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### Sex and the Single Girl in Early 1960s Cinema

In 1962, Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl* was published, selling over two million copies in three weeks. The advice book encouraged women to become financially independent and experience sexual relationships before or without marriage. This Single Girl was encouraged to have premarital sex and to gain experience, but she could also maintain her status as a "good girl."

American films from this period had already begun to tackle this topic of the sex lives of single women, sometimes in accordance with Gurley Brown's writings and sometimes in opposition. *The Apartment* (1960), *Where the Boys Are* (1960), *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) and *Sex and the Single Girl* (1964) all focus on single girls and their sex lives, or lack thereof. Positioned a few years before the sexual revolution of the later 1960s, these films expose the beginnings of change in American sexual mores. However, they also retain many of the traditional attitudes toward sex of previous decades. In my paper I will look at how the films of the early 1960s portray this transitional moment of changing attitudes about women and sex.

#### ***The Apartment***

Billy Wilder's 1960 film *The Apartment* centers on the character of C.C. Baxter (Jack Lemmon), a bachelor who tries to move his way up the corporate ladder at his Manhattan insurance company by renting out his Upper West Side apartment to executives who need a place to take their mistresses.

Shirley Maclaine plays Fran Kubelik, an elevator operator at the insurance company who is constantly hit on by the men in the office, but who seems able to stick up for herself. Her

plucky demeanor and no-nonsense attitude towards the men's advances makes her attractive to Baxter.

The audience soon learns, however, that Fran is not as innocent as she appears. In fact, she's been carrying on an affair with the personnel director, Jeff D. Sheldrake (Fred MacMurray). Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl* suggested to young women to take advantage of romantic relationships with bosses and other men in positions of power. *The Apartment*, however, portrays an ugly outcome for this behavior.

One scene from the beginning of the film demonstrates the stark reality for single women who become the mistress. In the scene, Fran and Sheldrake have stopped seeing each other for several weeks but meet up at their usual place, a Chinese restaurant, at his request. While visibly trying to hold back tears, Fran writes off the affair as a meaningless thing that happens when a man's wife and kids are away for the summer. "The kids go back to school, the boss goes back to his wife, and the girl..." she trails off and quickly changes the subject. She describes how she was able to trick herself into believing it was an honest relationship until the reality of the situation hits. Fran says, "So you fix yourself a cup of instant coffee and you sit there by yourself and you begin to think: it all begins to look so ugly." This scene and Fran's experience as the mistress are nothing like the glamorized life of a single girl that Gurley Brown describes in her book. Fran has not found empowerment through this relationship, she has only found embarrassment.

The commonness of Fran's experience is illustrated in a second clip from the film. Sheldrake's secretary, Miss Olsen (Edie Adams), learns of their previous affair and while drunk at the company Christmas party, confronts Fran about it. Miss Olsen tells Fran that she was Sheldrake's mistress four years ago and that they are just two among many others in Sheldrake's

life. “What a salesman,” Miss Olsen says. “It’s always the last booth in the Chinese restaurant and the same pitch about divorcing his wife and in the end you wind up with egg foo young on your face.” Fran, who was hesitant about breaking up Sheldrake’s marriage to begin with, realizes that his promises to leave his wife and be with Fran were empty.

Later that night, Fran meets up with Sheldrake at Baxter’s apartment. With mascara running down her eyes, she gives Sheldrake her present to him – an album of a musician who performs at their Chinese restaurant. He then gives her his present: a hundred dollar bill. She glares at him, realizing how he views their relationship. Sheldrake rushes off to catch his train and Fran says, “I just thought as long as it was paid for.” Depressed, later that night Fran attempts suicide. Once again, this depicts the type of relationship that Gurley Brown romanticized not only as bleak, but as not much more than prostitution.

Earlier that day, Baxter finds out that Fran was Sheldrake’s mistress and also gets depressed. He ends up getting drunk in a bar and picking up a stranger. While *The Apartment* is progressive in the way it approaches sex, the character of Baxter still represents a conservative ideology in that he found Fran attractive when he thought she was innocent and not so attractive when he found out she was carrying on an affair.

The end of the film however, proves itself to be slightly more progressive. Fran, who ends up not taking Sheldrake’s money, eventually ends up with Baxter. Whereas in a more conservative film she would be punished for having sex outside of marriage, instead she is rewarded a happy ending with Baxter. The last scene of the film is indeed exceedingly sweet. While playing cards Baxter tells Fran, “I love you Miss Kubelik.” She continues playing cards. “Did you hear what I said, Miss Kubelik?” he continues. “I absolutely adore you.” She smiles at him lovingly and says “Shut up and deal.” They smile at each other as the film ends.

This chaste ending, in which they don't even kiss, is indeed progressive in that Fran is not punished for what was then considered transgressive behavior, but there are still moral overtones to the film. The dark portrayal of extra-marital relationships seems cautionary for single women. They are not a way to advance one's career and gain sexual experience before marriage, they are a source of shame and grief. The only relationship the film does approve of is the innocent one of Baxter and Fran. Still, *The Apartment's* frank portrayal of sex and affairs makes the film distinct for its time.

### ***Where The Boys Are***

*Where the Boys Are*, Henry Levin's 1960 film, came out the same year as *The Apartment*, but is starkly different in tone and content. A teen comedy with some serious moral overtones, the film is about four female college freshmen who go to Fort Lauderdale for spring break with the goal of meeting boys.

The film begins on a progressive note as Merritt Andrews (Dolores Hart), the studious and introverted member of the group, discusses her views on relationships and premarital sex in her sociology class. She calls the textbook old-fashioned and talks about the pressures to get "emotionally involved" on the first date and even references sexology pioneer Dr. Alfred Kinsey. Her professor, the ironically named Dr. Raunch (Amy Douglass), asks Merritt what exactly she thinks the class should be discussing. Merritt responds "We're supposed to be intelligent, so why don't we get down to the giant jackpot issue: like should a girl, or should she not, under any circumstances, play house before marriage." Dr. Raunch tells Merritt she is afraid to hear what her response to the question would be and Merritt says "My answer is yes!" Merritt's progressive views on sex are not appreciated by her elderly professor and she is sent to the dean. The dean asks Merritt if she is overly concerned with the "problem of sex," to which Merritt responds, "I

imagine 98% of coeds are overly concerned with that problem.” The conversation shows that the issue of whether or not to have premarital sex is something young, educated women like Merritt truly struggle with. While Merritt says she believes women should “play house” before marriage, it is clearly a belief that she is still testing.

The next scene from the film shows that Merritt’s friends are similarly open-minded about sex and relationships. On their way to Fort Lauderdale, Angie (Connie Francis) tries to get the other girls to admit their real reason for going to the beach for spring break “to meet boys.” They talk about how it’s true and see no problem with their desire. They even make jokes about men’s shoe sizes, showing that they do not have to act demure and innocent.

As the film progresses however, the “problem of sex” becomes an issue for each of the girls. Tuggle (Paula Prentiss) meets a boy named TV (Jim Hutton) who asks on the first date if she’s a “good girl.” She says yes and he leaves. The next day, however, he apologizes and they end up dating. However, the issue of sex continues to be a problem for them. TV keeps trying to have sex with Tuggle and Tuggle repeatedly brings up marriage, her prerequisite for sex.

Merritt finds herself in a similar situation with the boy she is dating, Ryder (George Hamilton). Because of Merritt’s progressive ideas on sex, Ryder remarks that she sounds like she’s “been around” but as she turns down his advances, he’s disappointed to learn that Merritt’s open-minded ideas on sex are just that: ideas. In one scene he discusses his own progressive views and some of Merritt’s more conservative views becomes apparent. Ryder compliments Merritt on her kissing abilities and she says she’s a little offended “No girl likes to be considered promiscuous, even those who might be.” Ryder calls her notions old fashioned and tells her, “Sex is no longer a matter of morals, that went out with the raccoon coat. Sex is, well it’s part of personal relations...it’s a pleasant, friendly thing like shaking hands...it’s actually serving your

fellow man.” Still, Merritt, like Tuggle and Angie (who is unable to find a boy who will talk to her) is able to avoid actually having sex throughout the film.

Their fourth friend, Melanie (Yvette Mimieux), has a different fate. On the first night in Fort Lauderdale, Melanie gets drunk with Dill (John Brennan) a boy from Yale and it is implied that she let things go “too far.” The next morning she talks about a girl from their college who got married to a boy she met on spring break. Merritt tells her that what actually happened was they met on spring break and got married in the fall, “two jumps ahead of the obstetrician.” Tuggle expresses her disgust with the situation and says that she made a promise to herself she was going to catch a man “the chaste way.”

Dill has to leave Fort Lauderdale suddenly, and Melanie begins to date one of his friends, Franklin (Rory Harrity). She spends all of her time with him and frequently comes back to the shared apartment drunk. One the second to last night of spring break, Dill returns and corners Melanie in her room. He says he wants to take her out and she yells no. The film then cuts to a scene where Melanie calls the girls’ apartment from a motel room. Her dress is unzipped, her hair is disheveled, the bed is unmade and her voice sounds empty. From all appearances, it looks like she has been raped by Dill. The girls go out to find her, but Melanie wanders out of the motel and onto a busy road. She walks through traffic in a daze and is struck by a car.

In the hospital, Melanie talks of how her life is ruined. “I lived it up,” she tells Merritt and asks why she didn’t die. She plans to quit school and return to her parents. She cries as she tells Merritt “I feel so old.” Merritt tries to comfort her and says she has a long life ahead of her, she’ll meet a nice boy. “A nice boy?” Melanie asks her. “So I can tell him all about my wonderful spring vacation.” It is clear that Melanie blames herself for getting raped and that she considers her life to be over because of it.

In the end, Tuggle and TV plan to get married and Merritt and Ryder make plans to go steady and visit each other on weekends. Their abstinence has rewarded them with a happy ending. Melanie, on the other hand, has been punished through rape and getting hit by a car. While the film does illustrate the pressures on young women to have sex and the double standards that women who have sex face, the ending clearly expounds a conservative ideology in which the female character who has sex is punished and the characters who wait are rewarded with happy endings.

### ***Breakfast at Tiffany's***

Blake Edward's 1961 film *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is today considered significant for its portrayal of a "good girl" having sex. Instead of being punished for her promiscuity, as was the norm in most other mainstream culture until that point, call girl Holly Golightly (Audrey Hepburn) remains the heroine and even finds a happy ending. The character of Holly Golightly can very much be seen as a precursor to the "Single Girl" that Gurley Brown would introduce in her 1962 book.

The first scene from the film depicts the nature of Holly's single life. Still dressed in fancy clothes from the night before, she eats breakfast at dawn in front of Tiffany's jewelry store. She returns to her apartment and is confronted by Sid Arbuck (Claude Stroud), the man she escorted the night before. He bangs on her apartment door and talks about all the money he spent on her and asks "Doesn't that give me some rights?" Unlike Fran from *The Apartment*, Holly knows exactly what her relationship to this older, wealthier man is. She takes \$50 for the powder room without blinking an eye.

Also unlike Fran and unlike the women from *Where the Boys Are*, Holly embraces her singledom and insists throughout the film that she needs to be free from romantic relationships.

This idea of singleness equaling freedom is complicated in the film, as Holly does take money from men for companionship. It's also one of the reasons she's drawn to Paul Varjak (George Peppard) a writer who is "kept" by a wealthy married woman nicknamed "2-E" (Patricia Neal). While the film never explicitly describes Holly or Paul as prostitutes, one scene from early in the movie makes this clear. Holly, seeing money that 2-E has left on Paul's table, asks whether he works for a set rate or hourly. Paul is offended, but Holly quickly lets him know that she understands.

The film not only approaches the issue of prostitution quite brazenly, but also alludes to sex more openly than the other films. In one scene, Paul and Holly realize there is something more to their relationship. They remove the dime store masks they stole that afternoon and partake in a long kiss. The shot fades out and fades back in on Paul, alone in an unmade bed. He looks around the room, smiling contentedly as he sees the masks they had been wearing placed on a statue in his room. It is clear from the visual clues that they have had sex, which is important as, despite how she may earn her income, Holly is portrayed very much as a "good girl."

Like *The Apartment*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* portrays the nontraditional relationships that the young single characters fall into in an ugly light. Paul pursues Holly honestly and provides a way for her to escape the call girl life, but she tries to evade him. In one scene, he confronts her about this. "Do you think you own me?" Holly questions. "That's exactly what I think," Paul says. Holly tells them that everybody thinks they own her, to which Paul responds "I'm not everybody...or am I?" He realizes that Holly sees him just like she sees the other men, even though there is no monetary exchange. He gives a check, "\$50 for the powder room," he tells her. Holly watches him walk away and it appears she has had some kind of revelation.



But it isn't until the end of the film that Holly finally realizes that her choice of being single and alone has been more confining than a relationship would be. Holly, after being dumped by her latest rich boyfriend, has abandoned her cat on the streets of New York. Paul tells her, "You call yourself a free spirit, a wild thing and you're terrified somebody's going to stick you in a cage. Well baby, you're already in that cage, you built it yourself...it's wherever you go because you just end up running into yourself." Holly realizes she doesn't want to be alone, finds the cat and ends up in the arms of Paul as the film ends. Despite Holly's desire for freedom and being single, coupled life wins in the end.

Like Fran in *The Apartment*, Holly has also earned a happy ending, despite her sexual transgressions. In some ways she exemplifies Gurley Brown's single girl in that she sees the financial and social benefits of certain relationships and takes advantage of them. However, these relationships are ultimately portrayed as empty and confining. Only her relationship with Paul, a relationship in which they are both equal, brings Holly complete freedom. As noted before, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is significant for its portrayal of a "good girl" having sex (and getting paid for it), but it also ends the typical way with Holly ending her call girl ways and entering into a happy, traditional relationship.

### ***Sex and the Single Girl***

In 1964, two years after the publication of Gurley Brown's book, the film *Sex and the Single Girl*, directed by Richard Quine, appeared. A semi-biographical take on Gurley Brown's life, the film looks at the same issues that the author discusses in her book: why good girls should be able to have both sex and a good reputation.

In the film, Helen Gurley Brown is portrayed as a research psychologist (played by Natalie Wood) whose book, *Sex and the Single Girl*, was just published. Sleazy journalist Bob

Weston (Tony Curtis) wants to write an exposé on Helen to find out “does she or doesn’t she.” Bob impersonates his neighbor Frank Broderick (Henry Fonda), who is having marital problems with his wife Sylvia (Lauren Bacall) in order to get close to Helen.

In his story pitch to his editor, Bob says he will find out if Gurley Brown is sexually active or is not. Despite the silly nature of the film, it does a perfect job of satirizing a serious issue: American society’s fascination with women’s virginity, particularly in the early 1960s. The same double standards and pressure to have sex that were explored in *Where the Boys Are* are present in *Sex and the Single Girl*. Like Merritt, Helen is progressive in her views and her book advises single women to experiment before marriage. However Helen’s level of actual sexual experience remains a mystery.

In a scene from early in the film, Helen’s colleagues discuss a critique of her book that claims Helen is a virgin. She gets flustered, is unable to say the word “virgin” and tells her male colleagues that the term is “not a compliment!”

Later in the film, her colleague Rudy DeMeyer (Mel Ferrer) takes her out on a date. They discuss the popularity of her book. Helen describes how she’s solved all of her problems: she has a great apartment with money for furs and diamonds and she constantly receives fan mail from the women she has helped. Rudy points out that she still isn’t married, to which she responds, “Married? I don’t want to be married! I’ve got work I care about much more!” Like Holly Golightly, Helen enjoys being single and (at least in the beginning) does not see marriage as a goal she wants to attain. Rudy then brings up the article that had been published on Helen: “I must know, ever since that magazine raised the question of whether you were or weren’t...” “Why must you know?” Helen asks. “Everyone wants to know!” he replies and says that the office is taking bets. Rudy says that if she is a virgin, the elegant date he has planned will be a

waste of time they could be having sex, but if she is, then he might want to marry her. “You’re such a prude,” Helen tells him. “I’m simply appalled at the double standard you men keep trying to impose on us.” While the scene is comical, it still tackles the serious issue at the heart of the film: the obsession with women’s sexual experience and the pressures on women to have sex but also to remain a “good girl.”

This is approached directly through the theme song, which is featured in the film as a performance by a singer. The lyrics to “Sex and the Single Girl” describe how the single girl acts innocent and demure, but is actually sexually experienced. This is essentially how Helen operates in the film. As she gets to know Bob, she becomes attracted to him, despite knowing that he is married. One of the ways she demurely pursues Bob is by drunkenly coaching him in how to woo his own (imaginary) wife. While he kisses her ear, she tells Bob, “Oh yes, I made up my mind years ago that I was going to learn all I could about love and marriage before I made my mistakes...No sir, I’m not going to gamble with my life, particularly when it comes to men.” Bob then tries to find out if Helen does ever “experiment” or if she’s not “that kind of girl?” This infuriates Helen who asks “What kind of a girl? What kind of a girl?” Helen’s progressive views on sexuality — that a woman’s sexual experience does not make her a “good” or “bad” girl — are clearly visible in this scene. Still, within the film, Helen is not shown as being sexually active.

In fact, by the end of the film Helen abandons her single life and embraces marriage. Bob has discovered he loves Helen and so he comes clean about his job as a journalist and quits the magazine. Helen, still angry with him for lying to her, sees her book on display in a store next to Bob’s former magazine. In the display are figurines of a boy and a girl with magnetized lips. Helen puts them together so that they kiss and has a revelation: “I don’t want to be a single

girl, I want Bob Westin!” They make up and have yet another happy, chaste ending in which they walk off holding hands.

While the film does feature some progressive views on female sexuality, ultimately it ends with the single girl entering into a unconsummated relationship and retaining her reputation as a “good girl.”

### **Conclusion**

In the films discussed — *The Apartment*, *Where the Boys Are*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *Sex and the Single Girl* — the issues of Single Girls and sex are examined. While all of the films portray sex, and whether or not to have it, as a serious problem for young women in the early 1960s, the overall message of the films are not necessarily as progressive as they appear. *The Apartment* and *Breakfast at Tiffany's* both illustrate the ugly side of Gurley Brown's advice by showing the sad life of the mistress and call girl and by featuring female leads who only find happiness through chaste and financially equal relationships. *Where the Boys Are*, while showing that sex is a topic that many college-aged women agonize over, ultimately makes a moral point by punishing the one female character who does have sex and by rewarding the virginal characters with happy endings. Finally, *Sex and the Single Girl*, satirizes the double standard placed on women in regard to sex, but still features a character who abstains from sex within the movie and who embraces marriage over the single life she had previously praised. Because of their unique historical position in the years preceding the sexual revolution, these films present an intriguing push and pull between progressive and conservative ideologies. While they do show progress by actually discussing female sexuality, often in an open and honest way, overall the films promote the value of traditional, monogamous relationships

**Sources**

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