Teen Pregnancy in Hollywood: Nine Months of Deception

Amanda Lubeck

In the summer of 2008, rumors began surfacing about a group of young girls attending Gloucester High School in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Going into summer break that year, an astonishing 18 girls were pregnant (Kingsbury). As more and more of these girls were interviewed by newspapers across the country, the adolescents eventually admitted to making a pact with each other to become pregnant at the same time so that they could all raise their children together. School officials and parents alike were shocked to discover that these young women willingly became pregnant, but Amanda Ireland, a Gloucester student who gave birth her freshman year, was not. She explained to *Time* magazine that before she gave birth the girls who had created this pact frequently approached her at school to tell her how lucky she was that she was going to have someone who would love her unconditionally (Kingsbury). This statement sent shock waves throughout the nation. Many found it absurd that girls as young as fourteen would feel the need to have a child, but both Kingsbury from *Time* and Allen-Mills from *TimesOnline* in the United Kingdom suggest that Hollywood is a probable cause. Movies and television shows such as *Juno* glamorize teen pregnancy by portraying the soon-to-be teen mothers with desirable characteristics such as recognition among their peers, resolution of many of their previous emotional problems, and a newfound sense of maturity. Pregnancy in Hollywood can be seen as a coming-of-age event, which turns the characters in these films and shows into role models for young girls all over America.

The 2007 film *Juno* follows 16-year-old Juno MacGuff, played by Ellen Page, through her pregnancy. Although Juno is forced to face hardships such as debating the option of abortion, telling her father and stepmother about the "blessed miracle," and eventually giving her baby up for adoption, the bulk of the film consists of jokes and comical scenes in order to illustrate Juno as a strong and optimistic individual. Even during one of the most serious scenes, Juno cracks jokes about abortion, causing Juno to appear absolutely assenting about her decision to abort her unborn child. Upon making the appointment, she tells the receptionist that she's "calling to procure a hasty abortion" and asks if she can hold because her hamburger phone is "kind of awkward to talk on" (*Juno*). However, when Juno goes to the abortion clinic, she cannot force herself to go with the procedure because she discovers that her baby "already has a beating heart and fingernails"; the film glamorizes pregnancy by suggesting that the fetus already has an absolute value of life that Juno is responsible for protecting. Many teen girls would see this as a positive aspect of pregnancy and would be proud of Juno for making such a decision. Juno's decision to save the life of her unborn child allows Juno to become something of a hero.

Although Juno does appear very sure of her decision when she is making jokes about abortion, she eventually decides to give her baby up for adoption, causing adoption to seem like an easy solution for pregnant teens. Since fewer than 1% of pregnant teens decide to take the path of adoption, however (Back), the fact that the filmmakers fictionalize the simplicity of the decision further implies the film's unconscious support for teen pregnancy. After easily deciding the fate of her unborn child, Juno explains herself by saying that she could "give [her baby] to someone who totally needs it like a woman with a bum ovary or a couple of nice Lesbos" (*Juno*). Even while she is making this tough decision, Juno's hilarity shows her strength while under pressure, which causes young girls not only to begin to subconsciously see her as someone they

would like to be like one day, but also to believe that giving a baby up for adoption is an easy feat. Juno's humor, although it could be seen as psychological compensation for her emotional turmoil, serves as a tool to show her tenacity, which shines even while she is facing potential havoc. Because Juno's humor is so obvious throughout the film, teens see that Juno is still a strong-willed and likeable individual, all the more so because she is pregnant at such a young age.

Just as Juno's decision to give her baby away is simple, the rest of her pregnancy and the other choices she must make for her child continue to be filled with few complications, which subconsciously shows young girls that pregnancy as a whole is an uncomplicated event. In fact, even the seemingly impossible task of telling her family that she is pregnant is rather simple. When Juno decides to inform her father and stepmother that she is pregnant, they seem surprised at first but, shockingly, do not react with much anger or disappointment. Furthermore, her stepmother even responds with unrealistic excitement about the situation, calling Juno "a little Viking" (*Juno*) for her insistence on having the child, and offering to schedule her prenatal appointments for her. Juno's parents' approval is nonchalant, and seems to offer the idea that something like this would eventually happen to Juno anyway because all teenagers make mistakes. This acceptance, unfortunately, may give teens the wrong idea about pregnancy. Because Juno's parents react with such approval, teens may transpose this into their own ideas about pregnancy. Young girls most likely see this event and assume that pregnancy is as easy as it appears in the film. It is not shocking that teenagers would wish for the nine months of excitement that Juno experiences.

Not only is Juno's pregnancy relatively simple, but it also seems to resolve many problems in her life, making her existence less complicated and happier. Though many would

believe that teen pregnancy would rip apart a family, it actually brings Juno's closer together, which turns this complex situation into a beneficial one. After Juno discovers that Mark, the baby's prospective adoptive father, was planning to leave Vanessa, Juno asks her dad if it is possible for two people to stay in love forever. Juno's dad responds by telling her that he will always love her, a sentimental family moment which has not yet been seen in the film. The analogy of parental love as synonymous with romantic love is both disturbing and inaccurate, but it does show the filmmaker's subconscious support for teen mothers by depicting parental love as everlasting, even through an event as overwhelming as teen pregnancy. Juno's pregnancy forces her to examine the meaning of relationships, and she discovers that, no matter what, her family will always be there for her. When Juno becomes pregnant she also realizes that she must face the emotional complications that she feels for the baby's father, Paulie Bleeker. It seems that Juno's insecurities have caused her and Paulie to remain only friends, even though both secretly wish to be together, until she becomes pregnant. Though both Paulie and Juno agree that they should not date while she is pregnant, the pregnancy gives them a reason to discuss their relationship. At the end of the film, Juno tells Paulie, "You're not like everyone else. You don't stare at my stomach all the time, you look at my face. And every time I see you the baby starts kicking super hard. I think it's because my heart starts pounding every time I see you" (*Juno*), which begins their fairytale relationship. Juno's baby takes her and Paulie from awkward to happily ever after, confirming that pregnancy makes permanent adolescent high school relationships.

Juno's pregnancy resolves not only her own personal issues, but also Vanessa Loring's. When Juno is looking for prospective adoptive parents, she sees Mark and Vanessa Loring's photograph in the penny-saver and states, "They were even perfect in black-and-white" (*Juno*)

because in their photograph they are both aesthetically beautiful and appear to be very much in love. Although Juno believes that she has found her baby a perfect set of parents just by seeing their picture, the complications of adoption soon cause Juno to discover that no one is perfect. After she becomes very close with Mark, he discloses to Juno that he is planning to leave Vanessa. Mark eventually does separate from Vanessa, and though it seems like her world is falling around her, she still decides to adopt Juno's baby. Though afraid to be a new mother, Vanessa becomes happier than she ever was while with Mark. At the end of the film the audience sees Vanessa happily smiling and holding her new baby, and although filmmakers ignore crucial matters such as the financial responsibilities of being a single mother, Juno's child has helped Vanessa discover Mark's inability to love and provided Vanessa with someone whom she can love unconditionally who will also love her. Because Vanessa's problems are solved when she adopts Juno's baby, teens who see this film are likely to believe that babies born to teenagers have the potential to solve many adults' problems, even though this is unrealistic.

While Juno's pregnancy does resolve the problems in both Juno's and Vanessa's lives, filmmakers seem to make the attention that Juno receives from being pregnant even more important. During one of the first scenes in the film, Juno walks down the hall and must push past her classmates, who seem to treat her as if she were invisible. After she develops a large baby-bump, however, her classmates make an aisle for her to walk through on her way to class. Though this change is most likely negative because some of the individuals in the hall give her dirty looks, it is still a change. Juno has gone from being completely unknown at her high school to being a sort of celebrity. This, of course, is a desirable change for many teen girls who are struggling to make a name for themselves. While seeing Vanessa at the mall one day, Juno even tells her that "At school everyone's just grabbing my belly all the time…I'm a legend" (*Juno*).

When most people think of the word “legend,” they associate it with some sort of mythical provenance and more importantly, fame. Although many would agree that teen pregnancy does not necessarily amount to a great deal of positive attention, many young girls may not be able to make this distinction, like Juno. To some, attention may be positive no matter how it has been gained because, for many teens, attention is the equivalent to esteem. When Juno becomes pregnant she also seems to earn some admiration from her classmates. While in the lunch line, Juno’s best friend Leah remarks, “I wish my fun bags would get bigger” (*Juno*), alluding to Juno’s increasing cup size. Leah, like many teen girls, chooses to focus on the positives of Juno’s situation and fails to see the negatives and equates maternity with sexuality, which, once again, causes Juno to become something to be envied by young girls.

When Juno becomes pregnant, she also gains a false sense of maturity. To begin, the initial act is a privilege that is supposed to come with maturity. Juno jumps into sex seemingly on a whim, surprising even Paulie. Juno later tells Paulie that the only reason that she had sex with him was that she was bored, showing her immaturity in a situation that requires immense maturity. However, young girls may see this act as something that automatically allows you to be mature because it is something that adults do. Juno’s pseudo-maturity continues as she decides what to do with her child. After Mark leaves Vanessa, Juno must confront the idea of giving her child to a single mother. Though she does struggle with this dilemma, she confidently makes this life-altering decision to give her baby to Vanessa because she feels that she is mature enough to make such a choice for her child. Almost every young girl craves maturity as it causes one to feel older than one actually is. One plausible cause of this desire is that many girls find their teen years to be the most difficult. In the case of the Gloucester girls, school superintendent Christopher Farmer stated that because there are so many broken families in Massachusetts,

“Many of [Gloucester’s] young people are growing up directionless” (Kingsbury). Growing up in a dysfunctional home may cause teen girls to yearn to start a new home, and it is likely that they feel that having a child will give them the maturity they need to do so.

Since its release in 2007, *Juno* has received 38 nominations and an astonishing 49 awards, including an Oscar for Best Writing. Its popularity was certainly the result of a phenomenal screenplay, talented actors, upbeat underground music, and most importantly, a provocative storyline. Despite all of the reasons for *Juno*’s success, the fact that the film is so well liked should be disturbing to those who view the movie. The film portrays a young girl who makes a huge mistake. Strangely enough, America fell in love with a pregnant teenager, even though many of those who enjoyed the film would probably scoff at a teen in such a situation on the street. The popularity of movies and shows such as *Juno, Secret Life of the American Teenager, Knocked Up,* and *16 and Pregnant* is caused by our intrinsic interest in the dramatic. This interest has been transposed into everyday life as the teen pregnancy rate in America rises. Teens see funny, popular, and seemingly mature teen mothers in Hollywood so often that it is not surprising that many of these young girls view them as role models. Teen pregnancy rates will continue to rise in America until Hollywood ceases the glamorization of pregnancy by depicting it as a coming-of-age event.

Works Cited

Allen-Mills, Tony. “Teen ‘Pregnancy Pact’ Has US Town Reeling in Shame.” *TimesOnline* 22 June 2008. Web. 21 September 2010.

Back , Kimberly. "Teen Pregnancy and Adoption". eHow. Web. 29 May 2010.

Juno. Dir. Jason Reitman. Screenwriter Diablo Cody. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2007. Film.

Kingsbury, Kathleen. “Pregnancy Boom at Gloucester High.” *Time* 18 June 2008. Web. 1 October 2010.

Contents

Occasions Home

PWR Home