


2017

# Barbie Doesn't Have Bruises: Gendered Images of Anxiety and Avoidant Attachment Relationships in Film

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## Repository Citation

Chiang-Lopez, C. G. (2017). Barbie Doesn't Have Bruises: Gendered Images of Anxiety and Avoidant Attachment Relationships in Film.

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Claudia Chiang-Lopez

*Barbie doesn't have bruises: gendered images of anxiety and avoidant attachment relationships in film*

**Introduction and purpose of the study**

Humans tell stories in order to build their worlds and understand these worlds. We tell these stories through art: films, radio shows, books and fairy tales. These stories help mold society by teaching us what is appropriate. Because of this, the impact of our cultural narratives on our young people's behavior is not to be underestimated. For example, UCLA professor and literary critic Karen E. Rowe argues that when teenagers are "confronted by the trauma of blossoming sexuality," they find a "comforting release from anxieties by... perceiving... The commonness of... existential" (1979, p. 240) dilemmas and archetypes. This means that young people may use films in order to better cope with their lack of dating skills, using film as a learning tool. The patterns of behavior they are viewing have a special power: if a teenager is wondering how they should appropriately handle their romantic anxiety, they need only watch these films to learn what happens to people who don't shut down that anxiety. The devastating endings to our characters leave no doubt as to how they should *not* behave. However, these films don't just soothe anxiety, they "prescribe approved cultural paradigms," to ease teenager's "assimilation into the adult community" (Rowe, 1979, p. 240). These portrayals of romantic anxiety can be harmful to our views of women when they are heavily conflated with the "crazy" woman or "unhealthy" woman stereotype.

**Disciplines**

Some scholars were most influential in the making of this work. Their works were innovative, interesting or inspiring. Psychiatrist Dr. Amir Levine, currently the Principal Investigator for a National Institutes of Health research project (About the authors, n.d.), and social psychologist Rachel S.F. Heller, M.A. wrote the book *Attached*. This is a work in the field of psychology, and gives a general overview as to the root of attachment styles, the difference between social anxiety and romantic anxiety, and offers many examples. The work is accessible and practical, while remaining grounded in theory and presenting evidence. The way they covered attachment styles was highly influential for my work, as it inspired the types of questions I could explore. They suggested that protest behaviors can be easily dismissed. Heller and Levine then follow it up by explaining how this behavior can have long term consequences or even lead to domestic violence, particularly when it comes to relationships between those with anxious attachment and those with avoidant attachment.

Communication was also one of my areas of study. Dr. Barbara J. Wilson, a Communication professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Dr. Veronica Hefer, a Communication professor at Georgia College were the scholars who most heavily influenced my work. They created a content analysis on the top 52 highest grossing romantic comedy films from 1998-2008 (Wilson & Hefner, 2013). This content analysis found that romantic films tend to heavily rely on romantic ideals and challenges that can be overcome by love (Wilson & Hefner, 2013). They created a survey of 335 students, asking about their frequency of romantic comedy viewing and their belief on love myths (Wilson & Hefner, 2013).

The final disciple was Film. Dr. Emanuel Levy, a film professor in New York University who studied sociology of culture at Columbia University - conducted a content analysis on films from 1927-1987. He looked at 218 roles in around 50 different films that had won Academy

Awards for Best Actor and Actress and Best Supporting Actor and Actress, as these films were likely widely seen and distributed (Levy, 1990). He also asserts that media portrays a certain cultural lag, that women's status is limited in films, that women are underrepresented, that younger women are preferred over older women, and that women's relationships dominate their lives, findings which I felt were reflected in my own work (Levy, 1990).

## **Literature Review**

Different fields of study provided me with the tools I used for this project. Attachment styles are mainly discussed in the field of psychology, film contributed media analysis and I learned about media effects from the field of communication. It is important to understand what attachment styles are in the first place, as well as what media effects research has found.

## **Attachment Styles**

According to University of Oregon psychology professor Dr. Beverly Fagot and Dr. Kate Kavanagh, attachment styles are usually assessed through the Ainsworth Strange Situation assessment device, which looks at (1) how well an infant uses an "adult as a secure base," (2) how the infant reacts to strangers, and (3) how the infant reacts "to separation and reunion" (1990, p. 864). This way, the child is observed in different situations and their reactions studied and categorized. For example, when children temporarily separated from their mothers, the reactions fell into three groups (Campbell & Marshall, 2011). There were children who reacted calmly, there were children who did not seem to react, and there were children who were highly distressed and attempted to regain closeness to their mothers (Campbell & Marshall, 2011). In similar studies, the children's reactions seemed to be related to their caregiver's emotional availability, as well. Children who had a caregiver with inconsistent responses and who was not readily available responded with clinging and anxiety (Kotler, Buzwell, Romeo & Bowland,

1994). Children who expect to be rejected by their caregiver being to avoid seeking contact, as a way to protect themselves from being rejected (Kotler, et. al., 1994). If a child felt they had responsible and available caregivers, they were more likely to develop secure attachment (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000).

Both these sets of children - who had emotionally unavailable parents - developed a negative self-view (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000). Children with anxious attachment had developed negative self-views but positive views of others (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000; Campbell & Marshall, 2011). They desire intimacy and love, but believe they are unworthy of it (Birtchnell, 1988), and “devote themselves to gaining approval and admiration” from their loved ones (Kotler, et. al., 1994, p. 238). The avoidants had that same negative self-view, but they also viewed others more negatively (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000). Positive expectations of others and comfort with intimacy lead to secure attachment (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000).

Attachment styles then feed into a person’s working models and expectations, which can be a very stable part of their personality, and hard to then change (Campbell & Marshall, 2011).

These self-views are relatively stable from childhood into adulthood (Levine & Heller 2010), as they “influence the appraisal and assimilation of new experiences” (Main, Kaplan & Cassidy, 1985 as referenced by Kotler, et. al., 1994, p. 239). Indeed, they can become more difficult to change, as the person experiences situations which reinforce their internal working models (Levine & Heller 2010; Kotler, et. al., 1994).

### **Avoidant Attachment**

An overview of avoidant attachment can help us understand the behaviors which accompany avoidant attachment. According to attachment scholars, avoidant attachment comes from a fear of abandonment coupled with a fear of vulnerability and dependency (Levine &

Heller, 2010; Rodriguez, DiBello, Øverup, & Neighbors, 2015). Though avoidant folks can be in romantic relationships, they are often not seeking them, as they fear the intimacy and attachments that can take place (Levine & Heller, 2010). They often feel vulnerable in relationships: the chance of being abandoned, the limited freedom, and the demands for emotional intimacy are part of the reason for this (Levine & Heller, 2010). Even when in a relationship, they strive to assert their freedom through being emotionally and physically distant, so that relationships, then, can be difficult (Levine & Heller, 2010). They will often pressure their partner to be more independent, are less likely to offer words of reassurance, and can attempt to create distance from their partner (Levine & Heller, 2010). During times of distress these avoidant folks “will tend not to seek love and support,” will leave their distress unacknowledged, and hide their negative emotions (Kotler, et. al., 1994, p. 239). They will always seek to emphasize independence and self-reliance for themselves and others (Kotler, et. al., 1994).

### **Anxious Attachment**

Anxious attachment stands as a direct contrast to avoidant attachment, and it is important to understand its root causes and accompanying behaviors. Anxious attachment creates an intense desire for intimacy, coupled with a fear of being abandoned (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000; Levine & Heller, 2010; Rodriguez, et. al., 2015). They experience lower trust levels (Rodriguez, et. al., 2015), and report that they felt their partners were unloving, withholding and demanding (Campbell & Marshall, 2011). In these situations they are less likely to voice their distress and needs, and instead they attempt to regain attention and affection through other means (Levine & Heller, 2010). Often they are afraid of alienating their loved ones, and so they can be “compliant, appeasing, conflict avoidant, seemingly self-reliant, (as) they mask feelings such as

anxiety and anger” (Kotler, et. al., 1994, p. 238). However, research has also found that they tend to make more negative attributions, react in more impulsive and volatile manners, with greater anger (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000; Campbell & Marshall, 2011).

### **Relationship between avoidant and anxious**

The dynamic in an avoidant-anxious relationship is very different than one in which one of the partners is secure, or where both partners have the same attachment style. In their book *Attached*, Levine and Heller argue that when a person with anxious attachment begins a relationship with a person with avoidant attachment, both feel their core fears are being confirmed (2010). The avoidant person fears all romantic partners will want to rob them of their freedom and will depend on them, something which they will accuse the anxious partner of doing whenever they seek closeness (Levine & Heller, 2010). The anxious partner for their part, wants intense intimacy, but fears all romantic partners will pull away and see them as too demanding (Levine & Heller, 2010). The anxious partner constantly monitors their partner for signs that they are available or unavailable, they perceive ambiguousness as a possible threat, and ruminate on these signs (Rodriguez, et. al., 2015). As the anxious person increasingly fear the end of the relationship, the avoidant partner’s distance seems to confirm it (Levine & Heller, 2010; Rodriguez, et. al., 2015). In conflict, the anxious partner might be more comfortable with the high levels of conflict than other partners are, as anxious folks feel that sharing emotions and thoughts during conflict can promote intimacy (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000).

This dynamic is often read as romantic. The general premise in romance storylines is that there is a push and pull, agony and joy, something happy and something deeply wrong in the relationship (Dowd & Pallotta, 2000). The relationship between an avoidant and anxious person is full of these tensions. Both feel validated when they are close, yet suffer when they are again

separated (Levine & Heller, 2010). Their desires cannot work together, as they counter each other. We see this in the characters of these films: there is love and support, followed by a rupture for distance, after which they become close again, repeating the cycle over and over.

### **Romance narratives**

Romantic scripts are embedded in our media, and the advent of technology has made them available to most people in this world - youtube web series, films, television shows, books, music, art, advertising, social media, and newspaper columns (Dowd & Pallotta, 2000). However, popular films in particular, have a wider audience than many books do (Dowd & Pallotta, 2000). Levy claims that films seem to experience a certain cultural lag (1990), but some feel it might be demanding too much of a commercial enterprise to “position itself far ahead of cultural sentiment, and attempt to lead the culture to a more enlightened state” (Down & Pallotta, 2000, p. 565). Hefner and Wilson identified broad romantic ideal themes (love conquers all, idealization of partner, soul mate/one and only, love at first sight), as presented in romantic comedies (2013). I relied on their findings to then explore whether most viewers believe in love myths and how this can have its own impact into how they read films. Hefner and Wilson found that love myths are harmful when individuals in a relationship use love myths to encourage themselves to stay in an unhealthy relationship.

### **Media effects - media is important to young people**

Levy asserts that films are both a reflection and reinforcer of our culture (1990). While scholars and viewers interpret films in many ways, they contain certain messages about how the world works, and it is hard to counter these images when they are present in the rest of our culture (Steele & Brown, 1995). For example, romantic beliefs that are reinforced by our culture feed into the way romance is portrayed in films, regardless of genre (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). In



their study, Hefner and Wilson found that viewers who watched more films in general - not just romantic films - were more exposed to love myths and were likelier to accept the romantic beliefs the films promoted (Hefner & Wilson, 2013).

This is not to imply viewers are passive receivers of these ideas. Dr. Jeanne R. Steele from the Minnesota Department of Health, and Dr. Jane D. Brown, a communication professor at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, suggest viewers must manage their beliefs with the ones being presented by the media (1995). In particular, teenagers often use films as a way to learn dating norms (Levy, 1990). They are looking to make sense of their worlds and their own lived experiences and their “sense of who they are shapes” how they interact with media (Steele & Brown, 1995, p. 557). These interactions help them construct their identities, as they use media as a role model, to feel better, to feel a part of a larger social movement, as a fantasy, or a way to express themselves (Steele & Brown, 1995). But they also incorporate its messages and images into already “existing attitudes, feelings and prior learning,” often reproducing the dominant culture (Steele & Brown, 1995, p. 559).

### **Romance narratives of anxiety and avoidance**

There is little research about romantic narratives looking at anxiety and avoidance within them, much less when these dynamics are explored in film. However, if we believe that films are communicating what is already present in society, we can assume that messages about these relationships are already being shared in our culture. Exploring what these messages about romantic anxiety, avoidance, and relationships between two people of those attachment styles could give us some insight. Whether or not these images are ascribed to one gender more than the other is also important to consider.

Rebecca Collins in her content analysis of gender roles in the media, found that women are underrepresented, presented in a negative manner, often sexualized, subordinate and/or in traditionally feminine and stereotyped roles (2011). These types of representations can imply that women are most happy in those stereotyped roles, that their stories do not need to be told, or that they are always sexual creatures (Collins, 2011). If these portrayals are taken as being representative of the way real women ought to behave, harmful patterns could be created. So, then, a content analysis to see whether these romantic narratives of anxiety are most attributed to men or women and what kinds of treatment they receive is important.

### **Summary of Literature Review**

There is a paucity of research that looks into the connection between attachment styles and film. A lot of the research that looks at romantic relationships and the patterns contained within, look into fairytales or romantic comedies genre. Many researchers, like Emmanuel Levy, study portrayals of women in films. Understanding the four dominant attachment styles (anxious, anxious-avoidant, avoidant and secure) and how audiences are being encouraged to behave in their relationships is important. Their behaviors can be affected by the messages they absorb in film and if these messages are unhealthy, it is important to create narratives to counter them. Critically analyzing the messages that are being shown is vital.

### **Methods**

I used a content analysis in order to understand the patterns in the films I studied. Repeated viewings of the movies allowed me to become familiar with the themes, plots and characters, allowing for easier coding in a google sheets document. Open and axial code was used to find the themes and repeated behaviors in the films, based on the reactions of other characters, the language characters used, as well as relevant plots (Manning & Kunkel, 2014).

This form of content analysis can help uncover the themes and lessons that are presented (Collins, 2011; Manning & Kunkel, 2014).

The films *Sunset Boulevard*, *The Hustler* and *Sid and Nancy* are frequently part of film school curriculums. Whether award winning or simply cult films, they have a following and have been influential for other filmmakers, as well as their audiences. Choosing to examine more films could have provided further support for the claims I make, but the patterns exist nonetheless. It is important to note that the messages present in these films are not unique to them. They are recreating the love narratives that exist in the rest of society, as films tend to reflect the way our culture views things (Levy, 1990).

After choosing these films, I watched them several times to understand the characters and the storyline. This also helped me better track the behaviors of anxious and avoidant characters. Working off Levine and Heller's list of potential behaviors that an avoidant or anxious person might engage in (2010), I labeled a character as avoidant if they consistently displayed the following behaviors:

- Creates an intimate relationship quickly, but desires intense privacy
- Protects their independence, time, space and boundaries
- Demands others be unrealistically independent and self-sufficient
- Creates unclear plans
- Is unrealistically romantic
- Fears being taken advantage of by their partner
- Walks out or is silent during fights
- Is unclear about their feelings and intentions

Characters were labeled as anxious if they consistently engaged in the following behaviors:

- A desire for intense closeness early in the relationship
- Vocalizes anxiety and fear of rejection
- Strongly desires a romantic relationship
- Protests in order to gain attention or care (e.g. acting distant or busy when angry, provoking jealousy, repeated attempts to establish/reestablish contact)
- Difficulty opening up, out of fear of rejection
- Tries to end the relationship or ignore problems instead of tackling them
- Does not initiate or escalate the relationship, leaving that up to partner
- Ruminates and obsesses over the relationship
- Elevates their partner's good qualities
- Believes this is their one true love and only opportunity

### **Synopsis of *Sunset Boulevard*, *The Hustler* and *Sid and Nancy***

Despite a small sample, I felt that using award winning films or those often used in film school curriculums were more likely to have been seen, as Levy's work suggests. One of the films I looked at was *Sunset Boulevard*. This film opens with Joe Gillis's dead body floating in a pool. From here, he begins to narrate the circumstances that lead up to his death. A screenwriter who had previously been successful, he has experienced writer's block for a year, leaving him in poverty, and now his car is being repossessed. He attempts to evade the tax collectors by driving into the garage of a random house - one he believes is empty, as old dusty artifacts surround him. Joe describes it in a voiceover as "the whole place seemed to have been stricken with a kind of creeping paralysis - out of beat with the rest of the world, crumbling apart in slow motion"

(Brackett & Wilder, 1950). There, he is called by a butler, who has confused him with the undertaker, who is due to arrive to take their dead monkey.

And this is the first time we see Norma Desmond: she is set up as a strange, grieving, glamorous old woman, surrounded by old and dead things, and alone in her home. Her previous fame, her wealth and powerful personality form an irresistible pull for Joe. From here, the story is simple. She realizes Joe is a screenwriter, and begins to pay him to tell her story, while living with her. In the process, she falls in love with him, while he tries to escape her. One of the ways he attempts to escape her is by beginning to work in secret with his best friend's girlfriend, a budding screenwriter. He begins to arrive home late to Norma, and she is aware that he is keeping a secret. Norma is rejected - he sleeps with her, yes, he uses her money, indeed, but he still leaves her during the important moments in her life. He is horrified at her attempts to retain her youthful beauty, he is bored of her writing, bored of her films. Nonetheless, he is kind to her. When she attempts to kill herself, he is grieved, and sits by her side, comforting her. He demands she be told the truth about her situation, because that would be kinder.

*Sid and Nancy* - originally titled *Love Kills* - is a film made in the '80s, chronicling the real life relationship of Sex Pistols band member Sid Vicious with his girlfriend Nancy Spungen. Reviewers have described it as "a powerful story of love, destruction and drug addiction" (Splawn, 1987). Told in a flashback, starting with his interrogation and arrest over Nancy's murder, an echo of the way *Sunset Boulevard* begins. Nancy is dismissed from the beginning - when she realizes she's talking to the Sex Pistols, she's excited, being a fan, but the other characters (and many reviewers) immediately label her as "a groupie who has come to London to bed The Sex Pistols" (Fellner & Cox, 1986). He initially rejects her, telling her not to show up at his concert, but his eventual acceptance of her is pathologized by viewers, as one reviewer

described Nancy as latching “on to the Pistols and (becoming) a groupie” (Splawn, 1987). Their relationship is a tumultuous one, full of conflict, tours, drugs, and violence.

*The Hustler* was originally a novel by Walter Tevis. In Tevis’s teen years in the 40’s, pool halls were still dangerous places, yet he and his best friend watched professionals play billiards in a downtown hotel (Tevis, 1990). They practiced their moves later until they started to play in other small towns, against the locals, inspiring the novel about pool hustler Eddie Felsen (Tevis, 1990). The figure of the hustler as an outsider who criticizes society’s failings, yet is a conflicted hero, is most evident here, and is partly why the film is still a part of film curriculums (Trachtenberg, 1963). In the book, “Fast Eddie” Felsen is spoken of as a feared yet unproven threat to local pool hustlers (Tevis, 1959). He is described as “a nice looking kid, quietly dressed, with bright, serious eyes” (Tevis, 1959, p. 19) and Paul Newman’s portrayal in the film is full of boyish innocence. Eddie has come to New York to take the place of an “older, corrupt” hustler, Minnesota Fats, but after a 26 hour duel, he is “beaten flat” (Trachtenberg, 1963, p. 428). After this, he rejects an old friend, and moves in with Sarah Packard, a “part-time college girl” and alcoholic (Rossen, 1961). Sarah’s anxiety is fueled by his secretiveness, her addiction, and her adoration of him. She sees him as “a great man, (who) beat the system” (Haut, 2004), until he begins working for another hustler, Bert Gordon. Bert wants only to humiliate Eddie and Sarah, and they both struggle against it, even as Eddie works for Bert (Trachtenberg, 1963, p. 428). It is a story on capitalism, individualism and its costs (Haut, 2004).

## **Findings**

The films studied - *Sunset Boulevard*, *Sid and Nancy*, and *The Hustler* - showed a pattern where in a relationship between an anxious and an avoidant character, the anxious character was absorbed by their relationship, rejected, abandoned, and trapped in their life.

## Limited Portrayals

The women were only defined by their relationships and their failures. They remain “childlike - subjected to masculine supervision and denied any true independence,” their dependency “not only sexual, but also material,” (Rowe, 1979, p. 245) and romantic. Nancy depends on Sid’s money, having given up her job as a dominatrix to be with him. Sarah’s and Norma’s money - given to them by men: fathers, husbands, filmmakers- give them enough money to be robbed by the men they love and who they support financially. But the men’s continued presence is blamed on Norma’s manipulation (Chivers, 2006), and Sarah’s patheticness.

Nancy makes no mention of her work (beyond some implied drug dealing and BDSM work), while Norma is considered a has-been. They’re all seen as hungry for a relationship, clinging on to the men of the piece. Norma does this by moving Gillis’s things to her home and by giving him money, while Nancy does this by offering drugs. They are not *allowed* a definition beyond this - we only see Norma interact with a couple of other men throughout the piece: her ex-husband/butler, and her former director, both were men she had close ties to, who now pity her. Joe even described her as a sleepwalker, saying “You don’t yell at a sleepwalker - he may fall and break his neck. That’s it: she was still sleepwalking along the giddy heights of a lost career” (Brackett & Wilder, 1950). Nancy, for her part, only interacts in a positive way with Sid, being rejected at every turn by her friends and family. Yet the men are surrounded by people who care about them and who respect them.

Sarah, for her part, does not lead her own life. Sarah is the most clearly self-destructive, an alcoholic full of self-hatred. She feels defeated by life, and one critic describes her as follows: “she offers her own weakness, against (his) self-sufficiency her dependence, against

impersonality the involvement of one human being with another” (Trachtenberg, 1963). We never find out what Sarah studied in school, or what started her alcoholism. Her life has become one of *caring for Eddie, trying to save Eddie, trying to keep Eddie* and when he rejects her in order to play one final game of pool, she commits suicide. Even her death does focus on her. It is not about her friends and family, but rather about Eddie recognizing “his own lack of humanity in the hubris of seeking fulfillment solely through his own, unaided and aided, adopting a mechanical devotion to an ideal” (Trachtenberg, 1963, p. 429). Her death serves, then, to save Eddie, by letting him finally see who Bert really is. Eddie, after his last fight, tells Bert “You’re a loser. You’re dead and you can only live by making things dead around you” (Rossen, 1961). Eddie is allowed to triumph over his manipulators, while Sarah is killed for it.

### **Rejection**

The films portray the women as having developed an irrational, unwanted love for the men. Norma’s ardent desire for Joe is alarming, but her sexuality is already taboo - a widow in her fifties pursuing a younger man is still shocking to see in film. Norma is portrayed by Gloria Swanson, and many of the films shown in *Sunset Boulevard* are Gloria’s own films. Gloria - like Norma - was a silent screen actress pushed out because of her age when the “talkies” (films with sound) appeared (Chivers, 2006). By age 36, she was considered too old to take on a starring role and was called a “has-been” by reporters, and now at 50, she took on the role of Norma, a has-been of Gloria’s age (Chivers, 2006). In one scene, Norma has shown up at DeMille’s latest shoot, demanding to be seen. DeMille’s first assistant director quips “She must be a million years old” (Brackett & Wilder, 1950). DeMille responds by saying “I hate to think where that puts me. I could be her father” (Brackett & Wilder, 1950). The first A.D. apologizes and asks if he should “give her the brush” (Brackett & Wilder, 1950).



When we see Norma going through a series of “gruesome” treatments that are supposed to erase all her signs of aging, we are aware it is Swanson’s body being criticized (Chivers, 2006). These echoes between Swanson and Norma’s lives initially discarded Swanson from taking on the role (Chivers, 2006). Even as Swanson attempts to highlight her youthful beauty, we see Norma’s inability to accept her age that marks her as weaker, a sign of her mental instability (Chivers, 2006). We are witnesses to what is “meant to be grotesque flesh ignoring cultural expectations” (Chivers, 2006, p. 217). How could she believe she could ever be appealing enough, at her age, to be desired as a partner and as a star? Indeed, that is all she desires, to be wanted. In one scene, after some of her old fans flock to her, and the prospect of acting again with DeMille seems possible, Norma begins to cry and she says “I just want to work again. You don't know what it means to know that you want me” (Brackett & Wilder, 1950).

In the case of *Sid and Nancy*, Nancy’s behavior is the one criticized by other characters. Sid’s displays of devotion are treated as romantic acts: he spends a “night-long vigil in the rain waiting for her to return,” calls her incessantly while on tour and carves her name on his chest (Mainon & Ursini, 2007). He wears “a chain and lock around his neck to which only she has the key” (Mainon & Ursini, 2007). Nancy’s devotion is treated as a source of horror. While his actions are admired by other characters, Nancy is insulted, yelled at, and pushed away by Sid, his friends and co-workers. Sid only become interested at first because she can get him drugs, and work as his runner, yet it is Nancy who is blamed for his drug use, is called the “loony girlfriend,” is banned from attending the tour, and is offered money to break up with Sid.

In *The Hustler*, it is Sarah, too, who is rejected by the rest of the characters. While Sarah tries to encourage Eddie to believe in himself, her words are meaningless to him. He fails to reassure her when she asks him to tell her he loves her, when she asks if he will abandon her the

way he left his last partner, or when she asks when he'll be back from a trip. This all keeps her from getting too close to him, reminds her that she has no claims to him, and perhaps no real worth to Eddie. To Bert, his handler, her love is dangerous. Bert takes pleasure in humiliating her over her limp, and for her relationship with Eddie, once throwing money onto her bed. In one scene, he tells her not to challenge him, because "that would be bad for everybody" (Rossen, 1961). When she accuses him of having bought Eddie's future, he tells her (Rossen, 1961):

Listen, Miss Ladybird, you're here on a rain check and I know it. You're hanging on by your nails. You let that glory whistle blow loud and clear for Eddie and you're a wreck on a railroad track. You're a horse that finished last. So don't make trouble, Miss Ladybird. Live and let live. While you can.

In one of her last scenes, Sarah begs Eddie to save himself and he screams at her, tells her to "Get off his back" (Rossen, 1961). Sarah goes back to her hotel room and waits for Eddie. Yet it is Bert who finally arrives, throwing money at her that he says Eddie has sent her so that she will leave. Bert tries to kiss and seduce Sarah. Sarah, heartbroken and feeling used, eventually sleeps with Bert. Afterwards, Sarah stares into a mirror, writing the words perverted, twisted, and crippled, with lipstick. She underlines the word crippled, the word she has used for her herself because of her limp. She then kills herself. This is a violent, evil and brutal world, one that Eddie learns to live in and the rest of the men thrive in, but Sarah most intimately victimized by it (Trachtenberg, 1963, p. 428). *The Hustler* centers on the idea that caring only for oneself and one's goals can be destructive - yet it is most destructive to Sarah.

## **Leaving**

In *Sunset Boulevard*, Joe is shot twice in the back as he tries to leave Norma. This echoes Nancy's end: Sid announces he wants to stop using drugs, and return home, leading her to beg

him to kill her. The director leaves this moment ambiguous: did she run into the knife, or did he stab her to kill her? The women, then, when threatened with abandonment by the men, are suddenly left without anything. When Nancy pleads for Sid to kill her, Sid answers, “How would I do it? I couldn't live without ya” (Fellner & Cox, 1986). And indeed, the men have a larger world to return to, as Sid can go back home to England and start again, his devoted fans and family waiting for him, while Nancy’s life has been reduced to the room they are living in.

Norma’s life is reduced to her home, her films and her relationship. She was manipulated and lied to by Max, DeMille, and Joe, who considered her too fragile to know the truth. Max, for example, sends her fake letters from fans she believes exist, he fields her calls, and he does not allow the real world to intrude into her world. He fuels her ideas of glory.

We do not learn much about her previous self - we hear about her wild Hollywood parties in the ‘20s, about her three husbands, but next to nothing about who she was. The only time we do, it comes from DeMille who says she was “A plucky little girl of seventeen, with more courage and wit and heart than ever came together” (Brackett & Wilder, 1950). But that plucky and witty girl has been trapped into this world of delusions, and nothing else remains for her. When Norma threatens suicide, Joe this time says “Oh, wake up, Norma, you'd be killing yourself to an empty house. The audience left twenty years ago” (Brackett & Wilder, 1950). Her life is worth nothing anymore, and he can’t bring himself to care.

This lack of context for their lives leaves the women separated from themselves, their past, free air, cut off from “all the circumambient life,” the world at large, their feelings, and even from their avoidant partner (Sedwick as quoted by Delamotte, 1990, p. 26). The women find their own selves “pinned in a death-like sleep” (Sedwick as quoted by Delamotte, 1990, p. 26). There are social and economic causes that separate the women from their desires, from their

friends and family, and their larger world. While one could suggest that perhaps this is a symptom of the way society was when these films were written, much of what has affected these women has not changed. For example, all these women *are* living outside the norm: Nancy's drug use, Norma's age, three divorces and fresh young lover, and Sarah's alcoholism and her boyfriend's chosen profession would still be frowned upon in recent times. This leaves them shut off from the world They are shut off from themselves.

### **Trapped**

They also remain trapped within their unsatisfying and terrifying worlds. Delamotte says these boundaries "shut the protagonist off from the world,... shut the protagonist in, and... separate" them from the things which they fear: abandonment (1990, p. 19). These women are not so much as cut off from hope - Norma holds on to it to the very end, while Sarah had it for a brief time -, as they are cut off from the world at large. The women are isolated, but also subjected to "terrible invasions of individual privacy" (Delamotte, 1990, p. 21). Their anxiety derives its "force both from the terrors of separateness and the terrors of unity: the fear of being shut in, cut off, alone; the fear of being intruded upon" (Delamotte, 1990, p. 19).

Norma lives within a world of her delusions of fame, watching and rewatching her past, and seeking a new future of youth. She is trapped behind thick walls, dirty cracked pavement outside, sunglasses, dark blinds, old relics overwhelming her space, the way her memories are thick with images from her past. Joe is deep in the filmmaking world, he goes to work, he sees his friends. She is guarding herself from reality, from revealing herself and having the world revealed to her. She desires a goal she is unable to attain because of her age, as "Hollywood does not want to gaze upon middle-aged femininity" (Chivers, 2006, p. 216). Her boundaries are also violated: Max serves as a spy, really, the cops come her, the girl is an intrusion of reality.

Norma's world eventually becomes one in which she has been driven insane, further leaving her trapped. Her final escape from the outside is her slip into insanity (Mamula, 2012).

Sarah, in *The Hustler*, too, is unable to escape. She goes to school twice a week, yes, but merely out of boredom. When she comes home, she encounters a surly Eddie who does not want to spend time with her. Her only escape is drinking. One day, she is writing and Eddie takes her paper: "What's this supposed to mean: "We have a contract of depravity. All we have to do is pull the blinds down" (Rossen, 1961). When he presses her, she answers "We never talk about anything. We stay here in this room, and we drink, and we make love. We're strangers. What happens when the liquor and the money run out, Eddie?" (Rossen, 1961).

She has no friends, does not talk to the neighbors, and keeps the curtains shut. These types of boundaries and barriers suggest she fears an intrusion (Delamotte, 1990). Eddie, too, has a whole world he is a part of, and people he cares about and works for and is betrayed by. And these boundaries are violated: Eddie allows his former partner into her apartment. His partner then reveals the truth about Eddie's hustling and encourages him to leave her. This shatters Sarah's sense of safety in her own world. Later on, Eddie takes money from her purse, and Bert goes into her room to argue with her, further violations of her space. She is trapped in a cage, one that others can come into as they wish.

Nancy lives in an indistinct world, outside of time, in a flurry of hotel rooms and drugs. She is lost to friends and family, and is absorbed in her relationship with Sid. It is the same for Sid, though he is granted occasional reprieves from their life, and thus is not as frustrated with the turn their life has taken. One scene illustrates this (Fellner & Cox, 1986):

Nancy: I hate my fuckin' life.

Sid: This is just a rough patch. Things'll be much better when we get to America, I

promise.

Nancy: We're in America. We've been here a week. New York is in America, you fuck.

### **Male Portrayals of Anxiety**

Male portrayals of anxiety are worth looking at. I would like to do further research into it, though I must say finding male characters with anxiety in a romantic relationship has been difficult to find. However, I will mention the film and book *Maurice* by E.M. Forster. Written in 1913 (Wood Ellem, 1979), the book was not published until after he passed away in 1971 (Curr, 2001). It initially contained a happy ending. There were no happy endings in queer love stories, so Forster wrote *Maurice*, feeling that “a happy ending was imperative. I was determined that in fiction anyway two men should fall in love and remain in it for the ever and ever that fiction allows” (Forster, 1960, p. 236).

His story is about Maurice Hall, a man of the middle class, and Clive Durham, from the upper class. The first thing to note is that Maurice displays quite a lot of romantic anxiety: he longs for Clive Durham, he goes back to Clive again and again, he expresses that “if one (of us) dies, nothing remains for the other.” Maurice is expelled from university because he would rather spend a day in the fields, with Clive in his arms.

Clive, for his part, is at first happy in the relationship, and, indeed, is the one who pursued it in the first place, but he enacts a set of rules. Their relationship, reflecting the times they live in, must be kept secret, they must not have *sexual* contact and they must not live together. Clive claims the lack of sexual contact is in order for their love to live up to the *true* platonic love ideal, and this idealizing of love is another avoidant behavior. Instead, Maurice travels into London on the weekends, and sleeps in his own room. This is a particularly strong example of an avoidant person’s need for separation. In the film adaptation by Merchant Ivory in

1987, Clive sees an upper class gay man, and classmate, arrested and imprisoned for being gay, evoking the “trial, injustice and suffering of Oscar Wilde” (Curr, 2001, p. 68). This is the beginning of his cruel behavior towards Maurice.

After dinner one night, Clive walks around one of his rooms, using the furniture to block Maurice, and he makes sarcastic and cruel comments, challenging Maurice, even as Maurice simply seeks reassurance. But this need, and Maurice’s affection, seem to repel Clive. Earlier, Clive had subtly suggested Maurice go home with his family instead, and he seems to resent his presence there, too. Maurice leaves the room, and goes to bed. After some time in bed, Maurice climbs out and looks at himself, naked, in the mirror. He seems to be examining himself, to see what is so repulsive about him that would cause Clive to reject him. Clive eventually joins him in bed. He is wearing his pajamas, and gets close to Maurice, says he feels “cold and miserable,” but when Maurice relaxes into the embrace, Clive seems to panic again and he leaves the room.

Like Sarah, Nancy and Norma, Maurice is consistently rejected, insulted, and he, too, seems devoid of a satisfying world. He feels trapped with his family, in his occupation, and in his middle-class status. He feels trapped indoors, “a place of enforced responsibility, where one would moulder: a prison” (Wood Ellem, 1979, p. 95)

However, his story does not end in death, murder or insanity. Forster, instead, does grant him a happy ending, with a new love, Alec Scudder. Clive is shocked and rejects him, as all his friends and family likely would, and his is now to live in the woods with Alec. But this is *still* a punishment. Alec and Maurice go into the woods, “a sad place, a refuge” (Wood Ellem, 1979, p. 95), to live out their days together. “They live only for each other... huddling together in the cold woods,” fleeing whenever they feel at risk (Wood Ellem, 1979, p. 97). Like Norma, Maurice is alive, but now he is relegated to the outskirts of society. And his safety is precarious. Foster

writes, in his Terminal Note for the book, that in his future (1913 and forward), “police prosecutions will continue and Clive on the bench will continue to sentence Alec,” a poor man, “in the dock. Maurice may get off” (Forster, 197, p. 236).

### **Whose Story is Told?**

In the end, the films are tragedies, and all our main characters are suffering. The men die or give up, the women die or go insane. Viewers could then argue that both the male and female characters are equally punished by the storyline. Yet it’s the men who get to tell their stories, who are the heroes of the piece. Even critics speak harshly of these women. Joe’s creative dry-spell is what causes him to run into - and rely on - Norma, yet it is Norma who is accused of exposing “the female subject... to ridicule, contempt, pity, and scorn” (Russo, as cited by Chivers, 2006), Joe - one of the men who ridiculed, pitied and hated her - remains the tragic hero of the piece. The men are absolved of guilt (Joe played a part in Norma’s illness, using her and dating her for her money; Felsen abandoned Sarah in order to assert his power; Sid inflicted the mortal wound) but the meaning of their actions, and whose fault it was is left up to interpretation.

While Norma and Sarah were controlled and manipulated by every man in the story, and Nancy was rejected by all, the stories are told in a way that encourages our sympathy for the men. This is most obviously the case with Sid Vicious, as conspiracy theories and films abound which absolve him of the murder. Norma breaks under the need to speak, it is what pushed her out of films, while Joe is a screenwriter and the narrator of the piece (Trowbridge, 2002). And, so, the women are still silenced, their pain still seen as crazy, while the men’s is seen as a valid pain, one worth listening to. As the men deliver the first and last lines of the work, we are reminded that the women “brought them down,” and ruined their lives. The women’s pain is used to teach everyone a lesson: *don’t be like these women, or else.*



## New Narratives

Stories hold power. When we talk about stereotypes, we are talking about figures we learned about in films, in books, on television. Research continues to focus on the power of romantic films and children's fairytales, because we recognize that these stories contain messages that we, the audience, absorb. When stories seem to portray characters with romantic anxiety as needing to change, as pathetic or bad, while elevating the behavior characters with avoidant attachment, we are encouraging a potentially unhealthy dynamic. Levine and Heller emphasize that though neither avoidant or anxious attachment are unhealthy by themselves, together they can form an explosive union (2010). They feel that emotional, verbal and even physical abuse can come from this (Levine & Heller, 2010).

In the films, we see that these types of relationships involve high levels of verbal and emotional abuse, and our anxious characters are overwhelmingly punished even when they are being victimized. They are trapped within worlds full of their anxiety, and when they communicate this anxiety, they are rejected by their partners, and when they attempt to leave, they are punished. When young folks use this information to model their behavior, they are learning that they should remain silent about their anxiety. It's important to note that these images are heavily *gendered* - it is the women that have anxiety, the ones with no world outside their relationships, the ones punished. It is men, the heroes of the piece, who have avoidant attachment and take on a stoic attitude.

We need new narratives. The way the women's stories are told is not a reflection of the times the stories were written in, but rather, a reflection of how we still view women's emotional expression as a sign of weakness, and as something to reject. Those with anxious attachment need to learn to share their thoughts and anxieties, in order to allow their partner to reassure them

(Levine & Heller, 2010). When the media and our art say that they, instead, should keep quiet and pretend they are not in distress, we are leaving them at a disadvantage. These findings could be of special importance for parents, teachers, and others who work with younger folks.

Workshops that focus on what healthy relationships look like can discuss these cultural ideas about anxiety and how it should be handled.