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The Student-Teacher Romance Film Genre: Hollywood's Historical Representation of Abuse of Power

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The Student-Teacher Romance Film Genre:
Hollywood's Historical Representation of Abuse of Power

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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by

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Abstract

Despite vast literature analyzing films that depict romantic and sexual relationships between young students and their teachers, scholarship has yet to explicitly call this category of films and television a genre. The purpose of the present thesis is to define the student-teacher romance film genre and identify patterns that make it up as a means of illuminating the genre's exploration of abuse of power in the classroom. I use a historical-generic methodology and gaze theory as a framework to conduct this analysis. I identify three distinct eras of the genre and analyze films from each time period. The first era (1920s-1960s) defined abuse of power and outlined the parameters of what behavior was and was not acceptable during that time. The second era (1970s-1990s) exploited the sexuality of both female students and teachers. The third era (2000s-2020s) became more aware of the abuse of power; some films called out abuse, while others sensationalized it. I conclude that student-teacher romance is an abuse of power and should be presented as such in film and television.

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Defining the Student-Teacher Romance Film Genre: A Historical-Generic Approach

At a school outing, a group of male professors at an all-girls finishing school discuss their students. Professor Stefan Dominik gazes at his female student, Marie, as she stares back longingly. As the professors discuss the upcoming graduation and differing maturity levels of girls and boys as they finish school, one professor proclaims, “I’ll tell you; schoolgirls are fiendishly clever. They’ll take every advantage of a poor defenseless professor...” (Cummings, 1936, 0:12:38). This quote comes from Irving Cummings’ 1936 film *Girls’ Dormitory*. This film ends with Dr. Dominik proposing marriage to Marie the day after she graduates.

Girls’ Dormitory is one of the earliest motion pictures that fall into the genre of student-teacher romance film in the sound era. Much like the student-teacher romance films that preceded and followed it, *Girls’ Dormitory* minimizes professors’ interpretations of the power they hold and accuses young, female students of abusing their power and taking advantage of professors.

From *The Wild Party* (Arzner, 1929) to *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (Neame, 1969) to *Teachers* (Hiller, 1984), numerous movies and TV shows have depicted romantic and sexual relations between teachers and their teenage students. I grew up seeing this plot device in Hollywood media, and I began to notice how odd it is. Parents are legally required to send their children to school, thus forced to trust the teachers who are responsible for them. Films like *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* (Ross, 1969) depict teachers as kind-hearted role models that push their students to reach their full potential. These motion pictures reassure parents that their children are being safely nurtured by the educational institution in which they spend so much of their young lives. The existence of *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* makes films like *Girls’ Dormitory* all the more confusing. The key questions this research addresses are as follows: Why are there so many

films that turn a safe, socially-sanctioned place into an erotic arena? Why would audiences be interested in watching a relationship that is morally and, in most cases, legally wrong?

My literature review confirms that this phenomenon has yet to be explored to its fullest extent. Some articles analyze individual films and the abuse of power taking place in the relationship (e.g., Goering & Witte, 2017; May, 2009; Weaver, 2009). However, the phenomenon has not been put in a scholarly context to highlight the development of this narrative through history.

As a cinephile myself, I have noticed this phenomenon over time in my consumption of media. Some films depict the student-teacher relationship as a cautionary tale and end with the teacher, a predator, being fired or prosecuted, while others end with the teacher and student getting married. What piques my interest is films that treat these relationships as ‘forbidden fruit’ for the audience to root for or films that treat the student as the predator and the teacher as the prey. In my research, I identify periods of time based on the number of films in the genre that existed, the popularity of the genre during a period, and the cultural influences that would impact the productions such as wars, economic depression, or the sexual revolution.

Due to the visible pattern of this narrative and the extreme examples that pop up every few years, it is necessary to explore this category of films in a historical-generic approach. I define the student-teacher romance film as a genre in film and television characterized as a fictional work depicting a romantic and/or sexual relationship between a teacher and his or her current student; this relationship may be a narrative component rather than the central plot.

This type of film is important because it focuses on the socially-sanctioned environment of the classroom and introduces a relationship that inherently involves an abuse of power. Romantic and sexual relationships between students and teachers are controversial, to say the

least. In most states, these relationships are considered statutory rape. Even if it is not illegal, many schools have policies against teachers engaging with students in this fashion. Some people believe that if both parties are consenting, the relationship should not be regulated by legal or institutional guidelines. My position is that any romantic or sexual relationship between a student and teacher is an abuse of power by the educator. An examination of these movies in their historical contexts illuminates their characterizations of abuse of power and how films represented it to American audiences.

While filmmakers worldwide have contributed to this genre, this thesis focuses on student-teacher romance motion pictures produced within the Hollywood system. A portion of my analysis examines the influence of the American political and cultural climate of the 20th and early 21st centuries on the development of this genre. Therefore, I have excluded international films that fit the definition of the genre unless that film helps to define American culture during that period.

Two central questions guiding this research are as follows. How has the genre of student-teacher romance films developed from the 1920s to the 2020s, and what purposes did the genre serve for American audiences during each era of its development? What does a historical-genre analysis of the genre of student-teacher romance films reveal about the dynamics of abuse of power in the classroom? I argue that three eras that I have identified in the development of the genre of student-teacher romance films reflect recognizable perspectives of American culture, distinctly impact American audiences, and constitute abuses of power in differing ways.

Literature Review

In this section, a review of the existing literature on student-teacher romance films, educator sexual misconduct, feminist rhetoric, genre theory, and historical approaches to film

analysis will offer the ground upon which to begin explicating the genre of student-teacher romance films.

Student-Teacher Romance Films

What follows is an overview of the existing literature surrounding student-teacher romance films. I explore literature documenting school films in general and school films that involve a student-teacher romance. I also discuss international and domestic motion pictures that I do not analyze in this thesis.

Romance in the Hollywood Classroom

Before examining student-teacher romance films, we must discuss the genre of school films. James D. Trier (2001) defines a school film as “a movie that in some way—even incidentally—is about an educator or a student” (p. 127). This broad definition makes the school films genre home to hundreds of movies. Some of the most well-known school films are *Dead Poets Society* (Weir, 1989), *Dangerous Minds* (Smith, 1995), *Mr. Holland’s Opus* (Herek, 1995), and *Mean Girls* (Waters, 2004).

Much of the research surrounding school films focuses on the portrayal of teachers. Teacher educators analyze movies like *The Paper Chase* (Bridges, 1973) (e.g., Dillon, 1979; Stillwaggon & Jelinek, 2011; Trier, 2003), *Dead Poets Society* (e.g., Putri, 2019; Vannini, 2006; Wan & Jiang, 2020), and *Freedom Writers* (LaGravenese, 2007) (e.g., Choi, 2009; Mulyadi et al., 2022; Zulfian et al., 2018) in terms of the pedagogical methods the teacher characters display in the film.

In 1995, Mary M. Dalton introduced the Hollywood Model to delineate what Hollywood school films have constructed as the “good” teacher. The model hypothesizes that the “good” teacher is someone who is an outsider, gets personally involved with students, learns from their

students, has tension with the school administrators, and uses everyday events to personalize their teaching curriculum (Dalton, 1995). Many researchers cite the Hollywood Model as a means of examining cinematic representations of teachers (e.g., Barone, 2003; Beyerbach, 2005; Bulman, 2002). Andrew Wirth (2019) uses the model to explore the role of intimacy and belonging between students and teachers in the movie *Detachment* (Kaye, 2011). This research is mostly devoted to relationships between students and teachers that are appropriately loving without crossing physical boundaries.

Researchers have questioned if love belongs in the classroom: whether that is familial love or erotic love. While many educational thinkers explore the idea that some form of love is essential in the classroom (e.g., Cho, 2005; Goldstein, 2004; Martin, 2004), the consensus seems to be that many film depictions have created problematic images of teachers and students (Stillwaggon & Jelinek, 2011). Dale M. Bauer (1998) claims that just as Hollywood misrepresents and ultimately sexualizes all professions, teaching “is now represented as a sexual proposition—a shift that should give us pause” (p. 302). In this essay, Bauer gives several reasons why teaching and the classroom can be seen as erotic: educators are modeling a *desire* for learning; students can become attracted to a teacher’s display of power, knowledge, and self; and some subjects—namely English—necessitate a discussion of sexualized topics. Ultimately, Bauer argues that films misunderstand the presence of eroticism in the classroom to create a cultural image of teaching as a sexual enticement.

While the student-teacher romance film has not been defined as its own genre, the movies have been a part of the academic conversation. In 2009, Heather Weaver explores narrative patterns in a series of nine short films released between 1909 and 1939. These films cover strong bonds between teachers and students that toe the line of what is and is not appropriate classroom

behavior (Weaver, 2009). She discusses *Bored of Education* (Douglas, 1936), a remake of *Teacher's Pet* (McGowan, 1930) in which a teacher kisses her eight-year-old student on the mouth. This does not occur in the remake of the film (Weaver, 2009). Weaver posits that this change could have been a result of the introduction of the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930. The code was adopted in 1930 and enforcement began in 1934; it prohibited instances of or references to sexual perversion and apparent cruelty to children (Weaver, 2009).

Teacher educators have delved into this topic to understand teacher predators. Christian Z. Goering and Shelbie Witte (2017) examine the student-teacher romance in *Blue Car* (Moncrieff, 2002). Using Dalton's (1995) Hollywood model, Goering and Witte analyze the filmic teacher, Mr. Auster, as a "good" teacher, a "bad" teacher, and a teacher predator. They examine Mr. Auster using his position as a respected writing teacher to groom a vulnerable, young student (Goering & Witte, 2017).

Josephine May (2009) analyzes the Australian film *The Heartbreak Kid* (Jenkins, 1993) and offers a similar real legal case as a point of comparison. According to May, contradictory to the real legal case, the fictional teacher did not face legal action. May inspects the way in which the relationship challenges a societal understanding of the male student as a victim of a female teacher's sexual abuse. In her article, May differentiates Australian school films from Hollywood representations in school films. The following overview provides a perspective of the varying approaches these motion pictures have taken internationally over time.

Student-Teacher Romance Around the World

As previously stated, the present study focuses on films produced within the Hollywood system. However, it is necessary to highlight some of the popular student-teacher romance films from outside of the United States. This section provides a brief overview of the student-teacher

romance genre from an international perspective to illustrate how filmmakers in other countries used the genre in distinct ways.

Germany, France, Italy, the United Kingdom, and South Korea have produced several notable films in this genre. Among the three German films I discuss, *Mädchen in Uniform* (Sagan, 1931), was remade with the same name by Géza von Radványi in 1958. Both versions follow a similar storyline: in a Prussian all-girls boarding school, a young girl and her female teacher fall in love. According to Veronika Mayer (2012), the 1931 version is a lesbian classic in German queer cinema; however, the 1958 remake is not considered to be a lesbian film. Mayer concludes that this is because the 1958 version uses homosexual themes to develop its characters rather than to explore the nuances of a lesbian relationship. Another student-teacher romance film from Germany is *Unruhige Töchter* (Amon, 1968) which was released in several countries with the English title, *Sexy Baby*. This movie has been called a feminist drama (The Movie Database [TMDB], n.d.). It is about an attractive, teenage student named Sue. Throughout the film, Sue carries on several scandalous relationships, one of which is with her male teacher. He pursues her, and she chooses to engage in an affair with him because she finds it amusing. As I discuss in chapter three, many U.S. films of this genre in the 1960s and 70s portrayed relationships between students and teachers as a means of showing that the woman, whether she is the student or the teacher, is sexually liberated; *Unruhige Töchter* is no different. I argue that these films mislead audiences because student-teacher relationships are not liberating at all, they are an abuse of power.

There are many notable French films that fall into the student-teacher romance genre. I highlight three. *Futures Vedettes* (Allégret, 1955), also known as *School for Love*, is about a sought-after, famous male music teacher, Eric Walter, at the Conservatory of Vienna. In this

romantic melodrama, all the girls have crushes on Mr. Walter, resulting in a love triangle between him and two female students. One notable detail about the film is that, at one point, the students discuss a rumor that Mr. Walter used to beat his wife with a belt, and this excites the female students. This introduces the idea that young women are open to abusive behaviors and takes the onus off the teacher.

The next two movies come from the same French director, André Cayatte. The first is *Les risques du métier* (Cayatte, 1967), also known as *Risky Business*. A male teacher is falsely accused of sexual assault by multiple female students. The film focuses on the stressful consequences the teacher endures and the motivations of the young women who make these false accusations. *Mourir d'aimer* (Cayatte, 1971) was released with the English title *To Die of Love*. This motion picture is based on the true story of Gabrielle Russier, a high school teacher who had an affair with her teenage male student (Gallant, 1971). This love story is between a 32-year-old female teacher and a 17-year-old male pupil. The affair takes place in May 1968, a time of significant civil unrest in France that serves as the backdrop of the film. The student's parents find out about the affair, the teacher is sent to jail, and the student is checked into a psychiatric in-patient clinic. The teacher, like Russier herself, eventually commits suicide. The Internet Movie Database (IMDb) tagline calls this *Mourir d'aimer* "the most controversial motion picture in the history of France" (IMDb, n.d., *Taglines*). I find it compelling that Cayatte directed two student-teacher romance films within five years of each other. *Les risques du métier* and *Mourir d'aimer* both highlight the immense impact that these relationships can have but in different ways. *Les risques du métier* focuses on the impact that affairs with students can have on a teacher's reputation, while *Mourir d'aimer* fixates on the mental consequences to both the teacher and student.

Italy has produced many student-teacher romance films, and I will briefly discuss four of them. First, we have *Lezioni Private* (De Sisti, 1975) which translates to *The Private Lesson*. The sex comedy takes place at a Catholic college. Laura, the beautiful new piano teacher, is the object of many male students' affection. One student takes explicit photos of her through her window and blackmails her with them. Another student finds the photos, takes them to Laura, and confronts the student who took them. Laura awards the student who found the photos by having sexual intercourse with him. *L'insegnante* (Cicero, 1975), released internationally as *The School Teacher* and *Sexy Schoolteacher*, carries a similar tone. It follows a young woman, Giovanna, who is about to become a teacher. A rich father hires Giovanna to tutor her son, Franco. Franco is so shocked by her physical beauty that he pretends to be gay to restrain himself. He also fakes an attempted suicide in order to seduce her. Similarly titled, *L'insegnante Va in Collegio* (Laurenti, 1978) was released with the English title *The Schoolteacher Goes to Boys' High*. The movie depicts a father and son both falling in love with the son's new teacher. Finally, *Ænigma* (Fulci, 1987), a film that seems to be inspired by *Carrie* (De Palma, 1976), follows a young woman who gets tricked into going on a date with her gym teacher and her classmates show up on the date to make fun of her. Soon after, she gets hit by a bus and dies. A new girl arrives at school, and it turns out that she has been possessed by the girl who died. She exacts revenge on people at her school, starting with the gym teacher. He asks this new girl on a date and, while waiting for her to show up, the spirit of the girl who died possesses his reflection, attacks him, and kills him. These examples indicate that the student-teacher romance genre in Italy is associated with sex comedies and a "cautionary tale" during the same time period. The tone of a sex comedy generally makes light of the student-teacher romance.

I have chosen to discuss three student-teacher romance films produced in the United Kingdom. The first is *Term of Trial* (Glenville, 1962); it stars Laurence Olivier as an alcoholic schoolteacher who turns down the advances of a young student who propositions him. The schoolgirl becomes obsessed and accuses the teacher of molesting her. Next is *Bright Hair* (Menaul, 1997). *Bright Hair* follows a young girl with a personality disorder who becomes involved with her English teacher. The 2006 film *Notes on a Scandal* (Eyre, 2006) depicts a female high school art teacher, played by Cate Blanchett, who engages in an affair with a teenage male student. Her fellow teacher and close friend, played by Judi Dench, discovers the affair and uses it to blackmail Blanchett's character. Based on a book by Zoë Heller, the film's acclaim and popularity have inspired much academic writing (e.g., Heede, 2008; Krainitzki, 2016; Mooney, 2016). It has even led scholars to use the title *Notes on a Scandal* as a reference in papers that are unrelated to the film to discuss female abusers (e.g., Darling & Antonopoulos, 2013; Rowe, 2009). These motion pictures highlight dark externalities that can result from student-teacher romances.

I have chosen three student-teacher romance films from South Korea to discuss their contributions to the genre. *The Harmonium in My Memory* (Young-Jae, 1999), set in 1962, follows a young, female student harboring an unrequited crush on her new male teacher. Her teacher falls for another teacher, and the student does everything she can to discredit his love interest. Critically acclaimed, this movie was adapted into a musical in 2008. *My Secret Partner* (Hyun-Soo, 2011) is about a screenwriter and his son who is studying to become a chef. The screenwriter falls in love with his female student and his son falls in love with his teacher. Finally, *Misbehavior* (Tae-Yong, 2016) is a psychological thriller depicting a love triangle between two female teachers and a male student at an all-male school. These recent films expand

on the inherent complications that come from student-teacher relationships. Scenarios such as love triangles are explored involving other individuals. For example, in the case of *My Secret Partner*, a father and son are both involved in clandestine relationships with a student or teacher.

These international films reflect how the student-teacher romance genre has manifested itself in a myriad of ways in different cultures at varying times. In the following section, I explore interdisciplinary conversations about real-life student-teacher relationships and abuses of power.

Abuses of Power and Educator Sexual Misconduct

In the current thesis, I explore the student-teacher romance film genre as it relates to abuses of power. It is necessary to review the literature regarding abuses of power in the classroom. One abuse of power combines the power structure of teacher-student hierarchical roles with the power structure of race. Matias (2015) employs critical race theory to discuss teacher abuse via a color-blind ideology. Matias argues that color-blind ideologies do not confront or explore Whiteness and its societal impacts; therefore, teachers who employ this ideology use their professorial power to abuse their students of color by denying their humanity and perpetuating the institutional silencing of race.

Mottet, Frymier, and Beebe's (2006) model of relational power and instructional influence attempts to explain how power and influence affect how teachers teach and how students learn. Their three propositions are as follows: first, there exists an interpersonal relationship between teachers and students that involves social influence; second, the actors in this interpersonal relationship yield power to one another so that prosocial forms of power result in stronger influence; third, the quality of the relationship is enhanced when teachers and students engage in appropriate communicative behaviors and it is minimized when they engage in inappropriate behaviors (Mottet et al., 2006). When teachers engage in inappropriate

communicative behaviors, they misuse instructor power and undermine students' faith and trust in teachers (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2009). According to Goodboy and Bolkan, inappropriate communicative behaviors, or *teacher misbehaviors*, include any behavior that interferes with instruction and, further, learning.

Boler (1999) suggests that emotions are expressed, felt, and understood in relation to the power structure for which they are rendered. This suggests that emotions, such as love, are subject to the hierarchical power structures of educational institutions. Gregoratto's (2017) exploration of power and exploitation in romantic relationships posits that there is an inherent tendency for love to become oppressive and exploitative, especially when there is a social structural power dynamic involved. There is an inherent power difference in occupational roles in romantic relationships between a teacher and student, but there are often additional power dynamics of age, gender, and economic class. Abuses of power can occur in many ways in the classroom; in student-teacher romance films, professorial power is abused through sexual misconduct.

Teacher educators have researched student-teacher romance films. This literature is typically not intended to contribute to film scholarship but to pedagogical scholarship surrounding *educator sexual misconduct* (ESM). Shakeshaft (2004) defines ESM as "behavior by an educator that is directed at a student and intended to sexually arouse or titillate the educator or the child" (p. 1). This definition covers all sexual behaviors that are inappropriate, unacceptable, and unprofessional, including sexual abuse, molestation, sexual exploitation, and sexual harassment. I explore ESM and its real-world impacts on students to emphasize the seriousness of this topic, which is often treated as a light-hearted, sexy plot device.

In Shakeshaft's 2004 synthesis of existing ESM literature, she estimates that 9.6% of all students in eighth to eleventh grade report experiencing unwanted contact and/or noncontact ESM. Researchers believe that, because many instances of ESM go unreported, statistics like this are most likely under-estimates (Shakeshaft, 2004). In any case, this abundance of reports suggests that "institutions that are designed to foster the healthy development of children are sometimes being used by offenders to access victims" (Abboud et al., 2020, p. 134).

Two high-profile cases that have brought attention to the issue of teachers sexually abusing their students are the cases of teacher predators Mary Kay Letourneau and Jerry Sandusky (Abboud et al., 2020). In 1997, Letourneau, a 32-year-old elementary school teacher who sexually abused her 12-year-old student, pled guilty to child rape and was sentenced to seven years in prison (Grimm & Harp, 2011). Following her release in 2005, Letourneau married the student she had previously abused. Grimm and Harp call this case one of the best-known cases of a teacher raping their student. The Sandusky case involves 10 young victims and coverups that span over 15 years (Klein & Tolson, 2015). In November of 2011, the case gained nationwide notoriety when news media began reporting that Sandusky had been under investigation for the previous two years. Sandusky, the Penn State University Football Defensive Coordinator, molested 10 boys under the age of 13. While this is not a case of a teacher directly abusing their students, Sandusky's use of university facilities to commit these crimes and subsequent coverup by high-ranking officials at Penn State illuminated the phenomena of an educational institution protecting employees at the expense of victims (Klein & Tolson, 2015).

Much of the literature details tactics and patterns that are typical in cases of ESM (e.g., Shakeshaft, 2004, 2013; Robins, 2000; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). One tactic that is often mentioned is *grooming*. Robins (2000) describes grooming in a school environment as a process

in which an abuser identifies a student and gives them attention, awards, support, and understanding while slowly increasing the amount of physical and/or sexual contact with the student. According to Shakeshaft (2004), the purpose of grooming is:

...to test the child's ability to maintain secrecy, to desensitize the child through progressive sexual behaviors, to provide the child with experiences that are valuable and that the child won't want to lose, to learn information that will discredit the child, and to gain approval from parents.
(p. 32)

Vandiver and Kercher (2004) identify a group of abusers, known as *heterosexual nurturers*, comprised of women with an average age of 30 who groom males around the age of 12. One example is Mary Kay Letourneau. Heterosexual nurturers are usually motivated by feelings of love and do not consider their behavior to be abuse; they also do not usually have a criminal record of sexual assault (Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). Shakeshaft (2013) claims that teachers often target students that are vulnerable or marginalized because (1) they will be especially gratified by attention from an authority figure and (2) they are less likely to be believed if they report abuse. Shakeshaft distinguishes between two categories of teacher predators: the *opportunistic abuser* and the *fixated abuser*.

According to Shakeshaft, the majority of teacher predators whose targets are under the age of 18 are opportunistic abusers. These teachers take sexual advantage of a situation but are not always exclusively attracted to children or teenagers. Female opportunistic abusers might also be classified as heterosexual nurturers. Typically, an opportunistic abuser is an adult who operates at an emotional level similar to that of a teenager; they tend to spend lots of time around groups of students, wanting to be seen as hip, cool, and part of the student peer group (Shakeshaft, 2013). They comment on the attractiveness or sex appeal of the students and converse with them in a way that is often inappropriately personal (Shakeshaft, 2013).

The fixated abuser is typically a successful, male teacher who has “a disproportionate number of teaching awards” and is “considered to be [an] excellent teacher by the school community” (Shakeshaft, 2013, p. 9). Sandusky’s behavior aligns with that of a fixated abuser. The pattern of abuse the fixated abuser usually takes is to identify a vulnerable student, usually from a single-parent home, and find a way to build trust with the student. They indicate that the child needs extra help as an excuse to spend time with them after hours at school or even in their home. When the teacher eventually sexually abuses the student, it occurs in an environment where the teacher feels safe—the school, where they are respected by colleagues and administration, or at the student’s home, where he has built a foundation of trust with the family (Shakeshaft, 2013).

Goering and Witte’s chapter about *Blue Car* identifies the filmic teacher, Mr. Auster, as a fixated abuser. In conducting a deductive analysis of the film, they noted that Mr. Auster was established as a successful, respected writing teacher who targeted Meg, a vulnerable student with a troubled home life and a passion for writing (Goering & Witte, 2017). They identify specific moments in the movie wherein Mr. Auster blurs the line of what is appropriate and, eventually, crosses it. As teacher educators, the authors recommend that pre-service and in-service teachers should conduct similar analyses with Shakeshaft’s ESM research in mind to thwart these types of behaviors in their own institutions.

Theoretical Framework

As I examine these student-teacher romance films, I will use a feminist framework to interpret and critique them. My analysis will utilize “gaze theory.”

In 1975, Laura Mulvey introduced the psychoanalytical concept of the male gaze. Mulvey claims that the medium of film offers its audience pleasure in the form of *scopophilia*:

pleasure derived from looking at someone or something. She argues that the male gaze projects its erotic desires onto the female form. This theoretical concept holds that cinema typically displays the female figure as a sexual object that is coded to appeal to the male heterosexual viewer (Mulvey, 1975). In short, the man, who looks, is active and the woman, who is looked at, is passive. After introducing this concept, 1970s feminist filmmakers made a concerted effort to adopt a female gaze by identifying the difference between the male and female point of view through the lens of a camera (Freeman, 2020). Explorations of the gaze in scholarship contribute to what is now known as “gaze theory.” The gaze can be analyzed through three different lenses of ‘looking’: a character looking at another character, the camera looking at a character, and the audience looking at a character (Mulvey, 1975). This concept has been influential in feminist film analyses as it suggests that motion pictures portray women as objects that please men, not complex entities.

Since its introduction, film and television scholarship have explored gaze theory in various ways. Silverio and colleagues (2021) use the male gaze to analyze how viewers perceive platonic and romantic interactions in a reality TV show. Mulvey’s male gaze allowed the researchers to explain both the looks of the other reality TV show contestants and the looks of viewers (Silverio et al., 2021). They found that, based on online reactions, because both fellow contestants and audience members observed feminine attributes in a homosocial platonic ‘bromance,’ viewers assumed that the relationship was of homosexual intention (Silverio et al., 2021).

Banwell and Fiddler (2018) explore Holocaust-related films that eroticize the female body and use the male gaze to understand how gender and sexual agency are represented in these films. The authors draw on Mulvey’s explanation of the scopophilic paradox: the pleasure of

looking at the passive female as an erotic object, and the unpleasure of looking at the female form's lack of penis (Banwell & Fiddler, 2018; Mulvey, 1975). This article identifies the male gaze in scenes in which women are naked, fetishized, and vulnerable in front of groups of men, other women are seen having remarkably different reactions to an erotic image of a woman, and the camera lens' communicating of a woman's vulnerability through the framing of her form. Ultimately, they find that females in these films serve as erotic objects for the characters within the film and the audience members alike (Banwell & Fiddler, 2018).

Freeman (2020) examines the queer gaze in openly gay musician Hayley Kiyoko's music videos. The author argues that "Kiyoko has produced a new and complex portrayal of how female sexual desire is represented even when, on the surface, it may not necessarily appear to disrupt normativity" (Freeman, 2020, p. 1007). Even though her work conforms to many societal norms, Freeman asserts that Kiyoko's work begins to queer the gaze simply by depicting queer intimacy.

Methodology

I utilize a generic approach as a method of studying and defining the category of student-teacher romance films as a film genre. A historical approach will serve as a tool with which I define the genre. I split the genre into three distinct eras, analyze films from each era by placing them in their historical contexts and explore the ways in which the genre constituted abuses of power during that era. To begin, I identify the distinct features of the student-teacher romance film genre and I make a case for genre as the best method of practice.

Student-Teacher Romance as a Genre

It is important to establish the category of student-teacher romance films as a genre. To do this, I first define it as a genre based on five characteristics of genres: arena, iconography,

value system, characters, and conflicts. Then, I discuss counterarguments of generic approaches to justify why it is the best approach for this thesis.

Film genres are used to categorize groups of motion pictures. As Schatz (1981) says, "...the determining, identifying feature of a film genre is its cultural context, its community of interrelated character types whose attitudes, values, and actions flesh out dramatic conflicts inherent within that community" (p. 455). He claims that a generic community is not necessarily a specific place; it can be a body of characters, actions, values, and attitudes. Many student-teacher romance films take place in a particular arena: the classroom. However, we must distinguish the student-teacher romance genre from the school film genre. The student-teacher romance genre, much like the war film genre, is based on an event that takes place within the film. This event is a romantic and/or sexual relationship between a teacher and his or her current student. Other typical genre conventions such as artistic status, mood, style, sexual orientation, and racial background differ for films in this genre (Corrigan, 2010).

Each film genre has generic icons associated with it. Genre iconography is found through narrative and visual coding repeated throughout a category of film (Schatz, 1981). An icon assumes significance not only through its usage within individual genre films but also as that usage relates to the generic system itself. Generic icons have thematic value; audience members distinguish between characters who wear white and black in Westerns or those who do or do not sing and dance in musicals (Schatz, 1981). Thematic value includes elements such as dialogue, music, and even casting as key components of a genre's iconography (Schatz, 1981). Associating certain movie stars with specific genres is casting iconography. One icon of the student-teacher romance film genre involves the casting of the student and teacher. If the actors are close in age,

the filmmaker likely wants the audience to think of the relationship positively; vice versa if they are far apart in age or if the student looks particularly young.

Genres have value systems. According to Panek (2006), psychological puzzle films criticize Enlightenment values of order and reason. Student-teacher romance films' values systems are triggered by whether the movie is a story of forbidden love or a moral quandary.

Another feature of genre is the specific types of characters and their dramatic conflicts.

Schatz (1981) claims the following:

...each genre incorporates a sort of narrative shorthand whereby significant dramatic conflicts can intensify and then be resolved through established patterns of action and by familiar character types. These dramatic conflicts are themselves the identifying feature of any genre; they represent the transformational, or even geographical (as in the Western) aspect of American culture into one locus of events and characters. (p. 457)

Generic characters are identified by their function and status within their community. He also states, "all genres treat some form of threat—violent or otherwise—to the social order. However, it is the attitudes of the principal characters and the resolutions precipitated by their actions which finally distinguish the various genres from one another" (p. 458). Student-teacher romance films always include characters with the functions of student and teacher; one of the two parties threatens the social order by crossing the professional, moral boundary between them.

It is important to understand that genres are not comprehensive. As Langford (2005) says, not every aspect of a film can be attributed to its generic identity. Narrowing texts into categories provides critical utility by allowing critics to make meaningful discriminations (Langford, 2005). Derrida (1992) claims that a text has an individuality that keeps it from *belonging* to a category, while at the same time, it cannot escape from being generic. As I define the student-teacher romance genre, I use genre as a method of understanding a category of films that have not previously been recognized as a category.

Some scholars argue that generic approaches lack value. Patton (1976) argues that although the goal of generic criticism is clarification, resulting analyses often classify categories without providing substantive clarification. Patton attributes the lack of clarification to the dismissal of historical context in rhetorical generic analyses. The present study combats this criticism by combining historical and generic methods.

Booth (1974) is skeptical of generic approaches assuming identical intentions in radically different works. He claims that grouping works into genres is only useful if the works are similar in four ways: general pattern or sequence, technique, medium, and effect. The films I analyze in the current study are similar in these four ways; however, I do not agree with Booth's assertion. His criticism suggests that all works in a category must be similar in all four ways, or they are not useful. A Darwinian lens of genre holds that genres are not fixed; they evolve over time (Darwin, 1859; Patton, 1976). One cannot assume that all works in a category will be static in pattern, technique, medium, and effect throughout the history of the genre; therefore, all works in a category cannot always be similar in the criteria Booth offers. Fortunately, a historical approach to genre can illuminate changes in similarities between works over time.

Historical Approach

In defining this genre, I take a historical approach. Historical approaches organize and investigate films according to their historical context and developments (Corrigan, 2011). A film history analysis may explore the historical relationships of motion pictures themselves, the relationships of films to their production conditions, the relationships of movies to their reception, or any other relationships as they relate to historical context (Corrigan, 2011). Placing films of the student-teacher romance genre in their historical contexts allows for a more complete picture of the genre's development.

There is a precedent of blending generic and historical approaches in film and television literature. According to Langford (2005), locating the understanding of generic categories in an everchanging historical context can significantly extend the “historical horizons and cultural contexts for understanding genres and productively problematized conventional critical accounts” (p. 5). Penzhorn and Pitout (2007) adopt a critical-historical genre analysis to differentiate reality television from other genres it shares conventions with such as game shows, talent shows, talk shows, and documentaries. The historical approach allows the authors to identify generic conventions of reality television and establish it as its own unique genre (Penzhorn & Pitout, 2007). This thesis uses a historical approach as a means of establishing the student-teacher romance film genre. In doing so, I examine selected films of the genre in their historical context to understand how the genre has grown and changed over time.

Now that I have presented my argument for student-teacher romance as a genre that is best defined through a historical exploration of its films, I outline the chapters I use to organize this thesis in the following section.

Chapter Outline

Student-teacher romance films have existed as long as the medium itself. Film industries all over the world have contributed to this genre. An exploration of student-teacher romance films reveals patterns that repeat themselves over time. It has always functioned as a genre, but I have undertaken the challenge of defining it as such in scholarly literature.

I believe this genre of film is important because of the seriousness of its subject matter. Student-teacher romance films depict child abuse whether the film itself acknowledges it or not. This abuse is being swept under the rug for different reasons at different times. I have outlined

three distinct eras in the genre for analysis. In each chapter, I analyze and show how these films can be uniquely good, bad, and disturbing in illuminating their portrayal of abuse of power.

The first case study examines one film released in each decade from the 1920s until the 1950s (*The Wild Party* (Arzner, 1929), *Girls' Dormitory* (Cummings, 1936), *Margie* (King, 1946), and *Good Morning, Miss Dove* (Koster, 1955)), and briefly discusses two films released in the 1960s (*To Sir, With Love* (Clavell, 1967) and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (Neame, 1969)). During this era, the genre existed, but it was not very popular. I chose these films because I could only find and get access to one movie from each decade from the 1920s to the 1950s. I was unable to find an American film from the 1960s, so I chose two British films that reflect the political and social climate in the U.S. and uniquely showcase the genre.

The second case study discusses four films released in the 1970s (*Pretty Maids All in a Row* (Vadim, 1971), *The Teacher* (Avedis, 1974), *Summer School Teachers* (Peeters, 1975), and *Malibu High* (Berwick, 1979)), two films released in the 1980s (*Teachers* (Hiller, 1984) and *Summer School* (Reiner, 1987)), and three films (*Carried Away* (Barreto, 1996), *Wild Things* (McNaughton, 1998), and *Election* (Payne, 1999)) and a TV show (*Dawson's Creek* (Williamson, 1998-2003)) released in the 1990s. Student-teacher romance films became much more popular in this era. I included as many relevant and popular titles as I could access from this time.

The third and final case study analyzes a mix of TV shows and movies released in the 2000s (*Blue Car* (Moncrieff, 2002), *25th Hour* (Lee, 2002), *Loving Annabelle* (Brooks, 2006), and *Gossip Girl* (Savage & Schwartz, 2007-2012)), 2010s (*Glee* (Murphy et al., 2009-2015), *A Teacher* (Fidell, 2013), *Pretty Little Liars* (King, 2010-2017), *The Boy Next Door* (Cohen, 2015), and *Riverdale* (Aguirre-Sacasa, 2017-present)), and 2020s (*A Teacher* (Fidell, 2020) and *Gossip*

Girl (Safran, 2021-2023). The genre exploded during this era. In the interest of time and balancing the content in each chapter, I had to limit my analysis to films and TV shows that were exceptionally popular or impactful.

The next chapter will introduce the first era of the student-teacher romance genre. I will explore the historical influences of the nation from the 1920s to the 1960s and how factors were reflected in the genre. I will also evaluate how Americans during this period defined abuse of power through representations in these films.

Chapter 2: The Healing Power of the Schoolgirl

Films that can be categorized under the student-teacher romance film genre began appearing in the 1920s. This decade began the first era I distinguish in the development of the genre. This chapter analyzes one or two films per decade from the 1920s until the 1960s and examines that film in its historical and political context. During this era, the genre existed, but it was not very popular. I chose one film to represent each decade from the 1920s to the 1950s. I examined two films from the 1960s because the audience was particularly receptive to these motion pictures, which focused on very different student-teacher dynamics. Some similarities in the films I identify from this era are themes of youth as a healing influence and explorations of the distinct roles of men and women in single-gender educational institutions. In this chapter, I argue that the films of the genre during this era reflect each decade's distinct political and social climate in the United States during that time and constitute how people of that period defined abuses of professorial power.

I analyze each film using five criteria. First, I conclude whether the film is portraying an abuse of power or not. Then, I discuss whether the student or teacher in the relationship is the focus of the film. Films that focus on the teacher's point of view, for example, tend to be less interested in pointing out their abusive behavior. Next, I explore whether the film is making a commentary on student-teacher relationships, or if the school is just a convenient location for the story. Fourth, I examine the film's attitude toward education. Finally, I examine the movie's contribution to the student-teacher romance film genre in terms of its stance on abuse of power.

1920s: *The Wild Party* (1929)

The "roaring twenties" are known as a time of social and economic prosperity in American history. Coming off the heels of World War I, Americans were leaving their small towns to

embrace city life, and they were encountering an entirely new moral environment (Media Rich Communications, 2004). The Eighteenth Amendment and the Volstead Act that followed it banned the sale and consumption of alcohol (Spinney, 2020). People who disagreed with the prohibitionist movement went to hidden illegal clubs called *speakeasies* that sold liquor smuggled in from Canada (Media Rich Communications, 2004).

The role of women in American society was changing during this time. Women had more educational and career options available to them, and marriage became more of a romantic decision than a financial one (Media Rich Communications, 2004). An increasing number of women began studying in universities in the twenties (Browman, 2013). The image of the modern woman as “the flapper” was emerging (Streissguth, 2007). Women were cutting their hair short and replacing their floor-length dresses with short skirts (Media Rich Communications, 2004).

With a booming economy and a feeling of freedom from the fear of war, people were looking for new forms of entertainment. Movies were still prevalent, but they were declining in patronage in 1922 due to the popularity of commercial radio and television (Sklar, 1976). Hollywood began to make the transition from silent films to talkies in 1928 (MacGowan, 1956). I analyze *The Wild Party* (Arzner, 1929) as a means of exploring the 1920s through one of the earliest student-teacher romance films.

The Wild Party was directed by Dorothy Arzner and co-written by Samuel Hopkins Adams and E. Lloyd Sheldon. The film is the first talkie produced by Paramount Pictures, Hollywood starlet Clara Bow’s first sound picture, and it is directed by a lesbian female filmmaker during a time when neither of those identities promised success. It is peculiar that Paramount chose a film with such a taboo subject matter for their first venture into talking pictures. This film is also

particularly interesting because the focus is on morals rather than an abuse of power. Bow plays the vivacious college student, Stella Ames. Frederic March plays her professor, James 'Gil' Gilmore.

This film is set at an all-female university. Stella is a popular, outgoing student. Gil is an attractive, young Anthropology professor. The first time we meet Gil, Stella accidentally gets into his bed on a train, and he scolds her. He helps her sneak out and back to her own bed to avoid risking either of their reputations. Stella and many other students form a crush on Gil. The relationship between Gil and Stella begins when he rescues her from a group of men who are harassing her at a bar. After the men leave, Gil insults Stella's lack of academic ambition and scandalous partying. When she starts to cry, Gil kisses her. A fellow classmate sees them kissing and gossips to other students about it. They stop the relationship for a month. When Gil returns to work after an accident, they confess their mutual love for one another and kiss. Toward the end of the film, Stella's friend is in danger of being kicked out of school. In an effort to protect her friend, Stella confesses that she has broken school rules by dating someone, but she does not admit that it is her professor. Stella leaves the school following this incident and Gil resigns from his professorship. The film ends with Stella and Gil reuniting on a train out of town.

One cannot perform an adequate analysis of *The Wild Party* without considering its director's impact on the final product. Scholars have reinterpreted Arzner's motion picture as a lesbian film as evidenced by its subtext of homosexual desire in scenes between Stella and her friends (e.g., Mayne, 1994; Potter, 2011). While this analysis focuses on the heterosexual student-teacher relationship at the film's center, it is crucial to acknowledge Arzner's identity and how unique it was during that time in order to understand the gaze in the film.

The relationship between Gil and Stella is an abuse of power; however, the film portrays their romance as a difference in morals rather than abuse. The characters' moral differences come to a head after Gil rescues Stella at the bar:

James 'Gil' Gilmore: Have you ever seen the college from here? It's beautiful, isn't it? Have you ever thought why it's there? Fifty or sixty years ago, a great woman suffered and slaved to build it. She braved the ridicule of her friends and the abuse of her contemporaries to bring true freedom to women. Others have given their best to it because they have the same ideals. And what has happened to their ideal? You and others like you have turned the college into a country club for four years. Four years that you don't know how to occupy better. You haven't the slightest idea what true freedom means. Instead, you jazz around glorying in sham freedom. Life to you is just one wild party. You have no aim. All you want is cheap sensation.

Stella Ames: It's not true.

James 'Gil' Gilmore: Now be honest, why did you go to that roadhouse tonight?

Stella Ames: Because I wanted to.

James 'Gil' Gilmore: Superb reason. Because you wanted to. You fairly compel my respect. Because you wanted to. You risked scandal, expulsion; you involve me in a messy adventure that may cost me my job –

Stella Ames: I didn't ask you to come after me.

James 'Gil' Gilmore: Is that all it means to you?

Stella Ames: I'm sorry I said that. Why do you hate me so?

James 'Gil' Gilmore: Hate you? How could I hate you when I would have killed for you? (Arzner, 1929, 0:25:12-0:27:01)

Gil speaks to Stella with such detestation that she thinks he hates her. His response illustrates his confused feelings for her. This scene takes on a new meaning when viewed through a queer lens. Arzner is depicting a taboo, forbidden relationship wherein Gil is puzzled, and even repulsed, by his feelings for Stella. Audiences could read this as an allegory for the queer experience: two people whose love is forbidden by society, together against all odds. This interaction also displays different worldviews that were present in the 1920s. Stella spends her time worrying about her reputation, her social schedule, and her relationships. These are values that people often associate with the playful elements of the decade. Gil resents this. His worldview is more old-fashioned; he believes young female students should get serious about their futures. Arzner did not intend to shed light on Gil's abuse of power through this romance.

The focus of *The Wild Party* is on Stella's experience as a young woman engaging in what is perceived as promiscuous behavior. Bow's movie star persona was a 'good girl' that makes 'bad decisions.' Her characters were often victims of their circumstances. Arzner challenges this persona by portraying Bow as a young woman that chooses to engage in scandalous behavior like drinking, partying, and wearing revealing clothing but maintains her innocence. Her disarray and innocence are illuminated by Gil's interest in her. In his office after he returns to school, Gil tells Stella, "I hate you, and I love you. I hate you for what you've been, and I love you for what you could be" (Arzner, 1929, 0:50:16). Despite her reputation, Gil sees her potential. It is admirable for a teacher to take on a mentor role for a student; to steer them away from trouble and toward a path to success. However, Gil's influence over Stella as her educator is muddled when he makes an inappropriate advance, thus resulting in an abuse of power. Gil's interest in helping Stella is appropriate for a teacher, but his romantic pursuit crosses the line, and the film portrays her as a willing participant rather than a victim.

I do not believe Arzner is commenting on teacher-student dynamics in the education system. As aforementioned, I believe that Arzner is attempting to evoke a sexual tension that is similar to the forbidden nature of queer relationships. A relationship between a female student and a male teacher at an all-girls college achieves that goal.

This film takes an interesting perspective on education for its time. Universities had only recently begun allowing women into their undergraduate and graduate programs. Based on the title, Bow's portrayal as a bad girl, and Paramount Pictures choosing this film as their first talkie, it appears that was created to ruffle feathers and get people talking. As Gil mentions, women fought for people like Stella to have the opportunity to get an education, but she is squandering this opportunity with constant partying. The film ends with both Gil and Stella leaving the

school, which may be the filmmakers suggesting that students should be taking their education more seriously.

The Wild Party does not seem to consider this relationship to be an abuse of power. The film acknowledges that their relationship is against school rules because Gil mentions that he could have lost his job for helping her at the bar, and Stella hides in his office so that they are not seen alone together. I believe that the audience is not supposed to see Gil's pursuit as abusive because he appears to be trying to keep himself from acting on his feelings. However, I would argue that he should not have allowed himself to get involved with Stella's personal life in the first place. Ultimately, the school is presented as the antagonist when both protagonists choose to leave the institution. Even though they are no longer in their teacher and student roles when they get together in the end, their affair began in the classroom; therefore, I believe that the unbalanced power dynamic remains. Thus, the genre begins with a film that negates the abuse of power at play.

1930s: *Girls' Dormitory* (1936)

The 1930s in the U.S. is known for containing one of the most catastrophic economic events the nation has ever experienced: the Great Depression. The Great Depression was a time of severe hardship that impacted people of all economic classes (Duignan, 2012). This was not just an economic issue; the depression impacted the U.S. socially and culturally as well.

During this time, Hollywood adopted the Motion Picture Production Code, also known as the Hays Code. The Hays Code was named after Will H. Hays, the first chairman of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). Hays brought a conservative influence to a left-leaning Hollywood. His goal as chairman was to eliminate government involvement in the film industry by grounding films with traditional values. Under his influence, members of the

MPPDA wrote the Hays Code, a set of moral guidelines with which filmmakers were to self-censor their films (Schatz, 1961). This code caused what was and was not allowed in films to change drastically from the beginning of the decade to the end.

Along with the increased realism of the decade came an increased desire for entertainment. Hollywood films during this time were not interested in capturing the bleak reality of America. The most popular films of the 1930s were musicals, screwball comedies, and romances (Duignan, 2012). As talkie cinema became the industry standard, a type of film referred to as ‘women’s films’ centering on the dilemmas of heroines peaked in the 1930s (Morgan & Davies, 2016). The ‘women’s film’ I analyze from this era is a romantic drama that had a considerable impact on the student-teacher romance genre.

Girls’ Dormitory (Cummings, 1936) was a romantic drama directed by Irving Cummings. The screenplay, written by Gene Markey, was adapted from a 1934 play called *Mature* by Hungarian writer Ladislas Fodor. Herbert Marshall plays Dr. Stephen Dominik, a history professor and head director at an all-girls boarding school in Switzerland. Simone Simon stars as Marie Claudel, an anxious young student.

Much like *The Wild Party*, *Girls’ Dormitory* is set at an all-girls institution in which all the students and a female teacher, Professor Mathe, seem to have a crush on Dr. Dominick. At a fair, one student, Marie, asks Dr. Dominik to dance. He declines, calling it inappropriate, and Marie leaves the fair in tears. A week later, a strict female teacher, Professor Wimmer, finds an anonymous love letter in a wastebasket. The students are prohibited from dating, so the professor tries to identify the note’s writer so she can discipline her. Dr. Dominik and Professor Mathe conclude that Marie wrote the letter because it matches her handwriting, but they do not know for whom it is intended. Marie attends a disciplinary meeting; some faculty members scold and

try to expel her, while others believe she did nothing wrong. She admits to Professor Mathe that the letter was a fictional story about Dr. Dominik. Professor Mathe tries to convince the rest of the faculty not to punish her, but they insist on disciplining Marie.

Devastated and scared of getting suspended days before she graduates, Marie runs away into a storm. Dr. Dominik finds her and brings her to another professor's home close by. Marie admits that she wrote the letter about him, and he realizes then that he returns her feelings. Despite voicing his concern about their age difference, Dr. Dominik tells Marie he is going to ask her to marry him. When Marie overhears Professor Mathe admitting her own feelings for Dr. Dominik, she tells him that she lied about loving him to avoid expulsion. Dr. Dominik, hurt but unwilling to give up, proposes to Marie on her graduation night and she agrees to marry him.

In *Girls' Dormitory*, Dr. Dominik abuses his professorial power over Marie. The filmmakers justify this abuse of power by suggesting that young women are more mature than young men. At the school outing, a few male professors discuss the upcoming graduation. One professor makes a general comment about commencements: "A boy when he graduates is still just a boy. But a girl? She shakes herself and stands before you a full-fledged woman" (Cummings, 1936, 0:12:35). None of his colleagues argue. This statement suggests that young women are seen as more mature than men at the same age.

The perception of Marie's heightened maturity negates the age difference between her and Dr. Dominik. He mentions their age gap several times after realizing his romantic feelings for her. He tells Marie, "I must have loved you all the time, but I always thought of you as a child" (0:46:56). Coupled with the professor's comment about girls at their graduation, the film is suggesting that Marie is no longer a child and is capable of an adult romantic relationship now that she is about to graduate. Soon after admitting his feelings, Dominik says to Professor Mathe

that he cannot believe that Marie has loved him all this time: “But, me? Middle-aged, a schoolmaster. I just can’t believe it... Yet somehow, she’s not a child, she’s—I don’t know I can’t explain it” (Cummings, 1936, 0:49:17). Professor Mathe responds by saying “Why should you try? Some things need no explanation. They just are. Nobody can do anything about it” (Cummings, 1936, 0:49:38). Dr. Dominik is still portrayed as a good, moral male character for recognizing Marie’s young age, and his subsequent pursuit of her is justified by this response from the good, moral female character, Dr. Mathe. The next day, Marie comes to Dr. Dominik’s office:

Dr. Dominik: I still can’t believe [you wrote the letter to me]. In a few moments, Marie, I’m going to ask you to marry me, but first of all, I must remind you of something. There are 18 years between us and that’s a great many, my dear. We must be honest with ourselves about that difference. Have you thought about it at all?

Marie: Very much. Girls of my age think very clearly, Stefan.

Dr. Dominik: What have you thought?

Marie: But a few years have nothing when people love as much as we do.

Dr. Dominik: Then you will marry me. (0:52:10-0:52:49)

His worries about their age are squashed because Marie assures him that she can think clearly at her age. The audience is meant to believe that this decision is well thought out by both parties and there is no abuse of power involved.

The focus of *Girls’ Dormitory* is on Dr. Dominik rather than Marie. It is about Dr. Dominik’s desire to recapture youth. One moment that suggests this is when a professor enters his office the day before commencement and states, “Well, Stefan, graduation is tomorrow. How cool for the girls to begin life. But you and I? We’re just one year older” (Cummings, 1936, 0:53:18). These men are longing for the days when they felt that their lives were ahead of them. We can assume that Marie’s youth is what draws Dr. Dominik to her because he has a similar romantic option in Professor Mathe. He has known both women for years, they both claim to have loved him for much of that time, and they are similar in appearance and demeanor.

However, when someone assumes he is marrying Professor Mathe rather than Marie, he never gives a reason why he does not have feelings for her.

I do not believe this film is trying to engage in any commentary about students and teachers. Cummings set out to tell a story about a man recapturing his youth through a relationship with a young girl. A student and teacher at an all-girls school is a convenient setting in which to tell this story.

This film portrays all-girls schools as a place to teach young women how to conduct themselves rather than as an educational institution. This is shown through the attitudes and behaviors of many of the professors. We see in both *The Wild Party* and *Girls' Dormitory* that the students at these all-girls schools are prohibited from dating. When Professor Wimmer finds the love letter, she calls it disgraceful. Marie is brought into the disciplinary meeting, and Dr. Spindler and Professor Wimmer begin by berating her about wearing perfume and lip rouge; both of which are not allowed at their school. Dr. Dominik tells Spindler to stick to the situation at hand. When he brings up the incident depicted in the love letter, Marie denies that it happened. Dr. Spindler shouts, "I intend to see this case through. I'll break down your impudent defiance, young woman" (Cummings, 1936, 0:33:14). The professors' mention of Marie's perfume and makeup in a conversation about inappropriate relations with a suitor suggests that they equate effort in appearance with scandalous behavior. In their minds, her perfume and makeup dissipate her credibility. Despite her denial and a lack of proof that this rendezvous occurred, evidence of her cosmetic use is enough for them to decide that she is lying. While the film seems to disagree with this idea by showing the protagonist, Dr. Dominik, denying the importance of her cosmetics, the scene communicates the scrutiny with which a school could police a student's behaviors during this time.

Girls' Dormitory portrays a middle-aged man reinvigorating his youth by abusing his power over a student. When Dr. Dominik crosses the line, the film shows his anxiety about Marie's age; however, he does not mention anything about their student-teacher roles, only that he worries that she is too young for him. I think the student-teacher power dynamic is equally problematic to the age dynamic in this film. Marie's crush on Dr. Dominik is strong; she is devastated when he rejects her dance and when she knows he might find out about her letter. These strong emotions should indicate that Marie is not capable of engaging in a romantic or sexual relationship with Dr. Dominik, but he seems to ignore that behavior based on the idea that women are fully mature upon graduation. Dr. Dominik abuses his power over Marie by engaging her in a relationship that she is not emotionally equipped to handle. While this age difference and student-teacher relationship were still taboo in the 1930s, it was acceptable to release a film that ends with a happy engagement between a student and teacher. This film is an example in the student-teacher romance genre that ignores the abuse of power.

1940s: *Margie* (1946)

World War II had a colossal impact on the nations that took part in it. In the 1940s, the lives of Americans revolved around war efforts. Americans rationed gas and observed meatless Tuesdays so that large amounts of money could be sent abroad to those affected (Mars, 2015). Children gathered to help plant victory gardens as symbols of unity against the nation's rivals (Mars, 2015). While the level of economic devastation Americans experienced in the 1930s was gone, the nation was not in high spirits. One film released in 1944 sought to remind American audiences of a happier time in the nation's history.

Margie (King, 1946) was directed by Henry King and written by F. Hugh Herbert. According to Turner Classic Movies (n.d.), legal documents in the Twentieth Century Fox records suggest

that F. Hugh Herbert may have used elements from Gene Markey's *Girls' Dormitory* screenplay as inspiration. Due to its popularity, *Margie* was spun off as a 1961 television sitcom by the same name. Jeanne Crain stars as Margie, a high school student who develops a crush on her French teacher, Ralph Fontayne who is played by Glenn Langan. The film is a jukebox musical, using popular songs from the 1920s.

The film begins in 1946; housewife Margie reminisces to her daughter about her high school experience. In a flashback to her high school days in the 1920s, a female teacher introduces Margie to the new French teacher, Mr. Fontayne. When he leaves, the female teacher asks Margie if she thinks he is cute, and she says that she does not notice how teachers look. Later that day, Margie declines a ride home from Mr. Fontayne. Margie is interested in him, but she thinks it is silly to get a crush on a teacher and she does not think he will like her anyway.

When Margie is competing in a debate at school, Mr. Fontayne shows up to watch. Margie's grandma, with whom she lives, tells him that Margie will be excited he is there because she has a crush on him. After the debate, Margie gets hurt at the skating rink, and Mr. Fontayne comes to her house to make sure she is okay.

As the senior school dance approaches, Margie's date gets sick and is forced to cancel on her. Margie's grandmother secretly arranges for her father to take her to the dance and tells Margie that her date will be an older man. Margie thinks she is talking about Mr. Fontayne, and she is overjoyed. Mr. Fontayne shows up at Margie's house before the dance to drop off her French composition and compliment her good work. He tells her grandmother that he is taking another teacher as a friend, but he would much rather take Margie. At the dance, Mr. Fontayne asks Margie to dance and tells her that he would rather dance with her than anyone else. Cutting back

to housewife Margie in 1946, it is revealed that Margie and Mr. Fontayne are married, and he is now the principal of the high school.

The idyllic nature of the story may distract from the abuse of power present in its narrative. Mr. Fontayne is not explicitly portrayed as a predator, but his behavior is characteristic of a fixated abuser. Margie declines his offer of a ride home upon their first meeting. He continues to show up at school events that she is attending but does not interact with her, and he talks to Margie's grandmother about her multiple times at these events. It is as if he is using his position as Margie's teacher to endear himself to her family and ultimately get closer to her. Everyone loves Mr. Fontayne, so his behavior is never considered to be creepy.

The focus of King's film is on its title character, Margie. We see her initial interest in Mr. Fontayne and her contentment with their family at the end of the film. What the film does not show is how the relationship between Margie and Mr. Fontayne begins. Does he wait to take her on a date until after she graduates? How do her classmates react? While Mr. Fontayne's interest in teenage Margie is immoral, his behavior toward her until he asks her to dance is appropriate on the surface. The story skips past Mr. Fontayne crossing the line between teacher and lover to show Mr. Fontayne as her doting husband. In the final scene, Margie is much older, and their age gap is more appropriate. It is harder to see that Margie is a victim when the film glosses over her victimization.

Instead of highlighting Margie as a victim of abuse, King decides to observe Margie's coming of age. Margie is a loser at the beginning of the flashback. She is unpopular with her classmates; she wears old-fashioned clothing such as bloomers that often fall down. Margie has trouble talking to boys, and she cannot believe that a man as handsome as Mr. Fontayne would like her. Throughout the film, the audience is endeared to Margie, so the reveal of Mr. Fontayne

as her husband is satisfying. When she dances with Mr. Fontayne at the school dance, Johnny, a boy Margie was interested in, is attracted to her. Margie is not broken down by her teacher's abuse; rather, she is built up by his attention.

The goal of this film is to trigger the audience's nostalgia. It begins in bleak 1940s wartime and flashes back to the roaring twenties, using popular songs from the 1920s to make up its musical soundtrack. The setting of a school is meant to add to the audience's nostalgia. It takes the viewer back to a hopeful, exciting time and puts them in the shoes of a character that has her whole life ahead of her. Therefore, I think the school setting is necessary, but I do not think it was chosen to make a commentary on student-teacher relationships.

Margie treats high school as more of a social arena than an academic institution. Margie is a brilliant student and participates in extra-curricular activities, but the intellectual experience of her life as a student takes a backseat to her social interactions. This is not necessarily a negative; in fact, I believe most modern films about teenagers are interested in the social relationships developed in the high school environment.

If these filmmakers are taking any stance on student-teacher relationships, its stance is that they are completely acceptable. The only person that suggests that the relationship might not be appropriate is Margie herself at the beginning of the film. Margie's grandmother, other teachers, and classmates either support Mr. Fontayne's feelings for Margie or have their own romantic feelings for him. One generous read of this film is that Margie is an unreliable narrator, coloring her experience with Mr. Fontayne in a more innocent, romantic light. Whether or not that is the case, *Margie* depicts an abuse of power and ignores the effects it would have on its victim.

1950s: *Good Morning, Miss Dove* (1955)

The 1950s in the U.S. was a decade of reconstruction, a return to normality. Economically, the prosperity that began during World War II made its way to the middle class (Halliwell, 2007). Many people remember the 1950s as the emergence of youth culture and the seemingly unlimited availability of material comforts (Halliwell, 2007).

Along with economic prosperity came changing ideals surrounding families. As society shifted toward a more modern form of domesticity, the ideal nuclear family consisted of clear gender roles for the mother and father. Mothers were assigned the homemaker role, while fathers enhanced their involvement to become playmates with their children (Roesch, 2015). The nuclear family model was perpetuated by popular TV sitcoms at the time (Roesch, 2015). In reality, women were struggling to combine family and work. Many women joined the workforce during World War II while men were fighting, and some women kept their jobs when the men returned (Bax, 2010). Married women who chose to work while their children were at home or postponed having children to focus on their careers were criticized for the negative impacts this may have on their families (Bax, 2010). Representations of single, career-focused women and married women with children who assumed the housewife role may have been comforting to American moviegoing audiences in the 1950s.

Good Morning, Miss Dove (Koster, 1955) was directed by Henry Koster and written by Eleanore Griffin. Jennifer Jones stars as the titular Miss Dove. The film flashes back and forth between a middle-aged Miss Dove in the hospital after becoming ill and a young Miss Dove beginning her career in teaching.

From the first time Miss Dove appears on screen, we find out through voiceover that she is a local legend in the town of Liberty Hill. Most of the townspeople have been students in her

classroom, and she now teaches their children. People see her leaving her house to walk to school at the exact same time every day. Her classroom is run with very strict rules. Even so, multiple students throughout the film come back to tell Miss Dove that they felt safe in her classroom.

In her younger years, Miss Dove's father tragically passed away just after she returned from college. At the time, she was polite, but not very mature, and she was in a relationship with a man she met at school. Soon after her father's death, the bank alerted her that her father had accrued thousands of dollars of debt that were left unpaid when he passed. She took it upon herself to repay this debt on her own by becoming a teacher. The man she was in a relationship with proposed marriage to her, but she declined because she had just gotten the teaching position. This is when she threw herself into her career and became Miss Dove.

The rest of the film jumps between Miss Dove's physical condition worsening and memories of the students she affected. The film focuses on the stories of two students, Bill Holloway and Virginia Baker. Miss Dove supported Bill throughout his school years by giving him odd jobs and buying him a suit for graduation. As an adult, Bill has an illustrious career in the military. He exchanges letters with Miss Dove when he is away and visits her home for tea when he is in Liberty Hill. Miss Dove recalls an incident with Virginia years after she has graduated and left town. Virginia returns to attend a wedding and stops by Miss Dove's classroom. She breaks down crying and tells Miss Dove that her fiancé recently left her. Miss Dove calmly comforts and gives her advice, setting her on the right track.

At the climax of the film, Miss Dove finds out that she has to have surgery, but she might not wake up from it. This spreads around town, and people begin to gather outside of the hospital,

waiting to find out if the surgery is successful. Miss Dove awakens to the town bells ringing in her honor and a crowd of her former pupils outside cheering.

Good Morning, Miss Dove does not depict abuse of power. Each film mentioned thus far has acknowledged that relationships between teachers and students are taboo in some way, whether that be because of the age difference or the power difference between the positions. However, each film has culminated in successful romantic outcomes for the student-teacher pair. In that respect, *Good Morning, Miss Dove* is the antithesis of these films.

The focus of the film is on Miss Dove; her experiences with two particular students are detailed to examine her impact as an educator. Miss Dove is presented as a woman who is proper, dependable, professional, and almost asexual. She mentors Bill for decades following his time in the classroom. On the day of his graduation, Miss Dove says to Bill, “I shall watch where you go with interest. I have faith in you” (Koster, 1955, 0:41:21). Later in life when Bill is leaving the military, he shares his plans to become a police officer with Miss Dove, hoping for her approval. She says “A worthy ambition, William. I shall continue to follow your career with interest” (0:44:51). For Virginia, Miss Dove is a role model. Virginia goes to Miss Dove to figure out what she should do with her life after her fiancé has left her, and Miss Dove soberly advises her:

Miss Dove: First, you must return to your sister’s house. You must enter your bedroom, fall on your knees, and give thanks to your heavenly father.

Virginia: Thanks? For what?

Miss Dove: For preserving you from a fate worse than death...it is evident that the young man to whom you had given your affections discovered that his feelings for you had altered. He had, however, an honorable avenue of escape. He could have requested you to release him from his commitment. Instead, he proved himself a coward and a person of low principles.

Virginia: I thought there was something wrong with me.

Miss Dove: Your fault lay in rations of judgment. His lay in dishonor. After you have expressed your gratitude to the power that kept you from a disastrous alliance, you must

consider your duty to your neighbor and yourself. You must find a useful occupation. (Koster, 1955, 0:54:55-0:56:02)

Despite Miss Dove's choice not to become a wife and mother like most women at that time, Virginia values Miss Dove's judgment enough to ask her what she should do with her life. Miss Dove manages to give her students emotional and moral support without crossing any lines as an educator.

Unlike the previously mentioned films, *Good Morning, Miss Dove* needed to take place in a school. This film is similar to *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* or *Dead Poets Society*. It shows how a good teacher can change a student's life. Koster wanted to capture the positive impact of an appropriate student-teacher relationship both inside and outside the classroom.

This movie does not focus on education as a whole, but on the educators that develop it. Miss Dove acts as a mother figure to her students. Throughout the film, she is often referred to—behind her back—as, ‘the terrible Miss Dove.’ It is implied that people call her that because her classroom rules are so strict. However, when Miss Dove is no longer their teacher, her former students come to appreciate the way she ran her classroom. Both Bill and Virginia say that, in hindsight, they loved being in her class. When Bill visits Miss Dove's classroom to thank her for buying his graduation suit, he looks around, tears in his eyes, and says “It was always so clean in here. Like-like this was where I really lived. That's why I never missed a day” (Koster, 1955, 0:41:30). When Virginia visits Miss Dove's classroom years after graduating, upset with how her life is turning out, she tells her:

I felt secure in this room. I felt that if I obeyed the law and sneezed in my handkerchief and raised my hand for permission to speak and kept my margins near that that was my oyster. That nothing could go wrong. (Koster, 1955, 52:15)

This feeling of comfort and safety seems to stem from Miss Dove's organized nature. This story displays how a teacher can inspire platonic or familial love in their students through their level-headed demeanor.

Two important factors to acknowledge are that this is the first film I have analyzed with a female teacher as the lead and that Miss Dove's sexuality is not given much attention as she grows older. Once her looks fade, no one, including Miss Dove, expects her to get married. Bill and Miss Dove spend lots of time alone together during his adult life. Had Bill been a young woman and Miss Dove a middle-aged professor, I believe the story would have been about them engaging in an affair. Nonetheless, it is notable that audiences responded so well to a depiction of platonic, non-romanticized student-teacher relationships. While this film does not contribute to the student-teacher romance genre, it provides an important perspective on appropriate student-teacher relationships to the present analysis.

1960s: *To Sir, With Love* (1967) and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1969)

The 1960s in the U.S. is often remembered for its air of rebellion and protest. This decade contained devastating assassinations, achievements in space travel, the beginning of the Vietnam War, and key events in the Civil Rights Movement. Individual political activism was at an all-time high, and unemployment was low. Consumerism continued to prevail with Americans spending their disposable incomes on music, art, and leisure activities (Garoogin, 2013).

This decade was also a time of artistic influence coming from the United Kingdom known as the British invasion. The widespread acclaim of bands like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones led to the British Invasion (Garoogin, 2013). British influence on other art forms such as sculptures and film made its way across the Atlantic as well. This section will briefly discuss two British student-teacher romance films that were popular in the U.S.

One could attribute the popularity of *To Sir, With Love* (Clavell, 1967) and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (Neame, 1969) to the British invasion. *To Sir, With Love* stars Sidney Poitier as Mr. Mark Thackeray, an African American engineer who becomes a schoolteacher for a group of rowdy White students in the slums of London's East End. The film's titular song, performed by Lulu, was the number-one song on the *Billboard Hot 100* for five consecutive weeks. (Billboard, 1967). The film likely gained popularity in the U.S. because of Poitier's involvement; Poitier became the first black actor to receive an Academy Award for Best Actor three years prior to its release (Kaufman, 1964).

Both films involve romantic relationships between students and teachers. In *To Sir, With Love*, one of Mr. Thackeray's students, Pamela, has a crush on him. Other students are aware of this crush, and another teacher tells him about it. He accepts Pamela's request for him to dance with her at their school dance. Nothing physical happens between them, but he does not discourage her feelings and it is implied that he returns them.

This is a complicated representation of a student-teacher romance. As previously mentioned, Mr. Thackeray does not cross any physical boundaries with Pamela. When Pamela asks him to dance with her at the end-of-term dance, he accepts. I believe that what one permits, one promotes. By accepting her invitation, he is encouraging her feelings for him and indicates that he reciprocates her romantic interest. Is this a more acceptable portrayal than a teacher engaging in a sexual relationship with a student? The film provides no closure, so we do not know if their relationship goes further than the end-of-term dance, but his encouragement allows an opportunity for either party to pursue their feelings. In chapter three, I provide a more in-depth discussion regarding student-teacher relationships that begin after class instruction ends. Personally, I have trouble with this film propping up Mr. Thackeray as a model teacher and

positively portraying his encouragement of a student's crush on him. It walks a thin line, but I will not go as far as saying that the relationship depicted in this film is an abuse of power.

The focus of the movie is on the teacher, Mr. Thackeray. In a romantic interaction between a student and teacher, the responsibility should be placed on the teacher. It is for that reason that I like that the film focuses on Mr. Thackeray's experience rather than Pamela's. We see him deal with a coworker questioning his treatment of Pamela and how he treats his interactions with Pamela for the rest of the film. While it appears as though he may reciprocate her feelings, I think it is good for the audience to see Mr. Thackeray go through this emotional journey and ultimately choose not to cross any boundaries with his student.

To Sir, With Love had to take place in a school as it is based on an autobiographical novel about the real-life teacher characterized in the movie. This 'student crush' storyline was added in the adaptation process. The arc of the film follows a teacher with no experience winning over a group of rebellious, misbehaving students. I believe the culmination of this romantic storyline is meant not only to show that Mr. Thackeray has won over all of his students—and one student's heart—but also to show that he is a man of integrity for not carrying on an intimate relationship with his attractive young student.

What is intriguing about this film's attitudes toward education is how they interact with age and race dynamics. It is safe to say that the Hollywood film industry would not have created a film about a Black teacher becoming a beloved mentor to a group of White American students in 1967. While the U.S. Civil Rights Movement was making strides, guidelines in the American film industry were still preventing interracial relations at that time. The Hays Code was enforced until 1968, and it included a clause stating that "Miscegenation (sex relationships between the white and black races) is forbidden" (MPPDA, 1930, *II. Sex*). This would have been especially

difficult considering the romantic connotations between Mr. Thackeray and Pamela. Mr. Thackeray is a Black male teacher and Pamela is a White female student. Pamela's race gives her social power over Mr. Thackeray, while Mr. Thackeray's age and position as her teacher give him power over her. Mr. Thackeray does not abuse his power because he does not cross any sexual boundaries with Pamela; however, it is heavily implied that he reciprocates Pamela's romantic feelings for him. While discrimination toward people of color existed during this time in Britain, violent, racially motivated acts were decreasing, and liberal reforms were gaining traction (Holmes, 1975). It is possible that had this been a story about a White teacher and student, they would have pursued a romantic and/or sexual relationship. These factors and Poitier's status in American cinema may have made this film more palatable to audiences in 1967.

This is the first film in the present analysis in which a teacher has chosen not to act on feelings for a student. For that reason, *To Sir, With Love* is an example of a film in the student-teacher romance genre that does engage in abuse of power.

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie follows the titular character and the students she teaches at an all-girls school in Edinburgh. Miss Brodie, played by Maggie Smith, is an outspoken, independent woman. The film is based on a novel of the same name by Muriel Spark. At the Academy Awards, the theme song of the film was nominated the Best Original Song and Maggie Smith won Best Actress for her role.

In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, the romance happens between one of Miss Brodie's students, Sandy, and a male art teacher, Teddy Lloyd. Mr. Lloyd forcefully kisses Sandy, and she pushes him away, uncomfortable. Miss Brodie encourages Mr. Lloyd to have an affair with a

different student, but Sandy pursues an affair with him out of jealousy. She ends the affair when she realizes that he has harbored feelings for Miss Brodie the whole time.

This film engages in a clear abuse of power in the relationship between Mr. Lloyd and Sandy, but it does not excuse the behavior. Mr. Lloyd is portrayed as a predator. He continues to make advances on women after they rebuff him, and he is obsessed with Miss Brodie throughout the film. What is interesting is that Sandy calls out Miss Brodie for abusing her power by influencing her pupils for her own interest, while Mr. Lloyd is just portrayed as pathetic for being unable to love anyone but Miss Brodie.

The focus is on Sandy as she becomes the victor of the film. One significant theme of this film is agency. Mr. Lloyd's predatory actions toward both Sandy and Miss Brodie show the difference in the amount of power students and teachers have through their abilities to practice agency. When Miss Brodie encourages Mr. Lloyd to pursue a student to get him to leave her alone, it puts Sandy in a dangerous situation with her married teacher in which he abuses his power over her. Miss Brodie can easily reject Mr. Lloyd's advances as they have an equal-power relationship. Sandy, who initially rebuffs Mr. Lloyd's advances, is young and insecure. She gives in to Mr. Lloyd's pursuit as a way of emulating Miss Brodie's air of maturity and promiscuity. Mr. Lloyd eventually reveals that his feelings are not for Sandy but for Miss Brodie. Sandy practices agency by removing herself from the situation when she realizes that he has no special interest in her; he is just using her to distract from his real feelings for Miss Brodie. This situation exposes Sandy to the selfish nature of her role models.

This film deals with lots of power dynamics in age, gender, and status. The prominence of the student-teacher power dynamic makes a school the perfect arena for this story. Miss Brodie is the opposite of Miss Dove; this film shows us the negative impact a teacher can have

on their students. This movie aims to point out Miss Brodie's abuse of power, but I am not sure that it is trying to point out Mr. Lloyd's.

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie views the all-girls school as a place for female students to learn how to become cultured women. What Miss Brodie teaches her students in the classroom is not nearly as salient as the wisdom she imparts upon them during breaks and outside of school, like stories of her travels and her romanticization of European dictators. Her young students listen to her opinions and cultural experiences and absorb them as facts. This film also highlights the rare position educators are in to mishandle the influence of their students as shown through one student who dies after joining the Spanish Civil War at Miss Brodie's suggestion.

While the film does not acknowledge the sexual abuse by Mr. Lloyd, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* moves the genre in a positive direction by recognizing professorial abuse of power. This film allows audiences to see diverse factors that may motivate people to partake in a student-teacher romance. Through a teacher crush and an abusive student-teacher affair, these two British films appealed to 1960s U.S. audiences in unique ways.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I analyzed a single Hollywood film per decade from the 1920s until the 1950s and two British films from the 1960s. This chapter denotes the first of three eras in the genre's development. I argue that the films of the genre during this era reflect the political and social climate in the United States and constitute how people defined abuses of power during that time.

This analysis finds a clear trend throughout the 1929-1969 era. The films from the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s all treat the student-teacher relationship as a forbidden love or a love that must overcome obstacles rather than an abuse of power. In *The Wild Party*, Stella and Gil both

acknowledge that their relationship would be against school rules (i.e., forbidden love). In *Girls' Dormitory* and *Margie*, the relationships are not explicitly forbidden, but the protagonists wrestle with ethical dilemmas such as the age gap. Additionally, each film ends with successful romantic outcomes for the student and teacher. These findings suggest that Americans at this time did not view student-teacher relationships as abuses of power.

The films from the 1950s and 1960s begin to acknowledge the abuse. In *Good Morning, Miss Dove*, there is no romantic student-teacher relationship present; however, Miss Dove has close relationships with her students outside the classroom. By analyzing the student-teacher interactions in this film, we can see how a teacher conducts personal relationships with students without crossing the line and abusing their power. In *To Sir, With Love*, Mr. Thackeray clearly has romantic feelings for his student, but he chooses not to cross physical boundaries with her. In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, Miss Brodie, an obviously flawed character, encourages Mr. Lloyd to pursue an affair with a student. His advances and subsequent affair with a student are portrayed negatively, and the female student ultimately decides to end the affair. The romantic outcomes in these films are either not present or unsuccessful.

It is important to note that all of the teachers who engage in or consider romantic relationships with students are male teachers pursuing female students. The first three films I analyzed also explore appropriate conduct for women. I imagine that audiences were more comfortable seeing a young woman engage in an inappropriate relationship with the guidance of an older man than they were seeing an older woman corrupt a young man. As society began to progress toward the sexual revolution of the 1960s, audiences were more comfortable seeing an authoritative but noncontroversial female teacher protagonist in *Miss Dove* and a flawed, scandalous antagonist in *Miss Brodie*.

Applying gaze theory to this era is meaningful because all the films but the first have a male director; consequently, the gaze in *The Wild Party*, directed by a lesbian woman, is quite different from the others. The gaze in *The Wild Party* is most prominent in the portrayal of Stella's sex appeal. Arzner establishes Stella as both provocative and tantalizing to the opposite sex through the gaze of the other characters in the film. We know that she is suggestive because of the way other characters react to her clothing. Interestingly, as Potter (2011) suggests, the other female students seem to sexualize Stella with their spectatorship more than her male love interest does. The camera does not ogle Bow's body; close-ups only capture her face. The only moment in which the camera fixes on her body is in the scene in the bar. Stella and her friends catch the attention of a group of men. In a shot/reverse-shot sequence, the camera shows the men leering at something off-camera, then cuts to a quick two-second shot of the back of the women's bare legs.

The 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s films were released while the Production Code was enforced, so there are few references to the sexuality of the characters in the films I analyzed from these decades. The women are dressed modestly, and the other characters do not make comments or gaze at their bodies. Romantic connections are much more emotional than they are visual in these films.

The films from the 1960s are unaffected by the Code as they are British films. *To Sir, With Love* ends with a scene at a school dance in which there is a 'Ladies' Choice' sequence. As soon as the ladies' choice is announced, the camera closes in on Pamela as she fixes her gaze on Mr. Thackeray from across the room. He looks back at her and they make a beeline to each other. All the other students and faculty chaperones move back into a circle and watch the pair dance. The film cuts to a wide shot that captures the circle of students and faculty with the teacher and

student dancing in the middle. Everyone watches and a few students and a teacher are shown bobbing their heads and clapping along to the music. The framing suggests that this is their moment, despite it taking place at a dance for the entire student body. No one interferes. Even though they do not canonically end up together, the gaze of the camera and the other characters suggests that the film is promoting the romance between this student and teacher.

The gaze of the camera in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* communicates how inappropriate Mr. Lloyd's relationships with students in the film are as well as Sandy's victimhood and independence. Sandy is shown pulling off her stockings and the camera shows Mr. Lloyd leering at her from across the room out of her view. When Mr. Lloyd kisses Sandy without her consent, the shot shows the back of Mr. Lloyd's head and focuses on Sandy's horrified reaction to communicate how wrong this is. In Miss Brodie's classroom, Miss Brodie talks to Mr. Lloyd about another student, Jenny. As they talk, she is standing on a chair changing a lightbulb, and Mr. Lloyd stands at ground level; both of their heads are in the frame. When Mr. Lloyd comments that Jenny is a beautiful girl, the shot changes abruptly to a shot/reverse-shot sequence in which the camera gazes up at Miss Brodie and down at Mr. Lloyd. She angrily states that Jenny is much more than her looks and, as the camera zooms in closer to her, she begins to suggest that Mr. Lloyd should pursue Jenny in covert language. The camera begs the audience to focus on what she is really saying. Miss Brodie looks villainous from this angle. The camera and Mr. Lloyd's aggressive response to this suggestion communicate that Miss Brodie has malicious intentions. The character of Miss Brodie has a complicated relationship with empowerment. She implores Mr. Lloyd to think of Jenny as more than an object, but the framing of the camera suggests that she does not do this because she cares about Jenny. Miss Brodie's intentions are self-serving. She wants to be perceived as someone who cares about women wholistically, but

she does not. In this scenario, she contributes to her image as a woman who cares about female empowerment, then she prompts a man to commit an act of sexual violence against a young girl.

My goal with this thesis is to analyze the student-teacher romance film genre as a means of understanding how Americans constituted abuses of power through student-teacher relationships in a particular period of time. The present analysis suggests that by the 1960s Americans were beginning to view student-teacher romances as abusive.

The findings of this analysis provide context as we move into the second era: the 1970s through the 1990s. As the genre becomes more popular, there are more examples from each decade that provide a fuller picture of how the abuse of power was depicted.

Chapter 3: Sexploitation in the Classroom

The student-teacher romance genre gained more popularity in the 1970s and Hollywood began regularly producing films of this category. The 1970s begin the second era I identify in the development of the genre. This chapter analyzes multiple films from each decade from the 1970s through the 1990s plus one TV show in the 1990s. While the broad genres of each film vary between thrillers, murder mysteries, and screwball comedies, these films are filled with graphic nudity, sex, and references to sex. These relationships entail more gender disparities in student-teacher roles. In many of these films, the relationship is not the central focus of the plot but is used as a device within the plot. I argue that the films of the genre during this era utilize the student-teacher relationship to exploit female sexuality and negate the abuse of power over teenage girls by representing them as erotic and teenage boys by asserting their need for sexual growth.

My analyses for this era share all but one criterion with the previous chapter. I begin by establishing whether the film or TV show displays an abuse of power. Next, I identify whether the film focuses on the student or the teacher. Third, I explore whether the filmmakers are providing a commentary on student-teacher romance, or if the school was chosen as a convenient location for the film. I have chosen not to address the films' attitude toward education as I did not find that the films in the genre from this era were focused on portraying education in a specific way. Lastly, I discuss how the specific film or TV show contributes to the student-teacher romance genre.

1970s

The economic crisis and shifting social norms of the 1970s continued the erosion of the nuclear family model. The model of the breadwinner husband and the stay-at-home wife and

mother proceeded its collapse as women's access to higher education improved and divorce rates skyrocketed (Schmidt, 2018). Universities began adopting women's studies programs, allowing feminist scholarship to multiply rapidly (Schmidt, 2018).

There was an increase in sexual permissiveness and streaking in entertainment and on sites like university campuses (Cover, 2003). Hollywood films in the 1970s saw a spike in graphic nudity and depictions of sex acts. The Motion Picture Production Code ceased existence in 1968 and was replaced by a rating system created by Jack Valenti (Sklar, 1976). The rating system provided more freedom for filmmakers to include sexual content to be seen by mature audiences.

The nude form is not inherently sexual but, as Cover (2003) says, it becomes sexual when coupled with the presence of a second gazing actor. Grosz (1998) suggests three contexts to delineate the legitimacy of nakedness under another's gaze: 1) in a power relationship in which the lesser member permits gazing at their body; 2) in intimate relations between sexual partners; 3) in a mediated representation of nudity such as art, pornography, or cinema. In some way, each of these contexts is at play in this genre. Any student-teacher romance film depicting nudity is a mediated representation, typically in the context of intimate sexual relations. However, Grosz explains the first context as a power relationship between a parent and child or doctor and patient; Grosz is referring to non-sexual depictions of nudity. This genre blends the first two contexts by depicting nudity within the power relationship of a teacher and student and in a sexual context. Grosz elaborates that the lesser member of the power relationship consents to the superior party's gaze. When both contexts are present, the teacher is committing statutory rape and the student legally cannot consent. This further establishes the abuse of power present in this genre through the gaze.

In previous decades there were few Hollywood student-teacher romance films released. There is a clear spike in the genre's popularity as I have identified four 1970s films that fall into the genre. These films are similar in that they all contain graphic sexuality and female nudity. Up until this point, the only film I have mentioned that contains nudity is *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (Neame, 1969). All four films depict graphic sex scenes between teachers and their students. While these films carry a small variation in genre, they can all be considered exploitation films. Academic definitions of exploitation films are vague and varied, but most scholars agree that it is a category of sensationalized films with low budgets that depict graphic sexuality and excessive violence (Waddell, 2018). Exploitation films in the student-teacher romance genre seem to add objectification to the blatant abuse of power they typically depict.

The first film is *Pretty Maids All in a Row* (Vadim, 1971). It is directed by Roger Vadim and written by Gene Roddenberry. The movie is a black comedy, sex comedy, and murder mystery adapted from Francis Pollini's 1968 novel of the same name.

This film focuses on a high school that is being terrorized by an unknown serial killer. The two principal characters are Ponce, a sexually frustrated student, and Michael "Tiger" McDrew, the football coach and guidance counselor played by Rock Hudson. Tiger regularly engages in sexual encounters with students on school grounds and encourages Ponce and a female substitute teacher, Miss Smith, to engage in a sexual relationship to fix Ponce's problem. After sleeping with Miss Smith, Ponce finds evidence that Tiger is the killer. Ponce confronts Tiger who subsequently drives his car into the ocean. The film ends with a now confident Ponce flirting with his female classmates at Tiger's funeral.

This film depicts sexual relations between a male teacher and multiple female students, as well as a female teacher and one male student. These teachers are both abusing their power, but

their affairs are depicted very differently. A scene cuts between Miss Smith seducing Ponce and Tiger sleeping with a female student. Miss Smith and Ponce are talking and dancing; Ponce is nervous, and she is trying to make him comfortable. The scene is well-lit and slow, smooth jazz plays in the background. The film cuts to Tiger and an unnamed female student in the van. There is no dialogue, the scene is dark so that the actors can hardly be seen, and a fast-paced rock song plays on the radio as they tear each other's clothes off. It cuts back to a close-up of Ponce and Miss Smith's conjoined hands as they slow dance and Miss Smith asks about his relationship with his mother. These educators are abusing their power equally by engaging in sexual intercourse with their young students; however, Miss Smith's tryst with Ponce is portrayed as charming and intimate. In fact, Miss Smith is not only abusing her power as his teacher, but she is abusing his power as someone with more sexual experience than Ponce.

The focus in this film does not center solely on the teachers or students. Vadim chooses to make the male character the focus of these romantic scenarios. Tiger sleeps with several students throughout the film. These young female characters are not given names or personality traits, and most of them do not speak. Their lack of character dimension trivializes their victimhood for the viewer. Later in the scene where Miss Smith seduces Ponce, he accidentally sits on and breaks a liquor-filled chocolate duck while he and Miss Smith are kissing. His pants are covered with liquor, so Miss Smith comforts Ponce and unbuckles his belt for him. It feels as though she is his mother; she is infantilizing him. Because the movie ends with Ponce's character becoming a more confident romantic partner, viewers are supposed to think that Miss Smith's seduction has helped him mature. Her motivation for sleeping with Ponce does not matter; all that matters is that Ponce is now a mature sexual being.

Pretty Maids All in a Row is not making a commentary about student-teacher romances. Every single factor of this film is meant to stimulate its male audience. The affairs between teachers and students fetishize the professorial power dynamic. Tiger's domination of students and Ponce being dominated by Miss Smith evoke male fantasies.

While Tiger faces consequences for his behavior by dying at the end of the film, Miss Smith does not face any consequences for abusing her power over Ponce. In fact, the film asserts that sleeping with Miss Smith benefited Ponce. Therefore, this film is another example of the genre that at once acknowledges and disregards the abuse of professorial power.

The Teacher (Avedis, 1974) is written, directed, and produced by Hikmet Avedis. The film is a low-budget erotic thriller about a relationship between an 18-year-old boy and his 28-year-old female teacher. The three main characters are the teacher, Diane Marshall, the student she seduces, Sean Roberts, and her teenage stalker, Ralph Gordon.

Taking place over summer break, the film begins with Ralph watching Miss Marshall sunbathe from an old warehouse. Sean and Lou, Ralph's younger brother, watch her undress and exercise from the same warehouse. Ralph sees that the other boys are watching her and yells, startling them. Lou falls off a railing to his death. Ralph blames Sean for Lou's death and threatens him to not tell the police that he was involved. The next day, Miss Marshall invites Sean over for tea and reveals that she knows Ralph is stalking her. Miss Marshall comes to Sean's house the following day and talks to his mom about her interest in leaving her husband for a younger man. Sean comes back to her house later that day and they sleep together. Ralph watches with jealousy.

Miss Marshall and Sean continue their affair. Sean's parents find out about the relationship: his father is uncomfortable because Miss Marshall is married, but his mother is fine

with it. Ralph continues to threaten Sean and the film culminates with their final confrontation. Ralph kills Sean, Miss Marshall shows up and kills Ralph in self-defense, and the film ends with Miss Marshall weeping over Sean's body.

The relationship between Miss Marshall and Sean is similar to Miss Smith and Ponce's relationship in *Pretty Maids All in a Row*. Unlike Miss Smith, Miss Marshall shows no hesitation in sleeping with a student. In fact, it is implied that they are helping each other. Sean helps give Miss Marshall the courage to leave her deadbeat husband, and Miss Marshall teaches Sean how to be a lover. Much like Ponce, Sean is nervous, and Miss Marshall must make him feel comfortable in order to seduce him. Their relationship is not treated as an abuse of power but as a tragic love story.

The Teacher, despite what its title suggests, focuses equally on Sean and Miss Marshall. Sean's motivation for engaging in the relationship is teenage curiosity. Like Ponce, his tryst with Miss Marshall makes him more confident. Miss Marshall is tired of her abusive husband, and she wants to pursue a nicer, younger boy like Sean.

Miss Marshall faces consequences when Ralph, jealous that he is not the receiver of her affection, kills Sean. Avedis may be pointing out the intensity of teenage feelings. Rather than dealing with his unrequited feelings, Ralph responds with an act of violence. I do not believe this film is attempting to explore the nuances of toxic masculinity; however, it could point to teenagers' inability to handle adult relationships, something films in the student-teacher romance genre tend to ignore.

I will not go as far as saying that this is a progressive representation of abuse of power in the student-teacher romance genre. I believe this film is meant to sensationalize its characters, not study them in a complex way. Ultimately, elements of this film may portray the student-

teacher romance as a cautionary tale, but its poor execution falls short of communicating such a message.

The next film is B-movie *Summer School Teachers* (Peeters, 1975). It is directed and written by Barbara Peeters. In 1977, Gross from the *Los Angeles Times* praises Peeters for dealing with serious issues in an exploitation film, one of those issues being the “trauma of teacher-student romance” (p. 91). Vagg (2019) suggests that the female characters in the film are empowered because, while there is nudity, “...the women are confident and in control: they do most of the seducing” (para. 10). In his discussion of the sex scenes, he mentions such scenes from two out of three main characters, omitting the student-teacher sex scene.

This movie follows three friends who travel from their Iowa hometown to California to be high school teachers for the summer. Two of the friends partake in romances with age-appropriate co-workers while one teacher, Denise Carter, becomes involved with a delinquent student, Jeremy. The principal finds stolen items in Jeremy’s locker, and Miss Carter vehemently defends him. The principal says to Miss Carter, “I find your extreme interest in the student, shall we say, not quite in the normal line of duty” (Peeters, 1975, 0:34:22), but she does not get in trouble. Miss Carter is hesitant when Jeremy first shows interest, but she accepts his advances after rescuing him from a fight. They carry on an affair. It is unclear whether the school administrators found out about its sexual nature. Ironically, Miss Carter’s friends both get suspended for inappropriate conduct, but Miss Carter does not. Their story ends with Miss Carter saving Jeremy from danger and getting the principal arrested for framing him.

Summer School Teachers ignores the abuse of power it conveys. Unlike the boys in the last two films, the male students in *Summer School Teachers* are the seducers. They are not nervous to pursue their teachers. On Miss Carter’s first day, Jeremy intimidates and forcibly

kisses her. Although she does not “help” him gain sexual prowess, Miss Carter still takes on a motherly role by helping him out of trouble. Before their relationship becomes romantic, when the principal suggests that her interest in Jeremy is suspect, Miss Carter calls him small-minded and says that he does not know “what caring is all about” (Peeters, 1975, 0:34:39). The principal is portrayed as the villain in this scenario. Miss Carter’s defense of a troubled student is appropriate, but she abuses her power when it becomes romantic. Portraying Jeremy as a more active participant in the relationship makes him seem less like a victim of abuse.

Miss Carter’s experience is at the center of the film. The story conveys her initial struggle with the troubled summer school students and her eventual transformation into an advocate and motherly figure for students like Jeremy. When Miss Carter tells Jeremy that she knows that he did not commit the crime the administration is attempting to pin on him, he kisses her after asking why she cares. Miss Carter pushes him away, then accepts his advances when he says, “don’t turn away. I need somebody not to turn away” (Peeters, 1975, 0:44:40). We see that he is emotionally damaged, but we never learn why. This information services Miss Carter’s emotional journey, not Jeremy’s.

Summer School Teachers has themes of female empowerment and sexual autonomy that were progressive for the time. The exploitation of these female characters can be viewed differently because the film was written and directed by a woman. I believe Peeters’s intention was to depict Miss Carter standing up to the male administration to save the man that she loves. However, her film does not acknowledge the immoral behavior Miss Carter engages in by carrying on this relationship with Jeremy, and she does not portray Jeremy as a victim of Miss Carter.

This film is a generally positive portrayal of women. While it sexualizes its female characters, it does so to point out the male characters' misogyny. As a part of the student-teacher romance genre, this film fails to recognize the abusive nature of its central romantic relationship.

Finally, *Malibu High* (Berwick, 1979) is an exploitation film directed by Irvin Berwick and co-written by John Buckley and Tom Singer. Jill Lansing stars as Kim Bentley, a high school student turned criminal. The student-teacher affairs in this film are a narrative component rather than the central plot. After her father commits suicide, Kim gets broken up with, has no money, and her grades are slipping. Kim meets a pimp and becomes a prostitute to make money. She flirts with a teacher and tells him where she will be after school; he meets her there and they have sex. The next day at school, Kim tells him that she expects an A in his class. Her circumstances escalate and she ends up becoming a hit woman. The film ends with Kim being shot by a police officer.

The portrayal of abuse of power in *Malibu High* diverges from all previously mentioned films in the genre. The filmmakers present Kim as having power in all situations. This is not a scenario of a student or teacher's feelings clouding their judgment. Kim is failing her classes and does not want to do the work to raise her grades, so she takes advantage of her professors and uses her body to blackmail them into giving her good grades. This movie is not meant to be a realistic portrayal of a high school student's experience, so I do not fault this film for choosing not to address the adults' responsibilities in this scenario. However, I find it peculiar that Kim faces consequences for her actions, and the teachers do not.

Malibu High spends little time focusing on the teachers. Kim's rebellious journey is the central focus of the film; the teachers are just pawns in her schemes. Her history teacher, Mr. Donaldson, holds her after class to confront her about the scandalous outfit she has worn to

school. She flirts with him, and he rebuffs her. As Kim leaves, she tells Mr. Donaldson where to meet her after school if he is interested, and he responds by telling her he is not interested. When Mr. Donaldson shows up, Kim is waiting for him in a secluded spot on a picnic blanket. What follows is a scene of the two kissing in their undergarments that lasts one minute and twenty-five seconds. For reference, the sex scene between Tiger and the unnamed female student in *Pretty Maids All in a Row* lasts six seconds. The scene is shot in broad daylight and a slow jazz song plays. Six weeks later when Kim tells Mr. Donaldson she expects an A in his class, he reveals that at some point he told her that their encounter would not have any effect on her grade. However, he seems to be trying to blackmail her back by failing her because she has not “had any time for [him] for the last six weeks” (Berwick, 1979, 0:36:15). Kim threatens to tell his wife about a birthmark of his if he does not grant her an A. Kim propositions her physics teacher, Mr. Mooney, as well. Mr. Mooney sounds nervous when she asks him for personal help outside of school. When it becomes obvious that her advances are sexual, he raises his voice in resistance, but he still meets her after school. The teachers are presented as powerless against Kim’s advances.

I do not believe this movie is attempting to comment on student-teacher romance. In fact, I do not think this film needed to be about a teenage girl at all. This could have been about an attractive adult woman who, down on her luck, turns to sex work to make a decent living. Maybe the filmmakers chose this setting because school films were popular at the time.

Overall, I dislike the message of this film. Kim is a product of her environment, not a bad seed. This is a tragic story of a young girl engaging in dangerous behaviors and continually being failed by the adults in her life, including the two teachers with whom she engaged in sexual relationships. It seems merciless to end the film with her untimely death. Because the film is

written and directed by men, it feels misogynistic to portray a teenage girl using her sexual power to take advantage of men, then ultimately dying as a consequence of her actions. This representation is reminiscent of the professors in *Girls' Dormitory* (Cummings, 1936) who claim that schoolgirls take advantage of poor, defenseless professors. It sends the message that female sexuality is dangerous, and men are helpless in resisting it.

1980s

Many Americans remember the 1980s as the Reagan era. Ronald Reagan was President of the United States from 1981 until 1989 and his values of patriotism, national strength, and empowerment of the individual shaped the political and cultural landscape of the country during his reign (Rossinow, 2015). While his impact should not be overestimated, American conservatives' propensity to adopt his individualistic ideas and his former occupation as an actor are integral to understanding this decade in the student-teacher romance genre.

In the midst of the second wave of feminism, the women's movement continued to make major strides. By 1985, more than half of U. S. women with children under the age of six were working (Troy, 2007). The image of the 'career woman' was a popular topic of discourse in media and politics. While Reagan and his traditionalist followers demonized working mothers, mainstream TV and film praised the mom in the workforce; she was their target demographic (Leppert, 2019).

According to Sklar (1976), Reagan's influence engulfed the 1980s Hollywood film industry. It was a time of nostalgia and amnesia. Hollywood itself had become more progressive, but American audience expectations had become more conservative; therefore, Hollywood studios were forced to change what major films they released in order to maintain profitability. The Age of Reagan spawned lots of action-packed, "hard body" blockbuster films and John

Hughes-esque films that appealed to teenagers. The student-teacher romance genre at this time consisted of wild comedic films that had mainstream appeal for teenagers and for adult nostalgia. The films I analyze from this decade include student-teacher romance as a narrative component, not their central plots.

Teachers (Hiller, 1984) is directed by Arthur Hiller and written by W. R. McKinney. This film included stars such as Nick Nolte, JoBeth Williams, Ralph Macchio, Judd Hirsch, and Laura Dern. It is a satirical black comedy film. The film's theme song, "Teacher, Teacher" by 38 Special spent 12 consecutive weeks on the *Billboard Hot 100* (Billboard, 1984).

This film is about a high school struggling to adequately educate its pool of violent, delinquent students. A pending lawsuit against the school puts its existence in jeopardy. There are two notable student-teacher romantic dynamics at play in this film. First, it is revealed that the gym teacher is regularly sleeping with female students in his office. Diane, played by Laura Dern, falls pregnant by the gym teacher and asks Alex Jurel, played by Nick Nolte, to take her to get an abortion. He is hesitant to take her but ultimately decides to do it and is asked to resign when the principal finds out. The principal also discovers that the gym teacher fathered the child and fires him. Mr. Jurel has his own student-teacher romance dynamic with a former student. Lisa Hammond, who attended the school 12 years prior and was Mr. Jurel's student, is a lawyer involved with the lawsuit against the school. Mr. Jurel and Lisa develop a romance and end up together.

The film *Teachers* appears to acknowledge the abuse of power in one of its student-teacher relationships and raises questions about the other. The gym teacher is promptly fired when the administration finds out that he has impregnated a student. This sends a clear message

about the filmmakers' views on student-teacher relationships, considering the administration is presented as apathetic and ineffectual when dealing with other issues.

The central romance of the film is between Mr. Jurel and Lisa, and it evokes compelling questions about romances between former students and teachers. At the beginning of the film when Mr. Jurel is asked about Lisa, he remarks that he remembers her having a great body. This sets up an attraction that existed when he was still her teacher. Lisa also tells Mr. Jurel that she had a crush on him when she was his student. Mr. Jurel is presented as the character of the highest morality in the film, and it is implied that he and Lisa end up together. This begs the question: both parties are grown adults, but does the prior existence of a power dynamic negate the lesser party's ability to consent?

There is no scholarly literature on romantic relationships between former students and teachers (which could act as an answer to the question in itself), but there are several articles about the impact of clinical therapists having romantic or social relationships with former clients (e.g., Brown, 1988, Gottlieb et al., 1988; Sell et al., 1986). Skeen and Nielson (1983) denote that teacher-student relationships are like therapist-client relationships in a few ways: they both involve a distinct difference in power, the more powerful party is in a position to influence the less powerful party's potential for success, and sexual interaction is neither a duty nor a privilege inherent to the relationship for either party involved. The authors mention the importance of the degree to which the party with less power's participation in the relationship is voluntary (Skeen & Nelson, 1983). In a study exploring cases involving therapist sexual impropriety, all therapists who acknowledged sexual contact with clients were found to be in violation of state ethical standards regardless of the time between termination of services and initiation of the sexual relationship (Gottlieb et al., 1988). Brown (1988) concludes that client-therapist relationships

post-termination of services pose equal harm to the client as relationships initiated during therapeutic service. Brown asserts that when the sexual component of a client-therapist relationship begins post-termination, the genesis of their attraction was within the context of the therapy relationship. The author believes that the possibility of a sexual relationship contaminates the therapy process. In musing on the equality of therapeutic relationships, Brown acknowledges that there is often a power imbalance in every relationship, but the therapeutic relationship is inherently imbalanced. If therapist-client relationships are similar to student-teacher relationships, I am inclined to believe that relationships between former students and teachers are still imbalanced.

The filmmakers are pointing out critical issues in the public education system. Through Mr. Jurel's journey, we see how an idealistic teacher in an inner-city high school with few resources teaching students that have already been denied quality education in their primary schools can get burnt out. The film uses satire to depict lots of flawed teacher characters to distinguish between the educators that truly care and those that do not. The gym teacher is an educator that uses his position to take advantage of young girls; he does not care about the students' success. This makes it even more curious that Mr. Jurel, presented as a teacher who truly cares, engages in a romance with a woman to whom he has been attracted since she was his student.

The ethical and moral standing of sexual relationships between former students and teachers is ambiguous. Mr. Jurel and Lisa identify that their attraction to one another began when they were student and teacher, but no action was taken until Lisa was 12 years out of high school. Ideally, both parties would acknowledge the power imbalance and examine if it is still

present in their relationship, but the film does not recognize that the effects of their former roles might still have an impact.

The next film, *Summer School* (Reiner, 1987), is directed by Carl Reiner and written by Jeff Franklin. The film stars Mark Harmon, Kirstie Alley, and Courtney Thorne-Smith. In *Summer School*, unmotivated gym teacher Freddy Shoop, played by Mark Harmon, is forced to replace the remedial English summer school teacher. Bored with the curriculum, Mr. Shoop takes the students to the beach, theme parks, and zoos rather than holding classes. Throughout the summer, Mr. Shoop spends time partying and hanging out with his students, forming close bonds with many of them. One student, Pam, develops a crush on Mr. Shoop and subtly tries to seduce him several times to no avail. Mr. Shoop's behavior is eventually found out and he must help his students pass an exam at the end of the summer term to avoid losing his job. He tells each student that he will grant them one favor if they agree to study, and Pam's favor is to temporarily move in with him. A female teacher finds out that Pam is living with Mr. Shoop and tells him to end it. Mr. Shoop suggests to Pam that they would not work, and she leaves angrily. Toward the end of the film, Pam tells Mr. Shoop that she has outgrown him, but she would like to be friends.

Like *Teachers*, this film condones many illegal and immoral behaviors through its main character but draws a line at romantic relationships between teachers and students. While Mr. Shoop crosses boundaries with students by hosting parties and buying beer for them, he is careful not to encourage Pam's crush on him. In general, Mr. Shoop abuses his power, but he clearly recognizes the negative impacts of a student-teacher romance on a teenager.

The focus of the film is on Mr. Shoop and his journey to becoming a more caring educator. This is shown through his storyline with Pam. Allowing her to move in with him

crosses the line, but his intention is only to help her. The film's stance regarding their relationship is evident when a fellow teacher tells Mr. Shoop that the living situation is inappropriate, especially considering Pam's romantic feelings toward him.

The inclusion of this subplot is meant to serve Mr. Shoop's emotional journey, but it also makes an interesting commentary about students having crushes on their teachers. I like that the story ends with Pam saying she has outgrown him. To me, this says that a teenager having a crush on their teacher is normal. Especially in high school, when students generally see their teachers every day and may receive special attention from them, it should be no surprise that a lot of students develop feelings. However, more often than not, those feelings are fleeting – unless they are substantiated by the teacher.

Overall, this film chooses not to depict a student-teacher relationship and actively calls them inappropriate. *Teachers* and *Summer School* mark a positive trend in the history of the student-teacher romance genre toward responsible depictions of abuse of power.

1990s

Multicultural, feminist, and queer movements continued to prosper in 1990s America under a democratic administration. This came alongside conservative backlash politics in the form of economic anxieties and social victimhood for upper and middle-class White men that Kusz (2001) calls “White male backlash politics.” A few decade-defining events were the Columbine shooting, the Los Angeles riots, the Oklahoma City bombing, and the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky scandal. This late 90s scandal involving a power-imbalanced sexual relationship likely impacted the student-teacher romance genre in the 2000s.

The 1990s continued the era of nostalgic audiences. Drake (2013) suggests that cinema at this time evoked past iconography and commodified the past. Additionally, commercial outlets

allowed for the creation of more independent films (Sklar, 1976). The popularity of Black artists like Spike Lee and Eddie Murphy allowed younger filmmakers of color to get financing for their projects. Sklar (1976) talks about cultural myths and collective memory coming to play in the industry. According to Jacoby's (1997) notion of social amnesia, society was beginning to lose its historical memory. Sklar claims that historical memory became the touchstone of movies' cultural power during this time. In films like *JFK* (Stone, 1991), *Malcolm X* (Lee, 1992), and *Schindler's List* (1993), filmmakers attempted to recreate a moment in history. In doing so, they shaped the discourse surrounding these events. Sklar also mentions the popularity of identity cinema coming specifically from feminist and Chicano filmmakers in the 1990s.

Opportunities for marginalized female filmmakers came alongside media-driven backlash against feminism. The emerging third wave of feminism was driven by movements like "Riot Grrrl" (Knowles, 2018). The 90s Riot Grrrl movement consisted of feminist punk rock bands using angry lyrics to confront sexual violence and call out assailants by name (Doty, 2020). Female-led television media explored post-feminist depictions of women devoted to their careers and struggling with the consequences of the abundance of freedom they had been awarded by the gains of feminist movements (Knowles, 2018). Amid these cultural discourses, the student-teacher romance genre provides several perspectives on different gender and power dynamics.

Released in 1996, *Carried Away* is directed by Bruno Barreto and written by Ed Jones. It is a dramatic romance film based on the novel *Farmer* by Jim Harrison. The film follows 47-year-old teacher Joseph Svenden and his love affair with his 17-year-old student Catherine. Catherine is boarding her horse in her teacher's barn and decides to seduce him. Svenden is torn between the excitement the affair brings to his life and knowing that his actions are morally

wrong. Eventually, several people in town find out, yielding various reactions. The film ends with Svenden's long-term girlfriend leaving him.

Carried Away displays a gross abuse of power and exploits its teenage female character for unscrupulous reasons. This is not an exploitation film, but its portrayal of sexual encounters is similar to those of the 1970s films. The sex scenes are drawn out and vulgar, and the film's stance surrounding the morality of the relationship is murky. Their sex scenes are lengthy, prurient, and hard to watch considering the actors' age difference is larger than that of their characters. The relationship is portrayed as the ideal male fantasy. Catherine, a conventionally attractive teenage girl, determinedly seduces her aging teacher. Her character has few personality traits other than being hypersexual. Catherine does not need a personality, because her role is to bring youthful energy and excitement to Mr. Svenden's boring, dreary life living in a farmhouse with his ailing mother. The film ignores the abuse and, in turn, focuses on how Mr. Svenden's relationship with Catherine reinvigorates his life.

The focus of the film is on how Mr. Svenden's student-teacher romance affects him. Mr. Svenden recognizes that his behavior is wrong, but he chooses to continue the relationship. The first person to discover their affair is the town doctor, Dr. Evans, who promptly confronts him about it:

Dr. Evans: She certainly has a sweet-looking little body on her, but you ought to stick to fucking grownups, dumbass...when they're that young and as mixed-up as she is, they'll make trouble for you...How long has this been going on?

Mr. Svenden: I don't know. Three months, maybe four. It was her idea.

Dr. Evans: She's 17, you're 47. It was her idea? You're cracking up, boy.

Mr. Svenden: Okay, it was my idea. It's the first initiative I've taken in years.
(Barreto, 1996, 0:58:07-0:58:57)

Both men know the relationship is wrong, but they seem to be more concerned about how it will impact Mr. Svenden's life than Catherine's. I appreciate that Mr. Svenden admits to initiating the

relationship, but the film still fails to recognize the abuse Catherine suffers. When Mr. Svenden's mother finds out, they have a similar exchange in which he says, "What can I say? I'm a bad man...but sometimes it's great fun to be bad" (Barreto, 1996, 1:04:43). His mother replies, "You're not a bad man. If that made men bad, we'd all be lost" (Barreto, 1996, 1:04:55). This 'boys will be boys' mentality negates any admission of guilt. The film knows that, objectively, this relationship is wrong. However, it is not portrayed as an abuse of power. The people around Mr. Svenden justify the behavior as a byproduct of a midlife crisis and act as if he should not have to take responsibility for the trauma he may have caused Catherine.

The novel this film is adapted from does not depict a student-teacher relationship, but a romance between a schoolteacher and an 18-year-old girl who attended the school he used to teach at. As a viewer, I must ask why the filmmakers chose to lower Catherine's age and make her Mr. Svenden's current student. I assume that Barreto is tapping into the schoolgirl fantasy to attract heterosexual male audiences, rather than commenting on the abuse of power in student-teacher relationships.

This film portrays an abuse of power and exploits the sexuality of its female student character. This is one of the most repulsive examples in the student-teacher romance genre. *Carried Away* not only negates its abuse of power, but it exploits female sexuality as a means of exploring the male perspective.

Wild Things (McNaughton, 1998) is directed by John McNaughton and written by Stephen Peters. It stars Matt Dillon, Denise Richards, Neve Campbell, and Kevin Bacon. It is a neo-noir thriller based loosely on several Greek tragedies such as *Medea* (Thorburn, 2010). *Wild Things* spawned three direct-to-DVD sequels.

In this story, high school guidance counselor Sam Lombardo, played by Matt Dillon, is accused raping two female students, played by Neve Campbell and Denise Richards. This accusation is followed by several reveals of what really occurred. First, Suzie (Campbell), admits that her and Kelly's (Richards) accusations were false. Then, it is revealed that Mr. Lombardo was in a sexual relationship with both students and convinced them to make the accusations so that he could sue them for defamation and get paid off by their parents. Mr. Lombardo is then revealed to have worked with both girls separately to scam the other. Kelly and Mr. Lombardo are both killed, Suzie is revealed to be the ultimate mastermind, and she ends the film with millions of dollars from the defamation suit.

Wild Things portrays Mr. Lombardo abusing his power over two female students. However, Mr. Lombardo's intention was always to get money, not to be in a relationship with either of the girls. This film is not attempting to point out the power Mr. Lombardo has over the students as an educator, but the power each individual's sexuality has over the other's desires. In doing so, the film presents its teenage characters as having equal power over their teacher.

Because of the way the story is told, it switches between each character's point of view, thus giving them all equal focus. *Wild Things* ultimately empowers its mastermind, Suzie, and she poisons Mr. Lombardo. Although, I do not think this can be considered a consequence of his abuse because Kelly is also killed, giving their crimes against Suzie equal weight. I do not think Suzie can be a fully empowered character in this movie unless Mr. Lombardo faces the consequences of his actions.

I believe the filmmakers chose to use student-teacher relationships in this film to point out how the public reacts to accusations like this. They are playing with the dynamics of with which party people side and how both the accuser and the accused are impacted. It is made more

ironic by the fact that Mr. Lombardo is a guidance counselor. In that way, that the student-educator dynamic is crucial to the story of this film. At the same time, I am disgusted by the sexualized imagery of teenage characters that place *Wild Things* in alignment with other films in the erotic thriller genre. This film includes several scenes of intense sexuality that take place between Mr. Lombardo and Kelly; Kelly and Suzie; and Mr. Lombardo, Kelly, and Suzie. Much like in *Carried Away*, these scenes are long and graphic. In this film, they act as a visual representation of the characters asserting power over one another. Still, this film raises questions about the over-sexualization of teenage characters, even if they are played by adult actors.

This is an incredibly popular addition to the student-teacher romance genre. It acknowledges the abuse of power by showing the anger of people in town when the girls accuse Mr. Lombardo of assaulting them, but it exacerbates the issue by portraying the teenage female characters as having an equal amount of power over their teacher as he has over them. These characters all use their sexual power to scheme against one another. Viewing this film through the lens of a student-teacher romance film highlights that Lombardo used his professorial power as well as his sexual power, and *Wild Things* fails to recognize that.

Election (Payne, 1999) is directed by Alexander Payne and co-written by Payne and Jim Taylor. It is based on a novel by Tom Perrotta. The film is a satirical comedy focused on teacher Jim McAllister, played by Matthew Broderick, and his plot to keep overachieving student Tracy Flick, played by Reese Witherspoon, from winning the election to become the president of the student government.

One of the inciting events of the film is that math teacher and yearbook advisor Dave Novotny seduces Tracy, one of the yearbook editors. Their affair begins when Mr. Novotny takes all the editors out for pizza, and he and Tracy end up talking alone. He grooms her by

telling her that she is more mature than girls her age, but it is clear when he speaks about her to Mr. McAllister that he is only interested in her because she is young and attractive. They are found out because Tracy's mom finds a book of notes from Mr. Novotny and reports him to the administration. Mr. Novotny is promptly fired, and his wife divorces him. Mr. McAllister is friends with Mr. Novotny and, while he agrees that Mr. Novotny needed to face consequences, he resents Tracy for not receiving any backlash.

Election's depiction is distinct from the other films because the student-teacher affair is quickly found out and dealt with by terminating the teacher. This information is dispelled at the beginning of the film. What is interesting here is that the events of the story spawn from Mr. McAllister being upset about his friend's life being ruined and Tracy getting off unscathed. The implication is that Mr. McAllister thinks Tracy should face consequences for her role in the affair. Mr. McAllister is portrayed as an anti-hero that is unfairly prejudiced against Tracy. This film displays an abuse of power and points out the absurdity of blaming a teenager for being victimized by an adult.

This film mostly focuses on Mr. McAllister, but it spends just enough time on Tracy's point of view to point out how ludicrous Mr. McAllister is acting toward her. The events of *Election* demonstrate that Mr. McAllister harbors jealousy for Tracy. He despises her intelligence and unwavering ambition, and he is ignorant of the emotional issues she experiences. Mr. McAllister effectively becomes an anti-hero. He is described as a great, moral teacher that everyone loves, yet he cheats on his wife and tries to rig the student government election so that Tracy loses. Tracy probably experienced negative personal consequences as a victim of abuse, but her teachers would not be able to see these unless she confided in them. Mr.

McAllister seems to view the situation as his friend breaking a rule, and he thinks Tracy shares equal responsibility for breaking this rule. He does not view it as an abuse of power.

Election is ultimately about the American Dream. It is about students who have their whole lives ahead of them and teachers who try to guide their students to achieve success. All students except Tracy are portrayed as uninterested, directionless, and ready to get out of high school. These teachers are threatened by Tracy because they know her ambition will lead her to success. They are jealous of that. I think Mr. Novotny and Mr. McAllister are abusing their power over her to make themselves feel more powerful than her. This makes for a fascinating commentary about the American education system and utilizes student-teacher romance in a brilliant way.

The movie highlights Mr. Novotny's sexual abuse of power over Tracy, and it also portrays Mr. McAllister's blatant abuse of his status and power. A satirical, well-written script and Payne's direction that allows the viewer to see multiple points of view effectively depicts the preposterousness of the situation. *Election* shows a great understanding of what is wrong with student-teacher romances and positively represents the genre.

Next, I discuss the first television series in this analysis. *Dawson's Creek* (Williamson, 1998-2003) is a popular series on the Warner Bros. television network spanning six seasons. One controversial storyline from the show's first and second seasons is a romance between 15-year-old Pacey Witter and his 35-year-old English teacher, Tamara Jacobs.

Pacey meets Miss Jacobs while working at a video store. He knows Miss Jacobs is much older than him but does not find out she is his teacher until the next day in class. They are found out when a student overhears Pacey talking about the affair in the school bathroom. The student spreads the rumor throughout the school, eventually reaching the faculty. Pacey attends Miss

Jacobs's hearing and tells the school board that he fabricated the rumor. Despite no one finding out that the affair was real, Miss Jacobs receives so much backlash for the rumors that she resigns and leaves town. Pacey deals with many more consequences: he struggles to get over his feelings for Miss Jacobs, people make fun of him because they think he made up the rumor, and classmates still bring it up to him years later.

The depiction of student-teacher romance in *Dawson's Creek* is unique because it is a TV series; therefore, there is more time to flesh out the conflict. The show portrays the whole relationship, its downfall, and what each character experiences in the aftermath. Miss Jacobs's consequences are self-inflicted; she resigns and leaves town. Pacey faces massive social consequences from his family and classmates when they think the rumors are false. In future seasons, Pacey's classmates ask him if he made it up. His girlfriend treats him as though he is at fault when she finds out it is true. This relationship is an abuse of power, but the show does not treat it as such.

Pacey is one of the main characters of *Dawson's Creek*, so the focus is mostly on him in this storyline. We do not know much about Miss Jacobs, but the characters are much more worried about what will happen to her if the truth comes out. The only person who finds out about the relationship before it ends is Pacey's friend Dawson. Neither of them acknowledges that Miss Jacobs had done something wrong. They worry about how it could impact Miss Jacobs. When the rumors come out and Pacey claims that he made them up, everyone in his community chastises him for trying to ruin Miss Jacobs's life.

Dawson's Creek is about teenagers, so a lot of the show's conflicts take place at school. I do not think the creators of the show were trying to comment on student-teacher relationships; I think they wanted to portray Pacey fighting with his self-confidence. Being pursued by a woman

made him feel much more confident, but being reprimanded by his whole town shot his confidence down and made him an outcast.

This plotline comes up a few times throughout the show, and no one ever acknowledges Pacey as a victim of Miss Jacobs. In season two, Miss Jacobs comes back for three episodes, and Pacey's feelings for her return. Dawson tells him to stay away from her. Again, the responsibility to avoid the relationship is put on Pacey, when the adult should not entertain the relationship in the first place. This is an egregious example of ignoring the abuse of professorial power in the student-teacher romance genre.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I analyzed Hollywood student-teacher romance films from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. This chapter denotes the second of three eras in the development of the student-teacher romance film genre. I argue that the films of the genre during this era exploit female sexuality and negate adults' abuse of power over teenage girls by representing them as erotic and teenage boys by asserting their need for sexual growth.

These films all take on a comedic tone; many are considered exploitation films. Compared to the first era, they contain much more sexual content and highlight the vulnerability of the student. According to Goering and Witte (2017), predators who groom their victims often target vulnerable students with tumultuous personal lives who will feel especially gratified by the predator's attention. The student characters in these films are portrayed as vulnerable in a number of ways. Three of the films mentioned that the student in the relationship comes from a single-parent household. Several other students are shown having behavioral problems that authority figures in their lives criticize, thus making them vulnerable to an authority figure who does not criticize them.

We see a clear discrepancy in the depiction of graphic sex in these films. The films from the 1970s all include gratuitous displays of sexuality. These sex scenes all overtly sexualize the female party, whether she is the teacher or student. Compared to the previous decade, the films in the genre in the 1980s depict sexuality among teenagers without sexualizing the students that are in relationships with or attempting to be in relationships with teachers. While these films are filled with sexual content, it is referenced in dialogue more than it is visually depicted. Sex scenes only take place between adults. *Summer School* contains very little nudity. In *Teachers*, we see an unknown woman's breasts at the beginning of the film and Lisa runs topless through the school hallway in an emotional scene at the end of the film. In the 1990s, *Election* and *Dawson's Creek* do not show any nudity; *Election* contains only implied sex scenes between the student and the teacher, and *Dawson's Creek* shows sex scenes that are suitable for network television audiences. In contrast, *Carried Away* and *Wild Things* contain some of the most graphic sex scenes in any of the films mentioned up to this point.

The majority of these films include gratuitous nudity; however, all of them highlight the sexuality of the female characters engaging in student-teacher relationships. This era features four female teachers in relationships with male students. Both female teachers and students are sexualized, and this sexualization is established through the male gaze. *Pretty Maids All in a Row*, *Summer School Teachers*, and *Malibu High* all include scenes in which a man looks at the female teacher or student's body, and the camera follows his eye line to zoom in on the woman's body. The man typically has a reaction of pleasant surprise that is played for comedy. The female form is used in service of a punchline.

The gaze also presents itself in sex scenes. Almost every media analyzed in this era includes a scene in which a woman slowly undresses in front of a man; these scenes are usually

used to communicate the intimacy of the relationship. The scene may show the man in the frame watching her, cut back and forth between the woman disrobing and the man gazing, or focus on the woman's body with an implied gazer off-screen. Shots rarely linger on men undressing in the same way. In fact, there are several scenes (see *Pretty Maids All in a Row*; *Malibu High*; *Teachers*; *Carried Away*) in which the woman is nude, and the man is fully clothed.

Female teachers who prey on young men in these films are often seen as helping them in some way. In *Pretty Maids All in a Row*, Tiger convinces Miss Smith to seduce Ponce by explicitly insisting that it will help him become sexually mature. Sure enough, he is much more confident with girls his age at the end of the film. Miss Carter's pursuit of Jeremy in *Summer School Teachers* helps him feel less alone. He implies this when they first cross physical boundaries. They end up together and Miss Carter is unpunished. *Dawson's Creek's* Pacey refers to himself as "a young boy on the verge of manhood" (Williamson, 1998-2003, 0:24:28), and his student-teacher romance is implied to help him reach manhood. During his relationship with Miss Jacobs, he is more confident than he has ever been. He is much more romantically successful with age-appropriate partners going forward, but he is tormented by his lasting feelings for his teacher and is ridiculed by his family and friends.

In some instances, the relationship is meant to help the teacher. This is similar to depictions in the previous era. *The Teacher* takes the opposite approach. It is implied that Miss Marshall needs to be with a younger man in order to summon the courage to leave her older, apathetic husband. She eventually calls her husband to tell him she is divorcing him, but she ends up facing the consequences of her relationship with Sean. Sean is killed at the end of the film because of his affection for Miss Marshall, and she has to live with that responsibility. *Carried Away* is entirely focused on Mr. Svenden's midlife crisis and how his sexual relationship with his

17-year-old student enables him to take more initiative. In the end, everyone in town finds out about his affair and his partner leaves him.

There is a pattern in how films in this era portray teenage girls and their impact on the audience as spectators. Female students are objectified and sexualized equally as much as female teachers. In the 1970s, second-wave feminists challenged the principles of U. S. statutory rape laws to keep the laws from restricting the sexual autonomy of young women (ASPE, 2004). However, sexually active adolescents are more likely than adults to have experienced coercive sex (The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1994), and, as reported in 1998, half of the children born to minors were fathered by adult men (Donovan, 1998). The criticism of this law was well-intentioned, but there is a potential danger in promoting sexual autonomy for teenage girls. Female students in these films are shown undressing, engaging in sexual behaviors, and seducing adult men. Merskin (2004) argues that media depictions that sexualize girlhood could potentially contribute to the issue of child sexual abuse. In the context of this genre, it is clear that men in these films are attracted to young girls. Portraying young women as erotic and showing them seducing their teachers makes the audience feel less like the teacher abused their power. The maturation of these teenagers through their sexuality may equalize viewers' perceptions of the student and teacher's ability to consent. Even if audiences understand that student-teacher relationships are morally wrong, the over-sexualization of the female student may make the image more palatable.

Student-teacher romance films became much more popular during this time, but they have been gravely neglected ever since. Abuse of power is displayed in a myriad of ways in this era as filmmakers gained freedoms to explore sexual subject matters that would not have been possible previously. These representations of sensationalized abuse necessitate analysis. My goal

with this thesis is to analyze the student-teacher romance film genre to understand how Americans constituted abuses of power through student-teacher relationships in a particular time period. The present analysis suggests that the sexualization of women in cinema from the 1970s to the 1990s may have impacted audiences' perceptions of the abuse of power present in student-teacher romances.

The findings of this analysis establish context to bridge the first era to the third and final era: the 2000s through the 2020s. The modern political landscape and national culture illuminate the ways in which American audiences view student-teacher romance in film and television.

Chapter 4: The Emergence of the Professorial Predator

As the oversaturation of the media market continues, the student-teacher romance genre becomes increasingly relevant. The third and final era I discuss in this genre is the 2000s to the 2020s. This chapter analyzes several films and TV shows released in this time period. The representation of student-teacher romances in film starts to become more nuanced during this time. Simultaneously, romanticized depictions of student-teacher romance become a recurring motif in dramatic TV shows for and about teenagers. While films use student-teacher romance to investigate character motivations and explore themes with great depth, teen dramas use it as a plot device for an erotic storyline or new love interest. The genre has evolved so that the responsibility of the teacher in the student-teacher relationship must be addressed, but I argue that the abuse of power must be identified as a component through dialogue or portrayal of sexual intimacy.

Like the previous chapters, my analysis for each film or TV show will discuss if it portrays an abuse of power and whether that abuse is ignored or highlighted, if it focuses on the teacher or the student's point of view. I will also identify whether the filmmakers are providing a commentary about student-teacher relationships or are just using the school as a convenient location. Again, I found that many of these films were not displaying any specific attitude toward education, so this criterion will not be included. Finally, I will discuss how each film or TV show contributes to the student-teacher romance genre.

2000s

The world transitioned into the new millennium by preparing for Y2K. This was one of the first global challenges created by information technology. Chepaitis (2004) associates the impact on the United States of Y2K, an event that organizations, leaders, and experts had spent

years preparing a response for, with 9/11, an unprecedented crisis that carried massive impacts on the American socio-political landscape. Both events tested the cohesiveness of American leadership, collaborative intelligence, and security cultures, but 9/11 yielded a much more complex fallout.

In the wake of 9/11, the U.S. initiated the war on terror and the War in Afghanistan. The September 11 attacks and the war on terror resulted in increased security measures in countries that receive immigrants, an increase in discrimination against Muslims, and a rise in global tensions (Rousseau et al., 2015). Scholars explore the outcomes of the war on terror and the War in Afghanistan on Americans' mental health (e.g., Brancu et al., 2014; Konrad et al., 2009; Rousseau et al., 2015). In 2003, President George W. Bush set goals for a transformation of the mental health care system in America (Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). Konrad and colleagues (2009) found that there was still not an adequate estimate of the need for mental health care professionals in the U.S. While the crisis was identified, Americans continued to suffer great mental health issues throughout the political warfare of the 2000s.

The 2000s are known as the beginning of the digital age. As computers and mobile phones became more popular, online feminist subcultures began to pop up. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, third-wave feminists of all ages were expressing their beliefs and ideas through zines (Rentschler, 2019). Feminists began impacting the film industry as many women's and feminist film festivals that still operate today started in the 2000s (Kerns, 2019).

This decade includes films and TV shows that address student-teacher romances in various capacities. Until this point, very few films in the genre have been created by women. The difference in contributions to the genre that involve female filmmakers starts to become apparent with the first film in my analysis of the genre in the 2000s.

Blue Car (Moncrieff, 2002) was written and directed by Karen Moncrieff. It premiered at the 2002 Sundance Film Festival and was released in U.S. theaters on May 2, 2003. This film follows Meg, a young female student with an unstable home life. Meg has been abandoned by her father, and her mother neglects her and her younger sister. Mr. Auster, her English teacher, recognizes that she has a talent for writing poetry and encourages her to enter a local poetry competition. They begin spending time together after school preparing the poem she will compete with. As they grow closer, Meg finds out that Mr. Auster is working on a novel. Meg wins the local competition, and he recommends that she compete in a national competition in Florida over Spring Break. Soon after this, Meg's younger sister commits suicide. Meg finds solace in Mr. Auster as they continue to spend time together. One day, as she cries in his arms, Meg kisses Mr. Auster's neck. He seems taken aback, which Meg takes as a rejection and runs out. When they get to Florida, Mr. Auster ditches his wife and son who are traveling with him to spend time with Meg. He kisses her on the beach and takes her back to his hotel room. Meg has been interested in Mr. Auster up to this point, but she seems uncomfortable being in his room. She reluctantly has sex with Mr. Auster, and he stops when he realizes that she is not comfortable. When he is in the bathroom, Meg looks through his notebook and finds out that he is not actually writing a novel; Mr. Auster made this up to impress her. At the competition, Meg recites a new poem that indirectly calls Mr. Auster out for manipulating and abusing her. The film ends with Meg reconnecting with her father and making up with her mother.

Blue Car aims to capture a realistic depiction of a teacher predator abusing his power over a vulnerable student. The sex scene between Meg and Mr. Auster is meant to make the audience uncomfortable. Moncrieff's intention is not to promote this romance, it is to show audiences the trauma students in situations like this experience.

The film focuses on Meg's experience. Viewers see her unstable home life and how much she needs a solid parental figure in her life to stabilize her. This makes it more effective when it is revealed that Mr. Auster is not trying to help her; he is trying to sleep with her.

Moncrieff is utilizing the student-teacher romance to reveal the insidious nature of a teacher predator through Mr. Auster. In their analysis of the film, Goering & Witte (2017) point out the ways in which Mr. Auster is portrayed as a good writing teacher. He is supportive of Meg's writing, he encourages her to enter contests and expand her sense of self as a writer, and he begins a mentoring relationship with her to help her hone her writing skills (Goering & Witte, 2017). These are all best practices for teaching writing, and Mr. Auster is praised in the community as a quality educator. This film shows the audience how Mr. Auster uses his mentor role to get closer to Meg and eventually cross the line into predatory behavior. It allows viewers to rewatch the film and see everything Mr. Auster does in the classroom with Meg to groom her.

This is the first film in the genre that is entirely focused on portraying the abuse of professorial power. I like that Mr. Auster does not appear creepy at the beginning. We see how he hides his predatorial interests by engaging in quality pedagogical practices. *Blue Car* is the first of several films that appears to contribute to the student-teacher romance genre while criticizing it.

Spike Lee's *25th Hour* (Lee, 2002) is directed by him and written by David Benioff. This film received positive reviews with several critics revering its representation of New York City after 9/11. The student-teacher romance is a subplot in this film. *25th Hour* is about a man, Monty, spending his last 24 hours with his friends and family before going to jail for seven years. Jacob Elinsky, played by Philip Seymour Hoffman, is a high school English teacher and long-time friend of Monty. Mr. Elinsky is attracted to his student, Mary, played by Anna Paquin.

He expresses this interest to another friend, Frank, who tells him it would not be a good idea. Monty, Jacob, and their friends spot Mary as they are going into a nightclub. Monty can tell Mr. Elinsky is interested, so he invites Mary to join them in the club, which makes Mr. Elinsky visibly nervous. Mary gets very drunk and tries to seduce Mr. Elinsky. In the process, she takes his hat off his head and puts it on. Mr. Elinsky tells Mary that he could get fired if anyone saw them together. Mary heads upstairs to the bathroom. Mr. Elinsky stares longingly at the bathroom door, then walks upstairs and joins her. In the bathroom, he kisses her. When he pulls away, they both look shocked about what has happened. Mr. Elinsky leaves and stares into the camera with wide eyes. Mary, still in the bathroom, stares into the mirror, looking bewildered, and slowly removes Mr. Elinsky's hat. Mary does not appear again and Jacob, after telling Frank what happened, does not mention it again.

While this plot between Mr. Elinsky and Mary is a small part of the film, it is a unique example of a student-teacher romance. Mr. Elinsky's anxiety tells the audience that he knows how wrong it is, but he has clearly been fighting his attraction to Mary. He musters the courage to kiss her and immediately regrets it. What happens after their kiss is up for interpretation, but I believe Mr. Elinsky had imagined this exact scenario before. I think that it not only did not live up to what he imagined, but it felt wrong. Spending time with Mary at the nightclub and kissing her was wrong, but this film is not promoting this behavior by any means. It is a representation of the reality of the schoolgirl fantasy.

The focus of this plotline is on Mr. Elinsky. All we know about Mary is that she is intelligent, fiery, and assertive. She is essentially portrayed as a sexual object. We do not know much about Mr. Elinsky either, but he is given more interiority and this situation with Mary is presented through his point of view.

As this is a small aspect of the story, I do not think this film is trying to provide commentary on student-teacher relationships. *25th Hour* is about wishful thinking. These characters imagine better realities for themselves, then realize that what they wish for will not truly satisfy them. Mr. Elinsky kissing Mary is a perfect example. He is mesmerized by her, and it takes all the courage he can summon to follow her to the bathroom and kiss her. Then, he instantly realizes how much he has risked just to pursue a fantasy.

This is a great addition to the student-teacher romance genre. In all of their scenes before the kiss, Mary is presented as alluring, and Mr. Elinsky lusts after her. It feels like any other romance. After the kiss, the illusion is broken. Like *Blue Car*, the audience is meant to feel uncomfortable about the kiss. The events of the film do not go far enough to make it an abuse of power, but it leaves me wondering what happens to them after the film ends. Did they pretend the night never happened? Did Mary report him? Did he resign? What I am sure of is that they did not pursue anything further.

Loving Annabelle (Brooks, 2006) is written and directed by Katherine Brooks. Inspired by *Mädchen in Uniform* (Sagan, 1931), this film follows a female student, Annabelle, who falls in love with a female teacher, Miss Bradley, at her Catholic boarding school. Fresh off a breakup and shipped off to boarding school for her rebellious behavior, Annabelle is open with her roommates about being a lesbian. Miss Bradley is dating a male teacher from a nearby all-boys Catholic school. She is still grieving her girlfriend who passed away, and it appears that Mother Immaculata, the principal, is encouraging her relationship with a man. Annabelle and Miss Bradley slowly get closer throughout the film. Miss Bradley is hesitant but does not firmly discourage Annabelle's pursuit. Toward the end of the film, Annabelle sees Miss Bradley dancing with her boyfriend at a school dance. Annabelle takes the stage and performs an original

song she wrote about Miss Bradley. Miss Bradley storms out, Annabelle follows her, and they kiss for the first time. They spend the night together. In the morning, a student who is jealous of Annabelle's attraction to Miss Bradley recommends that Mother Immaculata go check on Miss Bradley. She finds the couple in Miss Bradley's room getting dressed. Mother Immaculata calls the police, and the film ends with Miss Bradley being driven away from campus in a police car.

The relationship between Miss Bradley and Annabelle is an abuse of power. The film acknowledges that their relationship is wrong by showing Mother Immaculata calling the police as soon as she finds out, but, at the same time, the film romanticizes the couple's bond. This muddles the film's stance regarding abuse of power.

Loving Annabelle focuses on both women equally. They are both characters with rich inner lives and backstories. This allows the viewer to understand both the student and the teacher, and it makes the events of the story feel much less predatory and less like Miss Bradley is abusing Annabelle.

I think this film is trying to highlight Annabelle and Miss Bradley's identities as gay women more than their status as a student and a teacher. I'm not sure that this film is much of a commentary on student-teacher relationships so much as it is using the location of a student and a teacher in a Catholic school as an allegory for their forbidden love. Annabelle is out, and Miss Bradley has been closeted since she began working at the school. When Mother Immaculata is reprimanding Miss Bradley, she never directly states what she has done wrong:

Mother Immaculata: How could you let something like this happen?

Miss Bradley: I don't know.

Mother Immaculata: Well, surely there must have been a moment when you thought to yourself, is this really the right thing to do?

Miss Bradley: That would've been every moment...I'm not trying to say what I did was right.

Mother Immaculata: It's not right.

Miss Bradley: I don't expect you to understand, but I love her. (Brooks, 2006, 1:08:22-1:08:38; 1:08:53-1:09:06)

The audience is meant to root for this couple. Mother Immaculata is portrayed as the villain for calling the police, but she is protecting a child from a predator.

At the end of the film, a quote from Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke appears on the screen. It reads, "for one human being to love another; that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks...the work for which all other work is but preparation." Just before this, the final shots of Annabelle and Miss Bradley show them smiling, likely reminiscing about their short time together. They both began the film depressed and broken-hearted but ended feeling joyful, despite their relationship's abrupt end. The audience is supposed to believe that they helped each other love again. They merely acknowledge the abuse of power, but the film does not want the audience to view it as an abuse of power.

Gossip Girl (Savage & Schwarz, 2007-2012) is a wildly popular teen drama that aired on the CW for six seasons. A reboot of the show came out on HBO Max in 2021. I discuss the reboot later in this chapter.

This series is about a group of wealthy, privileged teenagers living on the Upper East Side of New York whose secrets are constantly exposed by an anonymous blogger known as Gossip Girl. In season two, Dan Humphrey, one of the show's main characters, has a short romance with Rachel Carr, a young Shakespeare teacher at their private school. Dan's girlfriend, Serena, immediately loves Miss Carr. Serena is so fond of Miss Carr that she introduces her to Dan. Miss Carr and Dan spend time together outside of school so that she can help him with his writing. Another student, Blair, fabricates a story about Dan and Miss Carr having an affair that gets posted on Gossip Girl to get revenge on her for giving her a bad grade. Once Miss Carr gets Blair expelled for starting the rumor, Serena takes a photo of Miss Carr and Dan that looks

compromising, Blair exposes it to the school administration, and Miss Carr gets fired. Dan feels responsible for her firing. He goes to her house to apologize, and she kisses him, saying that she chose to do so because she does not teach at his school anymore. They sleep together. The administration finds out that the picture was a misunderstanding and Miss Carr is reinstated. Dan's father finds out that they slept together and goes to Miss Carr's house to confront her, but he does not report her. Dan ultimately ends the relationship because Miss Carr sabotaged Blair's college acceptance, and she resigns on her own accord.

Gossip Girl is known for being controversial and putting its teenage characters in adult situations. It comes as no surprise that this show features a student-teacher romance. Nearly every teenage character on this show has some sort of romantic encounter with an adult before they graduate high school, and it is never treated as immoral behavior. Unsurprisingly, *Gossip Girl* portrays Miss Carr abusing her professorial power over Dan and barely acknowledges it as wrong.

Dan is the focus of the story because he is a main character, but the show spends little time on the impact of this relationship on him. Miss Carr is intentionally set up as a young, hip teacher that is more of a friend than an educator. When we are first introduced to her, Dan thinks she is a student because she looks so young. When she helps with his writing, they meet outside of school at coffee shops and restaurants. After Blair is expelled, they discuss the rumor:

Miss Carr: ...this rumor is just so insulting. An affair with a student? Me and you? I would never do that.

Dan: Never? Wow, that's definitive.

Miss Carr: Please, don't take it personally. If you were older, or not a student at the brother school... You can call me in five years. (Savage & Schwartz, 2007-2012, 0:26:42-0:27:04)

Because many of the other characters on the show are presented as immoral and ruthless, this behavior does not seem as wrong as it is, but telling a teenager that he can call her in five years is

grooming. When Dan's father sees the photo, he believes that nothing happened between them, but he points out to Dan that it is still inappropriate for a teacher to meet a student outside of school and after hours. When he finds out they are actually sleeping together, he tells Dan to end it, but his concern is that Dan will lose his college acceptance and Miss Carr will get fired. He does not see this behavior as abusive, just reckless.

Like all the immoral behavior in *Gossip Girl*, the show is using this student-teacher romance for character development and drama, not to provide commentary. Blair makes up the affair and exposes the photo for selfish gain. Serena takes the photo and gives it to Blair because she is jealous. When people find out that they are actually sleeping together, no one reports Miss Carr. They do not see Miss Carr as an abuser that needs to be stopped. When Dan finds out that Miss Carr is sabotaging Blair, he says, "You're just as bad as [Blair] is. No, you're worse. Blair is a high schooler. You're an adult" (Savage & Schwartz, 2007-2012, 34:29). The show acknowledges that Miss Carr should know better when it is convenient for the conflict, but when she is sleeping with a student, they are treated as equal agents.

Gossip Girl is a show that is targeted toward a teenage demographic and refuses to call out student-teacher relationships as an abuse of power. This student-teacher romance plot falls in line with the rest of the show as it portrays high school students as if they are adults. While the show acknowledges that Dan and Miss Carr's relationship is wrong, it does not take the abusive behavior seriously.

2010s

This decade began with an economic recovery from the 2008 housing crisis. Barack Obama was finishing the first term of his presidency before beginning his second in 2012. His presence in this role was significant to people of color across the country. In 2016, Donald Trump won the presidential election, beginning a trend of political polarization in the U.S.

One of the most prominent women's movements in the 2010s was the #MeToo movement. This movement began on social media. Women began using the hashtag to share their stories and experiences of sexual assault, abuse, and harassment online. This led to many prominent figures' past sexual discretions being brought to light. In some cases, they were held accountable; in others, the accusers were shamed.

As the digital age continued, social media became incredibly prominent. According to Twenge and colleagues (2019), the average 12th grader in 2016 spent more than twice as much time online as in 2006, with 82% visiting a social media site every single day. Adolescents spent significantly less time engaging with print media, movies, and television when compared to teenagers in previous decades (Twenge et al., 2019). TV shows targeted toward adolescent audiences had to find a way to keep their demographic's attention. Of the five student-teacher romance examples I cover from this decade, three are teen drama TV shows.

Glee (Murphy et al., 2009-2015) is a musical comedy-drama series spanning six seasons on Fox. During its original run, *Glee* was nominated for dozens of awards, the cast went on a world tour that was turned into a 3D concert movie, and there was a two-season-long reality show called *The Glee Project* in which contestants competed for the chance to win a multi-episode arc as a character on the show.

Glee is about a high school show choir group in Lima, Ohio. At the end of season one, Shelby Corcoran, a show choir coach from a different school played by Idina Menzel, adopts the

newborn daughter of two students in the glee club named Quinn and Puck. In season three, she is hired at their school to coach a second club. She wants to give Quinn and Puck the opportunity to be a part of their daughter's life. In spending more time with them, Miss Corcoran and Puck form a romantic bond and end up kissing in episode four of season three. In episode six, Miss Corcoran tells Puck that their kiss was a mistake, but he continues to pursue her. In the following episode, they sleep together. Quinn threatens to tell the administration, but Miss Corcoran ends the relationship and turns in her resignation in episode eight.

This show displays an abuse of power through Miss Corcoran and Puck's affair. Their relationship is complicated by their adoptive co-parenting relationship; however, this is no excuse. Miss Corcoran is fully aware that she adopted her child from teenage parents. Puck knew her as a high school choir teacher before she adopted his child. Even though their co-parenting relationship gives them an intense bond outside the classroom, Puck is still a student at her school.

The focus of this story is on Miss Corcoran. It has been established throughout the show that Puck has been sleeping with adult women for years, the only difference here is that he has deep feelings for Miss Corcoran and wants to be a family with her and his daughter. This is a unique student-teacher romance example because Miss Corcoran seems to see him more as a potential father to her child than a student. That could somewhat justify her actions, but, when Quinn confronts her, she says, "I think I thought that being with an 18-year-old would make me feel 18 again, but mostly, it just made me feel even older" (Murphy et al., 2009-2015, 23:42). She admits that she just wanted to feel young.

Glee is not providing a commentary on student-teacher romance, they are using this plotline as character development for Quinn. In episode eight, Rachel, another student in the

Glee club, tries to keep Quinn from exposing Miss Corcoran: “First of all, Puck is 18, so what he and Shelby are doing, even though it’s wrong and so gross, it’s not illegal. So, all you’re doing is getting her fired...” (Murphy et al., 2009-2015, 0:0:32). Rachel is saying that because it is not illegal, it is not worth telling the administration. She tells Quinn that she will regret it for the rest of her life if she exposes Miss Corcoran. They bicker about the issue throughout the episode, and, in the end, Quinn decides not to tell because she does not want her daughter to get taken away from Miss Corcoran. The show presents this as the morally correct choice for Quinn to make.

Based on this storyline, it seems like the writers of the show do not think it is wrong for a high school teacher to be in a sexual relationship with an 18-year-old student because they are of age. It is not illegal, but schools typically have rules against teachers dating students of any age for a reason. While anyone is entitled to have that opinion, I find it irresponsible to espouse that belief to an audience made up of mostly high school students.

A Teacher (Fidell, 2013) is a 2013 film written and directed by Hannah Fidell. The film was screened at festivals such as the Sundance Film Festival and SXSW Film Festival. In 2020, Fidell created a miniseries with the same name that I will discuss later in this chapter.

In the feature film, Diana Watts is a high school English teacher in Texas. At the beginning of the film, it is revealed that Miss Watts is already in a relationship with her student Eric Tull. We do not know how the relationship began or how long they have been together. They are both careful to hide their relationship, but they sneak glances at school and find time to talk alone after class. They go away to Eric’s family’s ranch for a weekend, and a neighbor knocks on the door after seeing Eric’s car. Miss Watts is shaken by this incident and suggests that they put their relationship on hold for a while. Another teacher accidentally walks in while

they are talking after class and Miss Watts plays it off as a school-related discussion. This incident causes them to get into a fight that evening. She drives to his house, calls his cell phone and landline, and ends up speaking to his father who assumes she is a student. Miss Watts coaxes Eric outside and pleads with him to stay with her, but Eric rejects her. His dad comes out to check on him, and Miss Watts returns to her car to leave. She checks into a motel and finds a voicemail from the school saying that Eric's father has contacted them, and she needs to call back immediately. The film ends with Miss Watts crying in bed.

A Teacher recognizes Miss Watts's behavior as an abuse of her professorial power. Miss Watts is sexually obsessed with Eric. This film does not romanticize their relationship. Rather than fixating on Eric's victimhood, the film uses their relationship to highlight Miss Watts's unstable and childish behavior.

The film focuses on Miss Watts's downward spiral throughout the film. We do not learn much about who Eric is, but that is intentional. Miss Watts is not interested in being in a committed relationship with Eric. She is obsessed with the feelings of excitement the affair brings, and she often reverts to juvenile behavior when she is alone with him. Toward the beginning of the film, Miss Watts gets jealous when Eric accepts a girl's invitation to a dance, which he accepted to avoid suspicion. As the film continues, she acts erratically. After almost getting caught during their weekend away, Eric tries to sleep with Miss Watts, but she pushes him away angrily. Miss Watts then tells Eric she misses him at school on Monday and tells him to come over to her apartment. That night, one minute she is telling him that what they are doing is wrong and pushing him away, and the next she is clinging to him and asking him to stay. Her volatile behavior is what eventually gets her caught.

Ultimately, this is a captivating, nuanced portrayal of student-teacher romance. *A Teacher* makes you empathize with the abuser without absolving her of responsibility for her actions. The viewer feels for Miss Watts as her sanity deteriorates, but the film makes it clear that she is actively abusing her power over Eric. This film acts as a layered contribution to the student-teacher romance genre.

Pretty Little Liars (King, 2010-2017) is a mystery teen drama series that spanned seven seasons on ABC Family. The show was created by I. Marlene King and spawned three spin-off series. This show follows four girls who are being stalked by an anonymous source called 'A'. One of the most prominent relationships throughout the show is between Aria Montgomery, one of the girls being stalked, and Ezra Fitz, her English teacher. In the first episode, they meet at a bar that Aria has entered illegally. Mr. Fitz is days away from beginning his teaching job, so the two have never met. They hit it off and end up kissing in the bar bathroom. A few days later, he finds out that Aria is one of his students.

Aria and Mr. Fitz's relationship is one of the show's core romantic relationships. They go through many ups and downs throughout the series. They date in secret for months before her friends find out. In season two, Aria's parents find out about the relationship, but they do not report him. At this point, Mr. Fitz has taken a job at the local college where Aria's father works, and he tries to get Mr. Fitz fired. Eventually, Aria's parents allow the relationship. They do not entirely approve but do not stand in the way. In the series finale, Aria, now in her twenties, marries Mr. Fitz.

Pretty Little Liars is the show that sparked my interest in the topic of student-teacher romance films. I watched this show as a teenager, and I always wanted Aria and Mr. Fitz to stay together. When I look back at the show, I am horrified that the creators crafted such a

romanticized depiction of a relationship that is completely illegal, immoral, and unethical. The abuse of power is ignored throughout the show and the relationship is presented so that viewers will root for the couple.

Aria is one of the central characters of the show, so most of the relationship is presented from her perspective. This show makes a point to present Aria as mature and worldly. As the events of the story begin, Aria is returning from her family's one-year stint in Iceland, and her friends suggest that she is more mature after living there. Also, she meets Mr. Fitz in a bar by herself. Meeting in this context puts them on similar levels because Mr. Fitz thought she was over the age of 21, and they meet before they know Aria is his student.

If *Pretty Little Liars* is trying to provide commentary about student-teacher romances, its stance is unclear. The show is all about secrets, and each main character has secrets that they do not want to be revealed. Aria's relationship with her teacher is the secret she is hiding. This might tell the viewer that the relationship is wrong. When Aria tells her parents, they are upset, but they decide not to report Mr. Fitz to the police. Soon after the parents find out, Aria's friend Hanna goes to Mr. Fitz's office on behalf of all of her friends and says, "look, I know what's going down with Aria's parents, and I just want to say that the rest of us don't feel the same way. Two people who love each other that much should be together" (King, 2010-2017, 0:24:07). Aria's parents and friends finding out and allowing the relationship leads me to believe that the filmmakers think, at least in this instance, that student-teacher relationships are permissible.

Pretty Little Liars is the quintessential irresponsible student-teacher romance film. Premiering on ABC Family, this show is targeted toward teenagers. Romanticizing a relationship between a high school teacher and his student for an audience that is either in or about to enter high school is reckless and negligent.

The Boy Next Door (Cohen, 2015) is an erotic thriller directed by Rob Cohen and written by Barbara Curry. Jennifer Lopez stars as Claire Peterson, a high school teacher who is a victim of stalking by a student with whom she had a one-night stand. The film begins with a montage of clips establishing that Ms. Peterson's husband, Garrett, has cheated on her, and they are trying to decide if they are going to divorce. Noah is a 19-year-old boy who becomes the next-door neighbor of the Peterson family when he moves into his elderly uncle's house after losing his parents in an accident. The accident kept him from graduating, so he is still attending high school. Noah befriends Ms. Peterson's son, and he bonds with Ms. Peterson over their shared love of classic literature. Noah seduces her while her son and husband are out of town. Ms. Peterson regrets their encounter in the morning, upsetting Noah. She tries to end the relationship, but Noah starts stalking her. He hacks her email, requests to join her class, and puts photos of their encounter all over Ms. Peterson's classroom that she did not know were taken. He tries to confront and intimidate her when he finds out that Ms. Peterson is rekindling her relationship with her husband. It is revealed that Noah killed his father for cheating on his mother and he tries to do the same thing to Ms. Peterson's husband. The film culminates in Noah torturing Garrett, him pleading with Ms. Peterson to leave town and start a family with him and her son, Ms. Peterson killing Noah, and the family driving away in an ambulance with a nearly dead Garrett.

At first, I did not plan on including this film as Noah is 19-years-old and they sleep together before he is her student. That changed when I read an interview with Curry in which she said that she was inspired to write this film by the story of Mary Kay Letourneau (Papadopoulos, 2015). She wanted to write a story about forbidden love, and she was motivated by Letourneau's story to write a student-teacher romance:

All the recent stories about women who sleep with their students were very interesting to me, especially the Mary Kay Letourneau one: She'd been teaching [her 12-year-old

student], and they kept going back to each other over and over again despite the risk for her. She lost her family over it. As a person, that's fascinating to me. (Papadopoulos, 2015)

In this quote, Curry equates the power of the 12-year-old student and Letourneau by suggesting that they both chose to go back to each other. Thus, she fails to recognize that this is not a story of forbidden love, but a story of abuse. Curry likely chose to write Noah as a 19-year-old to make Ms. Peterson a more sympathetic character. It is confounding to me that Curry would model her film's protagonist after an abuser like Letourneau. This film does not depict abuse of professorial power, but it shows a severe lack of sympathy for the younger, less powerful party.

The focus of the film is on Ms. Peterson. She is the protagonist, and Noah is the villain. After denouncing their night together, Ms. Peterson is portrayed as innocent and helpless when Noah begins stalking her. Many student-teacher romance films represent the teenage student as the pursuer, then they become violent when the teacher later rejects them or regrets the sexual act. Like Noah, these teenagers often have tragic backstories that led them to become violent. In reality, these are teenagers experiencing big emotions. If they go through something traumatic and begin acting violently, in my opinion, the teenager is not evil, they have been failed by the adults and systems of care in their lives. It is revealed that Noah's dad cheated on his mom, so he tried to kill his dad and ended up murdering both of his parents. Then, he tries to do the same thing when he develops feelings for Ms. Peterson and finds out her husband cheated on her. Had any adults in his life intervened, this behavior could have been stopped. Looking at this story through a critical student-teacher romance lens, focusing the film on Noah as a victim would have been more compelling.

The Boy Next Door is not attempting to comment on student-teacher relationships. Curry explains her motivation for writing this relationship: "I wanted to show, despite their age

difference, that there was a real emotional connection...so that she could, in one moment of weakness, think, *This might be OK*” (Papadopoulos, 2015, para. 6). Curry even admits that it was hard to make Ms. Peterson sympathetic because, despite him being 19-years-old, she knows he is a high school student, which is why she chose to make Noah pursue her so aggressively. Cohen claimed in an interview that he had an affair with a Hollywood executive in her forties when he was in his early twenties, he then said, “I’m always grateful to her because she taught me a lot about sex and women and life” (Roberts, 2015, para. 3). He is tapping into the idea that is espoused in many of the 1970s films in the genre, that a young man sleeping with an older woman can help him reach maturity. However, it seems that Cohen misunderstands the film because that is not the relationship explored in the film. Sleeping with Ms. Peterson does not help Noah in any way, it only pushes him toward a sexual obsession that results in violence. *The Boy Next Door* is a musing on age gaps, not student-teacher romance, and certainly not abuse of professorial power.

Curry and Cohen were trying to make a film about a unique relationship dynamic, but I think they executed it poorly. It is completely misguided to draw inspiration for a screenplay from Mary Kay Letourneau, then make the older woman the sympathetic protagonist and the student the villain. Cohen’s comments indicate his interest in older iterations of the genre similar to those released in the 1970s like *Pretty Maids All in a Row* (Vadim, 1971). *The Boy Next Door* contributes to the student-teacher romance genre by following its old patterns.

Riverdale (Aguirre-Sacasa, 2017-2023) is a teen drama series created by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa. This show is based on the characters of Archie Comics, and it aired for seven seasons on the CW network. The show is about a group of teenagers in Riverdale who get wrapped up in the town’s dark mysteries.

In the first episode, young male student Archie Andrews is seduced by his music teacher, Geraldine Grundy. Their affair begins over the summer. Miss Grundy sees Archie walking out in the heat, she offers him a ride home, and they end up having sexual intercourse in her car. Their affair continues for a few episodes. Archie's friends and his father find out about the affair, but no one reports it. The administration never finds out, but Miss Grundy resigns regardless. Archie gets upset and feels guilty that she had to leave town, and everyone who knows about the affair puts all the blame on him. The next time Miss Grundy appears in the show is in season two when she gets murdered.

Miss Grundy abuses her power over Archie, and *Riverdale* recognizes that. While no one reports her, another character's mother finds out about the relationship and refers to Miss Grundy as a predator. It is later revealed that Miss Grundy is in a romantic relationship with a student at the new school she is teaching at. The anonymous killer that acts as the villain of the season breaks into her house and strangles her. In this way, she faces direct consequences for her abuse.

The show emphasizes Archie's experience, but he is not treated as a victim of abuse. He is visibly upset and feels guilty about Miss Grundy resigning, and everyone who knows about the affairs places all of the blame on him. I think it is good that the show recognizes Miss Grundy's abusive behavior, but it neglects to acknowledge Archie's experience as a victim of abuse.

Riverdale is filled with outlandish, dramatic events such as murder, cults, and high school drug rings. I do not believe the show is making a commentary about student-teacher romance; it was just a provocative plot device. However, I believe they always intended to portray this relationship as predatory. When Archie and Miss Grundy first meet, she is wearing the same sunglasses worn by Sue Lyon on the poster of the 1962 film version of *Lolita* (Kubrick, 1962). That film is based on a book by the same name about a middle-aged man infatuated with a 14-

year-old girl. This is a clear allusion and invites the comparison. It is confusing because Lolita, the victim, wears the sunglasses in the film, and Miss Grundy wears them in the show. They could be trying to suggest Miss Grundy's innocence, but I am inclined to believe that the creators of the show want the audience to associate this relationship with the famous literary pedophilic relationship.

While the representation has its flaws, *Riverdale* succeeds in calling out professorial abuse of power. The show's acknowledgment of Miss Grundy's behavior as predatory places it as a positive contribution to the student-teacher romance genre. However, it leaves much to be desired in its representation of victims.

2020s

At this point, I think I can safely assume that this decade will be characterized by the COVID-19 pandemic. In March of 2020, the worldwide pandemic began, and the U.S. has experienced various political and social effects in response to the event.

The rise of political polarization and social justice movements has massively shifted the political landscape in the last three years. In the summer of 2020, the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the police began a wave of Black Lives Matter protests. COVID-19 vaccines became available in early 2021, which started a discourse about whether the shots could be trusted. The issues of race relations and vaccines were points of contention in the 2020 presidential election in which Joe Biden was victorious.

Social norms have shifted this decade in a number of ways. At the beginning of the pandemic, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended everyone stay inside until more research on the disease could be done. Many people were laid off due to a lack of business, and those that could continue doing their jobs shifted to remote work. Non-essential

travel was limited. People were forced to find new and innovative ways to connect with one another using technology.

The entertainment industry was uniquely impacted. While the production of movies and TV shows had to pause for a while, the public spent much more time watching screen media. The number of streaming service subscriptions across platforms hit 1.1 billion in 2020 (Watson, 2021).

I will discuss two TV shows that fall into the student-teacher romance genre. Both shows were released exclusively on streaming platforms. One is a miniseries based on a feature film and the other is a reboot of a show. I analyzed the original versions of both shows earlier in this chapter.

A Teacher (Fidell, 2020) is a miniseries based on the 2013 feature film of the same name. Hannah Fidell, writer/director of the film, also created this show. This limited series spanned 10 episodes and was released on the streaming service Hulu.

The miniseries version of *A Teacher* has similar beats to the feature film, but it covers the relationship from before it begins until ten years after it ends. In this version, the student is still named Eric Walker, but the teacher's name is Claire Wilson. They meet in class and grow closer when Ms. Wilson offers to tutor Eric. Their affair officially begins when—shortly after Eric kisses Ms. Wilson in her classroom and she rebuffs him—Ms. Wilson leads Eric out of the school homecoming dance to have sexual intercourse in her car. After what appears to be several weeks and a weekend getaway to Eric's family ranch to celebrate his 18th birthday, Ms. Wilson confides in a fellow teacher that she is seeing her student. The co-worker reports her sexual misconduct, so Ms. Wilson and Eric run away to escape the police. Eric quickly realizes that Ms.

Wilson is unstable and returns home. Episode six ends with Ms. Wilson turning herself in to the police.

The seventh episode begins with a time jump. Eric is in college rushing a fraternity. Tons of students at his school know what happened with Ms. Wilson because it was picked up by state news outlets. His male friends praise him, but he is still processing his feelings and misses Ms. Wilson. She has been released from prison and is struggling to find a job. Ms. Wilson argues to her brother that she did nothing wrong. Eric reaches out to her, and she can see that he is still attached to her. Ms. Wilson finally starts to realize that their relationship affected Eric negatively.

The final episode takes place ten years after the relationship began. Ms. Wilson is now remarried with two kids and Eric works for a therapeutic wilderness camp for kids. He is back in town for his high school reunion and runs into Ms. Wilson in the grocery store. She wants to talk to him, but Eric is incredibly uncomfortable. They meet for lunch, and he confronts her. Eric tells her that their relationship destroyed him. Ms. Wilson acknowledges that she abused her power as an educator; however, she still believes that he initiated the affair and that she should have turned him down. Eric angrily tells her that he lost years blaming himself before he finally realized she groomed him. Ms. Wilson claims that she is still dealing with the consequences of her actions, and Eric storms out in disbelief that she is still making the situation about herself.

If *Pretty Little Liars* is the most egregious contribution to the genre, *A Teacher* (2020) is the least. This show intentionally romanticizes their relationship when they meet. As soon as they sleep together, the tone of the show changes. The first two episodes end with a pop song playing through the credits. The third episode ends with them sleeping together, and the credits are completely silent. Ms. Wilson's behavior begins to feel much more predatory. Up to this

point, she was incredibly kind to Eric. After their relationship begins, Ms. Wilson is forceful, constantly tells Eric what to do, and gets angry about any small thing he does that could get them caught. Fidell wanted the audience to have the same experience as Eric: to feel like he initiated the relationship, then slowly come to the realization that she was grooming him the whole time.

The show is pretty equally focused on Eric and Ms. Wilson. This helps the viewer to understand each character's motivations and how they were impacted by the relationship. After Ms. Wilson goes to jail, the focus shifts more toward Eric in college. We see more of Ms. Wilson's life again after she is released. *A Teacher* does a good job of showing the range of emotions Eric experiences as a victim of abuse. We see him wracked with guilt because he feels he is responsible, and we see him dealing with other people's responses to what happened. Guys in his fraternity call him a legend, which makes him feel guilty because he thinks he is responsible for Ms. Wilson going to jail. He refuses to go to counseling, and he gets upset when a girl he is interested in finds out about Ms. Wilson and wants to take things slow.

Rather than commenting on student-teacher romance, *A Teacher* is critiquing the student-teacher romance genre. Much of the beginning of their relationship feels derivative of earlier films in the genre. As the third episode begins, Eric is having a dream about Ms. Wilson. They are in her classroom at night. She is wearing glasses with square frames, and her hair is voluminous and blown out; she is meant to look like a teacher from a 1970s film. It is reminiscent of films like *The Teacher* (Avedis, 1974) and *Summer School Teachers* (Peeters, 1975). The show evokes the earlier styles of the genre, then goes beyond the older films by portraying the reality of what happens after they get caught. Fidell is showing her characters partaking in the same behaviors as these older films but presenting it in a way that shows the audience that the behaviors they represented are wrong and have always been wrong.

This is a responsible depiction of a student-teacher romance. Each episode begins with a warning: “This series contains sexual situations as well as depictions of grooming that may be disturbing. Viewer discretion is advised” (Fidell, 2020, 0:0:13). Then, each episode ends with text providing a link with informational resources and prompts viewers to visit the link if they or someone they know may be experiencing grooming. No other TV show or movie in the genre has acknowledged the behavior of the teacher as grooming. When Ms. Wilson admits to a fellow teacher that she is seeing Eric in the fifth episode, she calls the behavior “a monumental abuse of power” (Fidell, 2020, 22:08). *A Teacher* depicts harmful behavior and rightfully calls it an abuse of professorial power.

Similarly, *Gossip Girl* (Safran, 2021-2023) is a reboot of the original show. It features a new cast of characters, but it takes place at the high school that the main characters from the original show attended and occasionally mentions them by name. The reboot, released on the streaming service HBO Max, was canceled while the second season was still airing.

The reboot follows a similar storyline to the original show, but the identity of Gossip Girl is not anonymous to the viewer. Gossip Girl is now an Instagram account run by teachers at the students’ school. A promiscuous student, Max Wolfe, enters a sexual relationship with his classics teacher, Rafa Caparros. For the first three episodes of the first season, Max aggressively pursues his teacher. Mr. Caparros rejects him, saying that he does not sleep with students. However, they become close, and Max goes to Mr. Caparros for emotional support when he is having family issues. At the end of episode four, Max shows up at Mr. Caparros’s apartment, and they sleep together. Mr. Caparros then switches from being resistant to being determined to keep their relationship going without getting caught. At a masquerade party, a guy who used to go to Max’s school tells him that Mr. Caparros has a habit of sleeping with students. Max is not

comfortable with this, so he confronts Mr. Caparros who admits it. Max is done, but Mr. Caparros texts him obsessively. He decides to join the Gossip Girl team. Max sends the account video evidence that they slept together. The other teachers see it and try to figure out what to do. Mr. Caparros knows they saw it and threatens to expose their identities if they do not find information to blackmail Max with. They send Mr. Caparros a video of Max admitting that they slept together, and it makes him see what he did wrong. The story ends with Mr. Caparros resigning.

Gossip Girl displays an abuse of power that, at first, appears to be problematic. It begins with Max unrelentingly pursuing his teacher, then Mr. Caparros seemingly deciding to be with him. It is revealed soon thereafter that Mr. Caparros is a predator who has slept with several students in the past. Eventually, like *A Teacher* (2020), the show directly calls out the power dynamic at play.

Max is one of the show's main characters, so the focus is on him. Unfortunately, because this show has some writing issues, neither character's motivations are very clear. *Gossip Girl* ultimately takes a firm stance against Mr. Caparros sleeping with students whether they are above the age of consent or not, but the execution of this plotline is weak. When Max finds out Mr. Caparros has slept with students in the past, he is suddenly completely uninterested, and Mr. Caparros immediately becomes obsessed. In the seventh episode, Max reveals how he has been feeling about the situation with his teacher:

It's not Rafa's fault. It's mine. I went after him. I pursued him He said we shouldn't repeatedly, but I wore him down and I'm not proud of it. I feel pretty fucked up about it, actually. I've wanted him to feel bad, but...It wasn't his fault. Not just his fault. (Safran, 2021-2023, 0:47:15)

This is the first time the viewer is given any insight into how this is impacting Max. In my opinion, it comes out of nowhere and does not add up with his recent actions. This is probably

because, after he breaks off his relationship with Mr. Caparros, this plot takes a backseat to other plots he is a part of. What makes even less sense is how Mr. Caparros realizes the impact of his actions after seeing the video of what Max said about it: “I wanted revenge on him, a student. A 17-year-old kid. When you sent that, it became clear, I needed him to want me because, when he did, I didn’t have to face what I was doing” (Safran, 2021-2023, 0:52:07). He reveals that this is also what made him quit. The audience is supposed to believe that a character who has been established as a serial predator sees the error of his ways because he hears one of his victims say that he has been struggling because of their relationship. It seems like a rushed conclusion to the story. I think it would have been helpful to show more of what Max was going through and elaborate on how Mr. Caparros concluded that he was in the wrong.

In contrast with most of the teen dramas I have discussed, including the original version of this show, *Gossip Girl* is attempting to provide a commentary about student-teacher relationships. They make a point to acknowledge that the age of consent in New York is 17, which makes Max and Mr. Caparros’s relationship legal. However, they conclude that these students are still kids, and Mr. Caparros is abusing his power. When his coworker Kate finds out that he has been sleeping with Max, Mr. Caparros tries to place the blame on Max:

Kate: You expect us to believe that a student was the aggressor here?

Mr. Caparros: I don’t have to explain myself to you.

Kate: You’re a teacher. You’re supposed to know better.

[...]

Mr. Caparros: I made a mistake, but I can’t lose my entire career because of it. I didn’t take advantage of him. I didn’t abuse my position of power. It wasn’t even illegal, but it will still destroy me. (Safran, 2021-2023, 0:15:42-0:16:27)

As an educator, Kate knows how unlikely it is that Max was truly the aggressor. The show is trying to point out that the student cannot truly be the aggressor because of the power dynamic.

Even though it seemed, on the surface, like Max was pursuing his teacher, Mr. Caparros had the power to shut it down if he wanted to.

The *Gossip Girl* reboot is a step in the right direction. Considering the depiction in the original *Gossip Girl*, this example makes a positive contribution to the student-teacher romance genre. While the story it attempts to tell needs much more nuance than it is given, it is good that Hollywood is beginning to call out abuses of professorial power.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined Hollywood student-teacher romance films and TV shows from the 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s. This is the third and final era in the development of the student-teacher romance genre. The genre has evolved so that the responsibility of the teacher in the student-teacher relationship must be addressed, but I argue that the abuse of power must be identified as a component through dialogue or portrayal of sexual intimacy.

This era displays a clear difference in how sexuality is displayed, and there are two factors that may explain this difference: network television and female directors. Obviously, displays of sexuality are limited in network television. I discuss four TV shows that aired on networks during this era. The two shows from the 2020s aired on streaming platforms where sexual content is not as regulated. There have been more female filmmakers contributing to the genre in this era as well. The gaze in the works I analyzed in this chapter is very different than it has been in prior eras.

All of the network television shows included in this chapter are teen dramas, which are known for putting their teenage characters in copious sexual situations. However, they have to get creative to depict these situations because networks have strict standards and practice guidelines. When Miss Carr and Dan sleep together in the original *Gossip Girl*, the room is dark,

so only their silhouettes can be seen. Their final sex scene is well-lit, but it cuts to a new scene before anything gratuitous can happen. In *Glee*, Miss Corcoran and Puck are shown after they have slept together. *Pretty Little Liars* is similar to *Gossip Girl* in that the camera cuts before it gets too graphic. In *Riverdale*, Archie and Miss Grundy are in a car and the action is obstructed by rain on the windows.

In *Gossip Girl*, *Glee*, and *Pretty Little Liars*, the student-teacher relationships establish emotional connections through looks between the characters. The gaze of the camera and the viewer is much less important than the gazes of the student and teacher. In each show, the characters share looks at school or in other public spaces that communicate their feelings to one another without revealing their romance to the people around them. *Riverdale* is different. While it is supposed to depict a deep relationship, the student-teacher romance is purely a sexual affair. The first time Archie and Miss Grundy meet, he is walking down the street on a hot day. He lifts his shirt to wipe the sweat off of his face. Miss Grundy drives by, peering at his torso over her sunglasses. They share a few lines of dialogue before it is revealed that they sleep together. Her gaze suggests that she is only interested in Archie sexually.

TV shows created by and for streaming services are unrestricted in sexual content and use the gaze in a multitude of ways. *A Teacher* features lots of sexual situations but only shows Miss Wilson and Eric's bodies when it is necessary. The camera is placed intentionally so that it does not ogle them, but it highlights their emotional states in any given situation. The *Gossip Girl* reboot displays its teenage characters in graphic sex scenes throughout the show. However, they present the relationship between Mr. Caparros and Max differently. Max is upset and goes to Mr. Caparros's apartment for solace. They kiss, remove their shirts, then the camera cuts. Everything sexual between them is communicated through dialogue; it is not shown or objectified. This is

likely because both of these shows acknowledge their relationships as abusive. Female directors tend to take the same approach when portraying student-teacher relationships.

These female directors are deliberate in how they present their female characters. Three female directors' works are included in this chapter: Karen Moncrieff with *Blue Car*, Katherine Brooks with *Loving Annabelle*, and Hannah Fidell with the feature film and miniseries versions of *A Teacher*. Moncrieff captures Mr. Auster and Meg's sex scene in a way that is meant to make the audience uncomfortable. In the beginning, they share meaningful looks that establish an emotional connection between them. Then, the portrayal of their relationship shifts sharply. As they walk on the beach together and he offers Meg his sweater, the shot emphasizes how small and childish she looks next to him. Meg is much shorter than Mr. Auster, she drowns in his large sweater, and her hair is tangled like a child's. This suggests to the audience that there is something off about them. When they sleep together, the camera refuses to move away from Meg's face as she conveys the pain and discomfort she is feeling. In *Loving Annabelle*, Brooks portrays Annabelle and Miss Bradley's relationship through looks until they cross the physical boundary in the film's climax. During this scene, the camera focuses on their hands and faces rather than their bodies. Brooks is careful to portray their sexuality without sexualizing the characters. Fidell does the same in the feature film version of *A Teacher*. Miss Watts and Eric have several sex scenes, but they are mostly shown through close-ups of the characters' faces. One particular scene is captured through a doorway in Eric's house: Eric sits on the bed in the room facing the camera, while Miss Watts stands in the doorway with her back to the camera. Eric tells her to take her clothes off and watches her undress. The camera does not move or shift focus. Eric is centered in the shot and Miss Watts is slightly off-center. Even though her body is more prominent in the shot, her body is not meant to be the focus. The audience is not supposed

to be watching Miss Watts; the audience is watching Eric gaze at Miss Watts. The shot lasts over a full minute without moving, then cuts to a scene of the back of Miss Watts's head as she walks down the school hallway in slow motion and Eric walks by staring at her. Through Eric's gaze, this sequence suggests that he feels like he is living out the heterosexual male student-teacher fantasy.

The gaze in the two films in this chapter that are directed by men are drastically different from those directed by women. The first is Spike Lee's *25th Hour*. This film objectifies the character of Mary. Every single scene that includes Mary contains a close-up shot of her stomach. Through the gaze of the camera, Lee's direction establishes that Mr. Elinsky is mesmerized by the large tattoo of a dreamcatcher surrounding Mary's navel. In the scene with the two of them alone in the teacher's lounge, the camera fixes on Mary's legs as she leaves the room. Mr. Elinsky is sitting on the couch in the background staring at her. This shot helps establish his sexual attraction to and his fantastical view of Mary. She is nothing but a sexual object in this film. The gaze in *The Boy Next Door* is interesting. According to Cohen, he wanted the sex scene between Ms. Peterson and Noah to capture female pleasure (Roberts, 2015), but he shoots it in a way that caters to heterosexual men, not women. Noah is presented and objectified using the male gaze. The first time Noah appears, the camera shows his bicep before his face. Later, Claire looks through her bedroom window into Noah's and watches him change. Many films have featured similar scenes of a man watching a woman change through a window. When they sleep together, the camera spends a lot of time focusing on different parts of Ms. Peterson's body. Cohen is not portraying a woman's pleasure in a way that caters to female audiences, he is objectifying both characters and reversing the roles of the male gaze.

The gender dynamics between students and teachers have changed a lot in this era. Seven out of the 11 films and TV shows in this era portray a female teacher in a relationship with their student. There were no homosexual student-teacher romances in the prior eras, but this chapter analyzes a relationship between a female teacher and student and a male teacher and student. Neither couple ends up together, but that is where the similarities between these two relationships end. The lesbian couple's story is a tragic forbidden love, and the gay couple admits that it is abusive.

This thesis is intended to analyze student-teacher romances in television and film to gain an understanding of how Americans constituted abuses of power through the student-teacher romance genre in particular time periods. This chapter suggests that, while dependent on the audience demographic, Americans are beginning to recognize student-teacher romance as inherently abusive. Now that I have explored this genre over the last 100 years, I can draw conclusions about the impact of student-teacher romances in the Hollywood film industry.

Conclusion: A Student-Teacher Romance Film Genre Retrospective

The student-teacher film romance genre has existed in Hollywood talking cinema since the 1920s, but the category and the insidious behavior it depicts have not been identified until now. I discovered this genre, brought attention to the abuse of power present in its films and TV shows, and analyzed how audiences perceived that abuse throughout the genre's history. Through a historical-generic approach, this thesis explores how the political and cultural landscape of the time period constitutes audiences' perceptions of abuse of power. After defining this category of films as a genre and analyzing 27 student-teacher romance films and TV shows, I conclude that student-teacher romance is an abuse of power and should be presented as such in film and television. However, many filmmakers that contribute to the genre either merely acknowledge, misinterpret, or ignore the abuse of power they portray. Few films in the genre recognize student-teacher relationships as predatory and abusive.

In chapter two, I explored student-teacher romance films from the 1920s to the 1960s. The nation experienced some of its highest highs and lowest lows during this period. I argued that the films of the genre during this era reflect each decade's distinct political and social climate in the U.S. during that time and constitute how people of that period defined abuses of professorial power.

Chapter three analyzed student-teacher romance films from the 1970s to the 1990s. This era's student-teacher romance films were greatly influenced by the sexual revolution and the public's view of female sexuality at that time. I argued that the films of the genre during this era utilize the student-teacher relationship to exploit female sexuality and negate the abuse of power over teenage girls by representing them as erotic and teenage boys by asserting their need for sexual growth.

In chapter four, I evaluated student-teacher romance films and TV shows from the 2000s to the 2020s. As Americans became more aware of systemic injustices, the genre began to recognize the predatory nature of student-teacher relationships. The genre has evolved so that the responsibility of the teacher in the student-teacher relationship must be addressed, but I argued that the abuse of power must be identified as a component through dialogue or portrayal of sexual intimacy.

This analysis presents a fascinating trajectory in the student-teacher romance genre's portrayal of abuse of power. We began with *The Wild Party* (Arzner, 1929) and *Girls' Dormitory* (Cummings, 1936). These films and others in the first era depict male teachers overcoming obstacles to achieve 'happily ever after' endings with their students. Both films justify their couples ending up together by officially beginning their relationships after they are no longer teachers and students because the student has dropped out or graduated. Rather than placing any responsibility on these educators, the films portray other forces that try to pull the couple apart, to no avail. Almost a century later, the most recent iterations of the genre are *A Teacher* (Fidell, 2020) and *Gossip Girl* (Safran, 2021-2023). Both shows recognize that the power dynamic prevents the party with less power from being the aggressor in a student-teacher relationship. They not only identify the behavior as predatory, but they display tactics of grooming that their audiences can look out for in their own lives. Taking a historical-generic approach displays the direction the genre is going as it deals with its abusive subject matter. The student-teacher romance genre began by romanticizing abuse and can now act as a positive force in avoiding professorial child abuse.

These films can act as a litmus test for the American cultural view of abuse of power. In the first era, audiences viewed student-teacher romance films as tales of forbidden love. Even if

they understood these relationships as wrong or inappropriate, they were willing to overlook the inherent power dynamic to enjoy an idealistic love story. Ending the era with *Good Morning, Miss Dove* (Koster, 1955), *To Sir, With Love* (Clavell, 1967), and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (Neame, 1969), none of which result in successful marital outcomes between a student and teacher, it appeared as though Hollywood was beginning to recognize the sinister nature of student-teacher relationships. Then, the films of the 1970s brought the genre's momentum to a halt. *Pretty Maids All in a Row* (Vadim, 1971), *The Teacher* (Avedis, 1974), *Summer School Teachers* (Peeters, 1975), and *Malibu High* (Berwick, 1979) sexually exploited their female teachers and students in service of their male characters. Thus, they all ignored the abuses of power they displayed. The apparent popularity of these films suggests that audiences were ignorant of the real-life traumas behind these stories. The 1980s and 1990s showed slight improvements with films like *Teachers* (Hiller, 1984), *Summer School* (Reiner, 1987), and *Election* (Payne, 1999) implying the ludicrousness and unacceptability of student-teacher relationships. However, *Carried Away* (Barreto, 1996) actively refuted any responsibility that could have been placed on the teacher, and *Dawson's Creek* (Williamson, 1998-2003) held the student fully responsible for the relationship. Finally, the third era brought in films that did not idealize the student-teacher relationship (e.g., *Blue Car* (Moncrieff, 2022), *25th Hour* (Lee, 2002), and *A Teacher* (Fidell, 2013)). Independent filmmakers were taking nuanced positions on student-teacher relationships and audiences were receptive. However, while these kinds of films were resonating with adult audiences, adolescent audiences were being exposed to much more romanticized depictions in shows like *Gossip Girl* (Savage & Schwartz, 2007-2012), *Pretty Little Liars* (King, 2010-2017), and *Riverdale* (Aguirre-Sacasa, 2017-present). Young, impressionable audiences were interested in teenagers being depicted as capable of engaging in mature

relationships with adults. They did not take issue with these relationships, and the adult filmmakers did not suggest that anything was wrong with them. The recent spike in recognition of systemic injustice is likely what spurred the recent trend in which the genre recognizes abuse of professorial power.

This brings me back to my initial questions: Why are there so many films that turn a safe, socially sanctioned place into an erotic arena, and why would audiences be interested in watching a relationship that is morally and, in most cases, legally wrong? One possible explanation for the number of films that turn schools and classrooms into suitable locations for romantic encounters is their universality. Student-teacher romance films meld two common human experiences: education and love. Most everyone has attended some sort of educational institution. Schools are familiar and evoke memorable experiences to which viewers can relate. In the same way, everyone has experienced love in some way. The films and TV shows in this genre combine these two familiar experiences. I am not suggesting that people watch these movies because they want to see the exploitation of a child; on the contrary, the nostalgia of young love in a school environment is probably a pleasurable experience for the viewer. It all depends on how the film or show itself curates that experience.

I cannot provide a clear explanation of why audiences are interested in these immoral and oftentimes illegal relationships solely based on this historical-generic analysis of films and TV shows. However, I am inclined to believe that it has to do with how the romance is portrayed. It is not difficult to identify how the filmmaker feels about the relationship. As I have proven in this thesis, specific criteria can indicate to the critical viewer that the filmmakers believe the relationship to be or not to be an abuse of power. This begs a question with a much less clear answer: what responsibility do filmmakers have to portray student-teacher romance as an abuse

of power to their audience? Some films were clearly intended to represent the relationship as predatory. Others use it as a plot device to tell a completely different story. One example is *The Boy Next Door* (Cohen, 2015) in which the film's writer and director were not interested in telling a story about abuse; they wanted to tell a story about a woman who knew the relationship was a risk but could not help herself. This movie requires the teacher to be considered the protagonist, and the audience will not sympathize with her if she is presented as a predator. Did the filmmakers have a responsibility to acknowledge their main character's abusive behavior? This question has no simple answer, but filmmakers should be taking a few factors into account. The most important factor is the audience of the film. Is it for adults, adolescents, or children? *The Boy Next Door* received an R-rating, which leads me to believe that it is targeted toward an adult audience. If the film or TV show is produced with an adolescent or child audience in mind, there is a responsibility to point out abuse. Also, filmmakers should think about why they have chosen to make the couple a student and a teacher. Could the story of *The Boy Next Door* work in a different setting? Are the filmmakers capitalizing on the fetishization of student-teacher relationships? It is important to think about the implications of a story that is being broadcast to such a wide audience. In sum, a spectator's interest in these illegal and immoral relationships is dependent on how filmmakers portray them, and filmmakers should consider the impact of their work on their intended audience.

When it comes to the portrayal of abuse of power in this genre, so much lies in the film's gaze. The representation of sexual intimacy in this genre has taken on a different meaning throughout its history. Because of the Motion Picture Production Code guidelines, the films in the genre's first era featured few on-screen depictions of sex between students and teachers. However, the gaze of the characters, camera, and audience still emphasize the romantic nature of

these stories. As the influence of the Hays Code had ceased in the 1960s, the second era used the gaze to depict student-teacher romance as highly erotic. The exploitation of female teachers and students occurred through the camera's gaze and other characters on women's bodies. In the third and final era, a film or TV show's portrayal of abuse of power could be understood via the camera's gaze during intimate scenes. The camera would often fixate on a character's face either to highlight their discomfort or as a refusal to sexualize the act. While the depiction of sexual intimacy was similar in the first and last eras, its purpose completely changed.

It is important to note how my positionality impacted my analyses of student-teacher romance films. I taught at the university level as a graduate teaching assistant. I began teaching at the age of 23 and the students in my classes were mostly 18 and 19-year-old freshmen. Even though these students were all legal adults, and I was only a few years older than them, I could never have imagined pursuing a romantic relationship with any of them. It is even harder for me to imagine crossing the line if I had taught high school students. I began this research while I was still teaching, and it disgusted me to think about how vulnerable my students were and how awful it would be for someone in a position of power to take advantage of them. Therefore, I have little sympathy for anyone who believes these relationships are harmless.

My experiences with media also impacted this analysis. Growing up, I was a huge fan of teen drama TV shows. As a teenager, I watched *Pretty Little Liars* as it aired on ABC Family, and I always wanted Aria and Mr. Fitz to end up together. A search for clips of the show on social media today will yield posts, pictures, and videos with thousands of likes praising this relationship. Watching the show again as an adult made me incredibly uncomfortable. It is hard for me to believe that a group of adults created this relationship for an audience of teenagers that are currently in school. I would hate to imagine that a teenage fan of this show pursued a crush

on their real-life teacher with this idealized scenario in mind. For this reason, I am biased against films or TV shows that do not acknowledge the predatory nature of student-teacher relationships.

Once I identified the romanticization of this abusive phenomenon in film and television, I noticed how prevalent it was. This eventually led to my recognition of the necessity for student-teacher romance to be defined as a film genre. I have watched and analyzed dozens of these films and adequately argued for the validity of the student-teacher romance genre.

Recognizing this genre opens lots of opportunities for future research. Scholars should look further into the power dynamic between students and teachers. I mentioned several unique dynamics that necessitate further exploration such as relationships between former students and teachers as seen in *Teachers* (Hiller, 1984). My hope is that research on this film genre will have a positive impact on perceptions of abuses of professorial power.

When people go to the movies to watch a romance, they are not interested in seeing child exploitation. The films are portraying a fantasy, an idealized version of a forbidden romance. The sooner that Hollywood recognizes that the fantasy they are evoking is an abuse of power, the closer we are to identifying this predatory behavior and ridding it from our educational institutions.

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