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“Images as Arguments”

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### Survival of the Meanest: The Realities of Female Relationships in *Mean Girls*

Aggression and power struggles among female adolescents are nothing new; society has long since given up its “sugar and spice” scrupulous ideals for teenage youth. However, releases in recent decades (such as 1989’s *Heathers* and 1999’s *Cruel Intentions*) have gone so far as to portray teenage girls as conniving individuals who express their anger physically and overtly through violence and other abuse. This type of cinema, however, has its limits; this brand of aggression is not always able to exist outside of Hollywood. In reality, the fighting between girls is often more subtle and devious, and therefore it is harder to identify and comprehend.

In Mark Waters’ *Mean Girls*, the main character, Cady, is a new student forced into the deception and subterfuge that characterize many female teenage relationships. Cady’s observations of (and eventual transformation into one of) the “Plastics” reflect the realities that compose adolescent behavior in today’s society. The film achieves this success through its unique cinematic technique. First, the film lures the audience with stereotypical situations and characters, followed by edgy, comedic twists that contain a more realistic and profound message. The second method of success lies in the movie’s ability to address a relatively untouched side of girls’ behavior: the “hidden aggression”

that results from suppressed emotions. This type of fighting involves subtle, non-confrontational aggression that exists not only in the movie, but also in reality. In portraying Cady's story as a satire that rings true, *Mean Girls* transcends the typical label of 'teen comedy' and becomes a ruthless commentary on girls' roles in personal relationships.

To better understand the significance of the behavior shown in *Mean Girls*, it seems fit to first examine how the film differs from what has been previously explored in the teen genre. A broad range of darker teen comedies released in the past two decades have depicted girls with sinister intentions who express their anger physically. In 1989's *Heathers*, director Michael Lehmann introduces us to the Heathers: three powerful, manipulative girls who compose an ultra-clique of power and deception. Protagonist Veronica, played by Winona Ryder, longs to become part of this clique, but at the same time she is paradoxically repulsed by them. She becomes so caught up in the world of the Heathers – and she becomes so filled with deep-seated animosity toward them – that she quells her rage by taking physical actions. With the help of her boyfriend and accomplice, J.D., Veronica sets out to kill all the Heathers. She cleverly escapes punishment by making each death look like a suicide. After one particular death, Veronica confesses in amazement, "I just killed my best friend." J.D., replies, "Your worst enemy." "Same difference," Veronica muses. This movie shows how, at an extreme, the relationships and conflicts among girls can lead to violence and death.

Roger Kumble's 1999 release *Cruel Intentions* again transports the viewer into the dark, threatening world of girl behavior, this time through the vindictive Kathryn, played by Sarah Michelle Gellar. Kathryn is a powerful, malicious rich girl who seeks to

destroy the life of new student Cecile, first for revenge, then for her own personal amusement. Kathryn resorts to using sex, threats, and intimidation to secure her ways. She attempts to control everyone around her, and fails only when her stepbrother Sebastian refuses to fall prey to her actions. In a moment of reflection Kathryn proclaims to him, “Do you think I relish the fact that I have to act like Mary Sunshine 24/7 so I can be considered a lady? I’m the Marcia fucking Brady of the Upper East Side, and sometimes I want to kill myself.” Kathryn is portrayed as a girl whose pent-up feelings of anger result in sinister actions. Like other girls in so-called “black” comedies concerning female relationships, Kathryn exemplifies extreme outwardly malicious behavior.

It could be argued that these films, in general, are meant not to instruct, but rather to entertain, and that because movie characters are placed into fabricated settings, their actions are set apart from reality. However, in the teen movies described, the settings and situations are far from fantastical; the truthful, gritty nature of the films suggests they intentionally comment on female behavior. The motives and actions of Kathryn and Veronica, in all their sinister and horrific glory, are shown in true, almost painfully realistic portrayals. Their motives are not masked by society’s rules, and so these darker films attempt to reveal the “darker” side of female behavior.

There are, evidently, not as many occurrences of this cinematic violence in the everyday life of adolescent society. In reality, schools would not tolerate the excessive brutality the characters display. However, there are not always outlets for girls to express anger or resentment toward one another; they must oftentimes resort to more covert and subtle measures to express themselves. In the book Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls, author Rachel Simmons talks about this type of “‘alternate’...

aggression” (8) that results from being denied access to outlets for their anger. Simmons, who spent three years interviewing teenage girls at various schools around the country, draws the conclusion that there is an entire subculture of “hidden” aggression that manifests itself among girls in today’s society.

According to Simmons, girls, unlike boys, were never allowed by society to express their anger overtly. While boys are more prone to physical fighting to resolve problems, girls must live up to the “good girl” image society imposes on them, and so they express their anger clandestinely. Simmons claims that there is also the notion, in society, that “good girls” are not even capable of experiencing anger because they have learned to channel most of their anger furtively. Consequently, adolescent girls are unprepared to negotiate actual conflict. Simmons also proposes that another contributing factor in girls’ clandestine aggression is their rebellion against the pre-determined roles as female “caregivers” in relationships (Simmons 17). Instead of being nurturing in their relationships with other girls, teenage females are instead constantly seeking ways to keep *themselves* feeling secure, even at the harm and detriment of others.

*Mean Girls* is the first film to delve completely into this “hidden” world of female aggression. One of the advantages to *physical* fighting, Simmons points out, is that the fights are clearly expressed, and the issue resolved when the fight is over. Fights among girls, however, are “not marked by direct physical and verbal behavior” (Simmons 3) and so can become more harrowing and detrimental. Since these types of fighting are covert, there is also the potential for the malevolent behavior to be more long-term, allowing for the teasing, gossiping, and rumor spreading to continue unseen for many years. This type of indirect aggression manifests itself frequently throughout the movie.

When it was released in 2004, *Mean Girls* met much acclaim from critics due to its comedic portrayal of high school life. Peter Travers from *Rolling Stone* gave the movie three stars, stating, “[Screenwriter, Tina] Fey subverts formula to find comic gold” (Travers). Leah Rozen from *People Magazine* wrote in her review that the movie was, “A superior teen comedy with solid performances” (Rozen). However, there were only a select few critics who viewed the value in *Mean Girls*’ accurate portrayal of cruelty among girls. In a *USA Today* article entitled “On Screen: Teen Queens of Mean,” Claudia Puig explored the growing demand for realistic comedies like *Mean Girls* in today’s market. In her article she quotes Paul Dergarabedian, president of a box office tracking firm, as saying that today’s female teen audience “want to see movies that speak to them more on their level, rather than giving them a sanitized view of teen life” (Puig). Using *Mean Girls* as an example, Puig discusses how films portraying female realities can lead to the attainment of the coveted “teen” audience. These movies would then need to find entertainment not in the abstract, but in the (sometimes harsh) realities of female relationships.

*Mean Girls* achieves just that. Essentially, the film’s strength lies first and foremost in its observations of girls’ behavior, which are also depicted in Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence, a self-help guide for parents by Rosalind Wiseman. Through the lens of Wiseman’s analysis, we can understand each character’s actions in *Mean Girls* through a pre-conceived hierarchy of social roles. Every teenage female occupies a station in the system of “hidden aggression.” These roles, which together form a pyramid-shaped power hierarchy, afford girls varying levels of control based on their

social positions. The film portrays these roles as comedic; through this use of this humor, the movie connects to the audience on a deeper level by inviting viewers to evaluate the validity of what is being satirized. This humor, however, while diverting, never masks the cruelties that occur among girls and cliques, and so the true message of “hidden aggression” remains fully accessible.

The aptly named main clique in *Mean Girls*, “The Plastics,” are said to be made of plastic, i.e. they are devoid of emotion. (Ironically, they hold the most power over people’s emotions throughout the movie). Regina, whose name means “queen” in Latin (“Trivia”), is the “Queen Bee” of The Plastics. Her role, according to Rosalind Wiseman’s guide, is to be the leader of the clique (Wiseman 25). In *Mean Girls*, Regina’s role is one of great power. From the first moment that Cady crosses her path in the cafeteria, the audience senses Regina is eager to control Cady, if only because she is calculating enough to sense that Cady is legitimate competition.

While Regina is sometimes portrayed in a comedic manner, this humor does not detract from the real purpose of the Queen Bee character: to show a girl at her manipulative and conniving worst. Even when Regina appears to lack all common sense (she chooses to follow an all-carbohydrate diet to “lose weight”), we see that she is still able to manipulate everyone around her. Regina’s power, as pointed out in the movie, can be attributed to three basic sources: her high-status boyfriend, her “good” figure, and her “army” of friends. In the film, Janis, Damian, and Cady draw these three sources on a chalkboard, in a dramatic scene in which they plot Regina’s downfall. By categorizing these three attributes in list form, the film comments on the superficial nature of Regina’s status, emphasizing that she does not possess any truly redeeming social qualities. The

movie makes a point to show that all of these characteristics are unstable; at any point in time, they could be taken from Regina, and they have no true tie to her personality.

Regina's real power and influence, therefore, rely heavily on the presence of fear. When Regina is recovering from a bus accident, Cady comments, "Regina was living proof that the more people were scared of you, the more flowers you get [when you're injured]."

In being so influential, Regina epitomizes the display of "hidden aggression" of girls. As the Queen Bee, she is allowed almost unrestricted power over others, which she exploits to belittle other girls and increase her personal power supply (Wiseman 25). However, she also chooses to use this power covertly to achieve her goals. For example, in one scene, Regina nonchalantly compliments a fellow student on her clothing in the hallway at school. After doing so, however, Regina quickly admits to Cady, "That is the ugliest f-ing skirt I've ever seen." Regina therefore puts on a "nice girl" air so as to mask her true power until she needs to use it, thus disarming her victims.

The character of Gretchen, in the terms defined by Rosalind Wiseman, plays two "social" roles. On one level, Gretchen has the role of the Banker, who, according to Queen Bees, is the member of the clique who knows everyone's secrets, and uses this information as "currency" in exchange for power (Wiseman 29). As Janis and Damian, two "outsiders" in school, explain to Cady on her first day, "Gretchen Wieners knows everybody's business; she knows everything about everyone." The attainment of this information again emphasizes the "hidden" and secretive aspects of Gretchen's role; The Banker also is often thought to be more "cute" and "harmless" (29) than other girls, and is thus rarely involved with conflict. In a scene from the movie, Gretchen is asked to read an apology to the girls of the junior class. However, she appears completely clueless

when faced with the conflict and opposition from other girls; her only defense is to smile sweetly and say, “I can’t help it if I’m popular.” While she may appear trustworthy, Gretchen’s “nice” image can work against her; she can be seen as a pushover, or someone who is too nice for her own good.

Gretchen’s more important role in *The Plastics* is as the Sidekick; she is the one closest to the Queen Bee (Wiseman 27). Gretchen is the confidante with whom Regina shares personal details (in the movie, Regina shares her parents’ marital troubles with Gretchen). However, being a Sidekick is a potentially dangerous position, especially when characters like Cady and Janis arrive seeking a chink in Regina’s armor. The Sidekick does not possess the same confidence as the Queen Bee and so must keep many of her “hidden” emotions to herself, unless provoked. As Janis fittingly states, “[If] we crack Gretchen, and then we crack the lock on Regina's whole dirty history.”

The character of Gretchen, while humorous, also serves to emphasize Regina’s vindictiveness. Gretchen is co-dependent, and remains in such constant need of Regina’s approval that her eagerness becomes easily laughable. When talking about Cady’s crush on Regina’s ex-boyfriend Aaron, Gretchen warns, “Ex-boyfriends are just off limits to friends. I mean that's just, like, the rules of feminism.” Gretchen’s loyalty to Regina serves as a comedic plot point in this regard, yet it also grants the subject matter deeper meaning. As the audience watches Gretchen struggle to win Regina’s affections, the superficialities of their relationship become startlingly clear. The girls all rely on one another to fulfill a larger period of influence; this dependency was the sacrifice that they made in order to achieve power. Without each of their roles, they would all no longer function at the same “status.” As Cady observes about Gretchen, “She knew that it was

better to be in The Plastics, hating life, than to not be in at all.” This paradox is a true embodiment of an environment where suppressing emotions is not only accepted but required.

Cady is the most complex of all the characters, since she makes the most drastic transformation throughout the movie. She appears to go through many of the “roles” (previously detailed) during the movie and therefore experiences all sides of life with The Plastics. As a new student, Cady is at first an outsider. She fills the role of a Target or someone without true alliances (Wiseman 34). In the movie, this isolation is shown when Cady resorts to eating lunch alone in a bathroom stall. However, when later approached by The Plastics in the cafeteria, Cady becomes increasingly involved in the social order and is soon put in the position of innocent bystander. In one particular scene, The Plastics see Gretchen’s boyfriend flirting with another girl at the mall. Regina, sensing an opportunity to exercise her power, exacts her revenge quickly. She dials the offending girl’s house, and her mother picks up. After asking for the daughter, Taylor, Regina leaves the message, “This is Susan from Planned Parenthood; I have [Taylor’s] test results. If you can have her give me a call as soon as she can. It’s urgent.” We see the effects of this attack immediately, as the mother quickly calls her daughter to confront her about the situation. Not only was this attack cruel, it was also covert. First, it takes place without the victim’s knowledge, leaving no room for open confrontation. Second, it occurs over the phone, and as Regina so astutely points out, there is no way to identify a caller when he or she connects from 411 (Information).

Cady’s reaction to this scene is key to her development as a Mean Girl. This is her first exposure to the world of hidden cruelty, and, at first, Cady is nothing but a silent

witness to the malice around her. It is only after she receives input from fellow “outsider” Janis Ian that Cady reevaluates her position in the “girl world.” After the incident at the mall, Janice explains to Cady, “There are two kinds of evil people in this world. Those who do evil things, and those who see evil things and don't try to stop it.” Under the guise of trying to “take down” Regina, Cady quickly becomes more involved in The Plastics. However, she soon falls victim to their ways. She discovers that the only way to effectively “sabotage” Regina is to become like her, using her own tactics against her. As the movie continues, and Cady is surrounded by the superficial “roles” of The Plastics, she grapples with losing her own identity in the process. Finally, the situation culminates in the realization that she has become one of The Plastics. She narrates, “I know it may look like I was being like a bitch, but that's only because I was acting like a bitch.” When she finally succeeds in stripping Regina of her resources, Cady is faced with a dilemma and a difficult truth: she has become the new Queen Bee.

The “Burn Book” shown in the movie is a prime example of what makes *Mean Girls* so effective at portraying the “hidden aggression” of real life. The book itself appears to be nothing more than a scrapbook-like object; however, each page features a picture of a girl, accompanied by a disparaging remark about her, such as “fat whore.” This book is meant to be comedic, with such ridiculous statements as “she made out with a hot dog” as ammunition. However, at its heart, this book has very serious implications. The Burn Book is a cathartic way for the Plastics to express their anger and resentment towards other girls because they are able to write information in it without fear of retribution.

When Regina senses that Cady has stolen her Queen Bee status, she exacts revenge by scattering the pages of the Burn Book in the hallways at school. The pages are discovered by passersby, and it becomes clear that the statements in the book are secrets that have been betrayed and exposed by each victim's supposed friends. Friendships immediately begin to crumble, and in one particular shot, a girl reads aloud her own page in the book. "Dawn Schweitzer has a huge ass... who would write that?" she asks. "Who *wouldn't* write that?" her friend replies.

At this climax in the film, the school breaks out into chaos. Accusations begin to fly as to which girls betrayed their friends, and because the girls are unequipped to deal with confrontation, they resort to a chaotic, wild state, swinging from the lighting fixtures and walls. They run wild, finally expressing their emotional and mental turmoil through physical acts set to "jungle" sounds. They resemble animals running rampant in a zoo, while Regina stands from high atop the staircase, surveying the damage that she has created: she has succeeded in unleashing every girl's hostility, ironically with the very words that they themselves have said. During this alternately comedic and startling scene, the film invites the viewer to not only laugh at the girls' ridiculous behavior, but also to examine its significance. If these girls had been able to express their emotions toward one another in a healthy manner, perhaps they would have been better equipped to handle the conflict that ensued.

If nothing else, the lesson that *Mean Girls* imparts is that no girl is immune to meanness and deception in her life. At the "therapy" session held after the chaotic Burn Book incident, the viewer sees that in fact *all* of the female cliques in the school have their own sets of disagreements and struggles. When the Math teacher, Ms. Norbury, asks

the junior girls to raise their hands if they have ever “talked about a girl behind her back,” every hand is silently raised. Cady, despite being the normal and relatable protagonist of the film and once naïve newcomer, is not immune to the deceptive inner workings of this “girl world.” Even Janis, a onetime victim of Regina’s personal targeting, resorts to the manipulative, sneaky ways of a Queen Bee to gain her revenge. The film stresses not only the depth of the hidden aggression instilled in the girls, but the universality of the meanness.

The overall ending of *Mean Girls* remains a double-edged sword: it offers a solution to the problems raised by hidden aggression, yet it also raises more questions about its future impact on girls. Cady’s grand realization of her own manipulations is in fact a lesson for others to live by: “Calling somebody else fat won't make you any skinnier. Calling someone stupid doesn't make you any smarter. And ruining Regina George's life definitely didn't make me any happier. All you can do in life is try to solve the problem in front of you.” Cady understands the need to simplify her life from the twisted maze of cliques; she vows to stop gossiping and begin her social life anew, thanks to her newly gained knowledge of girl’s behavior. At last, she proclaims, “Everything [is] right in girl world.”

Yet, at the same time, the ending raises a difficult question: is this hidden meanness or alternate aggression a learned trait, or rather a recurring pattern inherent to all girls? The end of the movie proposes that the behavior is cyclical, showing a new crop of freshman Plastics walking in front of the school, seemingly already scheming for power. However, Cady, who originally came from a background of almost no social interaction with girls, learns this hidden aggression after never having been exposed to it;

perhaps, then, it was latent within her. In Odd Girl Out, Rachel Simmons expresses agreement toward both theories, stressing that the power struggles among girls are indeed continual and that “[a]ggression may be biological, but the face of anger is learned” (11). In her article “Mean Girls, Mean Women,” author Carolyn Segal details an experience in which she views firsthand the never-ending cycle of aggression in females, even among grown women. She even goes on to propose that hidden conflicts among females are not a new phenomenon, and she cites the March sisters’ interpersonal turmoil in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (Segal).

*Mean Girls* succeeds because it presents its audience with a taboo topic, showing a side of females that is rarely displayed in society. The film forces the audience to contemplate the deeper implications of a society based on hidden aggression, and to therefore comprehend the movie’s message not as a theory, but rather as a call to action. The movie’s connection with its viewers paves the way for other films to explore the inner workings of our society, hopefully allowing the media to one day use its influence to better the lives of those whom it reaches.

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