HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Sexuality in Cinema

The Graduate (1967)

Mike Nichols (1931-2014)



Director Born Igor Mikhail Peschkowsky in Berlin, Germany, Nichols lived there until the Nazis began arresting Jews in Berlin in 1939. He and his young brother were sent alone to the United States to join their father who had already fled, and his mother would join them in New York City a year later, escaping through Italy. Nichols became a naturalized citizen in 1944 and moved to Chicago to attend university there a few years later. It was at the University of Chicago that his career as a comedian began when he was given a late-night radio special that focused on folk music and satire. Back in New York City, he began acting in comedic plays and producing comedy albums. It was his skill for stage and music production that propelled him to attempt a career in film, beginning with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* In 1966. This movie won 5 Academy Awards and 3 BAFTAs, propelling him into the public eye. Riding on the success of his 1966 move, he was able to take great risks in his production of *The Graduate* in 1967, such as casting the relatively unknown Dustin Hoffman for the lead role and the use of Simon and Garfunkel's music for the soundtrack. Nichols would go on to a long and successful career in Hollywood and is credited with discovering many actors in the 70s and 80s who are still big names today.



Film Based on Charles Webb's 1963 novel of the same name, *The Graduate* began production in the spring of 1967. Casting was difficult: Many of the women approached to play Mrs. Robinson refused on the grounds that they found the nudity the role required or the situation the film portrayed as offensive. Similarly, many of the first choices for Benjamin walked away to chase after other projects, thinking this film was a risk too big to take. In spite of being late into his 29th year, Dustin Hoffman was brought in by Nichols, who thought his somewhat stiff delivery and awkward vocalizations helped to sell both the character and his young age. The film's release in late December 1967 should have eaten into its box-office profits, but it was found to be the highest-grossing American film of the year, earning $104.9 million in US and Canadian box offices. Statistical analysis found that around 96% of viewers were aged thirty or below, marking a shift in dramatic film viewership.

Background *The Graduate* relied on passion and experience in equal measure for its success. Where Nichols wanted to bring something new to American cinema and Hoffman was trying to make it big in Hollywood, playing into pop cultural iconography and style, cinematography was directed by Oscar winner and Hollywood legend Robert Surtrees. "It took everything I had learned over thirty years to be able to do the job," Surtrees said in an interview with *Vanity Fair.* "I knew that Mich Nichols was a young director who went in for a lot of camera. We did more things in this picture than I ever did in one film." Critics were a bit mixed on release, often disagreeing about the same aspects of the film: It was too risqué, too European, too young. These same arguments were reversed by others, saying it was a breath of fresh air in a film industry prone to stagnation and boring sure bets. At the time of writing, *The Graduate* holds an 86% approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes and an 83 out of 100 on Metacritic.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Benjamin Braddock – A privileged young man who returns home after graduating from college earlyMrs. Robinson – A family friend of the Braddock's
Elaine Robinson – The Robinsons' daughter
Mr. Robinson – Benjamin's father's business partner
Mr. Braddock – Benjamin's father
Mrs. Braddock – Benjamin's mother

SYNOPSIS

Benjamin Braddock returns to his parent's home in Pasadena, California, after earning his bachelor's degree in just three years. His parents throw him a big party, but the young man feels paralyzed by all the decisions he has to make that will determine his career and the type of life he will live. Mrs. Robinson, a family friend, asks Benjamin to drive her home. At her house, she insists he come in to keep her company, claiming to be afraid of an empty house, but instead she uses the opportunity to try and seduce him. Where at first Benjamin declines, he eventually gives in to her advances, renting them a room at the Taft Hotel. Benjamin spends the rest of the summer lazing around in his parent's pool, driving his new Alfa Romeo convertible, and spending his nights with Mrs. Robinson at the Taft.

One night, Benjamin jokes that he should date Mrs. Robinson's daughter, Elaine, and Mrs. Robinson forbids him. The next day, his parents set him up on a date with Elaine. Benjamin is very cruel to her in an attempt to push her away and avoid Mrs. Robinson's anger, driving recklessly and taking Elaine to a strip club. Unable to see Elaine in tears, he apologizes, and they kiss. Soon thereafter, Mrs. Robinson delivers him an ultimatum: Stay away from her daughter, or she'll reveal their affair. In an attempt to beat her to the punch, Benjamin runs to the Robinson home and tells Elaine about his affair with her mother. Elaine rejects Benjamin and returns to school at Berkeley, but Benjamin follows.

At first, Elaine thinks Benjamin is stalking her, and it's not hard for her to make that conclusion with him following her. Mrs. Robinson told her family that Benjamin raped her, and Elaine believes this. However, in a confrontation in his rented room, she learns the truth about him and her mother, and she changes her mind about Benjamin. He begins begging her to marry him, but Mr. Robinson appears, telling Benjamin he'll never see Elaine again. In a desperate bid to see Elaine one more time, Benjamin rushes across the state in his convertible until he learns she is getting married in Santa Barbara. His car fails just outside the city, and he runs in, looking for a church. He arrives just as the marriage ceremony is coming to a close, and he interrupts it by banging on the church's window. After pulling Elaine away from the ceremony, the two jump onto a bus and sit in the rear. As the bus pulls away, their joy fades, leaving them feeling unsure and ambivalent about their rash decision.

PLOT



Hello darkness – The screen is black as we hear the sounds of an airplane. A young man's face takes the screen as the pilot begins speaking over the intercom: "Ladies and gentlemen, we are about to begin our descent into Los Angeles. The sound you just heard is the landing gear locking into place." The pilot continues the typical spiel as the camera zooms out, the young man's face just one of many staring forward in ambivalent anticipation. Now walking through LAX airport, the song "The Sound of Silence" accompanies the young man as he collects his luggage. His face remains strangely expressionless throughout the whole segment. Only when he exits the airport and sees a face that he recognizes does a smile grace his face.



Worries – The young man sits before a burbling fish tank in a darkened room. “Hey, what’s the matter?” A man asks, entering the room. “The guests are all downstairs, Ben, waiting to see you.” Benjamin answers, "Look, Dad, could you explain to them that I have to be alone for a while?” His father insists that he come down and see the family friends. Benjamin says he’s worried about his future. Impatiently, his father feigns care before Benjamin’s mother enters the room and drapes a suit jacket over him, ushering him from his bedroom. Quickly, Benjamin straightens his tie. A haunting portrait of a clown faces him at the stairway. Downstairs, Benjamin finds himself lost in a crowd of well-wishers who don’t actually care all that much about his feelings or desire for solitude: Each wants to push ideas and careers onto the recent college graduate. Benjamin attempts to escape upstairs, where he runs into Mr. McGuire, who leads him outside and starts proselytizing the plastics industry as Ben’s future. Benjamin’s mother, bragging on her son’s accomplishments, begins reading from his college yearbook, and Ben takes this chance to rush upstairs back into his room.



Mrs. Robinson – Ben’s solace is interrupted when the bedroom door swings open. “Oh, I guess this isn’t the bathroom, is it?” A woman says. “It’s down the hall,” Benjamin says, calling the woman Mrs. Robinson as she continues to ask questions, lighting a cigarette in the non-smoking track star’s room and ashing on his bed sheets when he says he doesn’t have an ashtray. “Is it a girl?” She asks, sensing his anxious mood. “Is what a girl?” Ben asks back. “Oh, no, I’m just sort of disturbed about things.” “In general?” Mrs. Robinson asks, and Benjamin confirms this. She congratulates him on his graduation before leaving the room, but she quickly returns, asking Benjamin to drive her home. Ben tries to refuse, but Mrs. Robinson won’t take no for an answer.



Purely rational concern – Ben’s Alfa Romeo pulls to a stop in front of the Robinson house. Mrs. Robinson thanks him before making more demands: “I’d like you to come in till I can get the lights on.” Ben finds himself unable to refuse a family friend as seemingly simple request, though he does try to convince her the house is burglar-free. Inside, they walk to the bar in the rear of the house, Mrs. Robinson pouring them both a drink. Benjamin tries to get out of it, saying, “Look, Mrs. Robinson, I drove you home. I was glad to do it, but I have some things on my mind. Can you understand that?” “Yes,” she replies, forcing a drink into his hand. “Are you always this much afraid of being alone?” Benjamin asks. “Yes,” she replies again, lighting a cigarette and reclining in a bar chair. Not wanting to be too rude, Ben sits. Turning on a nearby radio, Mrs. Robinson asks, “What do you think of me? You’ve known me nearly all your life. You must have formed some opinion of me.” Ben replies politely that he thinks she’s a nice person. Mrs. Robinson reveals her alcoholism, and her body language takes a flirtatious turn. Benjamin accuses her of trying to seduce him, and, playfully, she denies this.



Elaine’s portrait – “Mrs. Robinson,” Benjamin says, suddenly serious and anxious, “Will you forgive me for what I just said? It’s the worst thing that I ever said to anyone.” She tells him to sit down, insisting when he refuses. Benjamin continues his stammered apologies as he gulps his drink. “Have you ever seen Elaine’s portrait?” Mrs. Robinson asks, trying to change the subject. Ben says he hasn't, and he’d love to see it. In Elaine’s room, Ben looks over her portrait while Mrs. Robinson removes her jewelry. She asks him to unzip her dress so she can go to bed, but Benjamin is uncomfortable with the situation, and he tries to leave. Mrs. Robinson coaxes him back over, and he undoes the zipper for her. “What are you so scared of?” She asks. In his halting, stammering way, Benjamin says he’s worried about what kind of ideas Mr. Robinson will get seeing them together with Mrs.

Robinson in a state of undress. “I’m twice as old as you are,” Mrs. Robinson says. “How could anyone think…” Benjamin interrupts her with more concerns before she interrupts him, asking, “Would you like me to seduce you? Is that what you’re trying to tell me?”



Mrs. Robinson’s Purse – “I’m going home now,” Benjamin says, sounding sick to his stomach. “I apologize for what I said. I hope you can forget it, but I’m going home right now.” Mrs. Robinson follows him out of her daughter’s bedroom, asking Ben to bring up her purse so she doesn’t have to get dressed again. Trapped between the desire to leave and the desire not to be impolite to his father’s partner’s wife, Benjamin awkwardly does his best not to come all the way back up the stairs, eventually leaving it on the top step. From the bathroom Mrs. Robinson snaps, “For God’s sake, Benjamin, will you stop acting this way and bring me the purse?” Benjamin says he’ll leave it in Elaine’s room, but when he does, Mrs. Robinson rushes in behind him and closes the door. She’s nude. “Oh, God,” Benjamin says. “Let me out.” “Don’t be nervous,” Mrs. Robinson says, as flashed images of her body take the screen while Benjamin’s eyes wander. “Benjamin, I want you to know that I’m available to you, and if you won’t sleep with me this time, I want you to know you can call me up any time that you want, and we’ll make some kind of an arrangement. Do you understand what I’ve said?”



Awkward conversation – Outside, tires screech. Benjamin agrees hastily to what Mrs. Robinson has said, pushing her aside and unlocking the door when he hears a car door shut outside. Knowing he won’t be able to sneak away, Ben runs into the bar and sits by his drink. “Is that Ben’s car outside?” Mr. Robinson shouts, entering the house. “Yes, sir!” Benjamin says, failing to hide his nervous disposition. “I drove… I drove Mrs. Robinson home. She wanted me to drive her home, so I drove her home.” “Swell,” Mr. Robinson says, putting down his golf bag. “I appreciate it.” Mr. Robinson insists on pouring Benjamin another drink and talking with him before he leaves. Ben admits to being worried about his future, and Mr. Robinson tries to advise him, telling him 21 is “a hell of a good age to be.” They sit, and Mr. Robinson tells Benjamin, “You’ll never be young again.” Mirroring Benjamin’s conversation with his wife, he asks how long they’ve known each other, and when he replies, he says he thinks of Ben almost as his own son, “So I hope you won’t mind my giving you a friendly piece of advice.” Mr. Robinson tells Ben to take it easy and to “sow some wild oats.” Mrs. Robinson, now fully dressed, joins them at the bar, and Ben awkwardly excuses himself.



Feature attraction – “Ladies and gentlemen,” Mr. Braddock says, "your attention, please, for this afternoon’s feature attraction.” Days later, on Ben’s birthday, another party takes place at the Braddock house: Burgers by the poolside. “Are you ready in there, feature attraction?” Mr. Braddock says through the door to the kitchen. “Could I speak to you for a second, Dad?” Benjamin asks meekly. Mr. Braddock ignores him, going through more of his goofy carnival barker routine, occasionally moving back to the door and repeatedly ignoring Benjamin’s pleas for him to stop. “Let’s hear it now for Benjamin Braddock!” He pushes the door open wide, revealing Ben dressed in a full diver’s suit with a harpoon gun. Awkwardly, he slaps his flippers toward the pool. He can’t hear his father or any of the guests with his mask on. At the water’s edge, Benjamin sits down and pushes himself into the water. He turns to face his parents, and his father reaches down to push him under, and Ben sinks quickly to the bottom. There he sits, reveling in the sensation of isolation. The camera pulls back, giving us a view not unlike the bottom of the fish tank in Benjamin’s room.



Phonebooth – “I was thinking about that time, after the party,” Ben says over the phone. “Where are you?” Mrs. Robinson says on the other end. Benjamin says he’s at the Taft Hotel. Sweat drips from his face: He’s nervous. “Now, I know it’s pretty late, and if you’d rather…” “Give me an hour,” Mrs. Robinson says, hanging up. Breathing shakily, Ben hangs up the receiver and exits the booth. He removes his jacket and lights up a cigarette, a new habit for the former track star. At the door of the hotel, he patiently holds the door as a parade of older people attending an event walk past. Awkwardly, Ben follows some others toward the check in counter. He’s too nervous to rent a room and lies, saying he’s with another engagement in one of the ballrooms. After an awkward conversation with the people checking the guest list there, he admits he’s not on the list and leaves, walking back across the lobby.



Bar – In the hotel bar, Benjamin finds a secluded table and sits down. A waiter walks by, and Ben tries to flag him down, but the meek young man fails to attract his attention. A bit later, now with a drink, Ben smokes nervously. “Hello, Benjamin,” Mrs. Robinson says, her appearance reflected in the glass tabletop. “Oh, hello!” Ben says flatly. They start the usual small talk, and Mrs. Robinson asks Benjamin to order her a drink. He fails to flag down a waiter again, and Mrs. Robinson takes charge, snapping her order to the waiter. “You don’t have to be so nervous, you know,” she says to Ben. He responds with his trademark nervous rambling, and she cuts him off: “Did you get us a room?” Benjamin says he hasn't, and she asks if he wants to. “Well, I don’t… I mean, I could, or we could just talk.” “You want me to get it?” Mrs. Robinson asks, a frustrated tone in her voice. Benjamin says he’ll get it, and she suggests he do it now. Walking back out into the lobby, Ben approaches the front desk and, using a false name, rents a room. Awkwardly, to avoid interaction with the porters, he says he misspoke when he mentioned his luggage, saying he only has a toothbrush.



Call for Mrs. Robinson – In the bar, a waiter carries a phone to Mrs. Robinson. “Thank you,” she says, picking up the receiver. “Mrs. Robinson?” Ben says on the other end. “It’s Benjamin. Benjamin Braddock.” Frustrated, Mrs. Robinson asks where he is. “Can you look through the glass?” he asks. Over her shoulder, she sees Ben inside a nearby phone booth. He’s nervous about the desk clerk, but she’s straightforward and to the point, asking him to head up to the room. He says he’ll head right up, and she says she’ll follow in five minutes. Ben turns to hang up, but Mrs. Robinson interrupts him: “Isn’t there something you want to tell me?” Stammering, Benjamin answers, "Well, I want you to know how much I appreciate this. Really…” “The number,” she says. “The room number, Benjamin. I think you ought to tell me that.” “You’re absolutely right,” he replies. “It’s 568. I’ll see you later, Mrs. Robinson.” Smiling, Mrs. Robinson hangs up, finishing her drink and cigarette in the bar. In the lobby, Benjamin makes a goofy show of having retrieved his toothbrush, the clerk trying and failing not to give him judgmental looks for his odd behavior.



Room 568 – Ben walks down the long hallway, playing with the room key. He enters room 568. After closing all the blinds, he moves to the bathroom and brushes his teeth. When he’s finished, a knock comes on the door: Mrs. Robinson. “Hello, Benjamin,” she says when he opens the door. “Hello, Mrs. Robinson,” he replies, goofily placing the ‘do not disturb’ placard on the hall-side door knob and double locking the door before turning the lights back off. Awkwardly, Ben tries to kiss Mrs. Robinson, and she seems unimpressed. “I’ll get undressed now,” she says, coolly. “Is that alright?” “Sure,” Benjamin replies. “Er… I mean, shall I just stand here? I mean, I don’t know what you want me to do.” “Why don’t you watch?” she suggests. Eventually, she then asks for help with her zipper,

and after removing her top, Benjamin awkwardly cups his hand around one of her breasts. He gives up, seemingly disgusted at himself. He crosses the room and starts pounding his head against a door. She asks what's wrong, and he says he can't go through with the affair. "Do you find me undesirable?" She asks. "Oh, no, Mrs. Robinson." Ben says, "I think you're the most attractive of all my parents' friends. I mean that." He continues to say he doesn't feel like what they're doing is acceptable and fears the shame that will come if others find out, suggesting that they go catch a movie instead. Mrs. Robinson asks if it's his first time, and, while he doesn't confirm this, it's heavily insinuated he is a virgin. He closes the bathroom door, shrouding the room in shadow.



Summer – "The Sound of Silence" plays over the black screen. The crystal blue of Benjamin's swimming pool comes into view, the sun shimmering brightly on its surface. A montage of various shots of Ben lounging and tanning in and around the pool fades in and out of view. Days seem to pass while Benjamin floats in the pool, drinking beer and napping. When he leaves the pool, he opens the door to his house, but he exits the bathroom in a room of the Taft Hotel instead. There, Mrs. Robinson undresses. He climbs into the bed and waits for her. She unbuttons his shirt and feels his chest. Ben's face takes center screen, and suddenly his parents are having dinner just outside the door. Benjamin stands and closes the door, now in his bedroom. The young man sits and watches television with a beer. "The Sound of Silence" ends, and "April Come She Will" begins playing. Ben lies in a bed at the Taft, drinking a beer. Mrs. Robinson crosses in front of him, dressing. She finishes and leaves without a word. Lying in his bed at home, Benjamin smokes a cigarette, parting his blinds to see the morning sun. He pulls on his trunks and grabs a towel before heading down to the pool. He dives into the water and swims to the nearby raft, pulling himself onto it. Suddenly, the raft is Mrs. Robinson in a bed at the Taft.



"**Ben, what are you doing?" –** "Ben," Mr. Braddock asks, "what are you doing?" "I would say that I'm just drifting here in the pool," Benjamin replies. "Why?" His father asks. "Well, it's very comfortable just to drift here." Mr. Braddock probes him about grad school and his future, but Ben doesn't have any answers: He just wants to relax. With a frustrated sigh, Mr. Braddock continues: "Look, I think it's a very good thing that a young man, after he's done some very good work, should have a chance to relax and enjoy himself and lie around and drink beer and so on. But after a few weeks, I believe that person would want to take some stock in himself and his situation and start to think about getting off his ass." Mrs. Braddock appears, telling Mr. Braddock the Robinsons have arrived. Mr. Robinson greets Ben and tells him that his daughter, Elaine, is coming home from Berkeley over the weekend, and he hopes the two will find some time to get together. Feeling her son is being rude, Mrs. Braddock butts in: "Say hello to Mrs. Robinson, Ben!" "Hello, Mrs. Robinson," Benjamin says. "Hello, Benjamin," Mrs. Robinson replies with a smile that quickly fades.



Motherly questions – In a steamy bathroom, Benjamin shaves his face. His mother enters, exclaiming "oh my!" at the level of steam in the room before asking her son a question: "Benjy… Darling, I'm going to ask you something, but you don't… You don't have to tell me if you don't want to… I'm going to ask you what you do when you go off at night." Ben suddenly stops shaving. He quickly regains his composure and lies, saying he drives around all night. "What else?" Mrs. Braddock asks. "Nothing," Benjamin replies. She says he must be meeting someone, and Ben cuts his thumb on the razor, trying to hide it from her. "Why do you say that?" he asks, pretending to be guiltless. "I don't want to play games with you," Mrs. Braddock says, frustrated, turning to leave. "I don't meet anyone, Mother, but why would you say that?" "I would rather you didn't say anything at all than be dishonest," she scolds in response. "Wait a minute!" he calls after his mother.



A few words – “Will you wait a minute, please?” Benjamin says in a darkened hotel room. The light comes on, and he lies across Mrs. Robinson, who looks displeased. “Mrs. Robinson, do you think we could say a few words to each other first this time?” “I don’t think we have much to say to each other,” she responds coldly, reaching to turn off the light. Frustrated, Ben stands, saying, Look, for months, all we’ve done is come up here and leap into bed together.” “Are you tired of it?” she asks. “I’m not, no,” Benjamin says, “but do you think we could liven it up with a little conversation for a change?” They struggle to find a topic to discuss, Ben unwilling to talk about college and Mrs. Robinson clearly wanting to do something besides talk. Benjamin eventually corners her into talking about how she handles the affair, and she claims she doesn’t do anything but wait for her husband to fall asleep, and she admits to some marital troubles between them. It turns out they married only because Mrs. Robinson became pregnant with Elaine. Ben keeps prying, eventually joking that he’ll have to take Elaine out on a date. Mrs. Robinson forbids Ben to date her daughter. The argument escalates, and Benjamin begins dressing to leave. He changes his mind, promising to never date Elaine so they can continue their affair.



Elaine Robinson – One morning, Ben eats breakfast with his parents. Mr. Braddock mentions that Elaine is back from Berkeley, saying, “I think it might be a nice gesture if you asked her out.” Benjamin ignores him, staring at the text on the back of a cereal box. Later in the pool, Mr. Braddock heckles his son: “I suppose she’s not good enough for you. Is that it?” “Look,” Ben says, “Elaine Robinson and I do not get along.” “How do you know?” His father asks. “You haven’t seen her since high school… I suppose I’ll just have to tell Mr. Robinson that you’re too busy every evening doing God knows what.” Mrs. Braddock turns the tables, saying she’ll just have to invite the Robinsons over for dinner. The doorbell at the Robinson house rings. Mrs. Robinson lounges in the bar at the rear of the house. Mr. Robinson greets the caller: “Well, Braddock, it’s about time you got around to this.” The television blares and a cigarette burns in her hand, but Mrs. Robinson sits, unmoving, watching the door. Benjamin says hello, and Mr. Robinson leaves after pouring him a drink. Quickly and quietly, Benjamin tries to explain that he’s been forced into a date that breaks his promise to Mrs. Robinson. She refuses to see reason, however.



Date – Ben’s Alfa Romeo roars through the night as he weaves recklessly through traffic, driving Elaine to their date. In spite of his odd behavior, Elaine tries to have a pleasant conversation. At their destination, Benjamin walks quickly, almost leaving Elaine behind as he passes bar after bar, music hall after music hall, the sounds emerging from each drowning each other out as they pass. Eventually, Ben enters a seedy nightclub where sultry blues music blares. He and Elaine take a seat near the front, and Ben watches with a cigarette in his mouth as the woman on stage performs a striptease. She removes her top, revealing a pair of tassels she gyrates to spin. Elaine faces away from the stage, Ben goading her: “You’re missing a great effect here! Could you do it?” The stripper crosses the stage and uses the tassels to tap the top of Elaine’s head. Ben realizes Elaine is crying, and he suddenly becomes defensive, lashing out at the stripper. Elaine stands and runs out of the club, Ben chasing after her.



Tears – The scene from before plays out in reverse, Elaine running away from Benjamin as music blares from nearby clubs, keeping just out of his reach until they reach a street corner. “Elaine,” Ben says, “I’m sorry.” “I think I’d better go home,” Elaine says, holding back a sob, “please.” Benjamin tries to explain that the date was his parents' idea and that he was acting out against them by acting the way he has. He suggests they start over, saying he can’t stand to see her cry. They kiss on the street corner, and she doesn’t pull

away. A bit later, at a drive-in, Ben and Elaine talk over burgers. “I’ve had this feeling ever since I graduated,” Ben says, “this kind of compulsion that I have to be rude all the time.” Elaine says she understands through a mouthful. Ben continues talking about his alienation from society, but the conversation is drowned out by some nearby rockers and their radio. Benjamin asks them to turn it down, but they turn it up, so Ben puts the top of his convertible up, and he and Elaine keep talking, now muted by the windows.



“**Would you like to come in?”** – Benjamin and Elaine sit in the Alfa Romeo outside the Robinson house. “Would you like to come in?” Elaine asks softly. “I could make you some coffee.” “No,” Ben says, something sad in his voice. “I wouldn’t want to wake anyone up.” Elaine insists, saying they won’t wake her parents. “Wait a minute,” says Ben. “I was just thinking. It’s still early. Maybe we could do something, go somewhere else.” Elaine smiles and agrees. As they drive away, the camera pans up to the top window of the Robinson house. While Ben drives away, Elaine suggests the closest bar is at the Taft Hotel, and Benjamin swerves into the curb out of shock. At the hotel, Ben tries to convince Elaine there isn’t a bar, but she can see the Palm Room right across the lobby. Porters and other hotel workers greet Ben by his assumed name. Ben says he must be being confused with someone and pulls Elaine back outside. Back on the streets in the car, Benjamin admits to liking Elaine a lot and she deduces he’s having an affair with someone. Ben comes clean: “It just happened.” She quizzes him a little more, and he responds with near honesty. Elaine asks if it’s over, and Benjamin says it is.



Pouring rain – Driving through the rainy streets the next day, Benjamin whistles to himself. He stops outside the Robinson house, expecting Elaine to come out and meet him. He’s surprised to see Mrs. Robinson get into his car instead. “Drive down the block,” she demands. Ben explains that he has a date with Elaine, but Mrs. Robinson snaps at him to drive. “Listen to me very carefully, Benjamin,” Mrs. Robinson growls. “You are not to see Elaine again ever. Those are my orders. Is that clear? I can make things quite unpleasant.” She tells Ben she’ll reveal the truth about their affair to her family if he tries to see Elaine anymore. Benjamin tries to call her bluff, but Mrs. Robinson’s attitude causes him to take action. He sprints through the pouring rain to the Robinson house and barges in, running up the stairs to Elaine’s room. She yells at him; she's changing, but he tells her to go over the back fence, and he’ll meet her around the corner. Mrs. Robinson catches up, coming through the front door, soaked. Ben pulls Elaine aside. He tries to tell her the truth about the married woman. Mrs. Robinson watches from the cracked door. Ben locks eyes with her. Elaine turns around and, seeing her mother’s expression, understands. Elaine screams for Ben to get out. “Goodbye, Benjamin,” Mrs. Robinson says outside the room.



Obsession – Another montage plays out, this one accompanied by Simon and Garfunkel’s “Scarborough Fair/Canticle” medley. In his bedroom, Ben smokes cigarettes by his fish tank, knocking the ashes onto the carpet. He drives by the Robinson house, watching from the end of the street from his rearview as Elaine leaves the house. Ben drives away before he can be spotted. Now from his bedroom, he watches his father clean the first autumn leaves from the pool. Sometime later, Ben watches from behind a bush as Elaine is packed into the family car and driven away. In his bedroom once again, Ben sits at his desk, trying to write a letter. Instead, he has lovingly written Elaine’s name over and over.



“**Say that again”** – Ben stands in his parent’s kitchen. “I’m going to marry Elaine Robinson,” he says proudly. “Say that again,” Mr. Braddock says. Benjamin repeats himself, and his father crosses the kitchen, laughing, to hug him. Hearing the noise, Mrs. Braddock enters the room and asks what’s going on. She screams with excitement when her husband tells her what’s going on. “We’ve gotta call the Robinsons!” Mr. Braddock says, picking up the phone. “We’ve got something to celebrate.” Ben tells him to wait, and his mother asks, “They don’t know?” Ben says they don’t. “When did you decide all of this?” Mrs. Braddock asks. “About an hour ago,” Benjamin says dryly. “You talked to Elaine this morning?” Mr. Braddock asks. “No,” replies Benjamin. “She doesn’t know about it.” Mr. Braddock asks for more clarification, and Benjamin says Elaine knows nothing about his decision. They haven’t talked in weeks. “Ben,” scolds his father, “this whole idea sounds pretty half-baked.” Ben insists it isn't, even though he quickly admits that Elaine doesn’t even like him. Without another word, he leaves the house.



Berkeley – Simon and Garfunkel’s “Scarborough Fair/Canticle” medley plays over another montage as Ben drives his car through the pine-covered hills of northern California. We then see him walking along well-maintained paths scattered with newly fallen leaves. He approaches a stately fountain where he sits. Benjamin is nearly lost among the tall trees as the camera pulls back, seated up high, viewing one of Berkeley’s picturesque courtyards as the day drags on. Students mill about between classes and sit on the grass or beside the fountain. Benjamin scans the students, looking for just one person. Eventually, he sees Elaine exit the building and greet a friend. He watches with a strange look, eventually running away. In a hard cut, Benjamin is suddenly talking to a suspicious landlord who seems reticent to rent his last room to such a strange young man who isn’t even going to school. “You’re not one of those agitators? Those outside agitators?” The man quizzes. “I hate that. I won’t stand for it. I won’t stand for that.” The music picks up again as Ben watches Elaine from afar, still unable to approach her. He watches from a cafe and sees her get on a bus. Sprinting after it, Elaine sees him and looks shocked.



Zoo – Panting and sweating, Ben boards the bus and sits just behind Elaine, trying to strike up a conversation with her. Even the strangers around them can see the young girl is uncomfortable, but they don’t do anything more than give Benjamin dirty looks. Eventually, she tells Ben she’s going to the zoo to meet someone, and he says he’ll go with her. A troop of monkeys screech in their enclosure as Ben follows Elaine into the zoo, asking her about her date, what he looks like, where he’s going to meet her. She confronts him about what he’s doing in Berkeley, and he says he’s sitting in on some classes even though he’s not enrolled. “Maybe we can get together sometime and talk about it,” he says. “Really incredible,” is all Elaine says before walking away. Elaine’s date spots her and starts walking toward them. She uses the date as a quick out after Ben introduces himself to her date. The medley picks up again as Benjamin watches two chimpanzees mating in the cage before him.



Scream – A pounding knock comes on the door of Benjamin’s rented room. “Who is it?” he asks, and Elaine barges in. “I wanna ask you a question, and then I’m going,” she says fiercely. “I wanna know why you’re here in Berkeley.” “Because,” Ben says, “I am.” “Is it because I’m here?” she snaps. “What do you think?” Ben asks. “I think it is… I want you to leave.” Elaine says, pacing. “Well, look,” Ben says firmly, his face covered in shaving cream, “I love you.” Spitting with rage now, Elaine asks, “How could you possibly rape my mother?” Ben is confused: His affair with Mrs. Robinson was consensual. Ben asks for clarification, telling Elaine what her mother said isn’t true. She tells him Mrs.

Robinson's story, and Ben responds with the details of what actually happened. Elaine screams and passes out, unable to take the emotional stress. Quickly, Benjamin pours her a glass of water and rouses her before answering the pounding on the door. There, the landlord demands to know what is going on before kicking him out. Elaine apologizes and tries to talk things out with Ben, but he's not interested in talking since he needs to get packing. Elaine asks to sit with him while he packs, and he agrees. Eventually, she gets up to leave, telling Ben she doesn't want him to leave, not until he has a plan.



Surprise visit – Laying in bed later that night, Benjamin sleeps. The click of a door closing is heard, and Ben rouses, asking, "What's happening?" To his surprise, it's Elaine, and she asks him to kiss her. He does so, passionately, afterward asking her to marry him. "I don't know," she replies. "But you might?" Ben asks hopefully. "I might," she replies. Elaine also says she doesn't know when she might marry him, but Ben pushes for tomorrow. "I don't know what's happening," she says, lost in a whirlwind of emotion. "Look," Benjamin says, "don't be confused. We're getting married." "I don't see how we can," Elaine mutters. "We just can," says Ben. Elaine pushes away, saying she has to go, but she promises to think about marrying Benjamin. "Good God," Benjamin says as he lies back down in bed.



Carl – The flags of the world's nations fly along the promenade in one of Berkeley's big buildings. "We can go down and get our blood test today…" Benjamin says (a required medical examination in many places across the US before 1980). Elaine cuts him off again and again as she has plans. "I haven't even said I'll marry you yet," she reminds him. "We'll need our birth certificates," he murmurs. "I have mine with me. Where's yours?" "I just don't think it would work," Elaine says as she walks into her classroom. "Why wouldn't it?" Ben asks, and the doors close. The bells ring. The hall is empty. Ben remains by the door. The bell rings again, signaling the end of the period, and Elaine exits. "Why wouldn't it?" Ben repeats as if there has been no pause to their conversation. "I just don't think it would," Elaine responds. He follows her to basketball practice, and she asks why he doesn't just drag her off. He promises he will as soon as they get their blood tests. "I have to see Carl first," Elaine replies, referring to the man we saw at the zoo. "I said I might marry him." Badgering her as she tries to study in the library, Benjamin wants to know how Carl proposed, mocking his proposal. At the end of the day, they part, Elaine responding to Ben's constant demands for marriage with, "Maybe we are. Maybe we're not." She walks away but returns for a quick kiss.



Mr. Robinson – Benjamin whistles "Mrs. Robinson" to himself as he purchases an engagement ring. Bounding up the steps at his lodging with a pair of gifts under his arms, he's surprised to find a man seated on his bed, and he screams. Puffing on a cigar, Mr. Robinson says, "Do you want to... You want to try and tell me why you did it? Do you have a special grudge against me? Do you feel particularly strong resentment? Is there something I've said that causes this contempt, or is it just the things I stand for that you despise?" "It was nothing to do with you, sir," Ben responds politely. Their exchange continues like this, Mr. Robinson making accusations and Benjamin politely denying them. Mr. Robinson informs him that he and Mrs. Robinson are getting divorced before dropping the bombshell: "I think I can get you behind bars if you ever look at my daughter again. I've seen Elaine, and I've made damn sure you can never get to her again." He leaves, espousing more insults dramatically while Benjamin stands in shock. The landlord overhears this and says he's calling the police on Benjamin. Ben flees.



Elaine's letter – A closeup of Benjamin's face takes the screen as a woman talks: "Elaine Robinson has left school. Her roommate's coming down with a note for you." As her friend approaches from the end of the hall, Elaine's voice reads the note: "Dear Benjamin, Please forgive me, because I know what I'm doing is the best thing for you. My father is so upset. You've got to understand. I love you, but it would never work out." A jauntier version of "Mrs. Robinson" plays as Benjamin's Alfa Romeo roars down the highway, south to Pasadena. He has a determined look on his face as he drives through the night.



Breaking and entering – Over a fence, Ben appears. With confidence, he strides across the lawn and opens a sliding door that leads into a familiar-looking bar. It's the Robinson house. Ben sprints up the stairs into Elaine's bedroom, saying her name. It's Mrs. Robinson who awaits him there, however. "Hello, Benjamin," She says coolly. She crosses to the phone and picks it up. "Where is she?" Benjamin demands. Mrs. Robinson says, "I'll be with you in a moment, Benjamin," before speaking to the police dispatcher: "Do you have a patrol car in the vicinity of 1200 Glenview Road? Good. We have a burglar here. Just a second; I'll ask him. Are you armed?" The camera looks at Benjamin, who stands looking limp in the middle of the room. "No, I don't believe he is," Mrs. Robinson concludes. "Thank you." Ben continues trying to interrogate Mrs. Robinson, but he just offers him a drink, saying he might be able to enjoy it before the police arrive. When tires screech outside, she comments on the quick response time. Ben flees, swearing that he'll find Elaine.



Frat house – The frantic version of Mrs. Robinson speeds up again as Benjamin drives off through the night, seeking information on Elaine's whereabouts. Having learned that Elaine is to be married, he assumes that means Carl is her betrothed, so he heads to his fraternity house. There, some of Carl's fraternity brothers tell Ben he's "probably one step ahead of the shotgun" in Santa Barbara. They don't know the church, but a lead is a lead. The sped-up version of Mrs. Robinson kicks back up as Benjamin drives back south, swerving through traffic. He swerves off the road at the first exit for Santa Barbara.



Gas station – Simon and Garfunkel keep up the frantic pace as Ben's Alfa Romeo screeches to a halt outside a gas station. He hurls himself inside, asking desperately to use the phone as the guitar continues, muted but nervous. Panting, he calls up Carl's father's office, posing as Dr. Smith's brother, Reverend Smith, and learns that the ceremony is likely taking place at First Presbyterian Church. Ben sprints out of the service station, turning around when he realizes he doesn't know the address. The mechanic gives him directions, and Ben runs back out to his car, peeling out and driving away. "You need any gas, Father?" the man shouts after him. The frantic guitar begins halting and slowing like an engine running on fumes. Twice, Ben tries to turn over the engine before abandoning his car on the side of the road and sprinting toward the church.



Wedding – Ben gets to the church but finds the front entrance locked. He manages to get in through a side door, finding his way onto a viewing balcony separated from the sanctuary by a great window. He watches Elaine and Carl kiss and murmurs, "Oh, Jesus, God, no…" As the wedding march plays on the organ, Benjamin shrieks out her name, pounding on the great plate glass window. Everyone turns to look. "Who is that guy?" says Carl. "What's he

doing?" "I'll take care of him," says Carl's father, but Mrs. Robinson stops him. "He's too late," she says with a smirk. As if entranced, Elaine walks toward Ben. She looks around at her family and Carl. They wordlessly snarl commands at her. Turning her face back to Benjamin, she shouts out his name. Ben rushes down the stairs, exchanging a few blows with Carl's father, who tries to stop him. He then tackles and pushes Carl away, grabbing Elaine's hand and pulling her away from the others, who shriek and yell. Mrs. Robinson manages to grab her daughter for a moment, telling her it's too late before slapping her. Ben grabs a cross and swings it around like an axe, giving the two room to slip out of the front door. He then turns around and uses the cross to bar the door.



Escape – Smiles splitting their faces, Elaine and Ben sprint away from the church. Ben flags down a passing bus, and he helps Elaine on board. Ben in his torn-up raincoat and Elaine in her wedding gown can't help but attract the eyes of everyone aboard the bus. As they pay the ticket fee and move toward the last two empty seats at the rear of the bus, all eyes follow them. They sit and look out the rear window as the church fades into the distance. Turning around, they smile at one another, but their smiles start to fade when they turn to face the other people on the bus, who simply stare at them. "Hello, Darkness" begins playing as their smiles slip into ambivalent expressions and the bus drives into the distance.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Benjamin Braddock

Benjamin is a young man who has just completed college. He returns home to rest and recuperate, but everyone around him pushes him to make life-changing decisions instead. He falls in love with Elaine and goes to great lengths to see that they are together.

Anxious Benjamin's anxiety is shown most strongly at the beginning of the film. It is frequently played off for laughs—especially during sexual encounters with Mrs. Robinson—but it is a deep part of him. I'm sure many reading this know the feeling that comes just after graduation, when you feel doors closing and opportunities fading and the pressure to make a decision: What are you going to do with your life? This is what torments Benjamin at the beginning of the film, egged on by the persistent demands of his family and their friends to get another degree, to join various fields, or get jobs at specific businesses. All Ben wants is to be alone for a moment, but his parents keep pushing him to attend parties they keep throwing for him. His anxiety pushes him to try and take some control, doing this by calling up Mrs. Robinson for sex. Their first encounter showcases his anxiety most clearly as he's afraid the staff will realize he's there for an affair, and it leads to a lot of comedy, but we see that Benjamin is dealing not just with anxiety about his life, but in attempting to avoid shame as he does something shameful. In a strange way, his anxiety comes from morality as much as it does from self-centered desires for a different world.

Determined Ben shows his determination mostly at the end of the film. He is desperate to get Elaine back after having been scorned by her and her family. Through some stalking and a bit of creepiness, Ben is able to get close to Elaine again, and after he explains the truth of the situation (that he didn't rape Mrs. Robinson), she relents, giving in to her desire to be with him. When her fear of her parents' reaction to their seeing or marrying one another creates another barrier, Benjamin does everything he can to knock it down, demanding to marry her the next day. When Mr. and Mrs. Robinson take Elaine away to marry her to Carl, he drives through the night over several days to track her down, eventually stealing her away from her marriage ceremony. This is a massive transformation from the nervous, indecisive young man who was presented to us at the beginning of the film.

Non-Traditional Benjamin chafes at the thought of conformity. The idea of going to graduate school and taking a mid-to-high-level position at his father's company causes him so much anxiety he freezes. His desire to be different leads him to take Mrs. Robinson up on her offer of sex on demand: While not explicitly stated, it's pretty clear Ben is a virgin, and having sex with an older woman, especially one so close to his family, must tickle some sexual desire, and affairs as taboo tend to draw especially

inexperienced people in. While initially it's to get her to dislike him, Elaine enjoys the non-traditional way their date goes. The two bond over their non-traditional views of society and other topics, falling in love very quickly. Because he reveals the affair with Mrs. Robinson to Elaine, Benjamin has to go to extremely non-traditional methods to recapture Elaine's attention, and he stalks her to do this. While it's not healthy, Mrs. Robinson's manipulations drove the young man to take desperate measures. The film ends with a literal assault on traditional marriage when Ben takes Elaine away from her wedding at the film's end.

Mrs. Robinson

Despite most of the film revolving around her affair with Benjamin, we learn relatively little about Mrs. Robinson. We know she is the wife of Mr. Robinson and that their marriage is on the rocks. She takes advantage of Benjamin's inexperience to start an affair, though the reasons behind this decision are never made entirely clear.

Dissatisfied This trait is at the core of Mrs. Robinson's decision-making. She is spiteful toward her husband for essentially forcing her into marriage at a young age when he got her pregnant. We're shown several clear shots of her face when she is admitting these things to Benjamin one night while they're sleeping together. The look on her face is painful, to say the least. Mrs. Robinson hates to be reminded of what could have been, the person she would have been had it not been for one decision to have sex in the back of a Ford. Her dissatisfaction drives her to drink, to boss others around, and to take advantage of a young man for an affair. Seeing Benjamin like she sees her husband, Mrs. Robinson makes a twisted yet motherly attempt to keep Elaine from meeting the same fate by marrying her to Carl. Blinded by her desire to see Benjamin suffer and keep him away from her daughter, Mrs. Robinson fails to realize she is putting Elaine in the same situation she was in by forcing her into marriage.

Dominant Compared to Benjamin, Mrs. Robinson is practically domineering. She is clear and upfront with Benjamin about her sexual desires after her flirtation and undressing fail to get the response she desires. She quickly goes through with her promise to sleep with him, taking control in the bedroom when she realizes he is inexperienced. This behavior continues throughout the montages, which show their affair, taking off his clothes, initiating sexual contact, and ending the encounter when she sees fit, often leaving Ben without a word. In her marriage, too, she seems to hold a lot of power, lying to gain sympathy from her family and telling them her months-long consensual affair with Benjamin was a one-time sexual assault with Ben the perpetrator. She seems to take pleasure in using a younger man to get her sexual thrills, perhaps a side effect of her dissatisfaction with her life and being forced into motherhood at about Benjamin's age.

Elaine Robinson

Elaine is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Robinson. We don't learn a lot about her during the film, as she shows up for the first time about halfway through the movie; most of the focus is on Benjamin, and she is then sequestered away by her parents to keep her from him. Elaine falls in love with Benjamin but is unable to marry him due to parental pressure and a forced marriage.

Sensitive We're given a few quick glimpses of this trait in Elaine. The first comes when she feels Ben is mistreating her on their first date. She begins crying in the strip club, though a kiss from Benjamin is able to bring her back into a more agreeable mood. We also see her angry when Benjamin tracks her down on the bus and later when she confronts him in his apartment. There, she learns the truth about his and her mother's affair and passes out with a scream. Her sensitive nature allows her to give Ben another chance, as deep down she does love him and wishes to marry him.

Tolerant In Elaine we see the more personally negative side of tolerance. Throughout the film, she puts up with a lot of different things from a lot of different people. She tolerates her parents' behavior, their endless spending, and their distant marriage. She also somehow puts up with Benjamin's stalking. This might be explained by her deep love for him, but he frequently crosses some obvious boundaries, and she says little about it. At the film's end, she agrees to marry a young man she doesn't love to appease her parents' desire to keep her away from Ben. Most women these days would have something to say

about their parents forcing them into a marriage, but Elaine says to Benjamin that “it’s the best thing for him.” She views herself as self-sacrificing and values keeping her parents happy above her own love and desire. In a lot of ways, it’s Elaine’s inability to complain that causes her deep emotional distress.

THEMES

Society

Class While never expressly stated or explored, *The Graduate* is an upper-class romance through and through. It is a story about rich people fueled by too much excess cash. Benjamin spends his summer driving around in his new Alfa Romeo his father bought him for his birthday and bathing in their expansive and deep swimming pool outside of their extremely large house: It’s honestly hard to believe only three people live in such a large space. The Robinsons, too, have massive wealth and flaunt it, having an even larger house than the Braddocks that is filled with all sorts of expensive decorations, technology, and furniture. They even have a business-sized bar stocked in the rear of their home. Their children want for nothing, and the only thing they are shown to really worry about is social rejection. Benjamin is able to abandon his life in Pasadena and follow Elaine to Berkeley without ever having to worry about working or making money. We’re given very little exposure to lower classes in the film, most appearing as a sort of comedic element in the Taft Hotel when they greet Benjamin by his pseudonym, as he’s become a familiar sight there during his affair with Mrs. Robinson.



Illustrative moment The clearest moment of the wealth of the characters comes early in the film. During yet another party for Benjamin, his father hypes him up as a “feature attraction.” Eventually, Benjamin is revealed to be standing in the kitchen in a full diving suit with a harpoon gun. Mr. Braddock tells the gathered guests that he’s “out $2,000 if it doesn’t work” jokingly, as one might express minor anxiety trying a new sandwich from a fast food chain. This is *after* purchasing Ben an incredibly expensive convertible as well.

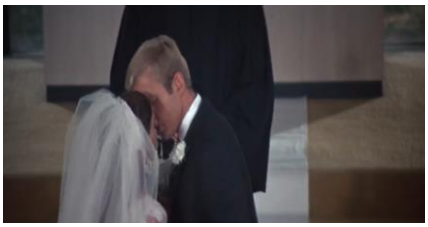
Relationship

Motherhood This minor theme shows up mostly in Mrs. Robinson’s defensiveness around Elaine. We’re shown Benjamin’s mother a few times, but she matters so little to the plot, we barely hear a word from her. We do, however, learn that she is very supportive of Benjamin and wishes him to have a happy, normal life, shown most clearly by her ear-shattering scream of excitement when Ben says he’s going to marry Elaine. For most of the film, Mrs. Robinson doesn’t do much but sleep with Benjamin and ignore her family. However, when she overhears Benjamin joking that he should date Elaine, she becomes overtly defensive, telling Benjamin to never even think of dating her daughter. Later, Benjamin’s parents force Ben into a date with Elaine, and afterward, Mrs. Robinson delivers him an ultimatum: Stay away from Elaine, or she’ll tell her family about the affair. This is done in an odd defensiveness of her daughter, as she believes Benjamin to not be good enough for her, having experienced him firsthand. She continues her trend of possessiveness when she forces Elaine to marry Carl to keep Benjamin from marrying her. One of her final lines in the film is her smirking up at Benjamin for being “too late” to stop the wedding, and her final exchange with Elaine includes slapping her daughter over Elaine’s admission that she wants to live her own life.



Illustrative moment While vague through most of the film, Mrs. Robinson’s motherly instinct is on full display when she confronts Ben in his car about Elaine. Knowing he’s coming to pick her up for a date, Mrs. Robinson runs out to his car and tells him to drive. While he drives and tries to explain himself, she demands that he never see Elaine again. To ensure his compliance, Mrs. Robinson threatens to tell her family about the affair. This strange lover’s spat turns the film on its head and also shows Mrs. Robinson at her most fiercely motherly.

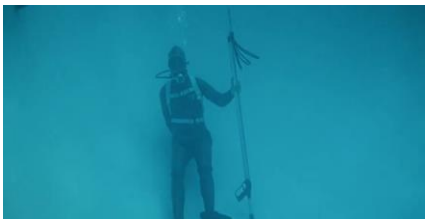
Marriage Marriage is one of the most explored themes of this film. We're shown several marriages, and then the film ends with a marriage interrupted. Mr. and Mrs. Braddock have an outwardly happy marriage, and while we don't see much from them, they don't give us any reason to doubt this outward appearance. Mr. and Mrs. Robinson, however, are shown to have a failing marriage. Mrs. Robinson is depressed and despises her husband for forcing her into a marriage too early: The culture of the time dictated that a pregnant woman marry the man who impregnated her to create a nuclear family unit. This cost her an education, her youth, and her desires to be an independent woman. It is difficult to tell if Mr. Robinson understands what is going on based on the way he blames Benjamin for destroying his marriage; however, it could be projection on his part. His role as a comedic element stifles further examination: We just can't take him seriously. The desire to marry one another is shown in several complex ways through Benjamin and Elaine. Both bounce around in their desires: Elaine begins as open to possibilities, closed to Benjamin, then desperate to escape a forced marriage to Carl, where Benjamin begins as closed to possibilities, becomes obsessed with Elaine, and eventually decides to be her savior to prove his love. In the end, both are shown to be somewhat ambivalent to their situation as the weight of societal judgment and estrangement from their families dampens the mood of their escape from the wedding. In several ways, it is the expectations of others that weigh on those married or engaged more than their actual desire to wed or love for each other that causes characters distress or discomfort.



Illustrative moment At the film's end, Elaine is forced to marry Carl, a young man her parents approve of, in order to keep Ben away from her. Benjamin arrives just as the ceremony ends, and Elaine kisses Carl to seal their marriage. Desperate and in love, Benjamin begins pounding on the window, calling Elaine's name. The gathered guests all react in anger, and seeing their gnashing teeth and hatred for Ben, Elaine is driven into his arms: She decides to take her fate into her own hands. While a messy and frankly violent scene, this portrayal of marriage perfectly sums up what *The Graduate* is trying to say about marriage, love, and family: Control only serves to distance family from the children they've raised, and too many expectations create rebelliousness.

Psychology

Alienation Alienation is one of the predominant themes in *The Graduate*. It, more than any other theme, drives the plot and Ben's decision-making. Even as the son of a wealthy business owner, Benjamin struggles to find himself among the expectations of his family and their friends, most of whom are equally influential business owners. Everyone wants Ben to do something else, but the young man barely understands his own desires. It's this alienation that causes him great discomfort when his parents parade him around like a prize-winning animal, and it's this alienation that drives him into bed with Mrs. Robinson. Elaine commiserates with Benjamin about these feelings, leading to their own love and romance. Because he feels so alienated by the world and society, Benjamin is willing to throw away everything he has to be with the woman he loves, pursuing her in spite of the fact it will damage his relationship with his parents and her parents and make further education more difficult, potentially damaging his economic future. Feelings of social alienation will drive people to desperate measures, as highlighted in the final scene of the film.



Illustrative moment One of the most thematically clear moments of alienation comes early in the film. Benjamin's father is goading a crowd of family friends outside into applause for the young man who exits the house in full scuba gear. From his point of view, the camera shows us how much sound the gear drowns out as his parents and friends noiselessly encourage him toward the pool. When he jumps into the water, his father literally pushes him under and signals for him to stay there, symbolically drowning his son. At the bottom of the pool Ben sits, enjoying the moment of solitude away from the expectations of others and the demands of society he doesn't want to fulfill.

Flaws

Obsession The latter half of the film is all about Ben's obsession with Elaine. Unable to be with him because of her rejection due to his affair with her mother and the Robinson's cloistering of Elaine to keep her out of his grasp, Ben pursues her through more clandestine means. He stalks her from afar, learning her patterns and following her to off-campus events. Because we're watching from Benjamin's perspective, there is something sensitive about this portrayal of obsession. We see the almost teenage desire in him as he lovingly writes Elaine's name in cursive while trying to write her a letter. He's fallen in real love, perhaps for the first time in his life, and he's not giving it up easily. His obsession with Elaine quickly becomes an obsession with marrying Elaine when she forgives him for his affair with her mother. His obsession leads him to extreme lengths when Mr. and Mrs. Robinson force Elaine to marry another young man to keep her from being able to marry Benjamin. While certainly a flaw, Ben's obsession with Elaine gives him the push and determination to do anything he can to be with her.



Illustrative moment There is an entire montage of Benjamin stalking Elaine. Even with these small glimpses and the inherent empathy of experiencing the story through Benjamin's perspective, we can see an acceleration. He begins just driving by her house and glimpsing her in his rearview mirror. He doesn't stop here, however, hiding in the bushes of a neighboring house and watching the family pack Elaine's things for her return to Berkeley. The thematic and film elements of obsession are clearly shown in the voyeuristic framing of many shots in this fantastic montage.

Sexuality

Seduction This is one of the more important themes in *The Graduate*. While it only comes up explicitly in the beginning of the film when Mrs. Robinson seduces Benjamin, the effects of this seduction echo throughout the film. We see it both in its playful form, such as when Mrs. Robinson moves her legs so that Benjamin can see up her skirt while coyly denying that she's up to anything, but also in a more serious form when she states outright she wants to have sex with Ben and again at the hotel when Mrs. Robinson asks if Benjamin wants to get a room. In many narratives, we see an older man attempting to seduce a younger, inexperienced woman. *The Graduate* remains unique in its narrative, where an older woman uses her social power to seduce a much younger, inexperienced man.



Illustrative moment Early in the film, after Benjamin tries to leave the Robinson home, Mrs. Robinson corners Ben in Elaine's bedroom. She's fully nude and speaks in plain tones, almost like a teacher or mother, telling him that she's hopeful he'll change his mind in the future and call her up so they can have sex. Seduction can take many forms, but rarely do we see it portrayed so clinically in film.

Sexual Affair An affair is the driving plot point throughout the film. Dissatisfied with her home life and being disconnected from her husband (who she may never have really loved, she reveals in a conversation with Ben), Mrs. Robinson seeks sexual pleasure with her younger family friend, Benjamin. Just as in the rest of her life, her actions throughout the affair are cold, nearly clinical. She's not interested in a relationship or getting to know her partner better; Mrs. Robinson is only interested in the physical act of sex, something she's not getting from her husband. Whereas Benjamin has anxiety about being found out or seen as someone having an affair, Mrs. Robinson is completely calm and collected until Benjamin suggests he should date Elaine. Ben's anxiety and behavior are played off for laughs, but it's fairly realistic given his inexperience and the immorality of the situation. He's frightened that one slip of the tongue could ruin his life, his father's business, and more. While both Mrs. Robinson and Benjamin have different concerns and goals with their affair, it is their desire for sex that bonds them. In other media, affairs are based on deep desire, overt attraction, or even love. *The Graduate* subverts this narrative expectation, giving us two people who have no connection other than a desire for easy access to genitals.

Mr. Robinson plays the archetypal role of the clueless cuckold excellently, never giving us any hint that he realized what was going on the entire summer.



Illustrative moment We see an affair in stop motion in one of the film's artistic montages. Ben wastes his summer floating in the pool before heading to the Taft Hotel to mount Mrs. Robinson. The way this time all blends together is expertly portrayed as Benjamin exits his bedroom through the same door he enters the room at the Taft. Walking through these doors, he also shuts out his parents and their desires to see him succeed. This summer, Benjamin is only interested in "sowing some wild oats," as Mr. Robinson put it. Likewise, Mrs. Robinson is only interested in having sex, often leaving Ben in the room to watch television and drink beer without so much as a word. *The Graduate* does an excellent job of artistically explaining the feelings that come with trying to hide an affair, visually putting Ben at odds with his parents and treating them as intruders in this montage.

Attraction/Desire This dual theme is explored extensively throughout the film. We see it first when Benjamin feels as if he's putting his foot in his mouth when dropping Mrs. Robinson off at her home. She makes it clear she meant to try and seduce him, claiming that she doesn't know what Ben's talking about when he asks her if she's trying to seduce him, all while uncrossing her legs in the hopes Ben will look up her skirt. It's only in this moment that we see Mrs. Robinson being flirtatious, obviously attracted to Ben and desiring his touch. Ben's attraction to Mrs. Robinson is made clear by the flashes of her naked body that cross the screen as he tries not to look when she makes her seduction clear in Elaine's bedroom. He states his attraction to Mrs. Robinson several times in the film, saying at one point, "You're the most attractive of all my parents' friends." It's clear Mrs. Robinson's attraction is more surface level, as she seems only to want a young man, nothing more. Likewise, where Ben's desire for a relationship with Mrs. Robinson becomes clear; she makes it clear all she desires from Ben is sex. Attraction and desire become more complex when we're introduced to the film's second romance, that between Benjamin and Elaine. At first, Ben tries his best to drive Elaine away, having been threatened by Mrs. Robinson to stay away from her daughter, but when he sees her crying because of her behavior, he hates himself and realizes that he's attracted to her deeply. Elaine shares this attraction, agreeing to start their date over and even inviting Ben inside for 'coffee' at the end of their date. Ben's desire takes an obsessed turn when he's rejected by Elaine when he reveals the truth of his affair with Mrs. Robinson. Elaine obviously likes him, but having been told by her mother that Ben is a rapist, she keeps her distance at first. When she learns the truth from Benjamin, her conflicted feelings remain, as despite her attraction for Ben and her desire to be with him, she sees how difficult it would be given her family's hatred of Benjamin.



Illustrative moment Toward the end of the film, after confronting Ben in his apartment, Elaine sneaks in during the night to ask Ben to kiss her. They share a passionate kiss, and Benjamin asks her to marry him. In her tone and body language, she wants to say yes, but she can't given the complex social situation the affair between Benjamin and her mother has caused. She says she might marry him, giving him the hope to pursue her, but also asking for some distance since her family dislikes him, and that makes getting married risky and uncomfortable for both of them: Their marriage could destroy their fathers' company.

Love Love is a powerful yet fleeting theme in *The Graduate*. It comes up as an impossible idea: The relationships between older adults in the film tend to be tinted by marital troubles and what might be referred to as "situationships" today. There is little actual love clearly on display, mostly gender-normative ideas of men providing for wives who serve them or women marrying for wealth or to avoid scandal, as seen with Mrs. Robinson. When Benjamin tries to get closer to Mrs. Robinson during their affair, she pushes him away, seeing him only as a sex object. Ben soon thereafter admits to having trouble finding love, as most people disinterest him and he can't stand to be around them. She understands and even

shares in his feelings of alienation, and it's from this shared experience and values that their attraction grows into love.



Illustrative moment As equally fleeting as the other mentions of love in the film, the clearest moment of this theme comes at the very end of the film. In an attempt to steal Elaine away from Carl, Benjamin crashes her wedding, causing a brawl. Elaine runs to Ben, helping him escape. It is just after this escape that we see their fiercest and most honest feelings of love: While running away from the wedding, they hold hands and smile, joyous despite the anger and outright violence they just caused because, finally, they are together of their own choice. We see this joy fade into ambivalence on the bus as they're judged by the stares of the other riders and the probable outcomes of their choice fulminate, creating a lasting debate about the meaning and strength of love. This ambiguous ending draws from the viewer their deeper feelings and desires.

Beauty While *The Graduate* does some exploration of beauty, it is muted by the more romantic themes and the affair between Benjamin and Mrs. Robinson. We're shown beauty mostly from Benjamin's perspective and specifically from the context of his sexual desire. He seems smitten with Mrs. Robinson even before she really begins her seduction, and while his reaction to her nudity comes off as panicked, had Mr. Robinson not been pulling into his driveway, he probably would have given in right then and there: He's unable to keep his eyes off of her body. When she asks later if Benjamin finds her attractive, he reiterates repeatedly that he finds her very attractive. In Elaine, however, we see Ben's real idea of beauty. He can't stand to see her cry, and very quickly he decides he wants to spend his life with her, not just because of her looks, but because of her desires, worldview, and deeper thoughts. The rest of the examples of beauty in the film deal with the fleeting, artificial qualities of beauty, mostly in dress and makeup. The lack of joy in Mrs. Robinson's life has killed her passion for art, something she was going to school for before becoming pregnant with Elaine. In some ways, the expectations of society and the American Dream took away her capacity to see beauty, as she is no longer interested in art because it reminds her of a life that was stolen from her.



Illustrative moment About halfway through the film, Mrs. Robinson and Benjamin lie in bed together. She wants to start having sex, but Ben wants to spend some time getting to know her, demanding a conversation. She lackadaisically tries to appease him until she suggests the topic of art. She becomes distant when she admits she doesn't care for art, soon revealing that she studied art in school. Her forced marriage to Mr. Robinson after she became pregnant with Elaine derailed her life, and it's the base cause of her unhappiness. She has rendered herself unable to see artistic beauty because it reminds her of what could have been.

Age gap Alongside the affair, the most important theme in all of *The Graduate*. The drama of the film rests on the subversion of the May-December romance between Benjamin and Mrs. Robinson. Whereas in most media exploring this taboo the man is the older partner, *The Graduate* swaps the positions, making the man the younger partner. Benjamin is seventeen or eighteen years Mrs. Robinson's junior; it's never clarified exactly how old she is, but she's nearly forty to his twenty-one. This inversion of the trope and the comedic focus of the film make it more palatable for the viewer to explore these kinds of relationships. Benjamin admits to finding some older women very attractive, Mrs. Robinson chief among them. She is obviously pleased to have such a young man wrapped around her finger, though her attraction is never quite as clear. Part of her desire for Benjamin seems to be getting some sort of warped revenge on her husband. It could also be a part of her mental state as someone who sees her life being stolen from her; similarly, she wants to steal Ben's youth, though she can never really achieve what happened to her in reverse because of biology. Many films that explore this subject often focus on the disgusting or grotesque aspects, but the age-gap romance in *The Graduate* is a bit less sensationalized,

acting as a sort of wading pool for perverse sexual ideas compared to works like *Death in Venice* or *Lolita*.



Illustrative moment This theme is very pervasive, and it's difficult to pin down one moment that really contextualizes the ideas the film is trying to explore. Early in the film, we see the slightly more predatory nature of this type of relationship, even if it is between adults. Benjamin is inexperienced in love and obviously isn't much of a ladies' man. Mrs. Robinson plays on this, flirting with Benjamin and ignoring his discomfort, trying to play off her advances with statements like "I'm twice your age" and "we've known each other for so long." Her motives become crystal clear when she removes her dress in Evelyn's room, innocently asking Benjamin to help her with the zipper so she can go to bed. When Ben reacts to her undressing in front of him, she scolds him, saying, "Haven't you seen anyone in a slip before?" In this series of scenes, Mrs. Robinson uses her position as a family friend and a motherly figure to get inappropriately intimate with a boy she helped to raise in some ways. While he is nearly 21, they are in different stages of life and different power positions socially, creating a situation where Mrs. Robinson can prey on the overactive libido of a young man to cheat on her husband.

Life Stages

Coming of Age In youth, people typically come of age several times: Teens learn to drive and handle money; they go to college. College kids become legal drinkers at some point, and those students graduate, joining the workforce. Benjamin has gone through all of these things, but he's missing something: sexual experience. During his first night with Mrs. Robinson, Benjamin vaguely admits to having no prior sexual partner in his reaction to her supposition that he's inexperienced. As with many other themes in this film, coming of age is viewed through terms of sexuality and alienation. Benjamin's anxiety about his life and future is based on the pressure of others who want him to continue schooling, enter specific fields, or when his parents want him to essentially perform for their friends. Most examples of this theme in visual media deal with exploration, excitement, and opportunity, whereas Benjamin's story shows us the fear and paralysis that often comes with feeling like you're losing your chances to take advantage of specific opportunities, especially when trusted adults are trying to manipulate or micromanage you.



Illustrative moment The film begins with Benjamin struggling with this theme. While he was in school, he knew how to do what was expected of him. Now he sits in his room, trying to avoid everyone. We soon learn why: Every single one of his parents' friends has some advice, some demand to make of him. They surround him as he comes down the stairs, practically shoving each other to get to him. As he tries to avoid them, another takes their place. Among them is a man named Mr. McGuire who wants Benjamin to work at his plastics company. Using social prowess, he manages to pull Ben aside and speak to him at length about what he wants Ben to do. It's clear Benjamin has no interest in this or any of the other suggestions people make of him, but they don't care about his feelings or desire for pensive privacy.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the soundtrack impact the storytelling?
2. In what ways does the film's cinematography represent asynchronous storytelling? List two examples.
3. In your opinion, is this a story of young love or of dangerous obsession? Explain.
4. How does *The Graduate* portray predatory sexuality? Who perpetrates what actions?