

Radboud University

hooked on Hughes

A feminist consideration of *Sixteen Candles*, *The Breakfast Club* and *Pretty In Pink*.

Kelly Thijssen

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Dr. Mathilde Roza

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Abstract

This thesis explores how John Hughes's teen films Sixteen Candles, The Breakfast Club, and Pretty in Pink reinforce traditional ideas about gender, class, sexuality, and race. Each film was subjected to a combination of narrative and semiotic analysis, revealing that patriarchal ideals are embedded in Hughes' film language. The findings of each analysis were then interpreted in a segment of discussion using feminist theory and cultural criticism of bell hooks as a primary source.

Keywords: John Hughes, teen film, bell hooks, gender, class, sexuality, race, narrative analysis, semiotic analysis, patriarchal ideals, feminist theory, cultural criticism

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1. Introduction

John Hughes (1950-2009) was an American filmmaker and director who wrote and directed numerous highly successful films. He is best known for the teen films he produced in the 1980s, such as *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Pretty in Pink* (1986), and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986). As a former writer for comedy magazine *National Lampoon*, Hughes films are recognized for their comedic puns. But more specifically, Hughes' teen films were loved because they took seriously the lives and problems of adolescents. Aside from themes such as social acceptance, cliques and first love, they cover social concerns such as class inequality. Filmmakers today still endlessly draw from Hughes' film language, and it is nearly impossible to find a movie about adolescents that does not refer to his work. Hughes' films are widely perceived to have accurately captured the experience of being a teenager in high school. As such, many people relate to them because they represent values, norms and ideas that appear natural, given facts of life. However, in *Practices of Looking: an Introduction to Visual Culture*, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright explain that (moving) images can be read as ideological subjects. They suggest that it is often difficult to see the ideology hiding behind an image when the image reflects the prevailing morals and beliefs of a culture. Moreover, they stress that whenever an image is widely seen as natural, it is in fact part of an ideology (51). Considering Hughes' continued popularity, and influence on popular culture, it is especially interesting to explore what other messages his films convey, and the ideologies they uphold.

The existing critical literature largely agrees that the narratives of Hughes' middle-class, suburban teenage characters do little to challenge the status quo with regards to its representations of gender, and class, but only few, non-academic

sources dare address the ways in which Hughes' representations might be sexist, classist, and even racist. Blog posts with titles such as "'Sixteen Candles', Rape Culture, And The Anti-Woman Politics of 2013"(Rogers, 2013) are among those few. Moreover, the majority of the teen film literature does not sufficiently account for the fact that in film, narrative, visual, and audible aspects work together to create meaning. Essays such as "Mean Girls? The Influence of Gender Portrayals in Teen Movies on Emerging Adults' Gender-based Attitudes and Beliefs" (2008), and "White Western Girls and Urban Space: Challenging Hollywood's representations" (2010) discuss the ways in which teen films influence gender perceptions, but fail to recognize that these perceptions are a collaboration of visual, narrative and audible aspects. This is unfortunate, as Hughes' visual language and use of pop music greatly influenced the teen film genre. Furthermore, although some authors employ feminist rhetoric to explore themes like class and gender, only a handful of critics challenge the dominant perception of Hughes' teen films. While there is a lot of literature about various different topics relating to Hughes' teen films, there is a noticeable lack of critical literature about Hughes. Therefore, this thesis engages writings of bell hooks to obtain the critical distance needed to interpret Hughes' representations of gender, sexuality, and class.

bell hooks is the pen name used by Gloria Jean Watkins (9-25-1952); an African American feminist theorist, activist, and cultural critic. Watkins adopted the name bell hooks to honor her grandmother. hooks chose not to capitalize her pseudonym in order to distinguish herself from her grandmother, and emphasize the importance of the content of her work, rather than the identity of the author. Along with contemporary feminist scholars such as Judith Butler and Kimberlé Crenshaw, hooks' first notable publications incited discussion about the exclusion of

marginalized voices in commercial cultural productions, American history, and feminist scholarship. hooks' unconventional style of writing, and participation in some of the most heated public debates about media and politics have allowed her ideas to reach audiences far beyond academia, making her an undeniable force in the feminist movement. Over the last thirty years hooks has produced numerous books on a variety of subjects; some political, some more personal. However, all of her work is aimed towards creating an understanding of the ways in which classism, sexism and racism influence society, and the everyday lives of people. Furthermore, bell hooks is dedicated to teaching people ways to identify, resist, and ultimately liberate themselves from these interconnected systems of oppression, which she collectively refers to as "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (*Cultural Criticism and Transformation*). Hooks identifies popular film and television as the dominant means through which people learn about gender, sexuality, race, and class. The representation of these complex issues in film greatly influences the ways they are thought of in society. For this reason, hooks stresses the importance of critical spectatorship as a way to challenge cinematic representation, and uncover the ideologies they promote. This thesis reflects on Hughes by drawing from hooks' *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (2006), *Understanding Patriarchy* (2004), *Real to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (1996), *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (2002), and *bell hooks: a critical introduction to media and communication theory* (2013), and several different bell hooks articles on topics of gender, class, sexuality, and race.

Hughes' teen films have become a pop cultural phenomenon, and as such, they carry information about the cultural values of the society in which they were produced. Taking this into consideration, it seems only right to take hooks up on her

invitation, and begin to think critically about Hughes' representations of gender, sexuality and class.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to uncover how the different aspects of Hughes' teen film language, i.e. narrative, characters, verbal, and visual aspects collaborate to communicate messages. Furthermore, subjecting the films to a feminist reading will reveal the ways in which these messages are gendered, sexualized, and classed. Considering the critical nature of the analyses, the contents of this thesis create a counterbalance to the existing Hughes literature, which largely offers insights that agree, or negotiate with the dominant reading. In a broader sense, this thesis aims to demonstrate that culture's most loved, least contested pop culture productions are permeated with ideology, and have a key role in perpetuating oppressive ways of thinking.

1.2 Methods

This thesis will be divided into two main chapters, each accommodating the discussion of one film, divided into three parts. A segment of introduction introduces the film and direction of the inquiry. After that, a plot synopsis of the film is stated. Next, the film is analyzed combining aspects of narrative and semiotic analysis, and lastly, the findings of each analysis will be reflected upon employing the ideas of bell hooks as an interpretative lens.

Narrative Analysis

In narrative analysis, the entirety of a text is explored to expose the structure of a story or narrative. This method is largely based on the ideas in *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) by Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp (1895-1970). Having studied the history of Russia's folktales, Propp found that his country's folktales had remarkable similarities with regards to structure and theme. Although Propp dealt only with Russian folktales, the same method can apply to any other story. Today, media and cultural studies use a Propp-inspired form of narrative analysis to analyze films and television programs (Stokes, 2003). The method is based on the idea that people create and perform stories in order to interpret the world, and the people in it. When a text is subjected to a narrative analysis, a researcher adopts a critical distance in order to resist getting caught up in the story. This allows the researcher to see the overall structure of the text, and expose the underlying message, or ideology behind the entirety of the text. This thesis will subject *Sixteen Candles*, and *The Breakfast Club* and *Pretty in Pink* to narrative analysis in order to find the ways in which the overall message is gendered, classed, or sexualized.

Semiotic Analysis

Semiotics is the study of signs. Its aim is to decode images and their meanings. Semiotic analysis is a method that allows someone to identify layers of meaning connected to an image, sound, or word. Roland Barthes (1915-1980) was key theoretician of semiotics who devised a model to understand the way in which an image, sound, or word creates meaning. Barthes' model suggests that meaning consists of two levels, denotation and connotation. Denotation describes the literal meaning of an image, sound, or word. Connotations are the associated, or secondary

meanings. In addition, Barthes' model distinguishes between a *signifier*, and the *signified*. The first refers to the image, sound, or word, the latter to the meanings that the signifier brings to mind. Together, these elements form the *sign* (Sturken and Cartwright, 24). A sign can be a word, a (musical) sound, a gesture or an object (Chandler). A film in its entirety could be considered a sign, and thus, it can be subjected to semiotic analysis. In this thesis however, semiotic analysis will be applied to the specific elements that define a Hughes' films, i.e.

use of language, fashion, and music. Although the existing literature on Hughes recognizes the significance of these elements, only few explore alternative meanings connected to them, or the ideology they might project. Therefore, semiotic analysis is an especially fitting method for this thesis, because it facilitates the exploration of specific visual, audible and linguistic signs and symbolism that Hughes' teen films.

bell hooks as a critical lens

The ideas of bell hooks on pop culture provide the perfect lens through which to assess the findings of the analysis. First of all, hooks recognizes that popular media is the key means through which people learn about gender, sex, race and class.

Moreover, she acknowledges that film and television in particular have a key role in perpetuating harmful ways of thinking about these issues. One of hooks' key points of focus in her cultural criticism and media theory is the idea that pop cultural productions are conscious creations, and the representations within these productions are also consciously created. In order to understand what a movie or television show is communicating about, sex, race, class and gender, producers must be held accountable for their representations. While narrative and semiotic analysis will provide insight on what is being represented, hooks' cultural criticism and media

theory and feminist texts will be employed to discuss why Hughes chooses certain representations.

2. Sixteen Candles

As the first film released in John Hughes' teen film cycle, coming-of-age comedy *Sixteen Candles* (1984), established a style that would characterize his teen films. Although the cultural impact of *Sixteen Candles* is undeniable, analyzing it to find meanings other than those intended by Hughes is somewhat like venturing into uncharted territory. As Timothy Shary explains in his review of *Teen Film and Its Methods of Study*, many critics have disregarded Hughes' teen films for being frivolous melodramas, and as such, considered their content unworthy of serious discussion. He goes on to explain that critics tend to deem extreme teen dramas containing violence, drug use, and poverty more worthy of consideration (40). Still, what little substantive criticism there is on *Sixteen Candles* contains some serious allegations. An essay by Ann DeVaney targets the two films discussed in this thesis, and suggests that these films reinforce the patriarchal ideal of girls submitting to their father's authority, being satisfied to occupy only a limited number of spaces, such as their bedrooms, school, or libraries, and being modestly dressed (202). In addition, there are two internet articles written by women who, upon "reassessing the weird sexual politics" in Hughes' films, have come to conclude that *Sixteen Candles* lacks subversiveness in its portrayal of gender roles, and promotes rape culture (Rogers, Benfer). An informative column on Marshall University's Womens' Centre Webpage accurately describes rape culture as a culture in which rape is prevalent and in which sexual violence against women is normalized and excused in the media and popular culture. The page also explains that misogynistic language, the objectification of women's bodies, and the media's glamorization of sexual violence all contribute to an attitude that disregards women's rights and safety (*What is "Rape Culture"*). Also, some of the comedic highlights in *Sixteen Candles* film are accredited to the

character of a stereotyped portrayal of an Asian exchange student. Unfortunately however, some Asian American groups found this portrayal to be highly offensive (Macadam). All things considered, these claims suggest that the narratives and representations in *Sixteen Candles* uphold outdated patriarchal ideals, and include racist elements. Needless to say, these are topics worthy of bell hooks' consideration. Therefore, this chapter analyses *Sixteen Candles* and provides a feminist reading of the findings. By taking a step back from the story, and resisting the seduction of going along with its premise, the underlying messages of *Sixteen Candles* are made visible. However, resisting the story of *Sixteen Candles* requires being acquainted with it, and therefore, a plot summary is in order.

2.1 Plot Synopsis

Like Hughes' other teen films, *Sixteen Candles* takes place in Shermer, Illinois; a fictional town based on the Chicago suburb where Hughes lived as a teenager. The film introduces actress Molly Ringwald, who also has leading roles in *The Breakfast Club* and *Pretty in Pink*. In *Sixteen Candles*, Ringwald is the story's protagonist Samantha (Sam) Baker; a insecure high school sophomore who wakes up on the morning of her sixteenth birthday, to find out her family has completely forgotten it, as they are too preoccupied preparing for her older sister Ginny's (Blanche Baker) wedding. Too proud to remind her parents, Sam sulkily goes about her day at school. On top of that, Sam has a debilitating crush on the most popular boy in school: a sensitive jock named Jake Ryan (Michael Schoeffling). Jake is dating Caroline (Haviland Morris) a rich and popular cheerleader whose womanly physique has Sam struggle with feelings of inadequacy. However, Jake has grown increasingly disenchanted with Caroline's snobbish behavior. Unbeknownst to Sam, Jake is

informed of Sam's feelings for him, which sparks his interest in her. On the bus ride home, a geeky freshman named Farmer Ted, or "The Geek" (Anthony Michael Hall) annoys Sam with his clumsy advances. Sam's mood worsens when she finds her home occupied by relatives, and an eccentric Asian exchange student named Long Duk Dong (Gedde Watanabe), who is staying with her grandparents. Sam is forced to bring Long to school dance that evening, crushing her hopes of having some private time. While "The Donger" greatly enjoys himself, the sight of Jake and Caroline slow dancing together is upsetting Sam. Overwhelmed, she escapes into the school's auto shop, where later, Ted joins her to apologize for his behavior. The two have a heart to heart in which Sam tells Ted about her crush on Jake. Ted then informs Sam that Jake asked about her. Delighted at the news, Sam agrees to let Ted borrow her underpants so that he can win the bet he made with his friends. Following the transaction, Sam makes for the hallway to start mustering up the confidence to talk to Jake. But when Jake approaches Sam to greet her after the dance, Sam leaves abruptly, because she is too awestruck to reply. Long and his newfound girlfriend drop Sam off at home, where later that night Sam's father (Paul Dooley) apologizes for forgetting her birthday. Sam's father asks if something else is bothering Sam, and Sam admits that she has been struggling with her feelings for Jake. Meanwhile, Caroline is hosting an after party at Jake's house. When Jake arrives, the house has been completely trashed by drunken Caroline and her friends. Annoyed by Caroline's carelessness, Jake retreats into his room to look up Sam's phone number, and gives her a call. When someone finally answers at the other end, it is Sam's grandparents who mistake Jake for a pervert. By the party's ending, Jake finds Ted stuck under the glass coffee table where he has been put by a group of bullies. He frees him from the uncomfortable position, and the two begin to talk. To thank Jake, Ted shows Jake Sam's

underpants, and tells him how happy Sam was when she found out Jake asked about her. Having been confused by Sam's behavior earlier, Ted's talk gives Jake the green light on pursuing Sam. To return the favor Jake offers to make a deal with Ted: if he gets to keep Sam's underpants, Ted gets to take home the heavily inebriated Caroline in his father's Rolls Royce. The next morning, Sam's sister gets married while incoherent from the muscle relaxers she took to ease her menstrual cramps. Jake finds Ted and Carolyn kissing in his father's car when he drives by parking lot near the chapel. Although Jake has already decided to break up with Caroline, he conveniently uses the situation as an excuse to initiate the split. After the wedding, the bridal party starts gathering outside the chapel to wave goodbye to the newlyweds. Sam goes back inside to retrieve her sister's veil, and hurries back outside to find her sister has already left. To her surprise however, Jake is standing across the street, signaling that he has been waiting for her. The film ends with the iconic scene in which Jake and Samantha lean over a birthday cake to kiss while sitting on a dining room table.

2.2 Analysis

As the introduction hinted, *Sixteen Candles* contains some worrying messages with regards to gender roles, female agency, consent, and the role of racial minorities. Still, most of what has been written about this film suggests that it is a funny, lighthearted, sweet, and endearing film about the struggles of growing into young womanhood. Hughes persuades viewers into perceiving his film as such through his effective characterization and use of language. Within the first fifteen minutes of the film, viewers learn that Sam is white, quite intelligent, the middle child in a middle class family, lives in the suburbs, attends high school, and uses typical teen language to express herself. Moreover, viewers learn that Sam's parents forgot that it is her

birthday, she has a crush on a boy that is out of her league, and she feels insecure about her body. On top of that, she is not unattractive, and manages to have a sense of humor despite her problems. Although viewers might think they are getting to know Sam more personally in these fifteen minutes, in actuality they are tricked into identifying with her because she is an amalgamation of the most general collective experiences in mainstream society. Similarly, Jake Ryan embodies every aspect mainstream culture identifies as desirable for young men. Hughes deviates from the norm by giving the story a female protagonist, but unfortunately the subversion in terms of characterization ends there. Sam's problems are the premise of the film, and yet she is not the person who solves them. The wedding, and the fact that Jake already has a girlfriend attribute to the idea that Sam is a victim of circumstance, powerless to change her situation. This provides the perfect condition for Jake to assert himself as the hero. After Jake is informed of Sam's feelings for him, he goes on a quest to meet her. While Sam has not done anything to change her feelings of insignificance and inadequacy, all her problems magically disappear when Jake's quest culminates in the two finally meeting face to face. Regardless of how much real teenage attributes Sam and Jake have, Hughes still uses them to communicate a very gendered message about love. In a sense, Hughes is rewarding Sam for being passive and letting men provide the solution to her problem.

Sam's father also promotes this "good things come to girls who wait" rhetoric. After the dance, Sam goes to sleep on the couch. She is awoken by her father softly approaching her as he says "Sam, sweetheart"? Surprised, Sam replies: "Daddy?". By the language Mr. Baker uses to address Sam, and her surprised but endearing response to it, the viewer is informed of the type relationship father and daughter have. Mr. Baker apologizes with sincerity, but uses words typically used by

teenagers to express himself, he says: “I feel like a real jerk”, and, “I bet you’re really p.o.’d, huh?”, meaning, “you must be very angry”. This use of language makes the apology especially charming, because it shows that Mr. Baker is making an effort to connect to his daughter. Sam face lights up when her father apologizes, and at that moment, soft sentimental music starts playing in the background. At this point in the scene, Mr. Baker is established as a sincere and likable character. As such, it is difficult to be critical of him, or anything he says after the apology. When sad Sam tells her father about her unrequited love, he responds by speaking some words of guidance. Although these words are meant to be encouraging, they actually describe how Mr. Baker expects his daughter to go about her love life. He states: “When it happens to you Samantha, it will be forever”. With this comment Mr. Baker essentially declares that he commends Sam for being unassertive in her attitude towards to her crush. Furthermore, his words encourage her to wait for the one person she is willing to spend the rest of her life with. Mr. Baker later contradicts himself by reminding Sam that she should never let a man boss her around, and that she “should wear the pants in the house” when she does get married. These supposed words of empowerment only reaffirm Mr. Baker’s expectations of his daughter. In fact, he gives his sixteen-year-old daughter no other option than to get married in the future. Again, through effective characterization, and verbal code Hughes makes it acceptable that Sam has no agency in his story.

Although Jake has been discussed earlier, his character deserves some further questioning. Early on in the film, Jake is presented as a handsome, popular, soft-spoken guy with good intentions. However, during a conversation with Ted, Jake makes some statements that show an unfamiliar side to his personality. After Jake frees Ted from under the table, the two have a man-to-man talk while enjoying some

drinks that Ted has whipped up. Realizing Ted knows more about Sam, Jake uses the opportunity to ask about her. Ted expresses that Sam is special, because only few other girls would help out a nerd like him by donating their underpants. He then warns Jake to stay away from Sam if his only objective is to get “a piece of ass”. Jake then replies by saying: “Shit, I can get a piece of ass any time I want”, and “I could violate her (Caroline) now in ten different ways if I wanted to”. Although it is difficult to make this sentence any less horrible than it is, translated into plain language Jake is saying that he would not make an effort to know more about Sam if all he wanted was sex. Sadly, Hughes chose to have Jake express it in a way that makes him unsympathetic. Aside from being boastful, the second quote is explicitly violent in nature. Jake’s word choice is shocking because it does not match the kind, quiet personality established earlier in the film. Jake’s violent words may in part be explained by the fact that he is frustrated and fed up with Caroline’s behavior. However, there is no additional context or key to the plot that would sufficiently explain why Jake suddenly felt the need to verbally assert his dominance by braggingly making light of the notion of consent.

But this is not the only scene that calls into question Hughes’ ideas about consent. On the morning of the wedding, Ginny is suddenly on her period. Her mother is shocked when Ginny tells her she has taken three more muscle relaxers after taking the one her mother gave her to soothe the pain. By the time Ginny gets to the altar, she is completely intoxicated. Despite the fact that Ginny cannot consent to be married, as she is high, the wedding goes on as planned. Granted, the way in which Hughes portrays the situation is very comical, but the comedy only hides the fact that again, Hughes is making light of the serious issue of consent.

Lastly, the character of Long Duk Dong needs to be examined. Long is the only non-white character in the entire Hughes teen film cycle. Still, his presence in the film has no other purpose than to make people laugh. This is where his character becomes a problem. Although laughing at a person of color is not inherently wrong, laughing at the person of color because of his perceived ethnic traits *is* wrong. While some of the Long Duk Dong jokes are funny by themselves, many of them lean on the idea that he is a “fresh off the boat” foreigner who speaks broken English, and is oblivious to the social customs of the United States. Moreover, his looks, the things he says, the places he occupies, and the trouble he gets into all imply that Long Duk Dong is funny because is different. Hughes has encoded him to provoke laughter. The fact that Hughes does not specify Dong’s ethnicity beyond Asian somehow makes it more permissible for people to laugh at him. Hughes draws from an array of different Asian stereotypes to indicate that Dong should be perceived as a Joke. For instance, every time his face appears on screen a gong sound goes off, signaling that “the other” is now being portrayed. Also, by having Long Duk Dong drunkenly explain that he drove his host’s car into a lake, Hughes cheaply draws upon the stereotypical idea that Asians cannot drive. Moreover, Long’s reckless handling of his host’s American car could be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the idea that foreigners/people of color reject American values.

2.3 Discussion

In *Cultural Criticism and Transformation*, bell hooks suggests that there is a direct link between cinematic representation, and the way people live their lives. She explains, that this does not mean that people thoughtlessly copy what they see on screen, but that certain attitudes become more acceptable the more we see them

represented in film. Considering the fact that the romantic plot in *Sixteen Candles* has been reproduced in countless other films and television series, there is every reason to believe that Hughes is partly responsible for furthering the notion that girls are not in control of their happiness. hooks affirms the existence of this notion in the preface to *Communion: The Female Search for Love*, she explains that early on in life women learn that they “must be good to be loved”. However, this notion of “good” is always defined by someone else (14). In other words, girls learn that in order to be happy, they must make someone else happy.

In addition, the discourse between Jake and Sam, and the words of guidance Mr. Baker gives his daughter discourage girls from being assertive, while encouraging assertiveness for boys. Moreover, Mr. Baker praises, and Hughes rewards Sam for being submissive. It is very important to resist this type of thinking, because going along with it creates a paradigm that makes it acceptable to punish women who do take control over their lives.

The manner in which Hughes portrays the character of Caroline also enforces this paradigm. From early on in the film, Caroline is established as the polar opposite of Sam; Caroline is popular, assertive, confident and sexy. While Sam is embarrassed, self-deprecating, socially restrained, and passive when her family forgets her birthday, Caroline moves freely within social circles, and values her own needs enough to assert herself when they are not being met. Caroline demonstrates these qualities by casually greeting Sam in the school hallways during the dance, by confronting Jake about his distractedness, and by inviting the entire school for an after party at Jake’s house. Although Caroline may be seen as somewhat irresponsible for inviting such a large crowd to her boyfriend’s house, and getting drunk while there, she does not intend to deliberately hurt, humiliate, or punish anyone. Still,

Caroline undergoes several experiences that are hurtful and humiliating in nature. For instance, when an annoyed Jake rejects Caroline by slamming his bedroom door in her face, Caroline's hair gets stuck. Caroline's girlfriends cut a large chunk off her hair in order to free her. Although Caroline is relieved, she is undoubtedly too inebriated to realize that her head is missing a huge portion of hair. Still, this scene is significant, because the prom queen's image is inextricably tied up with her physical appearance. Religion, art, and pop culture persists the idea that a woman's beauty and desirability is in her hair. So, by having Caroline's hair cut off, Hughes indirectly condemns, or punishes Caroline's behavior. In a way, Hughes humiliates Caroline for refusing to submit and show humility; a trade that patriarchy encourages women to embrace. Thus, this scene shows that there is truth to the claim that Hughes promotes Patriarchal ideals of male dominance and female submission.

To shed light on the Jake's violent quote about his girlfriend Caroline, it is useful to consider the patriarchal thinking that would motivate someone to make such a statement. In *Understanding Patriarchy*, hooks explains that expressions of patriarchal verbal or physical patriarchal violence typically occur when the actions of a woman defy or humiliate a man (2). Taking this into consideration, Jake might have experienced Caroline's careless behavior with regards to his home. Furthermore, Jake may have experienced Caroline's public intoxication as a humiliating event. As such, his statement was a way for him to symbolically put Caroline in her place. The fact that Hughes' inclusion of such a violent quote has not been mentioned specifically the existing literature about the film proves that sexist thinking connected to patriarchy is so pervasive that it has become the norm to many people.

The same rationale applies to Hughes' representation of consent. In the booklet *Feminism is for Everybody*, hooks defines patriarchy as the institutionalized

form of sexist thinking (1). In the marriage scene, Hughes makes fun of the fact that Ginny is temporarily disabled from making rational decisions by allowing her to get married anyway. If sexist thinking were not institutionalized, Hughes would not have been able to get away with making light of the issue of consent. Although it may not have been Hughes' intent, this scene reveals a patronizing sentiment that suggests women are not able to take care of themselves.

Finally, there is not much positive to say about Hughes' portrayal of Long Duk Dong when it is considered in light of hooks' ideas, aside from the fact that his character provides the perfect subject to talk about representation, and the structures of power that decide how a character is represented. Hooks wants spectators to be mindful of the fact that everything portrayed in a film is a conscious creation made by the filmmaker. Moreover, in *Cultural Criticism and Transformation*, she explains that white male privilege allows male, white liberal filmmakers like Hughes to produce whatever images they please. As such it is important to keep in mind that Hughes made a conscious decision to include only one non-white character in *Sixteen Candles*. He chose to base this character on a variety of Asian stereotypes that *his* culture has produced, and he decided that this character's sole purpose would be making people laugh on the basis of this warped representation of Asian ethnicity. While Hughes could have used his privilege to create a non-white character of substance, he chose to produce a fringe character encoded to make white people laugh. By doing so, Hughes is perpetuating white supremacy.

3. The Breakfast Club

Out of all the films in Hughes teen film cycle, the coming of age drama *The Breakfast Club* (1985) has been the most popular and most influential to current pop culture.

The film was written and directed by John Hughes, and has produced many iconic scenes and images that are still being reproduced today in films, television series, and advertisements. *The Breakfast Club* introduces a group of actors that popular media refers to as “The Brat Pack”. Aside from *Sixteen Candles* alumni Molly Ringwald and Anthony Michael Hall, it includes Emilio Estevez, Judd Nelson, and Ally Sheedy. *The Breakfast Club* also introduces the use of popular music to film. The incorporation of pop music has played a key part in producing the film’s many iconic scenes. Moreover, it is praised for being one of the first teen films to have well-developed adolescent characters who have emotional depth, and heavier things on their mind than what to wear, or the next school dance. Ironically, before its release, some executives at the Universal production company felt that *the Breakfast Club*’s subject matter would be too heavy for teenage audiences (Gora, 46). While the breakfast club shows that teenagers have their own world, with their own language, customs and dress, it also recognizes that teenagers struggle with problems of the larger society to which they belong. Peer pressure, academic pressure, divorce, class divisions, domestic violence, and parental neglect are some of the serious topics represented in the film. Still, there is more that makes this film an interesting object for discussion. Although *The Breakfast Club* follows a traditional pattern in terms of narrative, and heavily relies on high school stereotypes for its characters, it brings into question the dominant beliefs connected to femininity, masculinity, and sexuality. It also brings into question the oppressive nature of the high school caste system. In addition, the film’s iconic final scene suggests that some sort of higher

ground has been reached in regards to these questions, but is this really the case? By analyzing narrative, visual, verbal, and musical elements in *The Breakfast Club*, this essay suggests that the film flirts with transforming messages about gender, class, and sexuality, but in the end still upholds the patriarchal beliefs that made them worth challenging.

3.1 Plot Synopsis

The Breakfast Club follows five high school students as they spend a Saturday serving detention in their school library, which is located in the fictional town of Shermer, Illinois. The group consists of five people, each belonging to distinctly different social groups. There is a the princess named Claire Standish (Molly Ringwald), the criminal named John Bender;(Judd Nelson), the brain named Brian Johnson (Anthony Michael Hall), the athlete named Andy Clarke (Emilio Estevez), and the basket case named Allison Reynolds (Ally Sheedy). The style in which the students enter the library to get seated suggests that none of them have much in common. Principle Vernon comes in to instruct the students to write a thousand word essay describing who they think they are. He also instructs them not to speak or move from their seats during detention. Recurring detention attendee Bender reveals himself as the provocateur early on; he ignores Mr. Vernon's rules, teases Brian, and Angers Claire and Andy with every other word he says. Allison mostly keeps quiet. The group spends the following hours quarrelling, telling stories, roaming the hallways, and smoking Bender's weed. As the day progresses, each character gradually reveals more details about themselves. Brian attempted suicide because his parents pressure him to succeed academically; Bender's hostile attitude is the result of being poor, and living with an abusive father; Claire's rich parents are on the brink

of divorce, and her mother is an alcoholic; Allison is a compulsive liar who is ignored by her parents, and Andy struggles with living up to his father's expectations of manhood. After an emotional conversation the group realizes that underneath their individual differences, they each struggle with similar personal problems, and fear becoming like their parents when they grow older. In the following scene the group shakes off the tension by dancing to the upbeat pop song "We Are Not Alone", by Karla DeVito. When detention is nearly over, Claire proposes that Brian writes the essay on behalf of the group, because he is the smartest. She then takes the darkly clad and made up Allison to the bathroom to give her a makeover. When Allison emerges from the bathroom, Andy is rendered speechless by her beauty. Claire goes to approach Bender, who is sitting in a closet by himself. Having annoyed each other all day, the two have developed a soft spot for one another. When detention is over and cars arrive to pick up the students, Allison and Andy kiss. Claire gives Bender her diamond earring, and the two share a kiss before Claire enters her father's car. A voiceover of Brian reads the letter that he wrote on behalf of the group:

"Dear Mr. Vernon,

We accept the fact that we had to sacrifice a whole Saturday in detention for whatever it was that we did wrong. What we did was wrong, but we think you're crazy for making us write an essay telling you who we think you are. You see us as you want to see us, ...

in the simplest terms, in the most convenient definitions. But what we found out is that each one of us is a brain, and an athlete, and a basket case, a princess, a criminal.

Does that answer your question?

Sincerely yours,

The Breakfast Club”

Finally, the iconic closing scene shows Bender walking across the school football field as he triumphantly thrusts his fist in the air whilst the Simple Minds song “Don’t You Forget About Me” plays.

3.2 Analysis

The Breakfast Club raises a variety of relevant social and political discussion topics. This is partly because its plot relies on a classic premise; an unlikely group of individuals forced to spend an unusually long period of time together in one location. Television series typically have at least one episode with this format. They are referred to as a “bottle episode”. Seeing as bottle episodes are filmed on pre-existing sets, and require only little preparation, television producers often create them as a way to reduce production costs. These financial limitations also restrict the possible narrative directions of the screenplay. This means that the success of a bottle episode is largely dependent on screenwriting talent and effective casting. As Rob Dean explains in his article on the importance of bottle episodes: “often times these episodes get to the very heart of the characters”. Moreover, he explains that they often allow the viewer to come to subtle discoveries about the relationships portrayed (par. 1). This is exactly the case in *The Breakfast Club*. Still, when a bottle episode is introduced in a series, viewers typically already know the characters from previous

episodes. Hughes on the other hand, only has a limited time frame to get viewers acquainted with his characters.

To speed up this introduction process, Hughes deploys stereotyped imagery. His characters are encoded to incite certain prejudices in the viewer. As such, general appearance, clothing and use of physical and verbal language inform viewers of the characters' personality, and the respective social groups to which they belong. In addition, more information about the character can be derived from what they eat at lunchtime. For example, Claire is encoded as the princess; her hair is fashionably coiffed, she has pink manicured nails, and diamond studs in her ears. Moreover, she wears a soft pink blouse, a leather handbag, a straight brown skirt with a wide leather waist belt, and knee-high boots. In an interview about the background of the characters casting director Jackie Burch explains that Claire's look was based on Ralph Lauren; an American fashion designer whose designs were featured in every fashion magazine in the 1980s. As Kim Ode explains in her article on Ralph Lauren's impact on American fashion, all of Lauren's designs represented "good taste, prosperity and quality" (par. 6). Moreover, Claire has sushi for lunch. This especially emphasizes the idea that Claire embodies sophistication, as the 1980s saw the rise of sushi restaurants in metropolitan cities like New York, and Chicago (Bhabha, par. 2). Considering that Claire finds it quite normal to bring sushi for lunch, this suggests that she has eaten the exotic dish for lunch many times before, most likely whenever she visits the city of Chicago. Similarly, before Alison has revealed anything about herself verbally, her lunch is already an indication of her parents' detachment from her. She retrieves from her bag a cling wrapped sandwich consisting of two mismatched slices of bread and a stale piece of ham. Also, a zip lock bag filled with breakfast cereal. Although Allison makes the best of what she has by rearranging the

scraps into a more appetizing sandwich, the makeup of her packed lunch suggest that there are hardly any, let alone fresh groceries present at her home.

Hughes also endows each character with a specific body language and way of speaking. For instance, Bender's role as the criminal of the group is expressed via his body language, which exudes rebelliousness. He puts his feet upon the tables, uses profane hand gestures, and does not sit still for one minute. Moreover, he leaves little space between himself and the person he is trying to aggravate, which is a very literal expression of Bender's main objective of "getting in people's faces". This attitude could be interpreted as an attempt to make his presence be known in a world that renders him irrelevant because of his lower social class. Also, Bender's verbal language is ridden with sexual or sex-related terms, and almost every one of them is meant to get the others' attention by angering or shocking them. He asks Andy if he ever slipped Claire "the hot beef injection", he calls the others "dildos", and constantly pushes Claire to talk about her sexual experiences. It is important to note that Bender's profane language and insults are directed towards Claire and Andy, most likely because they are on the other side of the high school caste system.

Claire and Andy's reactions to Bender's explicit language shows that the high school students have already learned that sex, sexuality, and sex-related language can be used as tools of manipulation. In addition, the fact that Andy constantly tries to protect Claire from being subjected to Bender's interrogations about sex suggests that virginity, and the notions of female purity connected to it, are things that need to be protected. More specifically, it suggests that young women should be protected from having to talk about these issues. Although the teenage characters of *The Breakfast Club* are still navigating their sexuality, they have already accepted that the value of a woman is largely decided by what she does with her body. In one scene, Hughes

addresses this issue head on. In Julianna Baggott's essay specifically devoted to this *Breakfast Club* scene, the subject matter is referred to as "the prude/slut trap" (17). In an attempt to persuade Claire to disclose her sexual status, Allison claims that she will do anything sexual, and that she has even had sex with her therapist. After making Claire seem like a saint in comparison, Allison asks her if she "has ever done it", but Claire is apprehensive about answering the question. Allison addresses Claire's apprehension by describing the situation as a "double-edged sword". She says: "If you say you haven't... you're a prude. If you say you have... you're a slut! It's a trap. You want to but you can't. And when you do you wish you didn't, right?". Put differently, this scene shows that navigating one's sexuality as a young woman is incredibly difficult, because whatever step they take, it is always connected to a societal belief about virtue versus depravity. Moreover, Allison's claims of supposed sexual experience are meant to trick Claire into thinking Allison is a slut. This illustrates that Allison is already aware of the meanings society connects to the sexual activity of women, as she uses them to manipulate Claire's perception of her. By addressing these issues of sexism that are present in society, Hughes acknowledges that patriarchy exists, and has harmful effects on young women. Hughes' also acknowledges the effects of patriarchy in his portrayal of his male characters. Bender, Brian, and Andy already struggle to uphold patriarchal ideals of masculinity, which prescribe that men must be able to secure a future for themselves, and possible future spouses. Brian's father pushes him to succeed academically, Andy's father encourages him to pretend to be an arrogant jerk in order to secure his wrestling scholarship, and everyone makes Bender feel like he will amount to nothing, because he is poor and maladjusted.

Unfortunately, Hughes' recognition of patriarchy turns into a patriarchal message when Claire gives her diamond earring to Bender. This interpretation needs some explanation. Everything in Claire's life reflects her social standing. But in actuality, this is the social standing of her father, because his earnings facilitate Claire's rich lifestyle. The people Claire affiliates with, the clothes she wears, and even the foods she eats are all an extension of her father's wealth. Her diamond earrings are in fact signifiers. The signified connotation is her father's wealth. Claire gives her earring to Bender as a way to symbolically show him that class is unimportant to her. But considering that the transaction, and the kiss afterwards happen in front of her father's car, it is very likely that Claire is actually making a calculated move to insult her father. To secure social survival and fatherly love, Claire must behave a certain way. Therefore, it is very unlikely that Claire and Bender will have a relationship. Inadvertently, the narrative between Claire and Bender only shows that women are used, and position themselves as pawns in a power struggle between men.

Furthermore, the makeover scene conveys a sexist message about women's bodies by suggesting that a better life is possible for women if they adhere to stereotypical feminine beauty standards. Andy only begins to see Allison as a possible love interest after Claire gives her a makeover. The idea that Allison is worthy of romantic consideration after the makeover is emphasized by the music used that plays when she emerges from the bathroom. Considering that the song accompanying in the scene is called "Love Theme", Hughes does not leave much room for alternative interpretations. While the theme of the entire movie is acceptance, the makeover scene refutes that very premise.

Lastly, the closing scene featuring the Simple Minds song “Don’t You Forget About Me” needs to be discussed. This scene has been referenced countless times in pop culture, often as metaphor for victory. For example, television series *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015-) has copied the scene to suggest a moment of victory. Also, in the film *Easy A* (2010) the female protagonist references the scene to suggest how victorious a boy should feel after winning a girl’s heart. The scene in which Bender thrusts his fist in the air is not only powerful visually, its message is emphasized by the song “Don’t You Forget About Me” which starts playing the moment Bender’s fist reaches its highest point and the frame freezes. Bender thrusting his fist in the air can be seen physical expression of celebration, a sign that a positive outcome has been reached. The chord progression of the chorus in “Don’t You Forget About Me” emphasizes this idea of a positive outcome; it begins low on the scale with an E minor chord, and ends higher in a D major chord. In an article on the emotional effects of major and minor scale chords lecturer of music psychology at Goldsmiths University Vicky Williamson explains that minor chords create a type of “sensory dissonance” within the listener. She explains that this sensory dissonance is created when the middle note of a major chord consisting of three notes is moved closer to the base note. The closeness of the base and middle note in a minor chord makes it sound as if the two sounds are clashing. Williamson explains that western culture teaches a person to associate minor keys and chords with sadness and misery, and major ones with happiness, elatedness and celebration. As such, the minor to major chord progression in “Don’t You Forget About Me” mirrors the storyline of *The Breakfast Club*, moving from conflict to resolution.

However, the lyrics to the song do not convey the same sense of resolution heard in the chord progression. The lyrics state: “Will you stand above me, look my

way, never love me?” and, “Will you recognize me, look my way, walk on by? (Forsey, Schiff)”. While the scene suggests victory, these lyrics only affirm the status quo. If the questions posed in the song lyrics are in any way reflective of the characters’ thoughts by the end of the film, no real resolution or victory has been reached. The questions suggest that the characters are still longing for social acceptance, recognition and visibility within their social environment. Although the group has become closer during their detention, and the boundaries between the respective characters have become much less distinct, the prospect of them spending time together once they return to school seems highly unlikely. By focusing on the personal feelings and issues of each character, Hughes succeeds in breaking down some of the stereotypes associated with their position in the social hierarchy. However, the film also recognizes that popular kids such as Claire and Andy are largely dependent on their social group for their survival and future. For Andy, befriending people like Brian might result in his father rejecting him, and risking his wrestling career. Similarly, Claire pursuing a relationship with Bender would probably result in her being rejected from her social group.

3.3 Discussion

One of the key themes in bell hooks’ ideas on popular media is the potential for transformation inherent in film and television. In *Reel to Reel: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* hooks suggests that in order to start using popular film as a means for transformation, viewers must hold the filmmaker accountable for his representations. (70). Hughes employs stereotypes so that viewers may question the stereotypical set of connotations associated with the characters. These stereotypes are a means through which Hughes shows that every character struggles with their lives, regardless of

their differences. In other words, he uses stereotypes to further the idea that underneath their façade, the teenagers are all human. Still, while *The Breakfast Club* provides depth to the characters' labels, Hughes does little to subvert them. For instance, Bender is poor and uses the most profanities. Moreover, his father is extremely abusive of him and his mother, and the way in which Bender imitates him suggests that he is uneducated, and more often than not, drunk. Hughes connects this narrative to the character of Bender in order to show the cause of his provoking behavior. By doing so, he is suggesting that Bender is a victim of circumstance. However, by representing Bender as such, Hughes is reproducing the stereotypical idea that being unmannered and uncultured are intrinsic qualities of the economically disadvantaged.

Furthermore, in *Cultural Criticism and Transformation*, bell hooks explains that "American culture is obsessed with transgression". Although she says this in reference to black culture being used as a sign of transgression, the same statement can be true for associating with the poor, lower classes, or in case of *The Breakfast Club*, the criminal. In this light, Hughes reaffirms patriarchal ideals by making it an act of transgression for Claire to affiliate with a man of a lower social standing.

As identified earlier, the harmful effects of patriarchy are also visible when looking at the male characters and the nature of their problems. They are all under immense pressure to be the person their parents, or society wants them to be. Although this clearly causes them emotional trauma, their behavior shows they have already learned not to express their emotions. In *Understanding Patriarchy* bell hooks suggests that when boys are introduced to the rules of patriarchy, "we force them to feel pain and deny their feelings" (2). This is exactly the case with the three

boys. Still, although Hughes' recognizes the pressure the boys are under, he offers no transformative thought for resolution.

The same goes for the prude/slut trap dialogue in *The Breakfast Club*.

Although Hughes addresses an important issue largely created by patriarchy; he does nothing to subvert it. This is a crucial point, because as bell hooks explains, "As females in patriarchal culture, we do not determine our self worth. Our value, our worth, and whether or not we can be loved are always determined by someone else" (2). While Hughes explicitly addresses the injustice of girls not being able to talk about their own sexuality without being harshly judged, he does not use his power as a filmmaker to influence the dominant perception of girls in relation to sexuality.

With regards to the makeover scene, bell hooks provides an interesting addition to the analysis. In *Communion: The Female Search for Love* hooks explains that in patriarchal culture, young women who do not feel valued in their original family are given a second chance to demonstrate their worth when they are encouraged to pursue love from men (17). Allison's problem is that her parents ignore her. Hughes presents the makeover as the solution to this problem, because the makeover makes Allison visible to Andy; a possible source for love. The stereotypical feminine look Allison is given presents itself as a golden ticket to a better life. It allows her to pursue the one thing every girl should allegedly want to pursue; male love and approval. However, in order to have access to this better life, Allison needs to rid herself of her personal identity. While Allison's identity was clear from the outside before the makeover, after the makeover she is encoded as just a pretty girl. Every thing that was indicative of Allison's personality, or problems, is stripped from her. In other words, after the makeover, Allison is no longer an individual, but just an object that represents traditional femininity.

4. *Pretty in Pink*

Like its predecessors *Pretty in Pink* was a box office hit. With a nine million dollar budget, the largest budget of all the films in Hughes' teen film cycle, production company Paramount and Hughes himself had high hopes for the success of *Pretty in Pink*. Still, the investments at stake did not keep Hughes from taking a huge creative risk regarding the production of the film. Against the will of the production company, Hughes insisted on having his screenplay directed by Howard Deutch: a television and music video director who had previously produced the trailers for *The Breakfast Club* and *Sixteen Candles*, but had never before directed a full movie. *Pretty in Pink* was also different from its predecessors in terms of casting. Although Hughes wrote *Pretty in Pink*'s main character Andy Walsh with Molly Ringwald in mind, Paramount wanted Jennifer Beals to fill the role. At the time, Jennifer Beals was well known for her leading performance in the hit film *Flashdance* (1983). Unlike Ringwald, Beals was an adult, and an established actress in Hollywood. In addition, Beals, who was born to an Irish mother and African American father would have been the first person of color to land a leading role in a John Hughes film. Beals declined the role, and as such, the movie went back to portraying a very white notion of adolescence with Molly Ringwald as Andie Walsh (Bains, 199). Out of all the romantic plots in Hughes' films, the notion of class plays the most important role in *Pretty in Pink*. The film is best described with the term class-clash romance, coined by Timothy Shary. In his essay *Buying Me Love: 1980s Class-Clash Teen Romances* Shary explains: "American teen films of the mid-1980s often posed their class conflicts in the form of divisive youth romances that inevitably trumpeted the economic rifts between teens only to offer an optimistic unification of these same teens by the end of their stories" (564).

Pretty in Pink is a film about a poor girl from a single parent household, and a privileged rich boy who fall in love with each other. Although their affection is mutual and genuine, both encounter difficulty navigating the possible social repercussions of their love story as it progresses. Still, in the end, the two confess their love for each other and kiss, signaling that they are now a couple. With regards to the overall narrative, *Pretty in Pink* does very little to challenge any conventions. As film critic Roger Ebert says in his review for *Pretty in Pink*: “The movie’s plot is old, old old”. Ebert praises a lot of other aspects of the film in his review, but also expresses its lack of narrative originality. Given its stereotype-filled ancient premise, It is safe to say that *Pretty in Pink* became a box office hit because of how Hughes’ script, which wittily taps into dominant 1980s sentiments about family life, love and even politics. *Pretty In Pink* shows that Hughes is attuned to the specific implications of being rich or poor in the nineteen-eighties. More specifically, the film shows teenagers as keenly aware of their family’s socioeconomic status, and how it might affect their future and relationships (Clarke, 78). Furthermore, Hughes’ spot on depictions of teen speak, quirky yet sophisticated dress code and perfectly timed, intelligent puns and jokes, and likeable characters, make *Pretty in Pink* a film that is easy to watch and get caught up in. The film’s depiction of Andie Walsh and her quirky friends shed a positive light on people of lower socioeconomic standing. Also, Andie’s rich love interest Blane McDonough shows that not all rich people are rude and unable to be compassionate. Hughes challenges the most pervasive assumptions about poor people. For instance, he depicts Andie as a well-spoken and very intelligent girl. Still, the movie is still full of stereotypical representations of class relations, gender role divisions, and sexuality. As such, Hughes’ lovable characters do not make up for the fact that essentially *Pretty In Pink* promotes a very narrow-

minded view of femininity, and the roles and spaces women should occupy in society.

4.1 Plot Synopsis

Pretty In Pink begins with the introduction of Andie Walsh (Molly Ringwald) as she gets ready in the morning. From the beginning shots it becomes clear that Andie has a knack for fashion, and a preference for the color pink. Andie is a senior in high school living in a poor neighborhood with her unemployed father (Harry Dean Stanton). While Andie is an independent, productive young woman, her father still struggles with the fact that his wife, and Andie's mother left them years ago. After getting herself ready, Andie lovingly wakes her father with a fresh cup of coffee, and tells him to take a shower, get dressed and see "the woman about the job". After agreeing reluctantly, Andie's father compliments her fashionable new outfit. Andie explains she bought the shoes secondhand, and made the rest of the outfit herself.

When Andie arrives at school viewers are introduced to Blane, a handsome rich young man who is interested to Andie, despite her being from a different social background. Soon after, the camera pans over to Duckie, Andie's quirky yet geeky male best friend. Right away, it becomes clear that Duckie is also interested in Andie as more than a friend. However, Duckie has a habit of turning his remarks of admiration towards Andie into jokes, because he is afraid to show his true feelings. During the day at school, some members of Blane's social group are introduced, all of whom are part of a rich elite that look down upon people like Andie. During class, the beautiful rich and popular Benny and her cohorts are making fun of Andie's clothes. The teacher notices, offers Andie an apology for the behavior of Benny and her friend, and gives them a homework assignment as a punishment. Realizing this

will only cause additional harassment from the popular girls, Andie asks the teacher not to give the girls an extra homework assignment, since no harm was done. Before the teacher can even answer Andie's request, Benny's friend quickly puts up her hand and says "we'll take the chapter", showing an unwillingness to accept Andie's peace offering.

After school, Andie walks to her car and is approached by Steff: Blane's pompous, privileged, chain-smoking best friend. Steff confidently leans against Andie's car and compliments her looks. He soon turns on her after rejecting his innuendos and ends his speech with "you're a bitch". After school Andy works at a record shop named Trax, which is owned by her eccentric older female friend Iona. With the event of senior prom coming up soon, Andie asks Iona about her prom, and if she thinks Andie should go to hers. Soon after their conversation, Blane enters the record shop. He and Andie awkwardly exchange glances as Blane picks out a record, and they share a flirtatious interaction when Blane makes his purchase. During the rest of the school week, Andie and Blane flirt some more, and finally Blane musters up the courage to approach Andie on her part of the schoolyard; A place where the punks, artistic, and non-conformist types gather during recess. Andie agrees to go on a date with Blane, but asks him to pick her up at Trax. Although she says it will be more convenient since she's working that day, she actually feels uncomfortable with Blane seeing where she lives. When Blane goes back inside the school to go to his class, Steff confronts him about asking Andie out on a date. Steff informs Blane that he thinks he should not hang out with people like Andie. In the evening, Andie and Duckie are in Andie's room to study, but Duckie is mostly busy admiring Andie. The next day during physical education, Benny and her friend start covertly insulting Andie and her friend again, but this time, Andie decides to speak up, landing her a

trip to the principle's office. When the principle asks Andy what happened during class, she explains that she was fed up with the way she is treated by the rich, popular crowd. He replies by suggesting it is better for her to keep a low profile and appreciate her education. That evening, Andie waits for Blane at Trax. However, Blane is late, and so, Iona suggests that Andie should not waste her time waiting for him anymore. Duckie is also hanging out at Trax, unaware that Andie is supposed to go on a date. When Andie informs Duckie about the date, he gets very upset. Firstly, because the date is not with him, and secondly because he feels betrayed by the fact that Andie is hanging out with the rich types that bully them at school. Blane turns up for the date after all, and takes Andie to a party at Steff's house. Andie clearly does not feel at home at the party as all of the attendees are drunk, rich popular kids. Also, Blane and Andie run into Steff and Benny at the party, and Benny insults Andie to her face. Blane and Andy leave to go to the music club Andie Likes to visit. They go to sit with Iona and Duckie who are also at the club. When Andie formally introduces Blane, Duckie is clearly bitter. He insults both Andie and Blane until the two leave. While Blane wants the date to continue, Andie suggests that she would rather go home, because she has an early start the next morning. Blane offers to take her home, but Andie wants to avoid this at all costs and suggests he drop her off at Trax. Surprised and unable to understand why Andie will not let him drop her off at her house, Blane insists on dropping Andie off at her home. Andie then starts crying and confesses that she does not want Blane to see where she lives. Blane takes Andie home, and Andie apologizes for putting a damper on the evening. Blane says he still had a great evening because he was with Andie. Although Andie is a little embarrassed about the evening, she lights up when Blane asks her to go to the senior prom with him, and the two kiss. Andie enters her home to find her father lounging

on the couch. Excited she tells him that Blane asked her to the prom. Also, Andie tells her fathers that she is a little worried about the class difference between her and Blane.

The next day, Andie visits Iona at her apartment in Chinatown. Iona wants to know everything about the date, and finally Andie tells Iona that Blane asked her out to the prom. The same day, Blane visits Steff at his home. Steff expresses that he thinks Blane should not have taken Andie to his party, because she is of a lower class, and an embarrassment to him and his friends. By the end of their conversation, Steff presents Blane with an ultimatum: either Blane stops seeing Andie, or Steff will no longer be his friend. Blane obviously likes Andie, but tormented by the choice presented to him. During the week, Andie tries to contact Blane several times, but Blane will not pick up the phone. Meanwhile, Andie's father bought her a second hand dress, knowing that she will be able to make a nice prom dress from its fabric. Although Andie is thankful, she cannot help but ask where her father got the money for the dress. Andie confronts her father about him still not having a job and the two argue for a moment. Then, they talk about the bigger issue at hand: the fact that Andie's father has not been able to let go of Andie's mother. Still, they resolve their argument, but when her Andie's father leaves her room, Andie breaks down crying over her mother and home situation.

At school, an upset Andie confronts Blane and asks him why he has not called her or replied to her messages. Blane awkwardly tries to make up an excuse, but Andie does not buy it. Andie then asks Blane about prom, worried that he is not willing to take her anymore. Blane avoids the question, but Andie is persistent. His unwillingness to answer her then causes her to lose her temper and she screams "admit it your afraid to go out with me!". Although the encounter visibly upsets

Blane, he does not say anything to ease her worry. The altercation ends with a distraught Andie running away from Blane. The next day, Andie visits Iona's apartment. Iona is in high spirits, telling Andie how in love she is with her new, straight-laced boyfriend. However, Iona's happiness triggers Andie to break down and cry. Upset, Andie explains that Blane backed out on her, and will not be taking her to the prom. While drying her tears, Andie then asks Iona if she can have her old prom dress. At her home, Andie uses the fabric from Iona's dress, and the fabric from the dress that her father bought her to make a new prom dress. When the dress is finished, and Andie's hair and makeup is done, she walks downstairs to showcase her look to her father. Andie's father finds her dress stunning, and thinks that Blane will find her stunning. Andie then informs her father that Blane will not be taking her to the prom, and that instead she is going by herself to show Blane and the people that were mean to her that she is still standing.

When Andie arrives at the venue, she hesitates to go in for a moment. Then, she spots Duckie in the distance walking towards her. Happy and relieved to see each other, they hug and decide to go in together. Meanwhile, Blane is sitting by himself, sulking. Benny and Steff are seated at another table. Steff has booked an expensive hotel room for the night, and is pushing Benny to leave prom with him, so that they can have sex. Blane is clearly surprised to see Andie and Duckie walk into the room together. He immediately gets up and starts walking towards them, but is intercepted by Steff, who wants to prevent him from being with Andie. He also takes the opportunity to make some insulting remarks about Andie again. This time, Blane is not having it, and he confronts Steff about his jealous, bitter attitude. After getting rid of Steff, Blane approaches Andie and apologizes for the way he behaved. Although Andie is hesitant to accept his apology initially, she is stunned when Blane then says

he loves her, kisses her on the cheek, and then walks away. Shocked Andie stands in silence, unsure of what move to make. Ducky then lovingly urges Andie to go after Blane before he leaves, because he has realized that Blane is actually a good guy. Andie runs outside and approaches Blane who was just about to enter his car. The film ends with the Blane and Andie passionately kissing.

4.2 Analysis

In its most broad definition, *Pretty In Pink* is a classic story of a poor girl, who meets and falls in love with a rich boy. While class is an important theme in all three of the films, *Pretty in Pink* distinctly draws from nineteen-eighties notions of social mobility. The film includes depictions of social cliques, home situations and working life that are reflective of the economic policy of the Reagan administration. As Shary explains in his essay, “Reagan’s economic policies systematically served the interests of the upper class” (563). While the premise of the film suggests teens can rise above class differences, it also relies heavily on stereotypical notions of class. Moreover, to facilitate the lovers rising above their class differences, Hughes employs archaic portrayals of gender role divisions, and stereotypical representations of femininity and masculinity .

For instance, the character of Andie embodies a very cliché representation of femininity. In fact, her stereotypical feminine look is what inspired the title “*Pretty In Pink*”. The word pink works on two levels with regards to Andie. Firstly, it refers to a color to that is traditionally seen as a female color in society. It is the color that Andie wears in almost every one of her outfits (most significantly her prom dress). Secondly, pink refers to a kind, nurturing, gentle attitude or personality that is typically encouraged in young females. As such, the name of the film “*Pretty in Pink*”

combined with the look and personality of Andie establishes the idea that being soft, gentle and traditionally feminine is something to aspire to for young women. The initial framing of Andie as a kind, good girl, manipulates the viewers into perceiving her role as the household manager as something good and natural, instead of the unfortunate consequence of her father's inability to take care of himself. One may argue that Andie's role in the home as a main breadwinner is a positive thing because it teaches leadership and, gives her the skills to run a household. Still, these skills are undetectable in Andie's love life. Andie expects her love interest to approach her. In all Andie's interactions with Blane, he is the one who approaches Andie, picks her up, drives her places, and makes plans. It may not seem obvious, but in a sense Andie's interaction with Blane allows her to return to traditional femininity, because he allows her to be passive.

Pretty In Pink also employs the characters to communicate a very conventional idea of romance and masculinity. Duckie's character is by no means traditionally masculine. For one, his real name is Philip F. Dale, but he allows his friends to call him Duckie. Moreover, Duckie has no job, rides a bicycle, is not handsome in a traditional sense, and is quite sensitive. In John Cryer's own words, Duckie is a "slightly effeminate dork" (James). However, he has a great sense of humor, a quirky sense of style that resembles Andie, and an interest in alternative styles of music. All in all, on paper he is a much better match for Andie than Blane, whom with Andie has nothing in common. Yet, although Duckie's personality and devotion for Andie makes him very lovable, the film suggests that someone like Duckie is not worthy of romantic interest, because he lacks traditional masculinity.

Still, Duckie, Iona and Andie's other eccentric, lower class friends are portrayed in a much more positive light than the "richies". While the main theme of

the film is superseding class differences, Hughes' depiction of the different class groups shows that he is obviously biased in favor of Andie's group. Therefore, he fails to deviate from the typical conventions of the class-clash romance. As Shary explains in his essay, in most class-clash teen romance films poverty is shown as humble and endearing while wealth is pompous and oppressive (566). Hughes adds to this idea by only giving Andie and her friends a candid sense of humor. For example, consider the language members of the two class groups use to insult each other. When Andie tells Duckie the name of her romantic interest, Duckie replies saying "Blane?!... His name is Blane? That's not a name, that's a major appliance!". Conversely, after having his ego bruised Steff refers to Andie as "a mutant" and "trash" in a conversation with Blane. While Duckie's remark is innocent because it only compares Andie's love interest to a brand of kitchen appliances by the name of Blaine, Steff calling Andie a mutant reinforces the stereotypical belief that the rich see poor people as less than human.

In her essay on *Pretty in Pink* Lisa Gabriele accurately mentions, "In most of John Hughes movies, money indicates the absence of respect" (84). With Blane as the only exception, "the richies" are indeed always portrayed in a way that shows their inability to respect anyone or anything, including money. For example, Andie goes to shop for a dress at a fancy store after Blane asked her to the prom. However, looking at the price tags she realizes that the beautiful dresses are way too expensive for her. Benny is also at the store, together with her mother. Unlike Andie, Benny is very rich, and yet, she is only complaining about the dresses she is trying on. Similarly, when Blane and Steff talk the day after Blane's date with Andie, Blane asks whether Steff cares about anything else than money. Steff angrily replies, "Look around, would I treat my parents' house like this if money were any kind of issue". This reply

shows that Steff, who represents rich people, does not have any respect or regard for the feelings or belongings of others, not even family. Although Blane eventually proves himself as a good person to his less fortunate peers, the other richies remain mean, pompous and sarcastic throughout the film.

Clearly, Hughes challenges the nineteen-eighties glorification of wealth and capitalism in his representation of the rich in *Pretty in Pink* (Mayer). Also, he portrays the poor as kind, well-rounded people who are creative, but victimized by the system. However, by having Andie end up with Blane, *Pretty in Pink* still promotes the idea that women will still reject the men that are more devoted and compatible to them in order to date a man who is wealthy (Shary, 573). This sentiment is not only expressed in the romance between Blane and Andie, but also in the character of Iona. While Iona is dating men throughout the film, she only considers settling down when she falls for a “yuppie” who owns multiple businesses. Also, Iona drops her signature fashion style and conforms to mainstream trends when dating the new man. While there is nothing wrong with changing one’s fashion style, the timing of Iona’s change suggests that she has dropped part of her signature, very established identity in order to be happy, and date someone higher up on the social ladder.

There is another pervasive gender convention present in *Pretty in Pink* that has a powerful influence on both Andie and Iona. *Pretty in Pink* presents high school senior prom as a defining moment in a young woman’s life. Iona is a woman who is confident, independent, successful, and rather non-conventional in her profession, style and speech. However, she becomes incredibly nostalgic whenever she talks about her prom. Although Iona is someone to admire because of her achievements in life, she still expresses that she envies Andie, who gets to attend her prom. While Andie is not particularly excited to go to her prom when she first discusses it with

Iona, she is elated, almost thankful, when Blane asks her to go. This suggests that prom had been important to Andie after all. Moreover, after Blane cancels the date, Andie still feels compelled to go, because not going would give her peers the satisfaction of seeing her as fallen from grace.

4.3 Discussion

In *Feminism Is for Everybody*, bell hooks explains that our culture holds the two-parent patriarchal family in higher esteem than any other arrangement. In other words, according to patriarchy, a family with a mother and a father is regarded as the best situation for children to grow up in. *Pretty in Pink* perpetuates this patriarchal ideal by portraying Andie's home situation as an example of how difficult life is in a single parent household. Andie's father abandons all household duties and is depressed without Andie's mother. With her mother gone and her father depressed Andy takes on the traditional role of her mother, taking care of her father, and the role of her father, being the main breadwinner of the household. Instead of being angry about her living situation she accepts her role as matriarch of the household with grace and dignity. Although Andie does the best she can as the head of the household, with virtually no help from her father, eventually the film shows that a household like this cannot be successful. When Andie and her father get into an argument about the fact that he still does not have a job, it becomes clear her father is not going to take charge of his life by taking the traditional role as the breadwinner of the family, and so he cannot possibly survive when Andie leaves for college. Although viewers are mainly framed to see Andie's home situation as a critique on capitalism, it is also idealizes the patriarchal ideal of the two parent household.

The character of Duckie is portrayed in a very positive way. However, indirectly, his character also serves as a means to promote a more conventional notion of masculinity. In *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love* (2004) hooks explains: “in patriarchal culture, males are not allowed to be who they are, and glory in their own identity” (11). Although Duckie is himself in *Pretty in Pink*, effeminate, sensitive, and a bit of a clown, these traits encode him to be perceived as unworthy of romantic consideration. Although he is in love with Andie, he is also truly her best friend. This makes Duckie unmanly, because according to patriarchy, no real man would just want to be a woman’s friend. Friendship means two people are equal. Yet, as hooks explains in her article *Understanding Patriarchy*, patriarchy is characterized by male domination and power (17). It may be argued that Blane’s personality is not particularly masculine either. After all, he is a kind, and sensitive young man, who is not particularly domineering. However, Blane has money, and as such, he has a higher position on the social ladder, and thus, has more power than Duckie.

Considering bell hooks’ emphasis on the deconstruction of representations of class, it is interesting to adopt her gaze to look at how Hughes’ portrays the wealthy kids versus the working class in *Pretty in Pink*. As mentioned earlier, Hughes shows an obvious bias for the Andie’s group of lower class individuals. He portrays Andie as sweet, intelligent, creative and hard working. However, he fails to recognize a harsh reality. If Andie is really the sole breadwinner for her family, this means that she and her father are incredibly poor. Andie only works after school hours, and most likely weekends. Moreover, her wage cannot be much, as she is only a teenager. Still, Hughes chooses to represent poverty, as a difficult, but charming state to be in. A state in which people get creative in order to take care of themselves and their loved ones. In an article about rich people’s perception of the poor, Ian Sansbury explains

that research shows wealthy Americans tend to overestimate wealth in the general U.S. population. In addition, they assume “a greater perceived fairness” in the economy than actually exists. Sansbury goes on to explain that these findings may have political implications, suggesting that the wealthy might be more open to the redistribution of wealth if they had a more accurate sense of America’s income inequality. In the video series *Cultural Criticism and Transformation* bell hooks explains that pop culture is the primary medium through which people learn about issues of class, race, gender and sexuality. For this reason, she urges filmmakers to take aesthetic responsibility over the images they produce. However, instead of using the opportunity to provide a realistic portrayal of what being poor in America entails, Hughes opted for a more glossy, Hollywood suited version of poverty.

The next point of discussion relates to the character of Iona, and the notion of redemptive love which bell hooks refers to in several of her works. Iona is a creative, successful and independent woman who seems to have her life figured out. By overhearing her telephone conversations viewers learn that her dating life is not very successful, as she tends to pick men that are disrespectful freeloaders. However, when Iona meets her new, normal, boyfriend, who owns several businesses, Hughes portrays Iona as finally being able settle down in the traditional sense. Her transformation not only transforms her physical appearance from an alternative, punk inspired look to that of what she describes as “a mother”, her outlook on love is also transformed. While she had little faith in love before, her new man has given her new hope for the future. She is even discussing picking out china patterns with Andie, meaning that she expects to get married some day soon. By depicting Iona in this way, Hughes’ suggests that women will find happiness when they meet a man that inspires them to conform to traditional femininity. In her review about the film *The*

Horse Whisperer (1998) bell hooks accurately captures the same sentiment expressed by Hughes: “it’s fine for women to stray from sexist roles and play around with life on the other side, as long as we come back to our senses and stay happily-ever-after in our place”. In essence, the very message that Hughes is conveying is that even the most independent, powerful of women eventually want the type of stability that only a man can bring into their lives. In a more broad sense, Hughes promotes the type of patriarchal, redemptive version of love that will allow women to return to traditional femininity by settling down, getting married and becoming mothers.

5. Conclusion

Sixteen Candles, *The Breakfast Club* and *Pretty in Pink* have each left a lasting mark on pop culture. However, this study has shown that Hughes' rendition of teen life furthers a warped view of gender role divisions, femininity, masculinity, class divisions, and in the case of *Sixteen Candles*, race. This thesis has established that *Sixteen Candles* includes some harmful messages about female agency, the issue of consent, and racial diversity. Moreover, the film promotes outdated gender role divisions. The patriarchal ideals imbedded in *The Breakfast Club* become visible after challenging the dominant reading of its premise. Hughes sheds light on a number of different important feminist issues and concerns in *The Breakfast Club*. Still, the two romantic plots and the imagery Hughes employs to represent them only affirm the status quo. By subjecting *Pretty in Pink* to hooks' oppositional gaze, some of Hughes' most persistent stereotypical representations were deconstructed. Revealing at the core a very conservative message about how women should live their lives.

hooks' ideas about class, gender, sexuality and race have provided a fitting framework to reflect on Hughes' representations. While engaging her writings in a discussion on Hughes has given some valuable insights, this research is only a starting point to encourage further discourse. As the introduction explained, Hughes' teen films have become so ingrained in American pop culture that only a handful of popular articles have expressed a critical attitude towards their contents. As such, this thesis is merely an example of the insights that can be gained from questioning pop culture productions by engaging texts from two opposite worldviews: feminist theory from a black author, and popular teen film. Just as bell hooks does, hopefully, this thesis will encourage critical spectatorship, and perhaps even inspire people to learn more about their favorite film by subjecting it to a critical reading.

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