

# **Likable Viragos: The Rise of the Sexually Assertive Women in Contemporary North American High School Films**

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**Abstract:** The paper suggests the advent of a new type of character in a popular genre of American high school films, namely a precocious and sexually assertive young woman. Such characters are usually highly intelligent and manipulative women who seduce unsuspecting male partners, often their teachers, for emotional or practical gain. Although their actions may appear morally wrong, they are often depicted in a positive light. The analysis is based on a selection of films considered to be symptomatic of the larger tendencies. The first film under scrutiny is *Election* (1999), treated as a trailblazer for the more recent pictures such as *Breathe In* (2013) and *Blame* (2017). The article suggests that the selected films should be read as celebrations of female agency as well as symbolic expressions of male *angst* in the face of the growing social importance of women. The authors also attempt to explore the contemporary school film as a reflection of the evolving understanding of education and the role of a teacher. The paper concludes with an observation that the figure of a manipulative and assertive young woman will continue re-emerging in various incarnations in the audio-visual productions about school in the coming years.

**Keywords:** women, representation, sexuality, film, school

## **Women and the high school film genre**

Apart from technological innovation, the way women have been represented in film has perhaps been the single most noticeable change in contemporary cinema. Female characters as passive

love interests or trophies for adventurous men have largely disappeared giving way to more independent and assertive female protagonists (Gill 2008: 36). This representational shift has also affected contemporary films about schools and education. The figures of innocent and gullible female students or teachers, a staple of such films only a few decades earlier, are visibly less common. Undoubtedly, those shifts in representational patterns are manifestations of the influence of feminist ideas and women's liberation movement throughout the world as well as subsequent transformations in traditional gender roles. In our article we want to investigate how those changes have affected high school films made in America in the twenty-first century.

We identify the school film as a sub-genre of popular cinema that is characterised by setting in a high school environment, where protagonists are predominantly either students or teachers, and where action revolves around matters of education and adolescence. The list of seminal films in the history of the development of the genre includes such motion pictures as *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955, dir. Nicholas Ray), *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982, dir. Amy Heckerling), *Stand and Deliver* (1988, dir. Ramón Menéndez), *Dead Poets Society* (1989, dir. Peter Weir) or *Dazed and Confused* (1993, dir. Richard Linklater). We focus on high school film (rather than just school films) because they portray people at critical moments of their lives and offer more open treatment of sex and gender problems. That is also why films set in high school typically have much wider appeal than movies about educational institutions for younger children.

The format of a journal article does not allow for a detailed analysis or even exhaustive cataloguing of all high school dramas released in the twenty-first century. Instead, we take a closer look at selected examples that we treat as symptomatic of broader

trends in cinema and serials today. The productions that we have chosen have a relatively wide international distribution and generous budgets. However, neither of them could be classified as a block buster, nor as a remarkable cinematic accomplishment. Probably with the exception of the first of the discussed films, Alexander Payne's *Election* (1999), their influence on wider cinematic production is negligible, even within their genres. At the same time, as we believe, this should not make us discard them as unworthy of analysis. Apart from other considerations, they can illustrate the prevalence of certain themes and show us which modes of representation have become normalised in contemporary audio-visual narratives.

Depictions of sex and sexuality are one of the most visible changes affecting high school film made recently. As institutions for adolescents on the cusp of their sexual lives, high schools are inevitable sites for erotic tension and attraction (Fisher, Harris & Jarvis 2008: 87). This atmosphere affects students as well as adults who supervise and educate them. The sexual dimension of school life has been explored by filmmakers from the moment it became legally and culturally feasible (Fedorov et al. 2018: 291; Fisher, Harris & Jarvis 2008: 86–87). But the treatment of the subject has undergone many twists. Thus, after the relaxation of the censorship regulations in the 1960s popular school comedies depicted erotic play between teachers, usually men, and students, usually females. Such cinematic teacher-student relations were usually presented in a light-hearted way and as initiation into adult life rather than abuse or harassment (Fedorov et al. 2018: 293). Revealingly, the rise of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s and the cultural backlash against it produced a proliferation of female teacher seducers. As examples we can mention here such titles as *The Teacher* (1974, Howard Avendis), *My Tutor* (1983, George Bowers) or *They're Playing with Fire* (1984, Howard Avoids).

Towards the beginning of the twenty-first century, one can notice the emergence of erotic thrillers that portray both men and women as potential agents of evil. At the same time, the relations of students with teachers are presented as inherently abusive (Fedorov et al. 2018: 293).

Another important feature of the school film at the turn of the twentieth century is the demise of the heroic inspirational teacher. Hugely popular during the Post-war social reform era, a heroic teacher has become a rarity ever since. Despite the success of Peter Weir's *Dead Poets' Society* (1989) and the film's subsequent rise to the status of a cult movie, it had surprisingly few memorable imitators or followers. Several notable titles include *Dangerous Minds* (1995, John N. Smith), *Mr. Holland's Opus* (1995, Stephen Herek), *Good Will Hunting* (1997, Gus Van Sant) or *Freedom Writers* (2007, Richard LaGravenese). If heroic teachers appear in films today, they are usually found in nostalgic returns to the past, like for example in *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003, Mike Newell), *Knights of the South Bronx* (2005, Allen Hughes) or *The Great Debaters* (2007, Denzel Washington). It seems that the only notable exception in this respect are the sports coaches. Films depicting influential sports leaders, such as *Glory Road* (2009, James Gartner) or *Draft Day* (2014, Ivan Reitman), remain popular but simultaneously their appeal rarely stretches beyond the niche of sports movies.

### **Cinematic schools in the new millennium**

The first noticeable feature of the twenty-first-century high school film is domination of themes related to initiation into sex, alcohol and illicit substances. Contemporary movies about students typically devote a considerable amount of screen time to depictions of wild home parties and sexual activities of the characters. Other popular themes include truancy, disputes and

rivalry among various school cohorts. At the same time, little attention is paid to the processes of learning in the classroom. Teaching in class is usually rendered in fleeting sequences, often staged in an artificial and highly ritualised manner. The most common image from the classroom is that of a teacher handing out tests or essays. We see teachers as stern evaluators and disciplinarians deriving profound satisfaction from scolding the bad pupils and praising the high-achievers. Rather than diffusers of relevant knowledge they are disciplinarians, often pathetically inefficient in that role (Dahlgren 2017: 92–97). The traditional in-class education appears abstract, boring and irrelevant. Contemporary filmmakers seem chiefly interested in school as a place of social initiation into intrigue and rivalry. This, rather than information found in textbooks and conveyed by the teachers themselves, seems the most vital part of the education process. Viewed from the perspective of representation, school today exists mainly to congregate and initiate young people into competition, sex and intoxicating substances. Interestingly, while sexual themes dominate, explicit nudity or graphic representations of sexual intercourse are still rare.

What seems particularly interesting in school films made today is an increased dependence on female rather than male protagonists. Moreover, those female characters often share several common features and are variations of the same kind of figure. It is a type of a precocious and physically attractive young woman who wilfully relies on her physical attractiveness and intelligence to pursue her goals. She resorts to intrigue, manipulation and even physical violence. By contrast, her male foils often appear insecure and weak. Rather than male predators known from the earlier cinematic period, they are naïve and sexually inexperienced victims. Such shift in representation may be explained as a cultural manifestation of the growing position of

women in American society, but also as a consequence of the gender gap, the fact that girls often do better at school today than boys (see for instance Maynard 2004; DiPrete & Buchmann 2013; Moskowitz & Stephens 2004). In other words, cinematic high schools are usually arenas for the assertive and self-confident women. However, there is also a very distinct racial dimension to those portraits. All the assertive young students are white. It seems that the deeply rooted racial prejudice still makes it unacceptable to see a woman of colour as sexually active, aggressive and dominant. Unless a high school film is a platform for the operation of a white saviour, race is kept out of the classrooms and beyond the direct concern of the characters.

### **New type of a female protagonist**

The film that in many respects may be treated as a trail blazer of the above-mentioned themes is Alexander Payne's *Election* (1999). It is a dark comedy built around a conflict between an unremarkable yet popular teacher, Jim McAllister (Matthew Broderick) and his hyper-ambitious student, Tracy Flick (Reese Witherspoon). The story begins when Tracy puts forward her candidacy in the titular election for the student council president and Jim vows to stop her by any means. At the climax of their conflict, Jim cheats during the ballot count he is supposed to supervise and deprives Tracy of her victory. Later his fraudulent actions get exposed. Jim is fired from his position and becomes vilified by the national media who eagerly pick up his story.

In *Election*, quite contrary to the cultural trends already prominent at the turn of the twentieth century, the audience is encouraged to sympathise with a hapless man rather than an ambitious young woman. Jim is repeatedly exposed as a cheat and mediocrity. He not only forges election results but destroys his own marriage mishandling an affair with his best friend's wife.

Despite his jarring flaws, his character ultimately emerges as a well-intentioned and likable man. His morally dubious acts seem overshadowed by the grander goal of thwarting a devious sociopath, Tracy. By contrast, Tracy is given few saving graces. Raised by an obsessive single mother, she is a monstrous caricature of a belligerent modern woman as well as the American dream. She may be diligent and hardworking, but her aims are raw power and social recognition. Obsessively driven by her ambition, she is ready to destroy anyone standing in her way. At the end of the film, when Jim strives to rebuild his life after the scandal, he catches a glimpse of Tracy in Washington D.C. in a company of a prominent politician. We are encouraged to believe that Tracy is on a path towards a major career in politics, where her destructive traits may be fully expressed. Jim is pictured as an unrecognised hero, who tried but failed to stop a destructive sociopath at an early stage.

Tracy Flick is an early example of assertive woman that will become much more common as the central figure of the high school films made at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Those characters may differ considerably in determination and resources at their disposal, but their actions usually lead to serious consequences for the adult men they seduce. What is quite characteristic is the high (and often varying) level of ambiguity. Their actions may be laudable when fighting the powerful forces of patriarchy, or deeply immoral and antisocial, threatening the stability and values of the contemporary society.

Probably the most grotesque representation of an ambiguous, scheming and destructive young female student can be found in Karyn Kusama's *Jennifer's Body* (2009). Made a decade after the *Election*, the film features the titular Jennifer Check (Megan Fox), who is literally turned into a man-eating demon. The story is told from the perspective of Anita "Needy"

Lesnicki (Amanda Seyfried), Jennifer's best friend. She discovers the reasons behind Jennifer's gruesome transformation and decides, driven by a desire for revenge, to become a demon herself. At the climax of the film, she executes a brutal vengeance on those who were responsible for Jennifer's possession. Although *Jennifer's Body* is a horror rather than a typical high school drama, it nevertheless draws heavily on conventions of the latter. What makes the film distinct is the initial social status of the monstrous protagonist. Jennifer is not a weird loner, who suffers from bullying and ostracism<sup>1</sup>. On the contrary, she is the most popular girl in school. Her self-confidence and penchant for thrills first leads to her fatal possession and later provides ideal cover for her murderous actions as a succubus. Despite being marketed as a "feminist horror film" (Kooyman 2011: 186), *Jennifer's Body* cannot credibly disentangle itself from what E. Ann Kaplan calls "pornographic technique" (Cavanagh 2011: 78; Angelides 2010: 74), the practice of debasing female characters who are first eroticised only to be punished for their transgressions. Although the film's scriptwriter Cody Diablo encouraged to view her creation as a feminist film which aimed to undermine the conventions of a male dominated genre by presenting powerful and efficacious female characters, most of the critics and reviewers remained unconvinced (Kooyman 2011: 188–190). The film's depiction of school life follows the formulaic patterns of the contemporary high school drama. The crucial scenes are staged outside the classroom and teachers are marginal and superficial figures. The few classroom sequences are brief and generic, with significant developments happening in the school corridors, sport yards or at students' homes. Importantly,

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<sup>1</sup> Vide Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976) based on Stephen King's debut novel (1974). The novel was adapted for the screen for the second time in 2013 by Kimberly Peirce.



women are the principal agents of change. With the important exception of the crooked rockers who lure Jennifer into a Satanic ritual that leads to her possession, the boys in the film remain clueless and vulnerable while the female characters are literally devious and demonic. Such realignment of gender roles has become very common in contemporary high-school dramas.

Mike Goldbach's dark comedy *Daydream Nation* (2010) happily adopts this pattern, although the dominant female does not have supernatural powers and is less deadly. Yet still, the female protagonist remains rapacious *femme fatale* in the guise of a high school student. Like in the previous example, *Daydream Nation* is set in a dull North-American provincial town. Spiced with the grotesque and absurd, the bucolic tranquillity of the setting is marred by a rogue industrial fire creating giant toxic cloud hanging over the landscape. Moreover, an elusive serial killer is on the loose, targeting young girls. Despite these menacing circumstances, residents appear oddly unperturbed. The ennui affects the high-school students in particular. Like in many teenage films today, the only viable pastime galvanising the jaded students is intoxication on a variety of mind-altering substances. *Daydream Nation's* protagonist, Caroline Wexler (Kat Dennings), after moving from a big city with her single father (again a shrew is a product of an incomplete family), assumes the role of an intriguing and disruptive newcomer. Although she initiates a loose relationship with her classmate, Thurston Goldberg (Reece Thompson), it serves (at least initially) as a cover for her other erotic engagement. Seemingly driven by boredom rather than attraction, Caroline seduces a handsome English teacher, Barry Anderson (Josh Lucas). She treats her relationships with Barry as well as her gawky boyfriend Thurston, with nonchalance, seemingly to reaffirm her sense of maturity and underline the superior status over other students. Similar characteristic cannot

be attached to the male figures. Caroline's machinations are push both Thurston and Barry to the verge of a mental breakdown. In the end, despite the dramatic turns, the relationships prove catalytic for Caroline's partners. Mr. Anderson is revealed to be a neurotic and talentless writer. By contrast, the initially inadequate Thurston matures into a steadfast partner. A surprising character transformation also concerns Caroline herself. At first, we are encouraged to treat her with suspicion or even antipathy. In this regard, although less academically ambitious and more jaded, she resembles Tracy from *Election*. Only later, in the course of the action, she emerges as a much more agreeable character. The portrayal of men is also quite typical for many other films discussed here. They come out as feeble, not only Barry and Reece, but also Caroline and Reece's fathers as they easily fall into traps set by various women. The film is also conducive to the image of contemporary school as innately boring. The narrative focuses on noisy parties, truancy and sexual encounters while school and formal education are pushed into the deep background.

Another film in which we may find a similar unsettling young female disruptor put vis-à-vis a bland and stunted man, is Drake Doremus' *Breathe In* (2013). The plot of the film revolves around a high school music teacher called Keith Reynolds (Guy Pearce) whose life is set into turmoil after falling for Sophie (Felicity Jones), an exchange student from England. Although the characters' portraits rendered in *Breathe In* are much more nuanced and complicated than in the previous films (also because of differences in genre), Sophie shares many features with Caroline (from *Daydream Nation*) as well as Tracy (from *Election*).

Similarly to the characters from the earlier-discussed films, Sophie is a disruptive newcomer from an incomplete family. Her parents are dead and she is raised by relatives. Apparently lacking

in parental affection, Sophie is ready to initiate sexual relationship with a much older man. She is quite ruthless in pursuing her goal. On the other hand, in his frustration and hidden grudges, Keith resembles Mr Anderson. For both these characters, the career in teaching is a reluctantly taken second option, much below their aspirations. Also the relationship with their student lovers have an analogous effect. Although the events are quite traumatic and, in Keith's case, threaten the disintegration of the family, in the end, the trauma helps them to restore their relations on a more solid base. Like it was in the case of Mr. Anderson from *Daydream Nation*, who found a sympathetic partner in Ms. Budge (Rachel Blanchard), Keith finds solace in returning to his wife. Resentment and frustration eating away at their relations get purged in the heat of the racy romance and the subsequent fallout. In the closing scenes of the film, they pose for the family photo looking happy and confident, although the viewers are aware that it was extremely difficult for them to achieve that state. The trauma seems indispensable. It exorcises the concealed dissatisfaction and brings reconciliation while the unsettling teenage seducers appear as indispensable catalysts in the process.

An interesting variation on the motifs of illicit sexual liaisons, peer rivalry and stifled ambition, all within a setting of an American high school, can be found in Quinn Shephard's *Blame* (2017). Also in this film the plot is propelled by the figure of a precocious, attractive and unscrupulous female student. In *Blame* this character is Melissa (Nadia Alexander) while the target of her intrigues is a handsome substitute English teacher, Jeremy Woods (Chris Messina). When Melissa discovers that Mr. Woods is attracted to her shunned classmate Abigail (Quinn Shephard), she plots to expose and destroy him. *Blame* adopts the three motifs already discussed earlier: the cunning female protagonist, school environment as the main stage for the machinations and the

cathartic outcome of the crisis. In the film we find disruptive newcomers as well as inadequate, indecisive men vis-à-vis resolute women. The film brings some variation to the formula as well. Instead of just one, we encounter at least two disruptive newcomers. One of them is Mr. Woods and the other is Abigail (although she is not a stranger in a strict sense, she returns to school after a long hiatus caused by a prolonged mental breakdown). All key characters, Melissa, Abigail and Mr. Woods, must overcome some kind of trauma. Once again, the machinations of a bellicose young female bring forward the catharsis. The protagonists end up purified and strengthened. Importantly, Melissa is not a mere replication of a precocious shrew. Although apparently self-confident and brazen, we later learn that it is largely a coping strategy. She suffers from sexual abuse by her step-father, Robert (Tate Donovan). Melissa's intrigue, designed to incriminate Mr. Woods, ultimately leads to the revelation of the real, not invented, sexual abuse. Thus, after the showdown, Abigail and Melissa return to school bruised but purged. Also the character of Mr. Woods deserves attention. In stark contrast to the teachers discussed earlier, he treats his job as a fulfilling and worthwhile career. Despite pressure from his egocentric and philistine girlfriend, he shuns a lucrative but boring corporate job. He prefers to vent his artistic aspirations through teaching and getting involved in school theatre. He remains one of the few examples of male teachers appearing in contemporary cinematic productions for whom their job is not degradation but realisation of ambitions.

## **Conclusions**

In our discussion, we focused on the four films as exemplifications of the wider trends prominent in high school films today. We attempted to highlight a significant development

within this sub-genre, the emergence of a new type of the protagonist, an assertive female student. These characters typically initiate sexual relations with their peers as well as teachers or use their sexuality strategically to attain non-sexual goals. Although presented as morally ambiguous and even contemptible, very often their activities ultimately bring positive consequences for the protagonists. The examples of the discussed films are meant to draw attention to an important shift in attitudes and representational practices in contemporary audio-visual images of school life.

Although films set in high school are far less common today than they used to be at the turn of the twentieth century, it would be premature to declare the demise of the entire genre. While the renderings of high school life are harder to find in cinemas, the school remains an attractive background in other media, especially in serials. Suffice it to mention here such successful and simultaneously controversial series as *13 Reasons Why* (2017), *Riverdale* (2017), *Élite* (2018), *Sex Education* (2018), *Quicksand* (2019), all produced recently by Netflix, or *Euphoria* (2019, HBO). The list of the series can be much longer, and they vary considerably in themes and approach to presenting school. However, two elements seem easily recognisable in most of those productions: education is treated as secondary in relation to school life (important developments unfolding usually beyond classroom) and most of the action is propelled by resourceful and driven female protagonists. Sexual life of the characters is one of the most important elements around which the plots are built. It seems that school as a playground for ambitious women has become a durable cultural motif and in the foreseeable future, we can expect further mutations of such protagonists appearing on television and cinema screens.

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