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# Examining Portrayals of Female Protagonists by Female Screenwriters Using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

Brooke Shapiro

This study explores the portrayals of female protagonists by female screenwriters through feminist critical discourse analysis. Specifically, this study examines the female protagonists in the four Academy-Award winning films *Thelma & Louise*, *The Piano*, *Lost in Translation*, and *Juno*. By analyzing the roles and behavior of the female protagonists in these four films, I reveal how these female protagonists each experience the Heroine's Journey, where they transcend their gender constraints and become more independent and empowered. These portrayals by female screenwriters are vital to the off-screen sector of the film industry because of the Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation, which states that human beings gain knowledge from the messages communicated to them by the media. Therefore, I conclude that the existing gap between female and male screenwriters must be closed to counter the reinforcement of gender roles and stereotypes, as well as ensure that women are inspired, not discouraged, by what they see on screen.

*Keywords:* feminist critical discourse analysis, feminist film analysis, female screenwriters, male gaze, Heroine's Journey, female protagonists

## Introduction

Throughout history, women have struggled to make themselves heard, not just seen. The media has failed to reflect this, as women are vastly underrepresented on all media platforms, especially film. Considering that people's (especially those of younger ages) perceptions of themselves and others are directly affected by media exposure, the absence of women in film (on-screen and off-screen) creates a major issue: presentations of women are distorted and not truly representative of their roles in society.

In terms of screenwriters, only four women have managed to break through the celluloid ceiling: Callie Khouri (*Thelma & Louise*), Jane Campion (*The Piano*),

Sofia Coppola (*Lost in Translation*), and Diablo Cody (*Juno*). They are the only women who have received the Academy Award for "Writing (Original Screenplay)" for a solo-authored script in the 75 years this award has been given. This study investigates how these four writers portrayed female protagonists in their award-winning films — *Thelma & Louise*, *The Piano*, *Lost in Translation*, and *Juno* — in order to determine the value of the female voice in the film industry. By examining the character traits of each female protagonist in these four films and identifying patterns among these characters, a generalization can be drawn about how female screenwriters depict females in their films and whether these portrayals are accurate and representative of the female experience.

## Review of Literature

### Gender Hierarchy and the Social Construction of Femininity

Gender inequality plays a significant role in how female protagonists are typically portrayed. Part of this is due to the existence of the gender hierarchy, which is described as “an ideological structure that divides people into two classes, men and women, based on a hierarchical relation of domination and subordination, respectively” (Lazar, 2007). The paradigm of gender hierarchy thus restricts the woman’s ability to define and assume her identity. According to N’Guessan (2011), “...gender relations makes the woman a constructed ‘other.’ Overall, as it is well-known because her physique does not allow her to execute some tasks that require the use of force, the woman is wrongly and purposely considered as the weaker sex.” Therefore, a plethora of expectations for women arises out of this assumption that women are weaker and more fragile. These expectations form the basis of traditional feminine ideology, which describes the attributes, behaviors, and roles traditionally and stereotypically associated with girls and women.

Without truly understanding the female experience, male screenwriters might adopt traditional feminine ideology when portraying females, restricting them to traditional gender roles. Thus, it is important to understand what those traditional feminine norms are when interpreting portrayals of female protagonists. In a broad sense, two different sets of expectations exist related to women: behavioral and physical. Various normative messages associated with femininity include “be nice, focus on relationships, be attractive, be thin, nurture others, be silent, defer to men, and be domestic” (Mahalik et al., 2005). In terms of their behavioral roles, women are often described as “homemakers and careers of the family, dependent on men, or as objects of male attention” (Kangas, Haider, Fraser, & Browne, 2014). Women’s traditional roles also tend to be related to nurturance, passivity, and dependence (Bem, 1993).

Physically, the cultural image of women emphasizes a slender body with trim hips (Mazur, 1986). Additionally, sexual characteristics of young women include “general roundness rather than angularity, fleshiness rather than flaccidity, unblemished and

smooth rather than saggy skin, and symmetry” (Mazur, 1986). However, the current societal standards for women, especially the beauty standard of thinness, are unrealistic and pervasive (Heinberg, 1996).

Some suggest that media is the most potent communicator of such sociocultural standards (Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). This is partly due to the “ready accessibility and universality of today’s print and electronic media,” and the fact that “print and electronic media images blur the boundaries between a fictionalized ideal and reality” (Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). Media promotes an unbalanced vision of the roles of women and men in society (Kangas et al., 2014), as it falsely implies that men are the cultural standard and that women are unimportant or invisible (Wood, 1994).

### Women in Film (On-Screen)

Females are underrepresented in films, relative to men, in their numbers, roles, and views. Particularly, female protagonists in films are vastly outnumbered by male protagonists. In Dr. Martha M. Lauzen’s study of 2,500 characters in the top 100 films of 2015, titled “It’s a Man’s (Celluloid) World: Portrayals of Female Characters in the Top 100 Films of 2015,” she reports that females comprised only 22% of protagonists in the top 100 films of 2015. Another study found similar results: “Inequality in 800 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBT, and Disability from 2007-2015” reports that out of 4,730 speaking characters, 68.6% were male and 31.4% were female in the 100 highest grossing films of 2015 (Smith, Piper, & Choueiti, 2016). Therefore, recent films lack strong female roles and instead tend to showcase men.

Meanwhile, female characters are portrayed in accordance with traditional feminine ideology. In films, women are usually dependent on other characters, overemotional or sensitive, and are restricted to low-status jobs (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Female characters often spend their time improving their appearances and taking care of homes and people (Wood, 1994). The reason for this portrayal is posited by the feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1974). Mulvey states, “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact

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so that they can be said to connote to be-looked-at-ness.” Thus, Mulvey argues that the use of females in films is to provide a pleasurable experience for male viewers, which she terms the “male gaze.” Mulvey provides this quote from Budd Boettichier:

What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance.

Mulvey characterizes a typical film as beginning with the female protagonist displayed as the object of both the audience and the male protagonists in the film, as she is isolated and sexualized. This is supported by the study “Inequality in 800 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBT, and Disability from 2007-2015,” which found that females were over three times as likely as males to be shown in sexually revealing clothing or nude in the 100 top-grossing films of 2015 (Smith et al., 2016). Mulvey further explains that the female protagonist falls in love with the male protagonist and becomes his property throughout the narrative.

### Women in Film (Off-Screen)

In part, the reason that females are misrepresented and underrepresented is because of the lack of females in the off-screen sector of film. Of the 1,365 directors, writers, and producers of the 100 top grossing films of 2015, 81% were males and 19% were females (Smith et al., 2016).

According to Dr. Martha M. Lauzen’s study titled “The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women on the Top 100, 250, and 500 Films of 2016,” women comprised 17% of all directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers who worked on the top 250 domestic grossing films of 2016, representing a decline of two percentage points from 2015. The same study found that 77% of the 250 films lacked female writers. In another study by Lauzen titled “Women and the Big Picture: Behind-the-Scenes Employment on the Top 700 Films of 2014,” 80% of the top 700 theatrically released films of 2014 had no female writers.

Consequently, the lack of female writers in the film industry translates to the number of awards bestowed on female writers. The Women’s Media Center study titled “WMC Investigation: 10-Year Analysis of Gender & Oscar Nominations” found that 86% of those nominated for the Writing (Original Screenplay) award from 2006-2015 were men, while only 14% were women. In this category, no more than two female writers were nominated each year during the period studied (except in 2007), which contrasted the fact that the number of male writers in this category “never falls below four in each year.” In 2009, 2012, and 2014, no female writers were nominated at all. Between 2009 and 2015, only one woman won in this category (Diablo Cody, *Juno*). In total, only four female screenwriters have won an award in this category in the history of the Academy Awards.

## Theoretical Framework

Two theories lay the foundation for understanding the implications of inaccurate portrayals of females in film: Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation and Objectification Theory. The Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation provides insight into the ways in which humans develop ideas about their gender identities. Bussey and Bandura (1999) wrote:

Children develop the stereotypic conceptions of gender from what they see and hear around them. Once they achieve gender constancy- the belief that their own gender is fixed and irreversible- they positively value their gender identity and seek to behave only in ways that are congruent with that conception.

According to Bussey and Bandura’s theory, individuals base their own behavior on behaviors they have observed in memory. Thus, adolescents’ perceptions of the world are affected by the media they are exposed to and the stereotypes they communicate, as “younger viewers with few of their own experiences to compare against may come to view these representations as cultural norms and form unrealistic relationship beliefs and expectations accordingly” (Johnson & Holmes, 2009). “As children gain mobility and

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competencies to act on the environment they begin enacting behavior that is socially linked to gender and experiencing social reactions” (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). By age five, children have already developed clearly defined ideas of what is considered appropriate behavior for men and women (Mahalik et al., 2005). Therefore, inaccurate portrayals of women in film and media reinforce gender roles and communicate those gender roles to children.

Bussey and Bandura also posit that gender development is a fundamental issue to humans because “the talents they cultivate, the conceptions they hold of themselves and others, the sociocultural opportunities and constraints they encounter, and the social life and occupational paths they pursue are heavily prescribed by societal gender-typing.” Therefore, reinforcing gender stereotypes to females through media affects their outlook, as well as the choices they make.

Objectification Theory also reveals how inaccurate portrayals of females can have long-lasting impacts on the females exposed to such portrayals. This theory, proposed by Fredrickson and Roberts, aims to highlight the “lived experiences and mental health risks of girls and women who experience sexual objectification” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Fredrickson and Roberts state, “This perspective on self can lead to habitual body monitoring, which, in turn, can increase women’s opportunities for shame and anxiety, reduce opportunities for peak motivational states, and diminish awareness of internal bodily states.” Therefore, displaying females as objects can create mental health risks for women, such as eating disorders, sexual dysfunction, and unipolar depression (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). It is clear that a lack of female screenwriters to provide accurate portrayals of females can be extremely detrimental to the lives and wellness of girls and women.

Based on the literature and theory presented above, the following questions are proposed to determine how female protagonists are portrayed by female screenwriters.

**RQ1: How do the female screenwriters of *Thelma & Louise*, *The Piano*, *Lost in Translation*, and *Juno* portray female protagonists?**

**RQ2: Are these portrayals of female protagonists accurate portrayals of the female experience?**

**H1: Because these films were written by females, the portrayals of female protagonists will be accurate and representative of the female experience.**

## Method

In this research, I performed a qualitative analysis of the four films to receive the “Writing (Original Screenplay)” Academy Award solo-authored by females to evaluate the portrayal of female protagonists by their female screenwriters. These four films were chosen to represent films written by females over other female-authored scripts because of their recognition by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences as the best examples of writing in the year they received the award.

Because this research is of an exploratory nature, a qualitative analysis of female protagonists in these four films is appropriate. In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (1994), Dr. Yvonna S. Lincoln and Norman K. Denzin define qualitative research as interpretative and “guided by the researcher’s set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied” (p. 22). I am interested in feminism and media portrayals of females, therefore the interpretations I make while researching this topic are influenced by these interests and my own beliefs. Thus, I fully recognize my bias while investigating the portrayals of female protagonists in these films.

Feminist critical discourse analysis constitutes the framework for analyzing the four films. According to Michelle M. Lazar (2007), feminist critical discourse analysis aims to “show up the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities” (p. 142). Thus, Lazar explains that the task of feminist critical discourse analysis is “to examine how power and dominance are discursively produced and/or (counter-)resisted in a variety of ways through textual representations of gendered social practices, and through interactional strategies of talk” (p. 149). Therefore, I will be analyzing the interactions between characters within each film and determining what these interactions reveal about the roles and behaviors of female protagonists.

The four films, *Thelma & Louise*, *The Piano*, *Lost in*

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*Translation*, and *Juno*, were selected by reviewing the Oscars website (OSCAR.ORG), and looking at the winners of the “Writing (Original Screenplay)” award each year beginning in 1941, when it was first awarded according to the Oscars website. After completing the review, it was determined that *Thelma & Louise*, *The Piano*, *Lost in Translation*, and *Juno* were the only four films to have received this award and been solo-authored by female writers. The four films were obtained from the iTunes Store and Amazon Video.

This study began with a viewing of each film and a qualitative examination of the female protagonist(s) in each film. The female protagonists were evaluated for certain elements: the role each female protagonist played (in relation to men and their occupation) and how they reacted to their role, how their role compared to stereotypical portrayals of females and traditional feminine ideology (as presented in the above “Review of Literature”), and how the protagonists were displayed (in a sexual manner or nonsexual manner). Field notes were taken in the table below to record any observations made (stated in “Findings & Analysis”).

The films were then viewed for a second time, searching for specific examples of the elements that were to be observed during the first viewing. This second viewing ensured continuity and consistency, as well as validated initial observations. Similarities and patterns between female protagonists were also

identified to find a common thread and theme among portrayals of females by female screenwriters.

Prior to the second viewing of each film, the screenplays were obtained from the internet to assist in the identification of specific examples of the elements that were to be observed during the first viewing. Field notes were written directly on each screenplay. Each screenplay was obtained by searching the title of each film followed by the word “screenplay.” To ensure that these screenplays were accurate, being that they were not obtained from a verified source, each screenplay was read carefully while the film was playing to make sure that the lines written in the screenplay matched those in the film. Following the second viewing, each screenplay was read twice. Quotes were pulled from the screenplays.

### Findings and Analysis

This study analyzes the portrayals of female protagonists in *Thelma & Louise*, *The Piano*, *Lost in Translation*, and *Juno*. Using feminist critical discourse analysis, I explored the roles and behavior of the female protagonist in each film. Specifically, I watched each film twice and took field notes during each film to record my observations and interpret the texts that were presented in the films. I also further examined

Table 1

Field Notes

Character/Actress	Film	Observations
Thelma (Geena Davis)	Thelma & Louise	
Louise (Susan Sarandon)	Thelma & Louise	
Ada McGrath (Holly Hunter)	The Piano	
Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson)	Lost in Translation	
Juno MacGuff (Ellen Page)	Juno	

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the portrayals of female protagonists by reading the screenplays of each film twice.

To better understand the findings of this research, I have provided brief synopses of each film. *Thelma & Louise* (1991), written by Syrian-American screenwriter Callie Khouri, is the story of two friends who embark on a road trip to escape their lives at home. Their trip soon becomes disastrous after Louise shoots and kills a man who tries to rape Thelma at a bar, turning the two friends into outlaws.

*The Piano* (1993), written by New Zealand screenwriter Jane Campion, is set in the 1850s and is about a mute Scotswoman and pianist, Ada, who has been sold into marriage and forced to move to New Zealand with her daughter, Flora. Once they've arrived, Ada becomes intrigued by another man, George Baines, who she begins giving piano lessons to.

*Lost in Translation* (2003), written by American screenwriter Sofia Coppola, is about a conflicted newlywed, Charlotte, and a lonely movie star, Bob Harris, who meet in Tokyo. The two form a meaningful bond as they adventure through Tokyo.

*Juno* (2007), written by American screenwriter Diablo Cody, is the story of a pregnant teenager, Juno MacGuff, who decides to give her baby to a failed musician and his wife. Complications arise as Juno begins to spend more time with the adoptive father, forcing her to decipher her relationship with this man, as well as the one with her child's actual father.

After viewing the four films, I determined that the female protagonist in each film followed the "Heroine's Journey," a narrative structure created by Maureen Murdock. I noted that each protagonist exemplified male qualities, rather than the characteristics described by traditional feminine ideology, which led me to this model. This model derived from Joseph Campbell's "Hero's Journey" monomyth, a common template for mythology that outlines the different stages of adventure experienced by the hero in a myth or tale (Bronzite, n.d.). The monomyth was clearly designed for male protagonists, which inspired Murdock to create a female-centered version. The Heroine's Journey is about "a heroine who must find balance as she struggles between the sides of a duality," a feminine and a masculine side (Winkle, 2014).

Though the Heroine's Journey was created as a framework for mythology, I will be applying it to contemporary films. Figure 1 provides an overlook of the

Heroine's Journey. This chart was obtained from Maureen Murdock's website.

Figure 1  
The Heroine's Journey



Murdock's model is specific to mythology, so identifying each phase of the Heroine's Journey in contemporary films is not possible, as each phase is not clearly defined nor present in these four films. However, overlying themes take place within the Heroine's Journey in each of the films.

### General Interpretative Findings

After performing feminist critical discourse analysis, I noticed a few common trends among the four films that provide evidence that the Heroine's Journey occurred in each film: a sense of awareness concerning their gender roles and constraints, the presence of masculinity in each female protagonist, their ability to transcend their gender roles, and individualism and choice. These trends are revealed through isolation, rejection of the male gaze, and within their relationships with other characters.

## Isolation

In each film, the female protagonist is presented as isolated, which is visible in both her physical and mental state. For example, Ada (*The Piano*), is forced to move from Scotland to a remote part of New Zealand amid an Aboriginal society to live with her new husband in an arranged marriage. Even more isolating is the fact that she is mute. Physical and mental isolation also occurs in *Lost in Translation*, as Charlotte is isolated in both her hotel room and Japan, presenting a significant cultural and language barrier for the young American wife as she accompanies her husband on a business trip. Meanwhile, Juno (*Juno*), is a pregnant teenager which is culturally and socially isolating and seemingly has little family support, forcing her to make major decisions alone. Thelma (*Thelma & Louise*) is isolated within her home, waiting for her neglectful husband to come home so that she may serve him.

However, each female protagonist eventually finds a way to escape this isolation. This is like her “call-to-action,” a key component of the Hero’s Journey. Her transcendence of her isolation signifies the beginning of her journey. For example, Thelma (*Thelma & Louise*) escapes her isolation within her home by leaving town on a road trip with her friend Louise without telling her controlling husband. In *Lost in Translation*, Charlotte decides to make something out of her vacation by going on various adventures with Bob, a man she meets in the bar of her hotel. The ability of these female protagonists to overcome their isolation is where these films differ from the typical film that Mulvey (1974) describes (as presented above in the “Review of Literature”), where she is initially presented as isolated and on display.

## Presentation of the Male Gaze and its Subsequent Rejection

Mulvey (1974) describes the typical narrative arc as the female character becoming the property of the male character, allowing the spectator of the film to “directly possess her too.” Not only can this be achieved through the narrative, such as when Ada (*The Piano*) is sold off to an arranged marriage by her father, but can also be accomplished visually through camera angles and shots. For example, close-ups of

Ada’s hands, arms, and bare skin are shown while she is playing piano. Likewise, Charlotte (*Lost in Translation*) is shown sitting in underwear in her hotel room, waiting for her husband to return. The camera pans her body and provides close-up shots of Charlotte’s legs and face, which integrates eroticism into the narrative (Mulvey, 1974). Physically, these female protagonists are built as a female is portrayed culturally, according to Mazur (1986): slender and unblemished.

Eventually, each female protagonist rejects the male gaze, as well as her portrayal as a sexual object. The most explicit example occurs when Thelma (*Thelma & Louise*) begins to resent her role as the subordinate housewife, as seen in Figure 2. In this conversation, Thelma is discussing the fact that she left town with Louise without telling her husband, Darryl. Her dismissal of her position within the household indicates that she no longer wishes to be viewed as an object.

Figure 2  
*Thelma & Louise* Screenplay

Thelma: I’ve never been out of town without Darryl.

Louise: How come he let you go?

Thelma: ‘Cause I didn’t ask him.

Louise: Aw, shit, Thelma, he’s gonna kill you.

Thelma: Well, he’d have never let me go. He never lets me do one goddamn thing that’s any fun. All he wants me to do is hang around the house the whole time while he’s out doing God only knows what.

Each protagonist’s rejection of the male gaze is accompanied by her discovery of her masculine side. As she rejects the male gaze, she begins to embrace the masculine parts of herself and identify with the men around her.

## Use of Relationships to Explore Feminine and Masculine Sides

The final part of the Heroine’s Journey is the “integration of masculine and feminine.” In each film, this occurs in the context of each protagonist’s relationships. Throughout the films, each female protagonist



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uses the relationships present in her life to discover her feminine and masculine sides, unify them and express herself freely, without constraints.

For example, Thelma (*Thelma & Louise*) finally gains the courage to stand up to her controlling husband, exhibiting her masculine side, as seen in Figure 3. This can also be seen in *Lost in Translation*, when Charlotte rejects the role of dutiful wife to spend the rest of her vacation with her new friend Bob. The female protagonist begins to identify with the men around her, not as an object but rather as their equal.

Figure 3

*Thelma & Louise* Screenplay

Darryl: What in the hell do you think you're doing? Have you lost your goddamn mind?! Is that it? I leave for work and you take complete leave of your senses?

Thelma: Darryl...baby...Darryl, calm down now, honey. Please don't get so mad. I can explain...

Darryl: No you won't. You'll be back today. Now! You get your ass back here, Thelma, now, Goddamnit. Thelma, do you understand me?

Thelma: You're my husband, not my father, Darryl.

However, each female protagonist eventually recognizes the importance of her feminine side, leading her to reincorporate the feminine, which (once again) she accomplishes using her relationships. Although Thelma (*Thelma & Louise*) has departed from her life of subordination and has now entered one of independence, she is still in touch with her feminine side, as she falls for an attractive young man she meets on the road. Additionally, Juno (*Juno*) rediscovers her feminine side by finally accepting the feminine behavior of her step-mother and the mother she is going to give her baby up to for adoption, behaviors that at she had initially rejected.

Upon the reincorporation of her feminine side, each female protagonist discovers that she must find a way to unite the masculine and feminine sides she has learned about throughout her journey. This is presented as a realization or epiphany. For example, Thelma's (*Thelma & Louise*) "union" of her feminine and masculine sides occurs at the end of the film, when she

and Louise are cornered by the police near the edge of the Grand Canyon. Thelma and Louise realize that Thelma could finally be herself, free of gender constraints, as seen in Figure 4. Thelma realizes that she cannot go back to a world of confinement and isolation, as she decides to drive off the cliff into the Grand Canyon. She determines her own destiny, finally.

Meanwhile, Juno's union is the realization she is in love with the father of her child, during a frank conversation with her own father (Figure 5). Juno thus discovers that she is independent while still vulnerable enough to love someone else. While Ada (*The Piano*) initially conforms to her feminine role by submitting to her arranged marriage and allowing herself to serve as a sexual object for her piano client, she comes to realize that she is attracted to her client. She displays her duality by taking equal ownership of the extra-marital relationship. The stage direction from that portion of the script clearly spells out the moment of unity for Ada (Figure 6).

Figure 4

*Thelma & Louise* Screenplay

Thelma: I guess I went a little crazy, huh?

Louise: No...you've always been crazy. This is just the first chance you've had to really express yourself.

Figure 5

*Juno* Screenplay

Mac: In my opinion, the best thing you can do is to find a person who loves you for exactly what you are. Good mood, bad mood, ugly, pretty, handsome, what have you, the right person will still think that the sun shines out your ass. That's the kind of person that's worth sticking with.

Juno: I sort of already have.

Figure 6  
*The Piano* Screenplay

ADA is flushed, shocked, the two face each other at this very moment of profound awareness of each other, profoundly equal. With each new breath, with every moment that their eyes remained locked together the promise of intimacy is confirmed and reconfirmed and detailed until like sleepwalkers who do not know how they came to wake where they did, they are standing next to each other and beginning to kiss each other, the lips, the cheeks, the nose.

## Analysis of the Findings

The findings, observations, and interpretations in this study provide insight into the way female screenwriters portray their female protagonists. Specifically, these findings reveal that female screenwriters tend to portray females as empowered and independent individuals. However, this finding is entirely based on interpretation and opinion. Through a postfeminist lens, I interpreted that the discourse within each film revealed that the female protagonists were able to take full control of their situations, choosing their individual courses of action based on their own desires and needs.

The protagonists of each film embody the characteristics of the postfeminist movement, which is “a new form of empowerment and independence, individual choice, (sexual) pleasure, consumer culture, fashion, hybridism, humour, and the renewed focus on the female body” (Adriaens, 2009). Postfeminism rejects the notion that females cannot be feminine or sexual if they want to be independent and empowered. Instead, it focuses on embracing both the feminine and the masculine. This is exactly what each female protagonist does during the *Heroine’s Journey*. Each female protagonist discovers the unity between their masculine and feminine sides throughout the *Heroine’s Journey*, learning that they can make their own choices and express themselves while still being in relationships with members of the opposite sex.

Successful female screenwriters, therefore, embrace portions of traditional feminine ideology. Instead of completely rejecting the traditional roles of women, these screenwriters recognize the existence of such roles. Each female protagonist is fully aware of

her place in society, as property and object, but she learns to overcome her position as subordinate and instead take control of how others perceive her. The screenwriter takes the female through a journey of unification, showcasing true female empowerment.

## Implications and Conclusion

Upon discovering that there was an overlying trend among the four films analyzed for their portrayals of females, it was concluded that female screenwriters in general portray females as empowered and independent individuals by putting their female protagonists through the *Heroine’s Journey*. Whether such a portrayal is accurate and representative of all real-life females, as my original hypothesis suggested, cannot be concluded. However, whether or not female screenwriters present female characters in a realistic manner, I believe that they, particularly the writers of the four films examined, are using their female protagonists to inspire viewers to examine and question gender constraints.

This has important implications considering the lack of female screenwriters in the film industry. According to the Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation, human beings develop their ideas about gender from their environment and the messages communicated to them through media. Therefore, it is crucial that females see empowered women in films and other forms of media to gain an understanding of their full value in society, as more than an object. It is important that women are inspired by what they see on screen, rather than discouraged. Equally important is for males to see empowered and independent females in films, rather than sexualized and stereotypical versions of females, to create understanding and tolerance between the two genders. This must begin with the closure of the gap between men and women in the off-screen sector of film, allowing for the incorporation of the female voice in narrative film. Female screenwriters, as well as directors, producers, and other off-screen occupations, are essential to the film industry because they can provide insight into the female experience and help create a media that teaches understanding and respect among human beings.

## Limitations and Suggestions for Future Directions

As stated previously, the results of this research were based solely on interpretation and opinion. Another researcher could have different interpretations of the discourse in these four films, as this research was qualitative. My perspective is different from someone else's perspective; therefore, my interpretation is unique. Perhaps a more quantitative study into this topic could be performed to draw more concrete conclusions, such as a study that quantified specific elements within each female protagonist or used surveys and focus groups to determine the impact of these films and their portrayals of females on real-life women.

My research was also limited in its scope. A key assumption in my research was that these four Academy Award-winning films accurately represent all films written by females. However, I could not adequately research all films ever created by females. For sake of time and quality, I limited my scope to these four award-winning films. Further research could be conducted by looking at a greater range of films written by females, perhaps in different genres or over certain time periods. These films could also be compared to films solo-authored by male screenwriters to determine how portrayals of female protagonists differ between male and female screenwriters. An assumption in my research was that female writers will write most convincingly in a female voice and are more capable of creating empowered portrayals of women. However, male screenwriters could be able to portray females in such a manner. Therefore, further research could be done to confirm the assumption that women are more capable of portraying women in an empowering fashion by examining whether male screenwriters incorporate the Heroine's Journey into films that feature female protagonists.

Despite these limitations, a qualitative analysis of these four films reveals some important trends in the depiction of women by female screenwriters. While it is evident that females are vastly underrepresented both on-screen and off-screen, female screenwriters write from their internal, unique perspective. Female viewers can relate to these writers' depictions of the female experience, one that incorporates the patriarchal expectations set upon women and the duality that exists for females to navigate that world. Those

viewpoints and experiences are distinct to females and while a man is apt to portray the female experience, he is limited by his imagination, rather than his experience. Therefore, authentic female voices must be heard.

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