[Rape Culture in Popular](http://www.shamelessmag.com/blog/2012/11/rape-culture-in-popular-culture/)[Culture](http://www.shamelessmag.com/blog/2012/11/rape-culture-in-popular-culture/)

**NOVEMBER 27, 2012 •**[ANNE TH](http://www.shamelessmag.com/blog/profile/80/)**[É](http://www.shamelessmag.com/blog/profile/80/)**[RIAULT](http://www.shamelessmag.com/blog/profile/80/)



**Shamless BLOG**

Let’s start out with a few basic facts:

Joseph Gordon-Levitt is a dreamboat. Like, on a scale of one to super-ultimate-double-plus-dreamboat, he is pretty high up there. Joseph Gordon-Levitt is reaching unprecedented break-my-marriage-vows levels of attractiveness. I would pay good money to watch a movie that was nothing but Joseph Gordon-Levitt sitting on a chair reading the phone book.

Not convinced? I present you with Exhibit A:

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And Exhibit B:
[Google YouTube video of Joseph Gordon-Levitt singing a cover of Nirvana’s “Lithium.” ]

Are you done swooning yet?

It’s fine, I’ll give you another minute.

Shhhh, I know. Feel free to replay that video as many times as you need to.

All right, are we good? I think we’re good.

Now, given the fact that I’ve just used science to prove that Joseph Gordon-Levitt is maybe one of the best things since sliced bread, what I’m about to say next might shock you:

Not every heterosexual woman wants to date him. Some straight women, presented with that choice, would, categorically, choose not to date him.

For example, the film *(500) Days of Summer* centres around the fact that Zooey Deschanel is not interested in dating Joseph Gordon-Levitt. Or rather, it centres around the fact that her character, Summer, doesn’t want to date Gordon-Levitt’s character, Tom. Although Summer repeatedly tells Tom that she’s not interested in being his girlfriend, he refuses to take no for an answer. He’s convinced that she’s his soulmate and his only reason for living, and is certain that they’re fated to be together. And therein lies the problem, not just with this movie, but with so many “romantic” books, movies, plays and television shows that focus on heterosexual relationships: the idea that if a man believes that he’s destined to be with a specific person, no does not actually mean no.

If a man continues to pursue a woman after being rejected, that is not romantic. If a man will not take no for an answer because he feels that he is “meant to be” with a certain woman, that is not romantic. If a man cites things like, “women like to play hard to get,” or “women don’t know a good thing when they see it” as reasons why they persist after being turned down, that is not romantic.

That is rape culture.

When we talk about rape culture, usually we talk about the bigger, more obvious examples: things like victim-blaming in cases of sexual assault (she should have fought back, shouldn’t have dressed that way, shouldn’t have kissed him, etc.), or the fact that it’s still considered to be a woman’s responsibility to avoid rape, rather than a man’s responsibility not to commit it, or the fact that some people still think that rape jokes are hilarious and edgy. These undeniably important themes are what typically come up in a discussion about rape culture; what we don’t often talk about are subtler ways that rape is normalized, the less visible but equally significant ways that our society carefully and methodically erodes women’s agency.

When a man is pursuing a woman and will not take no for an answer, no matter what his reasons, what he is really saying is: “I know better than you.” The message that he’s sending is, “my opinion/feelings/beliefs are more valuable than yours.” When, in a movie or book or television show, a man wins over a woman after repeatedly being turned down, what we, as the audience, learn is, he was right and she was wrong. We learn that, at the end of the day, men know what’s best for women.

So what do men who grow up in this culture learn? They learn that women are theirs for the taking, as long as they feel a strong enough attraction to them. They learn that no doesn’t mean no, it means, keep pushing until she says yes. They learn that women are crazy, inconsistent, moody, and changeable. They learn that their feelings are more valuable than anyone else’s.

They also learn to say things like this:

*You are not the only one who has a say in this. I do too, and I say we are a couple, goddamnit.*

That is a line from *(500) Days of Summer*, spoken (well, yelled) by Tom after several months of sleeping with Summer and still not being her boyfriend. Keep in mind that Summer had clearly laid out at the beginning of their relationship that a) she wanted to keep things casual, b) she did not want a boyfriend, and c) she doesn’t believe in love. Summer had been really clear about what she wanted and, out loud at least, Tom had been in agreement with her. However, with that one line of dialogue, we see Tom’s true colours: all along, he has believed that his (unexpressed) wants and needs trump Summer’s, and that this is somehow romantic.

Still not convinced? Re-read the line above, and substitute I say we are having sex for I say we are a couple. Do you see the problem now?

I can think of dozens of examples of this trope. How about *Twilight*‘s Jacob Black, whose sexual assault of Bella (kissing her after his advances are repeatedly rebuffed) is treated as totally fine and super romantic just because Bella finds herself physically responding to his kiss? How about adorable indie movie *The Trotsky*‘s relationship between Leon (a high school student) and Alexandra (a graduate student a decade his senior), which consists mostly of Alexandra telling Leon no way in hell, until he (surprise!) wears her down. If you want to go classical, then we can look at Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*, whose entire plot centres around men trying manipulate and trick a strong-willed woman into wifely submission. Or how about *The Big Bang Theory*, the second season of which involves Penny finally telling Howard off after a year and a half of sexual harassment, only to have her made out to be the villain of the conflict? That last one, by the way, ends with Penny being forced to apologize to Howard for her “unwarranted” assault.

In the interests of fairness, I’ve been racking my brain, trying to come up with examples of female characters who pursue men and succeed at wearing them down after being refused, but I could barely think of any. Most of the won’t-take-no-for-an-answer women that I could think of were treated completely different from men who behave in the same way (SHOCKER, I KNOW). When a female character won’t back down, she’s portrayed as anything ranging from ridiculous and slightly out of touch with reality (see: Irie from Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*) to totally and completely objectionable (see: Stacey from *Wayne’s World*). The only exception to this rule that I can think of is Melissa McCarthy’s character Megan in the movie *Bridesmaids*, who successfully lands a man after pursuing him (and being shot down by him) for most of the film. However, I would argue that in that case, part of the reasoning behind that storyline was that writers tried to make her character more stereotypically “masculine.”

What we most often learn from the media, then, is that when a man won’t give up on pursuing a woman, that’s beautiful and romantic. When a woman won’t give up on pursuing a man, that’s just plain ridiculous.
So how do we fix this? Well, for starters, if we want to raise a generation of young people who don’t have warped ideas about what heterosexual romance and dating are really like, then we need to make big changes to how these things are portrayed in the mainstream media. There are so many factors in our society that contribute to rape culture, and most of them don’t have any quick or easy fixes; however, the way that relationships are depicted in the media is something that we could, and should, change. We need to give young men better examples of how to treat women; we need to give young women stronger, more empowering role models. We need to put a stop to all the ways, little and big, that rape culture shapes how we view ourselves and each other. Being more careful about our media is a good place to start.

I’m going to finish off here with a quote from a [Playboy 20 Questions interview with Joseph Gordon-Levitt](http://www.google.com/url?q=http%253A%252F%252Fwww.playboy.com%252Fplayground%252Fview%252F20q-joseph-gordon-levitt&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFQjCNF_-iVKn0OAOnp1rrOrR7uzGpGSzQ) (kind of a wacky source, but the article itself is actually an amazing read):

The *(500) Days of Summer* attitude of “He wants you so bad” seems attractive to some women and men, especially younger ones, but I would encourage anyone who has a crush on my character to watch it again and examine how selfish he is. He develops a mildly delusional obsession over a girl onto whom he projects all these fantasies. He thinks she’ll give his life meaning because he doesn’t care about much else going on in his life. A lot of boys and girls think their lives will have meaning if they find a partner who wants nothing else in life but them. That’s not healthy. That’s falling in love with the idea of a person, not the actual person.

I would go even further and say that the actions that can (and do) result from projecting all of your fantasies and desires onto one person are downright frightening. When you need another person to behave in a certain way in order to give your life meaning, and when you begin to act in ways that reflect that, you are trying to take away that other person’s agency. When a man takes away a woman’s agency in anything that involves relationships, dating, or sex, that is rape culture. Unfortunately, our media makes it perfectly clear that rape culture is OUR culture.

See what I mean, though? Total dreamboat.