Abstract

This Web site presents the deconstruction of four romantic comedies that were produced between 1996-2000. The analysis draws upon anthropological knowledge to investigate the cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity in the context of romantic love. The first analysis, *The Romantic Comedy: Femininity, Beautification, and the Meaning of Empowerment*, discusses the beautification rituals that women engage in to become more attractive to men. These rituals are depicted/constructed in similar ways in *The Truth about Cats and Dogs* and *Miss Congeniality*. Based on the foundation of this research, the second analysis examines the way women negotiate work in the context of romantic relationships. This analysis, *Negotiating Business in the “World of Romance,”* deconstructs two romantic comedies, *You've Got Mail* and *What Women Want*. The Web site includes documentation of these two papers, and the following: the research proposal (Methodology link), film summaries (Feature Films link), Supporting Films, Reflection, Image Gallery, Film Trailers, Bibliography, and Acknowledgments.
Directions for access to Web site on CD:

Open "Honors" File

Double Click on "Index"

This will open the Web site to the Home Page

Use the Content Bar in the Left Frame to Navigate the Web site
The Romantic Comedy: Femininity, Beautification, and the Meaning of Empowerment

The romantic comedy constructs culturally understood meanings of romance through symbolic representations of femininity and masculinity. This genre of film situates males and females in relation to one another in culturally meaningful ways. The major theme investigated in the films: *Miss Congeniality* and *The Truth About Cats and Dogs* is the concept of attractiveness and femininity as defined by American culture. Female beautification rituals are symbolically reproduced in these films as shared experiences. The investigation includes assessing the options available to women to resist conventional beautification rituals and at the same time maintain a feminine identity. Analysis includes deconstructing the concepts of attractiveness, uniqueness, and resistance in romantic love.

The romantic comedy cannot be analyzed without first understanding the notion of romantic love within the United States. This cultural construct can be interpreted through an analysis of figured worlds. Dorothy Holland (et al., 1998) explains romantic love as a figured world or cultural domain that includes participants who share certain beliefs and behaviors. The figured world is not a context with tangible boundaries, but rather, a cultural landscape in which people are continuously interacting with one another. The participants are active in social practice and relate to one another according to their position within this domain. Holland points out that figured worlds are thus, “social encounters in which participants’ position matters” so that, “persons look at the world from the positions into which they are persistently cast”. In the world of romance, participants are positioned and position themselves in culturally meaningful ways that affect their perspective of romance and their potential as romantic partners.

The positioning of people in the figured world of romance is key to interpreting gender constructs in the romantic comedy. Women and men are positioned in different ways, and further, specific attributes are linked to femininity and masculinity. This positioning affects the participants’ perspective and experience in the world of dating. Within this figured world, attractiveness, in terms of physical beauty and personality, is culturally defined and assigned particular meanings.

Holland organizes cultural worlds as being figured with characters, artifacts, activities, and discourse. In the world of romance, characters may include blondes and brunettes, male studs, and
tomboys. Artifacts can be understood as symbols that persist as culturally meaningful over a long period of time, such as flower bouquets, love poetry, and make-up. These artifacts are integral to romance and have certain romantic meanings attached to them that are culturally constructed, understood, and shared. Further, activities can include dating and preparing for the date, such as beautifying oneself in order to make that “first impression.” Finally, discourse includes sayings that represent romantic notions such as, “I like him for his personality” and “He likes me for who I am”. Thus, characters, artifacts, activities, and discourse shape the landscape of the figured world, and are utilized by individuals in American society to both define their own personal identities and interpret the identities of others. In order for film to recreate this meaning system, it utilizes casting, imagery, and dialogue.

It is through the beautification process in *Miss Congeniality* that a woman who is single becomes more feminine and as a result, more attractive to men. Sandra Bullock plays Gracie Hart, an FBI agent who is dedicated to her job. She is cast as caring more about her work than her physical appearance. Called upon to work undercover as a Miss United States beauty pageant contestant, she must go through the process of a major make-over to her natural body. She is transformed into a beauty queen who wins second place in the pageant. During this process, she meets several women and establishes a friendship with Cheryl, a contestant dedicated to her physical presentation. After this transformation to beauty, Eric, Gracie’s fellow agent asks her out on a date for the first time.

In the figured world of romance Gracie and Cheryl are competing to win the Miss United States beauty pageant. During this competition, the two women become friends and in particular, give one another compliments that serve to mediate the competitive nature of their relationship. Gracie cannot win the beauty competition nor conceal her actual position as an FBI agent, without a make-over. Her experience with the make-over re-situates her identity from predominantly feminist to feminine. This process requires the assistance of her beauty coach, Victor, who helps her acquire femininity.

As we are presented with Gracie Hart, her relationships with other people position her with masculine traits. She is positioned in a largely traditional male domain at work and associated with some specific masculine artifacts. For example, after a bad day at work she sits alone in the bar,
eating with her mouth wide open, and participating in her previously established friendship with the bartender. This scene is more commonly associated with a male bachelor. When Eric enters the scene with his date, relationships proceed to identify Gracie’s masculinity further. Eric’s date is young and attractive, doing research about the FBI. When she says to Gracie, “I’d love to get a woman’s point of view,” Eric responds quickly, “Oh no, no, no, you’re barking up the wrong tree, right Hart?” Immediately, Eric affirms his relationship with Gracie as one of friendship because she is less feminine and not a potential romantic partner. Furthermore, referring to Gracie by her last name, Hart, he reaffirms their relationship status. The last name referent is a common identifier among males and makes Gracie’s feminine identity less pronounced.

Not only is Gracie’s identity in part, constructed with masculine traits, but she also comes across as a feminist. When discussing beauty pageants with Eric, Gracie asserts, “What could possibly motivate anybody to enter a beauty pageant is beyond me... So join the marines, it’s like feminism never happened.” Further, Kathy, the head of the beauty pageant, criticizes Gracie’s identity, “I’ve been fighting all my life against your type. The ones who think we’re just a bunch of worthless airheads, you know who I mean, feminists, intellectuals, ugly women.” Gracie actively casts herself and is cast by others as a specific “type”, a feminist, who is unattractive but intelligent.

To supplement Gracie’s identity in the world of romance, she is also conveyed as both insecure and aware of her unattractiveness. When Gracie first meets her beauty coach, Victor, she explains her inadequacies, “I’ve been having a bad hair decade really.” Later, while Victor works with Gracie on her poise, another aspect of attractiveness, he says, “Have you no pride in yourself, in your presentation.” Gracie replies, “I’m an FBI agent, I’m not a performing monkey in heels.” This dichotomy between masculinity and femininity is continuously reproduced by Gracie in a configuration of “us” and “them”. Gracie’s definition of “us” refers to her identification with masculinity and “them” refers to women that would enter a beauty pageant. Victor further counsels, “You’re also a person, and an incomplete one at that. In place of friends and relationships you have sarcasm and a gun.” Gracie is described as incomplete because she does not have friends and relationships, strongly associated with cultural constructions of femininity. More importantly, she has failed to practice another aspect of her femininity; her physical presentation has not been prioritized in

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comparison to her work. If she were to focus on her presentation, friends and boyfriends would become attracted to her, which we soon observe after the beautification process.

A major transition occurs in both Gracie’s perception of herself and other people’s perceptions of her after she is beautified. Prior to the beautification rituals, Eric tells her, “You look like hell”. Later, Gracie herself explains the contradiction in performing as a contestant in the pageant, “I don’t even own a dress, I don’t even own a brush...” When she proceeds with the beautification process, it requires painful body hair removal, teeth cleaning, tanning, a facial mask, breast enhancers, and a shift in her diet to exclude any fattening foods. Furthermore, her name is changed to Gracie Lou Freedbush. With a new identity established, she enters the scene on a mock runway with flowing hair, a tight low-cut dress, and high heels. She has come a long way from the athletic FBI agent she was prior to beautification. This is the first time she is considered physically attractive via the male gaze as Eric takes off his sunglasses to gawk. Eric is not the only person who recognizes Gracie’s beautification, but Victor prides, “I’ve taken a woman without a discernible smidgen of estrogen and I’ve transformed her into a lady.”

Not only has Gracie become identified as more attractive, but people begin to consider her uniqueness. Victor tells her, “Of any girl that I’ve ever coached, you are truly unique.” In addition, her competitor and friend, Cheryl, compliments her, “That’s why you’re going to win (Gracie). You’re so clever... You’re so nice and so smart and so sensitive.” These comments legitimize physical beauty by concealing its significance and rather, emphasizing Gracie’s personality, which is also a consideration in the meaning space of attractiveness. Finally, Eric confides in Gracie, “If they ever get a chance to see what I see then they’re gonna love you.” In the end, Gracie gets second place in the beauty pageant and Eric smiles, “way to go Gracie Lou”. At this point, he identifies her by her new name, not her last name, redefining their relationship. He further asks her out on a date, “When we get all ugly again, maybe we could have dinner... if we have sex afterwards, so be it.” Eric has become aware that Gracie has the potential of being more attractive according to the culturally defined rules of beauty. Both altering her body and mannerisms and being offered a date have reaffirmed Gracie’s femininity. On the other hand, Gracie was single when her masculine and feminist attributes were emphasized.

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After beautification, Gracie’s confidence is clarified in relation to romance. Flirting with Eric, she sings, “You think I’m gorgeous, you want to kiss me”. Further, when interviewed during the final round of the pageant Kathy asks, “As you may know, there are many who would consider the Miss United States Pageant as to be out-dated and anti-feminist. What would you say to them?” Gracie responds, “Well, I would have to say, I used to be one of them. And then I came here, and I realized that these women are smart... And we’ve become really good friends... And for me this experience has been one of the most rewarding and liberating experiences of my life.” With pressure and support, femininity can resurface via attractiveness and relationships, and the feminist woman experiences liberation in the beautification process.

The meaning of attractiveness in American culture is clearly represented in The Truth About Cats and Dogs as well. This romantic comedy, starring Janeane Garofalo as Abby Barnes, and Uma Thurman as Noelle Slusarsky distinguishes two female characters according to their positions as feminine and attractive. Abby Barnes is a veterinarian with her own radio talk show who falls in love with one of her listeners, Brian. Brian calls her talk show for advice and later asks her out on a date over the telephone. She lies to him about her appearance, identifying herself as her neighbor, Noelle. Abby, a brunette, chooses to describe herself as Noelle who is tall, thin, and blonde. Brian talks with Abby on the telephone, becomes attracted to her, and then meets Noelle in person thinking she is actually Abby. Therefore, he becomes attracted to Abby’s personality and Noelle’s physical appearance, believing the two women to be the same person. In the end, Abby tells him the truth about her initial lie, and asks him to give her a “second chance”.

In the figured world of romance, Abby and Noelle are competing for Brian as a future boyfriend and at the same time, bonding as friends. The female characters are defined through symbolic representations. Abby is a veterinarian with a radio talk show while Noelle is a model. These two jobs have strong meanings in the world of romance regarding femininity. While Abby is invisible to her audience because she is on the radio, Noelle’s success at modeling requires people to observe her. Further, Abby is cast as assertive while Noelle comes across as more passive and timid when relating to her boyfriend. Some of the artifacts used to define Abby’s identity include being single with a cat and interested in feminist books while Noelle has an abusive boyfriend and reads

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women's magazines with surveys about "Loser Guys". The women's physical characteristics, their poise or lack of poise, and the artifacts associated with them, are significant and purposely used to create specific cultural meanings about attractiveness.

Abby's femininity is undermined when she is consistently overlooked as an individual because she is not considered a potential romantic partner. When we first meet her, a male opens the door for three other women first, and then overlooks Abby. Her single-hood is also criticized in Noelle's statement, "You gotta have a boyfriend. Otherwise, it's just you and a cat and forty candles on your birthday cake." Women lose a sense of their femininity if they are not perceived as competitive in the world of romance.

There are specific artifacts and rituals associated with femininity that Abby would prefer to avoid. This resistance to acceptable beautification norms is often cast as a feminist characteristic. The artifact of make-up is closely linked to the ritual of preparing for one's presentation as a woman. Before Abby meets Brian, she and Noelle visit the make-up counter at the mall. This common ritual is condemned by Abby, as she later suggests, "Men don't go around buying all of this expensive crap, hoping women will want them, you know. If I was a guy I think women would be like lining up to go out with me. I'm smart, I have a good sense of humor, I make a great living." Abby criticizes the beautification ritual and identifies those qualities she finds to be attractive about herself. The second major beautification ritual that unfolds, involves food and dieting. Again, there is a strong discrepancy between Noelle and Abby as Noelle claims, "I don't eat. I love to order but I gotta keep the calories down." According to the American definition of beauty, in the figured world of romance, women are often expected to alter their bodies through decoration and weight loss.

The knowledge and tools for being attractive include more than physical beautification, as clarified by Noelle. She teaches Abby about confidence and the attractive way to carry oneself as a woman. However, Abby has several mishaps, for instance spilling food on her shirt while talking to Brian at the bar. Interestingly she comments in reflection, "Of course I would do that". It is this "of course," which is understood by the audience as humorous. In the romantic comedy attractiveness is defined as expanding beyond the scope of appearance to certain behaviors, such as the ability to maintain composure.

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While Abby attempts to resist some beautification rituals, in practice, she is continuously preoccupied and aware of her attractiveness. She is convinced that Brian will not be attracted to her, and being cast as an ugly duckling, she continuously sees herself in this way. An important scene in the movie is a mock set-up of a bar situation at Brian’s house. Noelle decides that in order to see Brian’s true attraction, she and Abby should get drunk together in a competition between “Time Magazine’s Woman of the Year or Playboy Playmate of the Year”. Brian decides to do a photo shoot beginning with Abby. She hides under a black scarf, like a security blanket, using her hand to hide her face. On the contrary, Noelle, accustomed to modeling, is comfortable posing and presenting herself. Abby later confides in Brian, “I just don’t come in a perfect package, I come in this one.”

Thus, the romantic comedy implies that those women who resist and question the culturally created tools for beautification also identify with insecurity. A woman who displays less emphasis on her presentation, remains single, is labeled a feminist, and this combination is translated as less feminine.

Women like Abby can still be attractive through the American value of uniqueness. In the “Lover’s List” Brian prepares for Abby, he discusses the reasons why he loves her. Those points that relate to Abby and not Noelle, are about Abby’s cleverness and her personality. When Abby informs Brian that men view women as “Helen of Troy, men die for that crap,” Brian replies, “No, I love Abby for who she is. It doesn’t matter what she looks like.” This final statement is well received by Abby because it differentiates her from Noelle and makes her unique. This emphasis on uniqueness allows women to relate to Abby, and becomes the defining characteristic of the “hope” in romantic love.

It is the role of being single in the dating scene that mediates femininity and masculinity and elicits “hope”. In these particular films, a feminist and masculine label is assigned to the single female, which undermines her femininity. The romantic comedy positions women like Abby Barnes and Gracie Hart as being inadequate in physical attractiveness, but having good personalities and being unique. The American notion of romance offers this alternative and continuously constructs a dichotomy between appearance and personality. Attractiveness, masculinity, femininity, and romantic love are all culturally and socially defined, recreated continuously in daily life and the mass media. Being able to resist conventional beautification norms and yet maintain femininity, is incorporated through the unique identity. However, women are encouraged to take “responsibility” and beautify
their bodies and poise in order to change their state of single-hood and be rewarded with confidence.
Negotiating Business in the “World of Romance”

“My breath catches in my chest until I hear three little words . . . I hear nothing, not even a sound on the streets of New York. Just the beat of my heart. I have mail. From you.”

—Kathleen Kelly, played by Meg Ryan in You’ve Got Mail.

This message speaks “romance” to American viewers of the romantic comedy. The American notion of romance is based upon cultural constructs of masculinity and femininity. Popular romantic comedies most often convey the world of romance through heterosexual relationships. In You’ve Got Mail and What Women Want, the lead characters begin as enemies and end up falling in love. The male and female characters conceptualize work differently, in terms of cultural meanings attached to masculinity and femininity. Within this meaning system, women establish, maintain, and potentially sacrifice their careers in a much different way than men do. This analysis of You’ve Got Mail and What Women Want, deconstructs how female characters choose, prioritize, and negotiate work in the context of romantic love.

You’ve Got Mail presents the business rivalry between Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan) and Joe Fox (Tom Hanks). Their careers are juxtaposed, presenting a dichotomy between a small family-owned business, Shop around the Corner, versus the corporate world, FOX books superstore. Kathleen’s work is defined by nostalgia, the traditional, and the personal. On the other hand, Joe’s career is associated with progress, advancement, and success, as well as negative traits such as, the cold hearted and the impersonal of business.

Kathleen and Joe become enemies because they are business competitors. Alongside their feisty interaction in person, they have built an on-line relationship with screen names, “Shopgirl” and “NY152.” Because they don’t share personal details when they email each other, they don’t realize that they are in fact, Kathleen and Joe respectively. Through an email, they decide to meet for the first time. Joe arrives to the coffee shop after Kathleen. Before going inside to meet his blind date, he discovers that “Shopgirl” is Kathleen. He talks with her but doesn’t tell her that he is her date, “NY152.” Through further encounters, they build upon their on-line friendship and fall in love.

As the script interweaves the world of work with the world of romance, layers of American
notions of masculinity and femininity unfold. The film depicts Kathleen and Joe differently through the creative use of artifacts, rituals, and dialogue. We first meet Kathleen, dressed in pajamas and asleep in bed. Her actions reveal that she is somewhat disinterested in her boyfriend, Frank. Once certain that he has left the house for work, she playfully checks her AOL messages. She whispers the first line of her message from “NY152”; at this point we meet Joe Fox. The camera directs us to a different house where “NY152” lives. Joe is wearing dress pants, dress shoes, a blue dress shirt and a black tie. His dog Brinkley follows him as he sits at the kitchen table to read the morning newspaper. This is a typical shot of maleness: the business clothes and the dog as artifacts, and reading the newspaper as ritual. Similar to Kathleen’s behavior towards her boyfriend, Joe rolls his eyes at his girlfriend Patricia’s voice. Both Kathleen and Joe aren’t overly thrilled with their present love life.

Meanwhile, Kathleen reads “NY152”’s (or Joe’s) email. His message flirtatiously suggests that if he knew her home address, he would send her a bouquet of newly sharpened pencils. As Joe’s girlfriend leaves for work, he checks his own messages to find that “Shopgirl” (or Kathleen) has replied to his latest email. Her message to him reads, “What will “NY152” say today I wonder? My breath catches in my chest until I hear three little words. I hear nothing. Not even a sound on the streets of New York. Just the beat of my heart. I have mail. From you.”

Already, there is a clear distinction established between gender roles. Joe would send her a bouquet, not of flowers but of pencils. The idea of a bouquet is traditional in the dating scene, but one of pencils is unique. Immediately, this signals uniqueness about Joe, a trait that often defines potential romantic partners. On the other hand, so absorbed in her longing for Joe’s emails, Kathleen is oblivious to the rest of the world. Their dialogue demonstrates the qualities that define masculinity and femininity; these messages reveal their attractiveness to one another in the world of romance.

The romantic comedy develops lead characters by situating them in particular contexts of social space, and in relationship to other characters (friends and mentors). The central social space that defines Kathleen’s and Joe’s relationship is the workplace. Work is where they must negotiate competition. Kathleen occupies social space that is different than other romantic comedies such as Fools Rush In. She does not spend her time in the kitchen and laundry room. Instead, when she is at home she usually sits at her desk using her laptop. When she is not at home, she is either at work or

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with Joe in public spaces.

Although Kathleen is a business owner, her work is closely tied to traditional women's roles. The first scene that presents Kathleen's relationship to work, illustrates many artifacts associated with her career—artifacts closely linked with notions of femininity. While Kathleen and her (female) employee Christina talk about Kathleen's on-line relationship, the background set includes stuffed toys, children's books, and bean bags. When the store opens, Kathleen and her customers greet each other by name. Her bookstore prioritizes relationships between staff and customers as she believes that this personal touch sells books.

Kathleen learned how to run her business from the lessons of her mother which shaped her career aspirations. She explains this to Joe the first time he enters her bookstore. (They do not know they are on-line friends at this point, nor does Kathleen know that Joe is Joe Fox).

Believe me I have been in the business forever. I mean, I started helping my mother after school here since I was six years old. And it wasn't that she was just selling books. But it was that she was helping people become whoever it was that they're going to turn out to be.

Because when you read a book as a child, it becomes your identity.

Both Kathleen and her mother are represented as nurturers of children's imaginations and dreams, definitive of motherhood. Though competitors in the realm of business, they compete by being "feminine."

In the world of business, Joe is Kathleen's direct competition. FOX books superstore invests energy in the bottom-line. The first time that Joe is situated in the world of work, he converses with a (male) co-worker just as Kathleen did with Christina. The background set highlights construction, with artifacts such as hardhats and the beams that form the foundation of the building. This scene is quite different from the stuffed toys and children's books at Kathleen's bookstore.

A characteristic of romantic comedies, male friendships often help develop the contours of the lead male character's personality. In doing so, the lead is often defined as either Mr. Nice Guy or insensitive, or a transformation from insensitive to Mr. Nice Guy. In You've Got Mail the conversations between Joe and his co-worker Kevin consist of women and work. First, Joe tells Kevin about the latest email from "Shopgirl" and then they talk about the bookstore's competition.

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As they walk through the construction scenes of the new FOX books, they banter about “us vs. them”. Joe says that they will appeal to the community, “We’re going to seduce them with our square footage and our discounts and our deep armchairs. And our cappuccino. That’s right. They’re going to hate us at the beginning but we’ll get them in the end. Cause we’re going to sell them cheap books and legal addictive stimulants.” Joe is framed as a business “shark,” knowing how to manipulate consumers in order to make a profit.

While Kathleen’s mentor is her mother, Joe’s mentor is his father, and also his grandfather. Kathleen’s memories of her mother are dissimilar from the conversations between Joe and his father and grandfather. Kathleen’s mother is referred to as “enchanting.” A scene near the end of the film, paints her mother twirling her around when she was a little girl in the Shop around the Corner. This mother-daughter relationship is sweet, full of memories and introspection.

Scenes between Joe and his father reveal that Joe learns how to run a business from parental guidance, too. One scene situates Joe gazing at the skyscrapers of New York City from an office window, quite different from Kathleen and her mother twirling around on a small reading table. His dad prides that FOX books will put neighborhood bookstores out of business. Joe gestures his hands like a cowboy, shooting guns. When Joe talks about liberal readers in the community, potential protestors of the superstore, his father advises him to be a tough competitor. “Don’t do that son. Don’t romanticize them. Keep them from jumping down your throat.” The mother/daughter and father/son relationships characterize You’ve Got Mail. Through memories and conversations, we learn what lessons mothers pass on to their daughters, and fathers pass on to their sons, teaching femininity and masculinity in the world of work.

One wonders if these roles were reversed, would You’ve Got Mail still be enjoyed as a romantic comedy. Would the film have the same impact if Kathleen owned the superstore and Joe owned the children’s bookstore? Could their relationships with role models be switched—Kathleen learning how to be a business “shark” and Joe learning how to care about children’s identities?

The lives of Kathleen and Joe persistently collide in the worlds of romance and work. While becoming attracted to one another on-line, they don’t realize that they are in fact, business competitors. Their on-line relationship is built on friendship, one form in which romance is
constructed in American culture. This theme of loving someone for “who they are,” as you love a friend, is ideal in the world of romance.

Through their AOL messages, Kathleen and Joe learn from one another. She is the medium of the feminine while he teaches her how to be more masculine. It’s the balance of both femininity and masculinity that pervades the ideal American romantic partnership. In *The Truth about Cats and Dogs* and *Miss Congeniality*, the lead female characters gain confidence and liberation from their male friends, by becoming physically attractive to those same men that were initially only interested in friendship. In *You’ve Got Mail*, the construct of physical beauty is not as central to the male/female relationship, but rather, Kathleen gains confidence from Joe in terms of her success as a businesswoman. This issue of confidence is customary in romantic comedies, and often mediated by male/female friendships. Friendship ensures confidence before the relationship enters the romantic stage, alleviating initial insecurities.

Kathleen’s insecurity with her work is complicated. Although she believes in her business and her mother’s values, at the same time she confides in men about her worries. These worries reveal that she may believe in the business, but she does not always believe in herself. She asks her boyfriend Frank, “What is it that I do exactly? All I really do is run a children’s bookstore.” Frank amends her self-doubt by responding, “All you really do is this incredibly noble thing.” She responds, “Well, I don’t know,” and Frank continues, “Kathleen, you are a lone read . . . Standing tall. Waving boldly in the corrupt sand of commerce.” Frank reassures Kathleen that her life is meaningful. Still unsatisfied, she writes to “NY152”. “Sometimes I wonder about my life. I lead a small life, well, valuable but small. And sometimes I wonder do I do it because I like it or because I haven’t been brave?”

In the children’s bookstore scene, when Kathleen and Joe first meet, she is portrayed as both confident in her business and a “damsel in distress.” Joe appears to be a father, babysitting his stepmother’s two children. Kathleen is “the storybook lady,” reading the children a story, while wearing a maiden hat that signifies, “damsel in distress.” The choice of the maiden hat as a prop, whether intended or not, can be interpreted in the context of Kathleen’s business situation. Her competitor, Joe, sits right in her audience listening to the children’s story, and yet she has no clue that

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he is Joe Fox. A “damsel in distress,” she will soon rely on men’s advice and assistance in order to run her business effectively. To build the romantic story, Joe is clearly attracted to Kathleen, and avoids conflict by failing to tell her that he is Joe Fox of FOX books.

During their next encounter, at a business party, Kathleen confronts Joe about being Joe Fox. She suspiciously questions his intentions when he first visited her store, and didn’t identify himself. Joe taunts her by insulting her business sarcastically, “Me a spy. Oh absolutely. I have in my possession the super duper secret print out of the sales figures of a bookstore so inconsequential yet full of its own virtue, that I was immediately compelled to rush over there for fear that it was going to put me out of business.” Kathleen is speechless in response to Joe, but Frank comes to her rescue, asking, “How do you sleep at night (Joe)?” Kathleen’s business may be embedded with virtue, but in Joe’s world, his business is not at risk.

This encounter leads to a new dialogue between “Shopgirl” and “NY152.” The irony of course, is that it is Kathleen and Joe confiding in one another. Joe writes admittedly, “Do you ever feel you’ve become the worst version of yourself? That a Pandora’s box of all the secret hateful parts, your arrogance, your spite, your condescension, sprung open . . . I’m sure you have no idea what I’m talking about.” These traits, arrogance and condescension, are definitive of the male lead in Kathleen’s favorite Jane Austen novel, Pride & Prejudice; the novel enters the story periodically. Kathleen responds to his email, “No, I know what you mean. And I’m completely jealous. What happens to me when I’m provoked is that I get tongue tied. My mind goes blank. Then I spend all night tossing and turning, trying to figure out what I said. What should I have said for example, to a bottom-dweller, who recently belittled my existence?” Joe’s next email, immediately following her condemnation of the “bottom-dweller,” excuses his previous behavior (since he is the bottom-dweller she speaks of), “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if I could pass all of my zingers to you and then I would never behave badly and you could behave badly all the time. And we’d both be happy. But then on the other hand, I must warn that when you finally have the pleasure of saying the thing you mean to say at the moment you mean to say it, remorse inevitably follows.” This dialogue constructs femininity in terms of inarticulateness and worries, and masculinity in terms of frankness and boldness. Joe’s last sentence suggests an apology. He regrets the way he insulted Kathleen, though he
isn’t apologizing to her directly, as he doesn’t know that she and “Shopgirl” are one in the same. More importantly, the audience knows he feels remorse. They learn that underneath his insults, Joe is a “nice guy” and therefore a prime partner in the world of romance.

Kathleen’s confidence in her business continues to wane as FOX books gains in popularity and Shop around the Corner loses more customers. Again, she writes to “NY152” for advice. They both sit on their own beds, while writing back and forth to each other, this time using Instant Messenger. Their relationship assumes a more personal level as Kathleen admits details about her life—her business is in trouble. Joe feels confident, this is his area of expertise. He advises, “You’re at war. It’s not personal, it’s business. Recite that to yourself every time you feel you’re losing your nerve. I know you worry about being brave. Don’t. This is your chance. Fight. Fight to the death.” Kathleen recites this to herself, internalizing his advice, and punches the air with a fist. She abruptly closes her laptop as Frank enters the bedroom, as though he’s caught her cheating on him. She then asks Frank to write an article about the benefits of Shop around the Corner for the community.

With encouragement from Joe, as well as Frank’s article, Kathleen’s store quickly evolves from no business to a store full of customers. A news reporter interviews her in response to both Frank’s article and protestors at FOX books. The news reporter says, “Saving the Shop around the Corner. Now on the verge of having to close its doors because the big bad wolf, FOX books, has opened only a few hundred feet away.”

While Kathleen speaks to the news reporter on television, Joe and Kevin are working out in a gym, watching the news coverage. Joe tells Kevin, “She’s not as nice as she seems on television. She’s a pill.” Kevin says, “She’s probably not as fine... as on television?” Joe responds, “No. She’s beautiful.” Joe’s contradicting comments pinpoint the values associated with attractiveness and femininity. Even though Kathleen is physically attractive, she is also “a pill” because she has been straightforward and callous about promoting her business. The callousness edge of a successful businesswoman somehow erodes her femininity and beauty.

Troubled about her business, Kathleen writes to “NY152.” “I need help. Do you want to meet me?” After setting the time and place, Kathleen waits inside a coffee shop for “NY152.” The scenario signals all of the fears associated with a blind date. Kevin, by Joe’s side for moral support,
questions, “She could be a dog.” He checks through the window for Joe, and sees Kathleen Kelly waiting alone. “She’s very pretty,” he tells Joe. Joe’s ecstatic, until Kevin identifies the woman as Kathleen Kelly. Joe says he will stand her up but changes his mind and enters the coffee shop. Joe and Kathleen talk of *Pride & Prejudice* as she defends the heroine of the novel. The scene unfolds Kathleen’s identification with the lead female in the novel; when invested in their pride both women lose opportunities for love. Joe’s tie and jacket assume his business persona, while Kathleen’s beige cardigan is more casual.

Joe doesn’t reveal that he is “NY152,” her blind date, but instead suggests, “I think you’d discover a lot of things if you really knew me.” Kathleen attacks him, “If I really knew you, I know what I would find. Instead of a brain, a cash register. Instead of a heart, a bottom-line.” She leans back into her chair, smiling, “I had a breakthrough. I have you to thank for it. For the first time in my life when confronted with a horrible, insensitive person, I knew exactly what I wanted to say and I said it.” This breakthrough seems connected to Joe on two levels, as “NY152” and as Joe Fox. Joe convinced her to be more articulate (masculine) rather than polite and personable (feminine). Joe stays longer, to Kathleen’s frustration, as she still hopes for her “date” to show up. She insults Joe further, saying that nobody will remember him, but people will remember her mother. “They think her store was something special. You are nothing but a suit.” Joe responds to her shallowness, offended, “That’s my cue. Well, goodnight.”

The next day at work, Kevin asks about the “date.” Joe says that she was insulting and provocative, that the only positive thing was her hair. She turned out to be a “bitch.” Again, though physically attractive, her rudeness was unacceptable. Clearly, Joe’s ego has been hurt by Kathleen’s insults.

Although Kathleen had a breakthrough, and articulated her feelings to Joe on the “date,” she regrets what she said. She confides in “NY152” and explains that a man who has ruined her professional life showed up at the coffee shop. She was frank with the man about her feelings, but felt guilty. Joe first responds to the email by making up excuses as to why “NY152” didn’t show up. Eventually, he deletes these lies and apologizes. Both Joe and Kathleen have now apologized to each other, though still under their screen names. However, Joe keeps his knowledge of their identities a

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Kathleen decides to close down her store, breaks up with Frank, and writes again to Joe. While she explains her personal life, she sits eating on the floor, characteristic of what “women do” when depressed. She writes that she had to close down her business, and the resulting sentiment of feeling a “baby gap.” “The truth is I’m heartbroken. I feel as if a part of me has died, and my mother has died all over again.” If Joe had lost his business, how would his feelings have been expressed differently? Would he have explained the experience as a “baby gap,” definitive of motherhood? He may have internalized it as personal failure in regards to the cultural expectations set on male performance.

Even though Kathleen’s virtue is revered at the Shop around the Corner, her femininity isn’t enough . . . it won’t make the bottom-line. She is considered a “bitch” when she practices “masculinity,” those traits similar to Joe’s, like being frank in the moment.

Joe arrives at Kathleen’s house with a bouquet of daisies to ask for her friendship. He says that putting her out of business wasn’t personal, and that he wants to be her friend, “the impossible.” Kathleen continues to email “NY152” and Joe continues to run into her around town—they share coffee, lunch, walks down the street. Their friendship as Kathleen and Joe grows as he teases her about her Internet relationship with “NY152.” This deception persists as he chooses to conceal his knowledge from Kathleen. Instead, he uses their on-line relationship to know the precise things to say to her in person. His own insecurity and need to “prove” to her that he is a man she could potentially love, seems connected to this continuous deception. Finally, the day that Kathleen has planned to meet with “NY152,” Joe meets her earlier in the day. He opens up to her, saying that he wonders if under different circumstances, they would have dated. In the midst of his honesty, she leaves to get ready for her date. When she arrives to meet “NY152” for the second time, it is Joe. Through tears Kathleen says, “I wanted it to be you. So badly.”

Nothing is said about Joe’s deception. It’s as though he never used manipulation to win her heart. Becoming friends, they had joked about Kathleen’s on-line relationship. This humor and lightheartedness overrides Joe’s deception, concealing it, and taking seriousness away from the behavior. A similar theme of deception develops in What Women Want.

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Nick Marshall (Mel Gibson) and Darcy Maguire (Helen Hunt) have heard about each other through Chicago’s advertising agency gossip. Although Nick expects to be promoted to Creative Director at Sloane Curtis, his boss Dan hires a woman, Darcy. Nick, an avid chauvinist, believes that Darcy is hired simply for being a woman, not for her qualifications. He thinks that he deserves the position, and sabotages Darcy in order to impress his boss and win an account with Nike’s Women’s Division. After being electrocuted in his apartment, suddenly Nick can hear every woman’s innermost thoughts, he can read their minds. He uses this skill to discover women’s perspectives in order to be successful at work and to develop a stronger bond with his daughter. In the process, he deceives Darcy. Nobody except his co-worker knows of his newfound ability, and yet he uses this trickery for self-advancement. He begins to fall in love with Darcy and finally tells her that he sabotaged her by stealing her ideas. She forgives him because she has fallen in love with him too.

Nick’s personality is depicted through his own actions and through women’s conversations about him. The first voice in the film speaks to his masculinity. “A man’s man is the leader of the pack. The kind of man other men look up to, admire, and emulate. A man’s man is the kind of man who just doesn’t get what women are about.” Though we hear about Nick from his ex-wife in addition to his intern at work, we don’t meet him until a few scenes later. He is lying alone in bed with a red lipstick kiss on his cheek, and awakes when his maid tells him he is late to work. Not only is it clear that he slept with a woman the previous night, but he also flirts with two women at the coffee shop before ever arriving to work. The clerk, Lola, knows his order at the coffee shop. He is both a regular customer and regularly flirts with Lola, a ritual that defines his behavior with women. He spends his morning leisurely, more concerned about meeting women than getting to work on time.

Situated in the world of romance as a charmer, Nick’s chauvinistic behavior shapes his business demeanor. He treats women at work as either sex objects or secretaries, who should do everything upon his request. In relation to his boss Dan, Nick reveals his disinterest in the importance of women and advertising, and admits his preconceived notion of Darcy Maguire. Expecting Dan to promote him to Creative Director, Nick is on edge with Dan’s actual news. Dan explains the changes in consumerism and the growing demand of women “who control our advertising dollars.” He compares the present demands of advertising with the past, “The eighties were our glory days.”
were all about alcohol, tobacco, and cars . . . And then in the nineties men simply stopped dominating how the dollars were spent.” The more Dan discusses women’s issues, the more Nick becomes fidgety, looking at his watch.

Dan asks Nick, “What do you know about Darcy Maguire?” Nick responds half interested in what Dan has to say, “I hear she is a bitch on wheels.” Dan says that he has just hired her, “It’s a woman’s world out there. And getting into a woman’s psyche is not exactly your strong suit. You can get into their pants better than anybody on earth. But their psyche is a whole other ball game.” Nick is successful in the world of romance when it comes to sex, but he is not as capable of building relationships. Further, he has been unsuccessful at fulfilling Dan’s marketing goals at work. Dan mentions an afterthought, “And she’s smart Nick. She’s very smart.” Nick, recognizing that Dan has hired her as Creative Director, asserts, “She’s got what you need meaning she’s a woman.” Dan affirms his statement, “You know how we can compete with that.”

Though the film follows Nick’s character more thoroughly, we get to know Darcy Maguire as well. We first meet her when she directs the staff meeting on her first day at Sloane Curtis, invading Nick’s work space. Nick checks out her legs; she is wearing a long white coat, over a fitted black dress with a wide neck. She never dresses traditionally male in a business suit but rather, her style reflects her feminine “sexiness.” Dan introduces Darcy, “I know Darcy’s extraordinary reputation as a leader in the field precedes her. At BVD & O, Darcy led a creative team that snagged 500 million dollars in new business wins.” Nick resituates himself in his chair, uncomfortable with her resume. Not only is Darcy a woman, but Dan knows that her work is effective. As Darcy stands confidently at the head of the table, she talks about teamwork with a strong, articulate voice, “I know that if we put our heads and our hearts into this company we will deliver. Now I love challenges. I love hard work. But most importantly, I want the work we do to say something about who we are, how we think, what we feel.” In response to this comment, Nick’s friend looks at him and Nick coughs aloud, disrupting Darcy. She proceeds with frankness, “Let’s cut to the chase. How are we going to turn this company around?” She talks about the bottom-line, noting that Sloane Curtis had zero shares of the profit for female driven advertising last year. She assigns the group a project—each team member receives a pink box full of products that need to be advertised more persuasively to women. Darcy is serious.

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about her work, intelligent, and driven to succeed.

Darcy’s presentation sets her apart from Nick in the world of work. Her emphasis on hard work alongside Nick’s initial attitude, never arriving on time, suggests that women have to work harder for promotion. Further, she competes in a “feminine” way. She encourages that the company’s goals should represent “Who we are, how we think, what we feel.” Likewise, in You’ve Got Mail, Kathleen describes her mother’s work ethic, “It was that she was helping people become whoever it was that they’re going to turn out to be.” Femininity as contextualized in work seems to demand investing oneself, in her job. Work ethic reflects something about who women are as individuals—they identify with work in a different way than men.

We understand Nick’s masculinity through his relationship to social space. As the film focuses on his character development, we see him change from a world dominated by masculinity to a proposed insight into femininity. His transformation teaches us just as much or more about American notions of masculinity and femininity as does his relationship with Darcy. In the beginning of the film, the time spent in his apartment revolves around artifacts such as cigarettes, alcohol, Frank Sinatra, and the remote control. He skips over television shows that deal with women, such as women’s gymnastics. His adherence to cultural definitions of masculinity changes after he develops the ability to hear women’s thoughts.

His experiments with the women’s products from the pink box mark a transition from his chauvinistic behavior prior to hearing women’s thoughts to his sensitivity after he acquires this skill. The first time that he experiments with the products he is clueless about how to use them. However, after being electrocuted he tries on the products the next night, and begins his journey to understanding “what women want.” His ability to hear what women are thinking, seemingly changes him from a chauvinist to a “nice guy.”

Nick’s prevailing mentors are women. His daughter, the female interns at work, women in the break room, and Darcy, are all mediums through which he becomes more “feminine” himself. For example, his relationship with his daughter Alex requires him to enter women’s social space. After hearing Alex’s thoughts about wanting to go to prom, and getting advice from Darcy that the prom dress is most important, Nick takes Alex shopping for the dress. From shopping for her dress to

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consoling her in the ladies’ restroom at the prom, Nick becomes more aware of what women want. These artifacts suggest that women want to look beautiful and they often worry about most everything in their lives. Nick is transformed because he hears women’s thoughts and spends time in their space.

In the world of business, Nick and Darcy have access to a different relationship with their boss Dan. Though Dan is not a mentor exactly, he is a mediator that controls whether Nick or Darcy has their job. Darcy learns that she will never fit in quite the same as Nick at Sloane Curtis. For example, in one scene with Dan, Darcy, and Nick, Nick uses his ability to hear Darcy’s thoughts in order to answer Dan’s questions about ideas for an advertisement. Darcy, frustrated with herself for not expressing her ideas, comes across as inarticulate. Dan, impressed with Nick’s (or Darcy’s rather) ideas, invites him to stop by and share his Cuban cigars. Darcy says okay to his invitation, and Dan responds, “You smoke cigars?” Dan wasn’t inviting Darcy, only Nick. Small details like male camaraderie shut her out from the world of masculinity and work. The competition between Nick and Darcy at work is definitive of Nick’s internal conflict between femininity and masculinity. He must think more like a woman in order to impress his boss and get promoted to Creative Director.

Though Nick and Darcy are competitors, they become attracted to each other. The more Nick is able to read her mind, the more he connects with her on a level that makes her attracted to him. Nick shows Darcy a storyboard he’s created that has an image of a woman jogging; this will be their pitch to Nike’s Women’s Division to try and win the account. While Darcy looks at the storyboard, she thinks to herself that the title isn’t quite right. Nick, hearing her thoughts, says aloud what she’s thinking in her head. She struggles with the title, playing with the idea that when women run, there are no games. She thinks about the woman, jogging on asphalt. Nick states her ideas aloud and Darcy wonders to herself, ‘Did I think of that title or did he?’ With all of this said, they open up to each other about the gossip they heard prior to meeting one another. Darcy says she dreaded meeting him. “Before I came here, I heard you were a tough chauvinistic prick.” He says he heard gossip about her as well. She fills in the blank, “Sure, I’m the man-eating Bitch. Darth Vader of the ad world.” Nick says, “Verbatim.” Darcy was surprised, offended, “Really?” She walks away, thoughts swirling in her head, ‘but that’s not who I am at all.’ Nick uses her thoughts to reply in her favor. “Just for the

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record, I don’t think that’s who you are.” By using Darcy’s thoughts to his advantage, Nick promotes himself in terms of his career and his attractiveness to Darcy. Darcy falls in love with the side of Nick that is more sensitive, but it isn’t really ‘who he is’; he is deceiving her the entire time.

It seems that the romantic comedy represents men as more attractive to women if they internalize femininity. Meanwhile, men are attracted to women who are more feminine as well. When women practice traditional traits associated with masculinity, they are less attractive to men. Nick is not attracted to the Darcy that is a “bitch on wheels,” merely associated with a successful career. However, when she is situated in the world of romance, and constructed with insecurities that often define femininity, she becomes attractive. Her concern that Nick may think of her as a man-eating Bitch, reveals to Nick that she worries about what men think of her identity. Nick becomes attracted to Darcy after understanding that even though she comes across as a successful business woman, she is insecure about her work and herself.

We discover more about Darcy’s insecurities with her working self, during a date with Nick. She flirts with Nick at work and eventually calls him to tell him that she’s been thinking about him. They meet at a bar. She wears a black sexy dress and he wears a blue button up shirt, different than his black attire at work. Darcy confides in Nick about her ex-husband, who was her previous work colleague. “It was great in the beginning. And then it changed. Became competitive. Suddenly the better I did the worse we did. The price I pay for being me.”

Women risk something in the world of romance by being competitive in the workplace. Successful at their careers, can translate to “bitch” in the world of romance. Darcy accepted the new position at Sloane Curtis in order to be more independent from her ex-husband. She admits her apprehension, “I guess I wasn’t sure I could do the job. I mean I thought I could do it, but I’m finding Sloane Curtis a much tougher place to navigate than I thought. I’m sorry. This is insensitive of me. I know you were up for my job. I’m sorry that I’m the one that got it.” Not only is Darcy insecure about her ability to meet the company’s expectations, but she apologizes to Nick for being hired. Nick compliments her saying he has learned a lot from her because she “loves” what she does. Darcy repays the compliment and admits her own self-doubt, “I think Dan’s even wondering why he hired me. Really, I think the bloom is definitely off the rose.”

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Just as Kathleen doubted herself in the competitive world of work, Darcy experiences the same self-doubt. They confide in Joe and Nick respectively, which allows the men to demonstrate their sensitivity to women's insecurities. This "understanding" of women's issues, sets Joe and Nick apart from other men, constructing their uniqueness. Darcy says to Nick, "I don't think there are men like you." Nick enjoys these compliments and like Joe, avoids losing in romance by not admitting his lies. After their date, Nick still uses Darcy's thoughts to make decisions, but his conscience begins to weigh on him.

At work the following day, Nick tries to convince Darcy to present the commercial idea to Nike, because of his guilt. Now that he has fallen in love with her, and seen her insecurity/femininity, he wants to make amends. Darcy doesn't take his advice because she believes in him and (what she thinks to be) his successful ideas. "This is your baby," she says.

Nick's advice goes against his original intentions of stealing Darcy's job. But love is worth more than work now. At a similar point in You've Got Mail, Joe gives advice to Kathleen in regards to her career, telling her that business is like war. Though Joe doesn't recognize that he is giving advice to his competitor, Kathleen, it's the same script. Men give women the confidence they need to be successful at work.

Before presenting to the Nike representatives, Nick confides in his male co-worker. He tells him that he wants to write a "letter of confession" to Darcy. His friend responds, "Are you officially a woman now?" It's as though Nick would not apologize if he possessed the traits of masculinity. He replies, "Well, I wish. A woman wouldn't have screwed over a woman she loved. No, they don't think that way." Nick romanticizes women and the ideal of femininity and selflessness.

When Nick presents the ad campaign, all of his ideas derive from either Darcy's thoughts, or the women that he has listened to over the past days. While a woman jogs down an asphalt road on the movie screen behind him, Nick speaks eloquently,

You don't stand in front of the mirror before a run and wonder what the road will think of your outfit. You don't have to listen to its jokes and pretend they're funny in order to run on it. It would be not be easier to run if you dressed sexier.

The road doesn't notice if you're not wearing lipstick, does not care how old you
are. You do not feel uncomfortable because you make more money than the road.
And you can call on the road whenever you feel like it. Whether it’s been a day,
or even a couple of hours since your last date, the only thing the road cares about
is that you pay it a visit once in awhile. (Nike swoosh appears on the image)

Nike. (Slogan appears) No games, just sports.

It is clear that the sales pitch was effective. Darcy smiled at him throughout the pitch as well as Dan.
Nike will accept Sloane Curtis as their advertising agency. Nick has manipulated Darcy in order to
win this account. The cultural meanings in the sales pitch suggest that women spend their lives
worrying about how attractive they are, how to fake their feelings in order to be polite, and overall,
how difficult it is to be a woman. (This pitch parallels Nike’s actual ad campaign in American
marketing, which was very successful.)

After taking credit for the ad proposal, Nick types a letter to Darcy on his laptop. He is
interrupted by her, as she enters his office with champagne to celebrate. We know he wants to tell her
the truth but he prolongs it further. Similar to Joe’s deception with Kathleen, it seems acceptable that
Nick lies to Darcy as long as he feels remorse. Darcy takes Nick to see her new apartment, which she
can now afford with the position at Sloane Curtis.

After spending this second evening with Darcy, Nick confesses to Dan that the Nike campaign
was based on her ideas. Dan says, “Darcy? Please, I was there yesterday, the girl didn’t open her
mouth . . . I want you to step in here . . . This isn’t about? I mean I know she’s adorable . . .” Dan
assumes that Nick defends Darcy because he is attracted to her, not because Darcy is qualified to lead
the Nike account. He tells Nick that he fired Darcy and she didn’t even argue. Nick orders Dan to re­
hire her, saving Darcy’s job.

The final scene of the movie brings the truth to surface. Before arriving to Darcy’s house,
Nick is electrocuted once again and loses his ability to hear women’s thoughts. He calls her apartment
to no avail; she doesn’t answer the telephone. As the phone rings, we enter her apartment. She is
relaxing in the bathtub, similar to the scene in You’ve Got Mail when Kathleen sits on the floor
eating. A construction of how women deal with depressing events in their lives. Not able to contact
Darcy, Nick paces his own apartment. The camera spans across alcohol, but he isn’t drinking.

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opens the refrigerator, “What am I doing. She’s not in the refrigerator.” While Nick was associated with drinking in the beginning scenes, now when facing a problem, he recognizes his behavior. He has learned what is required in a relationship and leaves for Darcy’s apartment once again.

Darcy lets him come inside and she stands at the top of the winding staircase. Their conversation begins with talk of the apartment. “So you sleep here now,” Nick asks. She replies, “I thought I might as well give it a try before I sell the place.” He asks why she hasn’t been answering her telephone; Dan is giving her the job back. Darcy says, “I didn’t do the job I was hired to do. I would fire me too.” Unaware of Nick’s deception, Darcy believes she is at fault for losing her job. Nick confesses that someone had been sabotaging her, and it was him. “I was the dope with the corner office. And when you came with the job I was supposed to have, I mean, it didn’t matter to me that you were better at it than me. Or you had earned it more than I did. As far as I was concerned it was mine. And so I took advantage of you in the worst possible way.” This scene is parallel to the on-line conversation between Joe and Kathleen, when Joe writes, “Do you ever feel you’ve become the worst version of yourself? That a Pandora’s box of all the secret hateful parts, your arrogance, your spite, your condescension, sprung open . . . I’m sure you have no idea what I’m talking about.” Similar to Joe’s assumption that Kathleen wouldn’t be arrogant, Nick continues, “Have you ever done that? Taken the wrong road? No of course you haven’t. You wouldn’t do that. Somebody like me does that.” Nick’s apology is wrapped in compliments. “How smart you are. How good you are. Makes me want you even more. Boy, so it looks like I’m here at one in the morning trying to rescue you. But the truth is I’m the one that needs to be rescued here, sure wish I could read your mind.” It is important that he no longer has the ability to read her mind. It makes his transformation concrete and his feelings heartfelt.

Darcy says with seriousness, “If everything that you’re saying is true. If I really have my job back, then I think you’re fired.” Shocked, Nick has difficulty accepting her proposal. Embarrassed, he leaves through her front door. She calls to him, “I didn’t know what to react to first . . . what kind of knight in shining armor would I be, if the man I love needs rescuing and I just let him walk out the door?” He embraces her, “My hero.”

The dialogue in the last scene attempts to reverse gender roles. However, Darcy’s only
comment about his lies is that she will fire him. The prominent theme is that Darcy is willing to forgive Nick’s sabotage which threatened her career. Throughout the film, masculinity is constructed through Nick’s confidence in his own career. Darcy, being a “bitch on wheels” justifies Nick’s manipulation of her, even during the process of falling in love. But once he had learned “what women want,” he had to adjust to Darcy’s intelligence and success as his superior at work. The film downplays his chauvinism with humor. In addition, Nick plays an important role in building other women’s confidence in the film, such as co-workers and his daughter, which seems to negate his demeanor as a chauvinist.

Both You’ve Got Mail and What Women Want conclude that women experience worry and insecurity in the world of work. While women apologize for being successful in business, men are comfortable threatening women’s careers. The pretense of these films, as progressive in terms of gender roles, is constructed simply because the lead female characters are “business” owner and director. However, an analysis of artifacts, scenes, and most importantly, dialogue, reveals that femininity is constructed with traditional gender roles. Further, both films demonstrate men’s insecurities about sharing the business world with women. In this same context, women’s careers are sacrificed because of their own lack of confidence. Though Kathleen and Darcy may project confidence in their careers in public space, they admit to men in private space, that they doubt their value as business women.

The films are packaged as empowering women, as one title even suggests “What Women Want.” Darcy commends the Nike corporation, “They want to empower women . . . Nike is state of the art, hardcore woman power.” In fact, Nike shares the same values as Darcy’s boss Dan. Both want to “get into women’s psyches” with values of empowerment in order to profit. Likewise, Joe and Nick get into Kathleen’s and Darcy’s thoughts, without their knowledge, in order to build relationships with them. It’s quite clear that the outcome of romantic relationships supports traditional notions of femininity and masculinity. Like Miss Congeniality and The Truth about Cats and Dogs, these romantic comedies fail to re-negotiate femininity in a way that empowers women to be confident in themselves.

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