

THESIS

JUST ANOTHER TEEN MOVIE: ANALYZING PORTRAYALS OF
TEENAGE ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS ACROSS A
DECADE OF TOP-GROSSING TEEN FILMS

Submitted by

Abigail J. Zwier

Department of Communication Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Summer 2012

Master's Committee:

Advisor: Cindy L. Griffin

Jonathan Lupo
Pamela Coke

ABSTRACT

JUST ANOTHER TEEN MOVIE: ANALYZING PORTRAYALS OF TEENAGE ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS ACROSS A DECADE OF FILM

America's teenagers exhibit dating attitudes and behaviors that have been labeled both risky and harmful. This critical film study examines the implicit and explicit messages present in teenage films' portrayal of teenage romantic relationships so as to better understand the possible influences of the messages present in these films as teens seek them out for information and advice about romantic relationships in high school. I uncover the themes running throughout the top grossing U.S. box office feature films for each year over the course of a decade (2000-2010) that depict teenage romantic relationships in high school settings. The study is a critical film analysis in which focuses on answering two main questions: (1) what is being communicated about teenage romantic relationships in these films? and (2) how are those messages being communicated? To answer the questions I look at the dating scripts that each of the main teenage romantic relationships follow and find that two main narrative structure undergird all of the films: narratives of pursuit and rescue. Then, I consider the agency that each of the characters in the main romantic relationship exhibit, finding that male characters are featured with active agency and female characters with very little agency. Finally, I look at the hidden ideologies present within the films and uncover a patriarchal agenda, which follows the same, unoriginal scripts present in a lot of romance films. Ultimately, I conclude that these films give the allusion of progressive agendas but underneath the mask are simply the same traditional plots we have been seeing in films for decades.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A year-long undertaking such as this can not be accomplished without the contributions and support of many important people. I am grateful to the following:

My brilliant thesis committee: Many thanks for your support and encouragement throughout the conception, writing, editing, and presenting of this project. Without your insights and questions, this thesis would not be what it is today. Specifically, to Dr. Pam Coke, thank you for your cheerful spirit, hugs, and insights regarding adolescent behaviors. Thanks to Dr. Jon Lupo for introducing me to Shary's work early on, which really inspired this project, and thank you for your infectious sense of humor and contributions regarding film and genre. To my thesis chair, Dr. Cindy Griffin, thank you for your dedication to this project, in spite of my making you watch eleven teen romance films. Thank you for your light-hearted attitude, for your brilliant mind, and for the amazing feminist example you have set for me to follow. I will forever be appreciative of your investment in my academic progress as well as my personal growth. Thank you for asking thought provoking questions that took this thesis to a deeper analytical level and made my own personal life a more reflective one.

My family: Thank you for being the constant foundation with which I know I can always lean. Mom, thank you for digging through mountains of movies in clearance bins at stores all over town in search of my thesis texts. Thank you for fielding multiple teary grad school phone calls and loving me through it all. Dad, I am grateful for the ways in which your career has inspired my own academic life. Thank you for your interest in the thesis process, for your thought-provoking questions, and for caring about communication theories. J, thank you for making the transition to Colorado such an easy

one by being my home away from home. Megan, thanks for commiserating with me over days spent in the library with a thesis instead of outside with friends, and thank you for phone chats that kept me laughing in spite of it all.

My friends: You have overwhelmed me with your support over the past two years, and specifically during this time of thesis-writing. Katrina and Andrea, thank you for your blog posts and three-way phone convos that kept me grounded and helped keep my perspective in the right place. Team Fuqua, thank you for feeding me and giving me plenty to laugh about. Katie, my little, thank you for your encouragement throughout the semester and for your hugs that always make my days at the office so much better. And to Jess, you are the unexpected, life-changing blessing that came out of graduate school. Without you, I fear I never would have made it through. Thank you for walking through this season with me and for pushing me to be better, more generous, and more joyful.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	v
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	4
Media Effects: Growing Up in a Media Saturated World.....	5
Feminist Approaches to Film: A Few Key Moments.....	10
Teenage Romantic Relationships in Films: Love Stories to Sex Quests...	15
Texts and Method of Analysis.....	20
Description of Films.....	21
Analysis of Films.....	32
Chapter 2: Dating Scripts for Teenage Romantic Relationships.....	35
Overarching Narrative Structures: Pursuit and Rescue.....	36
Pursuit Narratives: No Matter What.....	37
Rescue Narratives: I’m Lost Without You.....	42
Beginning and End: Meet Cutes and Finales.....	48
Overcoming Arguments and Obstacles.....	51
Obstacles: Testing the Romantic Relationship.....	52
Arguments: Fighting for Us.....	65
Reconciliation: Kiss and Make Up.....	70
Iconic Scenes: Bringing Romantic Baggage to the Relationship.....	74
Summary.....	78
Chapter 3: Agency in Teenage Romantic Relationships.....	80
Misuse of Agency: Love Tames Rebellion.....	80
Lack of Agency: Love Sparks Action.....	86
Active Agency: Love Knows What it Wants.....	93
Agency in Pursuit and Rescue Narratives	95
Collaborative Agency: Overcoming Obstacles and Arguments.....	99
Kissing: Collaborative Agency?.....	105
Summary: How Much Agency Can Young Love Stand?.....	107
Chapter 4: Ideological Implications for Teenage Romantic Relationships.....	109
Broad Ideological Themes: Affirming Teen Audiences.....	110
Pursuit Narratives.....	113
Roles for Young Men: Relentless Patriarchal Pressure.....	113
Roles for Young Women: Tamed by Men.....	115
Rescue Narratives.....	117
Roles for Young Men: Saving the Helpless Female.....	117
Roles for Young Women: Reforming the Bad Boy.....	118
Ideological Implications: Love is All You Need.....	120
Conclusions and Future Direction.....	121
Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research.....	124
Wrapping Up: Do you Believe in Life After Love?.....	127
Appendix I.....	130

Just Another Teen Movie: Analyzing Portrayals of Teenage Romantic Relationships Across a Decade of Top-Grossing Teen Films

Chapter 1: Introduction

In one of the most iconic contemporary teen films to date, four boys get together and make a pact to lose their virginity by prom night. This memorable plotline of *American Pie* (1999) addressed both male and female teenage negotiation of (and desire for) expressions of sexuality and portrayed female characters as acting with agency in the arena of sexual desire. By doing this, *American Pie* defined new standards for audience expectations of teen movies. The film grossed a total of over \$235 million worldwide and set the stage for a modern era of teen films to occur with the start of a new millennium. It was into this era that I became invested in teen films for a very particular reason—I entered high school.

Just one year after *American Pie*'s filmic debut, I started ninth grade, and I, like many of my classmates, saw the film. I found *American Pie* to be especially educational having attended private school from preschool through eighth grade. The film opened my eyes to a whole new world of teenage sexuality and relationships, and it remained a source of advice, mentoring, and exposure to relational roadmaps as I ventured through the unfamiliar world of high school in the years that followed. As it turns out, I was not alone in my choice of media for romantic relationship guidance.

Statistical data shows that teenagers are uncomfortable seeking advice from superiors regarding a myriad of topics, but they are most reluctant to ask for advice about relationships. Instead, teenagers are more likely to turn to media portrayals of relationships for understanding. William Wall and W.A. Simson's "The Effect of

Cinema Attendance on the Behavior of Adolescents as Seen by Their Contemporaries,” published in 1949 in the *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, chronicled the ways in which motion pictures fill a knowledge vacuum in the lives of adolescents¹ and serve as their only source of information in regard to matters such as romantic relationships. They write, “The emotional and social education of the growing youth is left to the vivid realism of the screen” (Wall 57).

Almost fifty years later, Christine Bachen and Eva Illouz report similar findings in their article “Imagining Romance: Young People’s Cultural Models of Romance and Love.” They found that 94% of the young people in their study looked to television and 90% to movies to form their perceptions and expectations for romantic love. In contrast, only one third said they looked to their mothers and only 17% looked to their fathers to learn about romantic love (292). Jeanne R. Steele reports the same findings in her article, “Teens and Movies: Something to Do, Plenty to Learn.” After studying 51 teenage participants who spoke in focus groups about the role of movies in their lives, Steele writes in her discussion section, “Teens look to movies to understand reality, to understand the world they have inherited . . . they embrace movies as stories about the way the world is and the way they should act as adults” (249). So as teens attempt to navigate the uncharted waters of romantic relationships, they overwhelmingly turn to television and movies for advice.

The evidence provided by these studies suggests the prominent role of media in shaping teenagers’ understanding and expectations for romantic relationships. As David

¹ Current scholarship defines “adolescence” as continuing until a person reaches financial independence. The term “teenager,” on the other hand, encompasses solely the years of 13-19. In this paper I consider “adolescence” to be the umbrella term that covers “teenagers” and thus use the two interchangeably.

Considine, author of *The Cinema of Adolescence*, explains,

By its very nature, the adolescent film audience is a special and unique group responding to the cinema in a way markedly different from the way in which either children or adults respond. . . . Unlike the adult, the adolescent is still in a stage of identity development, still formulating basic values and attitudes. Thus film must be regarded as one in a range of forces potentially capable of shaping either positively or negatively the young person's visions of himself and his society (3).

As teenagers turn toward movies and television in search of answers to questions about dating, intimacy, and romantic relationships, we have reason to be concerned. Considine is explicit in stating that the immaturity of the adolescent audience makes them especially susceptible to the teen film industry's "influence and manipulation" (3).

Recent reports reflect some of our American teenagers' current views on dating, intimacy, and romance. *The Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that approximately one in five female high school students report being physically and/or sexually abused by a dating partner (Silverman). The U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that females between the ages of 16-24 are the most vulnerable of any age group to intimate partner violence (U.S. Dept. of Justice). This same age group is implicated with carrying over half of America's 19 million new STD infections per year. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, among U.S. high school students surveyed in 2009, 46% have had sexual intercourse and more than 400,000 teen girls aged 15-19 years gave birth in 2009 ("Youth Risk Behaviors"), most of which were unintended (Hamilton 4).

America's teenagers exhibit dating attitudes and behaviors that have been labeled both risky and harmful. This critical film study sets out to further understand the implicit

and explicit messages present in teenage films' portrayal of teenage romantic relationships so as to better understand the possible influences of the messages present in these films as teens seek them out for information and advice about romantic relationships in high school. I uncover the themes running throughout the top grossing U.S. box office feature films for each year over the course of a decade that depict teenage romantic relationships in high school settings. While I acknowledge an implied U.S. male/female, heterosexual, teenage audience in my critical film analysis, I also recognize the agency these audiences have in decoding the movies according to what they find useful for their own lives. Because of this, my study simply focuses on the messages presented in the films through portrayals of teenage romantic relationships, not on audience reactions to those messages. This study is a critical film analysis in which I focus on two main questions: (1) what is being communicated about teenage romantic relationships in these films? and (2) how are those messages being communicated?

Literature Review

In the following sections I will survey the literature of three distinct research areas relating to my project. First, I will discuss the previous research and theories surrounding the effects of media on teenagers and adolescents. Then, I will look at the field of feminist film theory, briefly discussing its history and the points in which this study will merge with feminist film theory's theoretical conversation. Finally, I will look at previous research regarding depictions of teenagers in films. This will allow me to situate my analysis of the films that I have chosen for this study into a broader, historical understanding of portrayals of teenagers in film.

Media Effects: Growing Up in a Media Saturated World

Although strong agreement exists supporting the assertion that media consumption affects viewers, competing theories lobby for how the effect occurs and to what extent. Due to the somewhat tenuous social situation teenagers find themselves in during this phase of life, effects of media upon 12-18 year olds is a widely studied phenomenon. Researchers studying this topic often turn to social cognitive theory, a popular theory that suggests that people can learn how to act, behave, or think simply by observing others. Social cognitive theory predicts, “imitation of behaviors is more likely if the media consumer thinks the portrayal is realistic and identifies with or desires to be like the media character” (Brown 16). Amber Ferris, Stacy Smith, Bradley Greenburg, and Sandi Smith summarize social cognitive theory with regard to media consumption by saying, “This theory proposes that people are not merely passive viewers of content but are cognizant consumers who reflect, regulate, and vicariously learn from the material projected on television” (663). Social cognitive theory offers a framework for thinking about the ways in which television provides information to its viewers from which to learn about their social world. As Albert Bandura explains in his article on social cognitive theory,

Humans have evolved an advanced capacity for observational learning that enables them to expand their knowledge and skills rapidly through information conveyed by the rich variety of models. Indeed, virtually all behavioral, cognitive, and affective learning from direct experience can be achieved vicariously by observing people’s actions and its consequences for them. Much social learning occurs either designedly or unintentionally from models in one’s immediate environment. However, a vast amount of information about human values, styles of thinking, and behavior patterns is gained from the extensive modeling in the symbolic environment of the mass media (270-1).

Bandura summarizes his argument by explaining that people’s social realities are

generally quite limited, and thus they are greatly influenced through vicarious experiences: “To a large extent, people act on their images of reality. The more people’s images of reality depend upon the media’s symbolic environment, the greater is its social impact” (271). This is true in the case of teenagers, whose social realities are just beginning to develop apart from their parents in high school—especially as they explore the world of dating and romantic relationships. Thus, messages in films regarding romantic relationships have the potential to be incredibly influential in shaping attitudes, beliefs, and expectations for teenage romantic lives.

Using social cognitive theory, Carol Pardun investigates the romantic scripts in movies for the very reason that teenagers model relationships after what they see on the screen. In “Romancing the Script: Identifying the Romantic Agenda in Top-Grossing Movies” she writes, “Although the characters on screen can influence both teens and adults, the intentional and ‘larger-than-life’ saliency of the characters [on screen] may have a bigger impact on adolescents who are still forming their worldviews” (212). With this quote, she echoes Bandura’s assertion about the impact of media portrayals on teens.

Scholars are moving beyond sociological theory, though. Jeanne R. Steele’s media practice model is a model developed to illustrate the process of media use exhibited by teens. The media practice model illustrates the cyclical way in which viewers are both affected by and affect the media they use. After surveying teens to better understand what media they choose to interact with and why they choose that media, Steele conceived of the media practice model. She (along with Brown and Walsh-Childers) explains, “This model assumes that adolescents (and probably others as well) choose media and interact with media based on who they are or who they want to be at

the moment” (Brown 9). In other words, teens choose media that reflect their identities back to them. At the same time, the characters and plotlines that they see in media also work to shape their identities. In this way, media are chosen by teens as an extension of their identity and media simultaneously shapes their identity in the cyclical process that Steele terms the media practice model. Although it can be applied to a wider demographic of viewers, Steele’s original concept was developed based on teenagers’ media use and provides a theory to use alongside social cognitive theory when thinking about the ways in which teens use and are influenced by media.

Many other studies have investigated this link between exposure to media and audience attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Of these studies, a few have focused specifically on teenage media consumption and linked that consumption to perceptions about the world regarding gender roles, sexual activity, and dating expectations and norms. In 2005, Carol J. Pardun, Kelly Ladin L’Engle, and Jane D. Brown sought to understand the sexual content in the most-watched media by a group of seventh and eighth graders to determine whether or not a relationship existed between heavy viewing of media with sexual content and teenage sexual activity. Using both surveys and interviews, Pardun, L’Engle, and Brown studied the media consumption of seventh and eighth graders in the Southeastern United States in comparison to their scores on a health and sexuality survey. According to Pardun, L’Engle, and Brown,

This combined content and survey analysis suggests that adolescents do indeed live in a sexual media world, and that the more sexual media a teen sees, the more likely he or she is to be sexually active and to anticipate future sexual activity. These analyses showed that individuals’ sexual media consumption is significantly related to their sexual experience and intentions to be sexually active (88).

The researchers discuss that their data implies that television does not, in fact, have the

most important association with adolescent's sexual behavior. Instead, they suggest that future research ought to focus on analyzing movie and music preferences of adolescents and teenagers since these are the most sexually explicit and the most used by teens (89-90).

A few years later, Heather Marron and Steve Collins sought to understand the link between mass media consumption and sexual attitudes and behaviors of young adults. By examining surveys given to college undergraduate students in introductory speech courses, they determined the amount of media consumption in specific media genres for each respondent and then compared that amount to their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors as expressed through answers to survey questions. Although they had many findings, the research regarding television movie viewing is the most applicable to my study. The study showed that television movie viewing seems to have a greater predictive relationship for males than females. Researchers found that male viewers who watched the most television movies had more sexual partners and predicted that their peers had sexual intercourse with more partners than those who watched the least amount. Also, "high male viewers reported a more liberal sexual attitude than their low viewing peers" (62). When discussing this, the authors reported, "Males may be more likely [than females] to turn to television when developing their attitudes about sex" (64).

Amber Ferris, Stacy Smith, Bradley Greenburg, and Sandi Smith also examined the potential for linkage between young, male, heavy-viewers and their attitudes, this time exploring reality dating shows and stereotypical perceptions about dating. After coding 64 hours of reality dating programs for content reflecting dating patterns, the researchers then surveyed male heavy-viewers of reality television and found that they do, in fact,

exhibit many of the dating behaviors and attitudes portrayed as reoccurring patterns in reality television. These attitudes include: viewing women as sex objects; viewing dating as a game, and believing that men are driven by sex. These attitudes, seen in television, were reflected in the attitudes exhibited by those males in the study who frequently watched reality dating television.

Focusing on the female gender, in 2008, Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz and Dana E. Mastro published, “Mean Girls? The Influence of Gender Portrayals in Teen Movies on Emerging Adult’s Gender-Based Attitudes and Beliefs” in which they examined “the manner in which gender is depicted in teen movies and the extent to which exposure to these images influences emerging adults' beliefs about gender and female relationships” (131). The results of the study “tentatively suggest that affinity with teen movies is related to: (1) stereotypical beliefs about female friendships, (2) more unfavorable attitudes toward women, and (3) perceptions that social aggression increases one's popularity with peers” (141-2).

The studies in this section illustrate the ways in which social science, communication, and sociology researchers have explored the links between media exposure and media effects on teenagers. As each study shows, effects are often more prominent in this age category because of the social situation of these young viewers. The variety of studies surveyed in this section also show the ways in which media effect both males and females with messages regarding dating, romance, and friendships, and relationships. As teens attempt to navigate their expectations and perceptions of the world, media images and storylines play a large role in shaping their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, just as social cognitive theory and the media practice model predicted.

For this very reason, it is vital to understand the messages inherent in the media produced for and watched by teens. As Steele writes, “Movies are interlocutors or participants in a dialectic give and take between what teens know about themselves and society and what they still have to learn” (238).

Feminist Approaches to Film: A Few Key Moments

The literature of feminist film theory is far too extensive to cover in its entirety throughout this next section. Instead, this portion of the literature review will focus on a few key pieces of scholarship in feminist film theory’s history that have impacted the ways of doing this type of analysis. I have chosen to focus on these particular moments for their influence on the field as well as for their relation to my study of portrayals of teenage romantic relationships in film.

Feminist film theorist Annette Kuhn calls 1972 “the watershed year for feminist film theory” (72) because this was the year that feminist approaches started developing in the United States as well as in Britain. Although the development occurred simultaneously, the schools of thought were quite different in each place. In America, theorists Molly Haskell, Marjorie Rosen, and Joan Mellen published books devoted to examining the place of women in dominant cinema (Kuhn 73). Haskell’s *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, Rosen’s *Popcorn Venus*, and Mellen’s *Women and Their Sexuality in the New Film* each assessed the extent to which portrayals of women in film reflected, contradicted, or conflicted with the ‘real’ lives of women. They assessed the truthfulness of the depictions and the ways in which they either did or did not line up with women’s actual experiences— keeping their works in line with the sociological approach many researchers in this field used at the time. As

Kuhn states, “The frame of reference for all this work is defined by a shared and usually implicit assumption concerning the relationship between cinematic representation and the ‘real world’: that a film, in recording or reflecting the world in a direct or mediated fashion, is in some sense a vehicle for transmitting meanings which originate outside of itself” (Kuhn 73). In short, the meanings pre-exist their transmission via film, which make filmic representations merely a reflection of society.

While all three works were influential to feminist film theory, Haskell’s *From Reverence to Rape* provides scholarship that is particularly applicable to my study. Her book traces images of women in film from the 1920s through the 1970s, arguing that the changes in depictions of women draw attention to the ways in which women “generally emerge as the projections of male values” (39). Women are either revered in filmic representations of mothers, Mother Nature, or angelic beings, or women are overly sexualized. In every case, Haskell describes the relationship between the film’s director, the time period of the movie’s production, and the portrayal of women in that film. Ultimately, she suggests that because men overwhelmingly dominate the role of director, depictions of women in film “are the vehicle of men’s fantasies, the ‘anima’ of the collective male unconscious, and the scapegoat of men’s fears” (40). In a particularly candid section of her introduction, Haskell notes, “We hear them—usually the men—waxing lyrical over how much this or that director ‘loves women,’ a love that, on closer inspection, turns out to be more smothering than benign indifference” (39). She reprimands male directors for portraying women’s sexual humiliation and self-abuse as the defining essence of their sex and suggests that the narrow possibilities afforded to women characters in film needs to be expanded.

Haskell brought to light ways of thinking about how women are portrayed in film, specifically regarding the default roles in which they are too often cast. Coming out of the sociological field of study, she simultaneously implies that these characters are representations of reality and the roles in which women are cast in society. Because of this, she calls women to “speak with our own voices and go against the grain of male desires and definitions” (402) as a way of creating new roles for women in society. She believes that by creating new roles in society women can break out of their stereotypical roles in films. In the book’s closing line Haskell declares, “We want nothing less, on or off the screen, than the wide variety and dazzling diversity of male options” (402).

Across the pond, British feminist film theorists began a different approach to feminist film theory. Using a kind of “add women and stir” approach (Spitzack), these theorists sought to strongly ground their criticism and theory in existing film theory. In doing this, theorists advocated for a feminist film criticism that simply applied a feminist perspective to rigorous, pre-existing theories such as structuralism, semiotics, and psychoanalysis, which are based on the idea that meanings are produced within the film texts themselves. When structuralism and semiotics were combined with feminism to analyze films two main consequences resulted. First, the text of the film became the primary object of analysis, and, second, ideology became a critical component of films analysis. Because these theoretical frameworks were founded on the notion that meanings are constituted (at least partially) in and by texts themselves, and because ideology often conceals its own operations, making it appear natural, textual analyses using structuralism and semiotics required a deconstruction of the text in order to expose these hidden ideological agendas. So, adding a feminist perspective to these pre-

established approaches allowed film theorists to identify, uncover, and talk about patriarchal ideologies as they influence and constrain the ways in which women are constructed in films.

Perhaps most notably from this school of feminist film theory comes Claire Johnston's 1973 work, "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema," which exposes the ways in which depictions of women function as signifier to perform precise iconographic and ideological functions in film. Johnston's presumption in this piece is that film is a language and women are a signifier. Essentially, employing Barthe's conception of myth, Johnston argues that depictions of women in film are used to signify something outside of the woman herself. In this sense, women are simply vehicles for what are assumed to be transcendent and iconographic meanings. Johnson argues that women no longer represent women, but, instead, a woman is presented as what she represents for men, often playing upon female stereotypes (for instance, woman as home in the western film or the *femme fatal* figure in *film noir*). As Johnston notes,

Iconography as a specific kind of sign or cluster of signs based on certain conventions within the Hollywood genres has been partly responsible for the stereotyping of women within the commercial cinema in general, but the fact that there is a far greater differentiation of men's roles than of women's roles in the history of the cinema relates to sexist ideology itself, and the basic opposition which places man inside history and woman as ahistoric and eternal (23).

These presentations of women, then, are a reflection of the structural, institutional, and historical contexts of the patriarchal ideologies within which they were created.

Although taking a different approach to feminist film theory, both Johnston and Haskell expose the stereotypical images of women in film and argue that these narrow confines for female characters must be broken.

Other British feminist film theorists employed the use of psychoanalysis as a way of understanding the relationship between the viewer of the film and the film text itself, and this type of criticism is a final piece to my coverage of feminist film theory. Using psychoanalysis, critics were able to go beyond simply reading the isolated text as an isolated text with pre-existing meaning; psychoanalysis brought the moment of reading and the reception of the text into the picture. The most well-known example of this (and possibly of feminist film theory as a whole) is Laura Mulvey's article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," published in *Screen*, in 1975. Mulvey writes, "Psychoanalytic theory is thus appropriated here as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" (6). Using Freudian concepts like scopophilia (pleasure in looking) and fetishism (the threat women embody to men as seen in the sign that is women's lack of penis; a memorial to castration) Mulvey argues that images of women in film function as signifiers of sexual difference, confirming man as subject and thus the maker of meaning. In this sense, "woman" is simply the object to be looked at for the pleasure of the man. According to Mulvey the sexual difference signified by images of women in film also represents the threat of castration that must be contained, and films have historically dealt with this threat in two ways. She writes,

The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety: preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object (an avenue typified by the concerns of the *film noir*); or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (15).

In both options, the neutralization of the dangerous woman occurs by men exerting their control over her—either through their gaze (on screen and as spectators) or male characters' actions in the film. Mulvey's work can be summed up with one of her article headings: "Woman as image/man as bearer of the look" (12).

All of the works discussed in this section provide an introductory survey of the extensive amount of literature available in feminist film theory. Throughout the section, I traced the development of schools of thought within feminist film theory beginning with the sociological approach in America where theorists focused on depictions of women in film as representations of reality. Then, I discussed the British theorists' approaches grounded in structuralism, semiotics, and psychoanalysis which all believed that meanings are made within the film texts themselves. On each continent, images of women in film remained a main component of the scholarship produced in both factions of feminist film theory.

Teenage Romantic Relationships in Films: Love Stories to Sex Quests

Just as with feminist film theory literature, an extensive amount of research exists regarding representations of teenagers in film. In fact, entire books such as David Considine's *The Cinema of Adolescence* and Timothy Shary's *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary Cinema* are dedicated to discussing filmic portrayals of teenagers. Both authors look at the portrayals of teens in school, delinquent teens, teenagers and the horror film, teens and their families, teenagers and science, and finally, teens in romantic relationships. Nearly all research on portrayals of teenage romantic relationships, including the sections of both of these books, focus exclusively on sex. The researchers are interested in understanding the act of sex and expressions of sexuality

instead of the romantic relationship as a whole. There is virtually no research done regarding holistic portrayals of romantic relationships. No one seems to be looking at the romantic journey, the couple's interactions outside of the act of sex, or even relational outcomes: the focus of my study. Since sexual expression does play a role in romantic relationships, it is important to survey the current research on this topic, particularly those studies that will be applied to my own analysis.

Considine's section on sexuality in *The Cinema of Adolescence* focuses on early filmic representations of youth exploring sexual expression. He begins with films from the 1920s and continues up through the 1970s. Considine found that early filmic representations almost exclusively associated sex with death and portrayed females as the active initiators of sex. Characters who fell prey to carnal desires and engaged in sexual activity ended up dead, murdered, or violently mutilated. As Considine explains, "What was left was antiseptic, sexless adolescence, or an adolescence in which sexual activity inevitably resulted in death or mutilation" (211). This theme continued on into the 1940s where depictions of teenage sex acts remained associated with death and violence, but also became associated with economic status. Working class characters were sexually active and their expressions of sexuality were read as merely a reflection of their inability to progress socially. Considine summarizes, "It is impossible to view [films of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s] without coming to the conclusion that Hollywood regarded adolescent sexual activity as threatening" (213). By associating sexual expression with death, violence, or low economic status, Hollywood enacted a scare tactic against youthful investigation of sexual acts.

Shary's book picks up where Considine's leaves off as he discusses the more contemporary portrayals of youth in films during the 1980s and 1990s. He writes, "Because adolescent sexuality is so confusing for those who experience it . . . the topic provides ripe tension and drama for films about youth" (209). In his chapter, "Youth In Love and Having Sex," he discusses these filmic portrayals of teenage romantic relationships in detail. For instance, "More often than not, the emphasis in youth films since 1980 has been on positive aspects of young love and negative aspects of young lust" (210). Shary then divides these films into subgenres based on patterns present across the two decades: films about youth in love and films about youth on the quest to having sex (most often in the comedic form as they try to lose their virginity).

Shary claims, "One generic pattern of youth love/sex films becomes clear by the mid 1980s is the division between narratives in which the attainment of love is more prominent and narratives in which the pursuit of sexual practice is the focus" (212). He determines that for stories about youth in love, the plotline focuses on determining whether or not the love relationship is meant to last. As the films follow the relational journey, the couple often face obstacles. If they overcome the obstacles, it is taken as a sign that their love is real and lasting. By not overcoming the obstacles, the characters (and the audience) know that the relationship is not meant to be. Obstacles appear to the couple as one of several external social forces threatening their love: family, class conflict, age, race, or parental control (and sometimes a combination of these obstacles).

The second subgenre of films about youth relationships films takes on a more comedic light and are about youth having sex, particularly on the quest to losing their virginity. In the few cases where the narrative does not focus on the quest to lose one's

virginity, the characters instead face struggles in being attracted to an adult or a member of the same sex. Should these confused teenagers act on their desires, the plotline most often continues on to detail the consequences of that decision (in the form of pregnancy, social ostracization, or a sexually transmitted disease). Shary points out that the images of youth sex and love in films throughout the 1980s and 1990s are quite diverse, but still, a few generalizations can be made about these images.

First, nerds have the most difficulty attaining love or sex. Nerd characters overwhelmingly experience the most obstacles (often created by their own awkwardness and social status) to attracting romantic partners. Additionally, Shary found that a character's acceptance level is integrally linked to attractiveness, which is often taken as a sign of sexual and amorous "skills" in these movies (214). In other words, the good looking characters are cast as the most popular in films and their physical looks are taken by the other characters as a sign of their sexual experience. One can infer from these two observations that one of the best ways in film for a nerd to experience social and sexual success would be to become more attractive.

Toward the end of his section, Shary employs a feminist reading of the images of youth in film with regard to portrayals of relationships. He writes,

Few of these films could be called feminist, however, and are more often sexist in their portrayals of young women's exploitation by young men, or at least their formal imagining of girls' bodies which are held up for voyeuristic pleasure by the male gaze in much greater proportion than the number of boys who are photographed for the opposite purpose. Many youth love/sex films tell young women to resist their image as sexual objects but in their telling objectify them all the same (214).

This quote points to the portrayal of female characters in films as a double-bind and a contradiction. Females are reprimanded in the film for being sexually promiscuous, but

are exploited sexually in their portrayal to the audience. Feminist film critic Laura Mulvey discussed this very issue in her scholarship, and we see her theory at work here in Shary's reading of images of female characters in teen movies.

The research, theory, and literature discussed in this literature review lay a rich foundation for my study. Both social cognitive theory and the media practice model show that the more media teenagers interact with, the more influenced they are by that media. These two theories, along with the additional understanding that teenagers drive box office numbers with their average of almost \$100 per week of disposable income (Palladino 97), provide a strong rationale for doing this study. Feminist film theory—specifically the work of Molly Haskell, Claire Johnston, and Laura Mulvey, stress the importance of focusing on images of women in film from different viewpoints. Finally, the existing literature regarding depictions of teens in film pays almost exclusive attention to portrayals of the act of sex and sexual expression rather than the trajectory of teenage romantic relationships.

In this study I utilize the aspects of feminist film theory presented here to analyze depictions of teenage romantic relationships as a whole (not just the act of sex) in order to better understand the messages teens may be gleaning from contemporary filmic portrayals of characters the same age as them. My study acknowledges an implied audience of U.S. heterosexual males and females ages 13-19 viewing these films and relies heavily upon a reflective theoretical emphasis in which texts construct audiences. In doing this, I recognize the audience's agency in discerning the impact (if any) these filmic portrayals have on their own lives. Broadly, my goal is to understand what is being communicated through films about teenage romantic relationships and how those things

are being communicated. Specifically, I look at depictions of the teenage romantic relational journey as it relates to three main research questions: (1) What are the dating scripts that the teenage romantic relationships follow in each of these films? (2) What types of agency do each of the main characters involved in romantic relationships have and how do they use that agency throughout the film? (3) What ideologies—either familiar or unfamiliar—do portrayals of teenage romantic relationships embody?

Texts and Method of Analysis

In attempting to answer my three research questions, I engage in a textual analysis of the top grossing U.S. Box office teen movies for each year for a decade. This resulted in eleven contemporary feature films released between 2000 and 2010 that I analyze for this project. To select the movies, I utilized the advanced search feature on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com) and searched for released feature films between the years 2000 and 2010 identified with the key words “Teen Movie” and produced in English. A teen film, by definition, is a film that is marketed toward a teen audience, one that teens watch, or one that depicts teens. Once these results appeared, I sorted them using the “US Box Office” feature, which displays the movies in order with the top domestic grossing films listed first. This search provided 86 results from which I was able to select the top grossing teen film for each year.

For this study, I use only teen movies that depict characters of high school age—between the ages of 14 and 19—in contemporary settings. Thus, I manually sorted the top grossing U.S. box office teen film for each year from 2000 to 2010 and dropped any top grossing films that featured college-age teenagers (the *American Pie* sequels [2001; 2003] were taken out for this reason) or teenagers in non-contemporary settings (*The*

Notebook [2004] was taken out for this reason). I also chose to remove films that depicted teens with super powers or in magical settings. I understand the implications of dropping movies with magical aspects considering this is the time period when the hugely popular *Twilight* and *Harry Potter* movies came out, but for the purposes of this study, I want to focus on “regular” teens shown in “regular” high school settings and, thus, I eliminated movies that rely on magical themes.² This manual sorting process left me with eleven U.S. feature films for analysis that span the decade of 2000-2010. They are as follows: *Bring It On* (2000, PG-13), *The Princess Diaries* (2001, G), *A Walk to Remember* (2002, PG), *How to Deal* (2003, PG-13), *Mean Girls* (2004, TV14), *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2005, PG), *Step Up* (2006, PG-13), *Juno* (2007, PG-13), *High School Musical 3* (2008, G), *17 Again* (2009, PG-13), *The Last Song* (2010, PG).

Description of Films

Bring it On is the story of Torrance, a senior in high school who has just been voted into the coveted spot of “cheerleading captain” for the upcoming school year. Her job should be easy: lead the team to defend its championship title at Nationals using the cheer that the previous team captain left behind for the squad. But, things go awry on the first day of practice when a cheerleading accident forces the team to replace one of their

² Although the movie *17 Again* has a magical component to it (main character, Mike O’Donnell is transformed from his adult body back into his 17 year-old body), this movie remained a part of my texts because the magical component is simply a momentary vehicle that then places the main character back into a natural world. This sets *17 Again* apart from the *Twilight* and *Harry Potter* movie series since those movies rely on an unnatural, magical world or character to fuel the movie’s plot. Additionally, the romantic relationships presented in *17 Again* take place in a high school setting with high school age teenagers since flashbacks allow the audience to see Mike O’Donnell’s romantic relationship as it originally happened when he was in high school.

best cheerleaders. During auditions, Torrance defies her fellow cheerleaders' advice and accepts a non-traditional, punk rock transfer named Missy to take the spot on the team. Through Missy, Torrance finds out that the team's cheers are not originals and that the previous team captain stole them from the East Compton Clovers, an inner-city school located about forty minutes away. The rest of the movie follows Torrance's attempts to redeem and validate her cheerleading career by reconfiguring the team's cheers just weeks before the competition at Nationals. This proves to be more complicated than she expected and Torrance doubts she can pull it off. Her college-boyfriend (a previous member of the squad) echoes this thought when he informs her that she should simply give up because she was never really "captain material" anyway. But, with the support and friendship of Missy, and her guitar-playing brother, Cliff, Torrance manages to get the team to Nationals. At the final competition, Torrance and her squad place second to the East Compton Clovers. Torrance dumps her unsupportive college-age boyfriend and ends the movie in the arms of her new love interest, Cliff, who supported her all along.

The Princess Diaries tells the story of Mia, an awkward 16-year-old girl who is wildly unpopular in her high school. Her only friends consist of Lilly and Lilly's brother, Michael. Her goal each day at school is to remain invisible. This becomes quite impossible when Mia's grandmother comes to visit from a small country called Genovia and Mia finds out her father's unfortunate death two months earlier makes her the next in line, and the only living heir, to the Genovian throne. At first, Mia rejects the idea of being a princess, but her mother and grandmother convince her to take "princess lessons" with her grandmother every day until the Genovian Independence Day Ball. Mia is to decide if she will accept her new role or reject the opportunity to rule Genovia, and she is

to announce her decision at the ball. Her newfound status, and the results of her makeover, lead Mia to popularity in her school. The most popular boy in school, Josh, asks her to attend the annual beach party with him, and Mia blows off her friends, Lilly and Michael, to do so. At the beach party she is publicly humiliated by a prank pulled by the popular kids and Mia realizes that they are not truly her friends after all. To make it up to Lilly and Michael, Mia invites them to the Genovian Independence Day Ball where she plans to renounce her throne. But, a personal diary and a letter from her now-deceased father arrives in the mail for Mia's 16th birthday and Mia changes her mind about her future. She attends the ball, accepts the throne, and shares her first dance (and kiss) with Michael. The movie ends as Mia travels to Genovia, explaining as she writes in her own diary that she is moving there with her mother for good and that Michael and Lilly plan to visit during the summers.

A Walk to Remember is a film based on the Nicholas Sparks novel by the same title. It follows the life of Landon, a senior in high school who runs in the popular crowd. After getting into some trouble with the law and the school system, Landon is issued community service responsibilities to pay off his debts in the form of tutoring, cleaning, and participating in the school play. While fulfilling his community service, Landon gets to know Jamie, a preacher's daughter and wildly overwhelmingly unpopular peer in his high school. Landon and his friends constantly ridicule Jamie for her fashion sense (she wears the same sweater nearly every day) and her affinity for the Bible and helping others. When Landon is cast as the lead in the school play, he turns to Jamie for help with his lines. She decides to befriend him as a means of fulfilling one of her life goals, to be friends with someone she does not like. The two grow to know each other as they

work on their lines for the play and during the show's debut Landon abandons the script and kisses Jamie on stage. His moment of passion leads to an unlikely love that grows as Landon helps Jamie accomplish tasks on her "bucket list." Then, Jamie shocks Landon by telling him that she has had leukemia for two years and has stopped responding to treatments. He is upset with her at first for hiding this news, but eventually they come together and he supports her through the worst of the disease. In one of the final scenes of the movie, Landon helps Jamie accomplish the number one item on her bucket list: to get married in the church where her parents were married. The two wed and then Jamie passes away. The movie ends with Landon being accepted into medical school, still very much dedicated to the memory of his wife and first love, Jamie.

How to Deal is a movie about Halley, a high school student who loses all hope in love after suffering through her parent's divorce and watching her sister's engagement go awry. When Halley's best friend, Scarlett, falls for the star of the soccer team, Halley warns her to be careful with love. Instead of following Halley's cynicism, Scarlett falls for her boyfriend Scott and has sex with him. A couple months later, Scott tragically dies of a heart defect while playing soccer. His death leaves Scarlett shaken and upset and as she attempts to deal with his passing, Scarlett finds out that she is pregnant. Halley and Scarlett hang out with Scott's best friend, Macon, as they cope with Scott's death. Macon is more interested in having fun than in going to school and Halley feels drawn to him. After attending a party together, Macon gets in a car accident with Halley in the car. He is upset with her for not having sex with him at the party and so he leaves the scene of the accident with her injured in the car. Halley, now with a broken arm, is convinced that she does not need Macon, or any man in her life, but a discussion with her pot-smoking

grandmother about first loves changes her mind and the film ends with Macon and Halley back together, united in bringing Scarlett to the hospital to give birth to her baby.

In *Mean Girls*, 16-year-old Cady Heron deals with the challenges of entering the public school system after being home schooled by her parents in Africa. On her first day of school, Cady is befriended by two social outcasts, Janice and Damian. Janice and Damian educate Cady on the school's social hierarchy and together, the three of them devise a plan to take down "The Plastics," the group of girls that rule the school. The basis of the plan revolves around Cady pretending to become one of The Plastics and infiltrating the group from within. Once on the inside, Cady is to help Janice and Damian destroy power of the group's ring leader, Regina George, by taking away her three biggest weapons (as named in the movie): her hot body, her army of skanks, and her boyfriend, Aaron Samuels. As the plan unfolds, Cady falls under the spell of popularity and begins to act like one of The Plastics. She is obsessed with her appearance; she purposefully fails a math test in order to gain the attention of Regina's ex-boyfriend, Aaron Samuels, who can tutor her; and she blows off her true friends, Janice and Damian. Everything comes to a head when Regina seeks revenge over Cady for ruining her life. Regina releases copies of a book where she has written rumors and judgments about everyone in school and frames Cady for writing it. Cady's own popularity falls apart at this point as the school turns against her for the mean things they think she's written. In the end, Cady takes the blame for the book even though she did not write it and wins Aaron Samuel's affection for her honesty. She fixes her relationship with Janice and Damian, and joins the math team as a sign that she has given up on the quest for popularity.

The movie *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* follows four best friends (Tibby, Lena, Bridget, and Carmen) as they go their separate ways for a summer. Before leaving for their respective summer trips, the girls go shopping and find a pair of jeans that miraculously fit all four of them. They decide that over the course of the summer, they will each have the jeans for a specific amount of time and during that time they must chronicle everything that they do, since they believe the jeans will bring them good luck. They write letters to each other to stay in touch and the movie follows each one's journey through those letters. Tibby stays at home during the summer and works at a local drug store. She is determined to use her summer to make a documentary film. While working on the film she meets a young girl, Bailey, who is interested in the process, and volunteers herself to be Tibby's assistant for the project. The two form an unlikely bond. Then, Tibby finds out that Bailey has leukemia and her summer becomes more about Bailey's life than anything else. Tibby undergoes dramatic attitude transformation over the summer due to her experiences and her dealing with the eventual death of Bailey. Meanwhile, Lena heads to Greece to spend the summer with her Grandparents. While in Greece she meets and falls for a young Grecian boy named Kostas. Bridget attends an all-girls soccer camp in Mexico where she falls for her coach, Eric. She spends her summer scoring goals and seducing Eric, to whom she eventually loses her virginity. Finally, Carmen spends the summer in South Carolina with her father. Upon arrival at his house, she is shocked to find that he has a new family there that he is about to marry. Carmen faces the challenge of feeling betrayed and left out, but manages to salvage her relationship with her father just in time to be an attendant in his wedding. Throughout

the film, each of the girls grow in their own way and they reunite at the end of the summer as best friends.

Step Up tells the story of Tyler Gage, a street kid who gets in trouble trespassing with his friends on the property of the Maryland School of Arts. When caught in the school by a security guard, Tyler helps his friends escape and takes the blame for the vandalism of the school upon his own shoulders. As repayment to the school and community service issued by the courts, Tyler is sentenced to clean the Maryland School of Arts every day after school. While doing his community service work, Tyler meets Nora, a student at the Maryland School of Arts who is preparing for her senior showcase. Nora's senior showcase is her own choreographed dance that will determine whether or not she gets accepted into a dance company after graduation. When her dance partner suffers a sprained ankle in practice, Nora is left to find a new partner for her showcase. No one in the school lives up to her expectations, until Tyler offers to help. She is skeptical at first, but eventually decides she is willing to give Tyler a try. As they practice for the showcase, Tyler and Nora grow closer together and each one teaches the other about their respective forms of dance—Tyler teaches Nora hip-hop and break dance and Nora teaches Tyler ballet. Their interactions convince Tyler that he wants to attend the Maryland School of Arts full time, but the school director tells him that he must first prove to her that he deserves a spot. Eventually Nora's original partner returns to the dance and Nora is forced to dismiss Tyler from being a part of the showcase. Tyler angrily leaves the school and goes back to his street kid ways, but he has been changed by his time with Nora and now expects more for himself. He returns to the scene just before Nora's senior showcase performance where she apologizes to him and the two

decide that they must do the dance together for the audience. With Tyler's help Nora is able to give the performance she has always dreamed of giving and ends up with an offer to join a ballet company post-graduation. Tyler is accepted into the Maryland School of Arts and the movie ends with the two of them kissing in each other's arms.

Juno is a movie named after its main character, a sixteen year old who finds herself unexpectedly pregnant by her longtime friend, Paulie, after their very first sexual encounter. Juno's first reaction to the pregnancy news is to get an abortion, but after further consideration she decides to remain pregnant and look into options for adoption. She comes clean to her father, Mac, and stepmother, Bren, who are supportive throughout the entire pregnancy, and begins looking for a possible adoptive family for her baby. She settles on Mark and Vanessa Loring after meeting with them in their expensive, suburban home. Vanessa expresses doubts about whether or not Juno will actually be able to follow through with the adoption plan once her baby is born. Meanwhile, Mark and Juno strike up a friendship as they bond over their mutual love for punk rock. As her pregnancy progresses, Mark and Juno continue to spend time together and eventually he divulges to Juno that he does not feel ready to have a baby and plans to leave his wife Vanessa. Despite this news, Juno remains steadfast in dedication to the adoption plan. Juno comes to terms with her feelings for her baby's father, Paulie, and confronts him. He admits that he has only stayed away from her because she expressed earlier that she wanted him to do so. Now, with her blessing, the two of them can be together. He is there for the birth of their son, who is then adopted by single mother, Vanessa. The film ends as Juno and Paulie share a kiss.

High School Musical 3: Senior Year is the third movie in a series of films that debuted as television movies, which feature Troy and Gabriella, high school sweethearts and singing partners at East High. Troy is the star basketball player, seeking out college scholarships and Gabriella is the brainiac applying to law school at Stanford. Together they form the school's "it couple" and in this third movie they face the challenge of determining their futures post-high school graduation. As a final act of senior bonding, Troy, Gabriella, and all of their friends decide to join the cast of the school's musical. They have fun rehearsing together, learning the choreography, and spending time in practice painting sets and trying on costumes. Meanwhile, theater diva, Sharpay, concocts a plan to remove Gabriella from the musical so that she can be the star of the show instead and sing counterpart to Troy. When she finds out that Gabriella has been accepted into Stanford's freshman honors program that coincides with the same dates as the musical performance, Sharpay sees her chance to eliminate Gabriella from the show. She broadcasts Gabriella's honor making it impossible for Gabriella to turn down the opportunity that everyone is so excited about for her. Taking the spot in the honors program means that Gabriella has to leave the school before the musical, prom, and even graduation. Troy is devastated and decides that he cannot have his prom without his girlfriend by his side. He drives from New Mexico to California, picks up Gabriella and brings her back to East High in time for all of the final senior festivities. As the curtain is about to close on their senior year, Troy announces that he has chosen to attend the University of California Berkeley where he can play basketball and participate in theater, but most importantly, be close to Gabriella while she is at Stanford.

17 Again, the one movie that does contain “magic,” traces the life of Mike O’Donnell, a former star basketball player who gave up his chance at a basketball scholarship to marry his high school girlfriend, Scarlett, who got pregnant during their senior year. The movie opens with Mike as a grown man. He is bitter about his life and is headed into a divorce with his wife, Scarlett, who he has blamed for his present circumstances. In a small act of magic, Mike is given the chance to return to high school. He believes that the chance is given to him so that he can redo his basketball career and this time make what he believes to be the right choice, attaining his scholarship and not marrying Scarlett. Once re-entering his seventeen-year-old body and returning to the high school where his children now attend, Mike realizes that he has not gone back for himself, but instead has returned to high school to help his kids. His daughter, Maggie, is in an unhealthy relationship with the bully of the school who simultaneously is bullying Alex, Mike’s son. Mike (who goes by the name of Mark once he re-enters high school), helps Maggie see that she deserves better than her loser boyfriend. He also helps Alex join the basketball team and develop the courage to talk to the girl of his dreams. Throughout all of this, Mike spends time with Scarlett, helping her re-landscape her backyard. He falls deeper in love with her, but cannot make her see that she should give her husband another chance. When their divorce case comes up in court, Mike attends in his seventeen year old body and delivers a moving speech recounting the day that Mike fell in love with Scarlett. Scarlett asks the judge to postpone the case and she is granted this wish. As both have decided to give their marriage another chance, Mike is transformed back into his adult body and he runs after Scarlett. The two embrace and the movie ends as they kiss each other and walk away hand in hand.

The Last Song is a coming of age tale for rebellious teenager, Veronica “Ronnie” Miller. At sixteen years old, Ronnie has dealt with her parents divorce by refusing to speak with her father or play the instrument he taught her to love. Ronnie is a child prodigy in piano and already has a college acceptance to Julliard, but she is so bitter against her father that she refuses to attend the school let alone touch the instrument. Her bad attitude and affinity for defiant rebellion get her sent by her mom to spend the summer with her father at his beach house in a small seaside town. Over the course of the summer, Ronnie learns lessons about loyalty, honesty, and love fueled by her romance with local heartthrob, Will Blakelee. As she falls in love with Will, she simultaneously mends the relationship with her father just in time to find out that his terminal cancer is months away from taking his life. The news of Ronnie’s dad’s cancer shakes Will, as well, and he is forced to come clean about a secret he has kept from Ronnie. Will’s friend, Scott, was the person who accidently burned down the local church, an act that Ronnie’s father has been carrying the guilt and blame for since he was the only one inside the church when the fire was started. Ronnie is furious with Will for keeping this secret from her and she cuts him out of her life completely. He leaves for college and she chooses to stay with her dad past the summer’s end to take care of him in his last months of life. The two live in the beach house and Ronnie rediscovers her love for the piano. She determines to finish writing a composition her father began entitled “For Ronnie.” Just as she writes the last notes onto the page, her dad takes his last breaths. At the funeral, as Ronnie speaks a few words about her dad, Will returns and sits in the back of the church. The two speak briefly after the service, and Ronnie informs Will that she will be attending Julliard in the fall. He tells her that he has decided to

transfer to Columbia so that they can be together and the movie ends as the two share a passionate kiss.

Analysis of Films

The following research questions guide my study: (1) What are the dating scripts that the teenage romantic relationships follow in each of these films? (2) What types of agency do each of the main characters involved in romantic relationships have and how do they use that agency throughout the film? (3) What ideologies—either familiar or unfamiliar—do these films’ portrayals of teenage romantic relationships embody?

In answering these questions, I utilize several of the theories discussed in my literature review. Specifically, I pull from Haskell, Johnston, and Shary to assist in understanding the dating scripts that the teenage romantic relationships in my texts follow. Haskell and Johnston’s theories regarding limited portrayals of women in films aid me in naming the roles each of the main characters find themselves in throughout the romantic relational journey and allow me to analyze those roles. The findings in Pardun’s study, “Romancing the Script” and Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, and Smith’s study about the content of reality dating shows versus viewer’s perceptions of dating provide me with some typical dating attitudes, scripts, and themes found in media that I look for in my analysis. Finally, in answering the first research question, I rely on Shary to understand the narrative conventions of this teen movie genre. Shary gives me the vocabulary to identify the traditional narrative conventions found in teen films and then recognize how my texts either fit into or deviate from those conventions. Shary’s previous work in critical film analysis of teen movies will further expand the body of

texts with which I can compare my own narrative film analysis for understanding dating scripts.

To help answer the second and third research questions, I utilize Considine, Shary, and any other relevant bodies of literature that help me make sense of my findings. Answering the second research question allows me to combine my findings regarding dating scripts and agency, adding to what we already know about portrayals of teenagers in films. Taken together, these answers offer up a richer understanding of portrayals of teenage romantic relationships in films and supply the content for analyzing the ways in which ideologies function within those relationships—thus, attending to the third and final research question.

To begin my process of critical film analysis, I watched each of the films and broadly coded for the dating script that the main characters' romantic relational journey follows. Then, I named the different types of agency represented in the films by each of the characters in the main romantic relationships and compared the findings based on gender and power. Although communication scholarship is littered with the term, "agency" remains a concept with several definitions. Kenneth Burke's understanding of agency as concerned with how things get done (275-320) in his work, *The Grammar of Motives*, is one of the most widely accepted definitions. In this definition he focuses agency to refer to a means or an instrument. English professor Susan Wells builds on this notion with her definition of agency as, "The activity of a subject pursuing an intention" (*Rhetoric and Agency*). I will be using Wells' understanding as the large umbrella definition of agency for this project. In each of the films, characters engage in acts of

agency. That is, each character intentionally pursues action for a purpose during the film. It is those moments that I analyze in my third chapter.

Finally, I use the analysis from the previous two questions to answer the third research question regarding the ideologies portrayed through the relationships. The answer to this question provides insight into the decade long ideological package presented to teenagers about teenage romantic relationships through film.

Following this introduction, the second chapter will take on the first research question—focusing on the dating scripts present within the films. The third chapter analyzes the types of agency presented in the films and the ways in which those types interplay with gender roles and power dynamics. Chapter four examines the ideologies present in the films and summarizes the findings from my study as well as provides suggestions for future research and application.

Chapter 2: Dating Scripts for Teenage Romantic Relationships

In *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American*

Cinema, Timothy Shary distinguishes between types of teen films based on the ways in which they portray teenage relationships: those teen films that focus on the pursuit of sex verses those that narrate the teens' search for love. Although the films that I discuss in this project are not all focused primarily upon the attainment or development of a romantic relationship, I can categorize the relational plotlines in each of the eleven films that I am studying into the "attainment of love" narrative category. In other words, all of the films that I am analyzing for this particular project follow narratives where the main goal of the romantic relationship plotline is to attain love. Although sex may play a role in the couples' attainment of love, having sex is not the purpose of the pursuit of the romantic relationship. Because the top-grossing films chosen for this project all happen to be rated between G and PG-13, it makes sense that sex would not play a large role in the relational plotlines. By definition, in order to be rated in these more tame rating categories, the films cannot engage in racy scenes of sexual exploration. Instead, portraying stories of innocent teenage love seems logical as those plotlines more easily fit into G, PG, and PG-13 ratings. All eleven films are part of the teen film genre. More specifically, they are part of the faction of that genre that Shary categorizes as "attainment of love" films. Certain aspects of the romantic relationships portrayed in this filmic genre come to be expected by viewers of the films—namely, the obstacles, the arguments, the kiss, and the attainment of love. This chapter seeks to investigate the dating scripts to which the couples in these films adhere, specifically by analyzing the

ways in which they respond to this genre distinction and the conventions associated with it.

I begin by examining the broad narrative plotlines that undergird the romantic relationships in my texts. Then, I analyze the obstacles and arguments that each of the couples face throughout the course of the films and the ways in which they either do or do not overcome those. Finally, I look at the role of kissing, specifically considering how “the kiss” functions for each of the couples. As the chapter is organized, I move from a holistic level, as I look at the broad dating scripts, to a more detailed level, as I discuss the function of these smaller structures within the site of the teenage romantic relationships. By studying the romantic relationship scripts in this chapter, I seek to lay a foundation for enhancing the conversation regarding agency in chapter three and ideologies in chapter four.

Overarching Narrative Structures: Pursuit and Rescue

Two broad narratives structure the romantic relationships in the eleven teen films that I am studying: pursuit narratives and rescue narratives. Both narrative types play out in different ways across the texts particularly as they engage the more detailed aspects of the plot, which I will discuss in later sections of this chapter. But, first, I will take a pass at the overarching narratives as a way of illuminating what these films present on the most general level. Pursuit and rescue narratives exist within each of the texts in such a way that they are not mutually exclusive. To be clear, certain films incorporate both pursuit and rescue narratives simultaneously while others focus solely on one or the other. In this section, I will look at each structure individually, but I will remain cognizant that certain films hinge on the interplay of the two main narrative types. So,

although I look at them separately, they can— and do—function together, which I will discuss at the end of this chapter.

Pursuit Narratives: No Matter What

Those movies with pursuit narratives rely on one character (generally the lead male character) to chase after the other in an effort to win him or her over. These narratives tell the tale of unrelenting confidence in what often appears at the outset to be an unattainable relationship. Pursuit narratives are seductive in this way since they require one character to remain firmly dedicated to the other character and suggest that dating relationships will be successful as long as this condition is met. With one committed character willing to pursue the other without a doubt, the relationship proves strong enough to overcome any obstacle, argument, or immovable barrier standing in the way of the attainment of love.

Pursuit narratives run rampant throughout these eleven films. In nine of the twelve main romantic relationships depicted in these movies, the boy pursues the girl. Rarely does a female character pursue a male character although there are three relationships that follow this script. Interestingly, these are also the three most counter-cultural relationships. Cady pursues Aaron in *Mean Girls*, but this movie is a comedic representation of teenage life meant to make fun of the high school culture by portraying extravagant and absurd characters in larger-than-life depictions of teen drama. Thus, Cady's pursuit is somewhat of a joke on which the film's plotline hinges. Bridget's storyline in *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* is another example of girl pursuing boy, but in this case, Bridget is reprimanded for her advances and ends the film full of regret over her choice to pursue Eric. Their relationship does not work out—the only one of

any of the films for which this is so. Finally, *Juno* depicts a strong female lead who pursues her high school crush, but this independent film relies on the fact that her crush, Paulie, is already in love with her. So, in reality, though Juno pursues Paulie, her pursuit is more of an awakening to her true feelings for someone who has already expressed his interest. Clearly, these films that dare to flip the pursuit narrative face problems of their own. Rarely does the female pursue a male, but when she does, it is done in such a way that the relationship is meant to be laughed at or the relationship fails or she pursues the male within the safety of his pre-established affection. It is exponentially more common to see males pursue females in these teen films.

All of the other nine films that depict pursuit narratives do so in the traditional way in which the boy pursues the girl. In one of the most conventional portrayals of the pursuit narrative, Will relentlessly chases after Veronica (“Ronnie”) in *The Last Song*. Ronnie is a punk-rock loving, emotionally damaged teenage girl who is stuck spending the summer with her father whom she has chosen to be estranged from since his divorce with her mother. While roaming the beach to avoid her dad, Ronnie meets Will, the local straight-laced teen heartthrob and beach volleyball hero. Will is smitten with Ronnie despite her obvious lack of interest in him and their seeming incompatibility. He fights hard to get her to even tell him her name when he approaches her in the local burger joint. Somehow, her cold attitude toward him does not turn him away. Will continues to pursue Ronnie, asking if she would like to come watch him play volleyball sometime. She turns him down. Though she has given him no sign of interest, he continues to seek after her, even going as far as to spend the night on the beach helping her protect a nest of

sea turtles. Eventually Will's persistence pays off and he softens Ronnie's heart and she accepts his invitation to go on a date.

But Will's pursuit is not over yet. The same day as their first date, Will's ex-girlfriend intercepts Ronnie on her way to watch Will's volleyball match. She attempts to sabotage Ronnie and Will's relationship by telling Ronnie that Will treats all the girls in town the way he is treating her. Ronnie believes Will's ex-girlfriend and runs away without telling Will why she is leaving. As soon as Will's volleyball match is over, Will goes to Ronnie's house to find out why she left. She refuses to talk to him and slams the door in his face. But, Will cannot be deterred from his pursuit of the girl he likes. He decides to sit outside and wait for her, no matter how many hours it takes for her to give in and come talk to him.

Finally, Ronnie gives in and goes outside to talk to Will. She yells at him and tries to end the relationship, but again, Will refuses to give up. He tries to reason with Ronnie, which does not calm her down. Mid-argument, as Ronnie is yelling at him, Will resorts to simply grabbing her and kissing her as a sign of his affection and dedication to the relationship. His kiss wins her over and his persistence pays off as the two of them make-out on the beach, drop-the argument, and effectively continue their relationship.

True to the pursuit narrative script, Will never gives up. He chases after Ronnie in spite of her bad attitude, their seeming incompatibility, her lack of interest, and an ex-girlfriend's jealous attempt at intervention. Eventually Ronnie cannot sustain her indifference toward Will and she lets him in, coming to terms with the fact that he knew what was best for both of them all along. The viewer is seduced by Will's determination

and dedication to the relationship. His unwavering pursuit becomes a sign that the two are meant to be together, destined for love.

In a second conventional portrayal of the pursuit narrative, Macon wins over Halley with his persistence toward her in *How to Deal* (2003). The two meet through mutual friends and start hanging out in larger group settings, but soon, Macon is romantically interested in Halley. He asks her out on a date while the two are at school and she immediately turns him down. Halley is skeptical of love after her parent's divorce and she wants nothing to do with getting into a relationship. But, Macon is not deterred: he continues to pursue Halley. When one of their mutual friends passes away, Macon uses the opportunity to bond with Halley, spending time with her as they both deal with the emotional trauma. One evening, Macon shows up at Halley's house and, in an all too familiar romantic trope, throws pebbles at her window until she comes outside to see him. There he convinces her that they should kiss, and they do.

Though they date for a while, the two break up when Halley refuses to have sex with Macon. Even this break up will not deter Macon's dedication to the relationship. He comes back to apologize for being upset over Halley's unwillingness to have sex, recognizing that she was hesitant because she liked him too much and worried that having sex would ruin their relationship. But Halley dismisses his apology. In a second apology attempt, he shows up at her house and again summons her outside by throwing pebbles at her window, offers her a box of chocolates, and confesses that he messed up. Halley turns down this apology too and leaves him alone in her backyard. Finally, Macon publically apologizes to Halley over the radio, telling her he loves her and that he

is committed to her alone. This final apology wins Halley over and his persistence pays off. The movie ends with the two dancing in each other's arms.

Just as in *The Last Song*, *How to Deal* presents a conventional pursuit narrative through Macon and Halley's relationship. Macon's relentless commitment to the relationship, despite being turned down and rejected several times by Halley, can be seen as evidence of their true love. He is dedicated to Halley and will not give up on her even when she is determined not to be with him. Eventually his pursuit pays off as he wins over the girl at the end of the film. His pursuit allows the audience to recognize that all along, Macon what was knew best for both of them and that the two are meant to be together.

Both of these films are representative samples of the traditional pursuit narrative in which the boy pursues the girl. In its most basic sense, this narrative relies on the knowledge that the boy knows what he wants and will stop at nothing to get it, even if the girl is unsure that she wants him back. The scripts tap into the familiar trope in which the boy knows best and must seek after the girl and convince her to come to the realization he seems to have known all along: that they are meant to be together. Eventually, the boy's persistence and dedication award him the love of the girl and the two live happily after.

Pursuit narratives are not unique to teen romance films. This particular script is one we see played out across multiple genres of films and novels. What makes the pursuit especially appealing in teen films is the confidence with which one of the high school-aged characters remains committed to the relationship. These characters are all between the ages of fourteen and eighteen and they exhibit relationship confidence that

most grown adults seem to lack. The characters are young enough that they can only have had one or two previous romantic relationships and yet, in these scripts they are committed to putting themselves on the line and fighting for the love of the other character. The innocence of this love and the characters' unrelenting dedication to the relationship can only mean one thing: that the two are destined to be together. The pursuit is not only worth it for the characters, since it ends in the attainment of true love, but in the case of teenage romantic relationships, it is extremely attractive for the audience to watch. A teenager who relentlessly fights for a relationship perpetuates the stigma that in attaining love, someone always knows without a doubt that the love is meant to be and will stop at nothing to get it. A male character's pursuit, then, is the ultimate signifier of desire for one true love. His dedication lets the female off the hook, suggesting that love will literally hunt her down and find her without requiring anything from her. For female viewers (who are the majority viewers of this teen film genre), this plotline is understandably appealing. Clearly, male pursuit occurs in very traditional scripts in these films and remains particularly alluring in the teen film genre, specifically to a female audience.

Rescue Narratives: I'm Lost Without You

Rescue narratives build off of the traditional Cinderella script in which a rich, successful prince rescues a common, servant girl and transforms her into a beautiful princess. Though these rescue narratives occur in different ways across the films in this study, they ultimately portray one character saving the other character emotionally, financially, or physically. Rescue narratives are just as alluring as pursuit narratives because they suggest that true love transforms and elevates people to better versions of

themselves, versions they could not achieve outside of the relationship. Once the rich, successful, attractive character rescues the love interest, who lacks one or all of those traits, the rescued character can achieve higher status through popularity, attractiveness, financial, or emotional gain. In other words, it is only within the relationship (post-rescue) that the character (most traditionally the female) can be whole.

Lena's storyline in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* is an example of the traditional Cinderella rescue narrative. Kostas (the rescuer) literally saves Lena from drowning after she falls in the water, gets her pant leg caught on part of the dock, and is trapped beneath the water's surface. Kostas jumps into the water, unhooks her pant leg from the dock, and pulls Lena above the water where she can freely breathe again. He also rescues Lena from her uptight self and helps her let loose and enjoy life in ways that she would not before she met him. The movie portrays this change in Lena over time. Pre-Kostas Lena wore her hair in tight buns or ponytails, but Lena comes back from her trip to Greece where she met and fell in love with Kostas with her curly hair billowing down around her shoulders. He has helped her—both literally and figuratively—let down her hair to enjoy all that life has to offer. Kostas rescues Lena in two different ways: from drowning and from her uptight self. Essentially, he helps her to become a better, more complete version of herself, which she could have not achieved without him.

Reversed Cinderella narratives, where the female character rescues the male character, and mutual Cinderella narratives where both characters simultaneously rescue each other are present throughout these films as well. Interestingly, these different types of Cinderella narratives often intertwine across the course of the film; they are not mutually exclusive. This is certainly true in the case of the mutual Cinderella narrative,

which features both a traditional and reversed rescue narrative. For instance, *The Last Song* portrays the traditional Cinderella plotline in which wealthy Will rescues working-class Ronnie from her punk-rock, rebel self and helps her to rediscover her softer side. Will's financial status and his role in transforming Ronnie from punk-rock rebel into a soft-hearted, purple-frilly-dress-wearing girlfriend suggest that this narrative fulfills the conventional Cinderella rescue story. But, Ronnie also rescues Will from his emotional turmoil. After telling Ronnie about the recent death of his younger brother, Will explains that he and his family are still struggling to deal with their loss and that he felt emotionally dead before meeting Ronnie. He confides, "I went out with those girls because I was trying to feel something again, but no one made me feel like you do. I don't want to lose you." In this way, Will expresses that Ronnie has helped him to achieve an emotional state that he could not achieve without her. With her around, Will can feel alive again and thus, Ronnie saves Will and is saved by Will in a mutual rescue narrative.

A Walk to Remember is another example that clearly represents a mutual Cinderella narrative. In this film, Landon, who is part of the popular crowd, falls in love with Jamie, the ultra-conservative high school outcast. When Landon falls for Jamie, his love affords her some social capital in the school and he rescues her from her social isolation and ridicule. In one particular scene where Jamie is being made fun of by her classmates, Landon comes to her rescue, hugging her in front of the people who are laughing at her expense, and driving her home from school to make sure that she is okay. Jamie simultaneously rescues Landon from his bad-boy ways and reforms him into a respectful, thoughtful boyfriend. As she falls in love with him, she offers him support

and affirms his dreams. She tells him that he can do anything that he puts his mind to. Jamie's confidence pushes Landon to apply himself in school and eventually he lives out his dream of attending medical school because of her support. Together, the two transform each other into better versions of themselves and rescue each other from the lackluster lives they were living before they fell in love.

The simultaneous rescue narrative, as portrayed in *A Walk to Remember* (2004) and *The Last Song* (2010), two representative examples of the script, is appealing because it plays out a commonly exploited romantic relationship trope in which the characters discover within each other a better, more complete version of themselves. The two are bonded together by this fact since it is only through one another that they found the better versions of themselves and only within the relationship that the two characters can actually be this completed version of themselves. Simultaneous rescue narratives suggest that we are not responsible for being better people on our own. In fact, with the right love, we can be rescued from any situation or version of ourselves and transported—by no effort of our own—into a more complete self. This is incredibly appealing and gestures toward the commonly stated phrase “He/she makes me a better person” which we use in society to explain what we have qualified as good romantic relationships. When one person makes the other a better person, then the love is good and right. When portrayed in the context of a teenage romantic relationship, the script is even more enticing. High school is a time of life where teenagers are notoriously trying to figure themselves out and are especially susceptible to rebellion. As Jamie and Landon portray in *A Walk to Remember*, the right relationship can save even a juvenile delinquent and

change him into someone who builds telescopes for his dying girlfriend to help her see the stars better.

The transformative power of love that occurs in the rescue narrative is especially present in the dating script of the film *Step Up*. Although this narrative is most notably a flipped Cinderella narrative where the lead female character rescues the male character, there is a sense in which even this flipped narrative, which attempts to give women power in a third wave feminist sort of way, is really a mutual rescue narrative. In this film, female lead, Nora, a rich, successful dance student at the Maryland School of Arts, is working on her final dance routine to secure her future in a professional dance company. Tyler, a foster kid who lives in an underprivileged neighborhood, gets himself into trouble, stealing cars, and breaking into buildings. He and Nora meet at the Maryland School of Arts as he completes his community service. Tyler plays the part of the modern, male version of Cinderella, literally washing the floors and taking out trash for the rich kids at the school. Eventually, Tyler convinces Nora to let him help her with her final dance showcase, since her partner is injured, and helps her transform her dance into a less traditional routine by adding hip-hop influences. In this way, Tyler rescues Nora from her monotonous dance routine giving her the tools she needs to be successful in her audition. More prominently, though, Nora rescues Tyler by giving him a foot in the door at the Maryland School of Arts and supporting him in his dream to attend that school. She fights for him to prove that he deserves to be there and eventually helps him to see that he can have a bright future if he simply applies himself. At the end of the film, the principal at the Maryland School of Arts offers Tyler a scholarship to attend the school. Because of his work with Nora, Tyler's whole future has changed. He has become a

committed and driven student who cares about doing his best and looks forward to a bright future.

In this flipped frame, Nora rescues Tyler from a life of crime and gives him a promising future. This narrative structure appears to be an appropriation of the third wave feminist notion of girl power in which Nora's power and position help rescue Tyler. Yet, in spite of the "girl power" packaging, the narrative does not play out all that definitively for women. In the end, Nora would be lost without Tyler. His contribution to her dance is what allows her success in her audition and ultimately Nora could not have lived out her dreams without Tyler's help. So, although Nora plays the part of Prince Charming as she rescues Tyler, he also rescues her back. Thus, what appears to be a flipped Cinderella narrative is actually more of a mutual rescue narrative with a third wave feminist flavor. Either way, the rescue script is clearly present in the film as each of the characters become more complete versions of themselves through their relationship. In one telling montage, the film portrays Tyler and Nora in their separate habitats while Anthony Hamilton's *Dear Life* plays in the background. "I became somebody through loving you," he sings. And they most certainly did.

As these examples show, pursuit and rescue narratives occur in differing ways throughout the films for this project. Some films incorporate both pursuit and rescue and some only depict one of the two broad narrative structures. The films I discussed in this section provide examples of the traditional forms in which these narratives take place across the eleven films for this project. They are simply representative samples that give insight into the most traditional pursuit narratives and rescue narratives present in the films. In choosing them, I suggest that these narratives can be seductive to the audience

as they play off of traditional romantic scripts as seen across artistic genres. But, what makes them especially appealing to the audience is the fact that they are portrayed within teenage romantic relationships. The young age of the characters who find purpose and fulfillment in their romantic relationship proves that true love can (and will) conquer all odds. When the right love is found—even at the age of fourteen—nothing will be able to stop it. Pursuit and rescue narratives as present in teen films depicting teenage romantic relationships teach us just that.

In the next sections of the chapter, I will take a closer look at the specific aspects of the broad narrative structures that give the scripts drama and interest. I will look at the ways the narratives begin and the ways in which they end. Then, I will discuss the obstacles and arguments that the romantic relationships face. Finally, I will end with a discussion of the role of the kiss in these films.

Beginning and End: Meet Cutes and Finales

The main characters in each relationship meet in one of two ways: either the characters know each other from school or they are brought together by an act of fate. In those relationships where the two know each other from school, the plot does not hinge on their meeting in an interesting way. Instead, these relationships simply exist. Interestingly, this is also the most common way in which the relationships start across the eleven films for this project. Both *Juno* and *The Princess Diaries* provide clear examples of this. In *Juno* (2007) Juno and Paulie are best friends and classmates at the same high school. They know each other and hang out together with frequency. In *The Princess Diaries* (2001) Mia and Michael are also friends and classmates. They sing in the same choir and Mia's best friend is Michael's sister so they see each other and hang out with

each other outside of school as well. Both of these examples illustrate the somewhat mundane ways in which these romantic relationships begin with someone who is already in the characters' lives.

Relationships where people do not know each other previous to the film's beginning generally depict a scene where the two meet in a funny or memorable way. These meetings are traditionally known as "meet cutes," a narrative trope where an act of fate brings two characters together. In the event of a "meet cute" two characters, who will eventually fall in love, are introduced to each other in a memorable way that often involves awkwardness or embarrassment and sometimes hostility. For example, in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2005) Lena falls into the water while trying to catch a glimpse of her love interest, Kostas, who is out on his boat. Their introduction occurs as he pulls her out of the water and takes her up onto his boat to give her dry clothes. Lena is embarrassed and uncomfortable by the situation, but she and Kostas' introduction is certainly memorable. *The Last Song* (2010) provides another example in which Will physically runs into Ronnie, spilling her milkshake all over her and knocking her to the ground. Ronnie gets up from their "meet cute" and storms away feeling hostile toward Will and embarrassed about her soiled shirt. *Bring It On* (2000), *Mean Girls*, and *Step Up* each portray "meet cutes" in school settings. In *Bring it On*, Cliff enters class as the new kid in school and sits down next to Torrance. She engages him in witty conversation and Cliff is clearly intrigued. The two flirt and she leaves the room when class is over with Cliff staring after her. Similarly, *Mean Girls* (2004) "meet cute" occurs as Cady sits down in math class behind Aaron who turns around to ask Cady for a pencil. As he turns, the background music plays and Aaron's hair whips across his forehead in slow motion.

Cady narrates, “I’ve only had one other crush in my life, but this one hit me like a big yellow school bus. He was... so cute.” In this somewhat comical “meet cute” Cady fulfills the convention of “Love at First Sight” and falls for Aaron immediately. Finally, in *Step Up* (2006) Tyler and Nora meet as Tyler walks in on one of her dance classes. Nora’s friend points Tyler out to her by commenting on how attractive he is. Nora smiles at Tyler coyly and then does a dance sequence, which he is clearly intrigued by. He watches her dance and smiles at her, saying hello to her when she finishes her sequence right by where he is standing. She says “Hi” back and then continues on with her business, turning around a few times to find Tyler still watching her, to which she smiles back at him. This flirtatious eye contact and exchange of smiles suggests another “Love at First Sight” moment playing out for both characters.

Once the couples have met, or are introduced to the audience as knowing each other, their relational journey begins. Though they start in one of two ways, the movies end in virtually the same way—with the promise of a lasting future together, sealed with a kiss. For example, *The Princess Diaries* ends with Mia and Michael dancing together and then kissing as a sign of their sealed commitment to each other. The same happens at the end of *17 Again* when Mike apologizes to Scarlet for taking her for granted and then the two embrace and kiss as a sign that they are re-committed to each other. These two examples are representative of the way in which almost all of the films end, signifying that love conquers all. Two exceptions exist. The first occurs in *A Walk to Remember* where the female lead character passes away and thus, cannot be with her high school love at the end of the movie. The other time when the film does not end with the couple together is in Bridget’s storyline of *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. In *The*

Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants, Bridget and her soccer coach's inappropriate relationship ends when she leaves soccer camp for the summer. But, he ends up finding her at her home where he apologizes to her for the outcome of the relationship and tells her to look him up when she is older. Though the viewer does not get to see Bridget and Eric end up together in this particular film, Eric's suggestion that she look him up when she is older hints that there is a chance the two of them will end up together, eventually.

As the narratives close out at the end of the film, one common thread resides in each film: love conquers all. In "Romantic Relationship Ideal In Mass Media: An Explication Of A Construct," Veronica Hefner draws attention to this very detail, "The underlying theme of all of these narratives is that love conquers all. . . . Despite all signs pointing to a bad match of wits or terrifying personality conflicts, the romantic ideal contains the overcoming nature of true love—in the end, the lovers will resolve conflict and live happily ever after" (23). And happily ever after they do live.

Overcoming Arguments and Obstacles

Although these films broadly function under the same narrative structures of pursuit and rescue, and end in virtually the same way with the successful attainment of love, they do offer diversity in the form of obstacles and arguments. According to Shary, arguments and obstacles are the most prominent means of advancing teen romantic relationships forward in films. In explaining the conventional plotline of teen films, he writes, "In the youth love story, two or more teens struggle to confirm their romantic feelings and secure a union in the face of an oppressive obstacle which must be overcome for the couple to either live happily ever after or realize that their union was not meant to be" (213). In other words, obstacles and arguments function within films to move the

teen romance forward. This is true in other general narrative structures, as well.

Arguments and obstacles create moments of tension that bring drama and intrigue to the storyline. To begin this section, I will discuss the ways in which obstacles play out in the romantic relational journey of the teenage couples in the films that I am studying for this project.

There are five main types of obstacles that the characters in the main romantic relationships face: forbidden relationships (forbidden by family disapproval or other social barriers such as age or social status), pregnancy, villains, distance, and disease/death. Notably, all of the obstacles occur outside of the characters in the relationship. In other words, the problems never result from within the teenage romantic relationship but, instead, external factors threaten the couple and cause obstacles and arguments that the two must overcome together. In a Romeo and Juliet-type framing, the question is never whether or not the teens are meant to be together but, instead, whether their love can withstand the pressures they face from society or adults who do not understand their relationship. I will analyze each of these obstacles separately, discussing the ways in which they occur, in the following section.

Obstacles: Testing the Romantic Relationship

The most frequent obstacle the teen couples in this project face falls under the category of “**Forbidden Relationship.**” This category consists of any obstacle that tells the teenage couple that their relationship is not allowed. These obstacles appear as family disapproval, societal pressure, or as one of the characters being relationally unavailable. Ten of the teen relationships encounter a forbidden relationship obstacle, and some of those ten face the obstacle several different times. Relationships that are

forbidden based on **family disapproval** emerge in *A Walk to Remember* (2003), *How to Deal* (2004), *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2006), and *The Last Song* (2010) when the characters are told by an adult figure that they are not allowed to see each other. In *How to Deal* (2003), Halley's mom comes home to find Halley and Macon undressing each other while making out on the couch. Following the event, Halley's mom reprimands Halley for her actions and tells her that she is no longer allowed to date or see Macon. Because of this, Halley has to devise a plan to sneak out of the house so that she can see Macon behind her mother's back. She and Macon continue to see each other, disregarding the boundaries put on them by the parental figures in their lives.

The relationship of Lena and Kostas in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2005) illustrates this same obstacle. Lena and Kostas meet in Greece and quickly find out that their families have been feuding for generations. Because of this their families explicitly forbid their relationship. Lena's grandmother tells Lena that she is not allowed to see Kostas at all. Thus, Lena must disregard her grandmother's rule and sneak out of the house to meet up with Kostas. In these scenes where the romantic relationship is explicitly forbidden, the underlying narrative is always that the one partner is not a good influence upon the other and thus the relationship must be stopped in order to protect the characters' well being.

The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants example illustrates how this forbidden relationship obstacle interplays in a very interesting way when it occurs within a rescue narrative. As I discussed in the previous section, rescue narratives ultimately suggest that the characters are better, more complete versions of themselves within the relationship. But, the forbidden relationship obstacle usually occurs on the grounds that the parents'

think one character is a bad influence on the other. So, when these two scripts are paired together in a film, the teens clearly portray that they ultimately know what is best for themselves. The teens recognize that the relationship is positively impacting both of them even in spite of their parents' perception, and they prove this when their love withstands the obstacle placed upon them by their parents. This narrative interplay is both intriguing and appealing, especially to a teenage audience who is often told what to do by their parents. In overcoming the forbidden relationship obstacle, the teens assert that they know better than their parents, and the success of their teenage romantic relationship further perpetuates the notion that true love conquers all.

Sometimes this family disapproval of a character's dating partner choice brings ideological baggage. *The Last Song* (2010) illustrates how **class structure and socio-economic differences** play a role a family's disapproval in the forbidden relationship obstacle. Will's rich family disapproves of Ronnie because of her working class status. Although Ronnie tries hard to rise to the expectations that Will's family holds for a proper potential partner for Will, she continually faces judgment from Will's parents based on her socio economic class. In one scene, Will's mother suggests that Will invite his ex-girlfriend to be his date for his sister's wedding despite the fact that he is now dating Ronnie. Will's mom is clear in her preference for Will's ex-girlfriend, Ashley, who is of a higher class. Ronnie recognizes this and pulls Will aside after meeting his family, telling him, "Maybe you should find someone more suited to your lifestyle." But Will is unconvinced and responds to Ronnie by telling her that no one makes him feel the way she does and that he loves her. The two overcome the socio-economic barrier

threatening their relationship by disregarding it and staying together in spite of family and societal expectations.

Socio-economic barriers play a similar role in *Step Up* (2006). Tyler and Nora are portrayed in this film as incompatible from the start based on their socioeconomic status and opportunities afforded to them by that status. Tyler is a foster child living in an underprivileged neighborhood while Nora is a student at the Maryland School of Arts and lives in a brick townhouse with her well-off family. Their backgrounds create a barrier that they must overcome for their love to be successful. They do so, just as Will and Ronnie overcome the very same obstacle in their narrative, by disregarding the societal and familial expectations and letting their love rise above the obstacle.

The only way for the couples to overcome the obstacle of explicit family disapproval leading to a forbidden relationship is to disregard their family's wishes. They must rebel against the rules put in place by their elders and go behind their backs in order to see one another. In this sense, by overcoming this particular obstacle, the teenage couples suggest that they know better than their parents and that it is worth the risk to disregard their family's rules in order to be together. Eventually, the families always come around and support the relationship in the end, realizing that their teenage kids had love figured out all along. For example, in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, Lena confronts her grandfather after being told she can no longer see Kostas. Lena knows that Kostas is leaving on a boat that afternoon and she will not get to see him again. Wanting her grandfather's blessing to disregard the family's wishes she pleads, "I met someone who changed everything. He showed me that I can take a chance, if only for a moment. You had that same moment once when you met Yaya and you risked

everything for it. You had your chance and I'm asking you now to have mine." To which, her grandfather approvingly responds, "Go," meaning: go and be with Kostas. In this way, Lena's family eventually comes around to support her decision to be with Kostas.

Social barriers based on age and power also appear as a means of forbidding relationships. Bridget and Eric in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2005) illustrate this. They cannot be together because she is only sixteen and he is her college-aged soccer coach. Interestingly, though Bridget and Eric attempt a relationship, theirs is the only unsuccessful one in all of the films I am studying in this project. They cannot overcome the forbidden relationship barrier presented to them and thus the audience is left knowing that their love was not meant to be at this moment. Eric does come back at the end of the movie. He tells Bridget to look him up when she is older, and the two hug before he leaves. So, although they cannot be together because of the age barrier now, the movie suggests that their love can be redeemed once time allows the barrier to be taken away.

The forbidden relationship obstacle appears in the films in the form of **other relationships/romantic interests** as well. Essentially, the obstacle appears when one of the main characters already is in a relationship with someone other than the person they are meant to be with. Four of the twelve relationships face this obstacle at some point in their romantic relational journey (one relationship faces it twice). This obstacle is present in *Bring it On* (2000), *The Princess Diaries* (2001), *Mean Girls* (2004), and *Step Up* (2006). In each case, except for *Mean Girls*, the female character is dating or interested in someone other than the male character she ends up with at the end of the film.

Because of this, the male characters must overcome the obstacle by pursuing someone who is relationally unavailable to them. This is certainly true for Cliff in *Bring it On* (2000). Cliff is seemingly intrigued by Torrance from the moment that he meets her. The two flirt and show interest in each other until Cliff finds out that Torrance is actually dating someone else. Heartbroken, he walks away from her, but his interest does not wane. When Torrance breaks up with her boyfriend, she comes back to Cliff who eagerly takes her into his arms and the two end the film with a passionate kiss.

The Princess Diaries (2001) follows the same pattern where Michael and Mia must overcome the obstacle that Mia is interested in someone other than Michael at the beginning of the film. Michael is obviously interested in dating Mia and even asks her to hang out with him one Saturday evening. She accepts his invitation, but then bails on him when the popular boy she is really interested in asks her to attend a party with him. Michael is hurt and feels abandoned by Mia. His reaction to being blown off is a testament to his true feelings for Mia in spite of her not feeling them back. Mia's date with her love interest goes horribly wrong and she realizes that he does not like her, but was just using her to try to get famous now that she is the potential new Princess of Genovia. Mia comes to her senses and apologizes to Michael, recognizing that his intentions are genuine and he likes her for who she is, not for her fame. It takes several apologies, but she eventually gets through to him and he shows up just in time to dance with her at her royal ball and kiss her, sealing the deal on their love. Together, they overcome the obstacle of her confusion about who she is supposed to be with—Michael by remaining faithful in his interest in her, and Mia by realizing that her original crush was not all she had made him out to be in her mind.

Mean Girls (2004) is the one film where the plotline is reversed: the female character is interested in a male character who is in another relationship. In this particular case, female lead character, Cady, is friends with her love interest, Aaron and his current girlfriend, Regina. Cady has a direct hand in breaking up Aaron and Regina by informing Aaron that Regina has been cheating on him. Although Aaron does not go right for Cady after his breakup, he does end up with her in the end. He, like Mia in *The Princess Diaries*, comes to realize that Regina is not all he had made her out to be in his mind and that he is really much better suited to date Cady.

As the previous examples illustrate, forbidden relationships are the most common obstacle faced. Perhaps surprisingly, the next most frequently faced obstacle is **disease/death**. In two of the films (*The Last Song* and *How to Deal*), death occurs outside the main teenage relationship leaving the two characters to bond together in dealing with the loss of someone close to them. In *The Last Song* (2010) Ronnie finds out that her father has untreatable cancer and will die in the next few months. She and her boyfriend, Will, bond together to work through the emotional and physical toll that her dad's disease takes on him and his family. Ronnie's brother, Jonah, is especially upset by the news and Ronnie and Will take care of him together and help him come to terms with his father's health problems. While Ronnie's dad is sick, Will admits to him that it was his friend Scott who accidentally burned down the local church—a situation that Ronnie's father had been accused of causing since he was the last person in the church before it burnt down. Though Ronnie's father forgives the boys for letting him take the blame for the fire when they knew all along that it was their fault, Ronnie is not so generous with her forgiveness. She is furious with Will for putting her father through

emotional pain for something he did not do and she breaks up with him. In their time apart, Ronnie continues to take care of her father while Will abides by her wishes, leaving her alone, and heads off to college. Eventually, it is the death of Ronnie's father that brings the two of them back together. At his funeral, Ronnie and Will reconnect and Will comes to visit her at her father's house as she packs away his things. There, on the beach where they met, the two get back together, and the movie ends with their passionate reunion kiss. Together they dealt with a loved one's disease, which only made them stronger and, though they had to take a break, the obstacle of death eventually brings them back together in the end.

The bonding power of the disease/death obstacle is present in *How to Deal* (2003) as well. In this movie, Halley and Macon must deal with the death of their friend, Scott, who lost his life due to heart failure in the middle of soccer game. Macon and Halley spend a lot of time together, first grieving the loss of their friend and eventually finding happiness in each other. Scott's death is actually the vehicle that brings the two of them together and plants the foundation for their relationship and emotional bonding.

The other film that deals with the obstacle of disease/death is *A Walk to Remember* (2002). In this film the lead female role, Jamie, has leukemia and has stopped responding to treatments: she has only a few months left to live. When she finally tells this to her boyfriend, Landon, he is shocked. But, he does not let the disease dampen his love for Jamie and he remains committed to her throughout the rest of the film. In fact, the news of the disease propels him into a frenzy of emotion in which he works tirelessly to help Jamie fulfill all of the items on her list of things she wants to do before she dies. He even helps her fulfill her ultimate goal of being married in the same church as her

parents by proposing to her and marrying her. In the end, Jamie dies, yet there is a sense that the love of she and Landon lives on and thus, the two overcome the ultimate obstacle. As the movie draws to a close, Landon comes back into his hometown to visit Jamie's father. He is years older and attending medical school. After catching up with Jamie's father, he walks down to the dock where he first told Jamie that he loved her while he looks out over the water, a breeze blows through his hair. His voiceover recounts for the viewer, "Jamie saved my life. She taught me everything. About life, hope and the long journey ahead. I'll always miss her. But our love is like the wind. I can't see it, but I can feel it." In other words, even though Jamie's physical body is gone, her love is still present in Landon's life. Thus, just as in the other relationships that face the obstacle of disease/death, this one functions to bring the characters closer together and prove that their love is true and everlasting.

Just as the obstacle of disease/death brings romantically involved couples closer together, the next obstacle seeks to actively break them apart: the obstacle of **villains**. In all three of these narratives, the villains are ex-girlfriends of the main male character who try to sabotage the romantic relationship of the their ex and his new interest.

The Last Song (2010) and *A Walk to Remember* (2002) depict the traditional version of the obstacle of ex-girlfriend villain sabotage. Neither of the villains in these films are successful in preventing the main romantic relationship from happening, in fact, they ultimately work to make the couple's bond stronger. In *A Walk to Remember*, Landon's ex-girlfriend photoshop's Jamie's head onto a scandalous picture of a swimsuit model. Jamie, who is known at the school as an ultra conservative Christian, finds the photo as she walks into the lunchroom to a roar of laughter from her peers. Jamie is

mortified and turns to run away, but Landon is standing behind her and she runs right into his arms. He hugs her in front of their peers, glaring at his ex-girlfriend for her mean trick, and caringly escorts Jamie out of the lunchroom as a sign of his support. Landon's ex-girlfriend attempted to sabotage the relationship, wanting Landon to laugh along with his friends and ruin his relationship with Jamie. But, instead, her plot only sufficed to bring Landon and Jamie closer together as he proved his undying support to her in that moment by standing up for her.

In the case of *Mean Girls* (2004), the villain sabotage plays out slightly differently. This comedic movie has a way of exaggerating typical teenage drama in order to get a laugh from the audience. The villain sabotage portion of the film is no exception, and this is the only movie in which the ex-girlfriend villain is actually successful (for a while). To illustrate: Cady develops a crush on Aaron after she meets him in her math class. She tells her new group of girlfriends that she likes Aaron and they quickly explain to her that she is not allowed to date Aaron because he is their friend Regina's ex-boyfriend. According to "girl code" Cady is not allowed to date anyone that her new friend Regina has dated in the past. Regina catches wind of the fact that Cady likes her ex-boyfriend, Aaron, and decides to "help" Cady out. She tells Cady that she will talk to Aaron and drop hints that Cady is someone worth dating. Cady believes Regina has good intentions and thanks her for her help. But Regina's intentions are actually to sabotage Cady's potential relationship with Aaron. She tells Aaron that Cady is creepily obsessed with him and that she saves his old dirty Kleenexes that she finds in the trash. Aaron is grossed out and dismisses any thoughts of dating Cady. He decides instead to take Regina back.

To overcome this obstacle, Cady sabotages Regina right back. She finds out that Regina is cheating on Aaron and then tells him this news. Aaron immediately breaks up with Regina, but he does not end up with Cady until much later in the film. In her attempts to date Aaron, Cady has become just like Regina. She loses sight of who she really is and starts worrying about her hair, her clothes, and her popularity. One night when Cady thinks she and Aaron will “seal the deal” at a party, Aaron calls her out on her actions saying, “You’re just like Regina,” and leaves her alone, clearly communicating that he wants nothing to do with her. Eventually, after much drama, Cady realizes that Aaron was right. She ditches her newfound persona and goes back to who she truly is. She joins the math team and stops hanging out with Regina all together. At the end of the film, Aaron tells her “It’s good to have you back” and the two kiss on the dance floor.

Finally, the couples least frequently face obstacles of **pregnancy** and **physical distance**—each of these obstacle types occurring twice throughout the course of the films. The couples in *Juno* (2007) and *17 Again* (2008) both face the obstacle of pregnancy. While Juno and Paulie make an adoption plan for their baby in *Juno* (2007), Scarlett and Mike choose to parent theirs and get married as teenagers in *17 Again* (2009). The choices that the couples make in dealing with the pregnancy bring about different relational stresses. Juno and Paulie do not actually get together until just before Juno gives birth to their child. At that point, she has already decided without a doubt to find an adoptive family for her baby and has chosen that family. In *Juno* (2007) this choice is unquestioned by Paulie. Juno makes the decision and she never looks back. The two are shown at the end of the movie, playing their guitars together and talking

about their typical high school relationship in which Juno describes Paulie as the best boyfriend ever. No mention of the baby occurs again in the film and the, thus, the two overcome the obstacle by eliminating it.

Mike and Scarlett of *17 Again* (2009), on the other hand, choose to parent their baby and get married. This causes huge relational stress since Mike holds Scarlett and the baby responsible for him having to give up his dream of playing college basketball. He resents his choice and he and Scarlett eventually decide to split up and file for divorce. Over the course of the film, Mike comes to realize that he did, in fact, make the right choice in choosing to stay with Scarlett after high school to raise their baby. He apologizes for his actions of resentment and the two end up staying together. Without his family, Mike says, he would be lost. Both couples overcome the obstacle of pregnancy by accepting their choices and moving forward together.

Physical distance is the final obstacle that two of the couples face. Troy and Gabriella actually break up over the distance obstacle in *High School Musical 3* (2008), but end up getting back together when Troy chooses to attend college just thirty miles from Stanford where Gabriella will be attending in the fall. This obstacle is overcome through Troy's sacrifice. He gives up his original dream and his basketball scholarship to play with his best friend in college and chooses, instead to go to a school near Gabriella. Interestingly, his sacrifice seems to work out for him even better than his original dream could have as it affords him the opportunity to continue pursuing his theater talents on top of his basketball career. He declares his choice when he says, "I've chosen basketball. But, I've also chosen theater. The University of California Berkeley offers me both. That's where I'm going to be attending next fall... But most of all, I choose the

person who inspires my heart. Which is why I picked a school, which is exactly thirty two point seven miles from [Gabriella].” So, although Troy sacrifices in order to overcome the obstacle of physical distance and allow he and Gabriella to be near each other, the sacrifice actually works in his favor.

Mia and Michael face the same long distance issue in *The Princess Diaries* when Mia has to move to the country of Genovia to live out her role as the country’s new princess and heiress to the throne. Michael, who still lives in San Francisco, flies out to meet her in Genovia during the summer months so that they can maintain their relationship. *The Princess Diaries* fails to show the viewer whether or not this is a sustainable choice for their relationship, but at the end of the film, Mia seems happy enough with getting to spend only her summers with Michael. Now that she knows she is a part of the royal family of Genovia, she has the resources to fly to Michael or have him flown to see her seemingly whenever she wants. Her financial gain allows her and Michael to overcome the obstacle of physical distance.

Obstacles are present in all of depicted relational journeys in these films. In overcoming obstacles the couple proves that they have staying power and are meant to be together. They prove their unwavering commitment to their love in spite of circumstances that make being together hard or even forbidden. As Shary noted in his chapter, it is the ability of the couple to overcome arguments and obstacles that define whether or not their relationship is one of true love. If the couple can overcome the barriers they face, then they have shown their audience that they are meant to be together. Each of the couples of these films proves just that, as they overcome obstacles of forbidden relationships, disease/death, villains, pregnancy, and physical distance.

Arguments: Fighting for Us

Obstacles often set the stage for arguments. Because of this, nine out of the twelve relationships depict couples fighting at least once. The films that do not have arguments are both relationships in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2005) and the relationship in *High School Musical 3* (2008) where the couples face obstacles, but never argue about them, or anything else. Arguments serve a variety of functions in the films, but ultimately they allow the couples to prove their love by choosing each other. Together, they must choose to work through their differences in order to prove that their love will last. Arguments in these films center on five main themes: rejection, jealousy, lack of honesty, unhappiness, and sex.

The most common of these surrounds **rejection**, often in the form of being blown off. Four of the relationships have arguments based on one of the characters blowing the other character off, leaving him or her feeling abandoned. In *The Princess Diaries*, Mia and Michael fight after Mia chooses to postpone her date with Michael so she can instead go to a party with the most popular boy in school. Michael feels rejected and he confronts Mia about the way that she treated him. During the verbal argument, Mia tries to apologize by inviting Michael to attend the royal ball where she will announce whether or not she will accept her role as Princess of Genovia. Michael responds to her invitation by saying, “But Josh looks better in a tux,” clearly still hurting from her earlier rejection when Mia chose Josh over him. He leaves Mia’s house with no reconciliation, saying, “Don’t worry about me. I just consider myself royally flushed.” It takes a grand apologetic gesture to win Michael’s forgiveness. Mia orders a pizza to be delivered to Michael’s house. Inside the box is a pizza with the word “Sorry” written in M&M’s,

which the audience knows are Michael's favorite candy since we saw him eating them his band rehearsal earlier in the movie. This apology is what gets Michael to forgive Mia, and he shows up at the ball as a sign that he has accepted her apology and the two can finally be together.

The same type of argument stemming from rejection happens in *Step Up*. Nora is preparing a dance showcase piece for her final project at the Maryland School of Arts when her partner injures his ankle and can no longer be in the dance. Tyler, who is doing his community service at the school, offers to step in and help Nora practice for her showcase. She accepts his help and the two bond as they update her routine and incorporate his hip-hop style into her traditional ballet dance. When her original partner's injury heals and he returns, Nora is forced to choose between him and Tyler to be her dance partner in the official performance. She chooses her original partner since he is a student at the school and Tyler is not, but Tyler feels like Nora has blown him off and the two argue about this very thing. Tyler runs out of the practice and quits fulfilling his community service at the school where he would run into Nora and her new dance partner. Nora attempts to apologize to Tyler several times. She calls his house and asks to speak to him, but Tyler pretends he is not home so that he does not have to talk to her. During the time the couple is apart, Tyler suffers a huge loss when one of his family friends, Skinny, is shot and dies. After the death, his best friend says, "You really think this is the best we can be? I wanna be better. I wanna do better" to which Tyler responds, "You're right." Ultimately, the tragic death makes Tyler believe that he can be a better person, one that always gives his best. He realizes that he has to go back to the school and help Nora with her final dance piece so that she can do it the way she's always

wanted. He shows up behind stage and tells her that he wants to be in the dance, but at this point, Nora tells him that it is too late. Tyler persists, pushing Nora to realize that she will regret not doing the dance the way that she has always dreamed. She gives in to his insisting and the two perform the dance flawlessly. Afterward, they embrace and kiss, a sign that they have forgiven each other and can now be together.

Jealousy is another major source of arguments in the main romantic relationships in these films. Juno confronts her love interest, Paulie, after she finds out that he has asked another girl to prom. Although she does not explicitly state that she is jealous, it is apparent that her deep emotional response to Paulie choosing another date for the dance is a reaction to her jealousy that he did not ask her to the prom. She says, “Yea, you just take Soupy-Sales to prom I can think of so many cooler things to do that night. Like, you know what Bleek? I might pumice my feet, uh, I might go to Bren's Unitarian Church, maybe get hit by a truck full of hot garbage juice, you know? Cause all those things, would be exponentially cooler than going to prom with you.” Paulie is mad at Juno for being upset with him because he claims that she is the one who broke his heart. In the end, Juno walks away from Paulie, still upset with his prom date choice. In dealing with the argument, Juno seeks guidance from her dad about love and he tells her, “The best thing you can do is find a person who loves you for exactly what you are. Good mood, bad mood, ugly, pretty, handsome, what have you, the right person is still going to think the sun shines out your ass. That's the kind of person that's worth sticking with.” When she realizes that person, for her, is Paulie, she decides to apologize. Juno fills Paulie’s mailbox with his favorite candy and then finds him at his track practice to verbally apologize and make up. He accepts her apology and the two kiss.

The same is true in *How to Deal* after Halley sees Macon just days after their breakup and he is with another girl. She confronts him in a verbal argument, which stems from her jealousy that he seems to have moved on from dating Halley so quickly. To resolve the argument, Macon publicly apologizes to Halley over the radio. He confesses his love for the world to hear and tells her that he is committed to her and only her. This grand gesture allows Halley to forgive him and the two end up together.

Another source of arguments comes out of **lack of honesty**. Three of the relationships confront this argument. Cliff argues with Torrance in *Bring it On* after he finds out that she has a boyfriend and never told him, Will and Ronnie actually break up in *The Last Song* after Ronnie finds out that Will has hidden from her his knowledge about an issue that affects Ronnie's father, and Cady and Aaron argue in *Mean Girls* when he finds out she lied about being bad at math. The lack of honesty seems to break the trust in these relationships and it causes arguments.

17 Again (2009) depicts another type of argument that stems from **unhappiness**. Mike blames Scarlet for his unhappiness in his life. He is filled with regret about his choices for his future—namely, giving up his chance at a basketball scholarship to marry Scarlet and raise their baby. His inability to find the good in his life causes him unhappiness which he projects onto the relationship with Scarlet and which eventually breaks the relationship causing Scarlet to file for divorce. The two cannot overcome the argument until Mike finally comes to terms with his choice to give up basketball as the right choice and stops taking his family for granted.

Finally, only one of the couples argues about **sex**. *How to Deal* (2003) depicts Macon and Halley having an argument while driving home from a party where Halley

chose not to have sex with Macon. Though Halley's excuse for not following through is that she likes Macon too much, he is not convinced and feels like her refusal to have sex with him is a sign that she does not like him. Macon feels that Halley is not being honest with him about why she did not have sex with him and the two of them argue. Macon tries to apologize to her several times. He comes to her house with chocolates, but Halley is unconvinced that he is truly remorseful. What changes her mind is her conversation with her grandmother where she reminds Halley that no one is perfect and that first loves are forever. The adult intervention allows Halley a new perspective into her relationship and she realizes that she must forgive Macon and give him another chance. Her grandmother's advice and Macon's final grand apology (as discussed previously) tip the scale in Macon's favor and he and Halley reunite in a kiss. Ultimately, the reunion kiss in *How to Deal* (2003) signifies the acceptance of the apology and suggests that the couple will now be together.

The reunion-type of kiss that Halley and Macon have in this final scene of the film is not unique to this film. In fact, kisses that signify reunion and reconciliation are present throughout all of the films. I will discuss these kisses in further detail in the next section along with the other ways in which kisses function throughout the films. Since kisses play an integral part in the process of reconciliation, I will begin the section with a discussion of reconciliation as it ties to kisses and apologies. To be clear, the next section begins with an analysis of how reconciliation occurs within the couples. This will set the stage to discuss the kiss of reconciliation, and finally, the section will end with a discussion of other types of kisses.

Reconciliation: Kiss and Make Up

The main form of reconciliation occurs in the films when one of the characters actually enacts change to right the situation that caused the argument. For example, in *Bring it On* Cliff and Torrance fight when Cliff finds out that Torrance has been flirting with him in spite of having a boyfriend. Later, Torrance breaks up with her boyfriend when she realizes that he is not supporting her the way she ought to be supported. By ending her relationship with her boyfriend, she allows the space to resolve her fight with Cliff. She apologizes and the two end up together now that Torrance has eliminated the source of their argument. Similarly, in *17 Again* (2009) Scarlett kicks Mike out of the house and files for divorce after his unhappiness in their marriage has driven them apart. Throughout the film, Mike works to change his attitude and his outlook on life. In making these changes and apologizing explicitly, he creates a space for he and Scarlett to reconcile their differences and get back together. Both times, the person who caused the fight is the one who must change in order to resolve the point of contention.

Every single argument that the couples in these films go through ends in reconciliation. Although some take longer to work out their differences, they all eventually resolve their differences and move forward from the fight. In almost every case, the character that caused the argument apologizes to the other in order to reconcile. Sometimes it takes more than one apology, but with a little persistence, the apologies work. After ignoring Jamie in front of his more popular high school friends, Landon tries to apologize at Jamie's house in *A Walk to Remember* (2003), but this does not work. Instead, she slams the door in his face and refuses to talk to him. Later, he brings Jamie a gift as a peace offering, which softens her heart and causes her to accept his apology.

This example, like the ones previously discussed, illustrates that the apology scenarios usually occur as a grand gesture, complete with either multiple attempts, gifts, public displays of remorse, or combinations of the three.

Only one of the couples resolves an argument in the same scene as their fight. All of the other couples argue and then leave the scene only to return to resolve their issues later in the film. Ronnie and Will break this mold in *The Last Song* (2010) when they argue on the beach. Will discovers that his ex-girlfriend tried to sabotage he and Ronnie's new relationship by feeding Ronnie false information about his relational past. Ronnie, still steaming mad, yells at Will about not wanting to be another girl in his long line of girls. Will ends the argument by grabbing her face and pulling her in for a passionate kiss. Though they never truly talk through the issue, Will utters between kisses "You're not like the other girls" and assumedly resolves the argument.

Each of the couples prove their love and devotion by overcoming both arguments and obstacles. Though they occur in differing formats and with different details, the obstacles and arguments function in much the same way in each of the relationships. Obstacles bond the characters together as they work in conjunction to face the difficulties that society or destiny places before them. Arguments ultimately show the passion with which the characters are invested in the relationship. They also lay the foundation for a reconciliation scene that proves the couple can work through their differences because their love is real.

Because most couples fight and then leave the scene, reconciliation scenes are often perfect for a dramatic display of reconnected passion. This is certainly true in the films I studied for this project. Of the nineteen total kisses displayed throughout the

films, eleven of them take place after an apology and assist in reuniting the couple post-quarrel. This is by far the most frequent way in which kisses appear. In *High School Musical 3* (2008), Troy drives to Stanford to surprise Gabriella after she's told him that long distance is too hard and she wants to break up. The two are reunited on Stanford's campus when Troy drives through the night to surprise Gabriella and help her see that he is not ready to move on. The two kiss as a way of recommitting themselves to each other. *Bring it On* (2000), *The Princess Diaries* (2001), *Mean Girls* (2004), *Step Up* (2006), *17 Again* (2009), and *The Last Song* (2010) all feature the same sequence of events regarding the reunion kiss. One character comes back to apologize to the character that they've hurt, they verbally forgive one another, and then they seal their reunion with a kiss. Of these movies, nine of them end with this type of reunion/make-up kissing scene.

Six of the other remaining kisses in the films work solely to signify love. These kisses are tied closely to either an explicit expression of love or a montage that shows the couple falling in love over the course of several dates. In *A Walk to Remember* (2002), Landon and Jamie go on their first date, and the film depicts them in a series of scenes set to music as they fall in love. After this, Landon tells Jamie that he loves her and the two share their first real kiss. The same happens in Lena's narrative in *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2005). Several scenes of she and Kostas play out in the film as they fall in love. At the end of this "falling in love" montage, Lena opens up to Kostas in conversation and the two share their first kiss. In every case, first kisses are tied to affection. Those couples that engage in both love kisses and reunion/resolution kisses always have their kiss as an expression of love first in the relational journey.

Consequently, all of the films that end with a kiss do so by means of a reunion/resolution kiss.

Two kissing outliers appear in two of these films. Bridget's narrative in *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* has a kissing scene where Bridget and her soccer coach, Eric, kiss on the beach. This kiss then leads to the two of them having sex. Because Bridget and Eric are enacting a love that is not meant to be, this kiss leads to an outcome that both of them eventually regret. They do not have a successful relationship and their kiss—neither a reunion kiss nor an expression of love kiss—cannot be categorized as one of the two stereotypical kisses seen in these teen films. *Mean Girls* (2004) is the same way. In this comedy, Cady and Aaron's first kiss occurs while Aaron is tutoring Cady in math. Cady is looking for reasons to hang out with Aaron so she has dumbed herself down so that she appears to need a tutor even though she is actually quite good at math. Their first kiss is a product of her seduction and manipulation of Aaron who is dating someone else at the time of the kiss. When he pulls away from the kiss to say he does not think it is a good idea to cheat on his girlfriend, Cady responds by telling him that Regina is cheating on him and so he should not feel bad. By doing this, Cady breaks up Aaron and Regina's relationships. Aaron and Cady's kiss is neither a signifier of love nor a resolution kiss and their relationship as a result of that first kiss is unsuccessful. Not until the end of the film do Cady and Aaron get another chance at a real kiss. Cady re-discovers who she truly is and comes back to Aaron at the school's dance to apologize for her previous actions. Then, the two share a reunion kiss, signifying that they are now on the right track to love.

The kiss is one of the most iconic moments of any filmic portrayal of a romantic relationship. As the examples from the films for this project illustrate, teenage romantic relationships are no exception. The kiss is the ultimate culmination of sexual tension and relational commitment, and is the moment that the audience awaits as soon as the characters in the romantic relationship are introduced. It is not so much the kiss as it is what the kiss signifies that leaves the audience feeling fulfilled and hopeful at the end of the films. Wrapped up in the moment of the kiss is the established commitment of the couple, the promise of a lasting future, and the attainment of true love that the audience has been rooting for throughout the duration of the film. Obviously, teen films play off of this romantic trope in making the kiss an important moment in the couple's relational journey. Other iconic scenes exist throughout the films and function in much the same way as the moment of the kiss. These scenes bring with them all of the romantic baggage collected over the years of films depicting narratives of love. In the next section, I will discuss these iconic scenes and their role within the romantic relational journey of the teens in the films for this project.

Iconic Scenes: Bringing Romantic Baggage to the Relationship

Although the films for this project were all produced in the 21st Century, the relational plotlines still rely heavily upon traditional scripts of romance and love as seen throughout history. In fact, the films incorporate specific iconic scenes of romance, which gesture back to the memorable scripts we have seen over years. By doing this, films bring decades of romantic baggage to the screen in these memorable scenes of romance. The knowledge or romantic scripts that audience's bring to their viewing function to form arguments within these films about romance and love and relationships.

Ultimately, the baggage brings with it certain expectations and understandings that can be triggered through certain scenes of romance. In Aristotle's *Rhetoric* he names this trigger *topoi* (or topics) meaning general forms of argument or reasoning which lead the mind from one thing to another (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*). Aristotle suggests the concept of *topoi* in relation to arguments made in oratory. He describes general topics as those "that apply equally to questions of right conduct, natural science, politics, and many other things that have nothing to do with one another" (Aristotle, 1358a 12-13). In other words, *topoi* are guides to the form of arguments. In understanding the general form, orators can take one given premise or conclusion and use it to infer what the missing premise or conclusion ought to be. So, though the subject matter may change, specifically for Aristotle in the issues discussed by orators, the *topoi* remain the same, generally guiding the form of the argument.

Aristotle's notion of *topoi* applies to these films in that the audience is able to use general forms of argument, as they have been exposed to them over time to fill in the missing pieces of the narratives presented in the contemporary films. When an iconic scene of romance is portrayed, the audience is able to either backfill or project inferences about the romantic relationship based on the general forms of romance that they have been exposed to over time. To be clear, Aristotle's *topoi* help us understand the ways in which the audience is able to reason, in enthymematic fashion about the iconic scenes of romance that they see on screen. Their minds follow the general form of argument and connect the one iconic scene to their more general understandings of romance.

For example, more is going on in the scene in *How to Deal* (2003) when Macon throws pebbles at Halley's window than mere rocks hitting glass. The scene itself serves

as part of an argument in which the audience's understanding of the iconic relationship of Romeo and Juliet functions as a premise in a more general type of argument about the kind of relationship that Halley and Macon must have. Just as Romeo summons Juliet in the night, so Macon calls up to Halley, hidden by darkness. The contemporary scene in *How to Deal* successfully gestures back to the forbidden relationship of Romeo and Juliet. By playing off of this iconic moment of romance, Macon's act of throwing pebbles at Halley's window is part of a broader argument about teenage romance in which the teens must rebel against their family's wishes in order to be together. In this way, the audience is seduced by Macon and Halley's relationship as one of forbidden, true love. They offer their support, not because the characters' relationship earned it, but because the *topoi* for this argument allows them no choice other than to root for the teens in the hopes that they will fare better in their relational outcome than did Romeo and Juliet.

The same is true in iconic dance scenes, which gesture toward the more general Cinderella at the royal ball romantic narrative. Essentially, these dance scenes in teen romance films function as part of a broader argument about romance and love that was established in the Cinderella narrative. For instance, Cady and Aaron come together at the end of *Mean Girls* after Cady wins the title of prom queen. They dance together on the dance floor amidst their peers and seal their relationship with a kiss. Applying Aristotle's *topoi* suggests that this scene is more than simply Cady and Aaron dancing. Instead, this scene is a premise that makes a more general argument about romance by calling forth Cinderella's scene at the royal ball and the love story that moment represents. Essentially, Cady is a princess (in fact, she's already gotten a crown from her

new prom queen title to signify this new status) and Aaron is her prince, and at the dance they come together to express their feelings of love.

High School Musical 3 gestures toward a similar argument about romance in the prom scene with Troy and Gabriella. In this instance, Gabriella calls Troy to tell him that she cannot make it back from her freshman honors program at Stanford in order to be with him at their high school's prom. Troy is upset by Gabriella's choice and drives across the country to spend what would have been their prom with her at Stanford. She laments, "Prom is tonight in Albuquerque. That's a thousand miles away!" To which Troy replies, "My prom is wherever you are." And then the two dance together on Stanford's campus, Troy in his tuxedo and Gabriella in her jean shorts. Their dance ends in a kiss. This scene functions to call forth the multitude of prom scenes present in teen films, but on a broader level, to gesture toward the romantic narrative of Cinderella at the ball. Gabriella's drabby clothes in comparison to Troy's tuxedo make this argument even more clearly. Troy is Gabriella's prince sent to rescue her and bring her back to Albuquerque to finish out her senior year of high school with her friends. It is also here in this scene where they share their first kiss of the movie and express their feelings to each other.

Both of the prom scenes in *Mean Girls* and in *High School Musical 3* are part of a broader argument about romance—specifically that in the scene of the royal ball (read: prom) the characters will find their love. These films are not alone in this. Dance scenes are one of the conventions present in many of the films for this project and have come to be iconic moments in teen romance narratives as a whole. *The Princess Diaries*, *A Walk to Remember*, *The Last Song*, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, *How to Deal*, and

Step Up all include dance scenes where the two main characters find or express love to each other.

Another type of iconic scene present in these films that gestures toward a larger argument about romance occurs in *A Walk to Remember*, *The Last Song*, and *The Princess Diaries* where the female physically transforms as a way of proving that she can function in the male character's world. To be specific, Landon first notices Jamie as a possible love interest in *A Walk to Remember* when she physically transforms for the play that they are in together. She comes out on stage in a sparkly turquoise gown, hair curled and down at her shoulders and suddenly Landon cannot contain his feelings. He abandons the script and kisses her on stage in front of the entire audience. Her newfound beauty allows Landon to see Jamie in a new light and to ultimately realize that he wants to be with her. This moment of physical transformation is present in the other films listed above, but always functions as part of the broader argument that claims the characters must be physically attractive in order to be desirable.

Each of these instances illustrate the ways in which iconic scenes of romance function within the films in argumentative ways. Aristotle's concept of *topoi* provides the foundation for such a claim, for in each film, the scene nods toward something bigger that is going on. I will dig deeper into this notion in the following chapters as I discuss first moments of agency and then hidden ideologies. I will rely on *topoi* in chapters 3 and 4 to illustrate the ways in which these teen films are both important and impactful.

Summary

In this chapter I discussed the dating scripts present in the eleven films for this project. What I found is that many of these films follow the same specific formulas that

adhere to the conventions of this teen film genre. Though IMDb qualifies the films into a range of additional genres, including comedy, drama, romance and family, what these films have in common is that they are all top-grossing teen films for the year in which they were produced (See Appendix A for a detailed table regarding this information). Thus, my findings suggest that writers, directors, and producers recognize this proven narrative formula for success. In other words, they know that adhering to genre conventions pays off at the box office by giving viewers exactly what they are expecting. This chapter discussed how that proven formula resides in broad narrative structures of pursuit and rescue, which I found prominently in all eleven films. I also found arguments and obstacles in each of these scripts, as I expected, and discussed in this chapter the ways in which the couples faced and overcame each of those arguments and obstacles. Kissing is another clear genre convention that I found to signify both love and reconciliation in each of the films. Finally, I ended the chapter by discussing Aristotle's *topoi*, which helped me in making claims about the broader arguments these films are a part of. This notion of *topoi* and the ways in which these particular films function argumentatively will be discussed in the upcoming chapters on agency and ideologies.

Chapter 3: Agency in Teenage Romantic Relationships

Communication scholarship is littered with the term “agency,” yet the term remains rather slippery. Kenneth Burke’s understanding of agency is one of the most widely accepted definitions in which agency is concerned with how things get done. In *The Grammar of Motives*, Burke focuses agency to refer to a means or an instrument used toward action (275-320). English professor, Susan Wells, builds on this notion with her definition of agency. For her, agency is “the activity of a subject pursuing an intention” (Rhetoric and Agency). Just as with Burke’s definition, the means are an important aspect of agency for Wells and she claims that agency is the choice an entity makes to act purposefully. I will be using Wells’ understanding as the large umbrella definition of agency for this project. In each of the films, characters exhibit agency. That is, each character intentionally pursues action for a purpose during the film. Three agency themes exist across the films. That is, characters demonstrate agency in particular ways which I am categorizing into three different themes: (1) misuse of agency, (2) lack of agency, and (3) active agency. In this chapter, I will explore these three agency themes starting with characters who misuse their agency, then to characters who lack agency, and finally to characters with active agency. Then I will compare the agency themes to the broad narrative structures of pursuit and rescue, which I discussed in chapter 2. By doing this, I hope to illuminate the ways in which a character’s agency prominently interplays with narratives of pursuit and rescue.

Misuse of Agency: Love Tames Rebellion

The majority of the films feature characters who misuse their agency at the beginning of the film and often throughout the relationship, but who are able to harness

their agency for good because of their romantic relationship. This particular agency theme is demonstrated by male or female characters, but never by both male and female characters in the same movie. In other words, several movies feature female characters who misuse their agency and several movies feature male characters who misuse their agency, but never is there a movie with a male and female character both of whom misuse their agency. This is because characters who misuse their agency need to be changed by the romantic relationship and thus require a romantic partner who can help them to do that. If both characters misuse their agency, it would be impossible for them to break out of their cycles of rebellion to be changed by the romantic relationship.

For example, Halley misuses her agency in *How to Deal*. She purposefully cuts her hair as an act of rebellion against her father who tells her that she should never cut it. She also sneaks out of the house to meet up with her love interest for a New Years Eve party, even though her mother forbid her from seeing Macon ever again. Halley continually makes rebellious choices and appropriates her agency in ways to get back at her parents for their divorce. But, Halley also exhibits moments of active agency, as in the scene where she actively tells Macon to leave her alone after he mistreats her. After the New Years Eve party, when Halley refused to have sex with Macon, and the two fought about it, Macon approaches Halley and acts like nothing has changed between them. Halley responds, “You really don’t get it do you? And I’m really not in the mood to wait for you to grow up” and then walks away. In this moment, Halley uses her agency to stand up for herself. It is within the site of the romantic relationship that she learns to use her agency in more productive ways than to rebel. Of course, eventually Macon wins Halley back, but only after he publicly commits to her saying over the radio,

“I love you Halley. If you’re ready to make the jump, then I’ll be right here to catch you.” Macon messed up in the relationship, but through that process Halley changed her agency from rebellious to self-respecting. Pre-Macon, she misused her agency simply to rebel against her parents. As a result of Macon, she learns to use her agency more productively, because of the relationship, and in the end, to make her relationship work.

Ronnie from *The Last Song* (2010) demonstrates the very same misuse of agency theme. She is a rebellious teenager who steals, lies, and snaps at her parents. Then, Ronnie meets Will, falls in love, and he melts her heart. Instead of using her agency to run away from her parents and yell at her father for playing the piano, Ronnie begins to use her agency in more productive ways. She hangs out with her brother, she donates money to her friend in need, she saves a sea turtle nest, and she restores her relationship with her father. Through her relationship with Will, Ronnie transforms from misusing her agency to using it for good.

Female characters are not the only ones who exhibit this misuse of agency theme. Male characters such as Tyler in *Step Up* and Landon in *A Walk to Remember* portray the same sort of intentional acts of rebellion which change to productive uses of their agency. *Step Up* provides a useful illustration. The film begins with a scene that shows Tyler breaking, entering, and destroying private property. He uses his agency to rebel against society, his foster family, and his position in life. Then, throughout the film, as he falls in love with Nora while completing his community service sentence at her school, Tyler begins to re-configure the ways in which he uses his agency. Though it takes a while, Tyler eventually chooses to act in such a way that will prove to the director of the school that he is choosing to take his life seriously and actively pursue a scholarship to attend the

Maryland School of Arts. Indicating his switch to self-respecting agency, he shows up behind stage just before Nora's dance showcase so that he can help her achieve her dreams by performing her original dance with him as her partner. He says to Nora, "You said if you want something you gotta fight for it, right? Well that's why I'm here and I'm fighting for something for the first time in my life!" By showing his dedication and choosing to fight for his spot in the dance, Tyler uses his agency to actively achieve his own dreams of acceptance into the school.

Other characters misuse their agency, but not necessarily as an intentional act of rebellion. In these cases, the characters simply make poor choices that result in harmful outcomes. Then, through their romantic interest, they learn to make more productive, healthy choices. For example, Torrance in *Bring it On* (2000) misuses her agency and reaps the consequences of those choices throughout the film. On her first day of cheer practice, she tries to assert her captain-hood by making the team complete a difficult lift. When they complain and warn her that they are not in the right physical shape to perform this cheer, Torrance disregards them and orders them to try it anyway. Ultimately, her choice to push her team too hard creates an unsafe cheer environment and one of their best cheerleaders falls from the top of the pyramid, hurts her neck, and cannot participate on the team for the rest of the season. This is just the beginning for Torrance and her intentional choice to act in ways that are unethical. She chooses to let her team continue to perform a stolen cheer even after she sees the evidence that the cheer was taken from a cheerleading team at another school. Because of her school's economic status, she is able to steal this cheer from a school with far less monetary resources. Additionally, Torrance continues to stay in a relationship with her unsupportive boyfriend—an act that the

audience can identify as a misuse of her agency: The film shows that he is cheating on her, and he continually tells her that she ought to step down from her role as cheerleading captain.

Cliff, the new boy at school who is interested in dating Torrance, tells Torrance that he believes in her and supports her. It is through him that Torrance finally gains the confidence to believe in herself and use her agency to stand up to her cheerleading squad who is trying to get her to leave her role as captain. She attends cheer practice and says, “I am not crazy and I’m not resigning as captain either. You’ll have to kill me first. Look I know I’ve screwed up royally as captain but I believe in this squad and I know we can bounce back from this.” This is a turning point for Torrance as she actively chooses to stand up for herself, behave ethically, and work hard to help her squad earn a national championship in the next phase of the competition. Cliff’s support also gives Torrance the agency to break up with her unsupportive boyfriend.

The female characters in *Mean Girls*, *Juno*, and *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (Bridget) exhibit the same misuse of agency as Torrance does in *Bring it On*. They simply make bad choices. For example, Bridget in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* seduces her soccer coach into having an inappropriate relationship with her, has sex with him, and then regrets her choice later. She misuses her agency by making choices that will only harm her relationships and her future. Juno has unprotected sex with her friend Paulie and gets pregnant, then decides to have an abortion, and finally chooses instead to make an adoption plan for her baby. Though her final choice to find an adoptive family for her child is not necessarily a poor choice, the choices Juno makes prior to her pregnancy put her in a position to have to make these tough choices.

Importantly, none of the male characters demonstrate this type of misused agency. Male characters that do misuse their agency, all do so as an act of rebellion. They exude the “bad boy” persona and then are tamed or changed by the female character that they fall in love with. In other words, none of the male characters misuse their agency by unknowingly making bad choices that result in harmful outcomes. They *intentionally* choose to misuse their agency as an act of rebellion.

So, although characters that misuse their agency appear throughout all eleven films, in some films, the characters use their agency as an act of rebellion, in others they (read: the females) simply make bad choices—whether knowingly or not. Whatever the case, characters who misuse their agency function in one of two ways. First, male characters who misuse their agency set themselves up to need to be rescued, changed, or tamed. That job always falls on the shoulders of their female romantic interest who, without really doing anything, helps them to change. The same is true for the female characters who misuse their agency to rebel. Their acts of rebellion are a cry for help that they must be rescued and returned to a sweet state of contentment. Second, female characters who unknowingly misuse their agency to make bad choices essentially prove that they are lost. In other words, they need a partner to show them the way since they have little moral compass or they are naïve and cannot see the potential pitfalls of their choices.

Since all of the characters in these films end up together in a romantic relationship at the end of the film, they all also lose this misused agency flaw by the end of the film. As the examples show, each one, through the power of their significant other, overcomes his or her original tendency to misuse their agency. In the final section of this chapter, I

will explore in more detail the ways in which this particular agency theme coincides with narratives of pursuit and rescue. But first, I will explore the other two agency themes: lack of agency and active agency.

Lack of Agency: Love Sparks Action

In general, characters that lack agency at the beginning of the film gain the confidence, through their romantic relationship, to act intentionally by the end of the film. Most often these characters are female, although there are a few male characters that exhibit a lack of agency throughout the films. In this section I will discuss those male and female characters that demonstrate a lack of agency. Then I will discuss how, and if, they overcome that lack to gain agency by the end of the film. To begin, I will examine female characters who lack agency since they occur most frequently.

Several female characters exhibit a lack of agency as outside forces act upon them, inhibiting their ability to act for themselves. These forces range from the universe acting against them, to parents setting rules on their lives, to a necessary reliance on other characters in order to accomplish their goals. Mia in *The Princess Diaries* portrays the stereotypical character who lacks agency because it seems the universe is against her. Mia is clumsy and awkward, and her main goal at school is to be invisible. She does such a good job being unseen that she actually gets sat on by another student at the beginning of the film. Mia exercises very little control over her life, as portrayed by her unkempt hair, her inability to complete any task in gym class, and her disastrous attempt at public speaking in which she runs out of the room while trying not to vomit. Interestingly, even after Mia finds out that she is the heir to the Genovian throne and receives a makeover, which completely changes her appearance, Mia is still clumsy and

awkward. She sets someone's sleeve on fire at an important royal dinner and causes a waiter to fall and drop all of the food at the same dinner. Mia acts, but her actions are never intentional and they rarely result in a positive outcome. Her inability to control even her own limbs suggests that the universe is simply acting upon her.

After making a few bad choices (namely, ditching her friend Michael—who is interested in dating her—to go to a party with the popular boy at school), Mia begins to harness her agency and take responsibility for her actions. At this point in the film, she gains active agency. When the popular girl at school makes fun of Mia and one of her friends by calling them freaks, Mia responds by saying, “Yeah, I am [a freak]. But you know what, someday I might grow out of that. But you? You will never stop being a jerk.” Then, she smashes an ice cream cone all over the girl who was mean. In doing this, Mia stands up for herself and her friends. She exhibits active agency as she finally has confidence to assert herself. This agency continues as Mia eventually chooses to accept her role as Princess of Genovia for the very reason that this new position will allow her to enact change in society and stand up for the things in which she believes.

Mia taps into her own agency as a result of several factors. First, when she begins to use her agency, she does so poorly. As mentioned previously, she chooses to ditch her scheduled date with Michael to instead attend a party with the most popular boy in school. This choice ends badly for her, and her guilt over the way she treated Michael—and his hurt because of it—forces her to reexamine her choices. Second, Mia's makeover and “princess lessons” with her grandmother give her confidence to stand up for herself. And finally, Mia receives a letter from her deceased father in which he tells her, “Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment that something else is more

important than fear. The brave may not live forever, but the cautious do not live at all. The key is to allow yourself to make the journey [between who you are and who you can be].” This poignant letter encourages Mia to take hold of her agency and use it for good. Mia does just that by accepting the role of Genovian princess. Mia’s romantic relationship benefits from this as she recognizes that being with Michael is the right choice for her life.

Lena in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* also exhibits a lack of agency. Her lack of agency originates out of adult control. Like Mia, she is clumsy and the universe acts upon her as she accidentally falls off of a boat dock and into the water, but ultimately, Lena’s lack of agency results from her grandparent’s rules. Her grandparents tell her what she is and is not allowed to do, and she obeys their wishes. Lena’s lack of agency changes as she begins to spend time with her love interest, Kostas. Suddenly, she makes choices for herself—sneaking out of her house to meet him for dates. Her relationship with Kostas gives Lena the confidence she needs to eventually stand up to her grandparents who have forbidden her romantic relationship. She implores her grandfather to give her permission to go see Kostas before he leaves to attend the University of Athens in the fall, and her grandfather gives her his blessing. Lena takes the situation into her own hands and finally harnesses her agency to act for herself. Kostas is the sole reason she is able to do this. He questions Lena about why she is so closed off and scared. His interest in her demeanor causes Lena to be self-reflexive and realize that she is cautious out of fear and she no longer wants to live that way. At first, she is only able to let her hair down (both figuratively and literally) around Kostas, but eventually he gives her the confidence to do so with her grandparents as well.

Jamie in *A Walk to Remember* faces several outside forces that act upon her. Jaime's actions are not her own. She is controlled first by her father who is protective over her and sets strict rules for her social and academic life. Then her disease robs her completely of her agency by making her weak and then taking her life. Jamie intentionally acts throughout the film, but all of these actions are constrained by her father's wishes and her life-threatening disease. This suggests that, in fact, Jamie has very little agency of her own. Toward the end of the film, when Jamie's disease has left her bedridden, Jamie must rely on others to help her complete her bucket list and live the last days of her life. Landon, her romantic interest, must act in her place since she is too weak to do so.

This same situation occurs in several other films where a female character's agency is constrained by her reliance on her romantic interest to help her accomplish a task or goal. Nora in *Step Up* relies on her male dance partner, Tyler, to help her act. She has dreams to perform a very particular final dance showcase, but is unable to complete the dance on her own. When Tyler quits being her dance partner and her backup partner is too injured to perform, Nora is left without any agency to achieve her dreams. She tells her mom, "The guy I've been rehearsing with for the showcase...he quit today so basically I'm screwed!" For Nora, the issue is not so much that she *cannot* act, but that she cannot exercise her agency to act in the ways she *wants* to without the help of her male partner. Only with the male character can she exercise the agency necessary to achieve her dreams. Because her agency is not her own, Nora exemplifies a lack of agency.

In the same way, Gabriella from *High School Musical 3* exhibits a lack of agency in that she must rely on her romantic interest, Troy, to accomplish her goals. In one particular scene, Gabriella suggests to her friends that they all be a part of the school's musical. She tells them that doing the musical will be fun since it is their last year in high school and participating in the musical will allow them to spend lots of time practicing together. All of her classmates meet her with opposition. They are unconvinced by her argument. Desperately, Gabriella looks across the room at Troy, and utters his name, imploring him to be on her side. After an exasperated sigh, Troy raises his hand "I'm in" he says. When his classmates look at him questioningly he responds, "What? It'll be fun!" Then they all commit to the musical. Gabriella tries to exercise her agency, to act in a way that will get her classmates excited to do the musical with her, but ultimately, she cannot accomplish her goal without the help of Troy. She must rely on him to act for her or to assist her so that her intentions can take form in action. Gabriella's lack of agency exists throughout the whole film as she is pushed out of high school early by an opportunity at Stanford to participate in their Freshman Honors Early Acceptance Program. Even when she tries to exercise her agency by breaking up with Troy over the phone, he refuses to accept her choice and drives all the way to Stanford to pick her up and take her back to high school.

To sum up, female characters that lack agency exhibit this trait in a variety of ways. Depending on the forces that act upon them or for them, some of the characters are able to overcome these forces and gain agency for themselves while others are not as successful. In general, those female characters that must rely on male characters to

exercise their agency for them are the ones who have the most trouble claiming their agency as their own, and most often, never actually do.

Male characters who are portrayed as lacking agency occur exponentially less frequently throughout these films. Only three films show this type of male character and in two of those cases, the male character plays an obviously supportive role in the plot, meaning he is not one of the main characters. Aaron in *Mean Girls* and Paulie in *Juno* are two examples. Paulie has very little agency of his own in the film *Juno*. After he finds out that Juno is pregnant with his child, he says to her “What are we going to do?” When she responds that she is thinking of getting an abortion he simply says, “Do whatever you think is best.” He leaves the decisions and the action up to Juno, deferring to her choices. This is true throughout the rest of the film as Paulie is the receiver of news about his child, but not an active member of any discussions regarding the situation. He exists, and in the few scenes that we see him, he responds to Juno, doing as he is told. In the end, he and Juno end up together, but only once she has decided that she is in love with him and wants to be with him. He is ready and waiting when she confesses these feelings, and he accepts Juno as his girlfriend, telling her that he loves her too.

Similarly, Aaron exercises very little agency of his own in *Mean Girls*. He is at the mercy of the female characters who manipulate him into acting in certain ways for their benefit. In one particular scene, Cady tries to get Aaron to walk in on his girlfriend cheating on him so she devises several plans to lead him to the room where she cheats on him every Thursday. Aaron falls for every plan, though the plans all fail and he never actually catches his girlfriend cheating on him. Thus, Aaron exercises what he believes to be agency, but ultimately his choices are the pre-determined outcomes of the female

characters' schemes. He is simply the puppet in a show controlled by women. Aaron eventually overcomes his lack of agency by taking hold of his own life and choosing to not date any of the girls, but this only lasts for a little while. He ends the movie kissing Cady at the Spring Fling dance, only this time it really is by his choice and not because of her manipulation. Aaron is one of the only characters who seems to gain agency across the course of the film, all on his own. As he breaks free from the manipulation of women in his life, he is left to act out of his own accord.

Troy in *High School Musical 3* shows a similar transformation, but he breaks free from the constraints of his parents' expectations (not from women as in the other two examples) in order to exercise his agency. He, like Aaron, does this on his own in the film. In one particularly illustrative scene, Troy discusses his future with his father. The conversation becomes intense as Mr. Bolton tries to tell his son what choice to make for his future. Frustrated, Troy retorts, "You raised me to make my own choices and I need to make them. Not you or Chad or anybody else! Me!" This is a defining moment for Troy as he breaks free from the constraints of his parents' influence and exercises his agency to choose his future for himself.

As all of these examples show, both male and female characters that lack agency find themselves in that position for a variety of reasons. Some have their agency constrained by forces outside of themselves such as parents or disease while others are reliant upon their romantic interests to act for them. Percentage-wise, the female characters have a much harder time gaining agency for themselves. Male characters, on the other hand are able to choose to harness their own agency much more frequently and

successfully. In fact, this theme continues in the films as male characters most often demonstrate active agency. I will discuss this active agency in the next section.

Active Agency: Love Knows What it Wants

The majority of characters that exhibit active agency are men, and all of these male characters use their active agency for the same purpose: to pursue the female character. Female characters, on the other hand, demonstrate far less active agency. Though some characters gain agency across the course of the film (see the previous sections for examples), only two of them actively use their agency across the whole film and do so in positive and productive ways. In this section, I will first discuss the male characters that exhibit active agency since they occur more frequently and then I will consider the female characters with active agency.

Cliff, Michael, Macon, Kostas, and Will all exhibit active agency used in pursuit of a female character. As discussed in the previous chapter, these are also the characters that embody the pursuit narrative as they actively pursue the female character at all costs. These boys cannot be deterred by any obstacle or argument from attaining the love of the female character. Will from *The Last Song* is the most stereotypically illustrative example of this as he continuously uses his agency to pursue Ronnie in spite of her lack of interest and hardened heart. Will never loses hope and actively chooses to work at softening Ronnie's heart no matter how hard he has to work or what obstacles he has to face.

The only male character whose active agency is not used to pursue a girl is Eric from *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. Eric is a college-aged soccer coach who is being pursued by a high-school aged Bridget while at soccer camp. Eric uses his active

agency to resist Bridget, but eventually cannot continue doing so. He gives in to her advances and the two have sex. Immediately Bridget regrets the inappropriate relationship, but the audience does not see Eric to find out his reaction. At the end of the film, Eric finally comes back into the picture. He seeks out Bridget at her home and apologizes and takes responsibility for his actions. In doing so, he regains his active agency for good by doing his best to right the situation. Eric never pursued Bridget. Instead, he used his active agency to resist her until her agency in pursuing the relationship overcame him. When he does utilize his agency again, he does so to apologize and right the situation as best as he can.

Female characters with active agency occur far less commonly across the films. *Juno*'s lead female character demonstrates active agency as she navigates her pregnancy. She chooses to get an abortion, and then not to go through with it. She chooses to find an adoptive family for her baby, and then goes to meet them and commit to allowing them to parent her child. Juno also actively determines the course of her romantic relationship with Paulie. When she decides that she is ready to date him, he is more than willing to accept her. Though Juno acts purposefully and confidently throughout the film, it is her choice to have sex at the beginning of the film that puts her in a position to have to make such tough choices for her life. Thus, Juno's active agency is framed within a larger picture of misused agency.

Scarlet from *17 Again* is the other female character that portrays active agency. Interestingly, her agency is also framed within a pregnancy story. Scarlet becomes pregnant in high school and chooses to give birth to and parent her baby. Mike, her high school boyfriend, chooses to give up his basketball career in order to stay with her, marry

her, and help her raise their child. The movie picks up with Mike and Scarlet, sixteen years later when Mike regrets his choice and is disappointed with his life. At this point in the film, Scarlet kicks Mike out of the house and the first time the audience sees her on film, she is shredding up all of his stuff. Mike protests and tells her that he is extremely disappointed with his life to which she responds, “I didn’t ask you to marry me. You don’t have to do me any favors anymore. We don’t need to hold each other back anymore.” From there, Scarlet takes hold of her dreams to become a landscape design artist. She renovates her backyard as a showpiece for her new career, actively seeks out help in dealing with her pending divorce, and goes on a date with a new guy. She utilizes her agency to take hold of her life and act in ways that will better her life and help her to move on. But, just as in *Juno*, Scarlet’s strong, active agency is clouded over by her and Mike’s original misuse of agency, which landed her in this position in the first place.

As this section illustrates, both male and female characters demonstrate active agency. Male characters with active agency occur most frequently and they all use their agency to pursue after their love interest. Female characters, on the other hand, exhibit active agency much less frequently and both do so in the context of an unwanted pregnancy. The ways in which characters exhibit agency line up in unique ways with the overarching narrative structures present in these films. In the next section, I will discuss the ways in which agency themes interplay with broad narrative structures of pursuit and rescue.

Agency in Pursuit and Rescue Narratives

Broad narrative structures of pursuit and rescue undergird all eleven of the films for this project. Although there are no absolutes for ways in which agency themes

coincide with these broad narrative structures, some patterns do come to light. In this section I will discuss these patterns. First I will look at films with pursuit narratives in which the male pursues the female and discuss the agency themes that play out in those films. Then I will discuss pursuit narratives where the female pursues the male doing the same as I did with the first portion. Finally, I will look at rescue narratives and analyze how agency patterns line up with that particular narrative structure.

As the previous chapter illustrates, films with pursuit narratives in which the male character pursues the female character occur the most frequently of any of the narrative structures. After comparing these narrative structures with agency themes, I found that in general, pursuit narratives with males pursuing females most often portray males with active agency and females that misuse their agency. This makes sense. Male characters must have active agency since they are the ones pursuing the females. The previous section on active agency discussed the ways in which male characters with active agency all use that agency to pursue their female counterparts. It also makes sense that female characters in these films would misuse their agency. If they lacked agency, then they would simply fall for the pursuing male and the film would be over, but female characters who misuse their agency are a bit of a challenge. They present narrative intrigue as they fight against the male pursuing them or make poor choices and continue a relationship with the wrong male character leaving the right male character to pursue her in spite of her current bad relationship.

Torrance and Cliff in the movie *Bring it On* are a perfect example of this. Torrance continually misuses her agency. She stays with her unsupportive boyfriend, Aaron, and ruins her cheerleading squad's reputation. Cliff has active agency, which he

uses to pursue Torrance in spite of her inability to use her agency for the right purposes. Finally, through Cliff's support, Torrance regains her agency and breaks up with her boyfriend and leads her cheerleading squad to the national championship. This allows her and Cliff to finally be together at the end of the film.

In contrast, pursuit narratives that portray female characters pursuing male characters feature female characters who misuse their agency and male characters who lack agency. In doing this, these films suggest that female characters who pursue often do not know what they are doing. They cannot stand up to the challenge of pursuing an active agent and thus are cast opposite male characters who play supporting roles and lack agency. As I discussed in the previous chapter, these narratives are also the ones that often do not work out or are portrayed in a comedic light. Never do we see a female character who pursues a male character with active intentional agency in the same way that males who pursue are portrayed in the films.

For example, Cady pursues Aaron in *Mean Girls*, but Cady misuses her agency throughout the entire film to try and manipulate an agency-less Aaron. Their relationship is portrayed in a comedic light as Cady pretends to fail math class as a way of getting Aaron to tutor her and ultimately fall in love with her. Aaron responds just as she plans, but eventually Aaron gains some agency and realizes that he does not want to be with Cady since she is acting just like the mean, popular girls at school that he has dated before her. As he gains his agency back, this jars Cady into reexamining her life and she eventually alters her actions to use her agency for good. The two end up together at the end of the film.

Finally, films with rescue narratives most generally portray female characters who lack agency and male characters who misuse their agency for rebellion. This combination of narrative structure and agency themes set up these films to easily portray the simultaneous rescue narrative. The male characters must be rescued from their rebellious ways and the female characters must rely on the male characters to rescue them from their inability to complete the tasks or goals on their own.

Landon and Jamie in *A Walk to Remember* provide the textbook example of this combination. Landon misuses his agency to rebel—drinking on school property, skipping class, and being apathetic toward school and life. Jamie lacks agency as she must act within the wishes of her father and is constrained by the physical restraints her disease puts upon her. Landon and Jamie rescue each other as Jamie helps Landon to see his potential in life and transforms him from a bad boy into a prospective medical student with a healthy relationship with his family. Landon helps Jamie gain the confidence to stand up to her father and break the rules he has set upon her. He also acts for Jamie as her disease takes over her body and leaves her unable to act on her own. Together, their agency themes coincide with the broad narrative structure of rescue to create an iconic teen love story.

As the previous examples illustrate, agency themes appear broadly within narratives of pursuit and rescue in very particular ways. In chapter 2, I discussed the dating scripts that these specific narrative structures follow and drew attention to the obstacles and arguments that the couples face within those narratives. I showed how arguments and obstacles add drama and intrigue to the plot and also function to move the romantic relationship forward. Because of this, agency themes also appear on a more

microscopic level within these moments in the teenage romantic relationships in the films. In the next section, I will discuss the characters' agency and couples' agency in overcoming obstacles and arguments.

Collaborative Agency: Overcoming Obstacles and Arguments

In romantic plotlines, couples bond as they overcome obstacles and arguments, solidifying their relationship as they choose to fight against any outside forces that may jeopardize their love. The hope, then, is that in facing these obstacles and arguments, the couples choose each other and work together to prove that their love is one that will last through any trials it may face. Characters have different amounts of agency within these sites of obstacles and arguments. First, I will discuss their agency within the process of overcoming obstacles.

Forbidden relationships are one such obstacle in which agency plays out in very gender specific ways. In these cases, the couples choose together to see each other in spite of being told that they are not allowed to date, but only the female character actively chooses this against the wishes of the parental figures in her life. Alternatively, the male characters rarely have identifiable parental influences and thus are able to choose the relationship without much consequence. To be specific, Halley in *How to Deal* chooses to sneak out of the house to meet up with Macon (who her mother has forbidden her from seeing) on three separate occasions. In one scene, she even devises a plan to sneak away with him to the New Years Eve party after telling her mother that she will be spending the night at her friend's house. In another scene, Macon throws pebbles at Halley's window until she sneaks out the house to come meet him in the yard where they share their first kiss. Halley active chooses to disobey her mother's rules while Macon simply

gets to show up to the scene. So, together they overcome the obstacle, but Halley is the only one of the two who really had to face the obstacle.

The same is true in Lena's storyline in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. Lena's grandparents forbid her from seeing her love interest, Kostas. When Lena actively decides to sneak out of the house to meet up with him for a date, she is disobeying her grandparent's rules. Kostas merely shows up to the scene. The two overcome the obstacle of their forbidden relationship by choosing to be together, but only the female characters actually have to make a tough choice, jeopardizing their relationship of trust with the adult figures in their lives.

As I discussed in chapter two, forbidden relationships appear in the films in different forms. Characters who date and/or are interested in someone other than the character that they are meant to be with in the end of the film, are another form of forbidden relationships. Interestingly, it is the female characters in all of these films that cause this obstacle to be present. The female characters are the ones who are interested in the wrong guy or dating the wrong guy and reconfigure their lives to find that the right guy was pursuing them all along. Mia in *The Princess Diaries* is the perfect example of this. She is interested in Josh, the most popular boy at school and allows her feelings for him to completely cloud over any chance that her true love, Michael, would have with her. Mia blows Michael off in order to go to a party with Josh only to find out that Josh is not the right guy for her. She has to apologize to Michael and make amends so that the two of them can be together at the end of the film. In this way, the female character *creates* the obstacle that the couple must overcome. The male character has to remain actively committed to her in spite of her lack of interest and the female character has to

make a few mistakes before she figures out the right path to take in order to remove the obstacle. The right step is most often to break up with her current boyfriend. Again, just as in the previous examples, both characters have active agency in overcoming the obstacle, but in this case, the girl's active agency is a misuse of her agency. The male character already knows what steps need to be taken in order to overcome this obstacle, but he cannot take those steps. Instead, he has to sit by and watch the female character make mistakes, remain committed to her in spite of them, until she figures out how to assist in overcoming the obstacle and achieving the right relationship.

Similar patterns emerge as couples overcome obstacles of disease and death. So, in the previous examples, female characters created the obstacles by making poor relational choices. In obstacles of disease and death, female characters tend to complicate the obstacles by reacting poorly to them while male characters remain committed to the relationship. For example, Ronnie finds out that her dad is sick in *The Last Song*. At first, she and her boyfriend, Will, bond together over her father's disease, but eventually she reacts by pushing him away. The two break up and Will leaves Ronnie to deal with her father's cancer on her own. *A Walk to Remember* depicts a similar pattern. After Jamie tells Landon that she has leukemia, she flees from the relationship and refuses to let Landon back into her life, but Landon refuses to let her push him away. He tells her father, "Tell Jamie that I'm not going anywhere" meaning that he is committed to being with her in spite of her sickness.

In both cases, the couples overcome the obstacle, but only because the male character actively chooses to stick by the female character's side in spite of her pushing him away. The females do not know how to use their agency and they consistently make

mistakes in these plotlines. Not only do they make mistakes, but female characters complicate obstacles and create obstacles for the couples. The previous examples illustrated this as do examples of obstacles involving villains and pregnancy.

The villains in all of the films are female, ex-girlfriends of the lead male character who try to sabotage the relationship by creating drama with the lead female character. Often the lead female character reacts to the villain emotionally and tries to flee from the relationship, but the male character remains committed. This is seen in *The Last Song* when Ronnie believes Will's ex-girlfriend that Will treats all girls the same and then tries to break up with Will because of this false information. In the case of villains, girls are consistently creating drama with other girls, which then impact the relationship.

As before, the female characters usually react poorly to this drama. The male characters are the ones that remain calm, and continue to stay dedicated to the relationship in spite of the female trying to run away. In *A Walk to Remember*, Landon literally catches Jamie as she tries to run away after the his ex-girlfriend attempts to sabotage his and Jamie's relationship by making fun of Jamie in front of everyone in the school cafeteria. She tries to run away, but he is there to stop her, calm her down, and reassure her that he is there for her and committed to the relationship. So villains create another instance in which the couples overcome the obstacles together, but really only because of the male characters dedication to the relationship in spite of the female characters poor decisions and reactions to the circumstances.

Within the site of pregnancy is the only time wherein a male character complicates a couple's ability to overcome an obstacle. *17 Again* illustrates the story of Mike whose girlfriend, Scarlet, got pregnant during their senior year of high school.

Mike choose to give up his future basketball career to help Scarlet raise their child and the film picks up with them sixteen years later. Mike is incredibly unhappy with his life and his choice in high school to give up basketball in order to support Scarlet and their child. His unhappiness causes Scarlet to kick him out of the house and then to file for divorce. The couple is able to overcome this obstacle as Mike discovers over the course of the film what his life would be like without his family. He realizes that he would be lost without them and actively seeks to right his relationship with Scarlet because of this realization. In this sense, Mike is a male character who uses his agency to make poor decisions, but then is able to use that same agency to correct his attitude and repair his relationship with Scarlet. In this movie, Scarlet is an active agent who takes productive steps to deal with her situation, but hidden underneath the guise of this plot is the idea that Scarlet—though she actively made good decisions for herself and her family—ultimately made a mistake with her agency too in filing for divorce. Her relationship with Mike is one of those “meant to be” love stories off of which these teen movies thrive and so Scarlet continues the pattern of portraying a female character who cannot see the right relationship even when she is in it.

In general, obstacles provide further evidence of the agency themes present on a broader scale. Male characters have active agency that they use in ways that promote the right relationship to flourish while female characters misuse their agency or exhibit very limited agency. As the couples overcome obstacles, they do so together, but really only because of the male character’s dedication to the relationship and clear direction they have for the relationship. The female characters tend to make obstacles worse by creating them, complicating them, and reacting poorly to them. Eventually the female

characters come on board with the male characters, but only because they are following their lead.

Alternatively, depictions of arguments attempt to level the playing field in terms of agency allotted to the male and female characters. When male characters mess up, they must actively apologize to the female characters to reconcile the relationship. Female characters that mess up, must actively apologize to the male characters. Over the course of the eleven films, female characters mess up significantly more than male characters (as evidenced in the misuse of agency section), but the male characters that do mess up, apologize just as the female characters do. In this way, both males and females react to arguments with similar active agency. They recognize they were wrong and then apologize with a grand gesture (either publically or with a gift). For example, Macon apologizes to Halley over the radio in *How to Deal* after the two of them fight because he was unsupportive of her feelings. In the same way, Mia apologizes to Michael in *The Princess Diaries* by sending him a pizza with the word “Sorry” written on it in M&M’s, his favorite candy.

Only argument in all eleven films occurs and is resolved in the same scene. That argument happens between Ronnie and Will in *The Last Song*. The two never really talk through their issues, instead Will grabs Ronnie’s face and passionately kisses her, effectively silencing her concerns and ending the argument. The two move on without ever discussing the issue again. Here Will has complete active agency and control over the relationship and Ronnie. Since kissing is often a way in which couples signify reconciliation (as I discussed in chapter two) and it is also an act that all couples perform in the films, I want to discuss it next in more detail in its own section.

Kissing: Collaborative Agency?

A couple's first kiss is one of the most highly anticipated moments in any film with a romantic relationship plotline. All of the couples in these eleven teen films engage in kissing of various sorts, but the two most common types are kisses of affection and kisses of reconciliation. It is especially important to discuss the role of agency in the act of kissing because kissing is both a physical and sexual act that can set implications for gender roles in all physical and sexual arenas.

Several of the kisses, specifically those of affection, occur innocently enough as both characters lean in to share a mutual moment of passion. This is true in *Mean Girls*, *Step Up*, *Juno*, and *High School Musical 3*. To be specific, Troy goes to Stanford to pick up Gabriella and bring her back to high school in time for their senior musical and graduation. When he finds her on campus, the two sing to each other and dance the waltz that they would have danced together at prom. When the song is over, Troy leans his head down while Gabriella puts her hand up to his face and the two share a kiss. While kisses of affection like Troy and Gabriella's are sweet and function to show the couple's love, they are fairly standard. The kisses that stand out more prominently are the ones that have a bit more passion behind them.

I already mentioned Will and Ronnie's kiss in *The Last Song* as being one of these memorable kisses. This is not the only kiss where the male character takes charge and physically dominates the female character in a kiss. Will does so twice in *The Last Song*. He grabs Ronnie's face, mid-argument and pulls her in for a kiss as a means of silencing her side of the conversation. Then, at the end of the film, when the two reunite, he picks her up and holds her in his arms like a child while they kiss to end the film. In

both of these instances, Will physically controls Ronnie. He restricts her ability to talk as well as her ability to act by grabbing her, silencing her, and later holding her in his arms.

Other male characters act in the same way, but never as harshly. Macon tells Halley in *How to Deal* that is he going to pull a Jedi mind trick on her, which essentially means that he gets her to do what he wants by first suggesting the action to her so that she thinks it was her idea in the first place. He says, “You’re going to kiss me Halley. You’re going to come a little closer so I can put my arms around you. And I’m going to count to three, two, one” and then she kisses him. Essentially, Macon uses his “mind tricks” to control Halley’s agency, stripping her of her own ability to choose in the situation and ultimately to do what he wants.

In a less obvious way, Michael kisses Mia in *The Princess Diaries* and when he does, her foot pops into the air, hitting a light switch and turning on the twinkle lights in the garden where they are standing. Michael, essentially controls Mia’s limbs with the power of his kiss. Though this particular instance is not as clear an example of male domination, it still sets a precedent in which the female is putty in the male character’s hands. When it comes to the physical realm, he has ultimate power over her body.

Only two of the female characters physically dominate male characters in the act of kissing. Torrance does so in *Bring it On* when she grabs Cliff by the neck and pulls him in to kiss her. So, Torrance exerts physical control over Cliff with the power of her own body. Bridget, on the other hand, uses her words to dominate Eric in her storyline of *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. Eric tries to resist Bridget since he knows their relationship is inappropriate since he is her coach, but Bridget tells him “No, not now” pleading with him not to pull away. Prior to this encounter, Bridget is even aware of her

ability to control Eric, she says in a letter to one of her friends, “What can I say? I’m obsessed! And obsessed girls can’t be held responsible for their actions.” Clearly, Bridget is aware of the power that her actions can have and she is not afraid to use that power over Eric. Ironically, this relationship is also the only one that does not end successfully. So, the only relationship where a female physically controls a male in the act of kissing and that act results in a successful relationship is Torrance in *Bring it On*.

Obviously, there is much to be concerned about with regard to the implications of teen romances that suggest male characters can (and often should) physically dominate women in acts of passion. This will be a topic that I will further discuss in the next chapter as I analyze the ideologies present in the films.

Summary: How Much Agency Can Young Love Stand?

In this chapter I discussed the three agency themes of misuse of agency, lack of agency, and active agency as seen in both male and female characters across the eleven films for this project. I found that both male and female characters exhibit misused agency, but male characters mostly misused their agency for rebellion, while female characters misused theirs to simply make poor choices. Most characters that lack agency are female, although a few male characters do lack agency. Those male characters that lack agency are cast most often as supporting characters that do not play a main role in the film’s plotline. Characters with active agency are typically male and these male characters use their active agency to pursue a female. The few female characters that demonstrate active agency do so within the context of an unwanted pregnancy. When compared to the presence of overarching narrative structures of pursuit and rescue in each of these films, films that portray males pursuing females feature male characters with

active agency and female characters who misuse their agency. Films that portray female characters pursuing male characters feature female characters who misuse their agency and male characters who lack agency. Films with rescue narratives most often show male characters who misuse their agency and female characters who lack agency.

On a more microscopic level, I found similar results. Male characters lead female characters through obstacles that the couple can then officially overcome collectively. The female characters have little agency within those instances, but the agency they do have is often used to create or complicate the obstacle, not solve it. Male characters, on the other hand, seem to have clarity in trying situations and can lead the couple through them with their dedication to the relationship.

Couples seem to have similar agency in arguments in which both male and female characters eventually must take responsibility for their actions and apologize for them. Finally, the discussion of agency in kissing provided troubling facts about male control and domination over females in the realm of physical affection. Clearly, gender dynamics and stereotypes are at play as is who is in control of “love.” In the next chapter, I will discuss the ideologies—familiar and unfamiliar—present in these films as evidenced by the agency themes discussed in this chapter and the dating scripts discussed in chapter two.

Chapter 4: Ideological Implications for Teenage Romantic Relationships

A lot of people have a lot to say about the term “ideology.” Like “agency” this term is slippery, and theorists from a variety of disciplines have theorized about its meaning. My goal in this chapter is not to define the term but instead to choose a definition from the vast number of possibilities that will frame my discussion of ideology as it relates to this project in the most productive way. In order to do that, I have chosen to use John B. Thompson’s widely cited definition in which ideology is “the ways in which meaning (or signification) serves to sustain relations of domination” (Thompson, 4). Terry Eagleton summarizes this view in his book *Ideology: An Introduction* providing several strategies by which a dominant power may legitimate itself. He writes,

A dominant power may legitimate itself by promoting beliefs and values congenial to it; naturalizing and universalizing such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; denigrating ideas which might challenge it; excluding rival forms of thought, perhaps by some unspoken but systematic logic; and obscuring social reality in ways convenient to itself (5-6).

I will draw upon this definition and these strategies in the following chapter as I discuss the ideologies present in the eleven films for this project.

As I have done in previous chapters, I will begin my discussion of ideologies by taking a broad look at the overarching ideologies present in all of the films. Then, I will discuss the ways in which the portrayals of women and men respectively serve to sustain relations of domination first in films that depict pursuit narratives and then in films that depict rescue narratives. In doing so, I seek to illuminate the processes by which these films both promote and legitimate certain social dynamics and ways of thinking with regard to gender and power.

Broad Ideological Themes: Affirming Teen Audiences

All of the films that I analyzed for this project share a few similarities, namely: the teenage romantic relationships all look the same, the characters all ultimately find happiness in their relationship at the end of the film, and teens (read: males) know best. In this section, I will explore those two consistent themes as they relate to ideological constructs and serve to sustain relations of domination.

First, the main romantic relationships in every one of the films are made up of white middle-class heterosexual teenagers who are attractive by society's standards. A few of the films (*High School Musical 3* and *Step Up*) have racially diverse couples in them, but those couples play only a supporting role in the main plotline that features the ideal (read: white) relationship. In other words, the main or idealized relationship portrayed in each of the films fits into a narrow box of race, class, and sexual orientation. The only relationships that deviate from this structure are the few supporting relationships that feature two African Americans dating each other. There are no racially mixed or homosexual couples. In fact, only two of the films (*Bring it On* and *Mean Girls*) include explicitly homosexual characters who merely provide comedic relief. By featuring solely white, heterosexual characters as the main romantic relationship, these films naturalize those characteristics as the ones necessary for a successful teenage romantic relationship. The films exclude any rival forms of thought by depicting only relationships that look a very particular way and provide no models of alternative relationship styles. Whiteness is normalized and heterosexuality is unquestioningly promoted. As Eagleton points out, this adheres to a specific strategy of naturalizing or universalizing beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable. In

doing so, these films provide relationship models that are confined to look a certain way, thus sustaining the domination of heterosexual relationships in a homophobic society.

Should a teenage relationship fit the appearance model (a good-looking white heterosexual couple), it is bound to be successful. As the films portray, and as I discussed in chapter two, teens can attain and know love, and when they have found it, that love will conquer all. Each of the relationships depicted in the films ends with the couple together (with the exception of Bridget's inappropriate relationship with her soccer coach in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* and Landon and Jamie's relationship in *A Walk to Remember* where Jamie dies). The teens find love and that love overcomes all obstacles and arguments that the two may face. This outcome for the couples on the screen serves to legitimate and affirm teenage romantic relationships. Just as the characters attain love, so teens can feel hope for their own romantic relationships during a time in life when romantic and sexual exploration is taking off. Since teens drive box office profits by spending their disposable income on movie tickets, it makes sense that films would want to promote and legitimate what teens are often most interested in at that age. The films utilize Eagleton's strategy of obscuring social reality by portraying successful teen romances so as to affirm the target audience of these films in their own relationship quests. Box office numbers grow, movies make profits, and teenage audiences leave happily supported in the reaffirmed knowledge that there is hope for their romantic relationships.

Not only that, but these films seem to promote an ideology that not only gives hope to teenage romantic relationships by portraying couples who successfully find love, but also suggest that teens can actually know more about successful romantic

relationships than the adults in their lives. Only three of the eleven films provide models of working adult romantic relationships. In other words, only three of the plotlines feature characters' parents whose marriage is successful and who are still together. Every other film portrays teenage characters whose parents are divorced, or characters with single parents (either widowed or whose absent spouse is never spoken of). There is a sense in which these teenage characters know more about love and relationships than their parents do. The plethora of broken marriages and single parents presented in these films as role models for the teens serves to justify teenage rebellion with regard to relationships. Clearly their parents cannot give real advice about romantic relationships since their own relationships have ended terribly. So, instead, teens can rely on their own clarity about who they ought to love without regard for their parent's rules or wishes.

The success of the teenage romantic relationships in the films suggests that the teens really do know what is best and ought to follow their hearts, not their parents. This puts forth an interesting ideology in that it affirms teenage romantic relationships, but also gives teens reason to believe that they know better than their parents. Teen love, after all, conquers all. Adult love seems to fail. As I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter, the films more accurately imply that male characters know best, not teens in general. Thus, it is the men who lead the relationships in these films and the men who ought to lead the relationships outside of the films. In sum, the portrayals of teenage romantic relationships in these films serve to sustain the broadly accepted conservative thought patterns of what a relationship ought to look like by confining them to racial and sexual orientation standards that appease America's majority. The films depict teenagers finding long-lasting love as a means of promoting the social agenda of their target

audience thus appealing largely to audience expectations. They also promote teenage love as the ultimate, lasting love signifying that teens know best (even better than their parents) thus continuing to appeal to the films' target teen audience. Filmmakers can only make films so long as their product does well in the box office. By satisfying ideologically conservative thought patterns and affirming teenage love and relational "wisdom," these films set themselves up to be profitable to a majority white, middle class teenage audience at the box office.

Pursuit Narratives

Pursuit narratives portray an unrelenting teenage male character who knows what he wants (a female) and stops at nothing to get it. Though these narratives advance across films in different ways through arguments and obstacles, they ultimately suggest that the boy ought to actively seek after a female in order to win her over. The female, on the other hand must wait, patiently for the right man to come along to help her to know what she wants and how to act in order to get it. In this section, I will discuss the roles of young men and young women in pursuit narratives in more detail. I will show how these particular roles relate to familiar and unfamiliar ideologies regarding gender and power.

Roles for Young Men: Relentless Patriarchal Pressure

As evidenced in chapter three, male characters in films that primarily feature a pursuit narrative, portray boys with active agency used to pursue a female love interest. In doing this, the films depict male characters who choose their destiny, actively pursue the things that they want, and ultimately attain those things (read: women). Interestingly, these male characters in pursuit narratives are most often cast opposite female characters who are also active, but in all of the wrong ways. The stark contrast between male

characters verses females characters presents a very interesting dynamic. Male characters stand out as knowing best—for themselves as well as for the female characters in their lives. Female characters appear lost and confused.

Taken together, these themes promote a patriarchal agenda in which teenage males have control, active agency, and ultimately know best. Though men gain power and control in these portrayals, they also receive relentless pressure by proposing that male high schoolers can know with certainty who they ought love. Female characters can be hostile, rebellious, and lost. Female characters can spend the course of the film trying to find themselves, but in pursuit narratives, male characters must already have that figured out. On top of that, male characters must be willing to see through the outer layer of the females into who they truly are and love them for that.

The films set expectations for boys that are impossible to meet. Rarely can grown men achieve these standards, let alone high school aged boys. The patriarchal ideology that flows throughout the films' plotlines exerts immense pressure upon teenage male viewers to live up to unrealistic standards, essentially setting them up to fail. It also sets female viewers up to feel let down by the men in their lives who cannot live up to the standards set by the male characters in the films. The model provided for females strips them of their agency, calling them to wait for the right man to come along, recognize them for who they are, and pursue after them in spite of any obstacles. This simply is not the reality of teenage romantic relationships. It certainly promotes an ideological agenda by affirming patriarchal notions of power dynamics where men are in control, but as I have already discussed, this agenda is really not helping male characters in the high

school settings since it puts immense pressure on them to be someone they are not mature or experienced enough to be.

Roles for Young Women: Tamed by Men

Pursuit narratives most often depict female characters who misuse their agency until they succumb to the pursuit of the male character who is interested in them. Then, within the relationship, the female characters become a better version of themselves—the person they are meant to be. This plotline for young women is ideologically motivated in that it promotes women to remain complacent in their status and wait for a man to come change them. There is no need for a female character to act purposefully toward bettering herself or searching out a relationship on her own because she simply does not need to in order to attain love. All of the work falls to the male character.

Again, this promotes a patriarchal agenda in which women are taught to be stagnant, to second guess themselves, and to wait for a man to come along to lead them. Interestingly, the pursuit narrative shows women who misuse their agency, which means that when the man does come along, she is neutralized. This affirms Laura Mulvey's conception that images of women in film function as signifiers of sexual difference and thus men must exert control over women in films as a means for dealing with the ways in which this difference makes them uncomfortable. Pursuit narratives are a prime example of this since the men literally control the women, but also because men neutralize or tame women who consistently misuse their agency.

Women emerge in these pursuit narratives as projections of male values and continue to inhabit limited roles, just as Molly Haskell argued in 1987. All of the female characters are sexualized by society's beauty standards. They are tall, slender, and

stylish. The few that are not obviously attractive, namely Mia in *The Princess Diaries* and Ronnie in *The Last Song*, undergo makeover scenes that bring them up to stereotypical beauty standards. Ideologically speaking, women continue to be confined to small boxes of what is and is not considered attractive. This fits a patriarchal agenda that prefers women spend more time thinking about how they look (and how they look to a man) than they spend thinking about who they are, what they want, and how they can achieve it.

Something can be said for the romanticized view of a man who loves a woman in spite of her poor decisions. Additionally, there is something incredibly romantic about a man who pursues a woman to no end because he is certain that he is meant to be with her, but these notions are so far idealized in the films that they provide a problematic model for teenage viewers. The films fail to challenge girls to harness their agency by portraying females who have love find them without any effort of their own. They reward women who sit and wait and denigrate women who pursue what they want (as I have already mentioned, the films that show women pursuing male love interests are the same romantic relationships that end poorly).

All in all, both male and female characters in pursuit narratives promote the same patriarchal agenda where teenage boys are portrayed as knowing best and being in control of teenage girls who make bad choices until they meet the right man. Though these plotlines seem to be built on a patriarchal foundation, it is important to note that in the realm of teenage romantic relationships, the patriarchal agenda has the potential to do much more harm than good for both parties. Promoting teenage boys that have sole active agency in a relationship puts immense pressure upon them and asks them to be the

kind of people that they are not mature enough to be in high school. It also sets an unrealistic standard for teenage relationships that ultimately sets them up to fail. Young men and women learn early on that relationships are built on power dynamics and the only successful ones occur when men are in control.

Rescue Narratives

Rescue narratives support the idea that one character has the ability to save another character—either financially, physically, or emotionally. As I proposed in chapter two, these narratives often play off of a Cinderella-type theme in which a male character rescues a female, but they also feature mutual rescue narratives in which characters simultaneously rescue each other. Most often, the male characters are rescued from their rebellious ways and the female characters are rescued from having little agency in their own lives. In this section, I will discuss the roles of young men in rescue narratives as they relate to familiar and unfamiliar ideologies. Then, I will do the same for the female characters.

Roles for Young Men: Saving the Helpless Female

Rescue narratives build off of a patriarchal ideology in which male characters are portrayed with active agency used to help rescue a female character who lacks agency. Interestingly, these male characters initially misuse their agency for rebellion. Male characters turn from rebellious juvenile delinquents into humble, vibrant young men with promising futures. In each case, the female is the catalyst for this change, but the male uses his agency to enact the change. He changes for or because of the woman; the woman does not change him.

The hidden ideology in this type of narrative suggests that men may need direction or prompting from a woman, but ultimately they can choose the right path for themselves. So, men always remain active and in control so that they may rescue the females that they love. The male characters are the essential pieces in these plots. Without them, the female characters would remain helpless. Just as in pursuit narratives, this puts immense pressure upon the males. It requires them to make choices far beyond their maturity level and to act for both themselves and the females that they date. The next section will discuss this role for female characters in more detail.

Roles for Young Women: Reforming the Bad Boy

As in the pursuit narratives, young women in rescue narrative films are presented as physically attractive (by stereotypical standards), skinny, and made-up. Interestingly, in these particular films, they are also often conservative, quiet, and artsy. As chapter three discussed, these women also lack agency. Their quiet demeanor sets them up to get easily walked upon or lost in the shuffle. And yet, their obvious talent provides reason for them to need to break out and be noticed. In these rescue narratives, they cannot seem to break free until they meet a guy who helps them to do so.

Here-in lies the trouble with the rescue narrative. It suggests that someone ought to be rescued. Though in many cases, it appears that the male character is the one who is rescued (as discussed in the pervious section, these characters change from being rebellious bad boys to sensitive young men with promising futures), the underlying message is really that the female characters are the ones that need to be rescued from their helpless, unnoticeable state. Only within the relationship with the male character do these women let loose, get recognized for their talent, and achieve their dreams.

So, female characters in rescue narratives are able to direct male agency (to help them reform their lives), but their own agency depends upon the male. Without these love interests, the females in rescue narratives are helpless. Obviously, this is problematic as it sets a standard for females that they cannot act for themselves in the ways that they want. It also suggests that women can best achieve their dreams when they rely upon or are in partnership with men. In their relationships, these females gain the confidence to be the people they are meant to be and to break free from their shy tendencies. Ideologically speaking, this is problematic as it advances a patriarchal agenda of complacent female characters that can only be successful with the help of a male counterpart.

These female characters face an additional challenge in that the narratives suggest that the bad boy will reform *for* them. The stereotype certainly exists that girls want bad boys, especially during their younger years when they first start dating. This group of films, specifically those that feature rescue narratives, promote and idealize that idea. Young women see how the right female on screen can provide the incentive for a bad boy to completely change his ways. In reality, we know that it is much more likely that a girl will alter herself in order to fit the bad-boy standards and earn his love in high school. Unfortunately, these narratives posit forth the notion that female characters can be desirable enough to a man that he will be willing to change for her. This sets an unrealistic standard suggesting that if he does not change for you, you must not have been good enough.

All in all, I fear that the rescue narratives in these films lay a problematic ideology for young men and women as they seek out romantic relationships. They suggest that

with the right person, males and females will change and discover their true selves. The relationships portray this in such a way that neither character needs to prepare for the relationship, since the relationship will simply change them. Rescue narratives imply that without any practice or prior knowledge of treating people with respect or care, these young men and women will simply know how to make it work if they have found the right person. Not only is this unrealistic, it is discomfoting since it requires nothing of our teenagers. Realistically, we know that the most successful relationships are composed of two people who are fully whole on their own, and yet we continue to watch films where people find themselves *within* the site of the romantic relationship, suggesting that the right person will change the people in the relationship and make the relationship successful.

Ideological Implications: Love is All You Need

Ideologies are particularly powerful because they go unnoticed. They serve to legitimate dominant power structures by naturalizing them in such a way that people think they are inevitable and unchangeable. Because of this, the ideologies present in these teen films are exceptionally disconcerting since teen viewers are beginning to build more mature ways of understanding the world and developing what their role in that world should look like. Conventionally patriarchal views undergird the broad narratives in these films as well as the more microscopic moments of couples arguing, overcoming obstacles, and kissing. What we see are male characters with active agency used to pursue women, save women, and lead women. Female characters, on the other hand, make poor choices, have little agency, and need to rely on men to accomplish their goals. Ideologically speaking, a power dynamic is set in which active men and passive females

combine to find true love. Women learn that they ought to second guess themselves since all of their female models in these movies mess up relationships, make bad choices, and push the right men away. Men are taught, instead, to follow their intuition with intense dedication, trusting that they know best just as their male character models in the films know best.

These ideological implications are so well hidden in these films that I fear they are setting a standard for romantic relationships that people accept as unchangeable. Simply put, they take these power dynamics to be simply the ways things are in relationships, believing men are meant to lead and women are meant to follow. In the next section, I will discuss this in more detail, drawing this analysis to a conclusion with feminist reactions to my findings.

Conclusions and Future Direction

Broadly, this critical film analysis of eleven top-grossing contemporary teen films seeks to answer two main questions: (1) what is being communicated about teenage romantic relationships in these films? and (2) how are those messages being communicated? In order to do that, I answered the following three research questions: (1) What are the dating scripts that the teenage romantic relationships follow in each of these films? (2) What types of agency do each of the main characters involved in romantic relationships have and how do they use that agency throughout the film? (3) What ideologies—either familiar or unfamiliar—do portrayals of teenage romantic relationships embody?

First, the films follow dating scripts that adhere to narrative structures of pursuit and rescue. They also fulfill genre conventions of the teen film genre by portraying

teenage romantic relationships that conquer obstacles and arguments and ultimately end in the attainment of love. Interestingly, out of all eleven films, each romantic relational plot focused on a couple pursuing love, not sex. As Shary's work demonstrated, this has not always been the case. Teen sex quest films made a name for themselves specifically during the eighties and nineties, but did not appear at all in my analysis of eleven top-grossing films from the last decade. As we operate in a culture that is rightfully concerned with the ever-decreasing age of young people engaging in sexual intercourse, it is intriguing that none of these films really deal with sex at all. Part of the explanation for this resides in the movie rating system. A study conducted by the Dove Foundation examined the costs and revenues associated with the 200 most widely distributed films released by major Hollywood studios each year over a 15-year period ("Study"). They found that family friendly films made between 1989 and 2003 were eleven times more profitable than their racier, R-rated counterparts. In sync with these findings, the films for this project were simultaneously the top-grossing teen film for each year between 2000 and 2010 and were also all rated G, PG, or PG-13.

So, although a disconnect exists between what is happening in the reality of teenage romantic relationships and the top grossing films depicting them, this disconnect can be explained. Since these films are all the top-grossing films for the year in which they were made, and family friendly films are notoriously more profitable, the G, PG, and PG-13 ratings for these teen films place them in a position to make good money at the box office.

Next, the films portray characters with different types of agency which can broadly be categorized into male characters with active agency who know what they want

and female characters who either lack agency or who misuse their agency and are unsure of what they want. These stereotyped agency roles adhere to gender standards and present problematic power dynamics for the characters in the main romantic relationship.

Finally, in my analysis I uncovered several hidden ideologies that function to legitimate ways of being and thinking and sustain relations of domination. The most prominent of these appears with regard to the patriarchal agenda placed upon both male and female characters throughout the films.

My conclusions lead me to believe that although these contemporary films disguise themselves as progressive, they ultimately communicate tired, traditional themes and unoriginal scripts. Several of the films seem to present female lead characters who are strong and driven and yet patriarchal ideologies abound within the narratives, suggesting that men ought to lead and women ought to follow. We are presented with the illusion of change, but underneath the contemporary fluff are overused traditional romances. At the end of his book *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary Cinema*, Shary discusses the ways in which teen films from the eighties and nineties fail to accurately reflect the progression being made in the world outside of film. He writes,

Girls are still not represented with the same frequency as boys. The number of noncriminal roles for African American and Latino/a characters remains shamefully small. Teenage problems with drugs, depression, and divorce have received relatively little attention. Pregnancy, abortion, and parenting in youth films are far rarer than they are in real life. The incidence of sexually transmitted diseases among youth has been virtually ignored” (259).

These observations could be said of the films I studied as well. A decade later and the filmic portrayals of youth (specifically youth in relationships) remain virtually the same. The one area of progression seems to be with regard to the number of leading ladies in

teen films. Though I cannot make sweeping statements regarding the entire decade as Shary can, I am able to make claims regarding the eleven films that in my study represent the decade. In those films, eight of the twelve relational plotlines feature the female as the lead character. Unfortunately, as the chapter on agency illustrated, for this female characters, being a lead still does not give them ultimate agency. All in all, the surface reading of each film is simply an illusion of progression—when the mask is taken away, we are exposed to the same conventional script that fulfills the genre conventions of the teen film genre in very traditional ways.

These findings are troubling. For a decade, the top grossing teen films have made very little feminist progress. The messages communicated within the films about what makes a successful teenage relationship and the models provided in the films regarding what those relationships should look like remain predictable and conservative. Furthermore, the patriarchal ideologies hidden within the film scripts place detrimental expectations upon a teenage viewing audience. The pursuit and rescue narratives put immense pressure upon teenage males to lead, control, and know what they want far beyond what their maturity level will allow. These same narratives expect nothing of our teenage females except to sit around and wait for the right guy to come make their dreams come true.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Due to time limitations, I wanted to expand on several aspects of this study but was not able to do so. First, I was not able to study the role of the director and producer in the making of the film and thus, more appropriately place each film within its industry context. Obviously, there are films in this group that seek to portray teenage life in a

more comedic light (for instance Tina Fey's *Mean Girls*). I think it could enhance my study to include more research on the writers, directors, and producers involved in each film, specifically noting any differences in films written and/or produced by females verses those written and/or produced by males.

Additionally, my study only briefly touched on the role of adult relationships in each film and was not able to include the role of supporting teenage romantic relationships. I think that understanding more fully the relationship models provided in each film by describing the adult relationships as well as the romantic relationships found between two supporting characters could further add to my understanding of the full relational picture provided in each film. I believe that in every case, the main teenage romantic relationship is cast as the ideal relationship and I think it would be interesting to have studied the differences in that relationship verses the less-idealized versions as represented by other teenage couples and adult couples in the films.

I was also not able to study the types of support that the teenage couples received in the film. I think support systems are an extremely important aspect of successful romantic relationships and thus it would be interesting to study what types of support are portrayed in these films for the teenage couple. This could come in the form of parental support, mentorship support, sibling support, peer support, or even support within the teenage romantic relationship. In understanding support more fully, I think we could get a better picture of what these films are communicating about what makes a healthy relationship and what does not.

I was also not able to study any of the paratexts that go along with these films—that is, the other material that surrounds the main film text like the movie posters, covers

of DVD released version of these films, and related paraphernalia. Analyzing these paratexts could give a more holistic picture of the media portrayal of these films, and specifically these romantic relationships and allow further insight into what is being communicated in each instance about what makes a successful teenage romantic relationship.

There are many ways in which further research could build upon this current study aside from addressing each of the limitations that I have already discussed. Future research could look at a broader range of films from this same time period in order to build a better understanding of depictions of teenage romantic relationships in teen films at the turn of the century. As I mentioned earlier, my study is limited by the fact that I was only able to look at the top-grossing films for each year between 2000 and 2010. Because of this, I ended up with all films that are rated G, PG, and PG-13. In theory, a larger sample of teen films might include ones that are rated R and thus could potentially tackle issues like sex, sexually transmitted diseases, depression, or drugs.

Other research could build upon mine by taking a genre approach to the films and discussing the ways in which each genre category either enables or constrains the depictions of teenage romantic relationships in that film. A genre perspective coupled with a larger sample could provide for a very lucrative study that might further illuminate portrayals of teenage romantic relationships and what they can and cannot communicate depending on their genre.

Furthermore, this project was a critical film analysis meaning that it can only speak to what is being communicated within the films. This project claims nothing about how those messages are being interpreted by the audience that actually views the films. I

think further research in the form of an audience analysis could illuminate which messages teen viewers are actually taking away from the films. A study like this could help us understand the impact of these films on teenagers' lives—specifically on their relational lives.

Another possible way to further this project would be to take this information and compare it to the relational messages in teen films produced both before and after these eleven. By doing this, a researcher could place the project into a larger conversation, positioning it historically and tracing the evolution (if any) of relational messages in teen films over time. Researchers could also do a comparison of top grossing teen foreign films for the same year and compare/contrast them against the findings of this study.

Clearly this research can be taken in many ways and it is my hope that it will be. I truly believe that these are important messages to understand in a day and age when our young people are engaging in romantic relationships (and sexual activity) much earlier than ever before. The findings of this study can assist both parents and schools in better educating their teens on what it means to have a successful, healthy relationship. By knowing the messages presented in media, we can more productively interpret and intervene in the lives of teens searching out advice on romantic relationships.

Wrapping Up: Do you Believe in Life After Love?

Acclaimed feminist scholar, bell hooks, writes of films, “Whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people. It may not be the intent of the filmmaker to teach audiences anything, but that does not mean that lessons are not learned” (2). This project illuminates what some of those lessons could be for viewers and reasons why we ought to be cautious about those lessons. Teenagers are in

the process of shaping their own ideologies regarding our world. They are deciding who they want to be and how they want to think about what is going on around them. These films are not just another teen movie, they are pedagogical tools and we should be weary of the lessons they are teaching our youth.

Over a decade has passed since the release of one of the most iconic teen films in American history. *American Pie* (1999) not only set a new standard for teen sex-quest films in which the entire plotline is devoted to four male characters trying to lose their virginity, but it is also known for its progressive female characters who take charge in the relationship and, more specifically, in the bedroom. In 2012, *American Reunion* will be released. This film picks up with the memorable characters of *American Pie* at their ten-year high school reunion and will portray how the characters' lives have developed since they were together in high school.

Unlike most teen films that end with the teenagers finding love, *American Reunion* will give us insight into what love looks like ten years after teenagers find it. Though I want to have hope that these iconic high school characters—specifically Jim and Michelle who find love as seniors in high school in *American Pie*—will find themselves in successful, healthy relationships at their ten year reunion, I cannot help but feel concerned. American teen cinema has indoctrinated teenagers into a way of thinking that suggests the attainment of love is the main goal. Only time will tell (and perhaps the development of this new filmic genre) what lessons they can learn from revisiting those teen couples a decade later. If we have learned one thing from this study, it is that not much changes in a decade. And that, in the end, is the scariest part.

APPENDIX I

	Rating	US Box Office Gross	Genre (as listed on IMDb.com)	Narrative Structure	Female Agency	Male Agency
Bring it On	PG-13	68.4M	Comedy, Sport	Pursuit	Misuse	Active
The Princess Diaries	G	108M	Comedy, Drama, Family	Pursuit	Lack of Agency	Active
A Walk to Remember	PG	41.2M	Drama, Romance	Rescue	Lack of Agency	Misuse
How to Deal	PG-13	14.1M	Comedy, Drama, Romance	Pursuit	Misuse	Active
Mean Girls	PG-13	86M	Comedy, Drama	Pursuit (Girl pursues Boy)	Misuse	Lack of Agency
The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants (Lena)	PG	37M	Comedy, Drama, Adventure	Rescue	Lack of Agency	Active
The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants (Bridget)	PG	37M	Comedy, Drama, Adventure	Pursuit (Girl pursues Boy)	Misuse	Active
Step Up	PG-13	65.3M	Drama, Music, Crime	Rescue	Lack of Agency	Misuse
Juno	PG-13	143M	Comedy, Drama, Romance	Pursuit (Girl pursues Boy)	Misuse	Lack of Agency
High School Musical 3	G	90.4M	Comedy, Drama, Family	Pursuit	Lack of Agency	Active
17 Again	PG-13	64.1M	Comedy, Drama, Fantasy	Rescue	Active	Misuse
The Last Song	PG	62.9M	Drama, Romance	Pursuit	Misuse	Active