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Writing 181

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Exploratory Essay

Throughout my process of working on my final paper, I have found and continue to find new insights in my research and ideas. When I originally thought of writing my research paper on my primary source, *American Hustle*, I had not watched the movie in quite a while. So, just by re-watching the movie I was able to narrow my research and create questions based on new themes that had arisen. This allowed me to look at gender identities and how they impact the plot, as well as how they illustrate feminism during that time. My secondary sources have allowed me to deeply explore the ABSCAM in which my primary source is based on: the impact of scheming, cons, politics, and feminism in American history.

At first my research question was going to explore the political corruption that influenced the making of my primary source. However, after discerning the larger themes of the movie, I decided that the presence of gender was so explicitly framed that there could be a meaning behind it, one which I wanted to explore. When beginning my research, I kept my options wide-open and explored many topics that I found were central to the films composition. My research on women’s role in society drew me to look deeper into how the characters of *American Hustle* fulfill or break these representations of women in the 1970’s. Sydney Prosser (Amy Adams) seems to have so much power and confidence; yet she also is the assistant to the two main male characters instead of the head of the operation, and her power comes from her attractiveness and sexuality. These character traits lead to a very persuasive character, which I have learned plays a vital role in cons. Sydney’s foil character Roslyn (Jennifer Lawrence) is a bitter housewife, who portrays the “stay-at-home” women, unlike Sydney’s character which exemplifies women experiencing the “Sexual Revolution”. Though seemingly degraded, Roslyn has power over Irving because of their child, and the fact that she befriends the mayor’s wife during the time, Irving and Sydney are trying to sting the mayor. These sources lead me to question which women has real power in the movie. I also considered the portrayal of these characters in the modern day, and how society is still attracted to the idea behind a “sexy scandal.” I then began to wonder how the sexualized images of these women continue to have power in the media and film industry still today. As I continue my research I hope to find what contributesto these women’s power or lack there of, focusing in a historical frame with relation to feminism in the States.

While researching, I found several sources that covered central themes in *American Hustle*; however, I was unable to find sources directly related to the movie itself. Interestingly, I had to scour the web until I was able to find my only source that mentions both women and con-artistry. By using online research databases such as JStor and Emory’s DiscoverE website as resources, I was able to find compelling sources that adequately addressed my primary source, and allowed me to investigate and ascertain underlying themes in the film, even though they might have not addressed the film directly.

Annotated Bibliography

1. Caplan, Gerald M. *ABSCAM Ethics: Moral Issues and Deception in Law Enforcement*. Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger Pub., 1983. Print.

This source is an integral part to my research paper because *American Hustle*, is based on the ABSCAM, which was a Federal Bureau of Investigation sting operation. It gives me important background and facts that help me better understand the historical relevance of the movie. A detailed account of the operations, this book gives light to the proceedings seen in American Hustle. Through this source, my own claims have developed as I learn more about the context of the scandal. I find it interesting that the book does not mention the female characters who later were found to have played a vital role in the scams.

1. Frankel, Tamar. *The Ponzi Scheme Puzzle: A History and Analysis of Con Artists and Victims*. New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2012. Print.

This source looks in-depth at Ponzi schemes, from the beginning steps of creating a plan to the final stages of successful trickery. Through “*The Ponzi Scheme Puzzle*,” I was able to relate the steps in the book with the steps that the characters Irving Rosenfeld and Sydney Prosser in *American Hustle* take to successfully con someone. I found it interesting that the book did not look at specific genders when accounting how the schemes run, yet there three primary examples were all male. Seemingly, this source reveals that Con Artists is a male dominated occupation. However, many of the insights about deception that the books highlights were used by the female characters in *American Hustle* to persuade others, such as “deceptive friendship,” and the “advertising” of their schemes.

1. Gerhard, Jane F. *The Dinner Party Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007*. Athens, GA: U of Georgia, 2013. Print.

Looking specifically at feminism, “*The Dinner Party”* comments on women’s roles at home and in society. This source contributes to my research paper, because it allows me to look at the feminist theory of the 1970’s, which is when *American Hustle* takes place. However, it primarily focuses on artwork, which relates to the art forgery in *American Hustle*, but not much else in my research. The book describes how in the 1970’s women were finally beginning to transition from being “stay at home mothers” to the working women. This emphasizes Sydney’s ability to more freely create her own path, whereas Irving’s wife Roslyn, who is older, feels confined to her house and child, even though she yearns to be involved in Irving’s “business” endeavors.

1. Greenwood, Jeremy, and Nezih Guner. “SOCIAL CHANGE: THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION”. *International Economic Review* 51.4 (2010): 893–923. Web.

“Social Change: The Sexual Revolution” explores the connection between the sexual revolution and feminism. The breakthrough in this story primarily comes from the invention of the birth control pill, approved by the FDA in the 1960’s, but not publically accepted until the 1970’s. The ability to have non-committal sex revitalized women’s sex lives. They were no longer tied down with one man, they were able to explore their sexuality with much less risk than before. This sexual revolution connects with the women in *American Hustle* and how they use their bodies to manipulate people and have intimate relationships with more than one person.

1. Landay, Lori. *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania, 1998. Print.

This source is by far the most holistic in my research. “*Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture*” explores the women’s liberation movement in the sixties and seventies, and how it envisioned women’s participation in the private and public sectors overtly. Landay’s writing intertwines with how Sydney and Roslyn’s characters are portrayed in the movie. The book sites many specific examples from film and television while exploring the stereotypes behind “female trickery.” It is interesting to compare how women were portrayed in the era during which the film takes place, versus how they are portrayed in 2013 when the movie comes out.

1. Pomer, Marshall I. “Mobility of Women into the Economic Mainstream”. *Journal of Business Ethics* 2.3 (1983): 185–189. Web.

“Mobility of Women into the Economic Mainstream” explores how the advancement of women in the labor market during the 1970’s was hindered because of gender inequalities. Women were and still are far less likely than men to experience upward mobility. This source presents an interesting contrast between the way women were treated in the 1970’s and the way they are treated today. The movie actresses were purposefully presented in a specific sexual demeanor not only to represent how females looked in the 1970’s, but also to attract male viewers to theaters in the present day. Most women in the 1970’s who had jobs, had low-paid service jobs. This source gives insight to Sydney’s character and how she used conning not only because she fell in love with Irving, but also because she wanted a way to make enough income for a single woman, which the usual jobs at the time for a woman with her education level were paid comparably less.

1. Stevens, Anne. *Women, Power and Politics*. Basingstoke Endland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Print.

I found this source to be useful because it explored women’s political and social activity in America. Although I was slightly discouraged that this source did not have much information that I could tie directly to my primary source, it was still informative aboutwomen’s roles in politics throughout history. Steven’s writing was able to influence my own claims by addressing the lack of female representation, which correlates to the imagery seen in *American Hustle*, as well as with the fact that the ABSCAM didn’t acknowledge key female leads in the story.