



The Importance of Bond “Girls”

By Hetty Bai

The James Bond franchise has been a staple within cinema for over fifty years. A British cultural icon as well as an emblem of the ideal suave gentlemen, the James Bond franchise has decades of history associated with its books and films. Through the years, some staples have been associated with each film: the “Bond, James Bond” quote, Aston Martins, intricate spy gadgets, and Bond girls. People have criticized Bond girls as only existing to provide sex appeal without substance. After analyzing five scholarly sources about Bond girls, I conclude that they contradict the stereotypical notion that women in media only serve as eye candy, and show these women are competent and important characters. Before analyzing this topic, I provide background about Bond girls and the nature of a Bond film.

James Bond, the main character, is also known as 007 (McNeely). In every film, he must defeat his adversaries to complete his British Secret Service mission. Along the way, he always runs into a young woman who will be known as the Bond Girl. A Bond girl is characterized as the love interest of James Bond. Looking across the Bond franchise, a different Bond girl appears in every film. Honey Ryder was the original Bond girl, being introduced in the first Bond film, *Dr. No* (South). In 1962, Honey Ryder, appearing in a bikini, made headlines as the film was released during a socially conservative era. Since then, there have been Bond girl villains, Bond girl allies, and Bond girls who tread the line between both roles.

Bond Girls have evolved dramatically over time. When Bond girls were introduced, it was obvious one of their key characteristics was sexiness. Whether it was Honey Ryder’s yellow swimsuit or Plenty O’Toole’s revealing dress, Bond girls

attracted the viewer's attention (Nitins). The Bond girls' looks eclipse their characters as many people fail to notice the competence these women possess. This notion refutes the stereotype that Bond girls are just damsels in distress. For example, in the first Bond film, *Dr. No*, Honey Ryder reveals to Bond that she murdered the man who abused her (McNeely). There have also been times where Bond was saved by the Bond girl. In *Goldfinger*, Pussy Galore saves Bond and his mission, during the second half of the film when he is a prisoner of the main villain (McNeely). It is not until the very end of the movie that Pussy Galore shows any sexual interest in Bond, contradicting the notion that Bond girls in the franchise immediately surrender to Bond (McNeely). Additionally, Bond girls are frequently have the same profession as Bond. There have been six Bond girls who, among their other roles, were undercover government agents (McNeely). This detail is important as many people believe that all Bond girls have no knowledge or authority in Bond's field. Critics often focus on these women's looks, disregarding the fact that they have had similar experiences as Bond, and are essentially a female version of Bond.

Though James Bond is often presented as tough, Bond girls offer viewers insight into the emotional vulnerability of Bond. In *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1969), James Bond is married to a young woman, Tracy, a detail often glossed over in the history of Bond (Garland). His marriage to Tracy is significant as it shows Bond is willing to commit, trust, and care for a woman for life instead of being with multiple women like in the previous Bond films. This marriage shows the sensitive side of Bond as it debunks the womanizing attitude he is often known for. In the same film, his wife is murdered after their wedding (Garland). This loss is devastating for Bond as he feels responsible for her death (Garland). This marriage is never mentioned in subsequent Bond films so the viewers could never see how this loss affected Bond. Part of the reason we do not witness Bond's emotions following the loss of his wife may be because the actor playing Bond in the film, George Lazenby, left the

franchise after the film's release (Held). Sean Connery would re-launch the franchise with his portrayal of Bond, yet the character's short marriage would be passed over for newer plot lines.

In addition to Bond's relationship with Tracy, a stronger example of Bond's vulnerability is the relationship between him and Vesper Lynd in 2006's *Casino Royale* (Garland). This is the only Bond film where the Bond girl acts as both ally and enemy. Vesper and Bond's chemistry is evident throughout the film, though Vesper continuously refuses to sleep with Bond stating that he must stay focused on the mission (Funnell). This detail of Vesper's refusal of Bond reinforces the fact that Bond girls are socially independent. Near the end of the film, Bond confesses he will give up his "license to kill" to stay with Vesper ("Casino"). This confession is important as it further suggests to the humanity of Bond. He loves Vesper so much that he would leave the life he has led to in order to stay with her. Yet in the end, Vesper Lynd betrays Bond and in the process, is drowned despite Bond's efforts to save and revive her ("Casino"). Despite her betrayal, viewers witness Bond's desperation while he struggled to rescue her. This struggle indicated that he truly loves her and was potentially willing to forgive her. Unlike Tracy's death, the death of Vesper is continuously mentioned in subsequent Bond films. In *Quantum of Solace* (2008), Bond carries Vesper's necklace, this gesture showing that he was reluctant to move on after her death, an emotional element that was never touched on in previous Bond films. This roller-coaster relationship opened up Bond to the viewers, showing that despite the resilient look Bond wears, he is overwhelmed by his true love's death that it even haunts him in future films. Because of Vesper, Bond does not look like an indestructible secret agent, but rather a vulnerable man who, like everyone else, gets devastated over a loss.

Vesper Lynd and Tracy were arguably the only true loves of James Bond in the franchise, due to Bond's commitment to both. The differences of Vesper's relationship with Bond versus Tracy's relationship with Bond shows that in the fifty-five-year

history of James Bond, the films have evolved, and thus so have the Bond girls.

One aspect about Bond girls that has evolved are the names. When Bond girls were introduced, they often had names containing sexual innuendos, such as Pussy Galore. Although earlier Bond girls had sexually suggestive names, there has not been a Bond girl since Xenia Onatopp (1995) with a suggestive name (Garland). In *Casino Royale* (2006) Bond jokes to Vesper that he should call her "Miss Tiffany Broadchest," a reference to the earlier Bond girl names, which she adamantly rejects (Funnell). By having a Bond girl actively reject the usual Bond girl classification, it is obvious that the modern Bond films are trying to distance themselves from the previous objectifying terms. This distancing is significant as it signifies that these modern 2000 Bond films are a newer, rebranded, contemporary era of Bond.

Besides the names, other aspects of Bond girls have also evolved. In the article *I Know Where You Keep Your Gun*, Lisa Funnell, categorizes the Bond girls evolution into three stages: the English Partner in the 60s, the American Side-Kick in the 70s and 80s, and then the American Action Hero in the 90s and early 2000s (Funnell). From just a love interest, to a side kick and then an equal partner, Bond girls have evolved significantly and been given a greater role in the franchise. Instead of being just a standby, the roles of Bond girls have become more active as modern Bond girls are often undercover spies or competent fighters. Modern Bond girls are now physically, intellectually, and sexually equal to 007. The growing importance of Bond girls in the franchise has also been recognized by advertisers as now promotional materials of Bond films don't just focus on James Bond himself, but also the Bond girl. When *Die Another Day* (2002) was released, the car, bikini and lipstick that Bond girl Jinx wore were advertised (Nitins). Promotion for *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997) featured both Bond and the Bond girl in advertisements for Omega watches (Nitins). In modern Bond films, as the importance and status of Bond girls improve, so do

reviews of the franchise (Held). This growing attention on Bond girls is best described in a Yin Yang analogy by James South and Jacob Held. Held and South state that in earlier films, Bond, aka the masculine Yang, overpowered the feminine Yin of the Bond girls (Held). This led to imbalance as Ian Fleming, the author of James Bond, originally wanted both elements to be equally portrayed in this universe (Held). It was not until later films when the machismo of Bond was complemented by the substantial female characters (Held). This analogy is effective as many viewers think that by increasing the presence and competence of Bond girls, Bond's masculinity is threatened. The yin yang analogy is effective as Bond's masculinity is complimented by the Bond girl's growing character.

Bond girls complicate the notion that women in media exist as sexualized objects because a large portion of the James Bond fan base are women (Nitins). If Bond girls are demeaning to women, shouldn't this turn away half of the Bond demographic? The reason women enjoy the films is because Bond girls are competent characters and despite the exploitation of the Bond girls' sex appeal, the films equally utilize James Bond's sex appeal. All actors who have played Bond were cast, in part, due to their attractive appearance and mannerisms (Nitins). There have been many times throughout the series where Bond was either exposed shirtless or suggestively revealed in another way (Nitins). The most notable example of this is in *Casino Royale* (2006) where Bond himself rises from the ocean wearing only a swimsuit (Nitins). This scene is significant as it was Daniel Craig's first time as Bond and thus introducing a new, modern continuation of the Bond franchise (Held). Arguments have been made that Bond girls are sexualized due to the required *Playboy* promotional photoshoots of past Bond girl actresses, however, this is no longer a requirement (Nitins). Though *Playboy* photoshoots used to be in the Bond Girls contract, sexually suggestive *GQ* photoshoots were required for Bond too (Nitins). although Bond girls are characterized as sexy, so is James Bond himself, but this is often overlooked as critics focus on the women's sexualization.

Both James Bond and Bond girls are sexualized to fulfill one of the movie's main themes: making Bond the ideal man. In all films, Bond is always portrayed as the man every man wants to be, and the man every girl desires. He is capable in combat and suave, thus, appealing to both male and female audiences. The attention the Bond girls give Bond helps develop the mysterious appeal of his character. By making Bond appear to be the interest of beautiful women, Bond is seen as the man every girl wants to date, and every guy wants to emulate. The supporting females are sometimes saved by Bond, but only to reinforce his status as the lead of the franchise.

I conclude that the Bond girl's purpose is often muddled and simplified as the "sex kittens" of the franchise. As I have explained, Bond girls are far more complex and serve a greater purpose for the franchise. Bond girls are attractive, but only because the characters are meant to be attractive, and that does not make them unacceptable female role models. Many overlook their more complex qualities. Though these girls are not the main character of the franchise, they deliver elements like emotional vulnerability and another layer of character and plot complexity that are vital to the success and development of the Bond franchise.

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