzan*-esque sequence of him repeating "Korben, Leeloo" until she points the weapon away from him, distracted by the appearance of the priest (00:43:15–00:43:40). The idea of Dallas becoming captivated with her is further reaffirmed by the phone call he has with his friend from the beginning of the movie where he describes Leeloo, the look in his eyes dreamy: "Five nine, blue eyes, long legs, great skin. You know? Perfect" (00:45:21–00:45:31). Another staple of the BSY is the fact that these women often do not care about social norms or are not familiar with them. Here we have Leeloo taking her clothes off without any concern for the men in the room (00:48:08), prompting them to once again pronounce her as being "perfect" after they have turned around in order to give her privacy.

Her perfection is a motif that follows Leeloo through the narrative, making her the opposite to Dallas' "unremarkable." She is the Manic Pixie Dream Girl and the *femme fatale* all in one: innocent, strong and capable, helping the main male character achieve some higher purpose with her own mission, depending on him for security. Though reluctant at first, Korben agrees to help with her mission, his motivation being that he wants to be with her and help Leeloo rather than any noble goal of saving the world (01:07.00). Right before they are to set off on their mission, the priest Cornelius shows concern for Leeloo, saying that "she's also so fragile, so human" despite being strong in other ways (01:09:15). Her inexperience with the world is made less important in the light of her interactions with Dallas, and even though he talks to her in a way one would with a child, the audience is led to believe that this is all part of their charm as a couple-to-be (01:15:20–01:15:35). After a shootout in the second half, one of the characters repeats the priest's sentiment, calling Leeloo "more fragile than she seems" and instructing Dallas that she needs his help and his love or that she will die (01:35:45–01:34:51). This fatalistic view of their relationship sets up the ending of the movie, making Leeloo dependent on him despite her being a "superior being," relegating her to his "lesser" in the dynamic due to her being so inexperienced and "fragile."

All throughout the movie, Leeloo has been using a computer to teach herself about the world and the history of it. At almost the two hour mark (01:51:58), she types in "war" and the audience is shown a slideshow of images depicting the wars that had been waged on Earth. Leeloo is profoundly affected by these tragedies and with her seemingly last breaths she asks Dallas "What's the use of saving life when you see what you do with it?" (01:52:50), making her opinion on the "human condition" very clear. This is, however, a movie with a happy ending, which means that Dallas' responding sentiment is the opposite: "Love is worth saving" (01:57:32–01:57:54). In the final moments before her death, Dallas' love culminates by saving Leeloo's life and the world, giving her the strength to survive her mission (01:58:30–01:59:16). The closing shot is of Dallas and Leeloo in that same pod from the beginning, which is now covered instead consisting of see-through glass, copulating while *Little Light of Love* by Eric Serra plays in the background (02:01:30).

The journey of these two characters from strangers to lovers happens over the course of a few days, and as Dallas helps her along, he becomes Leeloo's "smartest, most amazing guy in the universe" (*Pop Culture Detective).* This happens by the nature of him being her first pleasant experience in the world and the circumstances that surround their first meeting, his history with the military and the villains of the story being incompetent and fighting each other.

Korben Dallas is the clear intended mirror for the viewer to project themselves onto and next to Leeloo, he cannot be the bearer of the observations. Instead, Leeloo, while not necessarily hindering the plot of the narrative, does cause tension between the male protagonist and the viewer and allows for moments of pause where the camera pans over her body or she and Dallas share a charged look. The power dynamic between them is clear, and is made only more insidious once it is taken into account that Jovovich was twenty years old at the time, having her body half-naked for a good part of the movie, and that Willis was in his forties already.

An article about the trope on *Nanofilmschool* calls it "A Justified Version of Lolita" (NFS Staff), bringing to attention the disparity in the ages of both the actors and the characters in the story. It stands to reason then, that when it comes to Besson's directorial and writing choices, a closer look into his filmography and personal life should be had. Namely, along with *The Fifth Element*, some of Besson's other works are: the aforementioned *Anna* (2019), a story about a Russian spy using her good looks and assassin skills to get what she wants; *Lucy* (2014), a story where Scarlet Johansson portrays a beautiful woman becoming a superior being and exacting revenge on those who have wronged her; *Colombiana* (2011), a movie with a plot following Zoe Saldana's character becoming an assassin and getting revenge; *La Femme Nikita* (1990), a movie about yet another woman becoming a top secret agent and spy. Lastly, and most importantly, *Léon: The Professional* (1994), a narrative about a 12-year-old Mathilda who is reluctantly taken in by Léon, a professional assassin, after her family is murdered. As the *IMDb* page for the movie states: "An unusual relationship forms between them as she becomes his protégée and learns the assassin's trade," making it another in a long line of Besson's assassin movies. It appears as though Besson has always had a fascination with strong female characters who use their femininity to their own advantage, while also subjecting them to the male gaze and confining them to their male counterparts. On top of these female assassin trope variants, Besson's movies also deal with power imbalance. Besson's own personal history with dating can be called upon to elaborate on some of his fascinations.

In an article for *The Daily Beast,* Marlow Stern writes about Besson's relationship with his second wife, Maïwenn, and the truth about the movie *Léon: The Professional.* Stern writes that the movie "echoes of Pygmalion and Lolita, as Mathilda is schooled in the ways of the 'cleaner' while repeatedly confessing her love to her much-older protector." However, unlike in *Lolita*, Léon does not reciprocate her feelings. These scenes of her obvious admiration are jarring due to the fact that Natalie Portman who portrays Mathilda was a child at the time, and as film critic Roger Ebert put it: "But always at the back of my mind was the troubled thought

that there was something wrong about placing a 12-year-old character in the middle of this action." Stern then goes on to write about the story itself being a case of "life imitating art": "According to *The Washington Post*, Besson met the child actress Maïwenn when she was 12, the same age as Mathilda in the film. He was 29. They claim to have started seeing each other romantically when she turned 15. Maïwenn gave birth to their daughter when she was 16 (and Besson was 33)" Additionally, Stern also writes about their divorce: "During the filming of Besson's follow-up movie, *The Fifth Element*, wherein Maïwenn portrayed the memorable blue opera-singing alien Diva Plavalaguna, the director left her for the film's lead actress, Milla Jovovich." Knowing that Jovovich was twenty when shooting the movie, makes the age gap between them almost eighteen years. Taking into account his personal history, his filmography and the narrative choices in *The Fifth Element,* it could be said that Besson's obsession with unhealthy power dynamics and surface-level female empowerment have influenced his work greatly. As the *NFS Staff* in their article on *Nofilmstaff* puts it: "The men are often unsatisfied with the women they've known or come in contact with. They want a female that isn't their equal or as experienced in sex, relationships, or life in general so they can protect her." Women such as these then, logically, tend to be younger in age than the men who desire them. When looking at the situation from an objective view, this woman who cannot take care of herself or is inexperienced to the point of pure naivety then inspires the image of a child.

2.3.2. Bella Baxter, *Poor Things*

Yet another example of this difference in power and age is Bella Baxter from the movie *Poor Things* (2023) by the director Yorgos Lanthimos. Once again referencing the *Pop Culture Detective's* video on the trope, Bella Baxter will be examined through the lens of the BSY character in relation to sexuality: "The subtext of the trope is rooted in a deep seated male insecurity around sex and sexuality. The crux of the trope is a fixation on male superiority. A fixation with holding power over an innocent girl" (00:14:33–00:15:00). With a rating of 7.8 out of 10 on *IMDb*, a 92% "tomatometer" score on *Rotten Tomatoes*, and a 4.0 out of 5 on *Letterboxd,* it is reasonable to say that the movie was a success. There are, however, some concerns to be raised by the topic of the film and the portrayal of its main character, Bella. The movie opens up with a shot of the protagonist (portrayed by Emma Stone) throwing herself off of a bridge in London, plummeting to her death after which the scene switches into something more domestic. The first few minutes of the movie (00:01:30–00:07:03) are dedicated to showing the viewer how Bella cannot use utensils while eating food, how she has no

coordination when moving, that she cannot speak and that she has no impulse control, breaking plates because it amuses her. Bella is followed around by two men, Doctor Godwin "God" Baxter (Willem Dafoe) and Max McCandles (Ramy Youssef), who observe her behavior. McCandles calls her a "very pretty retard" (00:07:03) to which Baxter responds that Bella's mental age and body "are not quite synchronized" (00:07:39). This information does not, however, stop McCandles from referring to her as "stunning" after which Bella proceeds to urinate on the floor (00:07:30–00:08:10).

Much like Leeloo, Bella appears to have been "born" very recently despite her fully developed body. As Bella is mentally at the level of a very young child, McCandles is tasked with observing her and taking notes on her progress (00:09:30), which leads to him following Bella around the house as she goes about her day as she usually would. Bella is shown stabbing a dead body and laughing at the noises it makes, riding a strange bike, babbling incoherently with a very limited vocabulary (00:10:15–00:10:58), which points out that she is not fit to function on her own just yet. Max reports to the Doctor that she "gathers 15 words a day" and that "her coordination is unstable at best" (00:11.00). After this, the audience is shown that the relationship between Doctor Baxter and Bella is parental, having him read her a bedtime story after which he tells her about the untimely death of her parents (00:11:22–00:13:02). With every new day depicted, Bella's speech progresses enough to form sentences such as "Tell Bella other places" or "Bella want look at world" (00:13:30–00:13:45) and hold conversation with her observer. She shows that she is curious about the world and that she wants to experience new things. She wishes to keep learning so she asks questions without any self-consciousness. The audience is then told that Bella has never been outside and following a tantrum that she throws, Baxter and McCandles decide to take her to a park of some sort. Bella shows a childlike wonder upon entering a forest for the first time, eyes wide and stumbling about as a child would since that is what she essentially appears to be. Aside from the comment about her "retardation," she is also called an "experiment" in which "God" wishes to control her and her environment in order to achieve the best possible results (00:15:10–00:18:46). Bella appears to be prone to violence, acting out when she is denied something she wants (as previously seen), but in this scene she gets violent with "God" and her observer, causing the Doctor to sedate her in order to calm her down (00:19.30–00:19:49). The audience is led to believe that this is for her own good. The movie then elects to show the viewer Emma Stone's breasts as she is disrobed by the maid (00:20:30–00:20:45). This is where the movie reveals the story behind the opening shot of Bella jumping off a bridge. Baxter tells Max that instead of being left in the Doctor's care

due to the death of her parents, Bella is a random pregnant woman who had decided to end her own life due to circumstances that are not entirely known to the Doctor. The truth behind Bella's condition is that the Doctor took the unborn infant's brain and put it in the full-grown woman, reanimated her, and decided to see what happens (00:22:14–00:24:25).

Following their outing into the forest, the movie takes a turn into speedily developing Bella's character through her exploring her sexuality and becoming fascinated with receiving pleasure. Even though she is mentally no older than a toddler, which can be concluded from everything that the movie has showed its viewer so far, there is a scene of her exploring her own body at the breakfast table: "Bella discover happy when she want" to which Max responds with "that is not done in polite society" (00:25:15–00:27:47). once again reminding the viewer that Bella has no concept of society at large. Despite this, Doctor Baxter still offers her hand in marriage to Max, stating "I believe I see love between you and Bella" (00:28:55). McCandles admits to having feelings for her despite her being essentially a child mentally and agrees to the offer (00:28:40–00:30:36). Max proposes, kissing Bella for the first time, but denying her when she tries to seek other pleasure with him: "I do not wish to take advantage of you. You are special," implying that her virginity and pureness are of great value to him and that she is to "save" herself for marriage (00:30:54–00:31:20).

The movie is labeled as a dark comedy, leading the viewer to think of it as something of a satirical view on the BSY trope, but from the point of their betrothal and the subsequent introduction of Duncan Wedderburn (Max Ruffalo), it dives into shameless exploitation of Emma Stone's nude body and her willingness to take her clothes off in the name of art. As Angelica Jade Bastién puts it in her review of the movie for the *Vulture:* "These early scenes of sexual discovery come across as cinematic exhibitionism: They're less about limning the interiority of Bella and more about a juvenile instinct to shock." The *Letterboxd* summary states that the story follows Bella as she "grows steadfast in her purpose to stand for equality and liberation," but from what can be observed, this liberation is very closely connected with her sexuality and physicality rather than her becoming her own person through self-actualization. "You're a prisoner and I aim to free you," Ruffalo's character tells Bella (00:36:09). He calls her "[h]ungry for experience, freedom, touch" (00:36:20), offering to take her from her life and save her, setting off the events that follow. Max opines that Wedderburn has "[i]nsidious ways of getting under a naïve woman's skin" (00:38:28) while Bella explains that she is being driven by her physicality, the sexual responses she gets when she is with Wedderburn though she still wishes to marry Max upon her return (00:38:45). Here the audience is shown that the two men

are set in opposition. Where Max "loves and cherishes" Bella, Wedderburn is a man with bad intentions looking to steal her away. And, much as a child with little-to-no impulse control, Bella is led by her yearning and guided by what others elicit in her body since she has no proper judgment to rely on. Wedderburn takes her to Lisbon where several explicit scenes of them having sex take place.

In Lisbon, however, Wedderburn comes to realize what the audience has known all along: Bella has a juvenile brain. She grows bored easily, is indifferent to things that should interest a young woman and, most importantly, she is still not aware of social norms. With her vocabulary now advanced enough, Bella talks about topics not appropriate for the dinner table, threatens to punch a baby, spits out food that tastes bad. All of this prompts Duncan to ask her to "behave," which she does not understand as she is led by her instincts to make herself feel good instead of what others want of her. In her mind, it is simple, if something is bothering her, she will not endure it. Wedderburn says that "reason does not penetrate" her and she slaps him for it (00:49:20–00:50:46). Bella has obviously come a great length since the beginning of the movie. Now that she is growing smarter and more resistant, becoming his equal in speech and coherence and intellect, Wedderburn no longer feels like he can control her and has become cross when she uses his own words against him (00:54:00–00:54:38). Bella and Duncan dance together in a scene that can also be interpreted as a fight for dominance happening between them, their dynamics shifting where she leads more often than not and he is left trying to catch up (00:56:00–00:56:51).

After a brief intermission between Lisbon and Paris in which Bella grows angry, takes up philosophy and is introduced to the cruelty of the world (1:06:54–1:26:53), the movie enters its final arc of Bella's development by having her work in a brothel. Wedderburn takes offense to this, stating that "[i]t is the worst thing a woman can do" (1:30:07), perpetuating the narrative that a woman who willingly sells her body is not worthy of respect or of love, taking her decision as a personal slight. As Bella is no longer pure and innocent, this image of her is fully shattered in his mind, which is hypocritical considering everything that they have done together so far. This line of sex work is framed as a "woman plotting her course to freedom" (1:31:21), but it falls short when so much focus is placed upon her materialistic gains and bodily pleasure rather than her seeking a better life for herself through means such as forming connections, making friends or finding a proper education. She is free to make her own choices now that she knows enough about the world to do so, but her understanding of nuance and her own possibilities is still at a primitive level. Bella is still, after all, mentally very young. She is

referred to as being new and having a mental illness (1:34:38) when she disobeys, showing the audience that she is still not a functional adult. Bella begins to understand the situation she has put herself in, showing less and less enthusiasm and asking question that do not agree with the Madam of the brothel. Her simple understanding of the world as black or white once again proves to be a detriment to true freedom as a character. In one of the following scenes, Bella can be heard saying "We are our own means of production" (1:43:28), and while it sounds as though feminist at heart, there is a certain commodification of the female body in this statement that rings shallow. It is true that sex work is regarded as one of the "oldest professions," but this movie portrays it in a way that is superficial and cares more about shocking the audience with its gratuitous sex scenes than about portraying the reasons behind women having to turn to sex work. Bella had been completely rational about this path in her life, but there are other women in the brothel who we do not get to see or hear speaking. Other than the Madame, only Toinette interacts with Bella directly. Unfortunately, her entire personality is that she is a socialist, the narrative caring very little about their friendship.

The Brothel plotline boils down to Bella having an unhappy time, trying to make herself feel better and then leaving once a letter from Max arrives as if she'd never been trapped there at all despite the movie having the audience believe otherwise. On top of being repetitive, the brothel plotline offers very little of value to further Bella's progression as a person with "real" emotions and thirst for adventure, which have been noted as being important to her from the very start. Since setting out and seeing its injustices, she has sought to know and heal the world through exploring it, a noble and naïve effort. Unfortunately, the latter half of the movie has the character stuck in an endless loop of sex and pointless observations just so that it can pat itself on the back for not shying away from portraying pornography on the big screen instead of having her do any real exploring. Despite trying to desperately show the audience that this is "art," the male gaze is firmly focused on the way Emma Stone's body can become an icon for the viewer's voyeuristic pleasure.

Bella returns home to marry Max just as she said she would. When discussing her life in Paris, Max says: "It is your body, Bella Baxter. Yours to give freely," to which Bella responds with "I generally charged 30 francs" (1:57:00–1:57:19), which is a witty exchange showing the audience the crux of the movie. It all is about the autonomy of the female body, which is, granted, one of the pillars of feminism but far from the only one. This movie deals with said autonomy and tries to satirize the BSY trope, but through portraying it in such an explicit way it exploits the notion of sex as being freeing. There is not much talk about the patriarchy, just

men's desires in ways of sex, and there is even less talk of inequality between the genders. This idea of sex and pleasure being among the most important aspects of woman's freedom continues till the final scene of the movie. Through Wedderburn's interference as a scorned lover, Bella is taken away by her alleged husband Alfie. It is revealed that the woman who had committed suicide on that bridge was Victoria, wife of a general and a deeply unhappy person (2:06:01). The last thirty minutes of the narrative tries to give McCandles and Doctor Baxter some form of redemption, comparing them with the other two men in Bella's life as being better than them despite all that they have done to her in the beginning. The narrative focuses more on bodily autonomy, showing how her husband Alfie wishes to take away her pleasure, to which Bella's response is: "I'd rather you shot me in the fucking heart" (2:09:30). The need for bodily autonomy is a serious and still a prevalent topic in the world, and yet this problem has been whittled down to Bella lashing out only when her pleasure is being threatened rather than this fierce response being a reaction to her losing her hard-won freedom. Once again, the focus is shifted to the physical rather than the emotional or the spiritual. In the end, her search for a kinder world is brought to naught due to her deciding to continue Doctor Baxter's legacy (2:15:38) where we see the abusive general behaving akin to an animal and a surgery scar running along his face, implying that they had put a goat's brain into his head via the same procedure done to her.

Calling this a movie about "female empowerment" would not be necessarily wrong. Bella does gain autonomy and freedom, finds aspects of herself that she had not yet known about throughout the story, and chooses a path in life for herself moving forward. Yet, this empowerment is overshadowed by the fact that Bella is a child at the beginning of the narrative. She is molded by the men around her because she has no other influences, and is left to her own devices by men who seek to control rather than teach her. Bastién calls the movie's spirit "corroded" in her review: "like it's intermittently possessed by an edgelord who's unaware most women menstruate, and an early-wave white feminist who believes having sex is the most empowering thing a woman can do." The narrative is haunted by an undeniably male view of the female body and female liberation, concerning itself more with aesthetics than getting to the root of the problem: "But *Poor Things* makes the fatal mistake of thinking the only thing interesting to a liberated woman is herself. Her naïvety is played for laughs, and not introspection, so that when her baby brain evolves, it's unclear what particular intellectual and pleasure-seeking pursuits guide her beyond what Godwin and the other lurking men have encouraged" (Bastién). Bastién also argues that "Lanthimos's lens is not interested in the sex

lives of women as much as the ways in which a young woman's body can be positioned and used," which can be seen in all the ways Emma Stone's body is portrayed in the movie. The lighting, the scenery, the clothes, they all serve to highlight her as something special and beautiful rather than a "real" person. Much like the rest of the visuals in the movie, Bella appears as a stunning visage instead of a figure of female empowerment. As Bastién puts it: "Watching it [the movie] for any sort of feminist revelation is akin to craving the salty chill of the ocean and the spray of a wave upon your face, and having to settle for resting your ear against a curling seashell, listening to only the echo of what you truly desire."

The BSY trope is at the end of the day "a male fantasy about escaping the humiliation of rejection" (*Pop Culture Detective* 00:16:54–00:16:57). When rejected, Wedderburn goes through a terrible time and seeks to have his revenge. Aside from the fear of rejection, what else is behind the trope? The male gaze for one, certainly, but there is also another prominent concept that is equated with innocence. The BSY character is, in crude terms, a pure, virginal maiden ready to give herself over to the first man that shows her kindness: "As such the trope rests on some troubling patriarchal ideas about female purity and virginity. By definition, characters Born Sexy Yesterday have no past lovers, and no previous sexual experiences" (*Pop Culture Detective* 00:16:21–00:16:30). Opposed to the *femme fatale,* the character upon whose shoulders rests the BSY trope is often a "literal" virgin, such as Leeloo, or a "metaphorical" one like Bella. As Berger and Wenger state, "female virginity is either a physiological status involving the disposition of the hymen, or a label bestowed upon oneself depending on one's self-defined level of sexual experience" (667-68). Yet, why is virginity important to the BSY trope? In their research on the topic of virginity and what is and is not considered virginal, Berger and Wenger conclude that "virginity, rather than seen as a 'state of being' in society, is viewed as a social-relational concept having to do with the state of conflict between two parties contending for scarce rewards in society, and in which conflict the contenders bring to bear those resources most available to them" (675). In the case of the BSY trope, this transactional view is not as pronounced but no less present. The bearer of the trope finds herself in a situation where she is desirable because she is "pure" and she is a sort of reward for the male protagonist's good deeds.

The idea of virginity being a kind of "gift" is not a new one. In her paper on the value of virginity, status and property, Alice Schlegel delves into what virginity used to mean in society. She labels virginity as a highly transactional matter, stating that "virginity is valued when men have to 'pay' for wives by transferring goods in the form of bridewealth to the

women's families" (719). The society that encourages abstinence is one where the man is "given" the woman along with a dowry. Schlegel also notes that "[i]t is clear that when no property accompanies the marriage, virginity is of little interest" (725), meaning that when women are not treated as possessions being given away, virginity loses importance. Aside from status and property, Schlegel adds that there is another possible reason for men valuing woman's purity. Namely "self-congratulation or acclaim by peers that accompanies the successful boy or man" and "the thrill of the forbidden" (Schlegel 731). In the case of Leeloo, we have already seen that Dallas infringes on her autonomy by kissing her while she was unconscious but there is also the idea of her "perfection." Her mission is more important than anything else and he is forbidden from pursuing her until the very end when it becomes crucial to the story. As for Bella, Wedderburn, in his self-important mindset, sees himself as a man who stole her away from home and took her purity for himself. Where McCandles wanted to preserve her purity for after they were married, Wedderburn relished in corrupting it. It is undeniable that virginity is a big part of the "born sexy yesterday" trope and that there is something insidious lurking underneath the surface.

2.4. Anna Poliatova, the *Femme Fatale*

Sometimes a female character in a piece of media is very familiar to the audience but they cannot seem to place her. She is not like the other girls, yet she is not a MPDG. She is vying for a man's attention but she is not putting other women down or sacrificing who she is for him. She is intelligent and capable, but she is not innocent nor is she virginal like those women of the BSY trope. *The Encyclopedia Britannica* defines the *femme fatale* as "a seductive and beautiful woman who brings disaster to anyone with whom she becomes romantically involved" (Ostberg). The definition of the archetype reveals that the basis for the *femme fatale* characters are two things: she must be beautiful and she must be involved with the male lead in some capacity.

This unflattering image of a "castrating" woman that brings doom to her male counterpart is hardly new. In his paper on the *femme fatale* in French decadence, George Ridge writes about the archetype as being a new type of woman that is active and "destroys the passive male" (352). He argues that the modern woman emerges with the shift in society but soon surpasses the men in it: "The new woman is at first the object of man's vanity – a lovely, costly bauble – but in time becomes an unnatural sex. The decadent writers feel, some explicitly, many

implicitly, that she is no longer woman as nature meant her to be. She incarnates destruction rather than creativity" (353). Ridge asserts that the themes surrounding the *femme fatale* are of sado-masochism and that the passive youth is drawn to the *femme fatale* due to her chaotic allure (353).

In the *Britannica* description of the archetype, it is also mentioned that the *femme fatale* has audiences divided in their opinions on it: "The *femme fatale* has been dismissed as a sexist figure of male fantasy but also defended as a subversive character who transgresses women's limited social opportunities" (Ostberg). Namely, showcasing a woman who is objectified to such a degree that her only important trait is that she is beautiful can be a harmful thing. On the other hand, a female main character who shows independence and grit even when faced with men trying to control her can be thought of as progressive and empowering. The execution of a good *femme fatale* character depends heavily on the plot which she finds herself in, the narrative surrounding her, and the moral of the story.

In her study on the *femme fatale*, Julie Grossman introduces the archetype as a staple of the *film noir* and assigns it the following characteristics: "Intelligent, witty, able to role-play and perform, deceptive, enraged, frustrated, mercenary, seductive, overtly sexual, fearless and tough as nails, physically self-confident with a striking appearance: these are the qualities we associate with the *femme fatale*" (1). Grossman compares them with the male protagonists of the movies who are usually "beleaguered tough guys" (Grossman 2); the female characters considered *femme fatales* seem to share some of their characteristics: "women in *noir* share this world-weariness, despite viewers' and critics' conventional focus on the hardboiled male and the women's part in adding to the troubles of men" (2). The *femme fatale* is by nature "not like the other girls," she shares male characteristics and yet she is often conventionally attractive. The archetype presents itself as feminist, as an opportunity for the female character to achieve some form of self-actualization but the oppressive, voyeuristic gaze is still firmly obsessed with her. These female characters align themselves with the men in the stories, distancing themselves from more "traditional" roles: "For women, displaying such cynicism breaks the conventional gender mold, threatening the cultural idolatry of mothers and virgins" (Grossman 3). Grossman equates this social norms breaking demeanor as "role-playing" (3), noting that the archetype is heavily based on the idea of it being a performance:

> the theme of performance captures the double bind that active and rebellious or transgressive female characters find themselves in: they perform roles sometimes to

> escape objectification or the rigid or socially sanctioned positions that oppress them, but then when they assume or "perform" unconventional or unprescribed roles, their ambition to find fulfillment outside of convention constitutes them as "bad actors," as deceptive, inauthentic, or "spider women. (Grossman 4)

Grossman notes that the stories of these women are often those of revenge or those of seeking a better life: "desperate grabs for power or happiness, or a mocking vengeance against those who have contributed to their desolation" (4). A theme that seems to follow the *femme fatales* through their media appearances is that they are characters who perform for the sake of their own wellbeing, thus inviting criticism from their male counterparts for it: "female characters branded as *femmes fatales* perform roles in order to survive, to seduce, or to manipulate others in order to get what they want, yet any 'pretense' to better their position is received as immoral and invites male scorn" (Grossman 6).

Delving further into the historical background of the *femme fatale*, Mark Jancovich explores this archetype in film and in postwar America. Jancovich states that, even though the archetype is now a staple of the *film noir*, it did not get its beginnings in the genre, but instead out of the need for men to retake control after the Second World War (100). He claims that the trope had been put to use in order to "demonize" the independent woman and persuade her to surrender her job in order to return to a more domestic setting (Jancovich 100). Following that thought, Jancovich also notes that the *femme fatales* of the past had not been associated with the independent women, instead they were seen as selfish or greedy slackers who cared little for anything other than their own wellbeing (101). In his study, he asserts that the origins of the *femme fatale* can be found within the appearance of the "vicious woman" and the "female monster films" such as *Cat People* (1942) by Jaques Tourneur (101). "Consequently, the characters later identified with the figure of the *femme fatale* were not simply 'masculine paranoid fantasies' and the films in which they appeared were often explicitly associated with female, rather than male, audiences" (Jancovich 101), which is different from the later iterations of the archetype. Jancovich goes on to list a few examples of these prototype *femme fatales* and uses several terms and scenarios to describe some of these earlier iterations: "a kept woman, [who] sexually manipulates men" (103), "a petty gold-digger" (103) "motivated by jealousy: she desperately wants to be loved and is driven to murderous rage when men fall for Ruth rather than for her" (105), and "sultry siren" (107). It is evident that the *femme fatale* is hardly a flattering depiction of a woman, and instead seeks to put down and shame the notion of a woman trying to escape her boring or unsatisfactory life. The *femme fatale* is shown to be a cautionary

tale for men who would fall for her charms, and a warning to women who seek to follow in their footsteps. The concept of fear, along with that of caution, is not uncommon when discussing women who are "criticized for forms of sexual conduct for which men are considered positively" (Walby 109). Being closely tied to active female sexuality, the *femme fatale* archetype attempts to escape objectification and the observers as it rejects male reduction of women to sexual objects, yet this leads to the "eroticization of dominance and subordination," creating the gender dynamics that exist in society (Walby 118).

Some notorious *femme fatale* characters over the years, as listed on Entertainment Weekly, have been: Catherine Tramell (Sharon Stone) in *Basic Instinct* (1992) directed by Paul Verhoeven, Nikita (Peta Wilson) in *La Femme Nikita* (1997–2001) directed by Luc Besson, Lorraine Broughton (Charlize Theron) in *Atomic Blonde* (2017) by David Leitch, and Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) in *Double Indemnity* (1944) directed by Billy Wilder. In addition to the extensive thirty names on the list, an argument could be made that both Leeloo from *The Fifth Element* and Harley Quinn from *Suicide Squad* fit the category of the *femme fatale*. As previously stated, both Quinn and Leeloo are intelligent, capable women who kill men or bring the men in their lives to ruin. Quinn believes that she was the reason that the Joker had died in the helicopter crash and Leeloo is the demise of the movie's antagonist (portrayed by Gary Oldman). However, their cases are not as clear-cut as that of Anna Poliatova from the movie *Anna* (2019), directed and written by Luc Besson. Peter Sobczynski's review of the movie on *Roger Ebert dot com* gives it a one and a half stars out of five, stating: "If *Anna* were made by any other filmmaker, it could be dismissed as little more than a shameless attempt to copy the offbeat and visually stylish action epics of French filmmaker Luc Besson that goes disastrously wrong right from the start and only gets worse as things progress." As the movie was not as critically acclaimed as the previously mentioned *The Fifth Element*, the same can be said for the writing of the movie's main character Anna, played by Sasha Luss, a Russian model and actress.

The movie introduces the titular Anna selling nesting dolls at a market where she is then scouted by a French modelling agency employee and asked to join them in Paris (00:04:43–00:05:37). Anna is tall, slim in build, with blonde hair and blue eyes, conventionally attractive in every regard except for her somewhat unkempt appearance at the market, which the scout does not mind. The implication of her "humble" appearance being that the scout had found a "diamond in the rough." The movie wastes no time in showing the audience that Anna's involvement with the plot will be heavily dependent on Sasha Luss' attractiveness and her

image in the eye of the observer. When she arrives in Paris, one of the first things that her booking agent says is that the "other girls are really jealous" since her good looks have already garnered some interest in the industry (00:06:57). Anna's next day in Paris has her immediately put to work, as the movie wastes no time in showcasing Luss' appeal on camera (00:08:47–00:10:44). There is a scene where Anna, obviously uncomfortable, is instructed to push out her breasts: "Tits out. Push them out" (00:09:58). Despite the scene making it obvious that the photographer is asking for something uncouth, the interaction is lighthearted and played off as a joke. One of the following scenes shows Anna and Maude (Lera Abova) at an extravagant party where the man who runs the modelling agency offers to introduce the models to a man named Oleg (00:12:00–00:12:29). Oleg, naturally, immediately takes notice of Anna, who is reluctant to strike up a conversation with him despite their common country of origin, but accepts his invitation to dinner regardless (00:13:00–00:13:29). In the next scene, the audience sees the two kissing and are told the information that Oleg and Anna have been together for two months already (00:13:40). At this point, Oleg is implying that Anna has been refusing to do anything more than kiss him for their entire time together, saying "You kiss me, you leave me. You kiss me again. Am I a toy?" (00:13:51–00:13:58). The movie wants the audience to know that Anna has the power to reject him and that despite it, he is still proud to be in a relationship with her: "Every night I ask you out on my arm, so I can show you off in front of all of Paris" (00:14:14–00:14:15). Anna rejects him again and instead uses his desire to her advantage. She knows that Oleg wants her and asks to know more about him: "What is your job? What do you do?" (00:14:30). There is obviously an ulterior motive to her line of questioning and eventually, he reveals information he should not have. Oleg, as proof of his love for her, puts his life on the line (00:15:47) and, in return, Anna kills him (00:16:30). This is the first instance in the movie where Anna is depicted as the demise of a man, but certainly not the last. She has used her good looks and intelligence, performed for those interested, and the short episode culminates with the murder of her male companion.

With this murder, the movie takes the viewer away from Anna's lavish life as a model and into her past, starting off with a scene depicting sex between Anna and a man, which she is not enjoying and is possibly not consenting to (00:16:50–00:17:17). Anna looks unhappy, her hair is shorter and disheveled and she is visibly malnourished as she sits at the table and applies for a job in the military while her male companion mocks her for it (00:17:20–00:18:08). Anna is then shown to be in an abusive relationship with this man, the scene showing him shouting obscenities at her, calling her names and pulling her hair for her alleged transgression

(00:18:08–00:19:45). As previously stated, Grossman writes that the stories of the *femme fatale* are likely to be those of revenge, and in Anna's past we see that need to escape her old life and the abuse she is suffering, exacting revenge on those who have wronged her. Following their argument, Anna and her boyfriend get involved in a robbery, ending up in a car crash (00:21:04–00:26:05). Upon their return home, Anna is greeted by a man (Luke Evans) sitting in their apartment who shoots her boyfriend and offers her a fresh start (00:26:36–00:27:40). The deal he offers her is an ultimatum that she does not like and she decides to instead, cut her wrist, taking her future into her own hands (00:27:40–00:29:36). The extreme action she undertakes is the proof of her desperation and the fact that she is tired of suffering, choosing death instead of being subjugated further. When the man tells her to have a little faith, Anna, bleeding out, responds with "Last time I put my faith in a man, look where it got me" to which he says: "Never put your faith in men, Anna. Put faith in yourself," inspiring Anna to cover her wound and live (00:30:02–00:31:00).

The narrative switches from the past back to the present where Anna is shown to be sitting in an interrogation room, nervously smoking a cigarette (00:31:30). The following sequence shows Anna being questioned about Oleg's death by Agent Miller (played by Cillian Murphy), showing the audience the levels of her performance as she claims not to know anything about what happened (00:32:00–00:33:45). Anna is quiet and subdued, dressed modestly, portraying innocence that the camera obliges, never straying from shots of her face. She performs for the Agent and the others watching from behind the mirror, there are tears in her eyes (00:33:48) and Miller is sympathetic. He offers to keep in touch, a professional gesture that is meant to keep her in check (00:35:15). After Miller leaves, the movie further drives home the idea that Anna is skilled above average by having Evans' character, Tchenkov, interact with Olga (Helen Mirren) who is in charge of the program Anna is being vetted for. Tchenkov is showing Olga a file where it shows that Anna has performed excellently in areas such as driving, knives, chess, marksmanship and acting (00:35:38–00:36:15). Olga seems dissatisfied despite Anna's scores and quotes Dostoyevsky to which Anna quotes Chekov back at her (00:36:30–00:37:04). The camera lingers on Tchenkov's face, expression proud as Anna impresses the woman in charge (00:37:23). The movie shows the viewer Anna's first mission, which ends in a shootout, the action scene showcasing Anna's capabilities as a fighter and gunwoman (00:38:13–00:43:52). Tchenkov checks in on Anna after, asking her to dinner and she tells him that she would love to see him but that she is too busy (00:47:02–00:47:42), the narrative now imbued with the possibility of a budding romance. Several sequences show the audience how

Anna got away with Oleg's murder; later, Anna is shown back in her apartment in Russia where Tchenkov visits her. Their budding romance, which had been shown in his silent support of her career and meaningful glances, culminates in them sleeping together (00:54:22–00:55:19).

From the start, Anna's motivation has been to leave behind her life in Moscow and she has made it clear that she will do this no matter what it takes. So upon realizing that the KGB will not let her go no matter the time limit (00:56:13–00:56:51), Anna has to struggle with working for Russia while being unhappy to do so, which is shown with a montage of her on various missions (01:09:41–01:13:20). After she kills the man in charge of the KGB, the movie switches to Anna's situation right after the meeting where she had realized that she would never be able to leave and shows that she had gotten captured by Agent Miller who then offered her a deal for her freedom (01:14:30–01:19:10), thus beginning her brief time working with the CIA. In only a few short interactions with the man, Anna seems to have also charmed Agent Miller who then follows her to her vacation spot where she sleeps with him as well (01:24:30–01:24:50). In the end, Anna leaves both Miller and Tchenkov heartbroken, the man in charge of the KGB dead, and her girlfriend to be interrogated by the CIA (01:35:19–01:36:29). Anna fakes her own death with Olga's help. Leaving her life as a spy behind, she escapes her fate and the control that the two competing countries (and the men vying for her attention) had on her (01:45:28–01:45:42).

In his review of *Anna* (2019) for the *IndieWire*, David Ehrlich points out Besson's seeming obsession with portraying strong women who end up being objectified on camera to a degree that is detrimental to the plot of the movie:

> The stylish French auteur and film mogul responsible for the likes of *Lucy*, *The Professional*, and at least nine alleged instances of sexual impropriety loves to build movies around blank women — usually fashion models — who can be reformatted with the power of his own design and costumed with the scant agency he's afforded them.

The idea of placing a female character as the one mirror image of the audience that Mulvey mentions in her paper seems to be impossible to achieve for Besson. Anna is essentially this "blank slate," but the audience has nothing to project itself onto her due to Anna not displaying any outward depth aside from her want for freedom and her intelligence, and as Erhlich in his review asserts: "Anna likens herself to the tchotchkes she sells, 'a woman inside of a woman inside of a woman,' and Besson has no interest in showing us that deepest layer — he keeps

that to himself like a secret." Ehrlich also notes that Besson is one of the directors that are most proficient in these types of movies, claiming that while "Besson helped give birth to this ready-for-the-runway breed of *femme fatale*" ("*Anna* Review"), he now seems to be the one determined to kill it. While there was an attempt at portraying the modelling industry as harsh and unforgiving to women, the portrayal falls short when the movie itself is doing nothing to combat this objectification Anna is facing during her gigs: "No, *Anna* has nothing more on its mind than the voyeuristic pleasures of watching a model waste a couple hundred cronies with a pistol" (Erhlich, "*Anna* Review"). Anna is clearly exploited by the people in her life as well as the job she has and, much like her, Sasha Luss is exploited by the camera. Anna is one of many modern takes on the *femme fatale* archetype, perpetuating the idea that the archetype does not present a flattering portrayal of women. Besson tries to distance her from the objectification but does not bring anything new to the trope aside from giving her a girlfriend as well as two men trying to win her over. Besson is interested in making sure the audience knows that Sasha Luss is attractive and that Anna can fight rather than in making the plot of the movie comprehensible.

Conclusion

To summarize, the thesis has sought to showcase how women are portrayed in media written by men and how these depictions can be harmful and perpetuate stereotypes or archaic beliefs about the inferiority of women. The stories chosen are representative of these tropes but are far from being the only such depiction, indicating a larger problem of men writing women characters well. Each of these characters is vastly different in age, nationality, and even species but they share the burden of the male gaze. While presenting themselves as the stories about female empowerment or love, they fall into the trap of writing characters that, while pleasing to the eye, are not developed enough to stand on their own. They are subjected to the voyeuristic observer, shown as conforming to modern, often, Western beauty standards and as decorations rather than people. The fact that these popular depictions are either directed or written by men also shows that despite trying to move away from the overly-sexualized tropes and stereotypes, these themes still prevail. These particular characters are the case studies that demonstrate how common such characterizations still are and how ingrained they are in our culture.

In order to move away from this type of harmful representations, further research should be done to ensure the prevention of negative influence resulting from it. There is the possibility of forming negative biases and perceptions when young girls and women come into contact with these depictions, further allowing the continuation of misogynistic views and oppression. More attention should first be given to representing female characters in media, subsequently, these representations should be well-thought out and realistic rather than focusing on outward appearances and idealized stereotypes. Lastly, as men's voices when creating such media are so strong, they should be more mindful when writing female characters and stories about female empowerment.

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