Harold and Maude & *The Graduate*: The Taboo of Reversed Gender Role May-December Romantic Relationships in Film

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Abstract

There is a common cinematic theme that involves a young person becoming romantically involved with a person significantly older than they are; aptly called the “May-December romance,” one may conjure immediate images of a very young woman with an older male figure. *Harold and Maude* (1971) turns this stereotype on its head when the main characters of the film – Harold, an 18-year-old young man and Maude, a 79-year-old woman – fall in love with each other. While this may seem to be an especially unusual pairing, there begs the question of why it seems socially unacceptable or strange, and the further inquiry of why it is widely accepted that older men should pursue much younger women. *The Graduate* (1967), which also depicts an older woman in a May-December romance will be assessed alongside *Harold and Maude* for their portrayal of older female sexuality and how it relates to young males of their interest.

Maude sits with Harold in a field of daisies - Still image from the film Harold and Maude (1971)

Through the analysis of *Harold and Maude* as a feminist work that depicts an elderly woman in an empowering and inspiring role involving romance with a man much younger than herself, a comparison is drawn between the depiction of a young man in love with a woman seen as "too old for him" and the depiction of similar scenarios in a film released within an aligned time frame, *The Graduate*. While the latter film comparably involves a young man and an older woman, the way the female character, Mrs. Robinson, is treated and displayed as an archetype of seduction and forbidden desire is quite different. She is seen through the sexual desires and fears of her naïve, much younger male counterpart, Benjamin – and is expected from her portrayal in the film to seduce or mislead him by her mere existence as woman of a generation older than the young man she is entangled with.

While Maude spends the film celebrating life, remaining comfortable in her own skin and genuinely enjoying and reciprocating the company of Harold, Mrs. Robinson as the other older female character in the additional May-December romance is seen as desperate or morally corrupt for the suggestion that she might want romantic involvement with a younger male. Whether the older females in question featured within May-December romances in films of the 1960s, 1970s and beyond are depicted as colloquial "cougars" who prowl in the shadows of what is socially acceptable and prey on younger versions of the opposite sex, or are simply painted as irresistibly different and a breakage from the typical stereotype of heterosexual coupling, the typical film seeks to make the romantic relationship between the younger male and older female a difficult and definitively unorthodox one.

Literature on Feminist Film Analysis, Popular Portrayal of Aging Women, and Age Difference in Romantic Couples in Film

Harold and Maude (1971) & *The Graduate* (1967): The Taboo of Reversed Gender Role May-December Romantic Relationships in Film will examine and analyze the ways in which Maude as a fictional portrayal of an older female in a May-December romance story in cinema differs from that of almost any other portrayal by the same category. While underlining the reasons she is a positive and undeniably feminist character, Maude serves as the comparative feature to place against many other stereotypical portrayals an older female in film finding herself in cross-generational romantic scenarios.

To compare the treatment of the archetypal May-December romance examples in *Harold and Maude* and *The Graduate* is to consider how both Maude and Mrs. Robinson were portrayed and what roles their figural characters played in the illustration of a young man becoming romantically involved with an older woman. Through a feminist film analysis of both works, common and contrasting themes are revealed that convey the taboo concept of a pairing between a youthful male and mature female; an illustrated romantic trope generally considered typical if the gender roles were reversed.

Feminist texts have questioned the portrayal of women and their place in romantic scenes in films beyond the archetypal trope in which a young woman in her prime meets and falls in love with a mature older man, and have also considered the ways in which the depiction of elderly women are handled in film altogether. In *The Aging Woman in Popular Film: Underrepresented, Unattractive, Unfriendly, and Unintelligent* by Doris G. Bazzini et al. (1997), an investigation takes place in which the elderly woman in film is compared to the elderly man.

While the elderly man character is often seen as wise, moral, grandfatherly (concerned with his family and/or family values) and charismatic, women on the other hand who have aged and their depictions have often been the opposite of the aforementioned qualities.

The Politics of Aging in the May-December Romance Plot written by Timothy Shary (2014) seeks to discuss the taboo of and reasons behind the cinematic story dynamics resulting from people romantically pairing with others much older than themselves. Shary navigates the stereotypes of both the geriatric adult and young adult (males and females alike) in romantic settings and what the typical audience-goer expects from each demographic in film.

Existing texts such as these serve to examine popular culture through film and the portrayal of the elderly (especially the older female). *Harold and Maude* is a film yet to be examined through this lens and studying it through a feminist narrative attempts to paint a picture of the elderly female romantic scenario archetype in a non-normative way.

Sherri Cash describes in her essay *"It's Too Late… Not For Me" The Graduate (1967) and the History of Women* (2019) how many women in upper-middle-class suburbia experienced a specific type of unhappiness during the post-World War II era, causing them to seek excitement and refuge in various distracting activities to keep themselves occupied. While it is implied that Mrs. Robinson's classic unhappy housewife character experiencing depression and alcoholism in *The Graduate* had in fact pursued extramarital affairs prior to meeting Benjamin, this romantic exchange is chosen as the main device used to solidify Benjamin's deeper desires for Mrs. Robinson's daughter, Elaine.

Mrs. Robinson is used as a lesson for Ben to learn; he coats his aimlessness and post-graduation timeframe with a temporary fix of his romantic involvement with Mrs. Robinson although he is fixated on an option that is traditionally seen as more age-appropriate for him.

Cash also mentions that Mrs. Robinson is in stark contrast to any woman that would be in approximate age to Benjamin due to her demeanor alone: she carries herself in a "regal and commanding, never juvenile" way that implies the older and higher up on the generational scale a woman is, the more she is supposed to lose her desire for childlike fun or adventure. Her affair with Ben is not something she takes lightly, but it is not because she enjoys or feels deeply for Ben. It is because she is fully aware of her using him for her own distraction or temporary gain.

In the essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) written by Laura Mulvey, the relationship between a male and female on the cinematic screen is described as and structured by both the passive and active roles, meaning there is a passive female object of desire and the male is intended to gaze upon her with attraction. *The Graduate* is perhaps best summed up visually by the famous image of Mrs. Robinson's stocking-covered leg (a fetishized fragment of her body and entire overarching character in the film) outstretched and crossing over a scaled-down figure of Benjamin in the background. Mrs. Robinson's sexuality and command of Benjamin's passivity towards his own goals in life serve to protect the realism of the portrayal of a young man and an older woman becoming sexually involved. It would be less believable for both characters to be equals; there must exist a power play role in which one young person is seduced by an older figure.

Harold and Maude alongside *The Graduate* has been considered before, not only because of their May-December romance themes of traditionally opposing genders, but because they were released within a few years of each other. Themes of escapism and rebellion reside in each plot, a reflection of the era in which they were filmed that would later become culturally significant in history for a time that would shift from the "nuclear family" image of the 1950s

and mid 1960s to one that was sexually liberated and gave women more choices in their destinies.

In the article titled *The Older the Better? Crises of Masculinity in "The Graduate" and "Harold and Maude,"* (2013) Oliver Krause argues,

> "both reflect the alienated youth generation of their era through their respective male protagonists. In particular, both characters' identity crises derive from a not-yet-accomplished masculinity and are coped with through a taboo-breaking love affair. In the following comparison, the use of the cinematic techniques of mise-en-scene, cinematography, and music in both films will be shown to represent this crisis of manhood and its final accomplishment by the principal male protagonist."

To put the focus on each male character from these two films is an easy way to compartmentalize the main stories, but if one were to focus on the female roles each film has to offer, there are far more complexities to the taboo nature of the May-December romance than a young male experiencing a crisis about his transition into manhood. While the idea that water as a visual motif in *The Graduate* (the fish tank) and *Harold and Maude* (his faked suicide by drowning in a pool at his home) is a rich method of depicting the "state between childhood and adulthood as an on-going fluid transition rather than a clear-cut change," there is a truth in this observation that is universal to all adolescents regardless of gender, and even still to those past the first stages of adulthood trying to find what they want based on their own desires combined with societal expectations.

Mrs. Robinson's iconic stockinged leg in the foreground - Still image from the film The Graduate (1967)

Krause goes on to discuss Maude's role in sexually awakening Harold as compared to Mrs. Robinson's "luring" and "teasing" of Benjamin – Maude's sexual interactions with Harold are more implicit, metaphorical and illustrated in a subtle manner as compared to the scenes in *The Graduate*. It would be arguably controversial if not downright unpopular to show a more explicitly visual scene between Harold and Maude's characters, especially in the 1970s. Maude is unlike Mrs. Robinson in that she is an entire two generations above Harold, which may on the hierarchal scale of taboos of age difference in couples, particularly between younger males and older females, be considered too "grandmotherly" – while some middle-aged women in film are seldom seen as having romantic desires outside their husbands, they are still of an acceptable age to have romantic interests. The idea of an elderly figure having her own ideas of what she wants

sexually would be too much for an average audience-goer to bear. Thus, the relationship between Harold and Maude is a bit danced around, especially their physical interactions on screen.

In Julia Hallam's *Inappropriate Desires? Sex and the (Ageing) Single Girl* (2016), female characters who are elderly are discussed as being condemned in many films' plots for having romantic desires. There is still an image in Western society that a "single" female is a young woman, and that once a woman reaches middle age she is expected to either be married and content (or at least settled with) her husband, or divorced and focused on her children's needs (if not, many stories have been created from the apparent comedic nature of a middle-aged woman trying to dip her toe into the dating pool again). Once a woman departs from her 40s, 50, and 60s, she is officially a "grandmotherly" figure as Maude at age 79 is in *Harold and Maude*. This is why she is seen as so radically different from any other depiction of elderly females in cinema of the time of the film's release. Maude is not only expressive in her desires of life and love, but she is not guilty or conflicted about what she wants.

Timothy Shary explains in the aforementioned essay that the appeal of the May-December romance plot in film is that it is dramatic and "thrives on conflict" because of questions of longevity and success of such types of relationships, the idea that one member of a couple will die much sooner than the other, and that generational differences may clash – the image of a young person pairing off with someone decades older than themselves appeals to both a younger and older audience. This is perhaps why it is such a commonly used plot device but does not explain why there is a distinct lack of older women paired with young men outside of the stereotypical "seductress" role where the young man is seemingly trapped into a romantic affair by the hands of a desperate older woman. There is an acceptable norm stemming from the post-war era (although throughout history around the world as well) that if a young woman

found herself pursued by an older man, she was lucky in the sense that he might provide security and financial support for her. In exchange, she is asked for her youthful appearance, sexual appeal and fidelity toward her older male counterpart. This type of pairing is not questioned unless there is a dramatic difference in age, but even when this is the case, it is not nearly as dramatically taboo as when an elderly woman takes interest in a young man or vice versa.

Analysis

Using the methodology of textual analysis to discover the meanings behind and relationships between *Harold and Maude* alongside *The Graduate,* a discussion is formed surrounding the presence of figural archetypes, historical background of the films and the period in America they took place in. The cultural significance of the cinematic themes provided in each production is considered through feminist film criticism.

There is a sense of domestic melodrama in both films: Harold is stifled by his mother's attempts to set him up with a debutant and both Mrs. Robinson and Elaine's characters are equally smothered by the prospects of being in loveless marriages. Mrs. Robinson represents a woman who has had her freedoms stripped from her due to domestic expectations. She loses her identity in her husband's surname. She is the product of a marriage that has not failed by anyone's standards except by her own measure of internal happiness. Maude's character never has a last name, reflecting her liberation and perhaps rejection of traditional expectations the world has placed upon women of "grandmothering" age.

Maude seems to have a genuine connection with Harold, and she enlightens his life and gives him a new viewpoint of hope and optimism through her scope of beauty she uses to look at

the world around her. Mrs. Robinson by comparison gives Benjamin a chance of momentary escape from impending responsibility – in direct opposition of growth and enlightenment. The wisdom and charm of Maude's character comes from her calm demeanor in the face of risk, breaking the law & facing consequences. It only makes sense that she might not care what anyone around her has to say about becoming involved with a young man such as Harold. Mrs. Robinson's emotional outbursts and distress when faced with the moral dilemma of becoming intimate with Ben and how this is affecting her family – particularly the scene in which Ben reveals their affair to Mrs. Robinson's daughter Elaine – shows that she is unhinged in her expressions of anger and desire for control of Benjamin.

Maude and Mrs. Robinson are equally iconic for the time periods they were filmed in; their contrast lies in the sense of empowerment women were beginning to have in the late 1960s and early 1970s. While Maude has lived a full life and welcomes the addition of Harold as a love interest, Mrs. Robinson sees an opportunity in Benjamin to rebel against the fate that has been set for her as a midcentury housewife, married to a successful man whom she is possibly content with but does not love.

Mrs. Robinson is portrayed in such a way because she is a representation of a larger group of women experiencing a similar dilemma at that particular time in the United States. Instead of being a character in her own right, she is a symbol of women who were always placed in the context of the men that surrounded them. It is up for debate whether Mrs. Robinson would even have a significant role in *The Graduate* had she not become in involved with Ben, despite her being the mother of Ben's ultimately true love interest, Elaine. She exists to underline the desperation of a woman who was, like the time frame of feminism in the late 1960s, transitioning

from believing her proverbial place was to be a wife at home to exploring her options with freedom of choice in life and exploring her own sexuality.

The underlying tone of Maude's character is a celebration of life, seemingly regardless of the struggles she may have faced throughout her own existence (it is revealed towards the end of the film that Maude has a tattoo of an identification number from Auschwitz, the German concentration camp, presumably illustrating her survival of the Holocaust). It is clear that Maude has lived through a lot, and that even at the age of 79, nothing will stop her from disobeying traditional social conventions such as theft, vandalism, attending the funerals of strangers, partaking in sex, drugs and alcohol which is seen as unusual for a woman of her age, and most notably becoming involved with a young man almost 60 years her junior. Harold does not serve as a reason for Maude's character to exist, despite the fact that *Harold and Maude* begins by focusing on him as the primary character. Maude's first appearance in the plot transfers the film onto a new track, giving it excitement and even adventure – signs that point to the fact that Maude could have had her own feature film regardless of Harold's participation.

Although Maude becomes a muse of sorts for Harold, their relationship is neither possessive nor inequal; they both offer strengths and novelty to each other and it is obvious that their love is genuine. Maude's decision to prematurely end her life on her own terms is another signal that she has exercised autonomy despite her age, gender, and the time period she lives in. This portrayal of a woman who does what she wishes regardless of taboos and the stigmas that may be stacked against her provides a rich character that is more believable as a real person than the comparable Mrs. Robinson. *Harold and Maude*, as compared to *The Graduate*, provides a progressive romance story about being yourself despite what others may think.

The contrasting soundtracks of both films stand alone as tone-setting for each story: Cat Stevens sings various songs touching on themes of letting your feelings out, being yourself, having joy in your heart about your life and being peaceful about your impending death. Stevens' melodies dance and float in a playful way and match the discoveries Harold experiences in his exposure to Maude. The lyrics also reflect a budding new take on how Harold envisions his future. On the other hand, Simon & Garfunkel sing dark, ominous refrains on darkness, uncertainty, and in what is perhaps the most famed song associated with *The Graduate*, "Mrs. Robinson," its lyrics mention the concepts of hiding your deepest secrets and being under surveillance by people around you, whether you consent to it or not. There is a stark nihilism to *The Graduate's* soundtrack, and it could not be any more different than the music setting the aural scene in *Harold and Maude,* which springs an eternal hope for the listener and seems to paint a picture of Harold's blossoming enjoyment of life after adolescence. Similarities between the two famed soundtracks lie only in the time period of the music, reflected in the folk-rock styles of each musician.

Both Harold and Benjamin are facing a time in their lives where they are expected to quickly grow up and become evolved, but undoubtedly different, versions of themselves from who they were prior to hitting post-adolescence. Benjamin is forced to face the idea of a career and is as equally influenced (or at least, he is seen as and targeted as someone who is easily influenced) by the adults surrounding him. The iconic "plastics" line takes place during a scene where Ben is supposed to be celebrating his accomplishment of earning a degree; instead he is told, much like plastic itself, to mold to the framework of society and take the safe, reliable route to adulthood. Harold is equally as exposed to the adults around him trying to determine his fate, especially in the scene where he speaks with his ex-military uncle who encourages him to be

willing to sacrifice his safety to enlist because of the excitement of it all. Regardless of what either young male character has been given as a prospective opportunity, both choose something else – in the form of romantic involvement with women much older than themselves. The difference between this concept in the two films is that Harold finds his time with Maude liberating, while Benjamin finds his time with Mrs. Robinson as yet another option he is rejecting, to be replaced with something he desires more deeply.

Harold lives in a fortress of higher class where he laments the fact that he was born into a social sect he does not relate to. To combat this feeling, he not only fakes his death in front of his mother (who at the point we visit in the movie has apparently already seen enough of his antics and is no longer shocked by them whatsoever) but he purchases a used hearse and parks it in front of the mansion he lives in. He is willing to conform but only to an extent: he will attend dinners hosted by his mother but with rude table manners, he will own his own vehicle but only if it is of a dark, unorthodox nature, and he will meet with various debutants but only to scare them off with yet another staged suicide attempt.

When Harold visits Maude's home for the second time, of his own accord, Maude is posing nude for an artist friend of hers. Harold is taken aback but not out of disgust; the wind blows in his face and sways the scarf wrapped around his neck as if to signify that he is literally blown away by Maude's liberal attitude towards sexuality. She later in the scene invites Harold to intimately touch the contours of a clearly feminine/vaginal wooden sculpture: "really get close, and reach in, and feel – caress" and Harold does exact this while sneaking peeks at Maude in the other room preparing tea from a whistling kettle. He attempts to stick his head through the narrow hole in the center of the sculpture, perhaps a Freudian nod to the male desire of returning to the womb.

Harold investigates Maude's wooden sculpture - Still image from the film Harold and Maude (1971)

Does Harold see Maude as a motherly figure? Decidedly not, as that role is already filled by his biological mother, who has continually pressured Harold to suppress and grow beyond what he enjoys and is comfortable with expressing about his personality. Harold is not in search of another mother figure, he is in search of a reason to love – himself, someone else, and life in general. Maude proves to be an escape from but simultaneously a refreshment of the idea that he needs to grow up and begin to live out life in adulthood. Maude shows him that being an adult – even a geriatric one – is not dull or sad but is whatever you make of it.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Research

While both *Harold and Maude* and *The Graduate* show the struggles a young man must face when transitioning from adolescence into becoming a full-blown adult, the difference in the May-December romances depicted with Maude and Mrs. Robinson offer varied outlooks on what it means for a young man to become involved with a much older woman. While *The Graduate* fails to depict the relationship between Benjamin and Mrs. Robinson as productive, happy, or even mutual, *Harold and Maude* shows that regardless of the characters' ages and genders, they can experience true love. Benjamin's ending in *The Graduate* shows his straying away from his older counterpart and choosing someone seen as more age-appropriate in society's eyes. Ultimately, the fairest written film of the two proves to be *Harold and Maude* because of its realistic illustration of what a friendship blossoming into love can look like, even between a 79-year-old woman and a 20-year-old young man.

While the story of *Harold and Maude* still raises eyebrows to this day (the concept of an elderly woman and young man in love is still very much taboo – just as a character in the film confronting Harold on his physical relationship with Maude describes their flesh "comingling" as vomit-inducing), the film continues to hold up as a feminist piece in which a strong female lead is taking command of each scene she is in, representing femininity and female empowerment at a time when women's rights were taking form and still much further from what they would become today.

In the future, if scholars should choose to revisit the themes of reversed gender May-December romantic relationships in film, one should note that these themes are still a taboo subject that the greater culture and society has not fully embraced. The reactions to an older

woman and young man becoming sexually or romantically involved still produce reactions varying from amusement to disgust yet are a far cry from acceptance or normativity. In the midst of the most current wave of feminism, one should wonder why the value of a woman is still very much placed on her appearance and age. There are myriad contemporary examples of men who either choose female partners decades their junior or, conversely, men who are praised for their decision to date someone within a decidedly reasonable age gap as compared to themselves. These phenomena are proof of a sexist cultural sphere that has attempted to make strides but continually falls short in the department of gender and age.

An upcoming investigation of this subject might consider contemporary films in the Me Too movement era. There may be little surprise that regardless of countercultural reactions to the gender/age status quo, mainstream film studios remain consistent in their depictions of older women in romantic situations in a very particular way (as lonely, desperate, depraved, or "cougars"). Sexual desirability is assigned strictly for young women, while the male gender seems to have their pick of whom they desire, regardless of age. Modern feminist theory and film analysis persist as an informative and fascinating look at why film depicts romantic May-December relationships in such a manner, serving to underline the fact that progress still needs to be made in this society and culture.

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