

# Sexual Subjectivity: A Semiotic Analysis of Girlhood, Sex, and Sexuality in the Film *Juno*

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**Abstract** Historical approaches to girlhood provide a basis for understanding changing cultural ideologies of sex, sexuality, and youth. While situating sexual desire, biological possibilities, and social responses to girls' engagement in sexual intercourse at the center of its plot, the film *Juno* depicts the transgressive sexual agency of a young girl without substantially disrupting longstanding discourses of femininity. Through an analysis of the semiotics of girlhood within the film, I argue that the girl figure in this representation signifies an amalgam of two traditionally dichotomized conceptions of "femininity." *Juno* serves as a particularly intriguing example of the ways in which adolescent female sexuality is conceptualized within popular western culture during the early part of the 21st century.

**Keywords** Agency · Gender · Girls · Discourse of femininity · Film · Sexuality · Visual culture · Media representations

## Initial Impressions

Upon my first screening of the film *Juno*,<sup>1</sup> I was immediately captivated by the main girl character (Halfon et al. 2008). Her outspoken and action-oriented persona conveys a notion of unbounded possibility. Throughout the film, the depiction of a

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<sup>1</sup> During its run in theaters, *Juno* grossed \$143,484,566 in the U.S. and \$227,656,145 internationally. The success of the film is characterized by its ability to straddle two worlds; originating as an Indie film production, *Juno* increasingly gained recognition among the Hollywood mainstream audience and was nominated for four Oscars. The recognition of the film as a sensation is largely attributed to its appeal on a broad level to mainstream America. The cinematic production of *Juno* stirred a variety of social responses in relation to cultural ideologies related to youth, sex and sexuality.

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young girl's sexual agency offers insight into newly emerging formulations of "girlhood"<sup>2</sup> and young female sexuality. Yet, after multiple screenings of the film I became curious about the extent to which *Juno* is an actual departure from past narrative characterizations of young female subjects. In this article, I argue that the distinction between *Juno* and conventional constructs of girlhood is overlaid with more similarities than differences. My purpose in exploring the text in relation to a semiotics of girlhood is to make visible the salience of dominant cultural discourses of femininity<sup>3</sup> which remain central to mainstream portrayals of young females and their sexual subjectivity.

In a visual era lacking widespread representations of strong young female characters not sexually objectified or singularly defined by their interest in romance, *Juno* offers a refreshing reconstitution of the young female subject. Multiple layers in the film produce a narrative that is familiar and yet distinct from culturally stereotypical approaches to the rendering of girlhood and sexuality. The film invites a multitude of perspectives and interpretations, not all of which may have been intended by screenwriter, Cody Diablo, or director, Jason Reitman. For the purpose of this article, my analysis centers around the semiotic portrayal of girlhood<sup>4</sup> in the film and the cultural implications of that representation on conceptualizations of young female sexuality.

## Sexing the Girl

Girls as sexual subjects remain largely invisible in western culture. In the past, notions of females as sexual beings with erotic drives and desires were all but absent within social constructions of girlhood (Gateward and Pomerance 2002; Pomerance 2001). The 2007 film release of *Juno* offers certain challenges to past conceptualizations of girlhood, yet the representation of female sexuality as tied to traditional notions of "femininity" remains substantially unchanged. *Juno* represents a cultural artifact of changing ideologies of girlhood, yet it also functions as an example of the pervasive ambivalence in the U.S. towards the sexual subjectivity of girls.

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<sup>2</sup> There are two clarifications that are central to the analysis of "girlhood" in textual and visual media. First, constructs of "girlhood" are multiple and complex—any singularized notion of girls' or "girlhood" is not only ineffectual but also potentially dangerous as well. Girls' life circumstances and experiences in the world are intricately linked to intersecting social variables that shape their material lives on the ground. Issues of class, race, sexuality, ability, and body type require a critical analysis of social constructions of girls and girlhood through a disparate and culturally contextualized lens. Second, media as a social institution is created, reproduced and maintained by concrete individuals. It is a human made social institution that people increasingly have access to within our growing globalized world. The importance of this fact is notable in that while power is certainly not unidirectional, and while individuals do indeed exercise agency when negotiating their relationship to media production, social imagery and cultural semiotics persist as social tools that largely serve to circulate dominant cultural ideology.

<sup>3</sup> Smith (1990) defines discourses of femininity as the "social relations of a 'symbolic' terrain and the material practices which bring it into being and sustain it" through interaction.

<sup>4</sup> Over the past two decades a variety of literature focused on female youth has emerged within the expanding academic research area of girls' studies (Bettis and Adams 2005; Davies 2003; Driscoll 2002; Hubler 2000; Walkerdine 1997). These works, while located within a variety of disciplines, provide a framework for examining semiotic constructions of modern girlhood.

In *Juno*, the representation of girls as sexless is challenged. Rather than a stereotypical depiction of the female body as sexual object, sexual desire is visibly expressed and acted upon by the girl character. Throughout the film, Juno is shown as agentive in the decisions she makes about her body, sexual desire, and modes of self expression; her classification as a girl who identifies as a “freak,” cares little about what other people think of her, and dresses in grunge style clothing connote an independent self-confidence that is apparent in all of her intimate relationships.

The ways in which young female sexual desire is depicted in the film, however, raise questions about the extent to which constructs of girlhood are still intricately tied to social ideas about purity, innocence, and vulnerability to sexual corruption even if and when that sexual corruption comes from within oneself. It is not desire itself that symbolically corrupts Juno, but rather her willingness to satiate her sexual desires. While the white female child has a historical association in western culture with a state of being sexless, the physiological capability for conception has paradoxically signified the female body as corruptible. Juno’s realization that she is pregnant is the lens through which the film depicts her sexual desire; in this context, Juno exists between childhood and adulthood, neither sexless nor parental, neither completely innocent nor entirely beyond “redemption.”

The focus in *Juno* on sexual relations among teens is not an uncommon practice in western representations of youth (Hentges 2005; Shary 2002). In fact, the way Juno’s story develops parallels the pervasive cultural ambivalence associated with the subject of sex and female adolescence. This ambivalence concerning girls’ sexualities is apparent in the widespread visual portrayal of females as both innocent and sexually alluring (Walkerline 1997). In visual imagery, girls are a particularly important population to study because as a social group they typically embody fears and desires of cultural transition. Metamorphosing ideas about gender are projected onto the young girl figure; Juno is a girl whose body and narrative is marked by cultural ideas about class, race, and gender.

The significance of the body in the film *Juno* on the one hand offers a different kind of aesthetic representation of girlhood, while on the other hand it continues to reflect dominant western socio-cultural themes of femininity and the body. Thus, though its construction of young female sexuality challenges the conceptualization of female youth as subjects without sexual desire, it simultaneously locates this narrative in traditional discourses of femininity which link sexuality to the bodily ability to procreate. Although the cinematic release of the film was touted by film critics as innovative, its departure from the conventional thematic female ‘Bildungsroman’<sup>5</sup> or coming of age story is minimal. The contribution that *Juno* brings to U.S. mainstream media in its depiction of girlhood need not, however, be discounted. It represents a visual characterization of newly emerging constructions of girls that fuse particular aspects of traditional “femininity” and “masculinity.”

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<sup>5</sup> The *Bildungsroman* is most simply referred to as a ‘coming of age story;’ however, this term offers a distinct approach to considering literary narratives that incorporate social and moral cultural lessons related to processes of maturation. In literary terms, the *Bildungsroman* is a novel of education. It is pertinent to investigations of “girlhood” specifically as it relates to novels that focus on the physical, psychological, and emotional development of girls within a specific cultural context.

This combination in the depiction of Juno produces an androgyny that typifies contemporary girlhood and calls to mind a fluidity of gender.

Juno is a girl who signifies an amalgam of previously disowned discourses of femininity (Taylor et al. 1995; Weis and Fine 2000). Her character indexes a model of girlhood strongly reminiscent of the markings of post-structuralist ideology. In this context, *Juno* offers a particular illustration of postmodern-girlhood<sup>6</sup> (Willis 2008). She is a girl who has neither super-powers nor excessive wealth; her strength is located in her decisive agency and use of voice. Juno is a particularly striking character because she does not fit neatly into the bifurcating model of the proverbial “good-girl/bad-girl.” She is a vibrant, witty, and vocal young working-class girl who faces questions about how to handle a pregnancy following her decision to have intercourse with a longtime male friend/beau. Although Juno lives in a small rural area, her actions do not mirror the classic characterization of a girl who feels ashamed or worried about what other people will say as a result of her being pregnant; her decision to have sexual intercourse and how she chooses to address the pregnancy are not determined by individuals outside of herself.

Juno’s agentic presence is apparent in her resolve about what she wants; once she decides that she wants to have sexual intercourse with her male friend/beau, Bleeker, she makes this happen. She shares with her best friend, Leah, that the sex (not the pregnancy) was “premeditated.” In addition, she tells Leah that the sex was “magnificent,” one of three occasions throughout the film when she uses this word to describe her sexual experience. Juno neither regrets having sex nor desires to be an immediate care-taker. In this way, Juno signifies an emerging cultural formulation of girlhood that incorporates independence and strength. This illustration offers a glimpse into early 21st century western notions of young female sexuality; it draws upon traditional discourses of femininity while simultaneously indicating generational shifts in the construct of girlhood.

## Cinematic Constructions of Sexuality and Youth

Ideas about youth, sex and sexuality explored within *Juno* present a textual representation of girlhood. While Juno faces the biological possibility of bearing a child, she does not fall into a typical script of feminine embodiment; she neither embraces the idea of becoming a parent nor confronts the situation with utter despair, helplessness, or even a sense of spiritual or physical ruin. This depiction of

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<sup>6</sup> Initially, I developed the concept of “postmodern-girlhood” as a tool for examining the role of postmodern discourses in 21st century U.S. constructions of “girlhood.” My goal was that this term be used as a means of talking about the effects of postmodern discourses, which integrated macro-social ideas about power and “femininity,” on changing cultural conceptions of “girls” and how changing images of “girlhood” might be impacting the ways that girls are thinking about themselves. Throughout my conversations with actual girls though, I realized that there was a more nuanced understanding of “girlhood” that the girls were describing. Girls utilized gender subject positioning as a means for playing and imagining different roles in the social world. This approach to “girlhood” incorporated theories of performativity in relation to gender roles and queer politics.

Juno corresponds to developing research in the area of girls' studies which suggests that female youth are actively engaged in negotiating their sexual drives, interactions, and behaviors (Brown 1998; Phillips 2000; Tolman 2002). Additionally, however, Juno's characterization has connections to historical ideas about youth and sexuality; her body remains central as a long-established frame of reference to female subjectivity (Walkerline et al. 2001). My analysis of *Juno* contributes to the emerging literature on girls by making visible the cultural implications embedded in seemingly progressive constructions of girlhood that remain linked to traditional western discourses of femininity. My argument is that the visual and symbolic use of the body as the primary signifier of female identity is problematic; it limits an understanding of physiology as diverse (Fausto-Sterling 2000), and reproduces a narrative of young female sexuality that is overly simplified, limiting the complexity and fluidity of postmodern-girlhood that Juno's agentive presence offers.

Cody Diablo's authorial intent in focusing on young female pregnancy in *Juno* was to provide a basis for interaction between "a very outspoken, unusual teenage girl and these two very kind of conventional antiseptic yuppies" (Celis and Diablo 2007).<sup>7</sup> The realization of Diablo's vision and focus on the relations between these seemingly disparate characters exists within a cultural milieu, yet the meanings derived from the text are constantly negotiated by audiences, created within a context, or additional milieu, of the viewer and the viewed (Berger 1973; Hall and Open University 1997). As Juno shares her story, the audience participates in the interpretation and production of cultural meanings. But what transpires reflects both a personalization of the narrative (Chodorow 1995) coupled with a collective reproduction of cultural perceptions about girls.

*Juno* offers insight into evolving images of girlhood; dominant cultural discourses of the time period<sup>8</sup> guide the representations of girlhood and sexuality

<sup>7</sup> Interview by Barbara Celis with Cody Diablo on Friday, December 7, 2007. Taken from: <http://www.ioncinema.com/news.php?nid=2383>.

Q: Why did you choose the subjects of teenager, pregnancy, etc. as a first screenplay?

DC: That's a tough one. "I think it was less the pregnancy that appealed to me than it was the interaction between this very outspoken, unusual teenage girl and these two very kind of conventional antiseptic yuppies. I liked the idea of that girl interacting with that couple, and then I tried to think, "What's a fascinating way that that could happen?" and I thought, "What if they were trying to adopt her baby?" To me, the entire movie sprang from that image."

<sup>8</sup> Historical ideas about youth and sexuality contribute to three prominent cultural discourses about girls during the last decade of the 20th century and early into the 21st century (Willis 2008). In popular writing about girls, the first and most deeply-rooted discourse focuses on protection (Egan and Hawkes 2007); it emphasizes girls as innocent and vulnerable subjects in need of protection from a violent and unsafe world. This approach is a distinctly adult (and primarily Caucasian upper-middle class) perspective that focuses on how to address social concerns related to "girlhood." The second discourse emphasizes 'girl-power' (Aapola et al. 2005; Harris 2004a, b; Inness 2004; Mazzarella and Pecora 1999). This discourse is complicated by its initial roots and connections to alternative and, more specifically, counter-cultural female empowerment groups (i.e.: the Guerrilla Girls and Riot Girls) and its later cooptation by corporate industries that reworked the idea of 'girl-power' and equated it with consumerism (Kilbourne 1999; McRobbie 2000). The third discourse is the "s-hero" or super-girl-hero (Inness 2004). This discourse is important specifically because it emerges in direct connection to the adult female discourse of the Super-mom or Super-woman; it maintains a link between girls' lives and their intricate connection to adult cultural discourses of womanhood. This discourse contributes to emerging constructions of "postmodern-

in the film. This semiotic portrayal of young female hetero-normativized sexuality tangentially marginalizes how, if, or in what ways Juno experiences sexual pleasure, and instead spotlights the female subject as body. At a textual level, the power of Juno as a young female character includes her willingness to resist certain dominant norms while leaving other normative discourses of femininity in place. The popular and well-received response to the film can largely be attributed to the cinematic treatment of a girl's sexuality not as the focus of the story but rather as the basis for telling an older, more familiar, story embedded within this seemingly new narrative. Despite Juno's unusual outspokenness, the exploration of her sexual desire is contextualized within a story about conception. The girl as a sexual subject enters cultural visibility through the visual representation of Juno as a potential conceiver/producer of the human species.

In *Juno* a young girl's body is marked as a text on which cultural confusions about sex, gender, and sexuality get played out. The young female body serves as a site for cultural struggle and a carrier of cultural conventions (Bordo 1993). Juno's body acts as a medium of culture that functions both as a metaphor and transmitter of cultural ideas about female sexuality. During an era in which visual culture serves as a primary medium of communication (Postman 1985), representations (and the lack thereof) of adolescent girls' sexualities provide information about how the body functions as a site for the embedding of cultural ideals (Bordo 2004; Brumberg 1997). The symbolic subject position of "girl" operates at an intersection between cultural ideas about gender, sexuality, and childhood (Willis 2008).

*Juno* replicates the long-standing association between female sexuality and procreation. A narrative focus on sexual innocence is replaced by the heterosexual highlighting of conception rather than sexual desire. Juno's experience of sex, intercourse, and psychological/emotional growth is tied to a biological narrative. In this construction, her existence as a sexual being is overshadowed by her physical ability to become pregnant. The costs of this culturally familiar approach to young female explorations of sexual desire are multiple. On a basic level, heterosexual intimacy is privileged. Juno's strong sense of self and clarity of desire operate within the normative framework of heterosexuality. Her positioning as heterosexual facilitates her ability to negotiate other social norms of "girlhood" while leaving primary features of femininity unchallenged. Juno's visibility as a pregnant teen publicly confirms her heterosexual status and reproduces the narrative construction of heteronormative girlhood.

The emphasis on Juno's pregnant body situates her sexual desire as peripheral to the possible results of unprotected heterosexual intercourse. The proverbial link between female sexuality and procreation sidesteps the exploration of young female

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Footnote 8 continued

girlhood" (Willis 2008) and draws heavily on imaginary realms that effectively communicate a cultural fantasy about feminized ways of occupying multiple social roles in a changing world. Each of these discursive approaches to "girlhood" builds upon intersecting cultural conceptions connected to circulating ideas about sexuality. The depiction of girls as sexless affirms a politics of desire that denies girls the right to a full spectrum of identity expression. This rejection of female sexuality for youth is firmly rooted in patriarchal ideology and reproduced within major social institutions.

sexual desires, and further negates curiosity about how female youths experience sexuality beyond the possibility of conception.

### The Sex Scene in Juno

In this section, I describe the first minute and 28 s of the 1-h and 35 min film. This is the only scene dedicated entirely to Juno's interest in sex and her involvement in a sexually intimate situation. The depiction of this heterosexual narrative makes visible an instance of young female sexual drives: Juno visibly expresses desire for touch, pleasure, connection, contact, and control.

A blank screen displays the words "Autumn," and blackness fades into an image of a young girl standing outside on a lawn of green-grass. She is dressed casually in blue-jeans, a brown t-shirt under a sweater, and red sweat-shirt jacket. She faces a brownish-orange lounge chair, drinking bright orange liquid from a bottle. Juno starts by telling the audience in a voice over that "it started with a chair." As she speaks these words, the camera moves from a wide angle to a facial close-up of her blank, expressionless face. Her words allude to the act of sexual intercourse while conveying a cultural silence around the naming of issues concerning sexual intimacy.

Juno's voice guides the viewer through her memory of a moment; her story communicates a private narrative of sexual desire. In the scene that follows, the audience observes an early 21st century depiction of young female sexuality. The boy figure present in the scene is viewed through the perspective of the girls' eyes. The film then cuts to an indoor living room scene. The lighting is dim and the color scheme is in varying shades of brown. Parisian lounge music plays quietly in the background. White legs of initially indeterminate genders are visible and facing one another. The camera angle is low, focused on the back calves of the standing pair of legs. In the background we see a seated body in soft focus, arms resting on the sides of a brown-orange lounge chair. White cotton underwear with a red cherry pattern, reminiscent of child-like apparel, fall to the floor and reveal the standing legs as female.

Slipping one foot and then the other out of the fallen underwear, the young girl slowly approaches the seated figure. Symbolically exhibiting control of the situation, the physical positioning of her body indicates an assertive stance. As she approaches her seated companion, the camera cuts to an upper-body shot of her face. She is wearing a red t-shirt and looking down at the floor. Her eyes move up and down, then back up again as her face draws closer to the seated figure in the chair. We hear her breathe deeply; the camera then cuts to a side view of only her lips, chin, and a wisp of dark hair. The background is in soft focus, the shape of her face visible in a golden lit backdrop. Leaning in forward, her face is parallel to the face of the seated figure and we see two pairs of lips crossing. Her head is beside his, no longer in full view; we hear a male voice say tenderly into her ear, "I've wanted this for a long time." She replies, "I know." We hear him breathe in deeply, saying "Wizard." The camera then cuts to the backside of the chair; a brown head of hair is

visible and we see the other side of her face. She licks her lips and bends forward kissing the side of his face.

Juno's sexual agency in this narrative conveys cultural ideas about contemporary "girlhood."<sup>9</sup> During this scene of sexual intimacy, Juno acts as an initiator. Her physical positioning on top during intercourse signifies her active role in erotic engagement. In this respect, the film *Juno* represents a notable change in cultural constructions of heteronormative girlhood. The depiction of a female youth who indulges in sexual contact on her own terms indicates a shift in the social recognition of girls as sexually desiring subjects.

*Juno* takes a different approach to the sexual subjectivity of girls. Contemporary discourses about girls are emblematic of ambiguity and ambivalence regarding shifting notions of gender and sexual relations; yet, a critical analysis of the sex scene provides insight into multiple discourses about "postmodern-girlhood." Although Juno is situated as dominant in the sex scene, the only words she speaks during this scene of intimacy are in response to the sexual fulfillment of her male partner's pleasure. When Bleeker whispers in her ear, "I've wanted this for a long time," Juno replies, "I know." Though it would be simple to shift this dynamic, Juno's reply is not "me too," which would make visible her own sexual desire; discursively, the scene emphasizes his pleasure while shadowing Juno's erotic drive. The visual characterization of Juno's sexual agency thus needs to be examined in terms of what is shown and what is not shown. Physically, Juno's actions convey her control within the sexual interaction; however, what remains clearly absent from this depiction is her own physical pleasure. While her male partner's orgasm is indicated by his calling out of her nickname, "Wizard," Juno's orgasm or display of sexual climax is missing.

Gendered discourses of sexuality that negate the visibility of girls' sexual gratification overlay this scene. Deficient attention to Juno's sexual pleasure (or lack thereof), coupled with the romanticized depiction of sexual intimacy and dialogue focusing on the male partner's sexual desire, speaks to dominant constructions of femininity. Juno's expression of how she feels in her body is almost entirely non-existent through the duration of the film. Other than a few minor comments about indigestion and constipation once she learns that she is pregnant, Juno's detached and non-vocalized experience of the body is particularly striking within the narrative's growing focus on bodily change. And, while Juno states on three different occasions throughout the film that her experience of sexual intercourse was "magnificent," at each instance this disclosure remains unexplored.

This divide between what is visible and what remains left to the imagination of the viewer is significant in *Juno*. Especially with regard to girls' active pursuit of sexual satisfaction, *Juno* departs from mainstream film productions that show girls engaged in ritualized behaviors (i.e.: the use of make-up, dressing-up, styling of

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<sup>9</sup> As social agents, girls are undoubtedly constrained by their various social locations and accompanying privilege. In this context, concepts of "girlhood" need to be understood as multifaceted and complex positions that female youth regularly negotiate, appropriate, and agentively occupy. The sexual agency that girls exert in relationships must be understood in a cultural context. While the most direct way to understand how girls draw from social discourses about sex is to speak openly with girls, an equally valid but less direct avenue is to examine textual narratives and visual representations of girlhood.

hair, shopping for clothing that increases attractiveness) aimed at enhancing their sexual appeal. For females, the narrative of sexual pleasure is predominantly embedded within heteronormalized discourses of femininity that include participation in cultural practices of aesthetically shaping the body (Brumberg 2000; Davis 1995). *Juno* marks an important shift in the depiction of female sexual subjectivity; it introduces the pursuit of female physical pleasure without a culturally expected preoccupation with the body. The act of beautifying or primping as a precondition to sexual fulfillment is discarded, and yet the idea that sexual interaction must be delayed until after pregnancy remains staunchly in place. In two separate scenes, the pregnant body is characterized as off-limits in terms of sexual interaction. The first scene takes place when Juno informs a receptionist at the women's clinic that she is "off sex" until after the pregnancy. The second instance occurs during a dialogue between Juno and Bleeker. As the two youth sit upstairs alone in Bleeker's bedroom, Bleeker suggests that he and Juno might "get back together" after she has the baby. The implication in both of these scenes is that the state of pregnancy makes the body either undesirable and/or assumes that the pregnant body is without sexual desire.

### Naturalizing Girls' Desire

Although the pursuit of sexual satisfaction for adult women has become somewhat more visible in popular culture, girls' expressed satiation of sexual desires remains largely taboo. The cultural trepidation attached to the visibility of young female sexuality (Irvine 1994; Phillips 2000; Tolman 2002) continues to resonate within *Juno*. The film reinstates a traditional discourse cautioning girls that sex and sexual desire are dangerous. While Juno as a character resists normative framing of youthful sexuality through her direct and open display of desire, her story simultaneously reproduces traditional discourses of femininity linking female sexuality to pregnancy and the female body to "nature." This narrative of girlhood not only connects female sexuality to pregnancy, but also reasserts a construction of the female body within nature that does little to disrupt conventional discourses of femininity.

Seasonal markers are used symbolically to signal the changes that occur in Juno's body. Throughout the film, Juno's physical state as pregnant is interconnected to a narrative about childhood lost. This thematic loss of innocence associated with the end of virginity, the literal changing of the seasons, and the physical capability to conceive is, thus, particular to Juno's female subjectivity. This is apparent in the gendered ways in which sexual coupling carries different meanings depending on the body/sex classification of the subject; a cultural loss of innocence is experienced differently for Bleeker, who is described in a voiceover by Juno as "going live." This description stands out in sharp contrast to Juno's recall of sexual intercourse continually prefaced and/or followed by a focus on her physical status as pregnant.

In *Juno*, the culturally symbolic loss of innocence is specific to females who express their sexuality. This is evident in the response that Juno receives from her step-mother when she shares the information that she is pregnant. The cultural connection between young female bodies and the symbolic representation of their innocence is apparent in the step-mother's reply: "I had no idea you were even

sexually active.” The response is deeply scripted; it offers a stereotypical cultural conception of mothers as uninformed, unaware, or unwilling to address issues of sexual development with their daughters or step-daughters, even when they themselves once negotiated discourses of girlhood. The scripting of this dialogue further implies that the dominant discourse of girlhood precludes sexual desire/agency.

Within the cinematic telling of the sex scene, Juno’s memory serves as a psychological tool for the recall of desire and its relationship to the physical state of her body. This raises a question concerning how sexual intercourse is popularly portrayed in the narrative. What implications are embedded in a cultural discourse that constructs heterosexual female desires primarily from a perspective of nostalgia and consequence? And, how is cultural thinking about sexual activity defined differently depending on the sex of the body that each character occupies? While *Juno* offers a narrative in which female sexual desire is central to the unfolding of the plot, it simultaneously presents the exploration of heterosexual intimacy as an imminent danger, and directly links the expression of female sexual desire to risk.

Juno’s character embodies social controversies about the extent to which girls can, should, and will be recognized as full sexual subjects. The textual emphasis in *Juno* on physicality and the body connotes conventional discourses of femininity central to current constructions of girlhood. The young girl’s experience of sexual intercourse is primarily expressed in a narrative about her changing body. Throughout the film, Juno’s discussion of sexual enjoyment is minimal. At three points, Juno refers to the act of sex directly. On each occasion, her sexual desire enters the conversation in parallel with her physical status as pregnant.

In the first such instance, Juno is standing outside on a green lawn, gazing reflectively on a discarded lounge chair and an oddly arranged living room set. She is abruptly jarred back into the present moment when a small leashed dog barks at her. Juno is in full upper-body view. She has just been recalling her sexual encounter. She states, “This is the most magnificent discarded living room set I’ve ever seen.” Holding a large container of orange Sunny-D in one hand, she takes in a hearty gulp and then wipes her lips with the back sleeve of her red sweat-shirt jacket. In the scene that follows Juno is shown walking to the local drug store to take a pregnancy test. On the second occasion that Juno talks about her physical enjoyment of sex, it is with her close friend, Leah. She shares her predicament of being pregnant and responds to Leah’s question about her experience of having sex with Bleeker. The third instance occurs when Juno communicates her pleasure in having sex as a retort to her father’s response when he learns the identity of her chosen sexual partner. Upon stating that the person she had sex with was Paulie Bleeker, her father makes an emasculating joke. Juno responds, “You know Paulie is actually great in chair.” Following this declaration, at no point during the film do either of her primary caretakers inquire about or engage in conversation with Juno about her own experience of having sex.<sup>10</sup> These three instances comprise the sum

<sup>10</sup> This moment yet again calls attention to what is framed cinematically seen/heard, as well as that which is not. In this sense, Juno as an original screenplay does little to disrupt traditional discourses of sex or sexuality.

total of Juno's verbal expression of sexual pleasure. In each instance, Juno's condition as pregnant is what gives rise to any exploration of her actual experience of sexual intercourse. Young female sexual desire is never perceptible in and of itself; the macro-narrative within this narrative significantly points toward the cultural invisibility of girls' sexual desires. In order to maintain Juno the character as a child, *Juno* the film must situate her sexual agency and its adultifying consequences as more significant than her desire.

Although the portrayal of girlhood in *Juno* parallels a trend in Hollywood mainstream film production, which privileges a hegemonic heterosexuality and affirms a politics of desire that denies the right to a full spectrum of identity expression, the film also produces a fusion between hegemonic discourses and feminist discourses of sexuality. In the scene in which Juno informs Bleeker that she is pregnant, she apologizes for having sex with him. She tells him, "I'm sorry I had sex with you. I know it wasn't your idea." Juno's statement illustrates the tension within macro-social productions of postmodern-girlhood; her statement is at once disconcerting and liberating. Her apology for physical desire, contact, and sexual fulfillment replicates traditional discourses of femininity that deny sexual gratification to females. The declaration that sexual intercourse with Bleeker was not his idea, but rather her own, relieves her male partner of any responsibility for the pregnancy. In this framing, Bleeker is released from participation in any future dealings with the pregnancy because the idea to have sex was not his. At the same time, this construction releases Juno from discussions about blame. She creates a type of autonomous heterosexuality, and in so doing, she claims her sexual desire by taking full responsibility for her actions, decisions, and sexual subjectivity.

During the scene in which the two youth engage in sexual intercourse, verbal communication between Juno and Bleeker is brief. The lack of dialogue during sex conveys a cultural conception of conversation as simply unnecessary during physical intimacy. Juno's decision to be sexually intimate with Bleeker appears mutual; reciprocal erotic indulgence thus characterizes the sexual interaction between these two youths. Notably, the western romanticized depiction of sexual desire as merely understood produces the absence of a conversation about birth control and sexually transmitted disease. This absence is especially striking when later in the film the audience learns that Juno's decision to have sexual intercourse was well-thought out; it was not a spontaneous act, but rather a plan for sexual engagement that was constructed over a full year of reflection. This raises a question that would significantly impact the film production of *Juno*, perhaps giving rise to an entirely different narrative about children, youth, and sexuality. Juno has immediate and affordable access to drug-store pregnancy testing supplies; why does she not have similar ease of access to and thus decide to use any variety of birth control methods?

### **Reconstituting "Masculinity"**

Although Bleeker does not challenge dominant cultural depictions of males as sexually desiring subjects, his bodily positioning in the sex scene suggests the

potential of a non-aggressive masculinity. In this way, the film produces a model of “masculinity” perhaps even more radical than the shifts that it offers in terms of discourses of femininity. Bleeker is selected specifically by Juno as a sexual partner who embodies a type of newly emerging alternative “masculinity.” Bleeker’s characterization as an athletic runner is distinctly positioned in contrast to the male football jocks who comb their high school hallway.

During intercourse, Bleeker verbally shares his desire for sexual connection. Upon learning that Juno is pregnant, his response to Juno indicates recognition of his own responsibility in the situation. After visibly swallowing down hard, Bleeker asks the question, “What should we do?” This construction of young “masculinity” denotes an acknowledged accountability and willingness to participate in the pregnancy process. Bleeker, nevertheless, tells Juno without reserve that she should “do whatever you think you should do.” His words indicate a respect for Juno and recognition of her right to decide what she wants to do with her body. Later in the film, when Bleeker learns that Juno is going to have her first ultrasound, he asks if she would like him to be present. Juno nonchalantly declines his offer. The film offers a few brief moments of conversation about the pregnancy between the couple, but primarily situates Bleeker as peripheral to the developing pregnancy and plans for selecting a future adoption family. This framing unfortunately impresses the hegemonic cultural idea that repercussions for sexual exploration are infinitely different for boys and girls.

The response of Juno’s father’s to the pregnancy is similarly indicative of cultural ideas about “fatherhood” and changing constructs of masculinity. Upon learning from Juno that she is pregnant, her father states, “Boy, I thought you were the kind of girl who knew when to say when.” These words point toward the normalized cultural belief that females are expected to restrict sexual desire, their own as well as the desires of others. The excess of female expressed sexual desire has historically been characterized as pathological.<sup>11</sup> The paradigmatic pathology of female sexuality is directly related to social constructions of the female child as sexless, without desire, innocent. One aspect of Juno’s father’s response is nevertheless a sign of generational change; the father does not say that Juno should know when to say “no.” Instead, there is an unquantifiable openness to the likelihood that girls of a particular developmental age are sexual beings with desires for physical pleasure. Yet, the dominant perception remains structurally unchanged that girls are responsible for stopping sexual gratification.

Throughout this girlhood narrative, innocence, protection, and corruption operate as fundamental concepts attached to ideas about sexuality and circulating discourses of femininity. Although Juno would most definitely reject a cultural classification as innocent, when she responds to her father’s statement that he thought *she was the kind of girl who knew when to say when*, she conveys ambiguity. She in turn tells him, “I don’t really know what kind of girl I am.” Juno’s response to her father is not in any respect an agreement with his idea that she should know when to stop her

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<sup>11</sup> In classic psychological interpretations of female sexuality, Freud characterized the onset of female puberty to be “marked in girls by a fresh wave of repression” that enables girls’ developmental transition toward becoming socially acceptable female subjects (Gilligan 1982).

sexual interactions. Contrary to her father's claim, Juno's words imply that there are multiple ways to embody both sexuality and identity. Her statement is most clearly a comment on the fact that sexuality for girls is complicated by social discourses that pronounce girls as powerful subjects but simultaneously impose constraints on their diverse sexual existence and full expressions of sexuality. This dialogue symbolically communicates changes in social ideas about "girlhood." Juno's words convey the ideological construction of girlhood during the early part of the 21st century as unstable, in transition.

A danger of female sexuality is that it can either result in a confirmation of "masculinity" or the emasculation of a male subject; in *Juno*, a girl's sexuality is the cause for both. Bleeker's "masculinity" is confirmed by sexual intercourse, while Juno's father's "masculinity" is questioned as a result of his inability to control and restrict his daughter's own sexual drives. The father's masculine authority is asserted when he serves in the role of protector. Additionally, Juno's choice of Bleeker offers a non-dominant masculine referent as an object of desire, moving *Juno*, the film, squarely into the 21st century.

### Social Management of Girls' Sexualities

After Juno discloses to her guardians that she is pregnant, the film presents a cultural narrative about sex as dangerous for girls and the need for them to be protected from their own expressions of sexuality, as well as those of others. The response that Juno has and receives when she shares with her adult caretakers that she is pregnant indicates an emerging generational tension between the social acknowledgment of girls as sexual subjects and the cultural resistance to an acceptance of girls as sexual citizens.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, the use of criminalizing language is primarily employed by Juno, not the adult figures in her life. When Juno stands before her parents with her closest friend Leah nearby and tells them that she is pregnant, Juno asks that her caretakers show her "mercy." Her parents (biological father and step-mother, Bren) are seated on a couch in a downstairs living room. Upon receiving the information that Juno is pregnant, neither caretaker displays serious shock or anger. Juno's plea for "mercy" connotes traditional ideas about girls and sexuality. The girl as subject embodies the cultural fear and ambivalence about the sexual subjectivity of girls, while the adult figures in the film signify a change in cultural constructions of girlhood. The response from her father and step-mother, their joint lack of astonishment, hints at shifting standards of judgment about girls and sexuality, as well as emerging models for parenting in the early part of the 21st century.

In the scene following Juno's disclosure that she is pregnant, the father asks his current wife (only after Juno exits the room), "Tell it to me straight, Bren, do you think this is my fault?" The rhetorical structure of this question contains a social questioning about the idea of the parent-child bond as a protective relationship.

<sup>12</sup> The recognition of children as sexual is further complicated by the language used to describe the role of parenting. Terms such as guardian and caretaker are invested in notions of the child as not fully human, thus citizenship is inconceivable.

While this notion is firmly embedded in western thought, the cultural emphasis on protection is a social creation. In reconstituting “masculinity,” the film invites a perception of fathers as active participants in the process of childrearing. Rather than traditional depictions which might include a father’s disownment of his unwed daughter after receiving information about her being pregnant, Juno’s father voluntarily offers his assistance in helping Juno screen and select the future adoption family.

Juno’s father’s question as to whether or not he is at fault for her pregnancy reflects a deeper question about cultural constructs of masculinity and parental responsibility. A paternalistic model of family as portrayed in *Juno* both perpetuates patriarchal ideas about sex and sexuality and hints at different ways of developing the relationship that exists between parent and child. The ways in which modes of protection are shaped within the family unit are inseparable from cultural ideas about gender and rationalizations for who needs protection and from whom. Juno’s father is positioned in a seemingly traditional way in relationship to his daughter; his primary social role as the “protector” of the family is thus questioned when Juno’s indulgence in sexual pleasure results in unexpected pregnancy. Nevertheless, Juno’s father participates in questioning constructions of a normative family unit and continues to play a central role in Juno’s life.

### **The Bad Girl and Good Mom**

Understanding girlhood requires attention to multiple aspects of Juno’s identity; her class, race, and age play a central role in her experiences of gender (Bettie 2003). Juno’s experience with sex, sexual desire, biological possibility, and social responses to her actions are each filtered through a lens of culture. In a classic iconic sense, the film initially portrays Juno as a stereotypical “bad girl.” Juno’s white privilege is offset by her working class status, and in this raced and classed context, her decision to indulge in sexual intimacy and intercourse is textually unsurprising. Additional symbolic indicators contributing to this lack of surprise include Juno’s geographical place of inhabitation and education. The newspaper ad that Juno uses to find the future adoption family highlights these two factors. The publication fittingly entitled the “Penny-Saver” contains an advertisement that reads:

Educated successful couple wishes to adopt a child. We live in a suburban area near good schools and playgrounds. The child will be raised in a loving atmosphere full of laughter, learning and teddy bears. Please call Vanessa and Mark at 320-555-0166.

Although the ad is barely readable to the film audience, Juno and her close female confidant (Leah) emphasize the suitability of this couple as “beautiful even in black and white.” As the two girls sit facing each other on a public park bench, Juno informally selects an adoption couple for her unborn child. Small but meaningful details that characterize the landscape of Juno’s daily life visually distinguish her as a young, unmarried, working-class, white girl with minimal material or educational prospects.

The contrast between Juno and the selected adoption couple is significant because it speaks to social and cultural ideas about who is best suited to raise a child. While the cultural acknowledgment of girls as sexually desiring subjects is more strongly resisted than the positioning of girls as sexually desirable, Juno is a character who achieves familial and social acceptance because she recognizes her limitations as a young working-class girl and her constrained ability to raise a child. Her indulgence in sexual activity is forgivable, even expected, and this is possible in large part because she decides both to carry the pregnancy to full term and to give up her full legal rights as a parent. As she shares her decision with her father and step-mom, Juno concedes, "It's just that I'm not ready to be a mom."

The emphasis on motherhood throughout the film implies that while all females, as a result of their bodies, should expect to become "mothers," there are clear distinctions between who qualifies as a "good" or "bad" mother. The idealization of motherhood in *Juno* is most clearly represented by Vanessa, the prospective adoption mom. Initially, Vanessa is positioned as a stable, Caucasian, upper-middle class wife of a happy marriage. Vanessa goes so far as to tell Juno that she feels she was, in fact, "born to be a mom." However, as the story unfolds, the marriage of the adoption couple deteriorates. As a result, Vanessa's status as a "good" mom becomes somewhat destabilized; although she appears to be economically stable, Vanessa's appeal as a single-mom is noticeably less valuable. This is apparent in Juno's consideration of whether the loving couple that she envisioned for her future child will be equally suited and cared for by Vanessa, once the divorce is final and she becomes single.

Throughout the narrative the commentary on parenting indicates not only a destabilization in cultural constructs of "girlhood" but also in those of "motherhood." Yet not surprisingly, traditional ideas about motherhood are reinstated through the use of a female figure as the ultimate parent/caregiver. The attribute of nurturance, which Juno as a result of her girl/child status is unable to claim, is easily transferred onto an adult character of specific age, class and gender.

## Conclusion

Although *Juno* has received praise for its originality, the story is most notable as a surprisingly familiar cultural fairy-tale. Juno's character is understandable as a metaphor for conditions of female sexuality that continue to limit girls' full expressions of sexual desire. Like the character of Juno, girls today are caught between increased expectations of agency on the one hand and continuing restrictions of their sexual expressions of desire on the other. In conceptualizing Juno's agency it is important to recognize the material and social ways in which Juno's agentive "choice" is constrained. Juno is not a free agent; her actions and her agency operate in connection to material and social structures influencing her daily livelihood. The central paradox within *Juno* is that it celebrates agency for girls while simultaneously linking that agency to their physical desirability and role as potential reproducers.

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