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American Lit and Culture in the 1990s

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The Blonde Welfare Queen and The Teen Maneater: Antifeminist Backlash in *Citizen Ruth* and
Election

Twenty minutes into Alexander Payne's 1999 satirical comedy, *Election*, the camera freezes on the perky, young, conniving Tracy Flick (Reese Witherspoon) in her social studies class. We hear voiceover and see images of her as a beaming young girl. "One thing that's really important to know about me is that I'm an only child," she chirps, as the camera closes in on an images of a little blonde girl posing for a portrait, receiving various awards, dancing at a recital, diving at a swim meet. "So my Mom is really devoted to me, and I love her so much. She wants me to do all the things she wanted to do as a girl but couldn't."

Flick's words are a reproduction of feminist rhetoric, though in this context, the language of feminism is satirized and made comedic and monstrous. At this point, Flick's social studies teacher, Jim McAllister (Matthew Broderick) has already characterized Flick as a sort of monster because of her ambition. Both her own voiceover and McAllister's voiceover describe the affair she had with her other teacher, Dave Novotny (Mark Harelik), an affair that resulted in his firing from his position at the school and cost Novotny his marriage.

Tracy goes on in her voiceover to say that "the pressures women face mean you have to work twice as hard, and you can't let anything or anyone stand in your way," and the film reconfigures her feminist rhetoric as the reason for her power-hungry monstrosity. The fact that Tracy's mother has pushed for her to achieve her goals, to succeed in having a "better life"

characterizes her, early on, as being a product of a second-wave feminist mother. There is a real life analogue to match Tracy's family. A real second-wave feminist writer, Susan Douglas begins the introduction to her book *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism* with an anecdote about her own relationship as a feminist mother to her teenage daughter in the late 1990s, her own desire to bring her daughter into a world with better opportunities than what she had growing up, so Flick's narration echoes this real-life sentiment. Yet *Election* characterizes Tracy Flick's relationship to feminism and its rhetoric as the things that make her dangerously ambitious, so much so that she views her successes as "destiny," and anyone who tries to get in her way (namely, Jim McAllister) as "going against destiny." Tracy is coded, especially in how McAllister speaks about her, to be a monster because of the ambition she has developed from being taught feminist ideals by her own mother. In this way, *Election* satirizes feminist rhetoric itself, and Tracy becomes a monstrous feminist or "maneater" figure. Moreover, the film treats feminism as an evil, showing that its opportunistic language and ideology will ultimately produce dangerously ambitious women, like Tracy.

Election, a film released in the final year of the decade, communicated that women and their private concerns—regarding sexuality, bodily privacy, social and professional mobility—could be satirized in the public forum without that satire being labeled "sexist." Moreover, right-wing counterattacks on feminisms construct feminism itself as the cause of women's suffering, as something which, ironically, contributes to women's disenfranchisement. Susan Faludi, in her discussion of backlashes to feminism, points out that both conservative and "mainstream" media portray "the women's movement...[as] women's own worst enemy." (2)

The backlash to feminism had plenty of material to work with over the course of the 1990s. In that decade, the conversation about workplace harassment, sexual assault, and

patriarchal manipulations of power were already being brought to light with Anita Hill's 1991 testimony in which she accused Supreme Court nominee and to-be Judge, Clarence Thomas, of workplace sexual harassment. As Colin Harrison notes, "Hill's testimony did not prevent Thomas's appointment, but the belligerence of his supporters and their refusal to concede the significance of sexual violence was itself felt to be transformative...it also spurred a rise in the reporting of sexual harassment incidents, which doubled in the next four years." (14-15). The Hill testimony and the feminist responses to it fueled a counter-backlash from the conservative political sphere. Harrison suggests that the "broad range of social changes" (such as the consideration of sexual harassment) in the 1990s "created new anxieties that surfaced in nostalgic reaffirmations of traditional norms of masculinity and femininity" (16). The 1990s, then, were a time of increased reactionary responses, both on the part of liberals and on the part of conservatives. With increased debate, discussion, and awareness about sexual harassment and assault and the genderedness therein came an anxiety that women could use their newfound emancipation as a tactic of manipulation. What if women lied? Or, what if they used their access to power and their sexually-powerful bodies in order to cause others harm?

Several real women became objects of these projected anxieties in the 1990s, Anita Hill being the first figure. The conservative backlash viewpoint was easily able to transform her into a manipulative figure, a "career woman" with unhealthy ambitions. Only a few years later, Monica Lewinsky would be subjected to a similar scrutiny and distortion of character, as soon as her affair with Bill Clinton was revealed to the public. Despite the fact that Lewinsky was a White House intern with clear political ambitions, she has always been characterized as a "man-eater, a praying mantis, or just an immature nymphomaniac" (Berlant and Duggan 205). The figures of Anita Hill and Monica Lewinsky are distorted in the cultural consciousness as

politically-ambitious “career women,” whose sexualities brought disorder to the lives of their male superiors in the workplace. This same anxiety is reflected in the character type of Tracy Flick, whose sexual deviance (sleeping with her teacher) is connected, at least implicitly, to her drive for success. Anxieties surrounding Anita Hill and Monica Lewinsky and the “types” of women they represent arise out of whether their apparent political and social enfranchisement is coming at the cost of the men whose hierarchical power had previously been the status quo.

These public women, and the concerns their images represent about women’s rights and social positioning, are embedded in Alexander Payne’s satirical films *Citizen Ruth* (1996) and the aforementioned, *Election* (1999). Both feature thin, conventionally attractive, white, blonde women in leading roles, and in both cases, much of the comedy arises out of the unexpectedness of having such a beautiful, innocent-seeming woman perform in an “unattractive” or manipulative way. *Citizen Ruth*, Payne’s first film, stars Laura Dern as the titular Ruth, a crass, grotesque addict whose motivations are self-serving and rooted in a desire for immediate gratification and bodily pleasure. She is arrested frequently for her abuse of household products like patio sealant or glue. She unwittingly becomes the figurehead of the abortion debate when she is arrested for her drug use and then discovered to be pregnant while in jail. Ruth then finds herself taken under the wing (through a variety of comedic costume changes and reveals) by pro-life activists and then, after, by pro-choice activists, in what turns into a back-and-forth game of coercion and manipulation by both sides, each of whom have their own political agenda for the symbolism and “message” of Ruth’s pregnancy and what she does with her body. The film, at its core, is a satire on the abortion debate.

Election, in contrast, does not satirize one particular political debate, but rather the structure of American government, campaigns, and (of course) elections. Adapted from the 1998

novel of the same name, a novel that was directly inspired by the 1992 Presidential Election between George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, the film takes place in a Midwestern high school, over the course of a student government election. The primary conflict in the film lies between Jim McAllister and Tracy Flick. McAllister, bitter over Flick's affair with his friend and frustrated by her overt ambition and sense of self satisfaction, decides that she cannot obtain the power of student body presidency and seeks to thwart her efforts in the election, first by convincing a more popular student, Paul Metzler (Chris Klein) to enter the race, and eventually by throwing away ballots in an attempt to rig the election against her (though his attempt is unsuccessful, and results in his own disgrace).

Both Payne films make silly the conflicts in American politics in the 1990s and social representation of women, and, more significantly, both films treat feminism as a movement that leads to selfish, destructive women. While ostensibly the two films satirize these cultural anxieties about women's roles, in their execution they end up reproducing many of these fears, and using the blonde, conventionally attractive protagonists in order to make the stereotypes funny, rather than "serious." The tones of both *Citizen Ruth* and *Election* allows the films to call into question the moral debates regarding private behavior among U.S. citizens, or what Lauren Berlant coins "the intimate public sphere." Both films, in their willingness to frankly and explicitly present sex, clue viewers into a more liberal or progressive perspective, and this is perhaps what allows the two pieces to poke fun at people who are ostensibly marginalized in some way. Yet the attempts to "make fun of all sides" also feeds into a sense that morality debates as a structure are the problem, and that one "side" is never more correct than the other.

Payne's *Citizen Ruth* and *Election* use the symbolic blond woman (a figure of All-Americanness, innocence, and purity) as a comedic strategy for illuminating the hypocrisies in

political morality debates in the first place. While both *Citizen Ruth* and *Election* are satirical films that seem left-leaning in their comedy, they end up reproducing anxieties about women's sexualities and careers. Because of this, both are what Susan Faludi terms "backlash" films ; pieces of art and pop culture that reacted against women's movements at the end of the 20th century, producing an antifeminist "counterassault" (10). While Payne's films may seem to be poking fun at American society in general, the means of their satire is the women. It does not matter what Payne's intentions were in making the film, because, as Faludi points out, "backlash is not an organized movement," but rather a system of varying coded reactions and implications. In fact, backlash in pop culture is effective in changing minds precisely because of the fact that it "appears *not* to be political" (13) so that it is therefore able to lodge internalized fears of women not just inside the minds of men, but inside the minds of women as well.

Both Payne films, then, intentionally or not, present a right-wing "fantasy" of social and political issues in some way: *Citizen Ruth* shows the fantasy of a morally corrupt "welfare queen" (though in this fantasy, she is blonde and white, rather than black, as the stereotype is normally coded), while *Election* presents the fantasy of what Barbara Johnson terms "muteness envy"—male victimization and silencing at the hands of women. In the satirical worlds of both films, in which everyone is caricatured, the ill-will between the conservative and liberal perspectives is chocked up to an issue with political and media structures, rather than an issue of systemic misogynistic hegemony.

The White Welfare Queen in *Citizen Ruth*

Citizen Ruth, while centered around the abortion debate, ends up reproducing a "welfare queen" figure in its main character. The "welfare queen" is a derogatory conservative "political creation" of a woman who takes government resources for her own gain. This figure is almost

always constructed as a black woman, a “single poor African-American mother” (Hancock 31), someone who “[shirks] her duty to carry her part of the load as an American citizen,” someone who “usurps...taxpayers’ money and produces children who will do the same” (39). The welfare queen, then, is a woman whose body is imagined to be tainting and taking from the public, rather than contributing to it. In this way, though *Citizen Ruth*’s titular character is not seen taking welfare checks, she epitomizes many of the fears associated with this figure: she is overly reproductive but will not take care of her children, she instead brings harm into society by bringing in persons that she will not provide for and draining public resources (specifically law enforcement) by consistently committing crimes. At her trial, the judge berates her, reminding her that she has been arrested sixteen times in the past year and a half alone, and that on six different occasions (he remarks sternly), they have provided her substance-abuse treatment in a hospital, instead of jailing her. Ruth’s behavior and consistent disregard for the law is what makes her an enemy of the state, and the film’s title ironic.

In continuing to take from state resources while still failing to comply with the rules of civility that the state puts in place, Ruth fails to be a proper citizen, at least in terms of how citizenship began to be constructed in the final two decades of the 20th century. Lauren Berlant, in her defining of the “intimate public sphere,” points out that ‘80s conservatism made way for “a familial politics of the national future,” (1) in which “citizenship...[is] a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values, especially acts originating in or directed toward the family sphere” (5). While Ruth bears children, she does not provide care for the children, nor does she provide them with a nuclear family structure, so therefore her reproductive behavior runs counter to the American ideals of familial participation. She also fails to live up to expectations of “civility”—she is quick to yell at those who get in her way, even when the

circumstances do not call for it, such as when, on a drive, her ex-boyfriend pulls up next to the side of her car and she screams expletives at him, then demands to be driven away. Later on in the film, as both the pro-choice and the pro-life groups fight to maintain Ruth as a political prop on their side, the anti-abortion advocates bring Ruth's own mother to a protest to try to win her over. Ruth's mother stands on a pedestal and screams into a mic "What if I'd aborted you?" to which Ruth screams back, into a megaphone: "Well, at least I wouldn't have had to suck your boyfriend's cock!"

Ruth's overt willingness to scream, yell, throw fits, curse, be sexually explicit, and even shame herself and her mother (in her allusion to her mother's boyfriend molesting her in the past) is part of what makes her an uncivil figure. "Civility," as Lynn Mie Itagaki describes it, is contingent upon a citizen behaving in a way which are "polite" (19) and which consequently position the civil citizen as behaving in a way that is "roughly equal to other citizens within a political community and society in general" (15). Yet Itagaki also usefully illustrates that this concept of civility, while presented as "colorblind" (22) and even gender-blind, actually has standards which are coded around ideals of performed whiteness. Therefore, there are some groups of people who are framed as being more civil or more "meritorious" than others, "despite their unmeritorious acts" (29). Ruth Stoops is only able to be used as symbol or a "message" for either side of the debate because her appearance as a young, white woman allows her to be perceived, by default, as a civil, polite individual. At the same time, the comedy of Ruth Stoops's chaotic public behavior is the fact that she consistently undermines expectations for what a person with her physical appearance should be doing.

While the welfare queen figure is typically constructed as a black woman, Ruth Stoops is an impulsive, self-serving, "white trash" addict. Much of the tacit comedy of the film arises out

of the fact that she becomes a pro-life poster girl after being arrested and charged with “felony criminal endangerment” of her fetus. We learn from the judge’s sentencing, and from an earlier scene in which Ruth visits her brother, that Ruth has already had four children, none of whom she provides for. The judge orders her to be tried in a superior court, but then suggests privately that if she has an abortion, he will lessen her punishment. The satire arises out of the fact that both the pro-choice and pro-life movements, each ostensibly invested in human life (though with differing interpretations of what constitutes this), will use a woman who has no morals, who instead is “responsible for the degeneracy of America” (36), as a prop for their political message. This positions both pro-life and pro-choice factions as being morally bankrupt. Moreover, Ruth’s blondeness, thinness, and whiteness is what allows her welfare queen behavior to be played for laughs and to come across as essentially inoffensive satire. If she were a black woman, the judge’s proposition for her to “do us all a favor” and get an abortion would resemble too closely actual fear-mongering language constructed around poor black mothers in America. Instead, Payne gets to draw upon this charged language without precisely reproducing the racist coding within the political archetype, therefore using the racist rhetoric for his own purposes.

Still, the public disgust with Ruth, with her drug abuse and her neglect towards her children, can only come across as comedic because of Ruth’s conventionally attractive, white, thin, appearance. Her drug abuse, moreover, is not portrayed in a serious or gritty way. She huffs patio sealants, whip-its, and glue; every time she sniffs another substance, the camera lingers on her cross-eyed face as she cups a paper bag around her nose and mouth and breathes in and out cartoonishly. Her drug abuse is a caricature of a fear projected upon pregnant women. In reality, pregnant addicts are not treated with levity, are instead viewed as people deserving of punishment for their mistreatment of the fetuses they carry. Like the welfare queen figure, the

drug-addicted mother is almost always characterized as an overly-reproductive black woman. The fact that this anxiety—of a woman who is pregnant but who cares more about feeding her addiction than the safety of her child—is repurposed for comedy, but only by putting it into a body that is not “supposed” to be so crass and grotesque. The humor (derived from topics which are usually considered quite serious) arises out of the “surprise” of seeing a conventionally attractive blonde woman act in a way that we perceive as ugly. This sort of “ugly” behavior is usually scapegoated onto other types of women who do not belong to a hierarchical class of femininity—women of color, fat women, elderly women, trans women, for example. Ruth’s disinterest in advocating for either “side” is part of what makes her figure one which contradicts any American dream of improvement. While both sides of the abortion debate seek to determine the direction the country is going, socially, politically, and at the intersections of both, Ruth’s only interest is in the immediate gratification of her bodily desires—to get high, to get fucked. In this way, she becomes a blonde caricature of the typically non-white stereotype figure of the welfare queen.

Equalizing “Both Sides” of the Abortion Debate

After Ruth is jailed in the initial scenes of the film, she confesses the judge’s proposition for her to her cellmates—who just so happen to be the pro-life group, The Baby Savers, arrested for protesting outside an abortion clinic. She is immediately bailed out by Norm Stoney, the husband of Gail Stoney, one of the fervent pro-life arrestees. The Stoneys welcome Ruth into their home and family—on the condition that she not get an abortion, and instead become one of the symbols for their politics. The Stoney’s manipulation of Ruth is explicitly comical in its hypocrisy and their total lack of care for Ruth as a person. They force her to attend a crisis pregnancy center, where the larger-than-life anti-abortion nurse and doctor chortle over her

insistence that she doesn't want a baby, show her tiny models of fetuses, and make her watch a film that compares abortion to the Holocaust. Back in the Stoney household, Norm lecherously peeks at Ruth through her bedroom doorway after saying grace. The film's project is flipped on its head, however, as soon as Diane Siegler, Gail Stoney's fellow pro-life advocate and friend, corners Ruth in a car and reveals herself to be a pro-choice spy. Suddenly, the satire is no longer aimed at one side of the political equation—both the pro-lifers and the pro-choicers are now implicated as manipulators and self-serving schemers.

The moment of reveal is immediately comedic in its nearly cartoonish quality. Diane parks the car she is driving Ruth in and turns to her. "There's something you need to know," she says slowly as Ruth awakes from dozing off. "I'm not exactly who I appear to be," she says, dramatically lowering her speaking voice and ripping off her prim blonde wig and big spectacles. "I'm not a Baby Saver. I work for pro-choice," she goes on. Her hair is now red and pushed back in a windswept, less-feminine style. As Ruth looks to her, dumbfounded, she carries on with her monologue. "You see, Ruth, there's a war on. And I guess you could call me a spy." As she confesses, the camera cuts to Ruth and we see another woman pop up, jump-scare style, in the window behind Ruth. "This is Rachel. She lives here with me," Diane explains. Ruth turns around to make eye contact with the smiling Rachel, inches from her face. She screams and crawls out of her seat to jump out of the car and run away from the two women, who have to chase after her in order to lure her into the house. Ominous background music plays as Ruth stumbles through the lawn, while Diane and Rachel speak to her in calming voices, their hands raised in peace: "It's ok, Ruth," "You're safe now," and "We're on your side." As they corral her, the camera pans back and forth to them from Ruth's perspective, so that we as the audience feel their advancement and narrowing in like we ourselves are being surrounded.

The scene then sharply cuts to Ruth, in a new baby pink shirt, lying on a couch and screaming out in what at first appears to be agony and then becomes orgasmic moaning. The camera cuts to a close up of her foot, which Diane is massaging. “Feel that?” she says sensually. “Uh, yeah, that feels good,” Ruth replies. “That’s your liver,” Diane smiles knowingly. From this point onward, it’s clear that the pro-choice advocates will be torn apart just as much as their pro-life counterparts. The satire is aimed not at one side of the political debate, but rather at the fight itself. Just as Payne’s pro-life characters are larger-than-life caricatures who fulfill many of the stereotypical characteristics a liberal viewer may expect, so to do the pro-choice women match the right-wing, highly conservative backlash idea of a pro-choice person. *Citizen Ruth* effaces the patriarchal underpinnings of the pro-life movement by having the entirety of the Baby Savers collective made up of women. The conflict in the abortion debate, then, is put upon the idea of women controlling other women, rather than men benefitting from this control. In this way, both “sides” of the debate are configured as women hurting other women, and the patriarchal presence is reduced.

Payne’s willingness to attack both sides of the debate in equal measure is what makes *Citizen Ruth* a satire about, Al-Yasha Ilhaam suggests, “moral realism in abortion debates.” In her criticism, Ilhaam agrees that in the film “the two sides of the abortion debate are depicted as interdependent and even united through the shared perspective of moral realism” (33). I agree with the first part of her analysis; Payne certainly characterizes both the pro-life and the pro-choice movements as codependent and followers of both movements as doppelgangers of each other, yet I would like to complicate her sense that the characters share a perspective of moral realism. Both the pro-choice and pro-life characters are debating a question of American

morality, yet in strongly satirizing both sides of the issue, Payne's filmmaking suggests that the morality is truly a cover-up for the self-serving, power-hungry desires of all the characters.

Having Diane literally double as both a pro-life activist and a pro-choice activist has clear metaphorical connotations—activists on both sides of the political debate are the same underneath their external appearance. Even as an imposter pro-life activist, she still participates in all the same behavior that the “real” pro-life activists—she is arrested alongside them for their participation in anti-abortion protesting, so when she ceases to pray for the souls of fetuses, takes off her disguise, and transforms into a militant pro-choice activist, the question is raised: are the people on either side of the abortion debate really that different from each other at all? *Citizen Ruth* suggests the two political sides actually share much in common with one another and that the debate itself is more about external appearance and rhetoric, rather than being about a true morality debate. In this way as well, *Citizen Ruth* perpetuates backlash rhetoric that views women, rather than the patriarchal structure, as the problem behind other women's demises. While the pro-choice characters are meant to be on the “side” that “helps women,” they choose a woman with no morality beyond her self-serving needs and use her for their own self-serving needs. In this way, the film's portrayal of abortion politics draws upon sexist rhetoric which, as Barbara Johnson states, imagines the issue not only of “woman vs. patriarchal state” but instead as “woman vs. woman” (Johnson “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion” 35). The film's satirical backlash is not directed at systems of patriarchy so much as women as enforcers of the control of women's bodies.

Moreover, the pro-choice side is configured as lesbians, who are often constructed as backlash figures, as women who cannot contribute to the public because their sexual behavior will not produce children. Diane and Rachel, the central lesbians of the film, are not merely the

pro-choice representatives, but also women who are queer not only in their sexualities, but also in their spiritualism. Their pro-choice politics then, become linked to what Lauren Berlant terms “nonstandard intimacies” (Berlant “Sex in Public” 559), which separate them from normative society, which is meant to be centered around the nuclear family. In this way, the pro-choice side becomes a caricatured reproduction of conservative anxieties about its being a pseudonym for anti-children and anti-life beliefs. The pro-choice characters’ identities as lesbian feminists feeds into the anxiety that “queerness...[brings] children and childhood to an end” (Edelman 19). Therefore, though the film’s satire also turns toward the overly-perky and hypocritical anti-abortion characters, it still reproduces a conflation of feminism, queerness, and pro-choiceness.

Ilhaam argues that *Citizen Ruth*’s satire prevents the audience from making “easy, familiar allegiances” with either side of the debate, as both the pro-life and pro-choice activists are shown to be manipulative and morally corrupt. This is true, but in its equalizing of both stances, the film ends up ridiculing liberal political ideologies in a way that is greater than its mockery of conservatism. Both Rachel and Diane are configured as stereotypes of progressive, liberal women. They are in a lesbian relationship, and they seem deeply connected to New Age spiritual practices and ideas, such as the earlier moment, when Diane massages Ruth’s foot and speaks as though her entire body can be affected by the massaging. At night, they walk outside and eerily sing to the moon as though it is their mother. Though the pro-choice movement is meant to be related more closely to science, Payne’s characterization of the women as believing in spiritual practices, and the actors’ campy performances of these parts invite the viewer to see the pro-choice community as just as cult-like as the pro-life community was portrayed as being earlier on in the film.

The anti-abortion movement, as Faludi points out, rests upon the patriarchal control of women's bodies, the personification of the fetus, and the dehumanization of the woman carrying the fetus, who becomes a vessel for its livelihood and autonomy. Backlashes to feminism portray women's movements as the reasons for women's suffering, so Payne's equalization of both anti-abortion and pro-choice activists essentially suggests that feminism is as harmful to women as antifeminism is.

Both the pro-life faction of women and the pro-choice faction of women clearly see Ruth as a prop, rather than a person who they sincerely want to help. They drive her around, instruct her where to go, and imply that their support of her is always contingent on her willingness to go along with what they desire. Yet Ruth's struggle throughout the film is her desire to act independently and wholly self-servingly. Ilhaam picks apart Ruth as a figure of morality, writing, "she wants to do her own thing, motivated by her own desires, without any acknowledgment of the wider public implications. Does this mean she is unwittingly practicing a sort of ethical solipsism, creating and living in her own subjective moral universe?" (36) Throughout most of the film Ruth is a laughable character, and even her moments of seemingly sincere vulnerability are consistently undercut by comedy, such as when she weeps on the floor of her jail cell after the judge gives her his ultimatum, only to then be quickly discovered by the Baby Savers, who stare at her blankly and make her suffering consequently come across as funny. Yet by the end of the film, the viewer is clearly positioned to empathize with Ruth, as the camera film her walking away from the crowd that is so obsessed with her as a political symbol that they do not notice her actual person leaving the scene to go her own way. The victorious, orchestral music which accompanies the shot as she walks away from the crowd seems to position Ruth as stepping

away from the debate entirely—she has a miscarriage, so she is not forced to make a decision either way.

Ilhaam frames *Citizen Ruth* as a character study of its protagonist. I disagree with this claim that the film is a character study. The characters are all larger-than-life, Ruth included, and it feels more apt to call the film a study of political positions. Ruth's "choice" at the end to walk away, suggests that both sides are equally manipulative of women's bodies, and that neither side is really offering choice at all. In this way, the film creates a false equivalence between the two "sides" of the debate, positioning both as hurtful to women.

The Man Haunted by His Urges and the Teen Maneater in *Election*

Jim McAllister does not walk away from *Election* unscathed. The film is, in many ways, a representation of his own decay into frenzied madness as he obsesses over Tracy Flick, and the film's willingness to have him suffer and lose his position of authority may mock him, but it also allows Flick to be reconfigured as a femme fatale-esque, maneater figure, ambiguous in her intentions and capable of bringing destruction upon the male protagonist—even as the satirical and comedic tone of the film make us laugh at McAllister's destruction, rather than gape at it in horror. Tracy Flick, then, is a satirized, high school version of a backlash maneater and modern femme fatale figure, seen most explicitly in films such as the Glenn Close vehicle, *Fatal Attraction* (Faludi 3). *Fatal Attraction* concerns Glenn Close's character, Alex, as she becomes obsessed with her affair with the married Dan (Michael Douglas), stalking him and disrupting his life and marriage to his wife, Beth (Anne Archer). Alex's relentless pursuit and obsession with her relationship to Dan results in her nearly destroying his life and harming both his wife and his daughter, though ultimately she is killed off instead. She is the paradigm of a late 20th century backlash film woman, and Tracy Flick's characterization draws upon many of the tropes that

Alex embodies, though in *Election*, Flick's sexuality and obsessive tendencies are played for laughs, because of her teen girl identity. The film's backlash, as well as Tracy's identity as a femme fatale and man-eater are occluded in the satirical comedy, so that the film does not come across as explicitly backlash in its delivery.

James F. Maxfield quotes Mary Ann Doane to characterize the femme fatale as “an articulation of fears surrounding the loss of stability and centrality of the self” (2), and then goes on to elaborate that in all film noir, the “threat of loss of male control” (4) is the key issue, and that the femme fatale, or “fatal woman” as he prefers to label the archetype, is “fatal chiefly to the man's sense of what he is or should be” (5). The issue then, is a crisis of masculinity, and of a fight for control. This is clear in McAllister's voiceover about Tracy early on in the film, when he first introduces us to Flick. He establishes himself in a position of power before introducing her, boasting: “In the twelve years I taught U.S. history, Civics, and Current Events...I was voted Teacher of the Year three times--a school record.” The scene cuts to him in social studies class, asking the class to define the difference between morals and ethics. As students waffle and struggle to respond, Tracy belligerently raises her hand, even as he desperately avoids calling on her. When no one else will answer and he is forced to acknowledge her hand in the air, the camera freezes on Flick in an unflattering, blurred shot, and McAllister's voiceover continues, framing her as an interruptive force to his otherwise baseline success within the school and among the other students. “Tracy Flick. Tracy Flick. I've never met anyone quite like Tracy Flick,” he narrates, in a noir-esque contemplative tone. “Her drive was astonishing. Even scary.”

When McAllister goes on to describe Tracy's affair with Dave Novotny, he frames his issue with the entire event as one of masculine loyalty. Dave was his “best friend” he proclaims in voiceover, a “good guy,” and someone who McAllister perceives “lost everything,” as the

revelation of his affair with a high school student cost him his job and his marriage and forced him to move back in with his parents. Yet a flashback scene to him arguing with Dave makes clear that his concern over Tracy extends beyond concern for the damage done to his friend. In Dave's basement, the two men converse back and forth, and Jim attempts to convince Dave of the wrongdoing of his actions.

JIM: Dave, I'm saying this as your friend. What you're doing is really, really wrong, and you've got to stop.

DAVE: You're not just jealous, are you? I mean, we both used to talk about her--

JIM: That was just talk! Fantasy talk! What are you, nuts? We talk about girls all the time, but it doesn't mean anything. I would never...I mean, I take very seriously our strict moral code. The line you've crossed is...it's illegal and it's immoral.

DAVE: I don't need a lecture on ethics, Jim, okay? I know what--

JIM: I'm not talking about ethics. I'm talking about morals.

Dave's quick line suggests that Jim is envious of his affair with Tracy, because her attractiveness is something they both used to discuss, and that Jim's attraction to her is part of the reason why he is fearful or resentful of her ambition. Tracy, too, is shown to be vaguely aware of the power she may be able to use her sexuality for. She appears to try to manipulate Jim after she receives all the signatures needed to run for student body president. She corners him alone in his office, presents him with her signatures, and flirtatiously suggests that, if she wins the election, they will "be spending a lot more time together," a comment which immediately sends Jim into a frightened panic.

Tracy's flirtation festers in Jim's mind, even as his voiceover tries to convince the audience that he is not attracted to her. He says that he "doesn't blame Tracy for what happened

with Dave,” saying that “Dave was an adult more than twice her age,” but only seconds later, the film cuts to a scene of him lying awake in bed, unable to rest. Tracy’s words echo in his mind again, and we see a close-up of her lips against his ears. “You and I...so close...so intimate...together” she whispers seductively. The lips detachment from her body further dehumanize her and establish her as a threatening (“maneating”) presence, one of McAllister’s nightmares. While he never says aloud that he fears she will seduce him, his ruminations on her lips and words indicate his concern, as does his decision, the next day, to convince Paul Metzler to run for student council president against Tracy.

This sequence of events is what makes clear that Jim’s anxieties about Tracy are not just about how she will lead the high school, but also about how she may manipulate and seduce him in her sheer, selfish, power-hungry ambition. Jim becomes representative of the male anxiety surrounding women in desire of power--that they will contribute to the destruction of patriarchal power structures.

Conflating the Teen Maneater with the Teen Feminist

Tracy Flick is the high school-aged embodiment of masculine anxieties that rose in popularity after the Clinton-Lewinsky affair was made public, as well as some of the anxieties surrounding sexual harassment that arose after Hill’s testimony. Lauren Berlant and Lisa Duggan suggest that Lewinsky “[constituted] a threat to a known and honored order, a menace to sanitized American politics,” and that she even could be construed as a “femme fatale” (204) herself. Embedded in this construction of Lewinsky as a manipulative femme fatale figure are two implicit beliefs: one: that the “order” Lewinsky disrupted with her affair is an order of a monogamous, nuclear family spearheading the country; and two: that Lewinsky, in having an affair with Bill Clinton, somehow disrupted and ruined his life. For Anita Hill, the anxieties were

of a similar ilk—both women’s relationships to the men above them harmed the men’s reputations. These real-life woman could become, then a representation of the backlash archetype of the “career woman” epitomized in *Fatal Attraction*—someone who “seduces and...destroys a...man” (Faludi 125) with her sexuality. In reality, this idea of man’s destruction at the hands of a woman is a fantasy—it imagines that a woman is like a modern siren figure—so beautiful and tempting that she is capable of luring the man in, against his better judgment, and consequently ruining his reputation. This fantasy is also contingent upon the woman not feeling remorse or being damaged after the sexual act, but instead continuing to participate. In terms of *Election*, we see this in Tracy’s action—even after Dave Nvotony has been fired for their affair, she approaches Jim McAllister to flirt with him, and by the end of the film, she is seen entering the car of a politician in D.C., with the implication that she will sleep with him, too, in order to continue climbing a political ladder.

The anxieties about the both the lascivious Lewinsky figure and the accusatory Hill figure are fantasies that only serves to fuel patriarchal power structures. Women like Lewinsky cannot be too close to power, or else their sexuality will end up endangering the men around them, and potentially costing men power. This is manifested in the character of Tracy, whose affair with Dave does actually lose him his job and his social status, and whose presence drives Jim so mad with fear that he, too, loses his job at the school. The real life analogue, Bill Clinton, did not, however, lose his job, and though the scandal did hurt his credibility and does still continue to plague his image, the real victim was and continues to be Lewinsky, who was disgraced, ridiculed, and threatened, in spite of the fact that she was younger, and he was in a position of power over her. *Election* satirizes a version of the Lewinsky figure (or how she was perceived in the public consciousness) in the Flick character, though it preserves a male fantasy

of victimization by having Jim McAllister, the anxious man, lose his position of power in the end.

Tracy Flick becomes the vessel through which the contradictions and flaws Payne portrays in American democracy are made clear. Tracy's feminist rhetoric, then, becomes conflated with power-hungry, self-serving ambition. Her language of ambition and uplift (taken directly from second-wave feminist language) is coded as entitled, and as the source behind selfishness within American politicians. Moreover, Tracy's appearance, and how it interacts with her behavior, contributes to the comedy of the film. Tracy is a perky, blonde, white teen, and her conventionally pretty, "innocent," even desexualized look (she dresses in conservative sweater vests, blouses, and turtlenecks), renders her so that her behavior, both sexual and aggressive, is fodder for laughter, rather than explicit outrage. This is what makes *Election* recognizably satirical—we recognize the "maneater" trope, but rather than presenting as a busty woman (such as Monica Lewinsky), she is a nerdy girl in high school, such an overachiever that she makes pins with her face on them to campaign for her position as student council president.

Tracy's feminism is rendered monstrous in the context of the film, even as McAllister is also characterized as buffoonish. While McAllister's attempts to thwart Tracy are comedic, much of this comedy arises out of the fact that he stoops to immature tactics usually reserved for teenage girls. Moreover, the film constructs Tracy's understanding of American democracy as a system through which she can achieve her own personal goals, rather than a system for serving the public. She volunteers to be on every committee of student government but, as her voiceover chirps "only if she can lead it." Tracy's opportunism is entirely tied to her personal vision of success. As Margaret Hankenson suggests, Tracy uses the "procedure" of democracy as a "cover for her true intentions" (240) of her own personal advancement. Therefore, even as McAllister

acts in ways that are laughable, such as throwing away ballots in an attempt to cost Tracy the election, the film frames his point of view to be more morally sound than Tracy's. Hankenson's analysis points out the embedded sexism within *Election*. McAllister, while still a comic character, at least has the ideals of true democracy behind his actions, while Tracy, the young teen maneater figure (who uses the language of feminist uplift) is ultimately self-serving. Her feminist desire for increased opportunity is what makes her detrimental to the body politic of both the school and, in an implicit, macrocosmic way, the rest of the country. In this way, the film critiques Flick's ambition and its feminist undertones, suggesting that feminism produces a sense of entitlement within the women who reproduce it, as we can see in the fact that "Flick considers her rise to power to be part of her own destiny" (247). Moreover, by the end of the film, Flick is seemingly poised to eat up another man, as she flirtatiously slides into the car and McAllister looks on, infuriated. Though she did not sleep with McAllister, the threat of her sexuality and her ambition is enough to have permanently altered his life, and driven him to extreme heights, even as the film sits within a satirical tone.

Conclusion

Before 2018 was labeled the "Year of the Woman," 1992 received the same title. In both years, this news media introduced the moniker as a blanket way of recognizing the significant changes in representation that took place in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate following sexual harassment scandals that shook the entire nation and ostensibly reinvigorated American women's political participation. In 2018, 102 women were elected to the house and 15 women to the senate, a significant increase from the 24 and 5 women elected to each of those branches of government in 1992. This more recent governmental shift arose largely in response to the 2016 election of Donald Trump, his rebukes of women's rights, and the accusations of sexual assault

against him, along with the accusations against several other politicians and high profile celebrities. The era we are in now, the “Me Too” era, has been heralded as a time when women’s accusations of sexual assault are finally being taken seriously.

Yet the 1990s were also labeled as a time for change, a time when the disenfranchisement and harassment of women was to be taken seriously. *Election* and *Citizen Ruth* make light of highly politicized topics of the decade: the debate over reproductive rights, women’s representation in government, sexual harassment and abuses of power. When interviewed about *Citizen Ruth*, Payne stated very clearly that he was “not delivering a message either for or against abortion” and was instead interested in exploring the comedy in “exploring the comedy in people’s endless ability to be fanatical and selfish” Yet as Emanuel levy points out, the “cartoon feminist” characters are “painted more negatively because their manipulation is hypocritical”-- they pretend to be interested in “empowering Ruth” but in actuality seek merely to use her as a prop for the advancement of feminist ideals (Levy 267-268). Payne’s treatment of pro-choice politics reconfigures the movement, ostensibly about allowing women autonomy over their bodies, as being about the manipulation of women’s choices for the ill-intentioned development of feminist system.

It may have seemed, in 1992, that issues of women’s participation in government were finally coming to a point of lasting change, and this itself may have encouraged Payne to satirize the political topics. Yet as is clear now, the rise of women in politics works in tandem with the rise of antifeminism and backlashes to the feminist political sphere. The question of whether these topics can be made funny, and who, exactly, is being made fun of, will continue to be up in the air. If there are more abortion-satires in the future, or satires about sexual relations between teachers and students, only time will tell if audiences will consume those stories with enthusiasm

and laughter if the protagonists look less like Laura Dern and Reese Witherspoon, and more like the many other types of women who make up the rest of the country, who we do not feel as willing to laugh at.

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