Understanding Career Women: A Comparative Analysis of Fatal Attraction and the Devil Wears Prada

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Abstract. This essay explores the evolving attitudes and perceptions of working women across different eras by comparing two films from distinct time periods. These films serve as poignant reflections of society's changing views on women in the workplace. Fatal Attraction exposes the concerns and apprehensions surrounding ambitious working women in its era, exemplifying the anxiety and self-doubt experienced by independent women of that time. In contrast, The Devil Wears Prada portrays a more contemporary perspective on working women, highlighting a different archetype with a positive lens. By analyzing these films from various angles, this essay sheds light on the shifting societal perspectives toward working women over the decades. It underscores the ongoing efforts towards gender equality in the workplace and prompts reflection on our comprehension of professional society, the persistence of stereotypes, and adherence to traditional norms. Ultimately, these cinematic narratives inspire a deeper appreciation of gender equality in the workplace and a heightened respect for the contributions of working women.

Keywords: Film studies, career women, gender equality, female empowerment.

1. Introduction

In a relentlessly competitive world where progress is marked by resilience in the face of adversity, it becomes evident that barriers must be dismantled through unwavering determination. Within this context, the journey of career women stands out as a testament to generations of tireless efforts to widen the horizons of the business world. There was a time when the roles of women in the workplace were systematically marginalized, overshadowing the remarkable achievements of figures like Madame Curie, Margaret Hamilton, Rosalind Franklin, and countless others. Yet, spanning multiple generations, certain women have shattered the constraints of traditional gender roles. The very emergence of the term "career woman" marks a milestone in the feminist movement, signifying the recognition of women across diverse professional domains.

However, their path has been anything but smooth. Career women have been tasked with the formidable challenge of navigating the intricate dance between work and family life. Understanding their experiences and evolution provides invaluable insights into the delicate work-family balance and society's evolving attitudes toward working women.

This essay delves into the shifting perceptions and attitudes toward working women across different eras. To illuminate this journey, it conducts a comparative analysis of two films: *Fatal Attraction*, released in 1987, and *The Devil Wears Prada*, released in 2006 [1, 2]. These cinematic narratives serve as poignant reflections of the evolving views on women in the workforce over time.

Previous studies about career women in films and TV series have mostly focused on the rise of women's independence. For example, Winn's research examines how women undergo class transformation through the movie *Working Girl* [3]. Also, Armaida Puspitasari analyzes how female independence is reflected in the film *Erin Brockovich* [4].

First, this research will delve into the challenges faced by working women in distinct historical contexts by providing backgrounds for both films. It will explore the difficulties they encountered in the workplace, including the weight of gender stereotypes and the delicate balance between professional commitments and family responsibilities. Through the lens of these films, readers will gain insights into the transformation of societal perspectives on working women, illustrating the changing landscape of female empowerment and the pursuit of equilibrium between career and

personal life. These cinematic portrayals, as cultural barometers, encapsulate the broader societal narrative surrounding women's roles.

Through these two films, this research will uncover the subtle nuances that breathe life into the intricate journeys of working women, each navigating ever-evolving environments. Moreover, it will draw comparisons with traditional female roles, providing a comprehensive understanding of the progress made and the persistent stereotypes that continue to linger. Through this exploration, this study acknowledges the formidable challenges faced by working women and recognizes the monumental strides they have made in securing their place in the workforce. Yet, despite these advancements, the shadow of stereotypes still looms.

2. Portrayals of Career Women in Film Across Different Eras

2.1. Fatal Attraction

In the 1987 film *Fatal Attraction*, the character Alex initially emanates an aura of maturity and competence. She holds a position as an editor at a publishing company. Her chance encounter with Dan leads to an instant connection, culminating in a night together. However, there is a significant twist – Dan is not a single man; he already has a wife and daughter. Alex resorts to various extreme tactics to maintain her relationship with Dan, including self-harm, faking pregnancy, posing as a potential buyer at his apartment, intimidation, killing a pet rabbit, and stalking him. Throughout the film, her character, portrayed as a career woman, descends into psychosis, marked by frantic behavior and anger. Despite her professional success, her personal life takes an extreme and dangerous turn. *Fatal Attraction* presents the audience with a negative image, reinforcing a detrimental stereotype of career women.

Conversely, Dan's wife, Beth, embodies the archetype of a traditional woman. She is depicted as a caring mother to her children and a devoted wife – a quintessential housewife. She radiates sincerity in her marriage and dedication to her family, embodying the traditional values expected of a housewife during that era. Beth diligently works to maintain a warm and loving family atmosphere, prioritizing her family above all else. Simultaneously, she displays vulnerability and insecurity when it comes to her family. The film's conclusion, where she kills Alex, although extreme, is not entirely unimaginable given the circumstances. These two women initially appear as polar opposites, serving to highlight a crucial contrast.

In this film, traditional women are portrayed in a positive light, while career women are depicted negatively. This aligns with Ellen McGrath's argument that *Fatal Attraction* mirrors the characteristics of the 1980s, wherein women who defied traditional norms faced consequences [5]. Alex serves as a striking embodiment of this theme, characterized by irritability, emotional instability, and a willingness to engage in illegal activities at any moment. The director accentuates her extreme emotions towards Dan at the expense of her professional accomplishments.

This perspective was prevalent during that era, underscoring the expectation that women would prioritize their families. As articulated by Ravenna Helson, "Women lose interest in the vocational world, the authors said, as their thoughts turn to marriage; their intellectual productivity is released only after their fulfillment as wives and mothers" [6]. Although women possessed intellectual capacities, they were often relegated to the background, a regrettable limitation.

2.2. The Devil Wears Prada

In the 2006 movie *The Devil Wears Prada*, the narrative predominantly revolves around career women. One of them is Andrea, a recent graduate hired as an assistant. She represents an inexperienced newcomer to the workforce who is initially dismissed by everyone and considered incapable of handling Miranda's harshness. However, she proves herself through the challenges and difficulties she faces. Although she doesn't end up staying as Miranda's assistant, she pursues her initial dream. Her argument with her boyfriend highlights the ongoing theme of balancing a career and family.

The other prominent career woman in the movie is Miranda Priestly, perhaps the most iconic portrayal of a career woman. As the editor-in-chief of *Runway* magazine, her role is reminiscent of Alex's in *Fatal Attraction*. However, the director portrays her differently. Miranda is depicted as precise and stable but also strict and severe. Her career achievements are not accidental; they result from her relentless dedication and exceptional work ethic. To be recognized, one must reach the highest position first, and Miranda's character symbolizes this pursuit. She achieves her career success through unwavering determination.

Miranda's accomplishments in her career are extraordinary, and she stands as a symbol of authority in the fashion industry. Yet, her gender subjects her to different perspectives. These two films from different eras demonstrate a shift in attitudes towards women in the workplace. *Fatal Attraction* leans toward encouraging women to adhere to traditional roles, while *The Devil Wears Prada* portrays women as capable of achieving great careers. Although progress is being made, deep-seated stereotypes about women continue to hinder their professional experiences.

3. Women's Challenges in the Workplace

3.1. Balance Between Career and Family

Women continue to face various forms of unfair treatment in the workplace, including the persistent issue of balancing work and family responsibilities. Some mothers are forced to give up their jobs and stay at home to care for their children. Tahani H. Alqahtani's article highlights that balancing work and personal relationships has always been a concern, and women's performance in the workplace often depends on their ability to maintain this balance [7].

This struggle to balance work and personal life is vividly portrayed in the movie *Fatal Attraction*. After being abandoned by Dan, Alex attempts to maintain an emotional equilibrium between her professional ambitions and her personal life. Her intense dedication to work leads to loneliness and emotional distance, pushing her to seek fulfillment outside of her job. This pursuit of Dan becomes an emotional rollercoaster as she grapples with managing her expectations and the reality of the situation, eventually leading to a breakdown. Her story effectively illustrates the challenges faced by working women in balancing their careers and personal lives, emphasizing the complexities they often encounter.

A parallel can be drawn with Miranda's character in *The Devil Wears Prada*. As the editor-in-chief of Runway magazine, Miranda's role is similar to Alex's in *Fatal Attraction*. However, the director portrays her differently. Miranda is depicted as precise, stable, strict, and severe. Her career achievements are not accidental; they result from her unwavering dedication and exceptional work ethic. Miranda's determination leads to sacrifices, including a failed second marriage and raising children through surrogacy [8]. Her character embodies the inherent struggle many women face in compromising their professional aspirations for personal connections, a dilemma encountered by women striving for success in male-dominated fields. Striking a work-life balance proves to be exceedingly complicated for women, often forcing them to make sacrifices that are inherently unfair.

3.2. Gender Stereotypes

Women also continue to grapple with gender stereotypes that cast doubt on their intellectual capabilities compared to men. In a study by Alice H. Eagly and Antonio Mladinic, women's agentic qualities are often perceived as weaker compared to men's, reflecting common biases [9]. Additionally, in an experiment, female candidates face unfair treatment, as employers are twice as likely to choose men over women based solely on appearances [10]. These stereotypes hinder women's progress in the workplace from two perspectives: the perception of their abilities and appearance-based judgments.

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, gender stereotypes of professional women are well-illustrated throughout the plot [2]. Successful career women often have their private lives magnified. Miranda's struggles with family conflicts due to her job result in criticism from others. She confides in Andrea

that she doesn't care what others think of her, but she does care if her daughter is disappointed in her. This complex situation highlights the double standards faced by working women, as pointed out by Andrea, who suggests that Miranda's behavior would not be criticized if she were a man. This blatant stereotype of working women is evident; strict male behavior in the workplace is often considered normal, while women are labeled as "devils" for displaying similar traits.

In contrast to *The Devil Wears Prada*, the stereotypical portrayal of the working woman displayed in *Fatal Attraction* aligns with societal expectations of the time. Alex's character embodies the stereotype of an ambitious woman who disrupts traditional family values. This portrayal reinforces existing biases and perpetuates gender-based assumptions about women who prioritize their careers.

Both *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Fatal Attraction* exemplify how media can perpetuate gender stereotypes related to working women. While the former challenges the unfair scrutiny faced by successful women, the latter conforms to the conventional depiction of ambitious women as disruptive. These portrayals serve as reminders of the deeply ingrained biases that persist in society's perceptions of women's roles and behaviors.

In summary, the portrayal of professional women in films from different eras reflects the evolving perceptions and attitudes towards women's roles in society and the workplace. Progress is evident, but persistent stereotypes and prejudices continue to hinder women's advancement. Nevertheless, the evolving cinematic portrayal of professional women serves as both a mirror and a catalyst for social progress, sparking important discussions about gender equality and the need to advocate for equal opportunity and representation for women in all aspects of life. These films remind us that the journey of the working woman is not merely fiction but reflects the evolving nature of our collective consciousness regarding gender roles and equality.

4. Summary

In conclusion, *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Fatal Attraction* serve as more than just cinematic narratives; they are windows into the evolving perceptions of working women across different eras. Both films offer a compelling perspective through which we can analyze the shifting attitudes, expectations, and stereotypes that have influenced women's experiences in the workplace.

Fatal Attraction vividly portrays the anxieties of women in the 1980s who dared to challenge traditional gender roles. It stands as a reminder of the consequences one might face when challenging conventions and prioritizing career aspirations over societal expectations. On the other hand, *The Devil Wears Prada* presents a more modern and positive portrayal of successful career women like Miranda. While Miranda's accomplishments come at the cost of personal relationships, they are celebrated, reflecting changing times and the evolving nature of women's careers.

The fact that these two films were made more than a decade apart underscores the qualitative improvement in attitudes toward career women. They emphasize the growing importance of gender equality in the workplace and signify that traditional stereotypes are becoming less relevant.

These films encourage reflection on how we perceive working women. However, they are just a part of a broader narrative. The status of women in the workplace will continue to change through their ongoing efforts. Their journey is filled with challenges and continuously documented. This essay captures a small portion of this ongoing story to shed light on the evolving landscape of working women.

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