

Cruel Intentions: How Gender Roles Construct Reputations

Analysis for Film and TV fans

“Come on, Kathryn. It's too easy. Go get one of your moron friends to do it I have a reputation to uphold.”- Sebastian Valmont

Cruel Intentions is a 1999 romantic drama that explores the dark underbelly of seduction through the lens of two rivals. Because the rivals are of the opposite sex we can learn how sex and intimacy are gendered experiences in our society and how these experiences shape our reputation for better or for worse. Each character in the story reflects a desire to keep their social status or achieve one of a greater proportion via social mobility. Here's our take on Cruel Intentions and the different ways that our gender and sexuality construct the reputations that pave the way for our societal success.

Sex and Status

“You and I are two of a kind, at least I have the guts to admit it.”-Kathryn M.

Kathryn and Sebastian are wealthy step-siblings who share more than their large suite in the Upper East Side of New York. They are both incredibly intelligent teens who have a penchant for sex and manipulation. *Cruel Intentions*, the movie's title insinuates that their motives are deeply sadistic. But despite their similarities, they are viewed by their peers in completely

contrasting ways. This is because Sebastian is very open about his womanizing and his sexuality. Sebastian uses his reputation as a way to affirm his masculinity. At the beginning of the movie we see him mocking his therapist by pretending he has been cured from the woes of hypersexuality, only to reveal that he slept with her daughter. Additionally, Sebastian creates a website shaming his former sexual partner for something they both engaged in. Sebastian's traditional outlook on gender allows him to revel in his sexual reputation while simultaneously berating the women he chooses to engage with. This outlook outlines how hooking up is a gendered experience. While society grooms men to view sex as winning it conversely condemns women and frames their experience as a loss. In *SEXISM IN PRACTICE Feminist Ethics Evaluating the Hookup Culture*, Conor Kelly states that "men have virtually no restrictions on their hookup habits while women have to carefully navigate a set of unwritten rules in order to avoid ruining their reputations." Therefore through the objectification of women, men can be seen as gaining a sense of social worth through the number of sexual partners they have. In contrast, a woman's worth is based on her restraint and chastity. Enforcing the patriarchal paradigm that a woman's virginity is tied to her worth and femininity. The framework for this thinking is what begins Sebastian's interest in "conquering" Annette, a young woman who's sworn celibacy until she is married.

"Can you imagine what this will do for my reputation, screwing the new headmaster's daughter before school starts, she'll be my greatest victory."- Sebastian Valmont.

While Sebastian is allowed to flaunt his sexuality without it inhibiting him Kathryn is forced to minimize hers in ways that adhere to traditional femininity. Whereas Sebastian gains social

worth through sex, Katheryn gains social worth through the performance of purity that the society she lives in asks of her. This desire for women to be pure dates back for years, but is especially of prominence in the period that *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, the book that inspired *Cruel Intentions* was published. Faramerz Dabhiowala in “The Construction of Honour, Reputation and Status in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth-Century” states that reputation lies “at the heart of two crucial issues: how people thought about social status and the differences between men and women.” Katheryn’s social status is very evident through her wealth and her positioning as the student council president. She is stated to be one of the most popular girls at school, but in truth, no one likes her for her, but only what she is pretending to be. It is alluded that one of Katheryn’s most open and honest relationships was with Court who inevitably left her for Cecile, a more innocent and naive woman. This along with Sebastian’s blossoming love for Annette reinforces the idea that men will always leave her when she presents her authentic self.

“ It’s alright for guys like you to f*ck everyone, but when I do it. I get dumped for twits like Cecile. God Forbid I exude confidence and enjoy sex. Do you think I relish the fact I have to act like Mary Sunshine 24/7 so that I can be considered a lady? I’m the Marcia-fucking-Brady of the Upper East Side.....and sometimes I want to kill myself .There's your psychoanalysis, Dr. Freud.”- Katheryn

Much like the mean girls from “Queen Bees and Wannabee’s” we covered in our [Mean Girls Trope Explained video](#) Katheryn is not allowed to express her competitiveness, anger, and sexuality in healthy ways. This takes precedence in her friendships with other women. Cecile,

the only other woman that she frequently interacts with is her target. In volume 78 of the Journal of Experimental Social psychology researchers stated that many women transmit their “romantic rivals' social information strategically” and that highly competitive women disclosed even more reputation damaging information. Kathryn knows very well that a woman’s anger affects her reputation. Therefore she uses indirect aggression like gossip and manipulation to manage her victims. She reveals to Mrs. Caldwell where Cecile hides her love letters from Ronald and threatens Sebastian to reveal his and Annette’s relationship to Annette’s father. These are all forms of destroying women she views as competition. However, Kathryn isn’t the only character who hides her sexuality to maintain power.

Football jock, Gregory McConnel, also projects an image hypermasculinity as a way to deflect from his homosexuality.”

So I pull out my dick and I shove it right in her face. And I’m like the hell is this? Grandma with a birthday present? Suck it ya dumb b*tch”- Greg McConnel.

Greg is a reflection of how when male sexuality leaves the traditional heterosexual framework it can also harm one’s social standing. A good reputation is related to how well someone fits the gender roles prescribed to them. However, gender roles are decidedly heteronormative. Marriage between men and women itself is thought of as a yin-and-yang dynamic in which both sexes complete each other because of their different sets of strengths. From a biological deterministic standpoint, men and women are born with different traits to make each other whole. This system however cannot be transposed to gay relationships. This is why from a traditional Christian heteronormative stance homosexuality is deemed as a wrong. Sebastian uses this fear as a tactic,

insinuating he would tell Greg's father that he raised a gay son. Choosing to tell his father is also important. Because male homosexuality sexuality is framed as being inherently feminine. Sebastian is inferring that his father failed to raise a man. Unlike, Kathryn Greg fails to acknowledge who he truly is. He blames it on alcohol and even puts one of his closest friends, Annette in the grips of Sebastian to avoid being outed. Furthermore, the majority of the time we see Greg he is performing as a hypermasculine straight man. He utilizes jerseys, crude t-shirts, and demeaning sexual locker room talk as a way to embody this role. This reveals Greg's fear of being outed. He believes he would not be considered man enough to play in the big leagues of football like he's always wanted. Greg's storyline reminds us that our sexuality whether gay or straight has a gendered implication that society can try to define us by. However, Greg's character is important because his greatest love football is not an act and proves to us that though society might try to define us by our sexuality we are still complex individuals with agency over our own lives.

Bad Boys and Bad Girls

By the end of the movie, we see the results of the step-siblings' actions. Though Katherine's exploitations are a mirror to Sebastian's she is met with perhaps a darker fate. Sebastian is killed by the onslaught of traffic and thus never has to deal with the destruction from his journal being leaked. Furthermore, Annette remembers the fondness of their relationship negating the fact initially she was nothing more than a mere wager. For a book that reveals all of Sebastian's treachery. The one page about Kathryn takes centerfold. Indicating that a promiscuous woman is more dangerous than a promiscuous man. Lastly, Kathryn's fears are realized. Sebastian's journal and the car which she was both eager to receive are gifted to Annette. The more "pure"

woman. It's telling that it's Annette who ruins Katheryn's reputation reminding us that Katheryn's fate is a common [femme fatale trope](#) that has been weaponized through the decades against smart, sexually liberated women, who defy gender roles.

Societal values and Personal fulfillment

Though the stories bleak ending *Cruel Intentions* leaves us with a positive message. Concluding for love to work we must sacrifice societal expectations of our gender for our own personal fulfillment. Sebastian's happiest moments are found when he's being honest and vulnerable with Annette. Sebastian becomes more emotionally open while Annette becomes more sexually open. These traits that they are acquiring are usually indicative of the opposite sex and not their own. When they both reject gender roles and the fear of their future reputations they can find happiness in the present. Leaving us with the message that these binary boxes might give us society's approval, but limit our self-expression and our capacity to engage with real love. Sebastian finally chooses Annette over the destruction of his reputation signals true growth away from the toxic masculinity he's become accustomed to. His final words are words of sincerity meaning we should be honest with ourselves and with ourselves and with our loved one while we still have time.

"I love you Annete." -Sebastian Valmont

References

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