

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
J. Zimmerman, MA

Sexuality in Cinema

Secretary (2002)

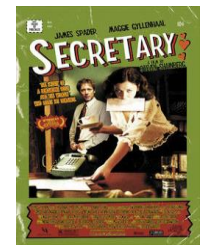
Steven Shainberg (b. 1963)

OVERVIEW

Director Shainberg is a bit private about his early life. We know that he graduated from Yale with a degree in Asian studies and English literature and soon after graduation began working a number of roles in the film and advertising industry. Having helped produce a number of rock videos for MTV, he used his connections to get two of his earliest short films (known as the Mr. Viril series) featured on the network in 1998. His directorial breakthrough wouldn't come until the release of *Secretary* in 2002. Unlike many of the directors we've highlighted in this series, Shainberg is infrequent in his productions, often taking as long as a decade between features.



Film Based on a short story of the same name in the 1988 collection *Bad Behavior* by Mary Gaitskill, *Secretary* was changed extensively in Erin Cressida Wilson's screen treatment. Large-scale expansion of the plot was needed to stretch the story into a feature film, and this included the tone and dialog from the story. Despite being set in Florida, the film is obviously shot in Los Angeles. Lee's family's home, the law offices of E. Edward Grey, and Grey's home can all still be seen today, and many have been used in other films and TV shows like *The Fast and the Furious*, *NCIS*, *True Blood*, and *Catwoman*.



Background In a 2004 interview, Maggie Gyllenhaal said, "I was surprised by how little controversy there was and how I didn't really get a chance to fight for the movie like I hoped I was going to get." With a \$4 million budget, *Secretary* more than doubled that investment upon release, showing popular appeal. Most of the controversy around the film has emerged in recent years, with retrospectives focusing on the film's toxic workplace dynamics after the #MeToo movement. Critics and viewers alike tend to agree that this movie approaches a number of tricky subjects with skill and consideration. At the time of writing, *Secretary* has a 78% approval rating on the review aggregation site Rotten Tomatoes.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Lee Holloway – A young woman who was recently released from a mental institution
E. Edward Grey – A self-hating lawyer who has a penchant for abusing his position over his secretaries
Peter – A former classmate of Lee's who seeks to marry her
Burt Holloway – Lee's alcoholic father
Joan Holloway – Lee's overly-protective mother

SYNOPSIS

Lee Holloway is the youngest daughter of a dysfunctional Florida family. After a stay in a mental hospital following a self-harm incident turned into a suicide attempt, she struggles to reenter society. Lee lacks the experience and self-confidence to succeed in a normal life. Enter E. Edward Grey, a demanding and quirky lawyer in need of a secretary. Grey tells Lee she's overqualified, but Lee is interested in steady, dull work, so she takes a place in his law firm, typing up letters and forms.

A conflict unfolds as Grey finds a number of errors in Lee's work, circling each with a red marker. Lee, wanting to be a good worker, submits to his demands, both finding secret sexual pleasure in the arrangement. One day, Grey catches Lee cutting herself and confronts her, ordering her to never hurt herself again. Soon thereafter, Grey forces Lee to bend over his desk and read her typos aloud while he spans her. This kind of workplace abuse would send most people running for a lawyer, but Lee is aroused and excited by the ordeal, seeking to expand the dynamic. For a time, Grey obliges, and Lee falls for him, but Grey's own cocktail of self-hatred boils over, and he seeks to end his sexually dominant habits. Lee responds to this by making errors on purpose, hoping for punishment.

Around this time, Lee is set up on a series of dates with an old family friend, Peter. Peter thinks Lee is meant for him, but she seems to barely tolerate him. After a date, they engage in sex, and Lee is disappointed by Peter's pathetic performance and lack of attention to her desires. The next day, Grey discovers that Lee has sent him an earthworm in the mail and orders her to bend over his desk again. This time, he masturbates and ejaculates on her back. Lee goes into the bathroom and masturbates, fantasizing about fellatio with Grey. Feeling ashamed by his lapse in judgment and return to his toxic sexual habits, Grey fires Lee.

Peter proposes to Lee, and on the day of their wedding, Lee runs from his family home in his mother's wedding dress. She runs all the way to Grey's office, where she declares her love for him. Grey turns this confession into a test, commanding Lee to sit in his office chair with her hands on his desk and to not move until he returns. After leaving, Grey tips off Peter to Lee's location, triggering a confrontation where Lee rejects him. The media soon becomes involved, believing this to be a hunger strike of some kind. After a few days, Grey returns to care for Lee and take her away. They are married, and their dominant-submissive relationship morphs into a more typical husband-and-wife relationship with time.

PLOT

Restrained – The scene opens on an eclectic but overly orderly office. A desk is laid out with immaculate care. From a hallway, a woman in a bondage yoke enters with a strange smile on her face. She performs several secretarial duties. Lowering herself to her knees to staple documents with her chin and retrieve typed letters from the nearby typewriter. She holds one document in her mouth as she moves to a kitchenette where she skillfully prepares a cup of coffee despite her encumbrance. With the documents and coffee in hand (and mouth), she walks into an ornate office and closes the door behind her.



Six months earlier – A title card reads, "Six months earlier." Lee—the woman seen before—lifts her skirt to straighten her socks as she speaks in a voiceover: "I got out of the institution on the day of my sister's wedding." She describes the routine as the doctor who treated her comes out to see her off with a loving hug, promising he'll do his best to help her if she calls for him. Lee hugs him back and thanks him. "Inside," the voiceover continues, "life was simple. For that reason, I was reluctant to go." Tropicália begins to play as a robin-egg blue station wagon pulls up. Inside, Lee's mother waves with a strange expression.



Wedding – Lee's sister kisses her new husband after they cut the wedding cake to rancorous applause. Lee watches from the sidelines near the pool in a frumpy blue dress that looks about ten years out of fashion. A young man emerges from the house behind her, and she recognizes him, calling him Peter. He asks if she's happy to be home, and she nods with a plastered-on smile. He presses, the smile fades, and she shrugs. "How did you know?" she asks. "I know what you mean," he responds cryptically.



The two dance together among the other wedding guests. Lee's father emerges from the crowd, beer bottle in hand, and welcomes her home. She mentions that he had quit drinking, and he quickly passes

the bottle to Peter, trying to hide it. Too drunk for his own good, Lee's father sits down, and she has a visceral reaction, running to her room, where she finds a hidden kit of sharp implements, bandages, and antiseptic. Ready to cut her thigh where no one will see, she looks up to see her sister driving away in a limousine. Quickly, Lee throws the implements back in the box and puts the box in a dresser.

Argument – As she's making a cup of tea before bed, Lee overhears her parents fighting in the living room. It's a heated argument: Lee's father's drunkenness has cost him his job. The fight seems to come to a head as Lee's father strikes her mother. The kettle on the stove begins to scream, but Lee quickly moves it off the heat, silencing it. With purpose, she takes the hot kettle back to her room, where she presses the hot metal into her thigh, wincing at the pain but taking a strange pleasure in the sensation of control it gives her. In the cool of the night, Lee floats in the family pool with the aid of arm and leg floats. She turns her head, staring at a little boat with the models of a bride and groom left floating on the water after the wedding.



Typing class – We see the exterior of Clairmont Community College. Inside, a man walks through a classroom of mostly women who work hard copying text on typewriters. He gives them helpful tips on how to succeed in their typing test. Lee is seen among the students, typing skillfully at several hundred words per minute. Lee's tongue dances around the corner of her mouth as she concentrates, her voiceover reading out the lines she's typing. Afterward, Lee's mother drives her home, giving her saccharine praise about "going out into the world."



Fighting the urge – In her mind, Lee remembers the accident that sent her to the mental hospital. Feeling the urge to cut herself, she used a knife she was washing in the sink, but she cut too deeply, nicking an artery. The self-harm was classified as a suicide attempt. "I'm not sure how I misjudged," Lee's voiceover says as she collects her kit from her dresser in her room. "I'd been doing it since seventh grade." We watch Lee's mother collect all the sharp implements in the kitchen, using a pink bicycle lock to hide them in a cabinet. Outside, Lee tries to throw away her kit, but she's unable to part with it. Underneath them in the garbage is the help wanted page of a newspaper, and Lee takes it inside, circling several jobs she finds promising. She then holds up a mirror, practicing interview lines while watching her expression.



Awkward interview – Lee's mother drops her off outside a lawyer's office in the pouring rain, assuring her she'll be there when she's done and wishing her good luck. A lit sign reads, "E. Edward Grey, Esq. Secretary Wanted." Wearing a purple rain poncho and holding her typing certification, Lee cautiously enters the office after turning to see her mother waving her in. The interior is in shambles, as if someone had robbed it. A woman takes a box of her belongings from the desk and leaves, ignoring Lee as she tries to get directions to the lawyer's office. Lee makes her way there, finding Mr. Grey in a strange, disheveled state. He tries—and fails—to act normal, but he continues the interview notwithstanding. His questions are strange, more about her living situation and plans to have children than her skills.



Test – For her first test, Mr. Grey asks for a cup of coffee with sugar. Lee struggles in the kitchenette to make a cup of coffee as Mr. Grey wanders about his office, stashing a picture of a blonde woman in his filing cabinet as he changes his tie and coat. Back in Mr. Grey's office, the lawyer lies down on the couch as he tells Lee she's overqualified for the position. She says she doesn't care and that she wants a dull position. "There's something about you," Mr. Grey says. "You're... closed tight. Do you ever loosen up?" With a small smile, Lee answers, "I don't know." The phone begins ringing, and Mr. Grey says, "I'm not here." He passes the phone to Lee. Outside, the rain has stopped, and Lee climbs into her



mother's station wagon. Lee's mom asks how things went, and Lee replies, "I got it." The secretary wanted sign turns off as Lee and her mother drive away.

Bath – A do not disturb sign crafted by a much younger Lee hangs on a door handle in the family home. Inside the bathroom, Lee takes a luxurious bath. She picks up a snow globe that chimes a childish tune, throwing it into a nearby trash can where it shatters. Lying on her back, she practices her secretarial voice: "Hello. You have reached the office of Mr. E. Edward Grey." She gets to the part of the spiel where she says 'we,' and she grins from ear to ear, relishing it.



Orchids – A montage of activity happens in a few seconds: Lee goes to her first day at work; she follows Mr. Grey through the halls burdened by all of his possessions, she has dinner with her family, and Mr. Grey praises her organizational skills. Lee flosses her teeth in the law office, and the paralegal addresses her. Turning to the other woman, Lee asks what a paralegal is, and the other woman simply scoffs and leaves the bathroom. Soon, Lee enters Mr. Grey's office and watches, entranced, as he cares for his orchids. She gives him his coffee and a pack of doughnuts. Without a reaction or a word of thanks, he asks Lee to dig through the garbage to find some notes he mistakenly threw out. Lee leaves his office with a soft smile. When she's gone, Mr. Grey pitches the doughnuts into a nearby trash can.



Dumpster – With a comic attempt at grace, Lee hoists herself into the dumpster behind the law office. Digging through the bags, she eventually finds the file Mr. Grey wants. Heading back inside, she notices something: Her mother is parked beside the law office. Lee's mom rolls down her window with a toothy smile. "Why are you here?" Lee asks. "I'm just waiting for you, honey," her mother replies. "But I'm here for five more hours," Lee says. "I know," says her mother with strange enthusiasm.



Mousetraps – Lee stands silently beside Mr. Grey's desk, filthy folder in hand. After a few beats, she says, "Excuse me, sir?" "It's okay," Mr. Grey says. "I found another set." He then demands more sugar in his coffee, several copies of a document, and asks for Lee to "freshen up" the mousetraps. Lee plucks a cheese cube from the fridge nearby and clumsily sets about baiting the mousetrap. As she's crawling around, placing bits of cheese in the traps, she notices the doughnuts in the trash can. Mr. Grey instructs her that the mice like to crawl behind the furniture, pointing out a trap she's missed: "Just because it's hard to reach does not mean we don't take care of every possibility." When Lee bends over the chair to retrieve the mousetrap, Grey stares at her rear. His eyes cast down, and he notices the cuts on the back of Lee's thigh. The phone rings, and Lee drops the trap, gathering the coffee and documents from the floor before running out to her desk.



Trisha – A blonde woman enters the office just as Lee makes it to her desk and answers the phone; she's the one from the picture Mr. Grey hid earlier. It's clear that she's just speaking to a telemarketer, but instead of hanging up, she tries to be polite. The blonde woman saunters up to the desk and asks, "Is he in?" Lee holds up a finger, still being overly polite to the telemarketer on the phone. "Submissive," the blonde says with an edge of disapproval. Lee starts to react, but the woman doesn't give her a chance, screaming, "Edward!" Mr. Grey sits at his desk, a panicked look washing over his face. Lee finally hangs up on the telemarketer, and the woman introduces herself as Trisha O'Connor. Lee finds Mr. Grey hiding in the closet near his desk. He whispers commands to her through the door. Back in the lobby, Trisha files her nails impatiently. Lee emerges to say Mr. Grey isn't in, but Trisha knows that she's lying.



Call from dad – The interaction is disrupted by another phone call. This time, it's Lee's father, and he's clearly drunk. Behind Lee, Trisha moves to the coat stand where Mr. Grey's coat hangs. After telling her father to hold for a moment, Lee asks Trisha if she has a message for Mr. Grey. In response, Trisha throws Mr. Grey's coat to the floor before stomping and treading on it. "Tell him to sign the settlement," she says after completing her display. After Trisha leaves, Lee turns her attention back to her father's phone call, but he's gone. She slams the phone back on the receiver repeatedly before sitting down. From her desk, Lee retrieves a cutting kit, ritualistically placing her iodine and bandages in front of her. As she picks a part of her thigh to cut, she looks up and sees Mr. Grey staring at her. She quickly abandons what she was doing before straightening her desk. When Lee looks back up, he is gone.



Date – Lee's mother drives her back home, asking the usual questions about her day before telling her, "Peter called!" Late that night, we see Lee and Peter seated at a table inside a 'laundrobar' sharing drinks. Peter makes small talk about laundry habits, and when Lee asks which kind of person he is, he responds out of left field: "I'm the type of guy who wants to get married and have a kid." Lee quickly shifts the conversation back to laundry habits. Peter tries to make the conversation about relationships again, but seeing Lee is a bit uncomfortable with the topic, he offers her more wine, which she gladly accepts. In talking, they both learn they suffered nervous breakdowns after high school.



Spying – Mr. Grey enters the laundromat with the coat Trisha trod upon, and he sees Lee with Peter. Lee makes fun of Peter for wearing briefs because they "squeeze your 'thingies'" and can make it difficult to have babies. She and Peter laugh as they throw out all of his briefs. "To babies!" Peter shouts. Peter then pulls Lee into an awkward kiss, and Mr. Grey retreats back to his car. From his briefcase, he retrieves a single red marker and places it on the passenger seat before speeding away.



Proofreading – A red marker circles a typo: 'gender' with two 'R's. Mr. Grey picks up the paper and storms out of his office to where Lee is typing up copies from a cassette recording. He slams the paper down atop her typewriter and demands that she look at it. Lee is shocked as he explains that he's been letting some of these minor errors slide since Lee is new to the job, but she keeps making errors that make him look stupid to his clients. "This can not go on," he says firmly before ordering her to type it again. After a few more rounds of proofreading, Lee types much slower, licking the corners of her mouth while concentrating. Suddenly, she stops and cuts a small piece from her skirt before typing up a new note: "A piece of me. A small sacrifice, to E. Edward Grey." Thinking better of it, she tears up the note. After delivering the letter, Mr. Grey tells her off about her appearance and her annoying habits that make his business look sloppy: She plays with her hair, taps her feet, licks her lips, and sniffs. Lee apologizes and promises to improve.



Peter's parents – In another date, Lee reacquaints herself with Peter's parents. Peter's mother pushes their homemade wine on Lee while his father peels and crushes grapes for winemaking. "Peter talks about you all the time," Peter's mother says. "He says he's found his soul mate." His parents then go back and forth talking about their daughter, who is getting married in the summer, and talking up how great their son is. His mother pitches a double wedding, and Lee's foot begins to tap. Peter notices this and gestures at his mother to tone it down.



Phone coaching – At the law office, Lee sharpens pencil after pencil. Outside, Mr. Grey releases a trapped mouse. When he enters his office, we can see Lee is now wearing a hairnet to help stop her from playing with her hair. The intercom buzzes, and Mr. Grey calls Lee into the library. She quickly does a dose of nasal spray to stymie her sniffles and goes to him. There, Mr. Grey insists that the phone is ringing, but it isn't. He begins vocalizing the phone ringing, and Lee realizes it is a test, picking up the phone and answering as she normally would. Mr. Grey says she needs to be more confident and professional: her voice is representing his firm. Lee tries again, and Mr. Grey claps in approval, praising her. He asks her to sit beside him on the couch before asking about her date with Peter. She shyly giggles when he asks if they've had sex, and they bond for a moment over their shyness. He assures Lee she can always talk to him about her problems.



Hot chocolate – Suddenly, Mr. Grey's mood shifts, and he—almost comically—offers Lee a cup of hot chocolate. He's made one in advance, reaching toward the table behind the couch to pick it up and pass it to Lee. Mr. Grey then confronts her about her cutting habit: "Why do you cut yourself, Lee? Is it that sometimes the pain inside has to come to the surface, and when you see evidence of the pain inside... you finally know you're really here? Then when you watch the wound heal, it's comforting, isn't it?" A shocked look and a smile cross Lee's face as she blinks rapidly. "That's a way to put it," she says softly. Mr. Grey then tells her that she will never cut herself again before asking that she go home early today and that she walk instead of getting a ride from her mother. "You're a big girl," he starts, "a grown woman. Your mother doesn't need to pick you up every day." He then takes Lee's picture with a Polaroid camera. Lee does as he asks and walks home, realizing she'd never done such a thing on her own.



Spanking - "The next day I didn't even bring my cuticle scissors and my iodine," Lee begins, "but I did make another typing mistake." Lee's fingers dance across the keyboard of her typewriter. Getting up in her personal space, Mr. Grey slams another proofread letter in front of her and asks why she keeps making such simple mistakes. He storms away, and Lee sniffles, clearly holding back tears. Mr. Grey hears this and stops just outside his office, thinking for a long moment before heading back out to the lobby and asking Lee to come into his office. After closing the door, he commands Lee to bend over the desk and read the letter aloud. Each time she reads a word where she made a typing error, Mr. Grey spansks her. He makes her read it again, and he spansks her harder and harder. While she knows this isn't okay, the expression on Lee's face turns from one of horror to one of arousal as the spanking escalates. Their fingers meet and intermingle atop the desk before Lee is sent away to retype the letter.



Bruise – In the bathroom, Lee lifts her skirt and lowers her panties to look at her bruised buttock in the mirror. She looks away, breathing strangely like we've seen her do before while cutting. After typing up another copy of the letter, she brings it to Mr. Grey for his approval, a strange smile on her face. He ignores her. Later, as she makes copies, Mr. Grey approaches her and tells her, "Good letter." Lee beams, unable to contain a girlish glee at his approval.



Into the river – While doing the dishes in her family's kitchen, Lee turns to her mother and says, "Mom? The lock can come off the cabinet now." Tearfully, Lee's mother hugs her. Early the next morning, Lee stands on a pedestrian bridge overlooking a slow-flowing river. She carries her cutting kit. She holds the little sewing kit and sticker-covered tackle box over the water, hesitating for only a moment before releasing them and watching them sink into the murky brown water. Jazzy electronic music plays as the film catches up to the first scene. We hear Lee being spanked behind Mr. Grey's office door and see her



carrying papers in her mouth, arms bound in a yoke. In a meeting with the animal welfare man, Mr. Grey clandestinely passes Lee a treat, which she happily eats like a dog. Later, Lee reports the family's dinner menu to Mr. Grey over the phone. He tells her, "Just a scoop of creamed potatoes, a slice of butter, four peas, and as much ice cream as you like to eat." Lee happily follows his orders, her family giving her a strange look as she eats far less than the rest of them. This elongated montage ends with Mr. Grey saddling Lee atop his desk as if she were a horse, her happily swaying her hips as he puts a carrot in her mouth.

Fantasy – Lee smokes a cigarette on her bed, putting down a Cosmo magazine. She parrots the advice about "getting your man to share his feelings" while puffing on the cigarette. She puts out the cigarette and lies face down on her bed, placing her hand between her legs. As she writes and moans, she sees Mr. Grey in her mind, sitting in a room lined with crimson curtains. He stands and parts them, revealing Lee standing inside a large orchid. Gently, Mr. Grey pulls her into a hug as a flower blooms behind them. She opens her eyes for a moment and sees a picture of Peter at her bedside. Back in her fantasy, she and Peter make out atop a pair of washing machines. After a frustrated sigh, she slaps the picture down and rolls onto her back, her fantasy returning to Mr. Grey's office. Lee climaxes, thinking about his command that she eat only four peas.



Purposeful mistake – Lee works in Mr. Grey's office as he takes a phone call. She cringes as she sees a mistake she made, and she reaches for a bottle of whiteout. Looking up at Mr. Grey, she hesitates, a sly look crossing her face as she caps the bottle and gives him the copy containing a typo. Looking expectantly at his cup of red markers, she is shocked when he doesn't proofread her copy, simply passing it back for mailing. Lee maintains eye contact, seductively licking the envelope slowly. "I have to work," Mr. Grey says, covering the receiver on the phone. She returns to her desk, clearly frustrated. Later that day, Lee announces that she's heading home, hoping that Mr. Grey will ask her to stay. Nervously, he tells her good night.



Bad news – A group of women chat beside the pool behind Lee's home. Lee's sister says her boss sexually harassed her at work, and one of her friends says she should sue him. Lee not-so-casually mentions that Mr. Grey is representing a woman in a similar situation. "Is he a good lawyer?" her sister asks. "He's the best," Lee says dreamily. One of the other women mockingly parrots her words. Lee's mother hangs up her cell phone with a concerned look on her face. "Who was that?" Lee asks. Her mother explains that Lee's father was checked into the hospital as the camera watches nurses working around him in a hospital bed. Lee and her family stand outside, staring with grief-stricken expressions. Lee runs away. The camera finds her again watching Mr. Grey work out on a treadmill. She knocks on his door, and, surprised, he takes off his headphones and speaks with her. She wants to express what has happened to her father, but her shyness takes over again, and instead she makes up a work-related excuse for her appearance.



"Regular old secretary" – Rain comes down outside the law offices of E. Edward Grey. Inside, Lee sits at her desk in the lobby, her voiceover narrating: "After he turned me away from his house, he put me back at my old desk, and he just stopped doing it. He threw out all his red pens. I kept making typos, but he just treated me like a regular old secretary. After a while, I began to wonder if that was all I was." While attending to Mr. Grey in his office, Lee seductively bends over the table as she has been instructed to before. Mr. Grey ignores her advances. Lee tries a different tactic, complimenting the golfer design on his tie and making a joke about the weather. Again, Mr. Grey doesn't respond, simply telling her to get to work. Later that day, Lee purchases flowers at a shop. She leaves the roses on his desk alongside a seductive photo of herself.



Worm – In the bathroom at home, Lee attempts to spank herself with the aid of a hairbrush, but she is left frustrated and unsatisfied. Leaving for work, she stops in her tracks when she sees something at her feet: A particularly large earthworm. She looks back up, smiling slyly. At her desk, she places the worm inside of a folded piece of letterhead. The camera looks to the desk where an envelope addressed from her to Mr. Grey sits. She places the worm and blank letterhead into the envelope, and Mr. Grey watches her work from around the corner. He rushes into the bathroom and washes his face. After drying himself and straightening his hair and suit, he walks back to his office past Lee without looking at her.



Bad sex – Cake's rendition of *I Will Survive* blares from a boom box inside a cabana amid trees. Inside, Peter lies atop Lee on a bed, and they kiss. In the heat of everything, Lee pushes Peter's hand down to her rear, but he pulls it back up. After repeating this a few times, Lee lies across his lap in a position clearly indicating that she'd like him to be rougher and to spank her. He simply looks confused, holding up a condom. She reacts with frustration, and Peter acts apologetically. Lee agrees to have sex so long as they turn the lights out and she can keep her clothes on. Peter scrambles to turn off the lights. Atop of Lee, Peter moans. "Oh," Lee repeats unconvincingly. Peter quickly climaxes and rolls off of Lee, unconcerned when she says she didn't finish.



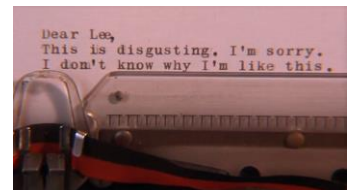
Risky punishment – In his office, Mr. Grey checks his mail. He finds the worm, and he has a strange reaction before compulsively doing pull-ups on a bar beside his orchid display. From her desk in the lobby, Lee hears him grunting. After collapsing from exhaustion, Mr. Grey crosses the room with the worm held gingerly between two fingers and places it on a fresh piece of letterhead, circling it emphatically with a red marker. Lee answers her intercom, and Mr. Grey calls her into his office. She responds breathily that a client is waiting, but Mr. Grey simply repeats his command. "Finally," Lee says under her breath, grinning. In Mr. Grey's office, she assumes the position on his desk she has so many times before. In the lobby, Peter enters, looking for Lee. He calls for Lee, and she answers from behind the closed door, telling him she'll have to cancel their date for later in the day. Following Mr. Grey's instructions, Lee raises her skirt and pulls down her panties. For a long moment, Mr. Grey simply stares before unbuttoning his pants and masturbating, ejaculating up her back.



Masturbation – Just moments afterward, Lee makes her way to a bathroom stall where she wipes Mr. Grey's load from her back, shooting an odd smile at the paper towel in her hand. From an adjacent stall, the paralegal overhears Lee mutter something about Mr. Grey. Lee then removes the letter Mr. Grey made her read the first time he spanked her from inside of her bra and looks at it as she touches herself. She whispers dirty thoughts, like confessing her desire to perform fellatio on Mr. Grey. In his office, Mr. Grey panics when he sees a bit of semen on his pants, and he frantically cleans the spot. Lee is unable to contain her voice as she climaxes, the paralegal overhearing everything.



Guilt – The moment Lee has left for her lunch break, Mr. Grey bolts from his office and frantically collects the framed diplomas and awards along the hallway, smashing them open as if his life depended on it. Having a sandwich at a cafe, Lee listens to a cassette on a Walkman: How to Come Out as a Dominant/Submissive. Back at the office, Mr. Grey burns a collection of Polaroids, including one of Lee. Clumsily, with two fingers, Mr. Grey types out a letter on a typewriter. He hears the front door open, and as Lee re-enters the office, he shreds the note before calling her into his office.



“Do you really want to be my secretary?” – Lee is shocked to see the chaos in the hallway, broken glass everywhere. She tries to ask Mr. Grey what happened, but he just repeats the probing questions he asked her during the job interview. She answers them all, staring doe-eyed at Mr. Grey. “Do you really want to be my secretary?” Mr. Grey asks. “Yes,” Lee answers, “I do.” “This isn’t just about typos, tape, staples, and pencils, is it, Lee?” asks Mr. Grey, standing. “No, sir,” Lee says as if in a trance. “I like you Lee,” says Mr. Grey, standing behind her now, “but I don’t think I’m going to offer you the job.” He then says it’s about her bad behavior and tells her to collect her things.



Fired - “Time out!” Lee says, whipping around. “Time out?” repeats Mr. Grey. “You’re fired.” “You’re fired!” Lee spits back. He tells her to get out, and she slaps him. “Why did you get glue smear all over the Ramsey papers?” Mr. Grey asks firmly. Lee defends herself, and he spits out an insult, saying her feet stink because she never changes her pantyhose. She defends herself again, and—now grasping at straws—Mr. Grey says she’s listening to music on her Walkman while she should be working. Calmly, Lee says she’ll leave it at home. Their faces drift closer as if they’re about to kiss, but Mr. Grey pulls away and moves to a chair across the room. “You have to go,” Mr. Grey says, “or I won’t stop.” “But I want to know you,” Lee says, crossing the room and stroking his hair. Mr. Grey apologizes and says he’ll give her excellent references before telling her to get out again.



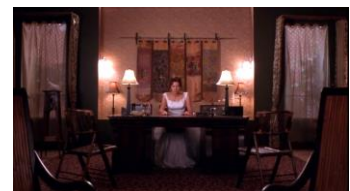
Severance – Taking an envelope from Mr. Grey, Lee collects her things in a box and leaves. She sees the secretary wanted sign light up outside and is reminded of her first day here, the image of the secretary she replaced leaving with an envelope held in her mouth flashes in her mind’s eye. She walks away crying, her voiceover explaining her actions in the moments and days just after this: “I opened the envelope the second I got home. It was a check for \$680. More than he actually owed me. It occurred to me to tear up the check, but I didn’t. I felt like I was doing the right thing. And I didn’t tell anybody about any of it. I pretended to go to work as usual and watched his office from across the street. He hired a new girl and changed the locks on the doors. There was just nothing for me to do about it. My doctor at the institution once said, ‘Every journey begins with the first step.’ So I decided it was time to meet someone new.”



Runaway bride – A short montage of the unsatisfactory S&M partners she met passes, and we see Peter proposing to Lee in the basement of the JC Penney’s where he works. Later, Lee is being dressed by Peter’s mother in her old wedding dress. She makes a comment about Lee’s weight, telling her she’ll have to hold her breath through the ceremony. Looking at herself in the mirror, Lee removes her veil and rushes from the room. Peter is in shock, saying he can’t see her before the wedding, but she doesn’t respond, running out of his house. She runs all the way to Mr. Grey’s office. She finds him there, doing sit-ups. “I have something to say to you,” she says as he gawks up at her. “I love you.” “Lee,” he says, getting up, “you should not be here.” She repeats herself, and Mr. Grey says he doesn’t believe her. He tries to kick her out, but Lee refuses to go.



Endurance – “I love you,” Lee repeats. “We cannot do this 24 hours a day, seven days a week,” Mr. Grey says. “Why not?” Lee says. Mr. Grey thinks for a minute before commanding Lee to sit at his desk, hands flat against the top. “I want to make love,” Lee says. “Keep both your feet on the floor until I come back,” he says, leaving. He sits in his car, watching the office door late into the night. Lee sits, staring forward, unmoving. While staring at Lee from the window behind her, he calls Peter, letting him know where Lee is. Very quickly, Peter appears and enters the office. He confronts Lee, but she only responds by telling him to leave: “You are trespassing.” Frustrated, he tries to pull her away from the desk, but she



screams and fights back, taking her spot at the desk again when she breaks free. "Peter," she says, plainly, "I don't want you. Now, get out."

Visitors – The next morning, Lee still sits in the chair. She's so intent on following Mr. Grey's orders that she urinates where she sits instead of moving to the nearby bathroom. A series of visitors come for Lee, starting with her mother. "I brought you some peas," she says awkwardly, sliding her daughter a Tupperware. The paralegal makes a legal argument; her sister's husband tells her there are other ways to express her feelings; Peter's mother demands she have the dress cleaned before she returns it; and the new secretary leaves her with a mountain of books on women's studies. Lee stares forward, ignoring them, thinking about Mr. Grey. A priest and other women Mr. Grey has dominated fade in and out, Lee's face still dominating the screen. They praise her for her endurance and compare her to penitent monks. The montage ends with her father reading from the Bible: "You are the child of God's holy gift of life. You come from me, but you are not me. Your soul and your body are your own and yours to do with as you wish." Lee smiles at him, saying, "Thank you, Daddy."



Media circus – All the people who visited Lee and several others mill about the law office lobby. A woman distributes drinks and snacks among them. In Mr. Grey's office, Lee begins to falter, clumsily singing "fifty-seven bottles of beer on the wall, fifty-seven bottles of beer..." Outside, a reporter talks about Lee's supposed hunger strike. Flashbulbs go off in Lee's tired face as she tries to ignore the journalists badgering her. As we see Mr. Grey reading about this in the paper, Lee's voiceover speaks: "In one way or another, I've always suffered. I didn't know why, exactly. But I do know that I'm not so scared of suffering now. I feel more than I've ever felt, and I've found someone to feel with, to play with, and to love in a way that feels right for me. I hope he knows that I can see that he suffers too and that I want to love him."



Trial completed – Mr. Grey pulls into the parking lot of his law office. Inside, Lee sleeps against the desk. Gingerly, Mr. Grey picks up her head and helps her to drink a milkshake. Dazed, she looks up at him. He carries her out of the law office, and the camera jumps with them to an apartment. There, Mr. Grey lays her down on a platform and draws a bath before helping her out of the dress. He washes her hair and dries her body before leading her back to the platform. Lee's voiceover speaks again: "Each cut, each scar, each burn—a different mood or time. I told him what the first one was. I told him where the second one came from. I remembered them all. And for the first time in my life, I felt beautiful." As he worships her body, feeling every curve and scar, she asks him question after question about his life, where he grew up, his formative moments, and more.



Married life – Lee and Edward make a bed together as Lee's voiceover narrates: "All our activities melted into an everyday sort of life until we looked like any other couple you'd see." As she continues, a scene of Edward and Lee having bondage sex in the woods plays: "We had a June wedding, by ourselves, at the justice of the peace. Then we honeymooned in the mountains. We only had the weekend, because Edward had to get back to work." Dutiful wife that she is, Lee straightens his tie and collar. They kiss deeply before he heads to collect his things. Lee takes a moment to drop the corpse of a cockroach on his side of the bed. He blows a kiss as he drives away, and Lee waves from the porch, enjoying her coffee in the morning air.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Lee Holloway

Lee is an unstable young woman from a family pretending it isn't broken, and it's for this reason she has a compulsion toward self-harm, specifically cutting and burning herself. Trying to prop up the façade of normalcy, she seeks out a job after receiving high marks in a community college typing course. It is at this job she is introduced to Mr. Grey and his thrilling sexual proclivities.

Submissive Lee's submissive nature is clear throughout the film. She wants to stay out of the way, be helpful, stay out of the spotlight, and let others be the center. She envies these people, such as her sister, but she is content being ordered around so long as she makes someone happy. When she is introduced to Mr. Grey, he senses this in her and—tempted by his dominant sexual desires—takes her on despite being unsure if she's a good fit. Trisha mocks her with the word when Lee is too polite with a time-wasting telemarketer. While she feels some sense of shame around her submissive nature at first, as she gets to know Mr. Grey and he begins to dominate her, Lee relishes it. She feels like she finally has a place in the world. Lee realizes that, in the right hands, submissiveness is a freedom from worry, something she sought before in self-harm. She is able to get this sense of control and calm from Mr. Grey in a more healthy way than from hurting herself in private.

Admiring Lee is a deeply admirable person. This is frequently played off for comic effect, but if we take it just a bit more seriously, we see a young woman who understands the potential in most people. As someone who suffered a mental breakdown when others her age were entering college or the workforce, Lee feels a bit left behind and unable to catch up. Having gone through a similar experience, Peter strikes her as more important and impressive than he is played to be because he has been able to reach a level of normal she struggles to attain. The difference between them drives them apart, as all Peter wants is a bland, banal normal of 2.5 kids and a ranch-style home with an in-ground pool, but Lee wants romance, desire, and unconventional sex, and Peter cannot deliver. Lee's admiration of Mr. Grey only grows as the film continues, turning into a near obsession as he rejects her out of guilt. It is her admiration and desire to prove her love that brings them together at the end of the film: In many ways, they are very similar, both in their drive to self-harm and their insecurities about their social and economic positions.

Unconventional While she tries to act in conventional ways, Lee is deeply unconventional. It is her coming around to this fact that dominates her character arc. We learn that she has been self-harming as a coping mechanism since she was a preteen. This unconventional attempt at self-soothing came about as an attempt at controlling a situation any child would find frustrating or frightening: her parent's constant arguing and her father's alcoholism. When she realizes how this experience has affected her sexuality, she finds a sense of belonging in the role of a submissive. Because of that, and much to Mr. Grey's disbelief, she is excited to engage in all forms of sexual play with Mr. Grey. It is her lack of conventionality that makes Lee's star-crossed lovers relationship with Mr. Grey work even though it began as a workplace indiscretion punishable by law. In a strange way, because their unconventionalities are so compatible, Edward and Lee are able to create the perfect façade of a normal relationship despite their unusual sexual proclivities.

E. Edward Grey

We don't learn a whole lot about Mr. Grey outside his relationship with Lee. We do see that he is a very demanding boss and that he has particular tastes when it comes to food, décor, and his workers' behavior. It is his domineering attitude that first entralls Lee.

Dominant This is one of Mr. Grey's more complicated traits. It stems from a number of places. First is his need for control because of some disorder or mental issue that drives him toward cleanliness and order. He pushes Lee around when it comes to how she acts, organizes things, and dresses because he finds several of her habits disgusting and a mark against him as her employee. Because of this urge toward cleanliness, we see Lee weaponize this knowledge in the form of the worm in the letter and—at the end of the film—the cockroach on the bed. Mr. Grey is obviously sexually dominant, taking joy in spanking

Lee, commanding her to do things, and stranger acts like horse-style pet play. While it comes out in a maladaptive way, his dominant behavior comes from his own self-hatred that drives him to some form of penance, but instead of being internalized, his judgments and values are projected onto the spaces and people around him. He becomes dominant in order to maintain stability, both mental and social.

Spontaneous While he wants to be a planner—as seen in the way he hides his ‘trophy’ from past sexual relationships—Mr. Grey is prone to quick, thoughtless action. This is clear in his first introduction, as he hasn’t even gotten rid of his secretary or cleaned up the office before he turns on the ‘secretary wanted’ light outside. He seems to make a split-second decision on spanking Lee for the first time, and we’re shown from his odd collection of Polaroids that this is likely repeated behavior. He views this as a weakness, an inability to resist temptation. What it is, however, is Mr. Grey taking advantage of his power over these women. His making a mess in frustration or fear is a common activity, seen again when he decides to fire Lee out of guilt. Again, he makes a huge mess of the office, perhaps as a strange show of penance. He views his office as an extension of himself. Because of his lack of forethought

Insecure Often played for comical effect, Mr. Grey is incredibly insecure. Like so many men, Mr. Grey perceives his own value only in how he is treated by others, and because of this, he often puts up a tough guy front. We see him act incredibly cowardly, however, whenever he must confront a woman outside of a sexual or employment situation. He tries to hide from Trisha in a closet, sending Lee to do his dirty work. We see him peeking around the corner at Lee as if he is a scared little boy, taking a long moment to collect himself before walking past without a glance or expression. Much like Lee, he sees fit to punish himself when there is ever a perceived fault in his behavior or that of his subordinates. Unlike Lee, he uses exercise to inflict his suffering, his penance. This also plays into his insecurity, as—again, much like Lee—he is concerned with others seeing how self-harm hurts him. Whereas Lee hides her cuts under her clothes, Mr. Grey works himself to exhaustion with pull-ups or the treadmill, hiding his lack of self-confidence, shyness, and the effects of self-harm behind a masculine, toned body.

THEMES

Society

Work As a romantic comedy, work takes a framing position in the narrative. We don’t see a lot of the actual work done, and most of it is played off for comedic or dramatic effect. Work is seen as a form of degradation throughout the film. It drives Lee’s father to drink. Peter is held up by his parents with great pride although he has a basic position at a store in the mall, the juxtaposition meant to be funny. Lee literally enters into sexual degradation as well as some menial degradation when working for Mr. Grey. While mostly tongue-in-cheek, *Secretary*’s perspective views work as useless tasks or meaningless wastes of time.

Illustrative moment Work is shown to have a bit of a degrading quality throughout the film. This is shown most clearly in the scene where Mr. Grey asks Lee to dig through the dumpster to find a file he threw out. After she retrieves it and comes back in, covered in garbage juice, Mr. Grey simply says he found a copy. Lee consistently tries her hardest but receives little recognition, and this might drive some of her dysfunctional behavior.



Relationship

Parenthood In the background of the story of *Secretary* is an off-screen parental conflict that has been smoldering for years. Her mother and father are at each other’s throats because of money troubles and her father’s alcoholism. This problem has been running for such a long time; it is a formative issue in Lee’s mind and why she began cutting herself. We aren’t shown much of Lee’s parents outside of some moments of comic relief and high drama, but from what we are shown, Lee’s father is a bit distant, and her mother frequently interjects herself into her children’s lives to make sure they’re taking care of themselves. Her mother feels as if she has let Lee down when her cutting habit is revealed, and she takes Lee’s recovery very seriously even though it causes her emotional tumult.

Illustrative moment: While Lee sits at Mr. Grey's desk, many people come to visit her. Many of them push their own ideas and opinions onto her and her actions, such as the journalists who think she is enacting a hunger strike. Her parents, however, both show their best traits in this montage. It begins with her mother bringing her some food, worried that her daughter isn't taking care of herself, whereas others are more concerned with making Mr. Grey look bad or manipulating Lee to stand up and leave. Similarly, her father soon thereafter reads to her from the Bible, giving his blessing for whatever she desires, as her life is her own. She smiles at him, the only person she responds to, saying, "Thank you, Daddy."



Marriage There are a few key moments dealing with marriage. Peter makes it clear that he's most interested in starting a family very quickly: It doesn't matter to him if it's with Lee or not, she just seems like the easiest option to him. The marriage between Lee's parents has been crumbling for some time, originally leading to her cutting herself as a preteen. For a large part of the narrative, marriage represents both a looming threat and an expectation Lee may not explicitly desire but feels she must achieve, and quickly. It all comes to a head when she is preparing to be wed to Peter, but in a split-second decision, she gives it all up to go after Mr. Grey, the man she truly loves. Their marriage is based in a shared perversion, but because of their compatibility and love for one another, they quickly become—at least for the sake of appearance—a fairly archetypal marriage.

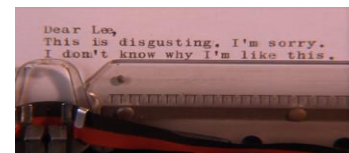
Illustrative moment We're given a surprisingly typical "runaway bride" moment toward the end of the film. Realizing she doesn't love Peter and does love Mr. Grey, Lee abandons her wedding to Peter and leaves. She runs in a stolen wedding dress to Mr. Grey's office, where she reveals her feelings openly, much to his surprise.



Psychology

Shame Shame may be the most important theme in the film. It is at the heart of most of the conflicts we see, and—even when it's not made fully explicit—we see all the characters go through shame reactions when they feel judged or viewed in a harsh light. Shame drives Lee to cut herself and Mr. Grey to exhaust himself with exercise. It comes up in both of their sexualities in inverse ways. Mr. Grey feels deeply shameful in his domineering behavior and the way he takes advantage of his secretaries. Lee, on the other hand, feels empowered by her submissive sexuality and seeks to expand and reinforce this, even trying to take on other partners after Mr. Grey kicks her out. It is overcoming the shame of their sexual desires and past actions that allows them to come together at the film's end.

Illustrative moment Mr. Grey's shame pushes him into a hasty decision. Feeling great guilt and shame at his actions and activities with Lee, he decides to fire her. He types up a letter, calling himself disgusting and attempting to apologize for his desires.



Suffering Suffering is a very important theme underlying many of the others in *Secretary*. Most of the suffering we see is very internal, taking place in the emotional spaces in characters' minds. It is caused by events like witnessing spousal abuse, parental addictions, and deep personal embarrassment. While other characters may be having their own struggles with internal suffering, we're only made privy to Mr. Grey's and Lee's. Mr. Grey's suffering is a bit mysterious. Beyond his past behavior with his secretaries, we're not given much information, but he does feel deeply guilty about falling into temptation and abusing his staff. Lee suffers because of her parents' failing relationship and her father's alcoholism. In a way to feel in control and to be able to better hide the cracks in the perception of their family as anything but typical, she cuts and burns herself. She and Mr. Grey both take part in different penances, bearing their suffering as a sort of sacrifice.

Illustrative moment Early in the film, we see Lee burn herself with a hot kettle. She does this after witnessing her father strike her mother in a drunken rage. Taking the kettle upstairs, she hurts herself in an adverse attempt at self-soothing.



Sexuality

Sadism Sadism gets a bad rap in our society. Much like schizophrenia, psychopathy, and multiple personalities, sadism is applied to the worst people's actions whether or not it's factually true. This film takes a gentler view on such behavior, especially in the sexual sense. Through Mr. Grey, we see how sadism is control, care, and desire, not just bloodlust. He feels guilty for how he takes advantage of Lee and others, but his shyness gets in the way of seeking out such relationships outside of the bounds of employer/employee relationships. It isn't just beatings with Mr. Grey either: It's petplay, roleplay, and domination in many other forms, such as diet. While we do see some of the more risqué elements of a dominant/submissive relationship, we are also clearly shown how Mr. Grey cares for Lee and her health. This is shown most clearly when he orders Lee to stop cutting and to push back against her mother's meddling. He wants to see her blossom into the woman she is instead of being held back as the little girl her mother wishes to protect. Lee sees this as he intended, having an epiphany on her commanded walk home: To Mr. Grey, she is like an orchid in his collection, and we're shown how delicately and dutifully he cares for them several times in the film. It takes a firm but delicate hand to care for the plants and their blooms. He does the same for Lee in their sexual relationship.

Illustrative moment We see many short glimpses of sadism throughout *Secretary*, mostly played for comic effect. The longest and most obvious moment of sexual sadism comes when Mr. Grey calls Lee into his office to discuss her typos. He commands her to bow over the desk, holding her face to her mistakes like one would a dog when it makes a mess on the carpet, spanking her as she reads them. They repeat the process several times, Lee shocked at first but growing more and more aroused as the beating continues. The spanking ends with Lee reaching for Mr. Grey's hand on the desk, showing just how much they were both aroused by the experience.



Masochism Alongside sadism, masochism is the most important theme in *Secretary*. Lee is a newfound masochist, first coming into her desire for sexual punishment. Mr. Grey awakens the desire when he spansks her for her repeated typos. From this moment on, Lee seems fixated on facing this treatment again, going from trying to please Mr. Grey to making mistakes on purpose and even provoking him with the likes of the worm in the letter. We see—after Mr. Grey sends her away in the hope of ending his sadistic sexual behaviors—Lee having trouble trying to find a partner to match her sexual desire, often landing the role of the sadist, which she performs but does not enjoy. It's during this time and after Peter disappoints her sexually that she tries to experiment with spanking herself to no avail. In some ways, her latent masochism bubbling under the surface might explain why she was so prone to cutting from such an early age: penance and pain are both parts of what a sexual masochist seeks in sexual practice.



Illustrative moment After her first spanking at Mr. Grey's office, Lee heads into the bathroom. There, with the aid of a mirror, she pulls down her underwear and looks at the red and purple bruise Mr. Grey left on her butt cheek. Her face is awash with arousal and wonder; this is the first time she's ever felt like this, and the pleasure it gives her is surprising.

Masturbation A minor yet important theme is that of masturbation. It comes up a few times throughout the film. We see Mr. Grey masturbate instead of having sex with Lee, a perverse sort of denial for her that gives him immense pleasure. Several times we're shown Lee masturbating. The first few occur in the privacy of her home. She touches herself in her bed after reading *Cosmo*, fantasizing about talking to Mr. Grey. Similarly, she faces frustration when she tries to spank herself, unable to get the thrill and sensation

she is seeking. We see her touch herself for a final time in a stall of the law office bathroom, the paralegal overhearing her. *Secretary* gives us a surprisingly broad representation of masturbation and why people do it.

Illustrative moment The most interesting moment showing this theme comes just after the film's midpoint. Lying on her bed reading *Cosmo* and smoking, Lee starts to think about how to get Mr. Grey to open up. She snuffs out her cigarette and lies on her stomach, beginning to touch herself. We see an artistic representation of her fantasies play out as we cut between her mind's eye and her bedroom. Lee stands inside of an orchid, and Mr. Grey approaches, hugging her. This gives her intense pleasure compared to the scene where she and Peter make out and fondle each other atop a pair of washing machines, showing the flexibility of arousal and desire: Sometimes what isn't overtly sexual has the most sexual connotations to a person.



Desire Desire drives the plot of this film. It is a love story between two people with highly compatible but socially shunned desires. We watch Lee come into her desire to be submissive just as Mr. Grey is coming around to self-denial. He feels guilt having abused so many of his secretaries in the past, he fears he is just doing the same thing to Lee, so he fires her to be rid of the temptation. Through her strange devotion at the end of the film, she makes it clear she loves Mr. Grey and willingly wants to participate in his domineering sexual play.

Illustrative moment We see this theme most obviously during Lee's romantic afternoon with Peter. He has rented a space for them, and on the bed, they kiss and touch one another. As things heat up, Lee tries to get Peter to touch her rear, but he pulls away. Frustrated, Lee lies perpendicular to him across his lap, an obvious spanking position, and tells him to be rough. Clueless, Peter just holds up a condom; he only has one thing on his mind, and it doesn't include what Lee wants. She agrees, and they have comically bad sex, Lee making nonplussed noises as Peter prematurely ejaculates and rolls off of Lee without a care about whether she had an orgasm.



Love The idea of love expressed in *Secretary* is a bit complicated. What we see in this movie is a romantic comedy's sense of love. *Secretary* is a romcom as much as it tries to pervert the typical tropes and structures of the format. Instead of the typical "meet-cute," Mr. Grey hires Lee on a whim because of her submissive nature. The romance blossoms when Mr. Grey gives Lee advice on how to answer the phone before asking about her personal life and telling her to stop cutting, and it's on her walk home—which Mr. Grey ordered her to do—that she really begins falling in love with him. His care comes through in his demands: He doesn't want her to hurt herself, and he wants her to stop relying on her mother's doting care to become the woman she is meant to be. Instead of another woman or a job coming between them (as happens in most romcoms), it is Mr. Grey's guilt that comes between them: He knows what he's doing to Lee in his office is ethically dubious at best, even if she is a willing participant. Instead of him asking her back with a grand gesture, Lee demands Mr. Grey come back to her with a show of utter devotion, pushing herself to the very limits of her endurance to prove her devotion to him is total. Opposing these ideas is Peter's relationship with Lee: He follows the formula more closely, but because their desires are such a mismatch, Lee fails to fall in love with him.

Illustrative moment As a romcom, there are many moments where we see love. The clearest, however, comes in the penultimate scene. Having accepted Lee's commitment after she remained at his desk for days on end in spite of media exposure and humiliation, Mr. Grey carries her to a private apartment where he bathes her before worshiping her body. Lee's voiceover recalls how she told him about every scar and where it came from, and in turn she asked him question after question about his life and formative years. Their love is based in sexual compatibility as well as a genuine interest in one another. They show devotion to each other in different ways, but ways that fit well together.



Domination Domination is key in how Mr. Grey manipulates and interacts with Lee. It's implied he exhibits these habits with others as well, but we're only really shown what he does with Lee. Mr. Grey feels great guilt in how he is driven to treat his sexual partners and the way he abuses his secretaries, but Lee sees his desires as perfect and desirable from her own point of view.

Illustrative moment We're not actually shown more than a glimpse of the domination Mr. Grey pushes onto Lee. We do see, however, that she is an incredibly willing participant after the first unexpected spanking. To highlight this, the film starts months into the story with Lee doing her secretarial duties in a yoke. She smiles and gracefully does her job even though she is hobbled by the device.



Submission *Secretary* is a study in feminine submission. Lee's mother is shown to be more concerned with appearances than substance in relationships, staying with Lee's father for more than a decade despite obvious problems in their marriage that causes Lee to cut herself. We see Lee's father strike her mother, and nothing really happens because of it. Similarly, the other secretaries Mr. Grey abused before, while mysterious, are examples of how fear of scandal and money often cover up vocal recognition of female oppression, especially in a sexual context. While this type of submission haunts the narrative, Lee's journey into sexual submission takes on a different edge: she is somehow liberated in her submission. Her acceptance of her breed of submission and the relationship it pairs with leads her to take control of her life for the first time.

Illustrative moment Mid-way through the film, Lee and Mr. Grey's dominant/submissive relationship is in full swing. During a montage, we see them engage in spanking, petplay, and other behaviors. At the end of the montage, Lee calls Mr. Grey, her family waiting to begin dinner behind her. Lee tells Mr. Grey the menu, and he tells her exactly what she can eat. As she listens to his orders, she closes her eyes and an aroused smile slips onto her face. Later, she'll climax thinking of the four peas she was allowed to eat.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways does Edward and Lee's relationship mirror a traditional relationship? In what ways does it differ?
2. Would you describe this film as having a feminist lens? Why or why not?
3. Does the set design help to characterize anyone, or is it just decorative icing on the cake? Explain.
4. Compare *Secretary* to other films dealing with S&M or dominant/submissive relationships. In what ways does this film set itself apart?
5. How does this film pervert the tropes typical of the romcom subgenre? List a few examples.