

The Representation of Female Characters in
the Academy Award Winners for Best Picture of the Year

by
Briyana Dyer

A thesis presented to the Honors College of Middle Tennessee State University in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the University Honors College

Fall 2018

The Representation of Female Characters in
the Academy Award Winners for Best Picture of the Year

by
Briyana Dyer

APPROVED:

Dr. Jane Marcellus
Department of Journalism

Dr. Philip E. Phillips, Associate Dean
University Honors College

Acknowledgments

To my family and friends:

Thank you so much for your constant love, acceptance and encouragement in everything that I do. Everything I do is made possible through your support. I love you all very much.

To Dr. Marcellus:

Thank you for being my voice of reason and clarity throughout the process of writing this thesis. I could not have completed this without your intellect, passion and commitment.

To MTSU and the Honors College:

Thank you for pushing me to think beyond myself. I am eternally grateful to have received an education that has challenged me and encouraged me to be the best that I can be.

Abstract

The representation of women in movies is critical to understanding how women interpret and view themselves in the real world. According to a study conducted by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media, only 17% of the top grossing films of 2015 featured a female lead. In addition, there is a tendency for the American film industry to display a poor representation of these female characters. This thesis shines a light on how women are being represented in recent, popular film. It examines and analyzes how female characters are represented in films, specifically examining the past four winners for Best Picture of the Year at the Academy Awards. The films examined are *Birdman* (2015), *Spotlight* (2016), *Moonlight* (2017) and *The Shape of Water* (2018).

In these films, female characters are still being underrepresented and are generally portrayed in a negative way or through a one-dimensional narrative. One of the larger overarching issues within the American film industry is the lack of women being allowed to tell their own stories. In the four movies examined, out of the 10 central directors and writers associated with these films, only one person was a woman. From the 2015 winner to the 2018 winner there was a noticeable increase in the positive representation of women; however, there is still improvement needed within the American film industry to accurately reflect the women that are present in our society.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Thesis Statement.....	2
Methodology.....	4
Birdman.....	8-17
Introduction.....	8
Analysis.....	9
Conclusion.....	16
Spotlight.....	18-26
Introduction.....	18
Analysis.....	19
Conclusion.....	24
Moonlight.....	27-34
Introduction.....	27
Analysis.....	28
Conclusion.....	33
The Shape of Water.....	35-42
Introduction.....	35
Analysis.....	36
Conclusion.....	41
Thesis Conclusion.....	43
Works Cited.....	46

Introduction

Since I was a child, I have loved movies. Whether they were animated children's films such as *The Little Mermaid* or feature films such as *Cast Away* and *Titanic*, I loved being able to watch and get lost in their engrossing storylines. As I grew older and continued to watch more films I asked myself, "Where were all the women?" There were Disney princess movies, with women singing, falling in love and being celebrated for their beauty. There were plenty of movies with male leads going on brave adventures and being celebrated for their daring and intellect, but in the films I was exposed to, there were never any women that I felt were celebrated for their strength, intelligence or tenacity to the same level that the male characters were.

A 2015 study conducted by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media revealed that only 17% of the top grossing films had a female lead. In addition, the study noted that in the 17% of movies with female leads, male characters were given relatively the same amount of speaking time as the female leads. This means that even in movies with a leading female character, secondary male characters are given almost the same amount of speaking time as the women in the leading roles ("The Reel Truth").

Women's stories are grossly underrepresented in the movie industry—with even fewer films portraying strong, positive female characters. Positive representation matters to viewers. This can be shown by examining a 2017 study conducted by J. Walter Thompson, a marketing and communications company, and the Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media where researchers discovered that "66% of women have actively switched off films or TV shows if they felt they were negatively stereotyping them" ("New Study Shows"). In the same study, researchers also found that one in four women

had stopped watching a film or TV show because there were not enough female characters (“New Study Shows”). From this research we can deduce that many women believe that the lack of positive representation of women in the film industry is important.

Representation is also an important factor to the U.S. economy. In 2015, the film and TV industry in the United States contributed \$131 billion in revenue to the U.S. economy (“Jobs & the Economy”). According to the 2016 Theatrical Movie Statistics by the Motion Picture Association of America, 52% of moviegoers in 2016 were women (“Theatrical Movie Statistics 2016”). The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media also discovered that films that are led by women gross an average of 15.8% more than films led by men (“The Reel Truth”). According to this research, it is easy to deduce that the underrepresentation of women leads to a loss of revenue in the movie industry. This caused me to wonder, if women make up more than half of movie attendance and contribute a substantial amount of income to the U.S. movie industry, why is there such a lack of positive representation of women in films?

Thesis Statement

In this thesis I analyze how women are represented in each of the last four movies to win Best Picture of the Year at the Academy Awards. The Academy Awards are regarded as one of the most prestigious recognitions in the American film industry, and the most significant award given out is the Academy Award for Best Picture of the Year. Since the film to receive the Best Picture of the Year is hailed as one of the best movies of the year, I felt that this would provide a good representation among what is regarded as

great cinema. The films studied include *The Shape of Water* (2018), *Moonlight* (2017), *Spotlight* (2016) and *Birdman* (2015).

It was important to analyze recent films because it provides a better reflection of how our current societal and cultural climate and concerns influence these films. Films tend to follow the trends and thought processes of the times in which are created, so I believe that the analysis of these films provides insight into how it affects people in the modern day.

This thesis does not stand from a neutral point of view, but rather a feminist point of view. It was built on the basis of my own observations about the lack of positive female portrayal that I saw in popular films. The entire purpose of this thesis was to gain a better understanding on how women are being portrayed in film by examining the films that were deemed the Best Picture of the Year. The representation of women in films is important because it affects anyone who enjoys and watches movies, especially the women who enjoy watching films. The way women see themselves portrayed in the media often influences the way that they view themselves in their daily lives. In his book *Representation*, cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall discusses why representation in the media matters. He first clarifies what representation means by stating the following:

Representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language. It is the link between concepts and language which enables us to *refer* to either the ‘real’ world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events. (Hall, *Representation* 3)

Hall goes on to state that humans have a system by which we sort all objects, people and events with a correlated set of concepts or “mental representations” (Hall, *Representation*

3). Without these concepts, we would be unable to interpret the world around us. Our perception and meaning of things depend on the “concepts or images formed in our thoughts which can stand for or ‘represent’ the world, enabling us to refer to things both inside and outside our heads” (Hall, *Representation* 3). To reiterate what Hall states in his book, representation helps us to identify and interpret our world around us, and that is why the representation of the positive female character matters. If we intrinsically use the images and language we observe to make sense of the world around us, it is important to be able to relate the characteristics of strong and positive female characters in films back to ourselves in the real world.

Methodology

The most extensive step of my research was to watch and examine all the past four winning films for Best Picture of the Year. In his introduction to *Paper Voices: The Popular Press and Social Change*, Hall prescribes taking a “long preliminary soak in the mass of material” in order to understand the material thoroughly (Hall, *Paper Voices*).

I chose to analyze two major scenes that centered around female characters in each of the films examined. This allowed me to examine a manageable number of scenes that ensured I could devote adequate time for full critical textual analysis of each scene. I carefully chose the two scenes in each movie by ensuring that each scene had at least one of the female characters as well as choosing scenes that generally encapsulated the overall tone of the movie in regards to the portrayal of women. This step of watching the

films in a focused way ensured that I had ample time to intently watch and analyze the films to focus my attention on each significant female character in the two chosen scenes.

While examining the films, I heavily drew upon Hall's insights from his book *Representation*. One of the main aspects in examining representation in media and film is analyzing the language used. Hall states that language is the "second system of representation involved in the overall process of constructing meaning" (Hall, *Representation* 4). Language, in this context, involves words, sounds and images because we use these signs to "stand for or represent the conceptual relations between which we carry around in our heads and... [how they] make up the meaning-systems of our culture" (Hall, *Representation* 4). The language in the visual signs and images carries meanings that we use to interpret the things around us and how we make sense of our reality.

During my analysis I took a deeper look into how the language of words and visuals are used by the female characters, and how it is used against them by both male and female characters. This included analyzing the tone in which they speak and are spoken to, how the women are addressed by the other characters and their specific roles in conversation.

Hall also discusses the concept and complexities that occur with stereotypes and stereotypical actions within the media. Hall explains that stereotypes take "simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them" (Hall, *Representation* 247). He goes on to state that stereotyping divides what is deemed normal and acceptable and splits it from the abnormal and unacceptable. Hall argues that "victims can be trapped by the stereotype" because of the way representation works simultaneously on two levels, "a conscious and overt level, and an unconscious or

suppressed level (Hall, *Representation* 248). While analyzing the films, one way I evaluated the portrayal of the female characters was by assessing if they fell into stereotypical female tropes such as primarily being a caretaker, having their value based on domestic value, being of inferior intelligence, being perceived as helpless, etc. I also looked to see if the characters exhibited those behaviors on a conscious or unconscious level. This helped to provide a basis of how the film is already establishing the female character's role in the film and her importance to the plot development.

One research method I used to analyze the female characters in these four films was to put them through the Bechdel Test. The Bechdel Test is a commonly used test designed to analyze if women are portrayed in a sexist or stereotypical way. To pass the Bechdel Test, the movie must meet the following criteria:

1. It must include at least two women;
2. Those women must have at least one conversation; and
3. The conversation must be about something other than a man or men.

(TVTropes.org)

Although the Bechdel Test is generally a good indicator of the level of gender representation in a film, passing this test does not definitively prove that the film displays positive representation of women. Rather than serving as an all-encompassing test for female representation, the Bechdel Test serves more as a simplistic test that can assist viewers in beginning to determine the amount of depth and characterization associated with the female characters. One of the other concepts I drew on for my research was feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze. In her essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey states that in film, characters are

typically split into the active male and the passive female. The female character is there primarily to serve as gratification for the male character (Mulvey 837). In her essay, she explains the tendency of films to be shown from the male point of view while often displaying the female character as an object of visual gratification. In Mulvey's words, "The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line" (837). Mulvey argues that most female characters are inserted to support the male character and are not meant to have a structured role in the furthering of the plot. She further states that there are three views and representations of the male gaze which include the following:

- The view of the camera,
- The view of the audience, and
- The view of the characters within the movie. (Mulvey 843)

I drew on many of the points made in Mulvey's theory of male gaze while analyzing these four films. It was imperative to first recognize through which character's perspective we are viewing the story and other characters. I then assessed the female characters in the film to determine how intricate their roles were to the film—did they help the plot progress or were they used more as an object for visual pleasure? Lastly, I analyzed the female characters from the three main viewpoints stated in her essay—how the camera angles were used to portray them, how the audience viewed them and how the characters in the film viewed them.

Birdman

Introduction

Birdman is the 2015 winner for Best Picture of the Year at the Academy Awards. The film, starring Michael Keaton, Zach Galifianakis, Edward Norton, Emma Stone and Naomi Watts, was written and directed by Alejandro Iñárritu. The film was released on November 14, 2014.

Birdman follows the story of a Hollywood actor named Riggan who is widely known for his portrayal of a superhuman character called Birdman. After the initial success of Birdman, Riggan failed to have a successful acting career. In an attempt to revive his career, he sets out to write, direct and star in his own Broadway play (“Birdman”).

The two scenes I chose to analyze in *Birdman* center around three of the female characters in the film—Sam, Lesley and Laura. The first scene centers around the interactions of Sam and one of the male characters, an actor named Mike. The second scene is about the interactions between Mike, Lesley and Laura. I chose both of these scenes because it gives a consistent overview of the way women are talked to and regarded throughout *Birdman*.

Out of the four movies examined, *Birdman* displayed the worst representation of women. Although this film had the most female characters compared to the other three movies examined, the portrayal of these characters served absolutely zero purposes in the furthering of the plot as well as tending to treat women poorly and displaying them in an

extremely misogynistic viewpoint throughout the entirety of the film. The women in this film primarily exist in either the realm of a minuscule side-plot development, that in hardly any way influences the larger actions of the plot, or only serve to further the accomplishments of the male characters.

Analysis

Throughout *Birdman*, the female characters are viewed and portrayed through the male gaze on multiple occasions while the men in the movie repeatedly use the women for their own personal gains without any perceivable repercussions for their actions. This includes the language used against women by male and female characters, in addition to the stereotypical and harmful characterization of the female characters.

Most of these encounters center around one of the main male characters, Mike, in his interactions with female characters. One of these examples can be seen in the beginning of the first scene analyzed. In the beginning of this scene, Sam, Riggan's daughter, enters the stage where Mike and Riggan are rehearsing a scene and tells the men that Mike is needed for a fitting. The men approach Sam and Mike asks her, "So, who are you?" As Sam begins to answer, Riggan breaks in and tells him that she is his daughter, Sam. Speaking directly to Sam again, Mike asks her what she does. Again, as Sam is about to answer Mike's direct question, Riggan interrupts and tells him that she is working as his assistant. Mike then says, "And does she talk, and speak?" Sam replies, "She does ... she can even sit or stay or roll over if you have any treats." This scene is troublesome because it works to take away the communicative power that Sam has and is

replaced by a male narrative. For argument's sake, I understand how Sam's response to Mike's asking if she could talk could potentially be seen as a clever dig at how her dad spoke for her, and there is the potential that it would have worked if there were any other moments where Sam was portrayed as a strong, powerful and witty character; however, throughout the entirety of the film, Sam is not portrayed as such. She instead is only presented in terms that center around her relationships with men and the actions of men and is only used in the furthering of the story for the male characters; this depiction is harmful because it works to take away female power and replace it with the accepted male view and narrative within the film.

Mike's mistreatment of women continues in the first scene examined. Later in the scene, Sam takes Mike to the dressing room where he is to be fitted for his costume. On the way to the room, Mike introduces himself to Sam since that was previously disregarded. Sam says to Mike, "Oh, I know who you are. I saw you in Hot House at the Geffen, you were great." Mike then replies to Sam, "Oh, thank you. Your ass is great." Sam responds, "Seriously?" and then Mike responds, "This is the theater sweetheart, don't be so self-conscious," and the scene continues. I struggle to find the relevance in Mike's dialogue other than to set up the point that Mike frequently objectifies the women around him and feels that he can say what he wants without fear of repercussions. Sam gives Mike a seemingly genuine compliment about his skills as an actor and all that Mike says is a weak "thank you" while making a sexual comment about her body. From this early moment in the film a narrative arises that tells the audience that men's egos need to be continuously praised and nurtured while women serve as visual objects of pleasure for the male character. This scene is an example of the harmful, derogatory language and

behaviors that continue throughout the film where male characters can do and say whatever they want to women and get away with it; subsequently, the female characters follow a pattern where the women, for a short period of time, get rightfully offended by the men but then brush off their actions and words and the issue is never brought up again.

Another issue in the representation of women in *Birdman* is the display of women pitted against one another. Continuing in the first scene, Sam and Mike are now in the dressing room, and during their conversation Mike proceeds to get fully undressed in front of Sam. Lesley, an actor in the Broadway play, then enters the room, and without knowing that Sam is there, begins talking to Mike about Sam and says,

Riggan's daughter is hanging around and I don't need her to walk in here ... She's always hanging around and watching everyone like Little Miss Creepy. I don't know if it's the drugs that fried her brain or what, but I just don't want her running to her father saying you showed her your junk. ("Birdman")

Mike tries to interrupt Lesley to tell her that Sam is there and eventually she realizes that Sam is presently in the room. Lesley then begins to apologize to Sam and Sam leaves the room. This stereotypical cattiness between women is a common and harmful trope that teaches women to turn against each other and that women have to tear each other down; and specifically in this movie, where women are already portrayed poorly throughout the film, it makes it especially hard to justify its inclusion. In addition, this is one of the only interactions and conversations that Sam and Lesley have in the entirety of the film which makes it more confusing in its lasting relevance to the plot development. Lesley even goes so far that she would place the blame on Sam if Mike were to get in trouble for

telling her father that Mike exposed himself in front of her. This works to shift the blame and consequences of the male action and place the responsibility unfairly on the female character. This is immensely problematic because it reinforces the notion of male dominance over females while exemplifying unjustified female blame over the actions of men.

The second scene analyzed in *Birdman* demonstrates how women are regarded as unnecessary objects as well as displaying how their lives revolve around the actions and admiration of the male characters. In this scene, Mike continues to demonstrate his disrespect for the female characters and how he justifies using them for his own personal gain. This particular scene opens on the first live performance of Riggan's play. In the production, Mike and Lesley's characters are supposed to be lovers and are lying in bed on stage waiting for their scene to begin. Before the play begins, and while they are on stage in front of a crowd, Mike tells Lesley that he is sexually aroused and places her hand on his genitals. Mike then gets on top of Lesley and suggests that they should actually have sex during their scene on stage. Lesley is protesting throughout the entirety of Mike telling her this, but Mike continues his advances. Mike repeatedly says, "It'll be incredible, it'll be so real, trust me." Lesley continues to tell him to quit and to get off of her as he continuously ignores her. Lesley is seen resisting as Mike tells her to stop struggling. This continues for a few minutes and then the scene continues with the play beginning and the two actors completing the scene. Lesley runs off the stage and can be heard saying, "I can't believe you'd do that ... why would you do that?" Mike is heard saying "I needed it to feel real [as an actor], I need that intensity. You've known that about me from the beginning." Mike then says that he was in the moment, and he thought

that she was too. To this, Lesley replies, “I told you to stop, you fucking animal.” Mike then praises her and calls her brilliant for her performance. Lesley then tells him she wants him to move out and Mike begins backtracking and apologizing for his actions.

Throughout the entirety of the film, and especially in this scene, Mike is an abusive and deeply misogynistic male character who repeatedly uses the female characters as objects for personal gain. In this scene in particular, he entirely disregards Lesley as a person and displays a complete lack of respect for Lesley by attempting to physically force her to have sex with him in front of a crowd. Even after Lesley repeatedly tells him to stop, he continues and dismisses her statements and tells her to stop struggling. This portrayal of harm against women at the hands of men is an alarming and detrimental component of media in our society. Especially in our social climate with the struggle against rape culture and the seeming nonconsequential, sexual assault acceptance within our society, is it extremely detrimental and reckless to display these types of male behaviors while failing to display any consequences for their actions.

Mike continues to dismiss her feelings even after she has stated that she is upset with his actions. Mike claims that he thought she was as into the moment as he was, even though Lesley was verbally and physically struggling to get away from him—Mike lies and twists the story in order to justify his actions to repress and minimize Lesley’s experience. It is only once Lesley threatens to kick him out of the house and he realizes that there may be real consequences for his actions does Mike even begin to apologize for his sexual assault.

As the scene continues, Lesley enters her dressing room after her sexual assault accompanied by another female character, Laura. Lesley tells Laura about

what happened, and Laura responds that she thinks that it is “kind of hot.” This is a frustrating and completely out of place statement to have been spoken from one female character to another—Laura’s character does not seem to respond as a woman who has just heard about a friend’s sexual assault, she answers how the audience would typically assume a male character’s answer and plays to the male point of view. The audience can then see that Lesley is visibly distraught and says aloud, “Why don’t I have any self-respect?” to which Laura replies, “You’re an actress, honey.” In this scene, Laura works to diminish and minimize the experience of sexual assault that Lesley has just endured and basically tells her that it comes with her chosen profession.

Lesley goes on to tell Laura that all she has ever wanted was to be on Broadway and that all she wants is for someone to tell her that she made it—and right on cue, Riggan enters the room to grant Lesley’s wish. Riggan enters the room to check on Lesley and then says to her: “Look, none of this is your fault, okay? ... You’re beautiful, you’re talented and I’m lucky to have you.”

What Riggan is saying, in and of itself, is not problematic; what is problematic is how Lesley’s identification of self-worth has to come from an outside character telling her all the things she wants to hear—that she is pretty and talented and must be told this in order to feel validated as a person.

Once Riggan leaves the room Laura then complains to Lesley that in the two years she has known Riggan, he has never said those things to her. I would argue that there is no relevance in this dialogue other than to show that the women in this movie revolve around the feelings of men and that their self-worth is directly tied to how the men in their lives perceive them. It also shows a pettiness that is so often stereotypically

associated with female characters where a woman, in this case Laura, is jealous because of another female character for receiving male attention that she herself is not receiving. The scene also shows how Riggan's character works as the stereotypical male savior for the female characters who are need validation from a male character. This is problematic because it works to justify the gendered stereotype of male characters coming to the aide of female characters to provide validation of their self-worth.

After Laura's complaint, Lesley, who apparently feels that she now needs to justify Laura's existence, turns to her and says the exact thing to Laura that Riggan just said to her. Laura then grabs Lesley's hand and intertwines her fingers with hers. Laura leans in for a kiss and Lesley asks her what she is doing, to which Laura responds, "Nothing." Laura then kisses Lesley and it is evident that Lesley is not kissing her back, nor does she seem to be enjoying it. But for some unknown reason, Lesley then tells her to do it again and they kiss again.

My first question while watching this scene was, 'why'? There is absolutely no relevance in this scene to the plot whatsoever. Not only was it appalling and disturbing how Laura was so indifferent towards Lesley's experience with sexual assault, but she also shows a complete disregard for her emotional state. But my greatest issue and frustration with this scene is the kiss between Laura and Lesley. The kiss has nothing—absolutely nothing—to do with the plot. Never in any previous scenes have there been any mention of intimacy between the two characters and this scene is never mentioned again in the remainder of the film. This scene appears to be placed there only to attract and please male movie viewers who want to view these two women kissing as a tool for visual pleasure. The utter disregard for the sexual assault that Lesley just went through

and the subsequent degradation of this character to an unnecessary intimacy with another female character does nothing to discuss or even declare that her assault was a problem in the slightest. In Laura Mulvey's words, "The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line" (837). This quote entirely sums up the scene with the kiss between Laura and Lesley; their presence and that action was only meant as a spectacle and works against the plot line.

Conclusion

Birdman passes the Bechdel Test; however, the conversation that allows it to pass is extremely brief. In a film that has female characters outnumbering male characters, there is only one scene where two women directly have a conversation with each other about something other than a man. Ironically, it is right before the kiss between Laura and Lesley. Sandwiched between Lesley's recount of her sexual assault and the utter idiocy of the kiss, Lesley and Laura have a brief conversation about Lesley wanting to be an actor on Broadway. Even though this movie passes the Bechdel Test, there is no relative way for me to say that this movie portrays any semblance of positive representation of women. The film fails, in every way that it possibly can, to portray women as more than pleasurable visual objects for the gratification of men who make no discernable differences on the developments of the plot.

In my opinion, this film was made specifically for the intended audience of male movie goers and caters to what is deemed appealing to the male gaze. This film is

rampant with women only existing for the gratification of men and using women as an ends to a mean. Furthermore, the issues I have previously discussed only pertain to the two specific scenes that I analyzed. Throughout the film there many additional problematic portrayals of women such as Laura faking a pregnancy, Riggan's ex-wife agreeing to sell the house that was meant to be Sam's (so Riggan can finance his play) and the storyline of how Sam continuously tries to be romantically involved with Mike, even though he consistently objectifies her and the women around him. What is even worse than how the female characters were portrayed and written into the story, is how the men are able to use and abuse these women with no consequences for their actions. The blatant disrespect shown to all of the women in this film works to demonstrate a damaging narrative that men can do what they want, including abusing women to get their way and that women make no difference in a storyline and that the success or failures in their lives orbit around the lives of the men around them.

Spotlight

Introduction

Spotlight is the 2016 winner of Best Picture of the Year at the Academy Awards. The film stars Michael Keaton, Mark Ruffalo, Rachel McAdams and Liev Schreiber. It was written by Josh Singer and Tom McCarthy and was directed by Tom McCarthy. It was released on November 20, 2015.

Spotlight is a biopic based upon the investigation of sexual abuse cover-ups by the Boston Globe's investigative journalist team, Spotlight. In 2003, Spotlight worked to expose the phenomena of sexual abuse and the subsequent coverups of abuse against children by priests within the Catholic church community in Boston, Massachusetts. The movie features only one main female character, Sacha Pfeiffer, throughout the film (“Spotlight”).

The first scene examined follows the only female reporter in *Spotlight*, Sacha, as she goes to meet with a survivor of sexual abuse as a child at the hands of a priest. The second scene analyzed is about Sacha coming in contact with one of the priests who is accused of the sexual abuse of children. These two scenes were chosen because they were the only ones where Sacha was featured on her own, without the accompany of men and also displayed her personality and characteristics as a character and also as a journalist.

The difficulty in examining female portrayal with this film is the lack of female characters due to Sacha being the only female journalist working for Spotlight during the time of the investigation. Since this is a factually based story, being accurate in the

incorporation of Sacha as the only female reporter is understandable and necessary to the accurate portrayal of the events that transpired. Although the portrayal of Sacha is represented well, I find issue within this film from the lack of easy secondary female character inclusion and the fabrication of certain events in Spotlight's investigation regarding Sacha.

Analysis

Throughout the film, Sacha is represented in a way that shows her composition, intelligence and compassion while demonstrating her dedication to her profession and journalistic integrity. This characterization is best demonstrated in the first scene analyzed for this film. In this scene, Sacha is meeting with a character named Joe who was sexually abused as a child. In the scene, Joe is visibly nervous. During the beginning of their interaction, Sacha tries to put him at ease before they begin talking about his experience with abuse. Joe begins describing his early interactions with the priest who abused him, Father Shandley. Joe describes an incident where Father Shandley suggested that they play strip poker. "And of course, I lost. And things went on from there," Joe continued. Sacha then asks him to specifically state what happened to him. Joe then says, "Specifically, he molested me." There is a pause between them and Sacha says, "Joe, I think that the language is going to be so important here. We can't sanitize this. Just saying molest isn't enough. People need to know what actually happened." It is visible on her face that she is sympathetic to Joe's experience and the difficulties that result in him having to retell the story; she demonstrates her understanding through her actions but all

the while doing due diligence within her professional duties as a journalist. This scene works to depict Sacha's dedication to her job as a professional journalist, while simultaneously showing her empathy and compassion; it strives to demonstrate that Sacha is a multifaceted character and does not have to choose between being a professional and showcasing her humanity. Later in the scene, Joe finishes telling Sacha about his experience while they are walking in a park. Joe begins crying and apologizes to Sacha for becoming emotional. Sacha tells Joe not to be sorry and comforts him.

As seen in the previous scene, Sacha is often represented and displayed in scenes that depict moments where the character is expected and needed to display empathy towards others. Both of the scenes analyzed for this thesis show Sacha through the scope of her profession as a journalist as well as demonstrating her compassion and empathy that she feels for others. Although this depiction of Sacha's compassion towards her sources is, I believe, well intended, it falls into the gendered stereotype that women are better empathizers than men. Part of being a professional journalist is being able to empathize with people whose story you are telling. Throughout this film, Sacha is prominently portrayed as a great empathizer; however, most of the major scenes surrounding Sacha are dedicated to her showing her compassion whereas her male counterparts are not held to the same standard of portrayal and are not forced to show their compassion as journalistic professionals.

The film continues to show the composure that Sasha has as a professional journalist in the second scene analyzed. The scene opens with Sacha making phone calls and going door to door trying to find people who would be willing to tell their story about the coverup of sexual abuse within the Boston churches. Sacha goes to a house, knocks

on the door and an older man opens the door. She soon realizes that he is one of the priests accused of sexual assault named Father Paquin. Sacha asks him, “We spoke to several men who knew you when they were boys at St. John the Baptist in Haverhill, did—They told us you molested them. Is that true?” Father Paquin replies, “Sure, I fooled around—but I never felt gratified myself.” Sasha continues taking notes and says, “Right—but you admit to molesting boys at St. John the Baptist?” Father Paquin continues confirming that he did do the things that she is asking him. Sacha then says, “Right, but can you tell me where and how you fooled around with these boys?” Father Paquin says, “I want to be clear. I never raped anyone. There’s a difference. I should know.” Sacha responds, “How would you know?” Father Paquin then says, “I was raped.” Sacha, who had been continuously writing in her notepad, stops and looks at him, obviously a bit thrown by his answer. She attempts to question him further but is asked to leave by his sister before receiving any further information from him. This scene displays good representation of the work ethic, composure and professionalism that defines the character of Sacha Pfeiffer throughout the film; however, this scene still works to reinforce the gender normative notions that women have to be empathetic and compassionate.

Although the aforementioned scene provides a good representation of Sacha, I do have one issue with it—the scene is not factually correct. After conducting research, I discovered that although the interview with Father Paquin is, more or less, factually accurate, in reality, the interview was conducted by Spotlight reporter Steve Kurkjian (“Spotlight Movie”). This scene is an extremely important and telling scene of the psychology behind the mentality of the priests that conducted the abuse and definitely

deserved to be included in this film; but why was the character that interviewed Father Paquin changed from Steve to Sacha? During the real investigation, Sacha did collaborate with Steve in writing the article that is based on the interview. One of the questions I kept circling back to was, why did they not just include the previous scene while leaving the correct characters intact? In my opinion, they changed the character from Steve to Sacha because they realized that they did not have enough representation of the only female character in the film—so they decided to insert her into one of the most critical breakthroughs and revelations of the case. However, even if we draw the conclusion that her character was placed there for more representation, my next question revolved around wondering why they did not just include a factual encounter of this scene and also include Sacha working on many of the other important aspects that she worked for the case. By replacing her character and having her take the credit of the work of a male character, the film subconsciously works to infer that the work that Sacha did pales in the comparison of what her male coworkers did—that the work she did was not deemed worthy enough to be included in this depiction of the real-life inspired events and that she had to be supplemented with the work and breakthroughs of a male character. Tying directly in with the previously mentioned question into the film's display of female compassion, I contend that this scene was specifically chosen to incorporate Sacha and works to reinforce an unconscious gendered stereotype that women are better empathizers than their male counterparts. To accurately examine Sacha in this film, it is also necessary to examine the men and their roles in the film. Whereas Sacha is highlighted through her journalistic duties while simultaneously displaying her compassion on screen, the men are never consecrated into the same realm of depiction—

they are allowed to show their journalistic integrity and professionalism without having to overtly display their humanity through their show of empathy to their sources.

On the website BechdelTest.com, where users can discuss if they feel that a movie either passes or fails the Bechdel Test, there is a debate about if the film passes the test. The scene that questions the film's passage is a quick scene where Sacha is speaking with her grandmother, who is referenced as Nana in the end credits. The movie implies that Sacha is telling her grandmother about the abuse scandal that she has been working to uncover regarding the male Catholic priests. The only spoken words between them are her grandmother asking Sacha for a glass of water. One user argues that it does not pass the test because her grandmother does not actually have a name, rather 'Nana' is a variation of a way to call a grandmother. Another user argues that regardless of the name, their conversation has to do with the sexual assault committed by male priests within the Catholic church, thereby failing the test. While another user argues that Nana signifies as a name and that the conversation does not involve a man since the conversation is based on the scandal and does not technically involve a male character. In my opinion, *Spotlight* does not pass the Bechdel Test; the conversation revolves around the actions of men and the subsequent effects of said actions. Regardless of the legitimacy of the name of the grandmother and topic of conversation, it is still a far reach for this scene to be considered passing for the Bechdel Test. As previously stated, part of this is due to the fact that there is only one main female character in the film. However, I find it frustrating that they did not bother to include any other female characters—even as a secondary character. This would have been a relatively easy feat to achieve by perhaps including

Sacha speaking with another female journalist about her experience with the case, for example.

Even though there is a lack of female characters in *Spotlight*, overall Sacha is represented as an intelligent and hardworking woman. The film never portrayed her as less than her all-male colleagues and portrayed the character as the professional, intellectual journalist that the character is based upon. The real Sacha Pfeiffer, in her self-authored article titled, *Hollywood was as Vigilant as Journalists in Building 'Spotlight,'* expressed her initial doubts about the movie and questioned the accuracy of it saying, “I feared ... the inevitable sensationalism as reality morphed into screenplay.” Once she was involved with the movie and saw the final screening she changed her mind. Overall, she was impressed with the accuracy and integrity of the portrayal of her team and herself. Although the movie is lacking in female characters and contains some aspects of fabrication from the actual events to the event in the film, *Spotlight* finds some redemption in the characteristics portrayed in the film's only female character, Sacha Pfeiffer.

Conclusion

Romy Fröhlich, a professor at Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, who specializes in feminist media studies, discusses how traditional feminine values are viewed in the realm of journalism in her chapter of *Gender and Newsroom Cultures* entitled, “Feminine and Feminist Values in Communication Professions.” She states that,

In the fields of communication professions, ‘female’ characteristics such as empathy, thoughtfulness ... [and] a talent for dealing with people ... are all considered to be qualifications that could be used as career advantages in contrast to supposedly typical male characteristics.... (67)

She goes on to say that because of this belief that women are better communicators than men, “more importance will be attached to gender as a social category ... [that will] be linked to strict, culturally determined stereotypes” (Fröhlich, *Gender and Newsroom Cultures* 67). Although this is a stereotype that generally affects working journalists, for the sake of this film, the stereotype that women communicate and empathize better than men carries over to this film because it revolves around journalists. Because of the gendered stereotype within typical newsrooms, this carries over to the film that is subsequently about newsroom journalist and is adapted to fit the narrative in *Spotlight*.

One of the overarching issues with this film is the tokenism displayed of Sacha in the actual investigative team, *Spotlight*. “Tokenism, broadly speaking, is including someone in a group for the sake of sounding or appearing diverse” (Giang). While this is an issue within the movie, the larger issue is the tokenism displayed in the real Boston Globe’s *Spotlight*; and the film accurately portrays the tokenism that was displayed in the real-life team. However, by stereotyping the character of Sacha into the role of the empathetic communicator, they played into the gendered stereotype and worked to reinforce this viewpoint, however conscious or unconscious that stereotyping may have been. However, this also begs the further discussion into if it is right for films to include more female representation only for the sake of claiming more female inclusion. If films begin adding more women only to placate and defend that they have more female

portrayal, than is it really fixing anything or is there just the addition of more problems which conserve the issue of positive female portrayal?

Too often in the analyses of these films, there is an overarching tendency to give no second thought to the inclusion of female characters. As in many of the other films examined, it would have been simple to include any number of female characters, even if they are not necessarily main characters. I argue that this is a general lacking component in our media today and unfortunately female representation is often something that movie directors, writers and producers glance over because they are not made aware of this and do not consciously recognize it as an issue.

Moonlight

Introduction

Moonlight is the 2017 winner for Best Picture of the Year at the Academy Awards. The film stars Mahershala Ali, Alex Hibbert, Janelle Monae, Naomie Harris, Ashton Sanders and Trevante Rhodes. The film was directed by Barry Jenkins. The storyline is based on Tarell McCraney's original play, *Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*. McCraney co-wrote the film along with director Barry Jenkins. It was released in the on November 18, 2018.

Moonlight is a coming of age film following the life of a young African American boy named Chiron who is growing up in Liberty City in Miami. The movie is segmented into three parts corresponding with three critical stages in his life and is titled by which name he identifies with. In his youth, he takes the name Little. As a teenager, he goes by his actual name, Chiron. As a young adult, he goes by the name Black. The film documents the challenges he experiences coming to terms with his sexuality and identity while learning to navigate the world as a young African American male while learning to deal with the physical and emotional abuse he endured growing up ("Moonlight").

The two scenes that I chose to examine both center around the two women who are featured in *Moonlight*. One of the scenes demonstrates how one of the female characters, Teresa, functions as Chiron's surrogate mother and describes their relationship. The other scene focuses on Chiron and his mother Paula as she apologizes to him for the mistakes she has made in the past.

Compared to the other films examined for this thesis, *Moonlight* displays one of the better portrayals of women; however, it is important to note that in this film, the female characters only exist through the eyes of the main male character, Chiron. The women are only represented in the way that they interact with Chiron and the positive and negative effects that they have on him as he grows up. The film features two central female characters: Paula, Chiron's drug-addicted mother and Teresa, who acts as his surrogate mother.

Another difficulty in this examination is that *Moonlight* is based upon the play, *Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, by Tarell McCraney; because of this it is increasingly difficult for analysis to ascertain when portrayals are represented factually, or if they are fabricated ("Moonlight").

Michel Foucault, a philosopher well-known for his specialization on examining the relationship between power and knowledge, spoke on the importance of not seeing the "'truth' of knowledge in an absolute sense ... but of a discursive formation sustaining a regime of truth" (Hall, *Representation* 34). To further clarify his statement, Foucault claims that we can only make meanings through representation. So, regardless if this film is based on real-life events, it is still imperative that this film is examined through the roles that the female characters play in this film and how the women are portrayed.

Analysis

Throughout the film, the female characters in the film seem to be at odds with each other—Paula, the lacking, drug-addicted, abusive mother, and Teresa, the surrogate

loving parent figure. For much of Chiron's life, his mother Paula could potentially be identified as one of the main antagonists of the film. Her drug addiction and emotional unavailability presented Chiron with a confusing coming-of-age narrative that propels him onto a path that eventually leads to a life of illegality and emotional confusion. The character of Teresa is introduced during the first act and continues to serve as a positive mothering figure to Chiron. Where Paula lacks as a mother, Teresa steps up to take her place and focuses on loving and raising him which extends from his childhood all the way into his adulthood.

Early in the film, the audience first becomes aware of Paula's increasing dependency on drugs. The film documents the heart-wrenching and painfully realistic depiction of the transformation that Paula and Chiron's life goes through because of Paula's struggle with her drug addiction. Our first visual of Paula in the first act of the film shows Paula appearing to be coming home from work in scrubs, signifying that she has a job and is working to provide for her and her son. Later in the same act, the audience first learns that Paula is starting to get involved with drugs. The film progresses and in the second act of the film, the audience now sees a Paula who is fully drug-dependent. Her addiction has completely interfered with the functions of her daily life, as well as Chiron's. The audience is able to see the disparaging effect that drug addiction and the lack of her emotional availability has had on her son's childhood and mental health.

One of my initial fears while analyzing this film was that *Moonlight* fell into a stereotypical characterization of Paula by portraying her as the negative and harmful representation of an abusive, drug-addicted, poor black mother. Although this portrayal

may be factually correct according to how Tarell McCraney depicts it, it is still necessary to examine how Paula could fall into a stereotypical depiction of addiction and poverty. In most ways, Paula does fall into this category. She is a black mother who is portrayed as abusive, struggling with drug addiction, and she does exist in the realm of poverty. Although I would argue that they do not set out to portray a stereotypical narrative, rather, for Paula, this character actually fits the stereotype rather than forcing the character into it; and while she does fit into this depiction, this stereotype slightly deviates from the norm in the ending of the film by showing her sobriety and showing regret for her actions towards Chiron.

One of the most important representations of Paula is demonstrated in the third act of the film with the depiction of the character growth that she undergoes because of her sobriety. Her character progression peaks during the second scene analyzed. The scene opens with Chiron, who is now a young adult, visiting his mother in a drug rehabilitation center. The film does not try and hide the tension and unease that fills the air around Paula and her son. As the scene progresses, for the first time, Paula apologizes to Chiron for what she put him through because of her drug addiction—she does not ignore the wrong that she did to Chiron in the past, rather demonstrates her strength by apologizing and taking responsibility for the pain she has caused him. In this scene, the character representation of Paula truly shines. In her apology, she says,

I messed up. I know that. I love you, Chiron. I do. I love you baby. But you ain't gotta love me. Lord knows I did not have love for you when you needed it, I know that. So you ain't gotta love me, but you gon' know that I love you.

In this scene Paula demonstrates one of the most incredible and hardest things that her character has had to do—she admits her faults and shortcomings as a parent and apologizes to Chiron for what her struggle with drug addiction put him through as a child. She apologizes to Chiron and validates his feelings towards her, acknowledging the mistakes and actions that she put him through in the past. She does not ask him to forgive her, rather she just wants him to know that he is loved and that she does not expect anything from him in return. Although her apology in no way excuses her for the abuse, abandonment and hardships that she forced on Chiron, the redemption of her character is made possible through her apology to her son and her newfound strength that allows her to admit her previous wrongdoings.

One of the interesting aspects of the representation of the character of Teresa is that she is everything that Chiron's mother is not. The differences between Teresa and Paula is best described by a quote by Dr. Robin Boylorn, assistant professor of interpersonal and intercultural communication at the University of Alabama. In her blog post, "Moonlight Musings and Motherhood: On Paula, Teresa and the Complicated Role of (Bad) Black Mamas in Film," she describes the dynamic of Teresa and Paula as such:

[The film] gives us the gift of Teresa. She is like air. The antithesis of a stereotype, Teresa is not the around-the-way girl you expect to be the live-in girlfriend of a gold-grill wearing, child-saving drug dealer. She is the reverse of Chiron's mother. But Chiron's mother lacks the depth, until the end, to mark her as anything other than a bad mother. She is only redeemable through Chiron's forgiveness.

The character of Teresa is presented to the storyline as a surrogate mothering figure to Chiron—in all of the ways that Paula lacks as a mother, Teresa makes up for. While Paula, through her words and often her actions, tears Chiron down, Teresa progressively works to build him back up and reinforce him with love, compassion and acceptance. The characterization of Teresa is best demonstrated in the first scene analyzed.

In the scene previous to the scene analyzed, Chiron enters his home after coming home from school to Paula lying on the couch. Paula then tells him that he cannot be there tonight, that she has company coming over, and that he needs to find somewhere else to be. The next scene shows that Chiron went to Teresa's house after being kicked out of his home. The scene opens on Chiron eating at Teresa's kitchen table. After some small talk on Teresa's end, Chiron continues to sit with his head down and eats silently. Teresa chastises him for keeping his head down in her house. She then says, "Stop putting your head down in my house. You know my rule. It's all love and all pride in this house. Do you feel me?" Teresa makes Chiron verbally acknowledge her sentence and the meaning behind it. Through this scene, Teresa strives to reinforce in Chiron the feelings of love and pride that Chiron is so often deprived of at home by his mother. Teresa seeks to validate Chiron's emotions and feelings in a way that Paula does not. Teresa works to ensure that Chiron knows that he is valued, loved and cared for even when he may not feel that way himself.

This movie does not pass the Bechdel test; however, judging the overall portrayal of women based on this test alone would be a mischaracterization of the representation of female characters in this film. For the plot progression of *Moonlight* to work, the separation of the two female characters is essential to the storyline. Paula and Teresa

exist in two different realms of Chiron's life, one as the mothering figure and the other as an external complication in Chiron's universe—the separation of the two characters are imperative for the film since the two women satisfy different plot developments in Chiron's life throughout the film.

Conclusion

One of the most crucial aspects to remember about the analysis of *Moonlight* it that this film is not a documentary; it is a biopic. By that distinction, this film is not strictly held to standards of truth: rather, writers and producers have the made creative decisions to alter character portrayal. In the same way that it is important to examine the film's representation of the women rather than the basis it was formed upon, it is problematic that the women of *Moonlight* only exist in the realm of Chiron and that their value only lies in furthering his character's plot progression.

As previously discussed, the women in this film only exist in the world of Chiron. Teresa exists in how she cares and loves Chiron and Paula exists as the antagonist to young Chiron as well as only being able to find redemption because of him. Critiquing this film on the basis of the main character's views of the roles of the female characters in his life is difficult to do without appearing to take away from the experiences that this biopic story is based upon. Dr. Boylorn demonstrates a great point when discussing how to examine stereotypical roles within *Moonlight* since it does have a real-life basis:

I don't see the portrayal of black womanhood in *Moonlight* as a failure, because I don't see *Moonlight* as a film about black womanhood. I do ... think that future

films ... [might] complicate and re-characterize representations of black mothers, so that even if and when they are not positive forces in their child's life, their characterizations are attached to context and history (alongside or in lieu of a stereotype). ("Moonlight Musings")

Overall, *Moonlight* provides a better representation of women compared with the other four movies examined in this thesis. Although the women only exist to revolve around Chiron, Teresa portrays a positive portrayal of a woman who works to reinforce feelings of love and acceptance; and although through most of the film Paula works as the antagonist, Paula also portrays redemption and the acceptance and reconciliation with wrongdoings.

The Shape of Water

Introduction

The Shape of Water is the 2018 Best Picture of the Year winner at the Academy Awards. The film was directed Guillermo del Toro who also wrote the screenplay alongside Vanessa Taylor. The movie stars Sally Hawkins, Michael Shannon, Octavia Spencer, Richard Jenkins and Michael Stuhlbarg. The film was released on December 22, 2017.

The main character of *The Shape of Water* is a mute woman named Elisa who works as a custodian at a high-security government facility. When a humanoid amphibian creature arrives at the facility, Elisa quickly falls in love with him and begins plotting a way to release him from captivity (“Shape of Water”).

The two scenes examined in this film show the two different aspects of Elisa’s characterization and her personality. The first scene works to display her intellect, creativity and her strong will. The other scene shows a more vulnerable side of her, but also shows how her self-worth is tied to a male character.

The Shape of Water generally displays a better portrayal of women as compared to the other movies examined in this thesis; however, as in the other films, there are a number of problematic characterizations within the female characters. With Elisa, the film sets out with the intention of displaying a strong, independent, disabled female character who does what she must to help the one she loves. However, the execution of

her strong nature and character is often undercut by the language and portrayal of the character throughout the film.

Analysis

The overall language used in this film by women and used towards women is fairly positive—language is not used to diminish them or make them feel inferior, with the exception of the antagonist of the film, Colonel Richard Strickland. Throughout the film, Colonel Strickland uses derogatory language and actions to infer that the female characters are intellectually and physically inferior to him. This can be best illustrated in the second scene analyzed in *The Shape of Water*. In this scene, Colonel Strickland questions Elisa and her co-worker Zelda about the disappearance of Amphibian Man. He asks the women, “If you know something about what transpired here, it’s your obligation to report any detail, no matter how small or trivial it may seem.” He pauses for a moment and then says, “Trivial means unimportant.” This explanation of the word, without the women asking, is an example of Colonel Strickland ‘mansplaining’ this to the women because he infers that they will not understand the language he is using. This is a small, but important display of how Colonel Strickland believes the women are of lower intelligence than himself and feels that it is his obligation to explain vocabulary terms that he feels they will not otherwise understand. In the scene, Elisa picks up on his derogatory use of language and later uses it against him. Continuing in the scene, Colonel Strickland asks Elisa and Zelda if they had seen one of the scientists, Dr. Hoffstetler, going in or out of the lab, to which Zelda points out that he works there. Colonel

Strickland replies, “I mean in a different way, doing something different.” In response to this, Elisa signs and Zelda translates, “Something trivial?” Elisa’s use of the word ‘trivial’ here is a funny and creative way to show her intentions of noncompliance with a man that she has previously and obviously shown her disdain towards.

After Colonel Strickland fails to get the information that he wants out of Elisa and Zelda, Colonel Strickland says, “What am I doing, interviewing the fucking help? The shit cleaners. The piss wipers. You two, go ahead. Leave.” Once Elisa and Zelda have demonstrated that they can be of no use to him, he stops trying to be civil towards them and begins trying to demean them because of the jobs that they hold.

The use of body language by both Elisa and Colonel Strickland says a lot about the personality of these two characters. As illustrated in the second scene examined, Elisa demonstrates her strength, determination and confidence through her use of language and body language. Throughout the entirety of the conversation with Colonel Strickland, Elisa maintains direct and unbreaking eye contact. Later in the continuation of the scene, Colonel Strickland walks to stand right in front of Elisa after she makes the joke that references something he previously said. He stands extremely close to Elisa, in a domineering position that is meant to make her feel inferior and prove his dominance over her. Elisa takes a different response by making strong eye contact with him and he eventually walks away. This use of strong body language from Elisa is used to demonstrate the inner strength that she possesses and show that she will not let a man intimidate her simply because he feels entitled and superior as a man.

Elisa is nothing but headstrong in her dealings with Colonel Strickland and does not let him get away with his condescending and misogynistic language and actions. Elisa

devises a creative way to use her strength and intellect to stand up and speak her mind to Colonel Strickland without him realizing. At the end of the scene, Zelda walks towards the door to leave and Elisa stays a little bit behind. She waits until Colonel Strickland is looking at her and then signs to him, “F-U-C-K-Y-O-U,” knowing that he does not know sign language and it will hurt his ego. I feel that this is one of the strongest moments of female portrayal in this film. Instead of resigning herself to acceptance of the outright disrespect shown from a male character, Elisa is empowered enough to stand up for herself in a creative and intelligent way.

Although Colonel Strickland uses negative and condescending language throughout the film to women, it is fairly typical and predictable since he serves as the antagonist of the film. In *The Shape of Water*, Colonel Strickland’s character is designed to play the stereotypical role of the alpha-male in order to aid plot progression and create tension in the plot—and I do not feel that his character could have been portrayed in any other way. Other than Colonel Strickland, the other main characters in the film use primarily kind language to each other. There is a good representation of positive female friendship from Elisa and Zelda throughout the film; and the other main character in the film, Elisa’s next-door neighbor, Giles, sees Elisa as a friendly companion and treats her with respect and kindness.

Although *The Shape of Water* does pass the Bechdel Test, the scene that allows its passage lasts for only a couple minutes. There is a quick scene where Zelda saves a spot in line for Elisa at work, and another woman chastises her for it—and that is the only scene in the movie where two female characters have a conversation that does not involve a male character. Even though Elisa and Zelda have a strong friendship, for the majority

of the movie, their conversations either focus on Zelda complaining about her husband, Elisa and Zelda talking about the men at work or the pair discussing Amphibian Man. Although Amphibian Man is a humanoid being, for this film I would consider him to be a male character since he is referred to as a “him” and is also a romantic love interest for Elisa. One of the most frustrating characteristics of this film is the lack of realistic female conversation that does not center around a male figure, an aspect that would have been easy to represent since Elisa and Zelda are close friends.

As hard as this movie tries to show an independent, strong female character, the film falls short of its execution of the portrayal of Elisa’s aforementioned characteristics. There are a few shining moments that display the intended strength and tenacity of Elisa, but there are just as many moments that undercut the strength that we are supposed to feel from her. One of the first instances of this can be seen in the first scene examined. The scene opens with Elisa pleading with her next-door neighbor Giles to assist her in helping Amphibian Man escape from captivity. During their discussion, Elisa says,

When he looks at me, the way he looks at me, he does not know what I lack, or how I am incomplete. He sees me for what I am, as I am. He’s happy to see me, every time, every day. And now I can either save him or let him die.

While this scene does demonstrate the emotional depth and compassion that Elisa has, it also gives the impression that before him, and without him, Elisa is incomplete and that she needs the love and adoration of a male figure to make her feel complete as a person. This representation of female loneliness and the idea that a man is needed for a woman to be fulfilled and complete is a harmful narrative that demonstrates a sexist ideological

standard that women need to have a male counterpart to give them a purpose and that they cannot possibly be content by their selves.

The Shape of Water also displays negative ideology in its representation of Elisa's disability. As seen in the first scene examined, while pleading with Giles to help her release Amphibian Man, Giles calls the creature a freak. In response to this, Elisa says, "What am I? I move my mouth, like him. I make no sound, like him. What does that make me? All that I am, all that I've ever been, brought me here, to him." In this quote, Elisa seems to claim that she is a 'freak' because of her disability and is closer in nature to that of a fictional monster than to humans. Valerie Osborn discusses this issue in her article titled, "The failure in representation in *The Shape of Water*." In the article, Osborn says, "While Elisa's character is not entirely defined by her disability, the audience is asked to accept the film's assertion that her inability to talk identifies her with something that is not human." Elisa herself explains to Giles that she feels incomplete and isolated by her disability and that Amphibian Man, who himself is not human and is by default, an outsider, is the only person that makes her feel truly seen. Author Elsa Sjunneson-Henry, whom herself is hearing impaired, wrote the following about her experience watching *The Shape of Water*:

I don't dream of seeing out of two eyes, or hearing without a hearing aid. I don't crave many things which are out of my grasp ... and I certainly can share my love with someone without having to subvert my disability in order to express it.

Undercutting her disability broke the flow of sign language, the believability of disability, and indeed, the power of her words through sign. ("I Belong")

In addition to the general lack of positive female representation in film, there is an even greater lack in positive representation in disabled female characters. *The Shape of Water* had an opportunity to portray Elisa as the strong, determined and able woman that she appears to be, but fails in its approach with her viewpoint of her disability. Even though there is the inclusion of a female, disabled character in *The Shape of Water*, if the portrayal of the underrepresented is detrimental to the community it is portraying, the inclusion of the character does more harm than good. The notion that Elisa is only able to find love and true understanding with a being that is other than human is a dangerous and irresponsible notion to represent to people within the disabled community and reinforces the negative and incorrect stereotype that people living with a disability, and in this case a woman with a disability, are either less than whole or wish that they could change or erase their disability.

Conclusion

Overall, I feel that *The Shape of Water* had the best representation of women in comparison to the three other films examined. Although there were shortcomings with the characterization of the women—conversations being primarily centered around men and the arising issues with Elisa's sense of self-worth and belonging tied to Amphibian Man—the overarching narrative placed upon the portrayal of the women in this film was relatively well done.

One aspect that I enjoyed about the portrayal of the women in this film is that they are not afraid to stand up to the male characters. Elisa and Zelda are noted several times

disagreeing and standing up for themselves against the male characters where, in comparison, the women of *Birdman* fleetingly showed their disapproval of the actions of the men and then went about the plot as if nothing had happened. While this film generally shows a better depiction of female representation, there could have been an incorporation of stronger female representation with less male centration and need placed on the women of *The Shape of Water*.

Thesis Conclusion

The Academy Awards are supposed to reward the pinnacle of great filmmaking in the American film industry. By choosing to examine the four past films to have won the prestige award of Best Picture of the Year, my goal was to discover if these films displayed positive representations of women that reflect the women in our society. Unfortunately, within these four films examined, the portrayal of women is overwhelmingly poor. Women should be able to see themselves portrayed as positive, intelligent and independent women, rather than viewing themselves through secondhand characters whose value is based on how they benefit others.

By the end of this thesis, I felt aggravated at having to continuously state the same general issues within these films time and time again—there is a lack of female characters, the depiction of women is not realistic and the value of the female characters are only based upon the men in the film.

Birdman, a film that shows general disregard and disrespect for its female characters, was chosen as the Best Picture of the Year in 2015. *Spotlight*, a film that demonstrates a lack of female characters and conformity to a stereotype, was chosen as the Best Picture of the Year in 2016. *Moonlight*, whose female characters only exist in the realm of men, was chosen as the Best Picture of the Year in 2017. *The Shape of Water*, a film that does include a strong female character, but determines her self-worth based on a male being, was chosen as the Best Picture of the Year in 2018.

If the Academy Awards are supposed to represent the best movies in the American film industry, should it not be central in their ideals to choose movies that

portray women in a positive empowering way in the form of inclusion in storytelling? In having the responsibility of choosing what they deem to be the top film of the year, the board of judges of the Academy for Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences have the responsibility and the obligation to choose movies that accurately, impartially and fairly portray women in their films.

I did notice a progression of positive female portrayal as the film progressed from 2015 to 2018. I am completing this thesis, in what I foresee as a turning point for the American film industry. In the past couple of years there has been an increased push for positive representation of women in movies and with the influence from the #METOO movement, I hope that we continue to see a shift in the dynamic in the storytelling that the Academy of Motion Pictures of Arts and Sciences deems to be the best example of powerful, artistic and impactful storytelling. It will be interesting to examine how our current and future societal changes and social movements will affect the future of filmmaking and storytelling in the film industry.

Inclusion and positive representation within the American film industry plays a vital role on how women view and interpret themselves and the women around them—and this is why I feel that the critical examination of these films is necessary and should be held to the highest of standards. As the epitome of what is deemed as the pinnacle example of excellent filmmaking and storytelling, writers, directors, producers and the chosen board of judges have a duty to accurately and positively show the wide breadth of women that are in society as that of the characters they represent on their screens.

The utmost reason as to why there is such a lack in the positive representation of women is the lack of women in the position to be able to write, direct and produce their

own stories. A study conducted by The Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film found that in the 2017 list of 250 domestic top grossing films “women comprised 18% of all directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers. This represents an increase of 1 percent point from 17% in 2016 and is virtually unchanged from the percentage achieved in 1998” (“Statistics”). Take the movies examined in this thesis for example: *Birdman* was directed by a man and written by four men; *Spotlight* was directed by a man and written by two men; *Moonlight* was directed by a man and written by two men; *The Shape of Water* was directed by a man and written by one man and one woman—and this is the problem. In the entirety of the four films analyzed, out of the ten central people who worked on these films, only one person was a woman. One of the larger overarching issues within representation is that women are not the ones creating and telling their own stories.

As my analysis of these films progressed, I was pleased to see a progression of better female portrayal through the films, but the entertainment still has a ways to go in order to address this issue and implement actual change. To sum up the importance of positive representation of women in film, I will quote Jessica Chastain in her speech at the Cannes Film Festival about the lack of positive female representation,

I do hope that when we include more female storytellers we have more of the women that I recognize in my day to day life. Ones that are proactive, have their own agencies, and don't just react to the men around them. They have their own point of view.

Works Cited

- "Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)." *IMDb*. b. Web. Sep 6, 2018
<<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2562232/>>.
- Birdman Or (the Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*. Dir. Alejandro G. Iñárritu. 2014.
- Fröhlich, Romy. "Feminine and Feminist Values in Communication Professions: Exceptional Skills and Expertise Or "Friendliness Trap?" " *Gender and Newsroom Cultures*. Eds. Marjan de Bruin and Karen Ross. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 2004. 67. Print.
- Giang, Vivian. *Feminism 101: What is Tokenism?*. Web. Oct 17, 2018.
- Hall, Stuart, *Introduction to Paper Voices: The Popular Press and Social Change 1935-1965* by ACH Smith (Rowman & Littlefield, 1975).
- Hall, Stuart. *Representation*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2013.
- "Jobs & the Economy." *Mpaa.org*, n.d., Motion Picture Association of America, www.mpaa.org/jobs-economy/. Accessed 27 Jan. 2018.
- "'It's Disturbing': Jessica Chastain on the Portrayal of Women in Films – Video." *The Guardian*, May 30, 2017, Web. Oct 18, 2018
<<https://www.theguardian.com/film/video/2017/may/30/its-disturbing-jessica-chastain-on-the-portrayal-of-women-in-films-video>>.
- Moonlight*. Dir. Jenkins, Barry. 2016.
- "Moonlight." *IMDb*. Web. Sep 24, 2018 <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt4975722/>>.
- Moonlight Musings & Motherhood: On Paula, Teresa and the Complicated Role of (Bad) Black Mamas in Film.*, 2016. Web. Sep 25, 2018.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford UP, 1999: 833-844

"New Study Shows Women Will Turn off a Film or TV Show If Too Stereotyped or Lacking Female Characters." *SeeJane.org*, 25 Feb. 2017, seejane.org/wp-content/uploads/new-study-shows-women-will-turn-off-a-film-or-tv-show-if-too-stereotyped-or-lacking-female-characters.pdf. Accessed 27 Jan. 2018.

Osborne, Valerie. "The Failure of Representation in 'the Shape of Water'." *UWIRE Text*, 2018, p. 1. *Academic OneFile*; *Gale*. Web.
<http://link.galegroup.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/apps/doc/A531511745/AONE?u=tel_middleten&sid=AONE&xid=35b9bb42>.

Pfeiffer, Sacha. *Hollywood was as Vigilant as Journalists in Building 'Spotlight': Boston Globe Reporter Gives Kudos to Filmmaker Tom McCarthy and His Team for Taking the Time to Get it Right*. Penske Business Media, LLC, 2016. Web.

"The Reel Truth: Women Aren't Seen or Heard." *SeeJane.org*, n.d., seejane.org/research-informs-empowers/data/. Accessed 27 Jan. 2018

"Theatrical Market Statistics 2016." *MPAA.org*, Motion Picture Association of America, www.mpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/MPAA-Theatrical-Market-Statistics-2016_Final.pdf. Accessed 28 Jan. 2018

The Shape of Water. Dir. del Toro, Guillermo. 2017.

"The Shape of Water." *IMDb*. Web. Sep 14, 2018

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5580390/>.

Sjunneson-Henry, Elsa. "I Belong Where the People Are: Disability and The Shape of

Water." *Tor.com*. -01-16T14:00:50+00:00 2018. Web. Sep 14, 2018

<https://www.tor.com/2018/01/16/i-belong-where-the-people-are-disability-and-the-shape-of-water/>.

Spotlight. Dir. McCarthy, Tom. 2015.

"Spotlight." *IMDb*. Web. Sep 7, 2018 <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1895587/>.

"Spotlight Movie vs. the True Story of Real Spotlight

Team." *HistoryvsHollywood.com*. Web. Sep 30, 2018

<http://www.historyvshollywood.com/reelfaces/spotlight/>.

"Statistics." Web. Oct 18, 2018 <https://womenandhollywood.com/resources/statistics/>.

"Spotlight - Bechdel Test Movie List." Web. Sep 29, 2018.

<https://bechdeltest.com/view/6707/spotlight/>

"Useful Notes/The Bechdel Test." *TV Tropes*, n.d., par. 1,

tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/UsefulNotes/TheBechdelTest?from=Main.TheBechdeltest. Accessed 1 Feb. 2018.