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An Analysis of Forty Years of Gender Archetypes on the American Silver Screen

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Recommended Citation

Valencia, Xaviera I., "An Analysis of Forty Years of Gender Archetypes on the American Silver Screen" (2021). *Senior Honors Projects*. Paper 920.

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XAVIERA VALENCIA (Political Science)

An Analysis of Four Decades of Gender Archetypes on the American Silver Screen

Sponsor: Sara Murphy (Honors Program)

Hollywood has come under fire recently from producer Harvey Weinstein's role in sparking the #MeToo movement to the predominantly white, male composition of the Academy Awards' voting members. Yet the film industry also provides a platform to actors, directors, and other crew members -- through acceptance speeches and movies themselves -- to spread awareness about pressing societal issues, including climate change, sexual assault, racism, and homophobia.

Art, especially film, has a tremendous effect on society and can either perpetuate stereotypes or dispel myths. For instance, *Philadelphia* (1993) brought into the mainstream the story of a man who was HIV+ and his wrongful termination lawsuit due to his HIV status. This film had an affirming impact on the LGBTQ+ community and helped those struggling with stigma from their status by inducing empathy from the public.

My project is a close analysis of Academy Award-winning films, culminating in a multi-part meta-analysis and cultural criticism thesis on the portrayal of women in canonical and award-winning films over four decades. I demonstrate that these films' stature and content reflect not only the awarders' values but also the movie-goers. The Academy chooses nominees and winners that reflect the institution's male, white-dominated disposition while at the same time occasionally awarding films that subvert what one would expect to be the Academy's best interests. The Academy does not represent those who have been marginalized and do not necessarily have the power and ability to tell their stories or obtain the resources necessary to produce films on a large enough scale that they enter the purview of the Academy. Given these factors, the Academy's choices reflect dominant culture's views and opinions of women while occasionally promoting stories that center on people who have been oppressed and ostracized by society. These are the complex gender and social attitudes that this thesis uncovers. Grounded in theory straddling the fields of gender studies, film studies, and sexuality studies, I contextualize my analysis with data that reflects the real-world status of women. Ultimately, this paper explores and uncovers the subconscious stereotypes and ideas that audience members consume simply by watching a movie.