

Predator, Prisoner, and Role Model: The Evolving Figure of Mrs. Robinson

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Introduction

Views on sexual relationships between older women and younger men in American society have changed significantly since the 1960's. This shift is the result of cultural, political, scientific, and legal innovations in the intermittent years. In this paper, I will present a genealogy of the character of Mrs. Robinson, tracing its evolution over time. To achieve this, I will first discuss the context in which *The Graduate*'s Mrs. Robinson is presented and why this is essential for understanding her motivations. I will then examine some important ways in which society has changed and their effects on depictions of modern individuals. I will draw upon real and fictional figures from pop culture and landmark legal battles to illustrate these points. Next, I will explore the tension between society's seemingly growing social acceptance of sex between older women and younger men and simultaneous loss of legal tolerance. Lastly, I will synthesize my findings and discuss the implications.

Since the release of the 1967 film classic, *The Graduate*, the name 'Mrs. Robinson' has become synonymous with older women seducing younger men. However, the historical context produces her character as much as her actions, and the way society portrays women like Mrs. Robinson changes over time. Films and television shows simultaneously shape cultural norms while reflecting existing ones. Thus, depictions of real and fictional Mrs. Robinsons jointly figure her within a particular time period.

Predator

Set in the late 1960's, The Graduate figures Mrs. Robinson as a dangerous predator. The film's main character, Benjamin Braddock, a recent college graduate unsure of his future, has an affair with Mrs. Robinson, the attractive but significantly older wife of his father's business partner. Like a predator, Mrs. Robinson is cool and calculating, seeking sex for power instead of love. Director Mike Nichols and the production designer strived to create a "jungle effect" by dressing Mrs. Robinson in animal prints and furs, thereby comparing her to jungle hunters like tigers and leopards.¹ Nichols also ensured that Mrs. Robinson never shares a scene alone with her daughter, Elaine, throughout the entire film although both women are key characters.² This deliberate choice by the filmmaker strips Mrs. Robinson of a motherly persona and adds to the predatory identity he gives her.

The film places significant emphasis on Mrs. Robinson's past as the motivation her for actions. As a young woman, an unplanned pregnancy forced her to give up her dreams, drop-out of college, and marry Mr. Robinson. Years later, her loveless marriage and empty nest bore and embitter Mrs. Robinson despite her luxurious life-style.³ The film's screenwriter, Buck Henry, says of the character, "She is a very intelligent and cynical woman. She knows what's happening to her".⁴ Finding Benjamin alone upstairs at a dinner party, Mrs. Robinson asks him to drive her home and escort her inside. When Benjamin attempts to leave, Mrs. Robinson insists with increasing force that he stay. Not

¹ G Sam Kashner. "Here's to You, Mr. Nichols." *Vanity Fair* 571 (2008): 418-432. Film & Television Literature Index with Full Text. EBSCO. Web. 25 Nov. 2009.

² Ibid.

³ *The Graduate*. Dir. Mike Nichols. Perf. Dustin Hoffman and Anne Bancroft. Studio Canal, 1967. DVD. 0:42:32.

⁴ Kashner. 'Here's to You, Mr. Nichols.'

only does Mrs. Robinson seduce Benjamin, but she goes out of her way to do so in her daughter's room, knowing that Elaine has a crush on him.⁵ This action reveals her as vengeful towards her daughter, whom Mrs. Robinson resents as the cause of her marriage, and of whom she is jealous for attending college—an opportunity she was denied in her own life. The affair is of course, also a blow to her husband, whom she holds equally responsible for her unhappiness. Mrs. Robinson resents that her husband possesses the freedom and power she craves solely by virtue of his gender.

In the film, the affair is the only area of her life over which Mrs. Robinson exercises any power. Like most women of her generation, she is financially dependent on her husband and needs male assistance for even day-to-day tasks. She cannot drive, relying always on male drivers or taxis, and she must ask Benjamin to undo her dress because the feminine fashions of the day prevent her from doing so herself.⁶ The film does not afford even Mrs. Robinson a first name, highlighting that she lacks an identity independent from her husband. Friends, acquaintances, and her lover all refer to her exclusively by her husband's last name. However, as the older, more experienced sexual partner, she gains a kind of control through her relationship with Benjamin that she lacks in every other aspect of her life. Through the affair, Mrs. Robinson challenges the social order that confines her.

The particular social order that produces *The Graduate's* Mrs. Robinson is specific to the 1960's. In a 2002 Broadway adaptation of *The Graduate*, actress Kathleen Turner played Mrs. Robinson. When interviewed about the role, she said, "One of the things we find in this production is that we now have to almost set it in a historical perspective".⁷ Turner labels her character "a bad mother and a bad wife. She's selfish and socially irresponsible and an alcoholic".⁸ Turner cites bitterness as the motivation for the character and explicitly links that bitterness with the time period, describing Mrs. Robinson as a woman who "got pregnant in college, and after the war, went straight into suburbia. This woman has been trapped her whole life. She's angry—and she should be angry. The whole world's on the verge of social change, and she's gonna miss that again".⁹ While stifling social constraints may not excuse Mrs. Robinson's behavior in Turner's eyes, they can explain it. Through the affair, "she feels she controls [Benjamin], and that's a pretty powerful feeling, especially for a woman in those days".¹⁰ However, by 2002, "those days" of the 1960s are gone, and with them the context for Mrs. Robinson's character. The role of Mrs. Robinson is necessarily figured differently in a new millennium setting than one from the 1960's or earlier in order to remain credible for modern audiences.

Placing her figure in the proper historical context is so crucial because technological, social, and legal, changes have eliminated over time many of the conditions that produce the bored, bitter women cited by her character. The sexual revolution of the sixties and the advent of the birth control pill enable women to avoid

⁵ *The Graduate*. 0:15:29.

⁶ *Ibid.* 0:13:19.

⁷ Maureen Dezell. "'Would You Like Me to Seduce You?' Kathleen Turner Seizes the Role of Mrs. Robinson in a Stage Adaptation of 'The Graduate'" *The Boston Globe* 24 Feb. 2002, Third ed., Arts sec.: C4. *LexisNexis*. Web. 22 Nov. 2009.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

unplanned pregnancies and have sex without necessarily committing to marriage. The 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* decision upheld women's right to an abortion until a fetus becomes viable. As women increasingly entered the workforce, "wearing the pants" both literally and figuratively, they became financially independent and able to lead lives without relying on a husband to care for them.

Since it no longer monopolizes women's financial stability and sexual satisfaction in American society, wifhood becomes a desirable, but nonessential state. Marriage becomes the exclusive domain of lovers, defined as broad emotional and sexual exclusivity instead of only reproductive exclusivity. Historically, laws against adultery specifically protected a husband from the financial burden of raising another man's child. The act required heterosexual intercourse, and some laws required the woman to be married.¹¹ In such cases, a husband could have sex with various unmarried women without technically committing adultery or giving his wife legal grounds for divorce, but the definition of adultery has evolved alongside that of marriage. The modern definition applies equally to men and women and pertains to emotional rather than financial betrayal. In the past 20 years, courts began to recognize cases of infidelity without intercourse, and in some cases, without physical contact of any kind; phone sex and Internet pornography are notable examples.¹² Defining adultery in this way figures the absence of love as grounds to end a marriage. Along with parallel laws in other states, California's Family Law Act of 1969 legalized no-fault divorce in the state effective January 1, 1970. These new conventions granted the next generation of American women more choices than Mrs. Robinson. Subsequently, without the same those of them who chose to have sex with younger men must have done so for reasons other than the bitter, trapped Mrs. Robinson.

Role Model

In stark contrast to society's reception of Mrs. Robinson, today real and fictional women who have sex with younger men can be seen as role models. Without the rigid social confinement that drives her to lash out against her family, romantic love, not power, motivates modern figurations of Mrs. Robinson. Demi Moore, married Ashton Kutcher in 2005 despite a 16-year age gap, but beyond having a significantly younger lover, she has little in common with the Mrs. Robinson of the 1960's. She is wealthy and well-known in her own right, perhaps even more so than her husband. Far from trapped in an unhappy marriage, Moore has been married three separate times. Lastly, instead of having a shameful, secret, adulterous relationship with a younger man, Moore's relationship with Kutcher was highly publicized from the start. Although the couple certainly raised some eyebrows, inspiring jokes and skepticism about the relationship's longevity, society overall accepts them. The couple often appear on the cover of magazines, and Moore is often praised as a symbol of empowerment and sexual liberation for women in their 30's and 40's.

Another modern figuration of Mrs. Robinson in film, Stifler's Mom, was performed by Jennifer Coolidge in the 1999 film *American Pie*. Stifler's Mom is a divorcée who pursues a sexual relationship with a man young enough to be her son. In

¹¹ Brenda Cossman. "The New Politics of Adultery." *Columbia Journal of Gender and the Law* 15.1 (2006): 274. GenderWatch (GW), ProQuest. Web. 25 Nov. 2009.

¹² Ibid.

fact, her lover, Finch, is her 18 year-old son's high school classmate. When she meets Finch in her basement during her son's after-prom party, the song "Mrs. Robinson" by Simon and Garfunkle plays in the background, alluding to the obvious parallels between Mrs. Robinson and Mrs. Stifler.¹³ Both are figured as cool and mysterious, but Stifler's Mom is considerably more benign than the predatory Mrs. Robinson portrayed by Anne Bancroft. Stifler's Mom famously tells Finch that her Scotch is "aged 18 years—just the way [she] likes it".¹⁴ This line figures her character as seeing sexual pleasure as the end in and of itself; she has sex with Finch because she is attracted to younger men, not out of spite.

Unlike the steely, cold Mrs. Robinson, whose motherhood is downplayed, Stifler's Mom is always explicitly referred to as a 'mom,' highlighting her emotional side. In *The Graduate*, Benjamin explains to Mr. Robinson that the affair was completely lacking passion, that he and Mrs. Robinson "might as well as have been shaking hands" when they had sex, but Mrs. Stifler is hyper-passionate.¹⁵ Her sexual encounter with Finch in the basement is lusty and spontaneous in opposition to Mrs. Robinson's calculated, systemic, seduction of Benjamin and subsequent cold, impersonal lovemaking. Film critics have noticed a striking up-tick in both the display of relationships between older women and younger men in movies, as well as their "unapologetic lustiness" in contrast to the cold, bored Mrs. Robinson of *The Graduate*.¹⁶ Geoff Pevere of the *Toronto Star* calls the development "a bold forward evolutionary step in relations between the sexes," and points towards benefits both men and women could reap from such arrangements if the film trend reflects real life.¹⁷

In another clear reference to *The Graduate*, Stifler's Mom asks, "Mr. Finch, are you trying to seduce me?".¹⁸ This time, the older woman is the seduced, not the seducer. She is figured as a desirable lover accepting an advance, not a predator forcing herself upon an unwilling victim. The idea that a middle-aged woman could be a desirable sexual partner challenges the age-old convention that only young women are sexy. This convention arises from societal beliefs that reproduction is the proper aim of sex, and that therefore, a woman's sex appeal should be based on her ability to bear children. Over time, American society's measure of a successful romantic relationship has shifted from a marriage that produces offspring, to a relationship, formal marriage or otherwise, in which both partners are emotionally satisfied. As a result of these changes, the old conventions are losing influence, and older women are no longer strictly excluded from the realm of sexiness.

Scientific studies facilitate this positive portrayal of Mrs. Robinson figures by increasingly normalizing the idea that women can keep their sex-lives as they age. Portrayals of female midlife sexuality in popular culture encourage further them to do it. The Association of Reproductive Health Professionals released a study showing that menopause tends to reduce women's interest in sex but does not significantly inhibit their ability to enjoy it. Since arousal in women is more emotional and psychological than

¹³ *American Pie*. Dir. Paul Weitz. Universal Pictures, 1999. DVD. 1:25:37.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 1:21:32.

¹⁵ *The Graduate*. 1:28:15.

¹⁶ Geoff Pevere. "Welcome Back, Mrs. Robinson." *Toronto Star* 26 July 2002, Friday Ontario Edition ed., Entertainment sec.: D03. *LexisNexis*. Web. 9 Dec. 2009.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *American Pie*. 1:25:48.

physical, women can stay sexually active as long as their partners remain healthy, and interested.¹⁹ Magazine articles praise Demi Moore and other female celebrities dating younger men while TV shows like 'The Cougar,' 'Flirting with Forty,' 'Cougar Town,' and 'Sex and the City' regularly portray middle-aged women, not only as actively dating, but dating younger men.

Writer Rose Weitz surveyed depictions of female midlife sexuality in thirteen films from 2002-2008. She concludes that while "only a tiny fraction of narrative films" currently cover the topic, and the treatment is usually comedic and non-graphic, "to have any positive portrayals of midlife women's sexuality at all seems like a considerable step forward".²⁰ Furthermore, "as a group these films validate midlife women's sexuality primarily for slim, white, middle-class women in committed romantic relationships with partners of similar ages," but the "cougar phenomenon" in television and other sources of popular culture suggests growing acceptance of women dating younger men.²¹ This is the case at least when the women are beautiful—"audiences may not necessarily interpret these shows as validating the sexuality of older, average looking, midlife women".²² This may also explain society's acceptance of Hollywood romances like Moore and Kutcher's and the sexuality of television characters played by beautiful actresses—the likes of Demi Moore, Jennifer Aniston, Halle Berry, Madonna, Courtney Cox, Heather Locklear, and Kim Cattral don't exactly represent the average middle-aged woman. "The Cougar" is a reality show, but its star, like any of the actresses mentioned above, could pass for much younger than her actual age.

In light of changing cultural attitudes towards sexuality for women over 40, it's not altogether surprising that Stifler's Mom is a fan-favorite in the *American Pie* films—so much so that the writers brought her back for both sequels. However, the film is a comedy, and she is ultimately a figure of ridicule. The writers include Mrs. Stifler having sex with Finch in order to scandalize her and outrage the audience. Shame is still the outcome, but it is different from that experienced by Benjamin and Mrs. Robinson. When Mrs. Stifler's son discovers the lovers in the morning, he is the one who feels shame.²³ His friends make fun of him and regard the incident as his embarrassment, not his mother's. For Finch, the incident is actually a source of pride. Stifler's Mom loses the aura of authority she would otherwise be entitled to as an adult character, but she doesn't say anything to defend herself when her son finds out, implying a complete lack of shame. She also stays with Finch in the sequels. Unlike Mrs. Robinson and Benjamin, Stifler's Mom and Finch's relationship doesn't have any major consequences; they both end up happy. The film figures their relationship as ridiculous, but not dangerous.

It may be step up from 'dangerous,' but 'ridiculous' is hardly a compliment. Some make the case that by trying to so desperately to stay young and sexy, cougars and MILF's implicitly promote the idea that a woman's value is based on male acceptance and sex appeal. They argue that pursuing younger men for sex comes across as pathetic

¹⁹ "Variables Affecting Female Sexual Function: Women's Sexual Health in Midlife and Beyond." *ARHP - Association of Reproductive Health Professionals*. May 2005. Web. 23 Nov. 2009. <<http://www.arhp.org/Publications-and-Resources/Clinical-Proceedings/NYN/Variables>>.

²⁰ Rose Weitz. "Changing the Scripts: Midlife Women's Sexuality in Contemporary U.S. Film." *Sexuality & Culture* (2009). *Springerlink*. Web. 25 Nov. 2009.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *American Pie* 1:29:33.

and degrading rather than liberating and empowering. Cougarlife.com, a dating service pairing older women and younger men, defines ‘cougars’ on its homepage as “classy, confident women that already possess many of the finer things in life—but now want the hot, young guy to go with it.” This description does not specify whether or not the women are seeking serious relationships or merely sexual flings, but the site’s parallel description for ‘cubs’ emphasizing that they must be above all “sexually driven!” and overt use of the term “boy toy” suggest the latter.

Writer Nikki Silverstein differentiates between ‘cougars’, who seek only sex under her definition, and women who have serious relationships with younger men. She encourages the latter, but condemns the former, saying, “it’s setting back the women’s movement by 25 years,” and that far from “confident,” women seeking ‘boy toys’ instead of long-term partners need to “get a grip” and come to terms with the fact that they are aging.²⁴ To her, real liberation comes from accepting her age and still being sexy to men her own age.²⁵ Julia Baird of Sydney’s *Sun Herald* agrees. She believes that the media frenzy surrounding the ‘cougar’ phenomenon has largely portrayed women seeking younger men as desperate, pathetic, and shallow. Female sexuality is figured as “bestly” and animalistic instead of “classy” as the users of ‘cougar’ dating sites would like.²⁶ To Baird, sex with younger men by itself does nothing to liberate women—what is truly “subversive” is a relationship with a man who happens to be younger. A relationship forces society to recognize both that women, like men, can attract a mate with qualities other than beauty, and that men look for these other qualities.²⁷

May-December romances between older women and younger men also challenge cultural stereotypes about what women look for in a mate—namely the long-standing belief that women look for men with high social standing who can provide for them. Younger men are unlikely to have high social standing or financial stability to offer. They possess instead what females traditionally have brought to the table: youth and sex appeal. In this sense, the older woman takes on the male role of provider and leader, and the younger man plays the passive, female role of eye-candy. These relationships between older women and younger men are still relatively taboo, but the fact that they have grown more acceptable over time demonstrates a change in how society perceives them.

Prisoner:

Neither cold predators, nor bold role model to emulate, under other circumstances, figurations of Mrs. Robinson are depicted as troubled criminals. Relationships in which the man is older are so commonplace that no term like ‘cougar’ or ‘Mrs. Robinson’ is needed to distinguish men who date younger women, but when the sexual partner becomes especially young, society’s sympathies flip. When the victim of statutory rape is a young male, it’s assumed that the sex was consensual, but the opposite is true when the victim is a young female. Women who have sex with underage males are

²⁴ Nikki Silverstein. "To you, Mrs. Robinson." *Pacific Sun* 27 Jul 2007, Alt-Press Watch (APW), ProQuest. Web. 25 Nov. 2009.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Julia Baird. "Taming of the Shrews; Sexuality." *The Sun Herald* [Sydney, Australia] 2 Aug. 2009, First ed., Sunday Life sec.: 16. *LexisNexis*. Web. 22 Nov. 2009.

²⁷ Ibid.

usually portrayed in the media, as mentally ill or desperate for affection, but not evil or dangerous, whereas men are portrayed as abusive predators nearly without exception. Although not mentally ill per se, Mrs. Robinson and Stifler's Mom are figured as heavy drinkers. Alcohol implies that the women's mental states are altered, and therefore that something must be wrong with these women to explain why they act outside of accepted sexual behavior. In contrast, no outside influence is necessary in society's eyes to explain why a man would have sex with a young female.

This prisoner portrayal would be impossible without recent legal changes. The assumption that males are always the perpetrators of statutory rape is embedded in society's laws related to the crime. In colonial America, rape laws were designed to preserve female virginity until marriage. Sex with a young girl was regarded as a theft of her father and future husband's property, and in the nineteenth century, many states required that a girl be proven a virgin "of previous chaste character" in order to qualify as a victim.²⁸ Although some states reformed their statutory rape laws earlier, until 1993, California had no laws prohibiting sex between a woman and a minor; only a man could commit unlawful sexual intercourse. Gender-neutral statutory rape laws did not appear in the laws of all 50 states until 2000. In a number of states, underage male victims of statutory rape are still required by law to pay child-support if they impregnate their rapists. Society's conventional views of the male as the sexual aggressor and rightful provider for children override the relatively rare need to protect young males from sexual abuse at the hands of an older woman.²⁹ Until 1993, it was inconceivable to treat a woman who had sex with a younger male, even a child, as a criminal.

For instance, Faye Abramowitz, who was brought to trial in California in 1992 for having sex with eight teenage boys, was charged with lesser sexual crimes instead. The case directly challenged societal views of what perpetrators and victims of statutory rape look like. Her lawyer played on this confusion, figuring the boys as aggressive and showing the judge photos of the boys flashing gang signs in order to drum up sympathy for his client.³⁰ Although she pleaded no contest to the charges, Abramowitz later defended herself outside of court by appealing to societal norms; she claimed that the boys aged 13-16 had raped her, and she had kept quiet out of fear.³¹ The evidence, however, told a different story, and Abramowitz was sentenced to probation and enrolled in a psychiatric counseling program.

Foreshadowing future changes in societal attitudes, The Daily News of Los Angeles quoted Deputy District Attorney, Craig Richman, on the case, "To many people, even in our office, this is somewhat of a joke. This is a serious crime, but people in our society are not prepared to send people like Mrs. Abramowitz to jail; maybe someday".³² Unlike the rest of society, however, it seems the boys' parents were fully prepared to send her to jail. The mother of one victim complained that Abramowitz "got off scot-free," and several parents lobbied California lawmakers with Richman's support for the

²⁸ Carolyn E. Cocca. "Prosecuting Mrs. Robinson? Gender, Sexuality, and Statutory Rape Laws." *Michigan Feminist Studies* 1 January 2002 GenderWatch (GW), ProQuest. Web. 25 Nov. 2009.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Karen Nikos. "Woman Sentenced In Sexual Assault Case." *Daily News of Los Angeles* 21 July 1992, Valley ed., News sec.: N3. *Access World News*. Web. 24 Nov. 2009.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

gender-neutral legal reforms enacted the following year.³³

In another notorious example, Seattle sixth grade teacher, Mary Kay LeTourneau, had an extramarital affair with her 13 year-old student, Vili Fualaau in the late 1990s. The case challenged the cultural assumption that women are always the victims in rape cases, fascinating Americans nation-wide and prompting many comedians to joke about the victim being the luckiest boy ever, or wishing they, too, had been 'victimized' in school. Such comments would be unfathomable if the victim were female. Fualaau denied the label 'victim' in television interviews. He claims that he initiated the affair, which LeTourneau resisted at first, and he and his mother begged the judge to be lenient in sentencing.³⁴ Coming from a female victim, it's unlikely such claims would hold water. LeTourneau's lawyer argued that she was delusional and needed treatment in order to garner a light sentence.³⁵ Cultural stereotypes of female sexuality make this argument an attractive and comfortable explanation. LeTourneau received therapy but no prison time after her first arrest in February 1997 despite her repeated offenses. It's nearly impossible to imagine that a man would receive such a generous sentence under the same circumstances. Male perpetrators of the same crime in some states have received sentences as heavy as the death penalty, but the Supreme Court ruled against capital punishment in cases of child rape in June of 2008, ending the practice nation-wide.

In February 1998, LeTourneau was arrested a second time when police found her in a car with Fualaau, violating a court order not to see him. She had become pregnant with the couple's second child, and had several thousand dollars in cash, baby clothes, and a passport in her possession at the time, apparently planning to flee the country. The judge imposed an 89-month prison sentence only after the second arrest. The second time around, LeTourneau rejected arguments that she suffered from mental illness, explaining that she preferred prison to faking remorse and undergoing treatment during an appearance on "Oprah".³⁶ The mere fact that she was asked to appear on "Oprah" and that viewers were open to hearing LeTourneau's side of the story demonstrates society's biases—no male teacher accused of raping an elementary school student would ever be asked to appear or find such a receptive audience. Fualaau and LeTourneau married in 2005 after she completed her sentence. NBC's Matt Lauer interviewed the couple on the "Today" show in May of 2006, one year after their wedding, using the generous euphemism, "a love against all odds," to describe a relationship that legally constitutes child rape.

Conclusion:

Society's sympathetic view of female rapists contrasts sharply with its view of Mrs. Robinson. She is figured as a predator who "knows what's happening to her" instead of a mentally ill woman who cannot control herself and needs medical or therapeutic help—this is despite the fact that Benjamin is legally an adult. Mrs. Robinson did not technically break any laws even by modern standards, unlike Abramowitz and LeTourneau, whose lovers were even younger. Legally, treatment of women dating younger men has become harsher—it's now recognized in all fifty states that a woman is

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Cocca. "Prosecuting Mrs. Robinson?"

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

guilty of statutory rape if the male is underage. The consequences may be lighter on average than those suffered by men, but there are consequences nonetheless.

To some extent the legal changes demonstrate less acceptance for women dating young by criminalizing it in certain cases, but it demonstrates increased acceptance overall. By outlawing only those relationships in which the male is underage, the law implies that other relationships between older women and younger men are acceptable—there is now a clear distinction between a woman like Demi Moore and one like Mary Kay LeTourneau where the line used to be more blurred. Plus, any official reference inherently recognizes sexual relationships between older women and younger men as a real possibility, not simply a freak occurrence society can simply dismiss or the sole domain of fictional characters like Mrs. Robinson and Stifler's Mom.

Women who date younger men have gained social acceptance both in fictional accounts and real life. In some sense, depictions of older women with younger lovers in film and television are symptomatic of growing recognition of that kind of relationship within American Society. In order to create characters that an audience will relate to, filmmakers and television producers have to cite real people, thus some real women must have sexual relationships with younger men in order for Mrs. Robinson or Stifler's Mom to be compelling. The Mrs. Robinson of the 1960's is not believable when placed in modern America, thus in order to stay current and reflect modern conditions, society changes the way it figures such women over time. That Stifler's Mom and Mary Kay LeTourneau are viewed as lusty and uncontrolled, rather than predatory and devious reflects this evolution.

In addition to reflecting current cultural norms, what Americans see on movie and television screens plays a crucial role in shaping new norms. Although Stifler's Mom is not shown in an especially positive light, just the fact that she is shown in a way that doesn't explicitly condemn her still validates women dating young by familiarizing the practice even without directly praising it. Social changes and film trends in American society work together to fuel growing acceptance for sexual relationships between older women and younger men.

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