

### *Jawbreaker's* Monstrous-Feminine: Cold, Cunning & Camp

The 1999 cult classic *Jawbreaker*, directed by Darren Stein, is a dark comedy based on the “Flawless Four,” a popular suburban high school clique, who “accidentally” kill one of their best friends, Liz Purr, and attempt to cover it up. The film’s antagonist Courtney Shayne is stylish, yet sociopathic, as her mean girl status is riddled in excess and camp. Courtney is portrayed as the monstrous-feminine, who “kills the teen dream,” and almost gets away with it. Courtney’s hyper-feminine style juxtaposes her calculating ‘mean girl’ title, as her dominant persona suggests an association with conventional masculine attributes. *Jawbreaker* offers a satirical view on postmodern anxieties surrounding suburban women/ girls and sexuality. In this essay, I will explore how *Jawbreaker* encompasses postfeminist ideology. I will specifically examine how Courtney Shayne’s excessive voice and camp aesthetic crown her as the monstrous-feminine prom queen.

Through its *Heathers* (1980) inspired narrative, tastefully excessive style and chaotic characters, *Jawbreaker* is overtly camp. In his book *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film*, Alexander Doty explains the idea of camp onscreen. Doty states that camp is a combination of a few things including irony, and playfulness, as well as excess and hyperbole (Doty 81). *Jawbreaker's* self-aware text, including the excessive depictions of femininity play into these camp aesthetics. Doty further identifies that style, sexuality and gender are all central to camp (Doty 81). These topics are all explicitly explored in the film, specifically in regard to Courtney’s character. For example, Courtney’s femininity is exaggerated through her hyper-femme style, colourful clothing, reminiscent of the sweetness of candy, but edgy enough to remind the viewer that she is “Satan in heels” (Fern, *Jawbreaker* 1999). Doty further equates camp as queer (Doty 82). The viewer is aware of the film’s not-so-subtle inclusion of sexual

desire and tension between the female characters. For example, Fern is obsessed with Liz, to the point where the viewer is unable to decipher whether or not she wants to become Liz or be with Liz. Courtney's sexual fluidity also hints to her character being read as queer, as her exaggerated femininity borders parody. This hyper-femininity is highlighted throughout the film, as a critique on socially conditioned beauty standards.

This idea is evident in the opening scene of the film, where Fern is narrating and describing the "Flawless Four;" Marcie, Courtney, Julie, and Liz. This scene is pivotal to the film's entirety, as the tension within the clique is clearly displayed. The four are shown strutting down the Raegan High hallway, in slow-motion, wearing over-the-top dresses and high heels. Fern is also seen in this shot, dressed in dull, baggy clothing, and stereotypical 'nerdy' glasses. As the group walks down the hallway, Fern is positioned in the middle of the frame, and drops her notebooks, thus further emphasizing her as an 'outcast.' As Courtney and the other girls ignore Fern, Liz, who Fern describes as "sweet and perfect," helps Fern pink up her notes. As this sequence unfolds, Fern explains that Courtney's popularity is derived through a sense of fear and terror, whereas Liz's popularity stems from her caring personality. Liz and Courtney are immediately positioned as opponents, not only through Fern's narration, but also within their style of clothing. In this scene, Courtney is wearing a skin-tight, green dress. The green colour indicates a sense of envy and bitterness towards Liz, who is wearing a soft pink, flowy dress. Liz's dress visibly contrasts the other three girls' whose outfits complement each other, thus emphasizing her dominance and hierarchal position in the group. This division is further emphasized as Fern states that Liz's kindness "pissed Courtney off." As this is said, the viewer sees Courtney shove a jawbreaker candy into Liz's mouth, as the three 'kidnap' Liz as a birthday prank. These two scenes edited together suggest that Courtney's intentions are not pure, instead

the viewer can infer that Courtney would do anything for power and would even go as far as to kill her best friend. The jawbreaker candy being used as a weapon, not only drives Stein's comedic narrative forward, but it also critiques the fear of the phallic woman, often found in thriller or horror genres. Instead of a high heel shoe as a tool for violence, like in *Single White Female*, the jawbreaker emphasizes anxieties surrounding the teenage girl and her sexual liberation, as a threat to patriarchal systems of power. Courtney kills the patriarchal idea of femininity and claims her spot at the top of the social hierarchy, thus deeming her as the film's monstrous-feminine.

To understand the monstrous-feminine, one must first acknowledge the unruly woman. In her book *Feminist Film Theory and the Question of Laughter*, Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, references Mary Ann Doane who discusses her theory on the female body. Doane explains that the body is not only seen as an object of the male gaze, but also as the subject behind the male joke (Rowe 11). This begs the question of whether or not women onscreen are being laughed at, or laughed with? Rowe explains that the unruly woman does not conform to this objectification, as she disrupts structures of dominance, associated with male laughter, with the use of her own laughter and "excessive voice" (Rowe, 31). *Jawbreaker's* self-aware, and satirical structure creates a space for Courtney's "excessive voice" and unruly characteristics. Courtney is depicted as an unruly female character, as she is dominant, not only in terms of popularity and status, but also in terms of her sexuality. This is specifically depicted in the bedroom scene with Courtney and her boyfriend Dane Sanders. In this scene, Dane, the stereotypical high school jock, and prom king is seen as more submissive than Courtney, as Courtney forces him to suck on a popsicle for her own sexual pleasure. Here, Courtney exhibits unruliness, as she breaks the stereotypical hetero, suburban narrative, and instead embraces her sexual fluidity. Courtney proves to the viewer that

men and women are not only equal, but women can also dominate in positions traditionally associated as masculine. This idea, along with Courtney's sexual liberation further emphasizes the film's postfeminist critique of the portrayal of women in popular culture.

Rowe aligns the unruly woman with the monstrous woman, "she's beautiful and she's laughing" (Rowe 9). Rowe references Helene Cixous' "The Laugh of Medusa," here as she explains that the unruly woman (in this case, Medusa) is both monstrous and beautiful. Rowe also identifies that Medusa reclaims her autonomy, through casting her own gaze onto men, thus turning them to stone (Rowe 10). Through this act of reclamation, Medusa essentially plays into the spectacle that she has been made into. If men looked at her for who she is inside, instead of her physical attributes, they would see the beauty. Instead, the men avert their gaze, out of fear of seeing a woman who does not comply with socially constructed beauty standards. Medusa is therefore depicted as a monstrous "unruly woman" (Rowe 10).

In terms of *Jawbreaker*, the excessive hyper-feminine portrayal of the "Flawless Four," creates a self-reflexive critique of the male gaze, in that the gorgeous popular girl that every guy wants, and every girl wants to be, is actually their worst nightmare. Thus, acknowledging social anxieties surrounding women in positions of power and authority. Much like Medusa, Courtney Shayne is depicted as "beautiful and laughing", as throughout the film Courtney's chaotic, yet comedic one-liners remind the viewer of her sociopathic tendencies. For example, as the now "Flawless Three" (Vyllette, Marie and Courtney), sit in the cafeteria for lunch, Courtney is explaining some ground rules of popularity, "it's not like we kill people...on purpose." After an outburst of laughter, the viewer realizes that Courtney's actions may have been more intentional than initially thought, thus aligning her as the villain of the film. In maintaining her status of the 'it' girl, and pretending that everything is "peachy keen," (despite her murderous acts), Courtney

symbolizes the film's postfeminist critique surrounding the pressures placed on women in terms of perfection and keeping up appearances.

In her book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Barbara Creed examines depictions of the 'monstrous-feminine' onscreen, as she identifies that many monstrous figures in horror are associated with femininity (Creed 1). Creed states that the monstrous-feminine can range from the supernatural witch/ vampire to the beautiful, but psycho killer (Creed, 1). Creed further acknowledges Sigmund Freud's theory that monstrous portrayals of the female/ feminine, are associated with men's fear of women along with anxieties surrounding castration (Creed, 1-2). Creed coincides this, as she identifies that the monstrous-feminine in film is related more to the fear of the male spectator than to their sexual desires or gender subjectivity (Creed 7). Although *Jawbreaker* does not quite fall into the horror genre, the parodic comedy functions similar to a teen horror film. Despite her bright candy-coloured appearance, Courtney Shayne is the monstrous-feminine of not only Raegan High, but the suburbs in general. Courtney is the monster that threatens cis, white suburbia, and further critiques societal anxieties surrounding women's sexuality and dominance in traditional patriarchal structures.

This idea is further explained by Creed, who identifies that the monstrous-feminine is represented as the 'abject,' in which essentially disrupts the system and order of the patriarchy (Creed 83). Creed explains that the abject repels and compels at the same time (Creed 14). This is indicative of Courtney's depiction in the film, as Courtney's compelling beauty and stylish clothing juxtaposes her cold and cunning nature. Despite Courtney's vile and vain personality, she is still able to attract the attention of her peers and sell the idea of perfection. This is seen in the film, as Courtney persuades Fern, the stereotypical 'geek', who worships the "Flawless Four," to stay silent about Liz's death, in exchange for a make-over. Fern agrees and undergoes a

lab-like, fantasy make-over into Vylette, reminiscent of Frankenstein's monstrous creation. Here, Courtney has lured Fern in with the hope of perfection, inevitably creating her own monstrous clone, Vylette. The dichotomy between the adored yet despised, emphasizes the film's critique of societal pressures placed on women; where women must be dominant enough to equate to men, but not too much, as it results in being regarded as a "bitch."

There are multiple examples of *Jawbreaker* referring to 90s "bitch" culture, as a critique on the word's negative use against 'angry' women in popular culture. For example, Courtney pulls Vylette into the bathroom, as she is threatened by Vylette's rise to popularity. In this scene Courtney calls Vylette a "bitch" while trying to intimidate her, however, Vylette is wearing a hot pink tank top, with the word "bitch" labelled on it. Here, Stein allows Vylette to reclaim this title through irony, as the word fails to offend her, and instead empowers her to embrace her new-found autonomy and power over the stereotypical mean girl.

*Jawbreaker* shifts the girl power narrative seen in feminism to a postfeminist mean girl narrative, exposing the patriarchal expectations that girls should be 'nice,' and non-confrontational. This mean girl narrative however creates a space for unruly women and showcases duality and intersectionality on screen. Despite her monstrous agenda, Courtney Shayne can also be viewed as vulnerable, particularly in the final scene. Upon being crowned 'Prom Queen,' Vylette, Julie and Zack (Julie's boyfriend), expose Courtney for being a murderer, as they play a recording of her saying "I killed Liz, I killed the teen dream." At this point Courtney's social status is stripped down, as the entire student body 'stones' her with corsages. There is an element of intertextuality here, as this embarrassing prom visual is reminiscent of Carrie a classic monstrous-feminine in the 1976 adaptation of *Carrie*. This comparison further positions Courtney as a monstrous-feminine, as similar to Carrie, Courtney

represents the abject. Referring back to Barbara Creed's idea that the abject disrupts patriarchal structures (Creed 11), in doing so Courtney's popularity has been dispelled. Creed identifies that the abject, which normally presents itself through bodily waste, decay, etc. is typically rejected and excluded when deemed life-threatening (Creed 8). Here, Courtney's social status and pristine façade diminishing is representative of her abjection.

Overall, *Jawbreaker* explores tensions within hierarchal social groups in high school, surrounding status and power. Stein's teen satire creates space for critical discourse around societal fears and anxieties regarding the postfeminist woman as dominant and powerful. Courtney embodies the monstrous-feminine, who eradicates oppressive, patriarchal structures through her excessive performance of gender and sexuality, as well as her self-absorbed ego and camp aesthetic. Courtney's unruliness and lack of empathy thus paved the way for the Jennifer Check's and Regina George's of the high school 'mean girl' narrative.

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