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Haley Grissett March 20, 2022

Pleasing: The Patriarchal Pleasure Hierarchy Revealed in 2010s Coming of Age Films

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Abstract

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How often is young female pleasure depicted and valued as much as male pleasure in American film? Film often reflects a patriarchal pleasure hierarchy that presents the male sexual experience as more important than that of females. Even female-focused films are guilty of this. Coming of age films with young female protagonists have an opportunity to subvert dominant social ideologies around gender and sexual pleasure. They can show real girls coming of age and into their sexualities that they deserve pleasure as much as anyone else. In this thesis, I analyze when and how six coming of age films from 2011 to 2019 present and respect authentic female pleasure. Representing these exceptions in film and scholarship is integral in order to make young female pleasure a norm rather than an anomaly. Still, these films mirror norms of the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy at times as well. In Chapter 1, I examine how *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (Marielle Heller, 2015) and *Eighth Grade* (Bo Burnham, 2018), while giving the protagonists power over their desires, represent their drive to please others rather than to seek pleasure. In Chapter 2, I explore the ways *Booksmart* (Olivia Wilde, 2019) and *Pariah* (Dee Rees, 2011) display how platonic and familial discourse around sex can reinforce or challenge the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy. Finally, in Chapter 3, I analyze how *Lady Bird* (Greta Gerwig, 2017) and *Yes, God, Yes* (Karen Maine, 2019) show the possibility of positive dialogue on sex counteracting the impact religious power structures can have on sexual shame. This thesis will contribute to a future in which it is common for sex in films, and scholarship about sex in film, to prioritize young female pleasure at least equally to that of males. All of the protagonists in the films learn that their authentic selves matter, including when it comes to sex and pleasure. All girls deserve to know this.

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Introduction

Sex sells, making it a common subject of film and scholarship. Nonetheless, very little sex in mainstream American film is centered on young female pleasure.[1] Even films about girls that feature them engaging in sex tend to be focused more on male than female pleasure. It is crucial that young women who are having their first sexual and romantic relationships have agency in their own experiences; however, filmic representations of this are very rare. Through my Honors thesis, I examine six coming of age films from 2011 to 2019 that feature young female protagonists experiencing, or trying to experience, romantic and sexual relationships for the first time. Their gender and age lend the characters to experience uneven power dynamics through the expectations placed on them in sexual spaces. I analyze when and how these films present and respect female pleasure, while also highlighting the ways they fit into the dominant patriarchal ideologies that are overwhelmingly common when it comes to sex in film. *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (Marielle Heller, 2015) and *Eighth Grade* (Bo Burnham, 2018), while giving the protagonists power over their desires, represent their drive to please others rather than seek pleasure. *Booksmart* (Olivia Wilde, 2019) and *Pariah* (Dee Rees, 2011) display how platonic and familial discourse around sex can reinforce or challenge the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy. *Lady Bird* (Greta Gerwig, 2017) and *Yes, God, Yes* (Karen Maine, 2019) show the possibility of positive dialogue on sex counteracting the impact religious power structures can have on sexual shame.

Through its focus on teenage women's pleasure, my thesis fills a gap in scholarship on sex in film, which is largely focused exclusively on adult sexuality. My case study films

[1]It is important to note that when I say female, woman, or girl, I am referring to the gender identity of the protagonists and characters. However, all of the protagonists mentioned are cis-gender, so in these cases the females also have vulvas.

foreground young female sexuality, but few go as far as presenting it as existing completely outside the terrain of male pleasure. I describe how this patriarchal pleasure hierarchy pressures women to perform. Additionally, I will uncover exceptions to the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy while illuminating where there is room for improvement. Representing these exceptions in film and scholarship is integral in order to make young female pleasure a norm rather than an anomaly.

Coming of Age Film

I define coming of age film as a subgenre within the teen film that is distinct by showing an emotional and/or ideological change in the protagonists and representing a significant shift in their lives. Many of the films discussed in the subsequent chapters could not have been made a few decades ago, as "Hollywood filmmakers have not been especially comfortable depicting desire that is either female or queer, and the teen comedy has long been a kingdom ruled by hormone-riddled straight boys" (Stanford). These coming of age films with male protagonists defined many of the subgenre's conventions:

> "the youthfulness of central characters; content usually centered on young heterosexuality, frequently with a romance plot; intense age-based peer relationships and conflict within those relationships or with an older generation; the institutional management of adolescence by families, schools, and other institutions; and [...] motifs like virginity, graduation, and the makeover" (Driscoll 2).

While there have been better representations of female and queer protagonists made in the 2010s, many of these themes can still be found in coming of age films. The conventions and motifs in

these films lend themselves to comparison, especially in how they define what makes one come of age.

Some of the films I discuss show their protagonists coming of age through sexual and romantic experiences. *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* is romance and sex centered, but it subverts the typical virginity plot by having the protagonist, Minnie, have penetrative sex early in the film for the first time, focusing on her sexual relations after this. It also is a story of statutory rape, so the film does not fit in to the age-based peer relationship norm and instead focuses heavily on Minnie's relationship with a much older man. *Yes, God, Yes*'s protagonist, Alice, comes of age in this film through her sexual awakening. This film also goes beyond the typical virginity plot to examine masturbation, something extremely rare for teenage women in mainstream American film.

Quite a few of these films define coming of age through graduation. The audience meets Kayla of *Eighth Grade* in her last week of middle school, and her graduation marks a milestone in her development. In this film, she does not have any sexual experiences but toys with possibilities of romance and sex, so I mainly focus on her perceptions of how sexual pleasure and romance should fit into her life. *Booksmart* has an even shorter narrative timeline, with its story taking place mostly the day preceding graduation. Amy, one of its protagonists, feels particularly pressured to have a sexual experience for the first time as part of her coming of age. Lady Bird of *Lady Bird* is living her last year of high school to the fullest she can while desperately trying to escape her hometown of Sacramento, California to a college on the East Coast. Graduation is a stepping stone to the next part of her life which she can't wait to start. Graduation feels like a deadline to many of these characters. It's their last chance to grow up before high school or college, depending on their age. Many of these girls consider their sexual

and romantic experiences as part of this journey, but they seem to care more about checking boxes than feeling ready for and pleasure from the acts themselves.

Something audiences were missing in the John Hughes era of teen films was queer and BIPOC coming of age. For some, like Alike of *Pariah*, their coming of age cannot only focus on new romantic and sexual experiences. For Alike coming of age also means being open with her family about her sexuality. As a Black lesbian, Alike faces so much stigma and discrimination that she hides her identity throughout most of the film, until she can't anymore. More recent queer protagonists, like Amy of *Booksmart*, do not have to rely on coming out as part of their coming of age stories. For Amy, being a lesbian is a part of who she is, but it is not the only part of her personality that the film focuses on or that the plot revolves around. In *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, Minnie also explores her sexuality with a woman, so queerness is becoming more common in these types of films. Still, there are not near as many BIPOC and/or queer protagonists as there are white, straight ones. Young heterosexuality still seems to be a staple of the coming of age film.

Something present in all the films is some sort of familial or institutional control over adolescence. Family is particularly important in *Lady Bird*, *Eighth Grade*, and *Pariah*. As viewers can see, parents in particular can have a significant influence on the sexual empowerment or disempowerment of their daughters. Alice of *Yes, God, Yes* has a bigger institution to dispute when it comes to her sexual empowerment: the Catholic Church. Molly and Amy fight the powers of the high school social hierarchy in *Booksmart*. Minnie in *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* is subject to a particularly heinous form of control over her sexuality through her relationship with a man that is twenty years older than her and rapes her repeatedly. All of these

young women, whether they realize it or not, are fighting the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy that says their sexual pleasure matters less than a man's.

With themes of romance, sexuality, and virginity tied into the genre, one would think more research would be done on how young female pleasure is represented in these films. When considering the audience of a teen film, while it may include people older than teenagers, it is important to recognize "that teen film is made to be watched by the ideal teenager of a particular time and place..." (Driscoll 3). These films are being made for teenagers who are coming into their sexualities, so it is interesting to explore what messages the films send about sex. These films have a unique opportunity to influence teens' ideas about the world. While "[c]oncern about what youth sees at the movies might seem like a contemporary issue [...] [,] modern adolescence has always been a sign for and site of cultural change" (Driscoll 6). What young women are learning from film matters because "...they are at a critical juncture in their development, learning foundational lessons about attraction, intimacy, arousal, sexual entitlement" (Orenstein 65). These coming of age films have an opportunity to change the dominant culture that values male pleasure over that of females. I will examine how some coming of age films with young female protagonists have been able to subvert patriarchal pleasure norms through more realistic examples of female pleasure and empowerment from platonic and familial relationships.

Screening Sex Informing Ideas of Sex

For as much sex as there is in film, there is just as much literature on sex in film. The scholars on this topic seem to agree that the sex screened in a society can influence the ideas about sex and actual sex in that society and vice versa. In this case as well as most others,

representation matters. However, there is very little scholarship about young female pleasure. This reflects that American sexual ideals do not consider their pleasure as important as others' pleasure.

The state of sex education in many American schools is not nearly as comprehensive as what students can find in media. To put this plainly: "Moving images are surely the most powerful sex education most of us will ever receive" (Williams 6). To discuss the importance of studying sex in film and media, Linda Williams in *Screening Sex* compares how much sex society has and how much of it society watches:

> "...people spend more time watching drama than they do engaging in the more basic biological function of preparing and eating food— then what can we say about the fact that many of us spend more time screening sex than we do having it? Sex acts— both graphic, as in porography, and simulated, as in most mainstream movies and TV— have not only embedded themselves in the dramas that we quantitatively watch so much more of but they have also become, to adopt [Raymond] Williams, qualitatively significant in how we learn and live our own sexualities" (Williams 6).

Given that many teenagers still do not receive a comprehensive sex education from their schools or their parents, many will turn to screens for this. Mainstream culture is saturated in sex, so the types of sex shown must be examined in order to expose the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy.

Representations of sex have changed overtime as America's ideas about sex have fluctuated and as regulations about what could be shown in mainstream film changed. For example, "the Production Code explicitly enforced and privileged a conservative Christian morality that shaped the representation of sex in hundreds of films produced by the mainstream American film industry" (Pennington 191). Still, even as the Code was replaced with the ratings

system, “the film industry has always been a house divided over the issue of sex” (Pennington 191). Conservatives may find Hollywood too sexy, while liberals may think it is too modest, but “both groups have united in their agreement that sex in films is an important social and cultural issue” (Pennington 192). Of course, filmmakers are not always concerned with how accurate or representative the sex in their films are; oftentimes there is a commercial aspect to the function of sex in film (Pennington 192). As the saying goes: “sex sells” (Pennington 192). Oftentimes, the sex selling the film necessitates that there are “performers (mostly female) willing to remove their clothes [...] or to simulate any number of sexual behaviors” (Pennington 191). Overall, there is a “sexual pluralism found both on- and off-screen in the United States[,]” but within these on-screen depictions, it is rare for young female pleasure to be the focus (Pennington 192). More typically, male desire is central: “Masculine desire is regularly displayed in the media, but it is not marked as *masculine* but rather the norm” (Banet-Weiser 32). Desire being understood as masculine limits the opportunity for female desire. Still, there can be and are exceptions, such as the coming of age films discussed in this thesis.

What is not a rare occurrence in film is sexual violence against women. In *Watching Rape*, Sarah Projansky examines representations of rape in film and other media. Still, she knows that she cannot cover everything in one book:

> “I have really only touched the surface of the plethora of [representations] of rape in twentieth-century U.S. popular culture [...] only a fragment of the many representations that saturate the last twenty years or so of film and television. [...]. Whether this ubiquity naturalizes depictions of rape for us so that we hardly notice them, draws our attention to them so that we feel overwhelmed by their presence, or places us somewhere in between

> along this continuum of awareness, it is impossible to avoid [encountering] representations of rape *often* in our daily lives" (Projansky 231).

Projanksy gives various options for how depictions of rape in media can influence a person and focuses on the sheer amount of women being raped in U.S. popular culture, but people have actually studied what impact this exposure to such violence can have. One study showed the numbing effect that repeated screening of sexual violence can have: "Men who viewed five movies depicting violence against women came to have fewer negative emotional reactions to the films, to perceive them as significantly less violent, and to consider them significantly less degrading to women" (Linz et al. 130). Another study drew conclusions that went beyond a numbing reaction to actually justifying the sexual violence:

> "... individuals who are frequently exposed to sexually violent material are likely to learn and abide by such negative behaviors and also to accept the violent treatment women receive as justified. Furthermore, individuals who view sexually violent media might be more willing to accept rape myths and to believe that the relationships portrayed on film reflect those of real life" (Emmers-Sommer et al. 318).

Given the commonality of sexual violence in film and media, it is important to take the impact of these depictions into consideration to fully understand American's ideas about, and in some cases numbness to, sexual violence. Additionally, while there are plentiful scholarly responses to the huge amount of sexual violence representations, it is hard to ignore the lack of large quantities of young female pleasure representation and research on such representation or lack thereof.

In this day in age, porn must be discussed when examining the screening of sex and how it imapcts its viewers. Porn is a controversial topic, even among feminists, but "... the occasional

feminist porn site aside, that is not what the $97 billion global porn industry is shilling. Its producers have only one goal: to get men off hard and fast for profit. The most efficient way to do so appears to be by eroticizing the degradation of women" (Orenstein 34). Given these ideas, it can be argued that "[porn] is the source of women's sexuality as a performance for men" (Orenstein 33). Digital porn is definitely not the origin of this, but it definitely reinforces these ideas and keeps them omnipresent in American society today. Bryant Paul, a scripting theory scholar, finds that people learn socialization, including sexual socialization, through film, and explains that sexual socialization ideas can be learned from porn: "[...][']So when you see consistent depictions of women with multiple partners and women being used as sex objects for males, and there's no counterweight argument going on there …' He trailed off, leaving the obvious conclusion unspoken" (Orenstein 35). Even if people avoid porn, "[y]ou don't need to log into PornHub to absorb its scripts; they're embedded in the mainstream [...] The average teenager is exposed to nearly fourteen thousand references to sex each year on television…" (Orenstein 39). If these representations largely put male pleasure above female's, this is concerning because "...in a media context in which if you are visible, you *matter*, visibility matters indeed" (Banet-Weiser 10). Female pleasure should matter as much as male pleasure, so visibility of it is important for women on-screen and off-screen.

Patriarchal Pleasure Hierarchy

In the subsequent chapters, I will argue that representations of sex in mainstream film tend to focus on male pleasure, even when the films are centered on female characters, reflecting a gendered hierarchy of pleasure. This is not representative of the sexual pluralism in America, but it is reflective of its dominant ideologies around sex. This patriarchal pleasure hierarchy is

strengthened through women feeling shame about sex and their sexual body parts, experiencing hypersexualization and objectification, and focusing their sexuality on pleasing others.

Shame about female sexuality goes back as far as the words for female genitalia do: "Medieval anatomists called women's external genitals the 'pudendum,' a word derived from the Latin *pudere*, meaning 'to make ashamed.' Our genitalia were thus named 'from the shamefacedness that is in women to have them seen'" (Nagoski 17). This etymology is striking, and this is still a common implicit, and sometimes explicit, part of many women's views of their own body parts. Shame, whether the presence or lack thereof, heavily influences female sexuality and pleasure in the films I analyze. In *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, Minnie battles shame of wanting sex too much. Kayla, *Eighth Grade*'s protagonist, feels shame for her lack of experience. These are two ends of a wide spectrum of shame that seems to have some kind of hold on the protagonists not matter how much or little desire and experience they have with sex and pleasure. As shown through *Yes, God, Yes*, religion can exacerbate this shame.

How Americans talk about– or don't talk about– female genitalia contributes to the shame around female pleasure. In 2013, an article titled "I'm a Feminist, but I Don't Eat Pussy" went viral and described vaginas as "objectively gross" and called the expectation of cunninglingus "selfish and, frankly, discriminatory" (Orenstein 64). This was written by a man, who I'm sure given the fellatio research discussed in Chapter 1 feels entitled to blowjobs, but calls women selfish for expecting reciprocation. In *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, there is no mention of cunninglingus with Minnie's male partners, but she gives a blowjob during her first hook up experience. Additionally, while blowjobs are explicitly discussed in *8th Grade* and *Yes, God, Yes*, there is no mention of reciprocal oral sex.

Even scholars who have written on women's pleasure in film use language that avoids naming women's genitalia by name. Simon Richter defines a whole genre of film, called a Lola film, based on unapologetically celebrating female pleasure in his book *Women, Pleasure, Film: What Lolas Want*. He describes the genre as one encompassing 35 films that do not punish its protagonists for pursuit of their sexual pleasure (Richter). Despite focusing on female pleasure, he rarely if ever mentions female genitalia by name. He commonly refers to female genitalia as "the locus of her pleasure" (Richter 81). By erasing the actual words for parts of a female's sexual body parts, people like Richter reinforce the shame of discussing female genitalia by name. Americans commonly reduce the very complex female genital region to the term vagina, effectively rendering the clitoris, which is almost always necessary for female pleasure, invisible (Mintz 29). Calling these parts by their names are important for empowering women to have knowledge of their own bodies and pleasure, so examining how these films discuss female genitalia can reveal if they are implicitly encouraging erasure of the vulva. This problem as it relates to representations in media is starting to be recognized. For example, there is a website called *The Clit Test* which gives passes and fails to pieces of media that accurately reference the clitoris and female pleasure. By normalizing references to the clitoris and other parts of the vulva, there is less room for shame in female's knowledge of their own bodies and pleasure.

This shame is very present among young women today. It is not uncommon even for sexually active girls to have an "aversion to their own genitals" (Orenstein 65). This shame should not be surprising. With "such limited representations of women's bodies" in media, porn, and even health classes, this "may actually be changing women's perceptions of what a 'normal' vulva looks like" because if it does not look like the cookie cutter hairless and tucked-in vulva, young girls may not realize theirs is perfectly normal (Nagoski 26). Furthermore, the only

depiction or mention of pubic hair in the films discussed is in an animation of a mother giving birth in one of Minnie's drawings in *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, which is set in the 1970s when having natural pubic hair was more normalized. This lack of female pubic hair is integral to the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy: "Hair is associated with sexual power, with passion. The woman's sexual passion needs to be minimized so that the spectator may feel that he has the monopoly of such passion.) Women are there to feed an appetite, not to have any of their own" (Berger 55). The idea that female genitalia and pubic hair are gross can make it hard to masturbate and explore how to experience pleasure. Relying on a partner, especially in a heterosexual relationship or hookup, does not always lead to reliable orgasm, so it is sad that so many young girls may not be able to provide that for themselves. I explore the protagonists' knowledge, or lack thereof, of their own bodies because "...how young girls feel about 'down there' matters. It matters a lot" (Orenstein 66). Young women must be able to know themselves in order to communicate to their partners what brings them pleasure because the dominant narratives society gives them will not work. Only half of the films in this thesis mention female masturbation, and this self-knowledge of their pleasure helps these protagonists not submit to the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy.

Hypersexualization and objectificaiton of female bodies is another way the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy is strengthened. This problem is difficult to isolate and critique because "... hypersexualization is ubiquitous, so visible as to be nearly invisible: it is the water in which girls swim, the air they breathe" (Orenstein 13). This hypersexualization is shown in the coming of age films discussed through the control adults exhibit over the clothing of the young female protagonists. Additionally, the gendered imbalance in nudity in film is reflective of this hypersexualization and objectification. John Berger, who examined objectification in European

oil paintings in *Ways of Seeing*, challenges skeptics who do not see the patriarchy embedded in the art, "If you have any doubt that this is so, make the following experiment. Choose [...] an image of a traditional nude. Transform the woman into a man. [...] Then notice the violence which that transformation does. Not to the image, but to the assumptions of a likely viewer" (Berger 64). I ask readers to do this next time they watch a film with a nude woman. Imagine it is a male. This will most likely be a more shocking display of human flesh. As Maria San Filippo discusses in her book *Provoc*auteurs *and Provocations: Screening Sex in 21st Century Media*, male full-frontal nudity is rare, but audiences are almost numb to female nudity because it is shown so often (San Filippo 84).

> "I see female full-frontal nudity as subject to [significations] distinct from those of male full-frontal nudity, owing to its manifestation in a cultural context in which women's bodies are subject to intense surveillance and scrutiny while men's bodies are policed in accord with (hetero)masculinist overvaluation" (San Filippo 75).

This surveillance and objectification of the female body is very often for the purpose of male pleasure in film. For example, a woman may be objectified on screen to avoid too much homo-eroticism in a film: "cis women['s] [...] fetishized form serves as a structuring presence. The bromance (and its progenitor, the male buddy film) must defuse its homo-eroticism with reassuring displays of women as sex objects" (San Filippo 76). These women are not active participants in sexual pleasure; they are objects. Their objectification is for the pleasure of the male characters within and the spectators of these films. The female is subject to being a thing on display, embodying *to-be-looked-at-ness* (Mulvey 63). This is not a coincidence, but rather reflections of ideologies American society has around sex and gender. This way of seeing bodies

in film begs the question, who is pleasure for in American film, and what does this say about who pleasure is for in America broadly?

Still, even with these critiques, women are often represented having sex, and isn't representation good? Not necessarily when the representation objectifies them, as "[g]irls and women are hypervisible because they are so often understood as bodies. Boys and men [...] aren't conceived of as bodies in the same way" (Banet-Weiser 32). This problem pre-exists film. In a painting called *Allegory of Time and Love* by Bronzino, one can see how the female body can be represented sexually, but in a way that is not for the female's pleasure: "But the way her body is arranged has nothing to do with their kissing. Her body is arranged in the way it is to display it to the man looking at the picture. This picture is made to appeal to *his* sexuality. It has nothing to do with her sexuality" (Berger 55). Even if a female character "falls in love[,]" she "becomes [a male character's] property, losing [...] her generalised sexuality, [...] [and by] means of identification with him, [...] the spectator can indirectly possess her too" (Mulvey 64). If the audience is meant to identify with the male protagonist and owner of the female character, this leaves women with the options to either identify with the objectifier or the objectified in regards to not only pleasure, but also personhood. This objectification of the female body through the male gaze is so omnipresent in society that women can internalize it. This is reflected in multiple of the films discussed in the subsequent chapters through the way the women talk about their own and other women's bodies and appearances. A Western woman is socialized "to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life" (Berger 46). This can obscure a woman's body image, which can in turn influence how she experiences sex and pleasure (Mintz 12). America's hypersexualized culture lacks inclusivity

and advocacy for female-pleasure (Orenstein 43). This leads to our next pillar of the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy: female sexuality for others' pleasure, not their own.

Given the lack of self-knowledge around and simultaneous objectification and hypersexualization of girls' bodies, it is not surprising that many girls learn to care more about how they look to others rather than how they feel, including in sexual situations. The patriarchal pleasure hierarchy perpetuates the false belief that "[for women,] learning to be sexually desirable [is] the same as exploring your own desire: your wants, your needs, your capacity for joy, for passion, for intimacy, for ecstasy" (Orenstein 43). Girls strive for hotness, but "'[h]ot' tells girls that appearing sexually confident is more important than possessing knowledge of their own bodies" (Orenstein 43). Women are taught to please others from a young age not only through their looks, but also through sexual acts. Girls and women are at a disadvantage when it comes to pleasure compared to men: in one study, "women tended to use their *partner's* physical pleasure as the yardstick for *their* satisfaction [...] For men, it was the opposite: the measure was their own orgasm" (Orenstein 72). This was consistent for women regardless of their partner's identity, so women who have sex with women tend to have more pleasure (Orenstein 72). In Chapter 3, Lady Bird exemplifies a protagonist who subverts this norm, but nonetheless, as reflected in the other films, society has taught girls that pleasing others is more important than experiencing pleasure. However, boys are not getting this same message. One young woman shared that she felt like "... *naturally* I'll do something for him and then he'll ask if I 'want' him to" (Orenstein 61). I'll explore in the first chapter the entitlement that men can feel to women's bodies, and the gaslighting they may use if their wants are not fulfilled.

The types of sex shown and discussed in film also typically benefit male power and pleasure over that of females. This is emphasized by the commonality of only or mostly showing

penetrative sex in film, such as in *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* and *Lady Bird*. Additionally, as discussed earlier, a film is far more likely to show or reference fellatio than cunninglingus. This is not only a film issue, but also a porn one: "Movies and porn show women having fast and fabulous orgasms from male pounding. These images are lies!" (Mintz 8). Therefore, just because a film or work of art shows a woman experiencing pleasure through sex acts, it is important to consider who the fictional woman's pleasure is depicted for. I examine when and how the films represent female pleasure authentically and female sexuality unashamedly.

The films' privileging of male pleasure is a reflection of the way Americans talk about sex. The dialogue about sex in American culture limits the capacity for female pleasure:

> "We label 'sex' as the act through which most men reach orgasm. We label women's genitals by the one part (the vagina) through which most men reach orgasm. We elevate men's sexual organ (the penis) with countless nicknames that no longer seem strange to us, but we have no word with which to comfortably name the clitoris. [...] It's cultural privileging of the male experience" (Mintz 33).

America's, and the American dictionary's, dominant definition of real sex is intercourse, but this act alone is not conducive to female orgasm (Mintz 22). Even though "95 percent of women need clitoral stimulation to reach orgasm," American mainstream culture is relatively silent about the clitoris compared to intercourse (Mintz 14). Popular American ideologies still "culturally privilege male sexual pleasure with the view that sex begins with penetration and ends with male ejaculation" (Mintz 34). Girls pick up on this idea: "As an eighteen-year-old high school senior [said], 'I understood before I started having sex what it meant for a guy to finish. You know it has to happen for sex to be over and for them to feel good. But I had no idea what it meant for a girl. Honestly? I still don't know. It's never addressed. So I've gone into it all

without really understanding myself'" (Orenstein 72). Still, it is hard to expect girls to be able to communicate or even be self-aware about all of their sexual needs as "many adult women can't do that even with long-term partners" (Orenstein 65). However, "...they are at a critical juncture in their development, learning foundational lessons about attraction, intimacy, arousal, sexual entitlement. Those early experiences can have a lasting impact on the understanding and enjoyment of their sexuality" (Orenstein 65). This emphasizes why it is important to consider young female pleasure in film and scholarship. Thankfully, there are more films emerging that authentically represent the sexuality of teenage girls, such as the ones analyzed in this thesis.

The patriarchal pleasure hierarchy can be overcome in filmic representation and in life. Before substantial changes in mainstream film and culture take place, there are steps parents can take to promote a more positive, pleasure-focused lens through which their kids can view sexuality. Parents can talk more openly and realistically about the pleasures of sex with their children because "[t]hey deserve something better than the distorted, false voices that blare at them from TVs, computers, iPhones, tablets, and movie screens" (Orenstein 235). Through the films examined in this thesis, it is clear that parents' discourse around sex can have a substantial impact on their children's sexual empowerment or disempowerment. I am hopeful that if parents do not provide their children with better narratives around sex, then there will be a future where the movie screen reflects pleasures equally for everyone.

Even though film oftentimes reflects misogynistic values, it can and has critiqued them too. In *Appropriate Behavior* (Desiree Akhavan, 2014), when the protagonist is teaching film to children, "...a chaste kiss is deemed 'not 'propriate' [while] farting zombies and women-terrorizing birds are acceptable" (San Filippo 304). This scene "[provides] a subtle yet sly dig at the cultural hypocrisy of celebrating vulgarity and misogyny while censoring adult sexuality"

(San Filippo 304). This relates to the censoring of sexuality in general, but getting rid of the hierarchy of pleasure is a harder challenge. One cannot simply reverse the roles "by merely substituting the man as submissive object and the woman as domineering voyeur and by handing off the penis from man to woman without [divesting] it of phallic authority" (San Filippo 96). Film can also combat the hypersexualization and objectification of women that enforces the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy. San Filippo offers an alternative to Laura Mulvey's *to-be-looked-at-ness*. She suggests that "corpo*reality* as a feminist critique of conventionally fetishistic uses of female eroticism and nudity in both mainstream filmmaking and pornography" can generate "not-to-be-looked-at[-ness]" (San Filippo 41). Through realistic, sometimes abject, representation, one can subvert the objectivity women's bodies are subject to when on display in film. I will analyze examples of this in *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*. Alternative forms of cinema also have the opportunity to subvert the norms of "a culture that confoundingly manifests both pornification and sexual puritanism," but mainstream film typically reaches more people (San Filippo 43). Sex in film can have power: "screening sexual provocation, while certainly about extending the boundaries of what kinds of (and how much) sex are shown, is as much or more about pushing the envelope on the politics of its representation" (352). Film is a powerful medium and as a society entrenched in media that oftentimes represents sex and/or sexual violence, Americans should care about what representations they are observing.

While there are exceptions to the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy represented in film, they are few and far between. Of the ones that do exist, they are not very diverse. While inclusive representation has gotten better over the 2010s, given the most popular forms of feminism today, only certain types of women are permitted the most visibility: "This means, most of the time, that the popular feminism that is most visible is that which is white, middle-class, cis-gendered, and

heterosexual" (Banet-Weiser 13). Of the films I have chosen to analyze, most of the protagonists fit this heteronormative, privileged outline. *Pariah* features a Black lesbian, but Alike is one of the only protagonists like this that is well known in these types of films. That film was made in 2011, so why haven't there been more like it? One of the protagonists of *Booksmart* is a lesbian, but she is still very privileged as a white, middle-class, cis-gendered woman. This queer representation is good, but it is not enough. Feminism as it exists in 2010s' popular culture allows certain women to "...become visible precisely because they do not challenge deep structures of inequities. That is, in order for some images and practices to become visible, others must be rendered invisible" (Banet-Weiser 11). With marriage equality and greater acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in America, having a lesbian protagongist in *Booksmart* is exciting, but she does not challenge any intersectional issues. It is great to have this representation, but it shouldn't stop here: "Visibility is not a static thing; it has to be in a constant state of growth" (Banet-Weiser 11). There are multiple critically acclaimed coming of age films from the 2010s that with female protagonists, but the overwhelming majority are white, heterosexual, and middle class. So, what are they really challenging? Maybe they are not trying to challenge anything that Betty Friedan had not already challenged with her white, middle-class, housewife feminism. The visibility of female pleasure is key to expanding women's right to pleasure, but only if it leads to changes in the dominant social pleasure hierarchy. That being said, "[i]t is, of course, important to have bodies at the table, but their mere presence doesn't necessarily challenge the structure that supports, and builds, the table in the first place" (Banet-Weiser 12). As discussed in regards to the portrayals of sex and pleasure women experience, it is necessary to critically examine the benefactor of these representations. It is integral that women experience authentic pleasure that is valued equally to that of their partners. Furthermore, one must consider

what type of women are represented and if they challenge any dominant ideologies around sex and pleasure. Just representing straight white women having intercourse is not enough. While intersectional experiences of queer and BIPOC women are still severely limited, this thesis acknowledges some progress that film has made in this type of representation.

In Chapter 1, I will focus on young female sex and pleasure in relationship to pleasing others in *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* and *Eighth Grade*. First, I will examine how *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* represents Minnie's sexual and romantic desires through animation and other tools that celebrate her sexuality. However, most of her sexual experiences are through statutory rape, so I analyze the way this skewed power dynamic reinforces the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy. Next, I explore how Kayla of *Eighth Grade* learns to perform to please others, while making the lack of learning about her own pleasure very obvious. Finally, I analyze how tools like gaslighting and shame are used to fortify the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy in both of these films.

Next, Chapter 2 discusses sexual empowerment and disempowerment through the discourse that the protagonists' friends and family have about sex. First, I examine the ways female friendship allows Amy and Molly to be sexually empowered in *Booksmart*, while also illuminating the ways the high school setting culturally privileges male sexuality. Then, I return to the home to see how Alike's family, especially parents, in *Pariah* disempower her ability to have a healthy sex life because of her gender and her queerness.

Finally, in Chapter 3, I claim religious power structures sexually disempower young girls but show how their friends and family can help them overcome or submit to, in these cases, Catholic shame. In *Yes, God, Yes*, Alice's best friend does not help her like Amy and Molly help each other, and Alice has to turn to those outside of her community to find support for her

emerging sexuality. However, in *Lady Bird*, Lady Bird's best friend strengthens the idea that female friendship can encourage these young women to feel comfortable exploring their developing sexualities through masturbation or sex with others. Lady Bird's discourse on sex with her best friend as well as her mother help her subvert the sexual shame of her religion. This thesis will contribute to a future in which it is common for sex in films, and scholarship about sex in film, to prioritize young female pleasure at least equally to that of males. The coming of age subgenre has a particular opportunity to influence young women's perceptions of sex as they come of age and into their own sexualities like the protagonists of these films do.

Chapter 1: Female Sexuality for Others

The Diary of a Teenage Girl and *Eighth Grade* are two quintessential coming of age films from the last decade. Both films feature some sort of sexual exploration for their teenage female protagonists, which is a realistic and expected part of coming of age for young women, despite the dominant messages they receive about growing up: "...whereas male's puberty is characterized by ejaculation, masturbation, and the emergence of a near-unstoppable sex drive, females' is defined by … periods" (Orenstein 62). However, both films prioritize male pleasure over that of females. Even in these films with female-focused stories, the girls' sexualities are influenced by the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy that pressures them to focus on what they can do to please others.

Statutory Pleasure in *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (Marielle Heller, 2015)

The Diary of a Teenage Girl places the protagonist's, 15-year-old Minnie's, sexual journey at the center of the story and her character development. However, this desire comes with consequences. Minnie's main sexual partner throughout the film is her mother's boyfriend, Monroe, who is in his mid-thirties. Still, the film, set in 1970s San Francisco, gives Minnie some autonomy over her desire and pleasure, which is rare for young girls in film. However, her first sexual experiences must be examined through the lens of statutory rape. In this section, I argue that even though *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* is focused on Minnie, it still values male pleasure above female pleasure. This is shown through the way sex and female bodies are displayed and discussed in the film.

Amelie Hastie examines the film in a *Film Quarterly* article and reflects on her own experience watching the film and grappling with its contradictory layers of female sexuality and

statutory rape. Hastie walks through some of the science about the brain development of teenagers in order to explain (to herself and the reader) why Minnie makes decisions such as sleeping with and taking acid with Monroe. She illuminates that Minnie is being led by her pleasure center, or nucleus accumbens, and the pleasure of the affair seems greater than any pain that could come from the consequences of that pleasure (Hastie 42). In this sense, Minnie is finding pleasure for herself, but also for the sake of an adult man's pleasure. Even so, Minnie is a child. She may find the experience pleasurable now, but in her adult life she could look back on this relationship as traumatic. Still, Hastie argues that the film is respectful of her body: "In the scene after she and Monroe have sex, she stands before a mirror, exploring her own body (shot, notably, without full frontal nudity)..." (42). Beyond her display, Hastie argues that the film gives Minnie ownership over not only her body, but also her story:

> "Amazingly, Heller lets Minnie have her body. Her body *belongs* to her; it is a part of who she is. Visually Powley's [who plays Minnie] body may indeed be an 'object among objects' in Kracauer's sense, but as a character, Minnie—and, as an actress, Powley—is not conventionally objectified. Rather than the camera, or other characters, seeming to control the mechanism for how Minnie's body is seen, Minnie is the driving, conscious force behind the way her body appears. She implicitly directs the unseen camera around her, as she encounters her own body again and again, thereby setting the means by which the audience, too, perceives it and her" (Hastie 42).

This is an exceptional feat for an American narrative film, to give not only a woman, but a teenage girl, power over her body and story. Hastie's article is not the only review that appreciates this: "What a treat to have a film that refuses to punish an adolescent girl for sex and instead seeks a happy ending that her own empowerment brings about. No, that shouldn't be

remarkable. But it is" (Rich 77). However, it is a difficult argument to be made that the character controls how the camera and the audience perceives her body, especially when she is topless in several scenes.

Nevertheless, the film represents young female sexuality rather than censoring or removing it like many others. It celebrates Minnie's romanticized perception of her relationship with Monroe, for better or for worse. While Hastie argues that even with the illegal affair, the film allows Minnie ownership over her body, it is not that simple. Minnie's body is not fully hers in her sexual encounters where the power dynamic is skewed to favor a man twenty years older than her. The film does a good job of explaining how the "hippie-era sexual revolution" did not always fulfill its promises: "Hippie culture['s] [...] vaunted 'free love' was anything but that for the girls and women caught up in the self-serving mantra of its menfolk" (Rich 76)(Rich 77). At the end of the film, Minnie announces through a voice-over that this story "is for all the girls when they have grown," but what is this story teaching the girls? Minnie learns by the end of the film that she does not need a man to be happy, so that could be the lesson. However, she learns this after a traumatic relationship. Surely there are better ways for young women like Minnie to learn to value themselves and their pleasure.

The film utilizes animation to demonstrate Minnie's creative, but also child-like, mind, which emphasizes the youthfulness of her adoration for Monroe and other boys. One night when Minnie is in bed, Monroe calls and tells her about how he just got arrested for drunk driving, but the cop was nice and let him ride around in his car for a while. He had a fun, wild night, and slurs his words as he tells Minnie, "I don't know, I just wanted to tell you about it. I-I, uh, you know, I knew you'd be the only one to appreciate it." After hearing this, Minnie lowers the phone to her chest, and an animated heart of flowers emerges from the phone. She whispers to

herself, “He loves me.” The animation serves to show how she feels about what Monroe said. She finds scraps of romance in his drunk call to her and expands it to fill her wistful, hopeless romantic heart. She is left feeling warm and loved, and this feeling is emphasized by the animation.

The animation in the film also serves to invite us into Minnie’s imagination in addition to her feelings. In one short animation which Minnie calls, “The Making of a Harlot,” a giant cartoon Minnie towers above the buildings of San Francisco as she stomps through the streets. Minnie describes her as “a young girl driven astray by the lustful lure of the flesh.” This animation is intercut with a scene of Minnie in a car making out with a junior, Ricky, from her high school. The cartoon version of this boy makes an appearance as a significantly smaller person that Minnie can fit in her hand. During the real-life make out session, they pause because Minnie senses a hesitation. Ricky admits, “You’re just so intense.” This dialogue continues in the animation, with cartoon Ricky trapped in Minnie’s large hand. “There’s something about having sex with you, Minnie… kind of scares me. Like, you’re just so passionate.” Cartoon Minnie throws him down “SPLAT” on the street and storms off in tears. Minnie’s imagination shines through this animation and gives us a peek into how her mind perceived the situation. She clearly saw herself as too much for him. In the animation, she was too big and enjoyed sex too much, so much as to make her a “harlot.” These personifications of her imagined self happen throughout the film and give us a better idea of how Minnie is reflecting on what is happening to her and around her throughout the film.

The animation also highlights Minnie’s child-like idealization of Monroe. In the beginning of the film, Minnie’s drawing of Monroe comes to life and is surrounded by animated flora and fauna. This imagined Monroe tells Minnie how the experience of cupping her breast

was: “They’re really great Minnie. Fantastic breasts.” Even in her imagination, how she appears and feels to Monroe is more important than her actual experience of him cupping her breast. When tape-recording how she and Monroe first got together, she guesses as to why Monroe likes her: “My appearance has not improved, so I suppose it was a lucky break when he was attracted by my youthfulness.” She sees herself as lucky that Monroe was attracted to her because she is young, but fails to recognize that she is still a child that he is simply taking advantage of. The animated aspects of the film emphasize this.

There are clear internalizations of the male gaze in the female characters of the film, and this is a significant part of the context through which Minnie has learned to prioritize male pleasure. The male gaze is apparent within the story in the way the film talks about female bodies. Minnie’s mom constantly attempts to get Minnie to dress nicer and wear more makeup to attract boys, without knowing, of course, that Minnie has already attracted her own boyfriend. During one conversation over breakfast, Minnie’s mother tells her, “You know, you aren’t always going to have that body, Min. I know it’s not exactly feminist to say, but I think you’d be happier if you put yourself out there a bit - a little make-up, a skirt every once in a while, Jesus. Get a little attention.” With this, Minnie’s mother is teaching her to prioritize how she appears to men over feminism. She projects onto Minnie the idea that women must embody the *to-be-looked-at-ness* that Mulvey critiques. This male gaze and concern for how Minnie looks is internalized. At one point when Monroe suggests they end things, Minnie whines, “Why would you say that? Do you think I’m fat?” Minnie has learned that the female body is for the male. She continually examines her own image like women are socialized to do: the surveyors in society are male, and the surveyed are female, and women hold both of these roles inside themselves as they constantly consider their own image and that of other women as well (Berger

47). While the film is set in the 1970s, it was made around "a time when interest in the *appearance* of sexiness had surpassed interest in the existence of sexual pleasure" (Orenstein 31). Minnie is urged by her own mother to make sure she is dressing for men, but there is no similar scene in which her mom encourages her to learn about her own body and pleasure. This internalization of the male gaze passed down by generations of women definitely influences how Minnie views sex.

Still, in Minnie's animations, she is able to subvert these limits on how she is supposed to look and be looked at. Minnie creates her first comic to send to her favorite cartoonist, Aline Kominsky, who we are introduced to first through Kominsky's somewhat crass drawing of a woman sitting on a toilet, underwear around her ankles, looking in a mirror. Minnie echoes this, what San Filippo would call *not-to-be-looked-at-nes*s, in her comic, titled "A Walk in the City." Her comic boxes come to life and a cartoon character that looks like Minnie clumps around San Francisco, similarly to "The Making of a Harlot," which she creates later. What is so subversive about Minnie's cartoon is how she draws the female character. She gives her extremely plump, unashamedly hairy legs, topped off with a large bottom that was not necessarily something women were strove for in the 1970s. She also gives her saggy boobs and lots of lines on her face. One might call the detail on the woman grotesque. I call it subversive. Minnie is using her creativity to define women, and perhaps even herself, outside of the box she has been told to fit in order to please men. Minnie uses her cartoons to focus on her experience because she lives in a world that values the male experience over that of females, in everything from having sex to talking.

This hierarchy of gendered experience and pleasure is exacerbated in her relationship with Monroe. The sex and dialogue in this film are always focused on the male even though it is

Minnie's story. Monroe and Minnie's months-long affair starts the evening when Monroe casually cups Minnie's breast while they watch TV. She records her thoughts into a tape-recorded diary, in which she says "I know it seems weird, but I had this strangely calming feeling that even if he meant to touch my tit, it's probably all right because he's a good guy, and he knows how it goes and I don't. But I wonder if my breast felt small." In this close up of Minnie and Monroe's hand on her chest, the audience sees Minnie's insecurity in her own body and sexuality.

Minnie feels lucky that Monroe is attracted to her. Later that night, after playfully simulating oral sex on his finger at a bar, Minnie states, "I want you to fuck me." Minnie is drunk, and Monroe claims he is not, calling her a lightweight. This adds to his power advantage. Minnie may seem confident in her claim, but she admits in a voiceover "I didn't know if I wanted him or anyone else to fuck me, but I was afraid to pass up the chance 'cause I may never get another." The audience can see how twisted the situation is, but it is clear Minnie does not yet. Monroe ensures that she does not. He does not sleep with her that night, but they do make out in his car. She also attempts to give him a blowjob. Minnie's pleasure is not of concern to Monroe in this first experience or any of the later ones, or else he really believes that his penis and penetration is all a woman, in this case a girl, needs to be fully satisfied. Orgasming is clearly not a primary concern for Minnie in her sexual encounters with Monroe, perhaps especially because of their imbalanced power dynamic. While Minnie gains pleasure through experiencing sex for the first time and further exploring her sexual self, it is always the pleasure of the male that is of upmost importance. This does not seem to bother naive Minnie, who simply takes this male-pleasure-focused type of sex as the norm. Minnie perceives Monroe as doing her a favor by teaching her how sex works.

One evening in Monroe's apartment, Minnie argues with him because he wants to take her home, but she wants to stay and learn about his life. As he gets dressed, Minnie nakedly and defiantly stands and whines, "Hey. Come back here." It escalates to a frustrated yell, "Hey!" She puts her hands on her hips and says, "I think we need to talk about our relationship." Monroe finds this funny, which frustrates Minnie, and the two begin to play-fight. Minnie smiles, "Get your hands off me. Get your hands off me or–." Monroes eggs her on, "Or what?" Minnie yelps back, "Or I'm gonna tell my mother!" Monroe's smile drops. He stops touching her. He walks away, orders her to get dressed, and tells her she ruined it. Monroe is angry now. He yells, "You're a fucking child! I should tell your mother! You want that? You're manipulating me! Well, I'm not having it!" After the screaming stops, Minnie does not say anything. She curls up on the floor by the bed and sobs. Minnie and Monroe's relationship is presented as if Monroe is a sexually experienced man who is helping Minnie discover her sexual self. However, what the story really tells is one of abuse and rape.

The sobbing child on the floor of Monroe's apartment is perversely repeated when Monroe decides to put Minnie in the role of caretaker. Monroe is well aware that their relationship is wrong, as seen in the way he hides it. During a paranoid, drug-induced trip, Monroe yells at Minnie to get off his bed. In an exasperated, desperate attempt to get this high teenager out of view from his neighbors, he explains: "It's level with the windows, it's gonna kill you. Get off the bed now, Minnie." She replies, "I like the bed," and hugs his covers. "They're gonna see you." Once he finally gets her down, he orders, "Stay low," pulling her to the floor. He sighs, "Good. I think we're safe." He is not only worried about being caught for cheating, but also being caught for sleeping with a fifteen-year-old that he is taking advantage of. Later in this scene, the emotional abuse escalates. Laying in her lap, Monroe breathily begs, "I need you

Minnie. I need you to take care of me. I love you." He cries when he thinks she does not love him back, pressuring her to reassure him that she does while she is sitting up, looking off to the side pensively, and coddling him on the floor. He is acting like a child, perversely wanting Minnie to mother him. This reversal where Monroe is the "child" shows her how the relationship, where she is actually the child, is depraved. Minnie's voiceover describes the scene: "He was vulnerable and weak. It was all I'd ever wanted, and now I had no desire for it." There is no animation. The fantasy is gone. This is the first part of the film where Minnie seems to see something wrong with the situation. The scene is a disturbing one, displaying a sobbing, adult man forcing a child he has been raping to nurture him.

Furthermore, Minnie's sex with men, even besides Monroe, is presented as purely penetrative or as fellatio. In one scene, after skinny-dipping with the boy from her high school, Minnie is shown having intercourse, laying on the floor of a pool house as the boy quickly and forcefully humps her. This is shown from a behind-the-shoulder shot that focuses on Minnie's disappointed, almost annoyed face. This is typical, as one girl Orenstein spoke to shared about her sexual experience with her first boyfriend: "He thought it would happen like in porn, that I'd be ready a lot faster and he could just, you know, *pound*" (Orenstein 37). Another girl shared, "They think [...] that's what girls like [...] They don't realize, 'Dude, that does *not feel good*.' It's all they know. It's what they see. If you're just hooking up with someone, like a one-time thing or whatever, you just *pretend* it feels good" (Orenstein 37). Minnie does not pretend in this situation. She tells him, "Let's turn over," and slightly nudges him until she can roll on top. In this encounter, she takes control over the sex and tries to make it more enjoyable for herself. She clearly enjoys being on top more, as she pauses her moans to explain to him, "See? Slower," and continues moaning. Now an over-the-shoulder shot shows the boy's confused face. He seems to

be thrown off by Minnie knowing what she wants and having the confidence to ask for it. However, almost all women need more than just penetration to orgasm (Mintz 16). Usually what they need more of is clitoral stimulation of some kind (Mintz 16). There is no mention of the clitoris in this film, as if it is of no importance to Minnie's sexual discovery. Contrarily, penises are referred to throughout the film not only in sex scenes but also in dialogue between women in the film. Minnie's friend Kimmie licks a poster of a celebrity and encourages Minnie to: "Just lick his dick right through his pants- try it! It really feels like there's something there!" These girls are both very sex positive, but they are focused on the pleasure they give to others. While there is no mention of female masturbation, male masturbation is normalized, as Minnie wonders if Monroe is masturbating about her. Even saying "male masturbation" sounds strange, because it seems implied that a man would masturbate anyways. Minnie and Kimmie even go as far as to pretend to be prostitutes, giving blowjobs to strangers in a bar restroom. In this film, if a male is present, real or imagined, his pleasure matters more than the girls of the film, even though it is a film about a teenage girl.

There is one representation of cunninglingus in the film, but it is limited to Minnie's relationship with a woman who also tries to take advantage of Minnie. Towards the end of the film, Minnie's mother finds out about her relationship with Monroe, and in a strange fit of anger insists Minnie marries Monroe. Minnie wants nothing to do with Monroe anymore, so she runs away. She heads straight to a party where she finds Tabatha, a woman she met previously at another social event, and kisses her. They sleep together later that night. Minnie lays passively, most likely due to being under the influence of who knows what drugs, and gives slight signs of pleasure as Tabatha rubs her breasts and gives Minnie oral sex. The action itself is not shown, but it is implied by the placement of Tabatha's head off screen. However, this relationship also

has an uneven power dynamic. Since Minnie is afraid to return home to her mother's anger and Monroe's engagement offer, she relies on Tabatha for a place to live. This gives Tabatha the ability to manipulate Minnie. She takes this opportunity and tries to pimp Minnie out to her friend. Tabatha tells her, "Mike's been asking about you, so I told him I'd come by. He's got really good 'ludes… you like that don't you? Don't I know how to take care of my girl?" Minne druggedly smiles and nods, giving one word responses. Tabatha continues, "Everybody thinks you're so sexy […] it's a good thing I'm not insecure [...] I'm not uptight and you're not uptight, right?" Minnie is confused. Tabatha does not clarify completely, but offers some reassurance: "It'll be quick. He only takes a few minutes." Even though Tabatha seems to care about Minnie's pleasure, penetrative sex and male pleasure still ends up taking center stage. Tabatha kisses Minnie and tells her she needs her to do this. This is another person taking advantage of Minnie. While Tabatha is collecting money to pimp Minnie out to Mike, "Yeah, she's real young, you like that?," Minnie runs away and eventually goes back home to her mom. Even though Minnie's clitoris is taken into consideration in this relationship, her pleasure is not considered important when Tabatha tries to use Minnie's body to make money. Most of Minnie's sexual experiences throughout the film are tainted by the trauma of manipulation.

The language and sex in the film that prioritizes male pleasure correlates with American society's relative silence on the clitoris and, more often than not, female pleasure. Minnie is not the only high schooler, let alone woman, trapped in the pleasure hierarchy: "The concern with pleasing as opposed to physical pleasure, was pervasive among the girls [...], especially among high schoolers, who were just starting sexual experimentation" (Orenstein 55). In one study that compared "the early sexual experiences of four hundred randomly chosen American and Dutch women at two similar colleges[,] [...] the Americans [...] described interactions that were 'driven

by hormones,' in which boys determined relationships, male pleasure was prioritized, and reciprocity was rare" (Orenstein 219-220). Even though *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* is based on an autobiographical graphic novel and is certainly a female-centered story, the film and characters within it are more concerned with male pleasure. This gendered hierarchy of pleasure is present in the relationships and world of this film and more recent ones as well, including *Eighth Grade*. In this transitional period of the film's protagonist's life, she is learning about ways to perform and fill the roles of this hierarchy. In *Diary*, Minnie lives these roles. In *Eighth Grade*, yet another young girl learns about her sexuality through the eyes of others and their expectations for her.

Learning How to Perform and Please in *Eighth Grade* (Bo Burnham, 2018)

Eighth Grade (Bo Burnham, 2018) introduces the audience to the life of Kayla, a socially anxious 14-year-old in her last week of eighth grade. Throughout the narrative, Kayla strives to overcome her personal shame and loneliness by making more friends, being more confident, and impressing her crush before she graduates middle school. A feat of this film is that it presents Kayla's "perspective [as] a reasonable and valid one," and "…[reminds us] that the objectively small and inconsequential tragedies and triumphs in the personal life of a 13-year-old are subjectively experienced with a seismic, transformative intensity rivaling the dramas that preoccupy the wider world," (Whittle 71). Kayla's perception of herself and others is tied deeply to social media and the Internet, which impacts her developing adolescence. Kayla not only consumes media, but she also posts self-reflective advice vlogs on Youtube that narrate the key lessons she learns in the film. Through these vlogs, "...[Elsie Fisher as Kayla] captures the anguished effortfulness of teenage self-presentation," similar to the self-reflective nature of

Minnie's tape-record journal and cartoons (Whittle 71). Both protagonists in this chapter have creative outlets for their anxieties and desires that are based in different media forms of the times they live in. The opening scene starts from the perspective of Kayla's vlog. A blurry image of Kayla slowly pans out as she encourages her viewers, through many nervous filler words, to be themselves. "But it's like, being yourself is, like, not changing yourself to impress someone else." This opening scene and quote is very revealing because throughout the film, Kayla tries to change herself to impress others.

She changes herself to fit the image of how she perceives the way women are supposed to be and act, which largely comes from the Internet. She learns gender expectations as well as sexuality standards online. These norms teach her how to be a woman in society and are very connected to sexuality standards, especially in heterosexual relationships, that teach women to focus on pleasing their partners (Mintz 11). Kayla is deeply experienced in viewing Youtube how-tos in order to perform how she thinks other people want her to. In her bathroom covered in post-it notes sharing encouraging words like "own who you are," she is shown watching a tutorial for an everyday makeup look. After completing the complicated makeup process and doing her hair, she very carefully gets back into bed and opens her phone. She takes a selfie, with a Snapchat filter that makes her eyes bigger and her skin clear, and posts it with the caption: "Just woke up like this… ugh," followed by several emojis that seem to say she is not satisfied with how she looks, as if asking for others to reassure her this "natural" look is beautiful. She feels pressured to meet the beauty standards of Youtube vloggers and present herself online as if she does this effortlessly. From blowjobs to makeup, Kayla has access to learn so many things online, but what are these tutorials teaching her about herself and other women? It all goes back to performance and the pressure to perform to a certain ideal, and as I will show throughout the

rest of this section, this standard typically puts male preferences and pleasure over that of females.

The self-love post it notes and make-up as a mask for her natural face reflect the contradictory messages girls receive today. This is depicted in advertising: “American girls, this new marketing narrative typically goes, have been excluded from a plethora of professional and personal fields [...] because they feel unqualified and have low self-esteem. However, these ads declare, an answer is at hand, and with only the right products, anything is possible” (7). This puts the pressure on the consumer to fix low self-esteem problems: “But the injury here is not primarily inflicted on women by society; rather, low self-confidence is self-injury, and the biggest injury to women is that which they bring on themselves by not ‘loving their body’...” (Banet-Weiser 73). Still, it is hard to love your body when “...the average US teenage girl is flooded with images of the ‘perfect’ female body...” (Banet-Weiser 72). Nevertheless, Kayla sees it as her responsibility to individually overcome all of society’s pressures. She shares this in another vlog on how to be confident: “Confidence is a choice. Like the really awesome thing about confidence is that you can just start acting like it, even if you feel like you don’t have any.” This is the message she has received and found to be true, but it is not the best message for societal change: “When girls and women are told to ‘be’ confident and empowered, it is framed as an individual choice: they just need to believe it, and then they will become it. This confidence will help them become better economic subjects, without interrogating the broad economic context that encourages women and girls to not be confident in the first place” (Banet-Weiser 30). Even so, Kayla has this capitalist choice ideology ingrained in her. She had learned that she has access to learn from the Internet and buy products like her makeup to make her more

confident. This puts the blame on Kayla if she is not able to use her resources to fix her insecurities that are largely caused by more systemic pressures put on young women.

Given Kayla's time spent on the internet engaging with various media platforms, she has to pick up a lot of messages from there, including popular feminist messages. This individualist version of feminism is what is popular at the time of the film. It's good for making some feminist ideas accessible, but it focuses on individual action rather than systemic change (Banet-Weiser 1). In one of the first scenes discussed, Kayla refers to a famous Beyoncé lyric in her Snapchat caption: "I woke up like this" (Beyoncé 2:35). The song and the popular feminism it reflects share the message that "[c]onfidence is something that women need to just try to have–and if they cannot attain it, it is their own failing." (Banet-Weiser 98). Seeing these messages still does not make Kayla feel flawless, but she eventually comes to the idea this is her own fault. Once she chooses to be confident, she feels better. Nevertheless, the contradictory messages to women's confidence and self-love are still just as popular as popular feminism.

Beyond Youtube tutorials, Kayla is deeply invested in all sorts of social media. In a montage of Kayla's face, lit by her laptop and phone screens, there are superimpositions of what she is viewing. On a trip down an Internet rabbit hole, Kayla starts on a Buzzfeed quiz, then makes her way through Tumblr, Youtube, Twitter, Snapchat, until she goes back to Youtube to view her own channel, then back to Snapchat to take some selfies, and then a notification finally brings her to Instagram. So many girls learn to compare and search for an ideal to reach towards on these platforms: "...the more concerned a girl is about her appearance, weight, and body image, the more likely she is to consult the magic mirror of her social media profile, and vice versa…" (Orenstein 18). Some girls want their profile to display a more perfect version of themselves: "'You use your experience to create an image,' [...] a high school senior in San

Francisco [said], 'with the ultimate goal being to show that you're desirable and attractive and wanted and liked'" (Orenstein 19). Kayla's Instagram notification was from Kennedy, a popular girl whose mom is making her invite Kayla to her pool party. After reading the message, Kayla goes to Kennedy's profile and scrolls through some comments on a post. These comments can become an ideal to strive towards or to compare oneself to as well: "Comments on girls' pages, too, tend to focus disproportionately on looks, and even more than in the real world, that becomes a measure of friendship, self-image, and self-worth" (Orenstein 18). Kayla does not really have friends, so one can imagine she longs for multiple comments like the ones on Kennedy's page. Kayla seems more interested in one comment in particular from Aiden, Kayla's crush who won "Best Eyes" when their class gave out superlative awards. Kayla won "Most Quiet," a detail that puts her middle school social standing in perspective. She clicks on Aiden's profile and finds a video of Aiden posing and flexing his tiny muscles in a mirror. She puts in her headphones and practices kissing her hand until her dad suddenly enters, and she throws her phone across the room, shattering the screen. This is the closest Kayla gets to masturbation or exploring how she feels pleasure.

One of the main plot points in the film is Kayla's new interest in boys, particularly Aiden. Whether this plot line on her crush was meant to be reflective of real female adolescence or its male director's idea of female adolescence, it is clear Kayla's fascination with Aiden leads her to focus on how she can perform to please him. The film is void of the pursuit of her own pleasure, and like on social media, Kayla learns to perform in order to get the attention and perception that she wants.

During a school shooting lockdown drill scene, Kayla's drive to perform however necessary to earn Aiden's love and affection is clear. During the drill, Kayla learns that Aiden

broke up with his girlfriend because she wouldn't send him "naked pictures." This is not a unique situation. Even young boys feel entitled to these pictures: "Among the girls I met, the badgering to send nude photos could be incessant, beginning in middle school" (Orenstein 22). Later during the lockdown drill, which is a practice for in case there is a dangerous person on school grounds, Kayla bravely crawls from her drill hiding spot under her desk to Aiden's. She starts a palpably awkward conversation with her crush. The shot frames the two, with Kayla in focus. Aiden keeps his head down, unamusingly responding to Kayla's small talk. At one point he casually mentions he wishes there was a school shooting because he'd "fuck him up" and wouldn't be a "pussy." (I would dive into the use of the word "pussy" to mean weak in American society, but that is another thesis. I will say that this is the only mention of female genitalia in the film, while blowjobs are a major plot point I discuss later.) Kayla goes along with these toxically masculine comments and gets to the point of the conversation, enticing Aiden with what he broke up with his last girlfriend for lacking. Aiden, head still down, barely acknowledges Kayla until she claims to have accidentally opened a dirty photo of herself. His head shoots up, asking for details: "What was the photo of? [...] Doing what? [...] Can I see it?" With this sudden change in Aiden's attention and attitude, he is showing her what is important for him. Aiden thinks he deserves these details about Kayla's life even though they've barely talked before this. It is likely that Aiden gets these ideas from porn, as "[e]ven if what [porn] they watch is utterly vanilla, they're still learning that women's sexuality exists for the benefit of men" (Orenstein 35). His confidence comes across as if Kayla is expected to share these personal details with him, and Kayla definitely feels this pressure. Kayla has learned that sexuality for females is about performance more than their own pleasure by her last week of eighth grade. She is not alone: "The girls [...] sometimes disconnected from their bodies during sex, watching and evaluating

their encounters like spectators," (Orenstein 37). Kayla, like many teenage girls, feels pressured to perform, but obviously, performance is not the same as pleasure.

The cinematography and editing also shows the shift in Aiden's attention. It begins with a static shot of Kayla crouched beside Aiden's desk, which he is underneath for the lockdown drill. It is an awkward position for an awkward conversation. Then, there is an abrupt cut to Aiden when his interest is peaked. It switches to a shot-reverse-shot sequence with close-ups of Kayla and Aiden to reflect how the conversation has changed from a mostly one-sided, uncomfortable attempt to impress Aiden to one with two equally invested parties. Kayla denies Aiden the opportunity to look at her, actually non-existent, nude photos and says they are only for her future boyfriend, but reassures Aiden, "But I take lots of dirty pictures so that I'll have plenty to send my boyfriend once I have one." It's clear Kayla does not have a plan for how to answer all the questions Aiden asks; her responses are purely reactionary and focused on enticing him. Kayla's nervousness and shame around the conversation is still very apparent. Aiden follows up asking if Kayla gives blowjobs, but before she can answer the lights turn on and the drill is over. She gets scolded for not being at her assigned desk, but before walking back Kayla turns to Aiden: "To answer your question, though, yes I do. I do give them, and I'm really good at it." The whole scene is awkward and embarrassing for Kayla and the viewers. Kayla has never taken dirty pictures or even kissed a boy, but feels the need to act as if she has in order to earn the approval of her crush. This could be read as a realistic representation of girls learning how to navigate heteronormative relationships with boys, but given that this film focuses on her coming of age, it should also focus on her pleasure.

However, instead of learning how to masturbate and please herself, Kayla goes home and Googles "how to give a great blowjob." Note that while female masturbation is not mentioned,

one gross middle school boy is shown hiding under his shirt to masturbate during class in one of the first scenes. Kayla's sexuality in the film is more focused on how to please others. It seems as if Kayla feels like she *has* to learn how to give blowjobs. Prof. April Burns of City University of New York's psychology department found that girls viewed fellatio "like homework: a chore to get done, a skill to master, one on which they expected to be evaluated, possibly publicly [...] Although they took pleasure in a task well done, the pleasure they described was never physical, never located in their own bodies" (Orenstein 55). After a quick Google search, Kayla finds lots of Youtube videos on how to give blowjobs and decides to go to the kitchen and use a banana to practice, to master the skill. With a close-up shot of Kayla lifting the banana to her mouth, the audience can tell how much she is shaking. Everything about sexuality for her is unsure and embarrassing, which is especially interesting in comparison to Aiden's hypermasculine and hypersexualized confidence when approaching his conversation with Kayla. Kayla is trying to learn how to meet Aiden's expectations, however, before she gets to touch her lips to the fruit, her dad walks in. In earlier scenes, we see that "Kayla's single dad [...] is desperate to reach his lonely daughter, even as she is equally determined not to require his care and concern," so this situation is particularly cringe-worthy (Whittle 71). Kayla is frozen, too embarrassed and ashamed to even attempt to hide the banana. She pretends to be getting a snack, but her dad knows she hates bananas. In fact, he wrote it down in his Notes app after she was upset at him for forgetting. She insists she does now and tries to prove it by slowly taking and chewing a bite of the banana, but her facial expression reveals her true feelings. When her dad suggests she does not seem to like it, she spits it out and yells, "Fine! I don't like bananas. Okay?" She throws the banana at her dad and storms out of the kitchen.

Not only does Kayla focus on learning how to please a partner before she learns what she herself wants in a relationship, but also she feels ashamed for exploring any part of her sexuality at all— so much so that she tries to eat a food she despises. This scene emphasizes how much pressure Kayla feels to act in a way she does not want to or does not feel ready to. She tries to eat the banana even though she finds it repulsive, and this could parallel the way she is learning to give blow jobs in order to prove herself. This Aiden plot line is about Kayla's developing sexuality, but even her own exploration values his pleasure over her own. This mirrors the common social expectation that male pleasure matters more than that of females. This is common among young females: "Whether they hoped to attract a boy's interest, sustain it, or placate him, it seemed their partner's happiness was their main concern [when engaging in oral sex]. Boys, incidentally, far and away, said that the number one reason they engaged in oral sex was for physical pleasure" (Orenstein 54). I doubt Aiden is looking up cunninglingus tutorials. Kayla has already been influenced by this ideological pleasure hierarchy before she has even graduated eighth grade. Maybe she, and all of the young girls watching this film, will be able to unlearn these values when they are old enough to escape the dominant conversations around sex and pleasure. One day maybe they will learn that "[t]he body as product [...] is not the same as the body as subject. Nor is learning to be sexually desirable the same as exploring your own desire…" (Orenstein 43). For now, in an American youth culture saturated in Internet tutorials on how to be, Kayla has learned that performance is more important than her own authentic self and pleasure.

Gaslighting is another tool used to keep the hierarchy that values male pleasure above that of females intact. In both of the films discussed thus far, both protagonists are taken advantage of by older men, and the men gaslight them to make the girls think it is for their own

good. This gaslighting makes them question and doubt themselves and think what is happening to them is their own fault. In a world where confidence is about choice, so lack of confidence is your own fault, what does it mean when a man takes away your confidence and blames it on you? In these situations, the men have power over, and even expected entitlement to, their own pleasure, and they take away any sense of the girls' agency.

In a later scene in *Eighth Grade*, Kayla is put in a very pressured, uncomfortable situation without her consent where she slips into typical performance at first, but suddenly decides to stand up for herself and her true wishes. After making friends with Olivia, a senior who showed her around the high school she will attend next year, Kayla is invited to the mall to hang out with her and a few other high school seniors. One of them, Riley, drives a couple of them home, but drops Kayla off last. When it is just the two of them in the car, Riley tells her that it is "Kind of awkward talking when you're in the back seat." Kayla offers to get in the front, but Riley rejects this request. This is when the tension in the scene begins to escalate quickly. He pulls over and turns off the car before climbing in the dimly lit back seat. It is shot so that light reflects off of the outlines of Riley, but most of the time his face is covered by shadows, illuminating the murkiness of the situation and his character. Even in the dark, Kayla is visibly nervous. Riley starts a game of Truth or Dare, and Kayla chooses truth. Riley asks her how far she has gone, and Kayla clearly is not sure what he means but pretends to: "Oh yeah, totally, I know, I was just thinking...trying to remember...like recently or all time?" The horrible uneasiness of Kayla is felt by the audience. After some more uncomfortable conversation, it's Kayla's turn to ask Riley truth or dare. Riley picks dare and does not like Kayla's somewhat childish suggestion to put a coin in his mouth, so he offers up an idea: "Um...I don't know...I could take off my shirt? Is that stupid?" He is clearly pretending to experience the same discomfort Kayla feels, pressuring her

to reassure him. Kayla, breathing heavily and nervously, timidly says no, and it's back to her turn. It is difficult to get across in writing how unbelievably icky this scene makes Kayla and the audience feel. When she plays truth, Riley pressures her, "You're no fun." She apologizes. She is constantly apologizing for not performing to his expectations of her.

During this whole sequence she is looking down, but not in the disinterested way Aiden did at the beginning of the lockdown drill conversation. She is looking down out of extreme discomfort with the situation. After she finally agrees to take a dare, Riley tells Kayla to take her shirt off. She insists she is not comfortable doing that, but Riley keeps pushing, "Do you think *I'm* comfortable right now? [...] Come on, relax, take a deep breath, come on, take your shirt off." He touches her shoulder, and her performance stops. Kayla quickly but more forcefully than before states, "No," and immediately apologizes. On the rest of the ride home, the mood is heart-wrenchingly tense and uncomfortable. She continuously apologizes, but Riley gaslights her. He insists he was trying to help Kayla, so she would not embarrass herself in her future high school hook ups, as if he would have been nicer and more understanding than other guys. Kayla is embarrassed and ashamedly asks Riley not to tell Olivia. This exemplifies her shame around not performing the way she thinks people want her to. In reality, she should have immediately told Olivia how uncomfortable Riley made her, but she does not because of this pressure she feels to perform. She sobs when she is finally safe at home.

This scene not only exemplifies the expectation put on young girls to perform their sexualities rather than focus on their own pleasure, but it emphasizes the pressure put on young girls in situations where boys initiate something the girls are not comfortable with. It gives us a glimpse into the harassment young women face everyday. Kayla did not want to be in that situation with Riley, but she felt the need to go along with it. She valued his experience over

hers, and so did he. This experience was different than the ones with Aiden and the banana. Those were more about performance, and Kayla initiated it. Riley initiated this and turned the pressure all the way up. It was not until Riley crossed a physical boundary that Kayla was able to say no. Regardless of whether she said no or not, it was clear that this uncomfortable situation was not consensual. There was an obvious power dynamic in favor of Riley, as he was Kayla's ride home, four years older than her, and one of Olivia's friends. Kayla is desperate for Olivia's friendship and mentorship, and Riley could see that and these other factors that put him in a position of power and control. He took advantage of it. His pleasure mattered more than that of the eighth grader in the back of his car. This is reflective of the gendered hierarchy of pleasure found dominant ideologies of heterosexual sex and hookups in America (Mintz 9). But mostly, it is representative of the unbelievable amount of pressure young women are put under to perform to male expectations. So many real American girls face this issue, and this makes one question: "...why a young man should *expect* to be sexually satisfied; why a girl not only isn't outraged, but considers it her obligation to comply; why she doesn't think a blow job constitutes 'anything happening'; the pressure young women face in any personal relationship to put others' needs before their own; the potential justification of assault with a chaser of self-blame" (Orenstein 55). Unfortunately, this agonizing scene is not unique to Kayla and Riley.

The power dynamic and gaslighting in this scene are not dissimilar to that between Monroe and Minnie in *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*. Riley claims he was trying to help Kayla, and this presents the abuse as an educational opportunity. However, these lesson plans are distorted when considering the power dynamic and pressure exerted on these young women. Both Monroe and Riley also employ gaslighting to discourage the girls from telling other women in their lives about what has happened between them. Minnie and Kayla are taught to be

ashamed of what has happened to them, even though reaching out to the women in their lives could provide much needed support. These men feel entitled to their bodies, and gaslight them if Minnie or Kayla dare to think differently. These situations reflect real ones:"In sexual encounters, girls, it seemed, were growing more accustomed to coercion and discomfort than, say, orgasm, afraid to say 'no' lest they seem uptight" (71). These men are not focused on Kayla's or Minnie's pleasure. They only care about their own, no matter how sleezy of a way they have to go about getting it: whether through Monroe's girlfriend's 15-year-old daughter or the eighth grader in the back of Riley's car. While this gaslighting and abuse is the sad truth for so many young women, I hope that the future holds higher hopes for young female pleasure, in film and in life.

Eighth Grade does show hope, however, in that it does give Kayla more of a resolution in her romantic pursuits and support from her father. Aiden and Riley are definitely shown in a negative light, but Kayla's father and new romantic interest at the end of the film, Gabe, embrace Kayla for who she is and does not pressure her to perform or be anyone other than who she already is. After the harassment from Riley, Kayla is filled with so much shame she decides to stop filming her vlogs, which her dad has always been so proud of her for making. One evening, she asks her dad if they can burn her sixth grade time capsule shoebox in the backyard, but when he asks what is in the box, she replies "Nothing really, um. Just sort of my hopes and dreams." This is a vulnerable scene, filmed in the dark with the characters lit by the fire. Her father tries to comfort her by putting a hand on her shoulder as she looks down at her feet. She quietly asks, "Do I make you sad?" Her dad passionately insists that she does not and inquires, "Why? Do I seem sad?" Kayla responds that he does not seem sad, but does not reveal more. He asks why she thinks that, and she responds looking down at her feet still: "Sometimes, you know, I think that

when I'm older, you know, maybe I'll have a daughter of my own or something, and… I feel like, you know, if she was like me, um, then being her mom would make me sad all the time." Her dad is stunned and saddened by this evaluation: "You're wrong." He makes her look at him and gives a monologue to convince her of just how wrong she is. "Being your dad makes me so happy, Kayla. [...] It's so easy to love you. It's so easy to be proud of you." By the end of this she is looking down again, as if it is hard to accept that she can be loved like that, so he continues. He tells her how she is so good all on her own and that he did not have to teach her any of the things that make her great. She begins to slightly smile. He was scared when her mom left about whether Kayla would be okay, but by watching her, he learned he did not have to be scared. She finally makes eye contact with him and receives the words: "You make me brave. And if you could just see yourself how I see you, which is how you are, how you really are, how you always have been, I swear to God, you wouldn't be scared either." With that, she hops out of her seat and hugs him on his lap. He wraps his arms around her and in his eyes, he seems to be asking himself, "Did I actually say something right this time?" He closes his eyes and holds his daughter. In this moment, she teaches Kayla that she is worthy all on her own as her most authentic self, no matter how many friends or Instagram likes she has.

Both films in this chapter reflect the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy through pressure on the protagonists to perform for the pleasure of others, but they are able to overcome this by learning to advocate for themselves and their own pleasure. Minnie escapes her traumatic relationships, and her animations allow her to celebrate her sexuality without shame. Kayla learns that she does not need to perform because she already belongs when she is surrounded by the people that love her for who she is. These films represent positive female sexuality without

avoiding the shame, abuse, and gaslighting that are used to strengthen the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy.

Chapter 2: Platonic and Family Discourse on Sex as Sexual Empowerment and Disempowerment

Shame is one of the most powerful tools of the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy, but friends and family can lighten or strengthen its effects on girls based on how they talk about sex. *Booksmart* epitomizes the importance of female friendship for teenage girl confidence. The protagonists are able to talk about everything with each other, including sex and pleasure. In *Pariah*, the protagonist has a strong female friendship as well, but the homophobic and sexual shame from her family nearly outweighs the empowerment she receives from her friend. With sex positive discourse from those closest to them, teenage girls can overcome the dominant narratives that do not value their pleasure.

Female Friendship as Sexual Empowerment in *Booksmart* (Olivia Wilde, 2019)

One element that is unique to many coming of age films in recent years is their discussion of female masturbation. Male masturbation is a common topic among young men in real life and in film. It's such an unashamed topic that there are a spectrum of ways it is represented, from serious to as absurd as a boy using a warm pie to please himself (*American Pie*, Paul Weitz, 1999). For girls, it is not as normal to discuss self-pleasure and even less normal to see it represented in film. It is important to normalize girls exploring their own bodies, so they can be sexually empowered to explore their sexualities with themselves as well as others. Thankfully, young women now have films like *Booksmart* to celebrate not only for their humor, but also for their real talk about female masturbation and sexuality. These conversations can only happen because a safe space has been created by female friendship.

Booksmart, set in Los Angeles County, is about two best friends, Amy and Molly, and their closeness is made clear throughout the film through the two sharing silly moments, hyping each other up, having difficult conversations, and being vulnerable with each other. Despite "...[centering] on nerdy high schoolers, 'Booksmart' lacks the classic glasses-off, hair-down transformation…" and Molly and Amy are "[n]ever the punchlines, [...] treated with genuine interest and a refreshing honesty more often reserved for their male counterparts" (Rao). They spend every minute together. The film follows them on an adventure to fit four years of missed parties into one crazy night before graduation. Additionally, this film represents women that push the mold of what a protagonist can be. Molly is not traditionally skinny, and Amy is a lesbian. Still, they are white, making it easier for the mainstream film to get away with representing more types of bodies and sexualities. Nonetheless, these protagonists are unique for the mainstream, and "...a film like theirs might not have been as viable back in 2009, when the original script was written" (Rao). Together, Molly and Amy have the confidence to be unashamed about the parts of themselves that are outside of the norm.

The opening scenes' sound and mise-en-scene set up the pair as progressive, intelligent, goofy, and tight. Molly is confident. She starts her day and the film with a meditation that the audience hears before the first scene is shown: "Good morning winner. Take a deep breath. *Ahh.* Good. You're ready to dominate this day." The meditation voiceover continues as Molly is shown from behind, sitting on her floor, her Yale pendant hanging in the top left corner of the frame: "You've worked harder than everyone, and that is why you're a champion. You understand that greatness takes sacrifice. Visualize what you still want to achieve, stand atop the mountain of your success, and look down upon everyone who's ever doubted you." Molly falsely believes she is the only one attending Yale next year because she worked hard and sacrificed a

party lifestyle. Now, a close up of Molly's face is shown. "Fuck those losers," the meditation demands, "Fuck them in their stupid fucking faces." A "ding" goes off, and Molly opens her eyes and takes out what appears to be a retainer or whitening tray. The title card appears in bold letters and hip hop blasts. This presents Molly as a bold, confident young woman.

Next, Molly dances and poses out of her apartment and down the stairs towards Amy, who is picking her up for school, honking loudly in a friendly, not angry, way. Amy encourages the silly dance, "Hey! … "Oh shit!" She eventually gets out of her old blue Volvo SUV to join Molly in her dance. "I'm a bad motherfucker," the music proclaims, and these girls seem to reflect this confidence when they are together. While dancing and shouting, the music stops, and the, now more awkward, shouting continues. Then, their dance is part of their conversation. Molly greets, "Missed ya," and Amy replies "I missed you. I missed you so much." "Been one night," Molly reminds, as the two continue their groove on the street and yard in front of Molly's apartment. Amy asks, "Are we gonna go to school, or–" but Molly cuts her off "No. I don't think we are." Amy plays along,"No, we're just gonna stay…" she suddenly shifts to dance towards the car as she finishes her sentence "here." They head to school as shown through a shot of the back of Amy's car, featuring lots of bumper stickers including "Warren 2020," "Life begins at perceptions," "Still a Nasty Woman!," and "I like Big Books and I cannot lie." Just in these first two minutes, so much is revealed about these characters. The girls are obviously close, missing each other after one night of being apart, and they feel safe being silly together, dancing on the street. Also, the meditation and music displays that they are strong and confident. Molly's room decorations and Amy's bumper stickers reveal their intelligence, progressiveness, and feminist ideology. All of these factors, most importantly their friendship, can create a safe space for dialogue around vulnerable topics like sex and masturbation.

The girls' friendship provides a foundation to overcome the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy that is ubiquitous in the scenes of their school. One stereotypical way this hierarchy is reinforced is through slut shaming. Even as a feminist, though, Molly quickly reveals that she is not immune from slut shaming girls. She refers to a female classmate as "Triple A," who was given that nickname for "giving roadside assistance" to multiple guys. The students assume the assistance was blowjobs, but Triple A was the only one who got a nickname from this situation, not any of the boys. Nicknames like these shame girls who are exploring their sexuality. This shame obviously can take away from pleasure. Amy tells Molly not to call her that, and she is actually the only girl not to. Triple A later admits that she expected the boys to call her names, but it hurt when the girls did too. Even an empowered girl like Molly can disempower other girls, but Amy is there to call her out.

Another example of reinforcement of the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy in this film is not calling female genitalia by name. This can be expected in dominant society, but even these feminist best friends rarely call their body parts by their actual names. Erasure of correct names and representations of female genitalia can create discomfort around female pleasure-centric organs (Mintz 33). While vaginas are explicitly referred to, other parts of female genital anatomy are not, with a couple of exceptions. The girls are able to use their friendship as a space where they can talk about their bodies, even in joking ways. Molly mentions vulva at the end of the film to poke fun at Amy's awkward hookup experience. Additionally, Molly gives Amy some words of encouragement to "flick the bean," implicitly referring to the clitoris. Given much of the humor is raunchy, one would expect explicit naming of parts, or at least, if Molly and Amy were male, one could definitely anticipate lots of explicit penis, dick, and balls references. While it is great that Molly and Amy can talk about their bodies in a way that does not silence their most

pleasurable parts, the film still reflects some of the ways this silencing is implicit, especially in a high school setting.

In addition to dialogue, one can find the normalization of male genitalia over that of female's in the mise-en-scene. In the gender-neutral bathroom, Molly is in a stall correcting the grammar of the "your ugly" graffiti to say "you're ugly." Meanwhile, two boys walk in while playing a "Fuck, Marry, Kill" game, where they are given three options, in this case a sex doll, a soccer ball, and Molly, and they must pick which one they will have sex with, which one they will marry, and which one they will kill. Theo decides given the choices, he would kill Molly. "Dude! No," Tanner reacts. They both don't know that Molly is in the stall. Now, Triple A makes an appearance, fixing her hair in the mirror, and joins the conversation. Triple A calls Molly weird, and Tanner admits she's cute, but also insults her. He also adds another drawing of a penis on the wall. This conversation is derogatory enough, but what is more subtle is the significance of phallic graffiti. While the girls may only refer to their genitals as vaginas, it's common that "[a]dolescent penises insist on recognition. Enter any high school and you'll see them scrawled everywhere: on lockers, on notebooks, on desks, on clipboards. Boys cannot seem to restrain themselves from drawing their sexual organs, loud and proud, on any blank surface" (Orenstein 61). Even with individual empowerment, seemingly small differences such as what graphic genitalia illustrations high schoolers are exposed to on a daily basis privilege male knowledge of their own bodies and male pleasure over that of female's.

The film reflects implicit aspects of the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy, but it focuses on Molly and Amy's friendship, which helps them subvert its effects. At the end of the bathroom scene, Molly discovers that these bullies are going on to as good or better opportunities as she is after graduation. She is shocked that even those who partied, had sex, and did not only focus on

school are going to great colleges next year too. This sparks the plot of the film: Molly wants to go to a party with Amy that night, so that they are not the only ones who missed out. After convincing Amy, emphasizing the fact that Amy's crush mentioned the party to her first, the two return to Amy's house to get ready. After they are dressed, their back and forth reemphasizes how close the two are. The two stand behind two open closet doors facing each other, slowly closing them to reveal their outfits. "No," Molly starts. "No," Amy replies. They go back and forth, hyping each other up: "Not acceptable," "This is not okay," "Who allowed you to be this beautiful?," "Who allowed *you* to be this beautiful?," "Who allowed you to take. My breath. Away?," and this continues until the scene cuts to a different one. Now that they have given each other confidence based in the security of their own love and friendship, they are almost ready for their first party.

Before going out, they want to be prepared for every situation. They watch videos on self defense and practice. They pack Molly's purse with all the essentials: hand sanitizer, chapstick, fake college IDs that they made to get into the college library, and mace. They also discuss Amy potentially hooking up with her crush. Interestingly, their discussion on hookups turns to a conversation about self-pleasure. Amy is nervous that she would not know what to do if the girl she is interested in wants to do more than kiss because she does not use her hands to masturbate, so she thinks she would not know how to use them on another vulva and vagina either. Molly is amazed, "You can make yourself come using only your mind? That's like the one thing my mind can't do." Amy is clearly embarrassed and clarifies that she uses "other stuff," and Molly guesses until Amy admits she masturbates with a stuffed panda. "Can we stop talking about it please, for the love of all things!" Amy buries her head in her arms, uncomfortable talking about masturbation even with her best friend. Molly is excited because she thought she knew

everything about Amy, but there are fun surprises to learn about. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me that you have been mounting that tragic panda every single night.” That statement normalizes female masturbation on a regular basis. Molly tries to think of a similar secret to share, but tells a story Amy has already heard several times: “I once tried to masturbate with an electric toothbrush, but I got a horrible UTI.” This conversation about female masturbation in film helps to normalize these conversations off-screen too. Not only that, but this one specifically normalizes pleasure without penetration. By using a stuffed animal to masturbate, Amy is subverting the dominant American structure of sex which values male pleasure, usually through penetration, more than that of the female (Mintz 34). This idea of sex leads many women to think that they are supposed to be able to orgasm through penetration alone, when that is simply not the case (Mintz 34). Given that Molly is a lesbian, in her hookups and sex life she does not have to deal with the same gendered hierarchy of pleasure as women who do sleep with men. Still, this representation of self-pleasure without penetration opens the door for young girls to explore what they find pleasurable outside of solely what is expected of them in sexual performance for male pleasure.

Another feat of this film is the unapologetic nature of its sex-based humor, something that is rare when it comes to films about young women. This film breaks misogynistic themes of buddy films like *Superbad* (Greg Mottola, 2007), which *Booksmart* was compared to, because it focuses on female friendship and features a queer protagonist. Films like these typically utilize raunchy and male body humor, and this film uses the same lighthearted approach with female body humor. In one unique scene, the girls are turned into dolls to represent the trip they are on due to accidentally taking drugs. The claymation and animation in this scene uses body humor in a way other films like this typically don’t: they critique expectations for how a woman’s body

should look based on a Barbie doll's proportions. When the girls notice they are dolls, they are shocked and scared. Amy is dressed as a sexy farmer, with a corn cob in her hand, and Molly is a sexy orthodontist. When doll Amy rises from the floor, she exclaims "Ugh, that hurt! My boobs are too heavy; I have no core!" Her top half makes her fall back down. Molly has better luck standing, but not with any less complaints: "Our legs don't bend. They're twice as long as our torsos. These proportions are insane! Where's my chub?" The way Molly misses her chub, which places her outside of normal beauty standards for women and especially female protagonists, is very important for recognizing body types outside of dominant ideals. While the buddy film has oftentimes represented male protagonists with chub, like Jonah Hill (the brother of Beanie Feldstein who plays Molly) in *Superbad*, female protagonists are very less often granted the space to have a larger waistline. The doll versions of the girls eventually find a mirror and immediately strip to examine their plastic doll bodies. They have no genitals. Their large breasts have no nipples. There is no hair except on their heads. Amy begins to think her doll body is beautiful, but Molly keeps her feminist lens: "No. Don't get sucked in. This is our nightmare, Amy." Amy admits, "I know this is unrealistic and bad for women, but is it bad? Because I feel pretty good." They are smooth, hairless, flexible, thin, and large-breasted– like a doll and maybe even like a porn star. This scene humorously critiques the body ideals girls are socialized to strive for even from a young age.

Booksmart also subverts stereotypes by showing a lesbian relationship on screen and not making it a core part of the movie or a problem to be solved or explained. Amy is a lesbian, but this is not her most-defining characteristic, giving her the privilege that straight characters have of not being defined simply by their sexuality. However, Amy does seem to feel some kind of pressure to prove herself. Molly points out that Amy has been public about her sexuality for a

while, but still has never kissed a girl. Amy "has the classic worries of a never-been-kissed teen" and is not sure if her crush, Ryan, even likes girls, but "[u]nlike several recent movies that follow a gay teen's coming out[...], Amy is not anxious about the fact of her queerness" (Stanford). Still, this pressure to prove herself through sexual experience might explain her boldness in randomly hooking up with a bully, named Hope, in the bathroom at a party. After arguing with Hope about being mean, the two get close, and Amy suddenly and forcefully kisses her. Hope is surprised, but the two continue making out. Eventually, Amy tries to finger her, but accidentally puts her fingers in Hope's asshole instead of vagina. After this embarrassing mistake, the situation gets worse. Amy drunkenly vomits on Hope. Showing Amy's first hookup is also crucial for representation of lesbian sex that is not simply for audience pleasure. It shows the awkwardness of the situation and the ways it can go wrong.

It's also important to notice the lack of shame Amy and Molly have around masturbating and sexuality, and the lack of shame, especially Molly, has about talking about it. Their friendship is foundational to this vulnerability. Kayla in *Eighth Grade* lacked this strong female companionship that could have helped her relieve some of her embarrassment. Before the party, Amy turns to Molly for hookup advice, unlike Kayla who goes to the Internet for almost everything including sexual tips. Still, Molly is straight and has little hookup experience too. In the back of a Lyft on the way to party, awkwardly driven by their principal, Molly rhetorically suggests to Amy's anxieties, "If only there was just a video of people hooking up." Amy is obviously against watching porn, especially in the back of a Lyft. Molly has a different view: "No one would know if you watched one porn, one time. Think of it as a documentary." Porn is definitely not a documentary. Amy still argues, "All of those women are European trafficking victims." Molly views porn as feminist, at least through the popular feminist lens of empowering

women to make their own choices, including the choice to watch porn. She challenges Amy, “I thought you were a sex-positive feminist.” Eventually, Amy agrees to put on headphones and watch “for educational purposes.” The two inquisitively look at the phone screen with their mouths hung open. The phone is almost dead, so the principal/Lyft driver gives them a charger and notices their headphones. “If you want to listen to your music I can just plug it in up here.” Molly and Amy shout in defiance, but it’s too late. A rapid slurping and licking noise comes over the car speakers as Molly and Amy continue yelling “No!” A woman moans, and another says “That’s fucking hot.” They finally unplug the phone and breathe in relief. The principal asks, “Was that Cardi B?” This scene presents the often conflicting ideas different feminists can take when it comes to porn in a humorous way. Still, it is clear that if even Amy is turning to porn for hookup advice, that arguably the majority of teenageres are. Maybe if American sex education was more open-minded and pleasure based, and less heteronormative and STD-based, then they would not have to rely on the Internet and porn for knowing how to hook up with someone they like.

This film is also groundbreaking through its focus on female friendship rather than solely romantic and sexual pursuits. As *The Washington Post* put it, “Friendship is so central to 'Booksmart' that the film's most devastating moment is not when Molly and Amy discover (spoiler alert) that their respective crushes on a handsome slacker and chill skater girl are unrequited, but when the wild night culminates in a fight between the two friends” (Rao). In fact, the most central part of Molly and Amy’s coming of age is this fight where they reveal hidden resentments to each other in a brutally personal and public way. Amy claims Molly forces her to do things she does not want to, and Molly complains that Amy would not stray outside of her comfort zone if it was not for her. With this, Amy reveals that she is not going to Columbia that

fall, but her summer abroad making period products for women in Botswana will be a gap year trip. Molly is devastated not only that the two will not have a synced college schedule, but also that Amy did not feel safe telling her this information. Still, the girls are able to overcome this because of the foundation of trust and vulnerability that their friendship. After the wild night wraps up, Amy winds up taking the fall for the crazy party and spends the night before graduation in jail until Molly finds out and picks her up in the morning. They make up through the glass of the visiting area before heading to graduation and driving through a fence as a dramatic grand entrance to the ceremony. They have proven to their peers that they can have fun too, and their friendship is stronger after healing from the fight.

Molly and Amy are two strong-willed, intelligent, feminist young women whose friendship would not be the focus of a mainstream film even in the early 2000s because of their dorkiness, body shapes, and queerness. More recently, they are celebrated as hilarious protagonists who break boundaries with their platonic love for each other. While the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy is implicitly present in some of the dialogue and mise-en-scene of the film, the girls are able to use their friendship to subvert some of the hierarchy's effects. One instance is the frank conversation they have about non-penetrative masturbation. Another example is the raunchy sex and body humor of the film that is not misogynistic or critical of the protagonists; in fact, it critiques the type of body humor that may have poked fun at Molly's size in another film. The film also subverts the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy by representing a complex lesbian protagonist who is not objectified or feared for her sexuality, and they show a lesbian hookup scene that focuses more on the awkwardness and embarrassment of Amy's first time rather than presenting it as more sexy than it is. These girls are able to overcome shame around taboo topics like masturbation and porn because of their closeness. When their tight bond is threatened by a

heart-breaking argument, the foundation for these types of honest conversations is jeopardized. This fight allows the girls to realize their friendship can overcome heated disputes, and the audience can rest assured that their friendship will remain strong. Molly and Amy will have this companionship to empower and help them continue to overcome shame and dominant patriarchal ideals in their years after graduation.

Family Discourse on Sex and Queerness in *Pariah* (Dee Rees, 2011)

Family discourse on sex has a particularly strong influence in the film *Pariah* (Dee Rees, 2011). Alike is a Black lesbian teen that is a part of a Christian family and community, and her mother constantly forces heteronormative gender roles on her. Throughout the film, Alike performs her gender through fashion in a more feminine way at home and church, but a more masculine way at school and when she goes out. This signifies how she tries to hide her sexuality from her family. Home is not a safe space for Alike to be her true self. These intersecting identities are rare in mainstream film, as "[m]ainstream movie culture, which carefully takes its cues from societal norms, is just catching up" to independent cinema (Stanford). Intricate black queer women characters like Alike can be examined through independent cinema. Still, it is appreciated outside of the indie film bubble: according to "*New York Times* reviewer Stephen Holden[,] [...] it [is] a universal coming-of-age drama" (Roach 201). Plus, it is central to the argument that family discourse can impact their young daughters' sexual empowerment. Alike's family sexually disempowers her through the way they talk about sex.

A dinner table conversation sets the scene for family's discourse around sex to be heteronormative and discouraging. Sharonda, Alike's little sister, is excited about the upcoming school dances and lists off all the boys she is considering going with. Their mother asks Alike

who she is going with, but Alike responds with a disinterested “I’m not going.” There is a strong shift in focus between her mother and Alike, the blurriness reflecting their disconnection. Her mother is mad that Alike does not want to go and begins to argue, and her father tries to calm her down, saying Alike does not have to go. Alike looks to him feeling more reassured, but her mother continues arguing. He shuts her down, mumbling “I don’t like all those boys buzzing around my daughters anyway.” Even as he is more protective of Alike than her mother, he is very heternormative. Her sister smirks, revealing the boys do not do that to Alike anyway. After this snarky comment, there is another shift in focus back to Alike; the blurring of her sister signifying another disconnect due to her subtly homophobic comment. Her dad does not pick up on the homophobia, liking that the boys are not swarming her and suggesting maybe he won’t let Sharonda go to the dances, so they can’t swarm her. Sharonda whines, “Dad!” Alike laughs. The conversation shifts to their mother’s memories, similar to those she insists Alike will miss out on if she does not go to the homecoming dance. The girls start asking her questions about prom. Their mother asks their father, “Are you comfortable with this?” He’s fine until Sharonda gets personal quickly, “Did you have sex at prom?” Their dad stops her, “Hey, hey, hey.” Alike is laughing more now. Sharonda plays with her food and announces, “I’m definitely having sex at prom.” Their father replies, “Then you definitely not going to prom. You’re not having sex for ten more years.” Sharonda is exasperated, “Ten years?” “At least,” he shrugs. That’s early for him, he admits. The father’s gatekeeping of his daughters’ sexualities reinforces the idea that a man is in control of their sexual pleasure, empowering the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy. Their mother is uncomfortable and calls the question they asked her inappropriate even though they are far beyond that now. Sharonda is not done firing back and asks if that’s how old he was when he first had sex. He does not reveal, and their mother stops this talk: “This is not dinner

conversation." The father clearly had sex far before he wants his daughters to, putting an unrealistic, gendered expectation on their sexualities and promoting the patriarchal pleasure hiearchy. These parents are clearly not willing to talk about sex openly with their daughters even when they ask. In what they do communicate, the girls see a disapproving and heteronormative view of sex. This silencing of sex even in what is supposed to be one of the safest places, their home and family, is disheartening to these young girls coming into their sexualities. This scene also sets up the relational differences of Alike and her mom and Alike and her dad seen throughout the film. Alike and her father are closer because he is more understanding and let's her be, but he still heteronormative and denies what she sees as clear signs that she is not straight. Alike and her mother, however, have a very tense and argumentative relationship, one that continues to escalate throughout the film.

Even though Alike dresses more feminine at home, it is not feminine enough for her mother. Her mother is also not pleased with the hyperfeminine nature of Sharonda. Before church one morning, her mother is upset that Alike is not wearing a stereotypically feminine and modest blouse that she picked out for her. She yells upon seeing Alike in a more masculine button down: "You're not going to church in that!" Alike does not see what is wrong with her outfit. When her father appears, she goes to him for defense. "Do what your mother says," he dispassionately verbalizes before even knowing what the argument is about. He wants to be left out of it. "Dad, what's wrong with this outfit?" He doesn't think anything is wrong, but tells her to listen to her mother. The mother insists she won't argue anymore and sends her up to get the blouse. "And put on a skirt," she forcefully adds. Sharonda comes down in the meantime, and upon first glance, her mother chastises, "Too much lip gloss." Sharonda turns around to fix her appearance before she is even in the room for more than two seconds. Their mother is critical of

both of her daughters, just in different ways. This forced control of their appearances disempowers both young women.

While the girls are gone, a conversation between the parents reveals that their mother has been trying to get their father to talk to Alike: “I’m tired of this whole tomboy thing she’s been doing. And Laura? You said that you were going to handle it.” Laura is one of Alike’s closest friends, and Laura is openly a lesbian. Laura is another example of female friendship leading to sexual empowerment. She helps Alike learn about her sexuality, taking her lesbian clubs, buying her a strap on, and helping her dress more like how she wants to. Laura was kicked out of her mother’s house because of her mother’s homophobia. She has lost so much that she is not afraid of being herself anymore. She presents very masculinely even in front of Alike’s mother. Alike’s mother insists that Alike needs a male point of view without knowing, or maybe thinking Alike can change, that Alike does not care what the boys think of her. Alike trudges back into the room in the new blouse. Her father chuckles slightly, “You look beautiful, baby.” Her mother still has critiques: “Tuck your blouse in.” Alike is upset, “This isn't me.” Her mother ignores her, “Tuck it in.” Her father thinks it’s fine out. This is another example of her father defending her, but also staying blissfully ignorant of his daughter’s lesbianism.

Alike’s father’s insistence that his daughter is not gay may come from wanting to protect her from the homophobia he sees in society, but his own heteronormativity is still hurtful. In a scene that takes place in the back of his friend’s convenience store, a masculine presenting woman walks in and his friends start talking about her. His friend explains while gesturing to the woman, “There’s been more of that since they opened that new club across the way.” The club he is referring to is a lesbian club that Alike has been to with Laura. His other friend is more upfront with his homophobia, calling out to her, “Excuse me, miss. Miss! Or should I say sir?

Sir. Sir! Hello?" Alike's father tells him to "chill out," but he continues. The friend who owns the store also tries to get him to stop. He continues harassing her while she is checking out. He explains he was trying to get her attention because "See, I just want to know, how does pussy taste? [...] I just want to know if you just go with women for the taste or is it because you dry, crusty, and ugly? So don't no man want you." He is practically in her face at this point. She smirks before responding, "I can't lie, the pussy do taste good, maybe you should try it sometime. Or better yet, ask your wife how much she like me." With that he begins yelling slurs at her as she leaves. Alike's father and the store owner laugh, "She told you." The harasser tells them he did not expect Alike's father to defend him, "The way your daughter's running around here, bull-dyke…" Alike's father stands up and grabs his shirt ready to defend his daughter. The friend who owns the store separates them before anything physical escalates. Alike's father realizes the homophobia that his daughter could face even from just dressing masculine, and he is protective of her while still viewing her through a heteronormative lens. Even when she tries to talk to him about someone she likes, he immediately assumes the person is a boy, shutting down an opportunity for Alike to come out to him. Even though he may be a safer space than her mother, he does not give her room to be her true self.

Alike's mother is presented as a homophobic, hard parent, but she actually accidentally introduces her to a crush. There is a very intimate mother-daughter scene where Alike does her mother's hair and, if only for a moment, they talk without arguing. The mother reads a woman's magazine, and Alike complains about the women presented, "They look fake." The mother calmly responds, "No, I think they're happy," before looking at something else and admitting, "Now, *that* looks fake." They laugh together. Alike tells her mother she should wear her hair down more often, but her mother explains, "Your father likes it up." She is showing her daughter

how to submit to a man she is in a relationship with, down to how she wears her hair. Alike looks sharply in the mirror and states, “It looks nice down.” Alike’s mother shifts the conversation to Bina, a girl who lives in their neighborhood and goes to Alike’s school. She wants Bina, who she believes is straight because of how she performs her gender, and Alike to be friends so that she stops hanging out with Laura. However, Bina becomes Alike’s main love interest in the film from the moment she kisses Alike to after they have sex, when Bina reveals she does not want anyone to know what happened between them. “I’m not like, *gay* gay.” It’s important to note the sex is not explicitly shown, as “...lesbian sex is highly variable in its degree of provocation given its [mainstream] fetishization…” (San Filippo 75). Bina breaks Alike’s heart, but she has no one to turn to at this moment because her mother and her time with Bina has driven a divide between her and Laura. She is left to her family, who has not ever given Alike room to be herself and talk about her love interests.

Her parents fight throughout the film about her father’s implied affair and Alike’s perceived lesbianism based on how she performs her gender, which stereotypes lesbians as only masculine presenting. This is how her mother missed the possibility that Bina would be interested in Alike. Even though they try to keep their fights private, both daughters can hear the screaming. During one fight, Sharonda joins Alike in her bed and whispers, “Lee, I hope you know, it doesn’t matter to me.” Sharonda reveals that even though she makes fun of Alike for her assumed lesbianism, she can be a safe space for her to be her full self. Another night, Sharonda watches their parents fight from the stairs and tries to stop Alike from storming back in, tired of hearing them argue about her. She tells Sharonda to go upstairs and lock the door. When Alike enters the room again and her father tries to send her away, her mother unabashedly yells, “Your daughter is turning into a damn man right in front of your eyes and you can’t even see it!” They

keep arguing and Alike tries to split them up. Her mother screams at her, “Tell him. Tell him where you hang out. Tell him that your boyfriend is a girlfriend.” Alike tries to explain over the arguing that Laura is not her girlfriend. Her mother continues yelling, “Tell him.” Her father asks, “Tell me what?” She keeps screaming at Alike, “Tell him that you’re a nasty ass dyke.” He yells at her mother and then begs Alike, “No! No! Tell your mother that’s not true.” Alike whimpers, “Dad,” and tries to get him to see, “You already know.” He denies this, “No, you tell your momma it’s just a phase.” Alike insists it is not a phase. Her mother yells at her father as if there was anything that could or should change Alike, “See, you should’ve done something!” Alike is persistent in self-defense against her own parents, “There’s nothing wrong with me.” The parents keep yelling and Alike screams over them that she is gay when her mom gets violent. She pins Alike against the wall and eggs her on to say it again. Alike yells, “I’m lesbian, yeah, I’m a dyke!” Her mother screams and pushes her to the ground and begins punching her. Her father pulls her off of Alike and out of the room. Alike sobs on the floor. Now that she has come out the homophobia is anything but subtle. This disapproval by her parents is disempowering not only to her sexuality, but to her sense of worth.

Alike moves in with Laura, and it is as if her mom has disowned her. Her mom throws away the pink and frilly blouse that she made Alike where to church. At a dinner table scene shot similarly to the first one, Alike is missing but her mom acts like everything is fine. Her dad goes to visit her at Laura’s, but her mom does not. Even though her mom is not accepting, Alike is accepting of herself. Referring to a scene from earlier where her mother tells Alike “God does not make mistakes,” as a way to subtly insist Alike is not gay, Alike tells her father that her mom was right, “God doesn’t make mistakes.” She has come to terms with her sexually and does not think there is anything wrong with her in God’s eyes. Alike goes to her mother’s workplace and

tells her she loves her, but her mom only says back, “I’ll be praying for you.” Thankfully Alike accepts herself, but this rejection from her own mother is damaging. Alike is able to graduate early and go to a funded program for college, escaping her traumatic family situation. Still, this trauma is something she will have to heal from in her sexual life and life in general.

Both of these films exemplify how the ways those closest to these girls talk about sex can directly influence their sexual empowerment. Molly and Amy have a deep friendship that allows for conversations about everything from hookup advice to masturbation techniques. This frankness and vulnerability is sexually empowering. Alike is able to find some security in her best friend, Laura, but her family places her in a disempowering heteronormative box. When she comes out, her mother’s homophobia becomes more explicit. These films reflect that the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy’s effects on young girls can be minimized or exacerbated by the discourse around sex from friends and family.

Chapter 3: Religion Gatekeeping Sexual Empowerment

Religion also presents obstacles for heterosexual teen girls' sexual confidence, and female friends and family can reinforce these limiting messages or help the girls overcome them. Themes of sexual empowerment through masturbation are surprisingly found in films with religious themes as well, but they make sure to show the social and religious structures that frame masturbation, especially female masturbation, as negative or sinful. There is a small discussion of masturbation in the renowned and award-winning coming of age film *Lady Bird*, but more of this topic can be taken on in less critically acclaimed films like *Yes, God, Yes*, which focuses entirely on another young Catholic girl's sexual exploration. While Lady Bird has a female friend to support and laugh with her about masturbation and sex, the protogonist of *Yes, God, Yes* is shamed by her best friend for acting on her sexual urges. Lady Bird also has support from her mother's positive discourse around sex, and with the strong foundation of sex-positive women in her life, Lady Bird is able to declare her right to pleasure. Alice has to search outside of her community, but also eventually finds a sex-positive woman who reassures her that her sexuality is not shameful. These two films showcase how the protagonists can overcome Catholic sexual shame through masturbation and openmindedness from friends, family, and sometimes strangers.

Female Friendship and Family Subverting Religious Sexual Shame in *Lady Bird* (Greta Gerwig, 2017)

Lady Bird is a bold spirit graduating high school in the 2000s who dreams of escaping Sacramento to an East Coast school, despite her mother's wishes. To frame this chapter and section, it is important to recognize the restrictive rules Catholicism places on sexuality.

Masturbation, homosexual acts, and premarital sex of any kind is not allowed, as "[any case] in which sexual expression is sought outside sacramental marriage, the Catholic Church expresses disapproval" (Kellogg Spadt et al. 1609). Lady Bird goes to a Catholic school because it is the safest in the area, but she is depicted as religious, just not as strictly as the Catholic Church may want her to be. For example, she argues with an anti-abortion speaker at her school, but later when she goes to her first college party she asks people if they believe in God and finds it a bit silly when they do not. Still, she does not let her religion get in the way of being accepting towards others. When her first boyfriend, Danny, turns out to be gay, she embraces him him after getting over the initial heartbreak. While Danny is ridden with shame from his religion, Lady Bird gives him reassurance that everything will be okay. This all to say while Lady Bird does practice her religion, she does not closely follow the sex-related rules of the Catholic Church. She empowered to do this by the discourse her friends and family have about sex.

The masturbation discussion scene in *Lady Bird* begins with a close up of a Communion wafer bread container, with an image of Jesus on the label. Lady Bird and her best friend, Julie (also played by Beanie Feldstein), are laying side by side with their legs up against the cabinet. They don their Catholic school uniforms and giggle as they share the techniques they use to masturbate, without actually saying the word for the audience to hear. With their backs on the floor, munching on the wafers, they are framed by a medium close-up from above. Lady Bird laughs and explains: "In the tub, I scoot myself under, just like this now, like this, and then the water just– *whoop*." She gestures her arms down to illustrate the water coming from the faucet onto her. Cackling, Julie joins her in making the motion– "*Schwoop*." Julie laughs, "You're so gross." Lady Bird has been doing that since she was a toddler. She figured out it felt good, and what is wrong with feeling good? Julie admits, "I use– I take the showerhead–." Before she

finishes, Lady Bird interjects, “Oh my god,” and snickers. “It’s embarrassing I use that.” As they continue, they discuss the intensity of their tools as Lady Bird wonders about how it feels to have a penis in there, but their conversation is cut off by an angry classmate who barges in and forcefully reminds them, “You’re not supposed to eat the wafers.” The two being able to discuss and laugh off the awkwardness around masturbation while eating Communion wafers creates a humorous lens to view discussion of mastubation among teenage Catholic women. The strong foundation of female friendship allows space for those conversations, as seen in *Booksmart*. Their friendship allows them to subvert the shame that their religion places on them for masturbating.

Lady Bird also finds support for her sexuality in her home. In a later scene, Lady Bird is shown looking in a yearbook for her crush, Kyle, and then there is a shot of her feet on either side of a running bath faucet. When she finishes the mother joins her in the bathroom to get ready. The mother-daughter relationship in *Lady Bird* is one of the main plot lines in the film, and despite their complicated relationship, *Lady Bird* is able to come to her mom to ask about sex. The discourse in her family around sex is an empowering one, and it emphasizes the closeness that the mother and daughter have to be able to have these conversations.

In this intimate scene in the bathroom, Lady Bird’s mother gets ready in the mirror while Lady Bird lingers awkwardly, wrapped in a towel from her bath. With her arms folded across her chest, she slowly asks her mother, “When do you think is a normal time to have sex?” Her mother replies quickly with another question: “You’re having sex?” After Lady Bird reassures her that she is not, her mother makes eye contact with her through the mirror and speaks as she forms her answer. “Umm… college is good. I think college, and use protection like we talked about.” Lady Bird nods confidently, signifying this is a conversation she is familiar with.

"Okay," she responds. They nod at each other and offer tight lipped smiles before breaking their eye contact and changing subjects.

The fact that this is not the only conversation that have had about sex and the way Lady Bird feels like she is able to ask her mom about these questions, show that there is a trusting relationship between the mother and Lady Bird. Despite popular belief, many kids want to know more about sex from their parents (Orenstein 235). Lady Bird's mother's multiple talks with her daughter about sex reflect a reassuring idea that there does not need to be just one daunting sex talk. The mother is consistent with her thoughts on sex as well, even though they go against the ideas of the Catholic school Lady Bird attends. Lady Bird's brother has a girlfriend, Shelly, who lives in their house because her parents kicked her out for having premarital sex. Seeing her mom's kindness towards Shelly reinforces this idea that premarital sex is okay and not something to be ashamed of in her house. The conversation in the bathroom as well as the others referred to have laid a foundation of trust that Lady Bird is able to fall back on when she has a disappointing first experience with intercourse.

Thinking that her boyfriend, Kyle, had also never had sex, Lady Bird is excited to share this first time experience with him. While making out, she whispers, "I'm ready." After clarifying that she means ready to have sex, he gives a dispassionate "Oh, okay. Great." He gets a condom from his nightstand and lays beneath her after putting it on. Without warning he puts his penis inside her, shown through Lady Bird's suddenly shocked face and gasp, "Oh." She realizes it has begun and awkwardly chuckles and touches his face. He asks if she is okay, and she assures him she is and begins kissing him. Lady Bird moans softly and grinds her hips for a few seconds, then Kyle removes his hands from her back and lifts them in almost a praise motion and moans. Lady Bird looks at him, puzzled and disappointed, and asks if he is done. He is. She

apologizes for asking because she was confused. Her nose starts bleeding and she is sorry again. Even though Lady Bird said she was ready to have sex, this first time experience of consenual interocurse shows that "affirmative consent [...] provides no guarantee of pleasure or meaning" (Meek 113). This scene shows how the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy is perpetuated in teenage heterosexual intercourse. It ends when the guy orgasms, and it does not matter if the girl does. Other films might suggest that a girl should be able to get off from a few minutes of pounding, but this expectation is unrealistic. Lady Bird's disappointment is a more likely occurrence.

Afterwards, they have off-sync pillow talk. Lady Bird is making conversation and jokes that Kyle either does not understand or is too cool for. When Lady Bird brings up how they "deflowered" each other, he still is not playing along. She apologizes again. Kyle admits he has a had sex with maybe six people; he cannot even remember. When Lady Bird confronts him for lying about never having sex, he gaslights her and says he did not say that. He goes even further to say he has not lied in two years. When she is getting more explicitly upset and sits on the edge of his bed, he joins her and asks "Why are you getting so moody?" in a tone that seems like he is trying to console her back to her previous passiveness when he finished in one minute. "I just had a whole experience that was wrong." Lady Bird is clearly feeling some kind of guilt and anger, but Kyle does not believe it is his fault: "Look, you're deciding to be upset." She fires back, "I *am* upset." "Because you're deciding to be," Kyle insists. The argument persists. Lady Bird wanted her first time to be special, but Kyle does not understand. "Why? You're going to have so much unspecial sex in your life." Lady Bird now yells in his face, "I was on top. Who the fuck is on top their first time?" He continues to belittle her emotions, bringing up the civilian deaths from the Iraq War, but she is not having it. "Shut up!" Lady Bird being open and showing intense emotion in this argument is groundbreaking. She insisted Kyle understood that she was

not happy with the sex they had, which is rare, especially for young women to do, in film. Eventually he climbs back to the top of his bed and starts reading again. Lady Bird, arms still crossed over her chest on the edge of the bed, looks back and timidly asks, “Are we still going to Prom together?” Kyle, indifferent, replies, “Sure.” Even though she just had this unpleasant experience with Kyle, this question shows that Lady Bird cares about how her relationship looks to other people. She wants to have a date to Prom, even if it is the guy who gaslit her right after having sex with her. When Lady Bird’s mom picks her up she cries in the car.

Lady Bird’s mom almost immediately senses something is wrong before a single tear leaves her eye. Her mom asks if she is okay, she shakes her head, and the water works start. She leans into her mother’s arms across the car console for comfort. Her mom hugs her and repeats, “It’s okay.” After a few moments, her mother suggests they do their “favorite Sunday activity.” Lady Bird nods and wipes her tears, forcing a soft smile. The following scene is a montage of Lady Bird and her mother wandering around different open houses in the rich neighborhoods of Sacramento. They smile and chat, walking around and sitting down to look out kitchen windows. They point to different parts of the houses they like. It’s a nostalgic, soothing scene that seems to lift Lady Bird’s spirits. The security Lady Bird finds in her relationship with her mother, even though towards the end of the film it does not seem as secure, helps her feel more secure in her sexual exploration and able to move on when it is not all she had hoped for.

Kyle is part of a popular crowd that Lady Bird joins and ditches her best friend, Julie, for. On Prom night, Kyle, Lady Bird, and a couple of their friends are on the way to Prom when everyone but Lady Bird decides they do not want to go. Lady Bird discovers these people are not as fun as she thought. They feel too cool for Prom, but Lady Bird has been dreaming about this night for a long time. She has them drop her off Julie’s house, where she finds her crying on the

couch. The two make up and then have the best time together dancing and acting goofy at Prom. This reconciliation allows Lady Bird a safe space again to talk about her experiences. She is able to laugh about having sex with Kyle and admits she likes dry-humping better. This disrupts the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy by exposing that the act that got Kyle off is not what Lady Bird prefers. In Lady Bird's religion's case too, marital intercourse for procreation was the only type of sex endorsed by the Catholic church for centuries, so she is also overcoming Catholicism's limits on the types of sex she can have. This emphasizes the affordances of these types of films to "challenge representational and ideological norms around sex and sexuality [...] [and] transform inveterate cultural scripts" (San Filippo 34). Lady Bird shows young women that they do not have to enjoy bad consensual intercourse just because that is the dominant form of sex they have heard about and seen in our culture and media.

At the end of the film, Lady Bird's mother is not on speaking terms with her because she secretly applied and got into Columbia. She moves across the country to New York before her mother forgives her. At her first college party, Lady Bird has a disappointing night out that lands her drunk in a hospital. The next morning, she heads to a Catholic church and emotionally listens to the choir before stepping outside to make a phone call. She leaves a voicemail for her mother that concludes with love and gratitude for her. Even though Lady Bird's beliefs sometimes conflict with her mother and the Church, she turns back to them for support. In terms of sex and pleasure, she has a strong foundation of positive discourse about it with her mother and best friend that empowers her to subvert any shame that the Church's strict rules impose on her. The Church supports the patriarchal pleasure hierachy through these rules that limit sex to marital intercourse because intercourse gets men, not women, most reliably to orgasm. Lady Bird is lucky, but other young Catholic girls, like Alice in *Yes, God, Yes*, do not have this sex positivity

among family or friends. Without anything to counter its shame, religion disempowers young female sexuality.

Discovering Sexuality in a Religious Bubble in *Yes, God, Yes* (Karen Maine, 2019)

Bluegrass Christian music and several quick shots of a 2000s Midwest Catholic school introduces the audience to *Yes, God, Yes*. There is a fountain of a woman assumed to be the Virgin Mary, a crucifiction of Jesus statue hanging on a gymnasium wall next to an American flag, a poster that reads "Sexual Abstinence: Choosing to wait," and a flyer that reads on top of a smiley face "We're Pro-Life." Then, Alice is introduced, nervously preparing to walk by the teacher that just got students in trouble for not wearing a belt, chewing gum, and having a skirt over 2.5 inches above the knee (she pulled out a ruler and measured). This regulation of girls' clothes and modesty in school as a means to protect boys from their own sexualities is a way of privileging the male experience by controlling females. Alice greets her with a timid "Morning, Mrs. Veda," and Mrs. Veda asks her to do the honor of serving as gift-bearer at school mass again. It may surprise someone who did not read the Netflix description before watching that this is a film largely about female masturbation. The director, Karen Maine, wants audiences to grow more comfortable with female pleasure: "And not just self pleasure, but expecting it from their partners [...] I think it would be good if women were told at a younger age to expect pleasure, and the same thing that men are told and have been told for a long time about sex" (Tauer). She adds that "...it's a male-dominated world and even young women know men's bodies better their own at that point" (Tauer). Young Catholic girls deserve pleasure just as much as anyone else, but as seen in this film, their religion tries to gatekeep them from their sexualities and bodies.

Soon after the start of the film, Alice is in what seems to be a sexual education class, but it's actually called Morality. The scene is so cringe-worthy that one would think it is exaggerated, but the director, "Maine, who grew up in the Midwest, approximates that around 80 percent of the film is autobiographical, including specific lines culled from her sex-ed classes from high school" (Tauer). Projected on the screen in big letters is "SEXUALITY," above a picture of a light switch with "MEN" below it next to a complicated control board with "WOMEN" below that. In the case that a boy and a girl did hookup, or if a girl's skirt was too short and a boy got a boner in class, this analogy blames the girl for the sinful act because it is not the man's fault he gets turned on so easily. This reinforces the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy and also implies the difference in men's and women's sexualities are distinct, when in reality there is as much variance within male and female sexualities as between them (Nagoski 35). The Priest teaching the class explains that "God created sex with boundaries, and for a purpose." The boundary being marriage and the purpose being to have children. No pleasure involved. "Any sex outside of one man, one woman, one marriage is against God's plan," the Priest preaches. One brave young man hesitantly asks, "Um, what about sex with yourself?" There are quiet giggles in the class. The Priest answers with a question: "Can you create children from sex with yourself?" Masturbation and sex before marriage are deemed sinful must be avoided "or else it is damnation for all eternity." These are hefty stakes for teenagers coming into their sexualities. Additionally, it promotes one type of sex: intercourse. As previously discussed, this is the type of sex that gets males most reliably to orgasm, but not most women. This is religious privileging of the male experience.

After class, Alice asks her best friend, Laura, if she knew masturbation was a sin. She is not met with sympathy; Laura is repulsed, "Ew. Of course. Why?" Laura shames Alice for

making her rewind *Titanic* to watch the car scene repeatedly because it's "probably also a sin." Alice claims she just could not hear what the whispers said, obviously playing off any possibility that she could have been aroused by the scene and wanted to watch it again. Laura is not convinced because it's a hookup scene, but she has shifted from shaming to making fun, smiling at Alice's attempt to hide her real feelings. These first five minutes set up the very religious environment that is Alice's world, and unlike Lady Bird, she has no escape from it even with her best friend.

Her exposure to sex does not only come from *Titanic*, but also the Internet. However, instead of the late 2010s' Youtube sex education seen in *Eighth Grade*, the technology of the early 2000s limits Alice to AOL. A random stranger on AOL she plays in trivia messages her unsolicited nude photos of him and his wife together and eventually asks if Alice, after she tells him she is 22, wants to "cyber." She does not seem to know what this means but agrees. He starts: "I take ur panties off with my teeth… ur soaking wet." Alice clearly does not know much, if anything, about sex or her own body. She whispers to herself in confusion, "Wet?" She naively messages back, "I take off your boxers. You're wet too." Things escalate quickly; he replies, "I slam all 10 inches inside you." Then, "R U touching yourself?" Alice seems shocked and confused, but curious. She scrolls up to the nude photos of him and his wife and sticks her hand down her school uniform skirt. She makes determined faces as she tries to figure out how to touch herself until she is startled by her mom calling her for dinner. She yanks her hand out of her skirt and slams the power button to turn the computer off. The next day, she does not admit to this in Confession, which she attends through her school regularly to "...privately [describe] the sinful behavior(s) to [the Priest], expresses sincere desire for God's forgiveness, does penance for sin(s); is absolved of sin(s), and asks for grace to refrain from sinning in the future" (Kellogg

Spadt et al. 1609). This goal is to allow room for Catholics to make mistakes, as "confession is an activity that provides for human deviations from that morality and supports its members as they strive to lead virtuous lives" (Kellogg Spadt et al. 1609). Confession is supposed to allow her to repent for her sins, but she must feel that this is too sinful of an act to confess. Perhaps she does not want God's forgiveness, or maybe she thinks she does not deserve it.

At a weekend Catholic camp where Alice isn't allowed to have her phone but sneakily keeps it, she finds that her old Nokia phone's vibrations are good for more than notifications when her phone is silenced. Playing Snake with her phone balanced on her legs, Alice is intrigued by the vibration of the phone on her body. She lays the phone down between her legs and makes it vibrate. Her eyebrows and mouth lift as she breathes in pleasure. After a shot to the crucifiction decoration on her wall, she closes her eyes again. Even in a space where sexuality is deemed sinful, Alice finds ways to explore hers. Still, she has shame, and her friends within her church community are not going to lift it for her.

In another Confession scene, this time at the camp, the Priest asks Alice if feeling turned on has gotten in the way of her relationship with Jesus. Alice looks down in shame, without answering. The two are sitting far apart in chairs facing each other, and the scene is filmed with shot reverse shots to frame the conversation. The Priest asks Alice if she has ever been turned on. Looking down, lips pursed, she nods. "And did you take any action when you had that feeling?" Still gazing at her lap, she shakes her head no. The Priest does not believe her: "You didn't take any action?" She looks off to the side and finally glances at him before she speaks quietly, "No." He then asks about a rumor that has been going around about her and her classmate, Wade. People have been saying that she "tossed Wade's salad," or engaged in mouth to anus sex with him. Looking down again, she denies this more confidently, saying someone made it up. The

Priest asks her to be honest, still not believing her. He is blaming her for a sexual act between two people, not just her, and actually, not between anyone. It is simply a rumor. By shaming her for hers and Wade's rumored sexual activity, he is belittling the female experience and privileging a male one. She boroughs her eyebrows and glares at him, and the scene ends.

This shows Alice start to grapple with her own beliefs versus the beliefs of her religion. She lies to the Priest about not taking action, because she has masturbated in response to her desire. She might feel the religious pressure of it being a sinful act, but not enough to repent in Confession. The Priest believing the rumor and pressuring her about Wade also pushes her closer to the edge. She is obviously angry that the rumor was even being discussed. This Priest pressuring her to answer questions about her maturing sexuality, prepared to shame her if she gave the wrong responses, is a form of gatekeeping her own sexual exploration and pleasure. He is the one who teaches her sex is a sin and has the upper hand in the power dynamic between them as the Priest of her school. A man teaching these young girls that they are to blame for their own sinful sexualities in addition to all the boys' sexualities is another example of how this Priest reinforces the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy. Since she has grown up in an environment like the one displayed at her school and at this camp while she develops into a sexually mature being, it is safe to assume she has internalized some of these damaging, shameful messages around sex and her own body. Alice shows bravery by masturbating in other scenes and tapping into her sexuality, forcing her to confront the beliefs of her community.

After being caught for keeping her cell phone, Alice's punishment is to clean the cafeteria, where she gets creative with her self-pleasure. While mopping the kitchen, she is distracted when out the window she sees two camp counselors making out. One of them is her camp counselor who took her phone away and tattled on her to the Priest. She pauses her chores,

resting on the mop handle between her legs. The scene gets spicier when most of the girl's head goes below the frame and the boy unbuttons his pants and leans his head back on the tree, breathing heavily. Alice squints her eyes to try to see better and figure out what they're doing. She realizes that her counselor is giving the boy a blow job, and glances down at the mop handle she is holding between her legs. She moves it closer to where the legs of her jeans meet and begins to grind on the wooden handle, the music intensifying. She closes her eyes and breathes heavily too, sometimes glancing back at the action outside of the window. When one of the nuns comes into the kitchen, Alice swiftly pulls the mop out from under her and starts on the floors again. This representation of so much young female masturbation that is for the purpose of the masturbator's pleasure, not the audience's, is rare in film. In this way, the film promotes "the radical practice of vulnerable viewing as a route to ensuring advocacy for and openness to challenging material and complex ideas concerning sex and sexuality" (San Filippo 44). Young women have sexualities as much as young men do, but representations of this in film heavily favor the young men. Films like *Yes, God, Yes* are changing the game. Still, it is utterly real about the lack of support some women find from their friends who are stuck in dominant patriarchal ideas about sex and pleasure. While Alice may be coming to terms with her sexuality that does not fit the perfect Catholic girl standard, not all young women are able to overcome the religious gatekeeping of sexuality.

When Alice tries to tell her best friend about the blow job she witnessed, Laura does not believe her, and asks why she keeps making things up, betting that Alice did toss Wade's salad. "You want attention," Laura stings Alice. Laura later admits that she is "sick of constantly feeling embarrassed for being friends with a pervy psycho." Alice's best friend calls her this, based on information she has assumed about Alice and because of Alice's interest in the earlier

mentioned *Titanic* scene. Alice has no safe space in her community to healthily explore her developing sexual interest without shame. She lacks the female friendship empowerment that Molly and Amy have, and her sexuality is burdened by her religious shame.

Another key moment in Alice forming her own beliefs is when she catches her Priest watching porn in his office. This shapes how she views the powers that tell her sex is sinful. In the last Confession scene, Alice decides to confront his hypocrisy. After confessing to talking back to her parents and not doing her chores, the Priest, seeming almost annoyed, asks, "Is that it?" Alice makes direct eye contact with him and confidently replies, "No." The Priest is intrigued and folds his hands in his lap, ready to listen, when she explains it is something that happened on the retreat. Making eye contact still, Alice smirks, and announces, "I watched people having sex." The Priest looks concerned and too startled to speak. He starts and then stops before he lets any words out multiple times before finally saying, "All right," but Alice cuts him off: "It was a video." The Priest shifts his gaze back at Alice as she begins to describe the porn that Priest was watching when Alice saw. She defiantly holds her glare directly into his eyes. When the Priest realizes what she is describing, he looks down in shame, similarly how Alice did in Confession scenes where he made her feel guilty for her sexuality. "And I did it even though I knew it was a sin." She glances down then back up with sarcastic, lifted brows and asks, "Will God still forgive me?" Without holding eye contact, the Priest replies, "That's between you and God." It's hard to say if the Priest was ashamed because he too suffers from the religious guilt placed on sexuality or if he is simply upset he was caught. Either way, Alice has learned that the people in power have sexualities outside of the boundaries of Morality class. She feels unashamed enough to go home from school that evening and watch her favorite scene in *Titanic*. She fervently sticks her hand down her skirt, then notices a handheld massager off to the side.

She presses a button, and it lights up and vibrates. She moves it below the frame and her face shows surprising pleasure. Through the retreat that was trying to keep her from her sexuality, she seems to have become more comfortable with her own. Admittedly though, a more influential part of the retreat for Alice happens when she runs away from the campsite and meets new people.

One aspect of what helps her become more accepting of having her own views about sexuality is meeting people outside of her Catholic community. Her final straw is pulled when she kisses her crush, who shames her for giving him a boner. He reinforces the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy by removing any blame from himself and placing it on Alice. After this, she flees the camp and walks until she finds Gina's Bar down the street. Based on the pride flag on the table and there only being women in the bar, the audience can tell it is a lesbian bar. This is definitely outside of Alice's typical crowd. She sits down and feigns confidence, ordering a wine cooler without making eye contact except for a glance up when she ends her request with "please." The bartender looks at a woman who is a couple of seats down from Alice, and the woman glances at Alice before responding to the bartender with a nod. Alice is served a pink drink in a glass bottle that she chugs half of when she first picks it up. The woman at the bar tries to talk to her, "Rough day?" Alice gazes at her then looks back down at the table, without responding. The woman tries again, "You from that Catholic youth retreat down the road?" Alice tries to deny this, but her sweatshirt with the retreat logo reveals her. "So what's it like over there?" Alice chugs her drink again in response to this question. The woman tells Alice she used to be Catholic and went to Catholic school for 12 years. Alice asks, confused, "You're not anymore?" The woman responds with an exasperated "No." Alice wants to know why. She lists a few reasons, including sex and women, and claims there are a lot more. The woman admits,

"But I remember being your age and just being scared shitless that I was going to wind up in hell." Alice is now fully engaged in the conversation: "Really? For what?" The woman says for everything from cheating on her homework to eating gumdrops. Alice laughs, then looks down before admitting, "I thought I was gonna go to hell for rewinding *Titanic* back to the sex scene three times." In this way, the fear of hell is sexually disempowering. Now the two go back and forth exchanging reasons they thought they were going to go to hell before laughing in disbelief that they ever thought such things. Alice appears revelatory, as if she can finally see the power that Catholicism has had over her shame around sexuality. She shakes her head. At the end of the scene, it is revealed that the woman she has been talking to owns the bar, and she offers to take Alice back to camp because she says, "I don't want any nuns showing up at my bar looking for you." This scene is so influential in the story and to Alice because it bursts the bubble that Alice has been in her whole life. A big part of coming of age in this film is finding out that the world is bigger than the community that Alice has grown up in. People have different ideas about everything, including religion and sex. This scene is liberating for Alice, who now sees that religion has been gatekeeping her from being sexually empowered.

Through these two films, it is clear that Catholicism uses shame, blame, and fear of hell to sexually disempower young women. Lady Bird was able to counteract this with sexual empowerment from her best friend and mother. With this foundation, she was able to claim her right to pleasure when she had a disappointing hookup experience. *Yes, God, Yes* shows us how young Catholic women are controlled and gatekept from their own sexuality because their religion blames them for the sinful effects of men's sexuality as well as their own. Alice was shamed for her sexuality by her best friend, Priest, and crush, but she found liberation by meeting an accepting queer woman outside of her community who presented a different way to

think about religion and sex. Both films shamelessly represent young female masturbation, combatting the double standard that expects teenage boys to masturbate but not girls. Lady Bird's and Alice's knowledge of their own bodies and pleasure helps them subvert the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy that is intensified by religious shame.

Conclusion

These recent coming of age films created from 2011 to 2019 had the opportunity to present authentic female pleasure for girls coming into their sexualities. While they succeed in a lot of ways, they also reflect dominant patterns in our society that value the male experience of sex and pleasure over that of females. *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* does not shame Minnie for her experiences and desires. Still, given the unbalanced power dynamics in her relationships, she is put in the position to please rather than be pleased. Kayla performs as an ideal teenage girl that she thinks will please those around her in *Eighth Grade*, but ultimately, she learns she does not need this performance to belong. Both of these films feature examples of gaslighting that men employ to keep the patriarchal pleasure hierarchy in place.

Looking to female friends and family for answers about their burgeoning sexualities, the protagonists of these films find empowerment and disempowerment. In *Booksmart*, best friends Amy and Molly have established a foundation of trust and connection that allows them to discuss the intimate and awkward details of everything sexual from porn to potential hookups to masturbation. In *Lady Bird*, a similar friendship is valued, but she also is able to find open, unshameful advice from her mother. This support from Lady Bird's friend and mother provides her with the safety to explore her sexuality without shame and subverts the negative impact that her religious school could have on her sexual confidence. Alice in *Yes, God, Yes* faces even more pressure from her Catholic school and church. In stark contrast to the open conversations the girls in *Booksmart* and *Lady Bird* have about self-pleasure, Alice is shamed by her best friend for implying she may not have known masturbation was a sin. Without a friend to turn to with her questions, Alice comes to terms with her developing sexuality through engaging with an open-minded woman outside of her community. In *Pariah*, Alike tries to hide her sexuality from her

family, including her religious mother who ultimately exiles her by the end of the film. Still, Alike is able to accept herself and find empowerment through her friend Laura and her education.

In all these cases, the girls are learning how to be a sexual being as a woman in their communities. Sometimes they are shamed, other times they are safely empowered. The girls may perform to fit certain sexual standards, but many of these norms value male pleasure over that of females. Even in these female-focused stories, this is reflected at times. Still, these recent coming of age films present hope for girls coming into their sexualities through their empowerment by their non-sexual relationships. With these foundational connections, the girls are able to overcome a lot of societal expectations and pressures put on them to please others. These girls learn, at least by the end of their films, that their authentic selves matter, including when it comes to sex and pleasure.

All of these films except for *Eighth Grade* are directed by women, and most of them were written by women. Perhaps this indicates a shift towards more films like these getting financed. With more stories of realistic young female pleasure that is valued reaching the big screen, hopefully this will empower real young women, including those that are BIPOC and queer, to know they deserve pleasure too. While screen time is increasing for queer characters in film, television is still far ahead of cinema in terms of transgender representation (GLAAD). Nonetheless, film is still slowly improving its representations of more diverse female pleasure in the 2020s. *The Half of It* (Alice Wu, 2020) features a Chinese-American queer female protagonist, a refreshing example of young intersectional queerness that was lacking in *Booksmart*'s loveable but white, middle-class Amy. Moving forward, more films need to allow their young female protagonists to demand their pleasure be valued as equally important as

anyone else's. This will teach real girls who are coming of age to recognize what pleasure really looks like.

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