

Muriel's Wedding, a 1994 romantic comedy from writer/director P.J. Hogan is a film that has become a classic in the vault of cinema. One of the reasons being that the topics it deals with – body image/fat bodies, powerful female friendships, and rough family dynamics – are still so relevant today. Who knew that a film set in both suburban and urban Australia would become such an important work in the U.S.? Muriel, our protagonist, is misunderstood, unconventionally attractive, and struggling with life and love. She is someone that I wholeheartedly see myself in. Muriel herself is the biggest draw of the film for me. I relate to her and all of her struggles. I have only rarely seen this much of myself represented in a character. As a person who too is not conventionally attractive, is lost in life, and whose seeking of outside approval is proving more and more stress-inducing, Muriel doesn't seem like a character, but an actual person that can and does exist.

Self-image, status quo, sexual identity and more topics like these make this film's exploration of them one that will never grow old or become second-best. By using feminist and queer theory, through analyzing media representation in regard to topics like self-image, love, and representation, and through analyzing certain scenes throughout the film that highlight these themes, I will analyze how *Muriel's Wedding* is a wielding force that does and will continue to draw audiences in.

Who Is Muriel? What's Her Story?

Muriel's Wedding follows a non-conventionally attractive, non-skinny, single girl named Muriel. She lives with her parents and her siblings in Porpoise Spit, Australia. Muriel's dad, Bill Heslop, is a politician who bullies his children and cheats on his wife. Muriel's mom, Betty, is a stay-at-home mother who lives to please Bill, despite all his flaws. Muriel and her siblings sit at home with no jobs, disappointing their father more and more each day. When asked if this family

in any way resembled his own, writer/director of the film P.J. Hogan said that it was, citing that like Muriel, he came from an abusive household with a dad that was never proud of him (*The Story behind Muriel's Wedding with PJ Hogan*, 2019).

Muriel herself as a character, dropped out of high school, has snobby, skinny, “perfect” friends, and dreams of getting married. Based on her environment, she’s not pretty, she’s fat and brings the party down.

Muriel goes on a journey of self-discovery after taking blank checks that her mother was giving her for work and eventually moves to Sydney to start her life over and rebrand. There, she meets Rhonda, and her life becomes better than anything she could’ve imagined in Porpoise Spit. But soon, things go sour: Rhonda gets cancer, Muriel gets married for money and not love, Bob and Betty get divorced, and Betty even dies by suicide. Muriel soon learns that rebranding yourself comes at a much higher cost than she had originally assumed. But before making this realization, Muriel goes through several moments in her life that connect her to audiences and make her real in our lives and minds. Those situations have also been adapted over time to stand out even more to other groups like the LGBTQ+ community.

Self-Image – “I Can Change!”

How audiences, myself in particular, interpret Muriel’s body image and how Muriel herself and the people around her interpret her body image stay pretty opposite for most of the film: I see Muriel has being pretty and not at all the “fat whale” that her brother calls her (CITE) but Muriel sees herself as disgusting and not worth loving or looking at. From a representative standpoint, a lot more can be said. In a study analyzing media cultivation theory done by Michelle A. Wolf and Kelly Briley, women studied said that media tends to focus on women who are societally deemed attractive and more specifically sometimes, women in general not

only have their bodies mocked, but their competence and personalities are too mocked (Wolf & Briley, 2007, p. 138). The film stands out against other movies like it that seek to represent bigger female bodies by not having Muriel's competence or wit be dumbed down. If you think about it, Muriel is quite a genius: she took an opportunity to get out of Porpoise Spit and successfully moves and starts over. She's nowhere near stupid, but the film does still fall back onto this tropism of how non-skinny women's main issue in cinema is nothing other than their weight. When it comes to non-skinny female representation in films, including Muriel's Wedding, being fat is "a plot device and not [necessarily solely] a human quality," (Wolf & Briley, 2007, p. 139). You see this typical mocking of fat bodies during the "I can change!" scene in the first act of the film. Muriel's "friends" dump her because she doesn't do her hair the right way and because she doesn't wear the right clothes and most importantly, because she's fat (Movieclips, 2011, 01:38–01:46).

Muriel is left crying and begging these "friends" of hers to not kick her out of the group and she promises to change, but to no avail. In the same study conducted by Wolf and Briley, they found that women are aware of the media's preference for skinny women and how positive representations of non-skinny women are rare or totally non-existent (2007, p. 138). In this scene, we see how thin bodies are portrayed as the ideal, with non-skinny bodies like Muriel's having to change or conform in order to be accepted. Muriel is also seen as somewhat less of a woman because of her bigger body; a participant in the Wolf and Briley study argued that non-skinny female characters are somewhat depicted and then forced to be interpreted as "non-women" or less than a woman because of their bodies (2007, p. 139).

Muriel, throughout most of the rest of the film, takes this outward portrayal of her body and uses it as a weapon used by herself, against herself. When you are in that environment for as long as

Muriel was, you can't help but to internalize the messaging. Especially when some of that messaging comes from your own family, with your father calling you useless (Anthony Lago, 2015, 00:00–00:17).

An example of this internalization is the scene where Rhonda finds out the truth about Muriel's obsession with marriage. Rhonda finds out the fiancé Muriel was going to marry was made up and that Muriel actually just longs to be loved enough that someone actually goes through with marrying her. Muriel has moved to Sydney to reinvent herself and as a result, she got a guy to ask her out and even has a sex life. But what she realizes in this scene is that this whole time, she's been running from herself and from a home that holds her to expectations that she can't meet while there. "Muriel. Muriel Heslop – stupid, fat, and useless. I hate her. I'm not going back to being her again!" (Movieclips, 2011, 01:09–01:17). Muriel screams this in the middle of a bridal shop, fully gussied up in a wedding dress, with Rhonda and the shop workers onlooking. While watching this scene, I have never felt more despair in my life. Muriel is so relatable in this moment, it's unreal. Collette's facial expressions and acting really elevate how identifiable Muriel is in this moment. This representation can be interpreted and internalized negatively by those that watch and are maybe in a similar body-image situation as Muriel.

One way that movies will typically reconcile this difference is by having the protagonist go through this telling physical transformation that makes them conventionally attractive and has the audience congratulate the protagonist. But Muriel's Wedding stands out because by the end of the film, Muriel actually does not go through this physical transformation by losing weight and wearing more make-up. Rather, she goes through an emotional and mental transformation which I appreciate more. I will get more into this and my lens later in the paper.

Status Quo – "I Do"

After moving to Sydney, Muriel seeks to reinvent herself and somewhat successfully does so. Back in Porpoise Spit, marriage was the epitome; it was the goal. But in urban Sydney, marriage can become the least of your issues. Back in Porpoise Spit, Muriel is completely enveloped by the status quo: Tania, the newest bride, self-proclaims her beauty because she's married, the throwing of the bride's bouquet is hailed as a superstition that has some backing to it, Muriel's family is in complete disarray and her father is the typical breadwinner with her mom becoming more and more lifeless at home. Tania specifically, is the best example of what the ideal woman in the film looks like. She is the "public ideal" (Chambers, 2003, p. 17) and Muriel and she present a binary that reflects a fairytale and real life (Chambers, 2003, p. 17) Life at home is a "narcissistic, materialistic, shallow society," (Bullock, 2011, p. 118) and Muriel is not equipped to continue living life as mundanely as she has been in Porpoise Spit. Yet still, in Muriel's aching to remove herself from the typical expectations of home, she still carries some of them with her. Before her trip to Sydney, Muriel tells her mother that she's going to get married and make it in life; she'll show her ex-friends, her father...everyone. Muriel's obsession with marriage is also linked to less overtly shown obsession with outward acceptance from others.

It makes sense that the women Muriel most identifies with are bridal shop workers: "with perfectly painted lips pursed in mock sympathy, these women officiate, deciding who will participate in the rituals of happiness and how they should look when doing so," (Bullock, 2011, p. 118). For Muriel, if women like the bridal shop workers accept her and think she's pretty enough to even be fitted for a wedding dress, then she's on the right path to self-reinvention and she must be doing something right. Only a matter of time before a guy will come along and sweep her off her feet. One of the first men that does this for Muriel is Brice. Brice asks her out and they even attempt to have sex (Leather Series & Movies 6, 2013, 00:00–01:38), showing that

Muriel on the surface seems to be shifting away from her old life while simply becoming the women she was once bullied by. Muriel was always an outsider when it comes to the typical but even during her attempt to assimilate, she is still somewhat left out because while she thinks that she is becoming a true bride, she is still left out of the conversation of true marriage and true love entirely because she has not actually experienced it (Chambers, 2003, p. 22).

Muriel eventually leaves Brice behind and blindly marries a rich and famous athlete. She is so caught up in the materialistic aspects of marriage and a wedding, that she does not seem to realize or care that her only marriage in the entire film is one that lacks love, depth or connection (littlepip100, 2011, 00:00–03:18), though that’s what she wanted when she started out. The status quo proves its power over Muriel by disguising itself and leading Muriel right back into its plot, despite her thrashing attempts to leave it behind.

Queer Reading

Muriel’s Wedding has been hailed a classic all around but specifically in the LGBTQ+ community, the film has gained and retained a mass following. In an episode of the A24 podcast, Toni Collette who plays Muriel and comedian John Early talked a bit about why the film has become such a staple within the LGBTQ+ community with Early citing that Muriel’s journey of acceptance is one that can be best assimilated to his own life as a young, closeted gay person (Early & Collette, 2018, 11:05-12:25).

Speaking from personal experience, a lot of how I approach a film is how much I can see myself in the story being presented, whether it’s an inherently queer story or one that can be adopted by queer audiences. According to research Jill A. Mackey, “lesbians and gay men go to films partly in search of validation of ourselves: our lives, our loves, our sorrows, our joys,” (1995, p. 86). Critical rhetoric scholar Stuart Hall calls this type of analysis “oppositional code,”

or the process in which the viewer takes the message that is presented in a certain code and resituates it in an alternate code to fit them as individuals (Mackey, 2001, p. 87). Mackey calls this outcome of this alternate code the film's "countertext" (2001, p. 87). In *Muriel's Wedding*, the typical heterosexual text its presented in is obvious: a young, straight woman is obsessed with falling in love with a boy and getting married, as is the status quo presented in her small town of Porpoise Spit. Everything she does revolves around a heterosexual relationship with my guy, and the message that Muriel has learned is that she only matters if she is situated next to a man who she will be with forever via the institution of marriage. But what does a queer reading of this heterosexual narrative sound like and, more importantly, how does it benefit and validate queer audiences?

One way that this movie reads queer is its ending: after Muriel has done all she can to get the attention of men and be married to a man, she finds that it doesn't work out and she ends up (platonically) with her new best friend Rhonda (Mackey, 2001, p. 94). The scene in which David and "Mariel" have sex, she leaves him the next day and says that she can't stay married to him, showing that even something as societally deemed sacred as sex doesn't keep Muriel there with him, pushing more of a subversively queer narrative that LGBTQ+ audiences can use for their own viewing pleasure (Mackey, 2001, p. 95). At the end of the day, the only person that Muriel can stay committed to is Rhonda and she runs away with her in her newfound confidence in herself as a woman and a person obsessed with love. This can also be read as an interpreted as a "coming out" film with a message of female love for some queer viewers (Mackey, 2001, p. 96). The music used in this film also has the ability to be queer-coded. Where else have we heard Abba? *Mamma Mia* and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*...both movies that

have a massive queer following. Abba has simply been a queer-coded music group throughout the group's career and the use of their music in *Muriel's Wedding* is no different.

From a personal standpoint, a lot of the queer-coding that I engage in for this movie comes from the fact that what Muriel goes through in terms of self-discovery and self-identity are processes that I can relate to. As a young, queer and nonbinary person, the past four years of my adulthood have reflected the journey of Muriel. Like Muriel, I have had to go through many situations in which I have had the ability to discover more about myself and who I truly am in relation to others. My queer journey shares a lot of similarities to Muriel's journey of body acceptance and true friendship.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Muriel's trouble with self-image and the status quo, along with my own interpretation of the movie to fit who I am as a person, a lot of what draws me to Muriel's Wedding is the fact that this is one of those movies in which I wholeheartedly see myself connected to the character. I don't think that I have ever been more connected to a character than Muriel. The lens in which I view this movie is a lot more than just me watching a movie, but me realizing that this movie means a lot more to me with each time I watch.

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