

Charles University in Prague  
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MASTER THESIS

Literary Depictions of Affairs between Female Teachers and Male  
Secondary School Students

Literární ztvárnění aféry mezi učitelkou a žákem

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Field of Study: AJ–NJ

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I hereby declare that this master thesis, titled “Literary Depictions of Affairs between Female Teachers and Male Secondary School Students”, is my own work and that all the sources I used are included on the Works Cited page. I also declare that I have not used this master thesis to gain the same or any other degree.

Prague, 20 July 2015

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## **ABSTRACT**

This master thesis examines two novels which depict affairs between female teachers and male secondary school students: *Notes on a Scandal* by Zoë Heller and *Tampa* by Alissa Nutting. In the theoretical part, female sex offenders, erotic age-preferences, child sexual abuse, and educator sexual misconduct are discussed. In the practical part, the two novels are analyzed in relation to the scholarly findings presented in the theoretical part. Despite the great differences between the two fictional depictions of educator sexual misconduct, both novels contain numerous parallels to real cases. The most notable difference between them is their approach to gender stereotypes. Although *Notes on a Scandal* allows an alternative reading, it more or less reinforces stereotypes, while *Tampa* has the clear objective to conquer them.

## **KEYWORDS**

female sex offenders, child sexual abuse, educator sexual misconduct, hebephilia, stereotypes, English literature, American literature

## **ABSTRAKT**

Tato diplomová práce zkoumá dva romány, které vypráví o aféře mezi učitelkou a žákem: *Zápisky o skandálu* od Zoë Heller a *Tampa* od Alissy Nutting. V teoretické části nastiňuji problematiku žen-pachatelek sexuálních trestných činů, erotických preferencí určitých věkových skupin, sexuálního zneužívání dětí a sexuálních prohřešků pedagogů. V praktické části pak zjišťuji, do jaké míry literární ztvárnění odpovídá odborným poznatkům prezentovaným v teoretické části. Navzdory tomu, že se oba příběhy na první pohled navzájem velmi liší, oba vykazují mnohé paralely ke skutečným případům sexuálních prohřešků pedagogů. Největší rozdíl mezi romány spočívá v tom, jak přistupují k genderovým stereotypům. Ačkoliv *Zápisky o skandálu* připouští alternativní výklad, stereotypy jsou v nich víceméně potvrzeny, zatímco *Tampa* aktivně usiluje o jejich vymýcení.

## **KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA**

pachatelky sexuálních trestných činů, sexuální zneužívání dětí, sexuální prohřešky pedagogů, hebefilie, stereotypy, anglická literatura, americká literatura



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# 1 Introduction

Over the last couple of years, the English speaking world has seen countless news reports of female teachers who became sexually involved with their students. While such affairs are certainly not a phenomenon restricted to the society of today, the incredibly high number of cases that come to one's knowledge nowadays has only been made possible by the Internet. The news servers that are most eager in reporting these cases are tabloids. Women teachers are pictured alongside half-naked models and reality show celebrities. Their stories seem to be perceived as a form of titillating entertainment rather than a threat to society.

Two writers, Zoë Heller and Alissa Nutting, have taken issue with the way female teachers are portrayed in the media. Both authors were inspired by real cases to write a novel about an affair between a female teacher and a male pupil. In this thesis, we will look at the ways in which their novels mirror reality, and we will determine to what extent they perpetuate or challenge stereotypes. In the theoretical part, we will review literature on female sex offenders, child sexual abuse, and educator sexual misconduct. In the practical part, the two novels – *Notes on a Scandal* and *Tampa* – will be analyzed in relation to the scholarly findings presented in the theoretical part.



# **Theoretical Part**

## **2 Sex offenses**

### **2.1 Female sex offenders**

#### **2.1.1 General observations**

Female sex offenders were recognized as a separate category of sex offenders in the mid-1980s. Before that, sex offenses were perceived to be a male domain, despite the fact that individual cases of sexual abuse by women have been documented since 1930. A more systematic research of female sex offenders began in the 1990s (Strickland 474). While research does suggest that the percentage of sex crimes perpetrated by women is lower than the percentage of sex crimes committed by men – reflecting statistics for crime in general – it also suggests that sex crimes perpetrated by women are under-recognized: surveys which ask respondents about their experience with sexual abuse report significantly higher proportions of female offenders than authorities. It follows that while criminal justice statistics for the USA, for example, suggest that less than 10% of sex crimes are committed by women, the real proportion may be much higher (Giguere and Bumby 1–3).

This under-recognition and, in the past, even denial of women's capability to commit sex crimes is caused by several interrelated stereotypes. Firstly, women's role in society is that of nurturers who are responsible for the care of children. This idea is irreconcilable with that of a harmful aggressor. Secondly, women are often perceived as passive and submissive in sexual encounters, men being those in control. Related to this is the notion that men, owing to their physiology, cannot be sexually victimized

(Giguere and Bumby 3).

Considering the nurturing stereotype, it is ironic that according to some studies, women most often sexually abuse when taking care of their wards (Pflugradt and Allen 435). Owing to the stereotype of female sexual passivity, abused males may fear that if they complained about sexual abuse by women, their masculinity would be questioned. If they were physiologically aroused, they may wonder whether any abuse took place at all. An adolescent boy who had sexual contact with a grown-up woman may even be perceived as lucky and his experience as a rite of passage (Giguere and Bumby 4). A recent example of this attitude is the case of Sean Kane, a male teacher who publicly scolded male students for reporting their sexual encounters with Kane's female colleagues to authorities. In his social network posts he exclaimed: "You should have just kept your stupid mouths shut and enjoyed it." As a result of this outburst, he was placed on administrative leave (J. Henry).

In her 2003 article "The myth of innocence", Denov looks at laws governing sexual offenses in the United Kingdom and the United States. At the time of its writing, laws in these countries stood as follows: In the UK, a woman could not commit rape. In the case of sexual intercourse with a minor who consented, women faced different charges than men. In the US, legislation varied from state to state. In some states, women could not be charged with rape. The majority of states, however, reflected gender neutrality. The wording of laws is crucial. As Denov points out: "Even if a victim comes forward to report a serious sexual offence by a female, the criminal law may not have had in the past or have now the language to represent such a case, nor the political will to prosecute it" (310).

Sadly, stereotypes also influence professionals who deal with child sexual abuse. Studies reveal that police officers, psychiatrists, and social workers respond ambivalently or even dismissively to allegations involving female offenders. Criminal justice professionals seem to be more comfortable arresting, prosecuting, convicting, and punishing male offenders. Police officers and psychiatrists appear to reconstruct sex offenses by females in their imagination so as to make them fit the conventional ideas about female sexuality. These responses ultimately determine how cases involving female offenders will be recorded. Furthermore, reactions from authorities influence whether victims feel that they will be believed, helped, and that justice will be done if they report their experiences. Numerous studies indicate that victims, both male and female, feel more uncomfortable about disclosing an abuse by a female perpetrator than an abuse by a male perpetrator (Denov 310–12).

A personal anecdote illustrates the influence of stereotypes on professionals. During a lecture on child sexual abuse aimed at future teachers, the lecturer mentioned in her presentation that the effects of the abuse were worse if the perpetrator was the child's own father. To a question from the audience whether that was even worse than abuse from the child's own mother, the lecturer answered that a mother could not abuse her son because she would have to arouse him. Arguments against this answer are fourfold:

1. The mother can abuse her daughter. Although the lecture was on abuse in general, upon being asked an unexpected question, the lecturer was a priori thinking in heterosexual terms, demonstrating her heteronormative view of the world. This view is inappropriate since literature suggests that “female sex

offenders don't target one specific gender” (Pflugradt and Allen 440).

2. The mother can abuse her son without any penetration taking place. The son need not be aroused in order to be fondled or abused verbally. Although the lecturer had only a few moments earlier enumerated various kinds of sexual abuse, including abuse without touching, upon being asked an unexpected question, her immediate thought was that of penetration and she based her answer on this. This self-contradiction suggests that she had never before thought the matter over.
3. The mother can arouse her son against his will. “Misperceptions ... that males are incapable of being physically aroused if they are unwilling participants ... reflect ... a limited understanding of physiological responses” (Giguere and Bumby 3).
4. Even if the mother's son was aroused *and* willing, any intercourse would still have to be considered abuse due to the asymmetry of the relationship (see chapter 2.4).

The lecturer's further argument was that literature documents only very few instances of mothers sexually abusing their children. This is in line with the observations of Denov and Giguere and Bumby described above. Nevertheless, it is no excuse for the lecturer's decision to talk of fathers only. However insignificant the proportion of cases of abusive mothers may seem, it is important not to make them invisible. Otherwise the recipients of the lecture might get the impression that mothers never abuse their children. Although the present discussion has been concerned with parent–child relationships, all four arguments hold for teacher–student relationships –

the actual topic of this thesis – as well. Indeed, the first three arguments apply to any abuse by a female perpetrator, whatever the age or the status of the victim.

To sum up, stereotypes contribute to the low numbers of female-perpetrated sex offenses in official statistics, which in turn only reinforce the stereotypes, resulting in a vicious circle of under-recognition.

### **2.1.2 Characteristics of female sex offenders**

Female sex offenders tend to have the following characteristics:

1. Histories of childhood maltreatment, including sexual victimization;
2. Mental health symptoms, personality disorders, and substance abuse problems;
3. Difficulties in intimate relationships, or an absence of intimate relationships;
4. A propensity to primarily victimize children and adolescents (rarely adults);
5. A tendency to commit offenses against persons who are related or otherwise well known to them; and
6. An increased likelihood of perpetrating sex offenses in concert with a male intimate partner.

(Giguere and Bumby 4–5)

There is an interesting point concerning the first characteristic: “Sexual victimization histories are exceedingly more common among ... female sex offenders than with male sex offenders, and their maltreatment experiences are often more longstanding, extensive, and severe ” (Giguere and Bumby 7).

Lawson's study on female sex offenders' relationship experiences revealed that they tend to idealize children, demonize men, distrust other women, and be ambivalent about themselves. They also tend to be self-referential: when considering the effects of their offenses, they think about effects on themselves, not their victim (340–41).

Studies generally suggest that female sex offenders' past trauma and social incompetence renders them unable to form a healthy relationship with an adult intimate partner. They subsequently try to replace such a partner with a child because in a relationship with a child they feel more in control than otherwise. One study observed that women who were abused as children chose abusive partners at first, thus reenacting their own victimization, and then turned to children for a change (Solis and Benedek 178–79). Sexual abuse may also have caused women to develop a sexually deviant interest in children (Strickland 484).

### **2.1.3 Typologies of female sex offenders**

Despite insufficient empirical data, several professionals have proposed typologies of female sex offenders. The first influential typology, although based on a very small sample, is that of Matthews et al. from 1989 which distinguishes three types: *male-coerced*, *predisposed*, and *teacher/lover*. While *male-coerced* women are dependent on their aggressive partner, the other two types act on their own. *Predisposed* sex offenders have a history of sexual victimization and tend to abuse their own children in turn. They are likely to have psychological difficulties (Giguere and Bumby 5; Sandler and Freeman 75). As to the *teacher/lover* type, *teacher* does not describe a teacher by profession but relates to the idea of an older woman teaching a younger male about sexuality (although the label becomes literal in meaning in the context of this thesis):

At the time of their offending, women in this subtype were often struggling with peer relationships, seemed to regress and perceive themselves as having romantic or sexually mentoring “relationships” with under-aged adolescent victims of their sexual preference, and, therefore, did not consider their acts to be criminal in nature. (Giguere and Bumby 5)

The first typology based on a large sample was developed by Vandiver and Kercher in 2004. The most common type among their sample was the *heterosexual nurturer* which is similar to Matthews et al.'s *teacher/lover*. The average age of *heterosexual nurturers* is 30 years and that of their victims 12 years (Sandler and Freeman 75). In 2007, Sandler and Freeman wanted to test Vandiver and Kercher's typology but ended up devising their own. The most common type in their framework is the *criminally limited hebephile* which is in many ways similar to the *heterosexual nurturer*. The main difference between the two concepts is that while *heterosexual* implies male victims, *hebephiles* comprise women victimizing both sexes – 70% of Sandler and Freeman's sample targeted males. *Criminally limited* means that they have low rates of arrest and incarceration, as opposed to another type labeled *criminally prone hebephiles*. The mean age of *criminally limited hebephiles* is 32.6 years and they target early adolescent victims of mean age of 13.8 years (Sandler and Freeman 83–84).

## **2.2 Hebephilia and other erotic age-preferences**

Now that we have come across the term *hebephile* in Sandler and Freeman's typology, it deserves a definition. The term *hebephilia* was coined in 1955 to refer to individuals whose erotic interest centers on pubescent children between 12 and 15 years old, but it has not been widely adopted by professionals. In 2009, Blanchard et al. advocated its use for maximum sexual attraction to children between 11 and 14; the lowering of the ages is due to earlier onset of puberty in today's children than in those of half a century ago. Blanchard et al. even proposed to include hebephilia in the fifth edition of *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, but this proposal led to a dispute in academic circles as to whether hebephilia qualifies as a mental



disorder. Some argued that sexual interest in pubescent individuals is natural, perhaps even evolutionarily adaptive. As a result, hebephilia was not included in the *DSM-5* but appears to have been established as a sexual preference in its own right (“Hebephilia”; Blanchard et al. 336; Prentky and Barbaree; Osborne).

If we adopt Blanchard et al.'s terms, the placement of hebephilia on the continuum of erotic preferences for specific developmental stages is as follows:

- pedophilia = erotic preference for prepubescent children, approximately under 11 years old; qualifies as a mental disorder
- hebephilia = erotic preference for pubescents, approximately 11–14 years old
- ephebophilia = erotic preference for adolescents, approximately 15–19 years old
- teleiophilia = erotic preference “for persons between the ages of physical maturity and physical decline” (336)
- gerontophilia = erotic preference for the aged

Although a hebephile may have their sexual preference from a young age, their hebephilia can be identified only when there is sufficient gap between the age of their preferred partners and their own – for example when the person reaches adulthood and they still prefer pubescent partners to partners of their own age (Osborne).

It is important to realize that hebephile does not equal sex offender. Not all hebephiles act upon their sexual preference and not all those who commit sex offenses against pubescent children are hebephiles (Shakeshaft, *Educator* 22). Indeed, of 91 male sexual abusers of children interviewed by Elliott et al., only 16% reported that children were more sexually attractive to them than adults. The majority of the men – 41% –

found sex with a child less threatening than sex with an adult and 25% found sex with children a positive experience as opposed to bad sexual experience with peers. 18% of the offenders felt that children met their needs (Elliott et al. 586–87). Shakeshaft mentions Finkelhor and Araji's suggestion “that offender sexual orientation be labeled on a scale from exclusive interest in children to exclusive interest in adult partners ” (*Educator* 22). Her own studies included both “those who were exclusively interested in children or adolescents and those who were more likely to be exploiters of any sexual situation, whether children or adult ” (*Educator* 22).

### **2.3 Child grooming patterns**

The process by which sex offenders establish a sexually abusive relationship with children is called *grooming*. It encompasses various strategies to persuade the victim to engage in sexual activity with the offender and keep it secret. These strategies can be divided into those for targeting victims, developing a relationship, and maintaining it. Offenders tend to target children who are vulnerable, socially isolated or emotionally needy because then they can take advantage of the child's feelings of being unloved or unappreciated. They also tend to choose children who are subject to less parental oversight than is usual so that their actions are more likely to remain unnoticed. Offenders often use caretaking activities, such as babysitting, teaching, or tutoring to come in contact with victims and develop a relationship with them. They try to bond emotionally with the child and build trust. Many offenders believe in the necessity of a “special relationship” in which the victim perceives their abuser as a particularly important person in their life. Offenders usually try to isolate the child from its family and peers. Some offenders succeed in gaining the trust of the child's parents. Once a

trusting relationship with the child has been established, the offender will gradually introduce sex into the interaction, e.g. by bringing it up in conversation, leaving pornography lying around, or increasing sexual touching. They may exploit the child's curiosity and uncertainty and present sex as something which should be explored or something which is natural in a close relationship such as theirs. Continued compliance and secrecy may be bought by bribes or gifts, or the victim may be threatened that a disclosure would have dire consequences, that the victim would be blamed, or that the special relationship would be lost (Knoll 374–75).

## **2.4 Arguments against adult-child sex**

Finkelhor, an influential researcher on child sexual abuse, tried to pin down what exactly is wrong with sex between adults and children. He refused three common arguments as inadequate because they are merely intuitive. The first of these arguments is that adult-child sex is wrong because it is unnatural. However, Finkelhor argues that many other intuitively unnatural behaviors have been accepted by our democratic society – e.g. homosexuality. The second argument is that children are prematurely sexualized by sex with adults although childhood should be a sex-free time of life. Finkelhor, however, points out that the sexual innocence of children is a myth – children explore sexuality on their own. The third argument is that sex with adults harms children. Finkelhor, however, warns that the clinical evidence that many children are harmed by sex with adults does not mean that all children are harmed by sex with adults – for all we know, the majority might go unharmed, it has simply not come to the attention of psychiatric professionals. Another counter-argument is that the harmfulness of an experience is not in itself enough to merit condemnation. Many other experiences

are harmful to children – the divorce of their parents, for example – yet are not banned (693–94).

Finkelhor, therefore, proposes a moral argument independent of all the previous ones. His argument is based on the issue of consent. Our democratic society tends towards the view that any sexual activity to which all parties have consented should be permitted. While children sometimes appear to consent to sex with adults, they are incapable of truly consenting. True consent has two conditions: an individual must know what they are consenting to and they must have freedom of choice. Children do not fulfill these two conditions. By virtue of their limited experience, they do not really know what awaits them when they consent to sex with adults, be it the sexual act itself or the social implications of sexual relationships. Children are also not genuinely free to say no. They are in a dependent position towards adults who provide for them, they are brought up to obey adults. This holds particularly for adults who are parents, relatives, or adults in a position of trust (for position of trust, see chapter 3.6) (694–95).

Of course, one could argue that even in relationships between adults, the two conditions are not always fulfilled. Many adults are quite ignorant about sex, and many are not in a position to freely say no. Lack of knowledge would also seem to prohibit sex between children. Sex between children and adults, however, is unique in its combination of children's lack of knowledge and lack of power. In child-child sex, there is no inherent difference in power, and in coercive adult-adult sex, the coerced adult has more knowledge or at least access to that knowledge (696).

Thus we have established an ethical argument against sexual activity between children and adults which is independent of empirical evidence of harmfulness or

transient social taboos (697). While Finkelhor, for the purposes of his paper, defines adults as persons 18 or over and children as “prepubertal youngster[s]” (693), thus not addressing sex involving persons between the onset of puberty and the age of majority, we will, for the purpose of this thesis, extend the meaning of *child* to include all persons under the age of consent. After all, the concept of consent proposed by Finkelhor and the legal concept of age of consent are based on the same premise.

### **3 Educator sexual misconduct**

#### **3.1 Definition**

The phrase *educator sexual misconduct* was coined by Charol Shakeshaft, an expert on the problem, in the early 2000s (Shakeshaft, “Know” 9). *Misconduct* is preferable to *abuse* because it includes a wider range of inappropriate behavior. While *abuse* evokes the perspective of the victim who in some cases may feel that they have not suffered any harm, *misconduct* implies the breach of a professional code of conduct for which the educator has sole responsibility. *Educator sexual misconduct* is therefore “any behavior of a sexual nature which may constitute professional misconduct” (Shakeshaft, *Educator* 2). This behavior may be verbal, visual, or physical. It may or may not be criminal, in either case it is unacceptable (Shakeshaft, “Know” 9).

#### **3.2 Offenders**

Available literature suggests that many educator abusers are chronic predators, meaning that there are fewer abusers than those abused. Teachers who work with students individually, e.g. coaches and music teachers, abuse more often than other

educators (Shakeshaft, *Educator* 22). The average age of offenders in one study was 28 years; the range was from 21 to 75 years old. As to gender, the trend is similar as with sex offenses in general: while statistics based on disciplinary proceedings or newspaper reports report that between 4% and 20% of offenders are female, the proportions in inquiries among students are much more balanced: two studies agreed that the number is 43%. One explanation for this discrepancy is that “female abusers might be underreported if the target is male, because males have been socialized to believe they should be flattered or appreciative of sexual interest from a female.” Same-sex misconduct makes up 18% to 28% of reported cases. It is important to realize that even teachers who identify publicly as heterosexuals can abuse students of the same sex. (Shakeshaft, *Educator* 24–25).

### **3.3 Targets**

Shakeshaft points out that the naming of abused students is a political issue. *Complainant* connotes that the abuse is only alleged, *victim* connotes weakness, and *survivor* connotes a process. She chooses the term *target* because it has none of the connotations and it reminds readers that the student is in no way responsible for the abuse. Findings on gender of targets again parallel those of sex offenses in general: inquiries among students return higher percentage of male targets than formal reports, indicating that abuse of males is less likely to be reported than abuse of females (*Educator* 27–28).

### **3.4 Patterns**

There is a marked difference in patterns between abuse taking place in primary

education and abuse taking place in secondary education. Abusers among elementary school teachers are often those most popular and trusted – they work on their distinction as excellent educators in order to have easier access to children and to make allegations of abuse seem absurd. Abusers among secondary school teachers, on the other hand, include both outstanding and mediocre professionals. “At this level [of education], the initial acts [of educator sexual misconduct] are somewhat less premeditated and planned and more often opportunistic, a result of bad judgment or a misplaced sense of privilege” (Shakeshaft, *Educator* 31–32).

In any case, the grooming patterns of educator sexual misconduct are the same as for child sexual abuse in general: the offender will select a student who is likely to comply and not tell. Such conditions apply particularly to students who are not close to their parents, who have low self-confidence, who engage in risky behavior etc. The offender will entice the student with attention, support, and understanding, which are particularly valued when coming from someone in a position of authority. The sexual nature of interaction will be progressively increased so as to desensitize the student and test their ability to maintain secrecy. Eventually, the student will feel complicity on their part for having complied for so long. Furthermore, the offender will develop a relationship and provide experiences that the student would regret losing. They may even win the trust of the student's parents. Teachers often groom students in the context of extra activities which parents appreciate. Teachers may take advantage of their position of authority to keep students from telling – they may threaten students with punishment within their school subject or warn the students that if they tell, no-one will believe them (Shakeshaft, *Educator* 32–33). The latter threat is not fictitious: the majority of reports of sexual abuse are ignored or disbelieved (Shakeshaft, *Educator*

35). Educator sexual misconduct takes place in schools (in classrooms, hallways, offices), in buses and cars, in the educator's home, and in outdoor secluded areas. Sometimes it happens even right in front of other students (Shakeshaft, *Educator* 33).

### **3.5 Effects**

Educator sexual misconduct has negative effects on the target and the school community. While unwanted sexual attention from an educator can obviously lead targets to avoiding school, other effects may also apply to students who welcome an educator's advances, such as trouble paying attention to their studies, confusion about identity, loss of trust in authority figures, or difficulty forming intimate relationships. Research suggests that educator sexual misconduct has a nature similar to incest due to the parent-like role that teachers play (Shakeshaft, *Educator* 42–43).

School climate can be seriously damaged by inappropriate sexualization on the one hand (Shakeshaft, *Educator* 43) and by fear among teachers of allegations of sexual abuse on the other (Knoll 379). Knoll also points out that teachers are, by virtue of their profession, supposed to transmit cultural norms and values onto the younger generation and to serve as models for appropriate social interactions. Students may therefore gain the impression that sexual misconduct is acceptable and carry this attitude into their adult lives (377).

### **3.6 Allegations and their consequences**

There are several ways in which educator sexual misconduct comes to the attention of school officials: formal complaints, informal complaints, anonymous reports,



observed abuse, observed suspicious behavior, or rumors. Formal and informal complaints are most commonly raised by targets, parents of targets, a target's friend, and parents of a target's friend. A teacher rarely reports a colleague's misconduct, even if they are actually told by the abused student (Shakeshaft, *Educator* 34). Only few cases are reported to law enforcement agencies such as police – almost always by parents – meaning that most cases never appear in criminal justice information systems (Shakeshaft, *Educator* 35). Studies reveal that the ways schools deal with educators found guilty of sexual misconduct are more than unsatisfactory. Schools are afraid of legal battles. Many abusers do not suffer any negative consequences. If the school really wants to get rid of the abuser, it sometimes trades a positive recommendation for a resignation. The school appears to have punished the abuser and preserves its reputation, but the abuser is free to continue abuse somewhere else (Shakeshaft, *Educator* 44). This practice has been called “passing the trash” (Knoll 379).

When a case of educator sexual misconduct is reported to law enforcement agencies, consequences are still difficult to predict. Laws vary from country to country and from state to state, resulting in dissimilar sentences for similar cases. We are particularly interested in laws regulating so-called *consensual sex*, i.e. sex wanted by both parties, which is relevant to our purpose. Age of consent in the United Kingdom is 16 while in the United States it ranges between 16 and 18 depending on the state (“Ages of consent in Europe”, “Ages of consent in North America”). Sex with a person under the age of consent is conceived as so-called *statutory rape*. This is a generic term – different jurisdictions use different terms for the crime. UK law further differentiates between sexual activity with minors under 13 and sexual activity with minors above 13, punishment for the latter being less severe (“Statutory rape”). The UK and a majority of

American states furthermore prohibit sexual activity between a person in a position of trust and a minor. “Any regulated profession dealing with the health and safety of others usually requires certification and licensing and would be a position of trust” (“Position of trust”). This applies to educators as well. A violation of such a law results in an offense termed *abuse of position of trust* or similar. As of 2003, five American states protected all students regardless of age from sexual activity with educators (Shakeshaft, *Educator* 40). In January 2015, news servers reported a case of a sex education teacher who had had sexual intercourse with an 18-year-old student and faced rape charges under Oklahoma law which forbids sexual relations between teachers and students under the age of 21 (Snider).

Even within a state where there is one set of laws, sentencing based on these laws is not uniform for similar cases, as a study of Nevada sentences for educator sexual misconduct revealed (Shakeshaft, *Educator* 45).

### **3.7 Perceptions of educator sexual misconduct**

Much research has been done on the factors that influence the perceptions of both child sexual abuse and educator sexual misconduct. In case of educator sexual misconduct, these factors include:

- the gender of the respondent
- gender dyads, i.e.:
  - male teacher + female student
  - female teacher + male student
  - male teacher + male student

- female teacher + female student
- the age of the student
- the age of the teacher
- the attractiveness of the teacher

We will deal with each of these factors in the following subchapters.

### **3.7.1 Gender**

Gender is the most salient factor influencing perceptions of child sexual abuse and educator sexual misconduct. Many studies have observed the following tendencies:

1. Women take child sexual abuse, including educator sexual misconduct, more seriously than men. Compared to men, women expect the experience to have more negative effects on the victim, they attribute more responsibility to the perpetrator and less to the victim, and they assign a harsher punishment to the perpetrator. A reason for this may be that women are more likely to experience sexual victimization and are therefore more sensitive to it.
2. A relationship between a female teacher and a male student is viewed less negatively than a relationship between a male teacher and a female student. This is in line with the general stereotype of women being sexually passive and harmless and of men being sexually dominant.
3. Men make more of a distinction between the two dyads, i.e. they seem to be more influenced by gender stereotypes than women.

(Fromuth, Kelly, Wilson, Finch, and Scruggs 351–52)

We will not address same-gender dyads here as these are not relevant to our purpose. If you are interested in the issue, see Dollar et al.

### **3.7.2 Age**

The age of the victim of sexual abuse is an important factor. The older the victim, the less abusive the relationship seems to respondents. Adolescents are generally held more responsible for their own abuse than young children (Fromuth and Holt 165). A study specifically on educator sexual misconduct confirmed these tendencies with one exception: in the case of a female student and a male teacher, the age of the student did not affect the relationship's perceived degree of abusiveness (Fromuth and Holt 177).

Fromuth, Holt, and Parker attempted to determine the influence of the teacher's age on the perceptions of educator sexual misconduct. In their study, which compared a 24-year-old and a 39-year-old teacher, the teacher's age “did not emerge as a significant factor” (70). More studies are necessary to confirm or refute this result.

### **3.7.3 Attractiveness**

Much research has been done on the influence of attractiveness on the perception of individuals. Studies have shown that generally, attractiveness helps its bearer to be perceived more positively, especially if the situation – such as a crime – is ambiguous (Fromuth, Kelly, Wilson, Finch, and Scruggs 343–45). In one study on educator sexual misconduct, the attractiveness of the teacher did not influence the perception of their actions, perhaps because it was evoked by a written description only – pictures might simulate real-life experience more adequately. (Fromuth, Kelly, Wilson, Finch, and Scruggs 351).

### **3.8 Arguments against teacher-student involvement**

Naturally, the arguments against sex between adults and children outlined earlier apply to adult teachers and students under the age of consent as well. There are, however, additional aspects to consider. It was mentioned earlier that some countries and states protect students who are above the age of consent from sexual activity with an adult in a position of trust. Smetáčková and Pavlík believe that an educator should never engage in a sexual relationship with their student, not even with an adult student. They argue that the power that teachers hold over their students influences the way the latter perceive the former: teachers' superiority adds to their attractiveness. This superiority is threefold: higher age, higher education, and higher formal position. Smetáčková and Pavlík suggest that as a consequence of these asymmetries, a student may perceive a teacher's advances as agreeable and interpret them as the mark of their own exceptionality. Ambivalent or negative feelings about the relationship may appear later, for example when the teacher's advances grow stronger, when the student is criticized by fellow students, or when the teacher directs his/her attention at another student. Because the attractiveness of teachers is amplified by their status, Smetáčková and Pavlík question the validity of a student's consent to an involvement with their teacher. True consent presupposes 1) full awareness of the consequences of power hierarchies that are inherent to organizational structures of educational institutions, and 2) a conscious decision about one's own movement within these structures. The influence of these structures, however, is mostly latent, and students cannot be expected to reflect on them. On the other hand, teachers, who are professionals and hold power over students, should reflect on their behavior and beware of crossing the border of a

standard pedagogical relationship (39–40).

To sum up, we have so far collected the following arguments related to the concept of consent:

1. Children are incapable of consenting to sex with adults because they are dependent on adults and not as experienced.
2. Students are incapable of consenting to involvement with teachers because they have a subordinate position within educational institutions and this position latently influences their perception of teachers.

While subordinate position is inherent to students' role in educational institutions, it is important to note that this subordination is not absolute. Research suggests that especially male students make use of their privileged masculinity to undermine female teachers' authority through sexual harassment (Robinson). Some even claim that sex with teachers can help students feel powerful. Jane Gallop, a university professor, has no scruples recounting how she used to boost her confidence by seducing her professors when she was a student (“Ms Behaved?”).

# Practical Part

## 4 Zoë Heller: *Notes on a Scandal*

### 4.1 Background

Zoë Heller is an English journalist and novelist born in 1965. *Notes on a Scandal*, her second novel, was published in 2003. It was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize that year. In the USA, the novel was published under the title *What Was She Thinking? Notes on a Scandal*. A film adapted from the novel was released under the title *Notes on a Scandal* in 2006. There are plot alterations in the screenplay that have significant consequences for character portrayal. We will mention some of these alterations where relevant to our purpose.

Heller was inspired to write about an affair between a middle-aged schoolteacher and her pupil by the case of Mary Kay Letourneau (Mullan). In 1996, the 34-year-old Letourneau became sexually involved with her 12-year-old pupil Vili in an elementary school in Washington. She gave birth to a daughter by Vili before her trial was over. She was then sentenced to 6 months jail. Shortly after her release, however, she was found having sexual contact with Vili again. This time she was sentenced to seven-and-a-half years in prison, during which she gave birth to a second daughter by Vili (“Mary Kay Letourneau”). Heller was irritated by the media coverage of the case and so she voiced her opinion on the “cant” through the character of Barbara (Mullan). This opinion will be explored in chapter 4.5.

### 4.2 Plot overview

Sheba Hart, a 40-year-old married mother of two, starts teaching pottery at St



George's, a comprehensive school in Archway, north London, in the winter term of 1996. In a so-called Homework Club, she encounters Steven Connolly, a 15-year-old pupil, and praises his drawing. Steven begins visiting Sheba in her pottery studio after classes, at first to discuss art, and later to simply spend time with her. One day, he declares his love for her and kisses her. She forbids him to visit her again, but when he invites her for a meeting on Hampstead Heath in early March 1997, she goes there and their relationship becomes sexual. Eight months into the affair, Sheba's colleague and friend, Barbara, finds out about it but does not report it. Only later, at a moment when she is angry with Sheba, she gives a hint about the affair to another colleague. By that time, Sheba and Steven's relationship has already begun to fall apart. In early January 1998, Sheba is charged with indecent assault on a minor and dismissed from her job. Barbara decides to leave the school too and to take care of Sheba, who has been thrown out of the house by her husband. While living with Sheba in the empty house of Sheba's brother, Barbara begins writing a book on Sheba's affair with Steven – the eponymous notes on a scandal – and finishes three months later. The book ends with Sheba awaiting her trial, leaving an open ending to the story.

### **4.3 Characteristics of the narration**

Barbara Covett is the narrator of the story. A spinster in her early sixties, she taught history at St George's for 21 years; her teaching career lasted 35 years in total. Barbara has set herself the task of writing about the affair between Sheba and Steven. Her aim is, in her own words, “to help the public understand who Sheba Hart really is” (Heller 8). The chronological recounting of Sheba's involvement with Steven is interrupted by the accounts of what is happening at the time of writing.

The film adaptation did not retain the form of Barbara writing a manuscript about Sheba's affair. Instead, Barbara keeps a diary on her everyday life. When Sheba starts working at St George's, Barbara's writing centers around the development of her relationship with Sheba. Barbara's scheming, which is subtle in the novel, is thus foregrounded in the movie and renders Barbara a more unsympathetic character. At the same time, Sheba's status as a victim of Barbara's scheming distracts the audience's attention from the fact that Sheba victimizes her pupil.

When examining Sheba's affair as it is depicted in the novel, we have to take into account that it is recounted by Barbara. Barbara can definitely be labeled an unreliable narrator. Heller herself says, however, that Barbara being an unreliable narrator does not mean that she is unreliable about every single thing (Mullan). Therefore, before we proceed to the analysis of Sheba as a sex offender, we will look at some of Barbara's opinions so that later we can recognize their influence on the narrative.

First of all, we have to address the way Barbara refers to the main characters of her narrative. Sheba, her friend, is always referred to by her first name, which suggests intimacy. Sheba's lover, on the other hand, is almost exclusively referred to by his surname. His first name appears in Sheba's direct speech, but for Barbara, he is always Connolly. This impersonal reference may alienate Steven from readers. To avoid such alienation in this thesis, we will refer to him by his first name.

The fact that Barbara refers to Steven by his surname reflects her relationship to pupils in general. She is very cynical about them: "St George's is the holding pen for Archway's pubescent proles – the children of the council estates who must fidget and scrap here for a minimum of five years until they can embrace their fates as plumbers

and shop assistants” (Heller 20). Barbara is a devoted advocate of traditional, authoritative approach to education. She sees her task as “guiding [her] pupils through the three Rs and providing them with some pointers on personal hygiene” (Heller 28) and laughs at modern concerns about the pupils' souls. The most important value for her wards to acquire is discipline. When she stumbles upon Sheba who has troubles with two boys, Barbara at first does not want to interfere, but overhears one of the boys swearing at Sheba and this makes her step in: “I was obliged to address the boy’s incivility. It would have been a dereliction of duty to do otherwise” (Heller 52).

It is not, however, a dereliction of duty in her eyes not to report educator sexual misconduct when she finds out about Sheba's affair with Steven. Her only motives for reporting it are her anger at Sheba for neglecting her as a friend and her jealousy of Steven. She openly declares: “I had no great concern for Connolly’s moral welfare. My assumption then – as now – was that the boy was quite capable of fending for himself” (Heller 164). While readers may have different opinions than Barbara, her cynicism with regard to Steven's psyche may influence them all the same.

Nevertheless, Barbara's cynical views lead her to give a rather sound piece of advice to Sheba: “[‘]t isn’t your job to be a friend to your pupils. When you blur the lines of the teacher-pupil contract – when you try to be soft and chummy and “one of them” – you are actually doing your pupils a disservice” (Heller 111).

Another thing that we have to take into account when reading *Notes on a Scandal* is that Barbara is not telling her own story. While she was present in some of the situations that she describes, she was absent in most of them. Towards the end of the novel, when Sheba finds Barbara's manuscript, she points out to her: “[‘]You write

about things you never saw, people you don't know." Barbara admits: "Well, that's what a writer does,['']" but argues: "[']There's nothing in there that you didn't tell me yourself'" (Heller 236). Indeed, she assures us at the beginning of her manuscript that she "rel[ies] upon detailed accounts provided by Sheba herself" (Heller 8). Which brings us to the fact that we have another unreliable narrator to deal with: Sheba.

Barbara addresses Sheba's unreliability before she starts telling her story:

I should acknowledge straightaway that, from a moral point of view, Sheba's testimony regarding her conduct is not always entirely reliable. ... But, confused and troubled as Sheba still is, her honesty remains utterly dependable. While I may dispute her *reading* of certain events, I have found no cause to doubt the factual particulars of her account. Indeed, I am confident that everything she has told me regarding the how, when and where of this affair is, to the best of her knowledge, true. (Heller 8)

To sum up, we are faced with two levels of distortion. When asked whether Steven Connolly was a sympathetic character, Heller pointed out that he was "refracted through two highly unreliable consciousnesses," that we are presented with "Barbara's idea of Sheba's idea of this boy" (Mullan). This double refraction applies to most aspects of the story, be it characters or events. Since we have no other choice, we will follow Barbara in accepting the factual particulars of the affair as accurate, but we will follow her too in offering our own reading of the events at times.

The double refraction is not retained in the film adaptation, which is shot in a conventional way. This has consequences for the interpretation of the story. While an attentive reader of the novel will recognize that reality is compromised by the subjective perspectives of two unreliable narrators, and may attempt to unveil it, the movie audience is presented with the story as objective reality. We do not get Barbara's idea of

Sheba's idea of Steven anymore, we get an actor who embodies these ideas. The room for different readings is thus severely reduced.

#### **4.4 Sheba Hart as a sex offender**

When we look at the characteristics of female sex offenders outlined in chapter 2.1.2, Sheba defies many of them. There are no signs of childhood maltreatment or sexual abuse: she has a difficult relationship with her mother but it is nothing out of the ordinary; she adored her father and was very sorry when he died. She does not suffer any mental health problems. She did not abuse substances prior to her misconduct – she only became an alcoholic after the affair got public and she saw herself to be “the Most Hated Woman in Britain” (Heller 237). She had been living in a stable marriage for twenty years. She does not idealize children, demonize men, or distrust other women. On the contrary, she seems to be generally rather trusting, to an extent which astonishes Barbara: “She tosses out intimate and unflattering truths about herself, all the time, without a second thought” (Heller 3).

Other characteristics, however, match well. Most importantly, one wonders whether Sheba is capable of forming healthy relationships with adults. When she first started working at St George's, she surprised Barbara by not associating with her colleagues for several weeks. While this is not deviant behavior in itself, it might be a symptom of her uncertainty about peer interaction. She admits herself: “[’]All my adult life, I’ve been the younger person, the baby in the group[’]” (Heller 126). This is because her husband, Richard, is a generation older than her. And age is not the only source of asymmetry: he was her college lecturer when they met. As opposed to Jane

Gallop (mentioned in chapter 3.8), she did not use the erotic tension between herself and her teacher to any academic advantage. On the contrary: at the age of twenty, she gave up further study at the college to marry him. Within the framework of Smetáčková and Pavlík, then, Sheba can be said to have a history of sexual victimization. She definitely has a history of boundary violation and of an asymmetrical relationship. Richard's marrying Sheba is not an isolated occurrence of professional boundary violation on his part. When he throws Sheba out of the household, he recruits his current student – female, of course – to do the housekeeping and to chaperone his son when he is to meet his supposedly pedophile mother. An odd service to perform for one's thesis-supervisor, but Richard seems not to register the irony of it. At any rate, it has never occurred to Sheba that Richard might have done something wrong in marrying his student, as Barbara observes: “A few times, I recall her saying something a little wistful about having got married so early. But she was always careful not to blame Richard for this. If she had missed out on opportunities, it was nobody's fault but her own, she insisted” (Heller 125). Sheba's unreflected experience with an asymmetrical relationship might have contributed to her involvement with Steven – she probably perceived the affair to be similar to her courtship with Richard which was innocent in her eyes. She realized that the relationship would not be perceived as innocent by others because Steven was a minor and a pupil at the school where she taught, and this realization led her to secrecy. It was also not innocent because it was adultery on her part. In terms of asymmetry, however, she was completely oblivious to the dangers of the relationship: from her point of view, she and Steven were having a romance and there was nothing harmful about it above the usual harm which a romance among peers can cause. When charged with indecent assault on a minor, she refused to plea guilty, although it would have spared

her trial. “‘There was no assault and I’ve done nothing indecent,’ she likes to say” (Heller 6). To sum up, we can say that Sheba was *predisposed* to educator sexual misconduct by her past experience. We could even go so far as to see a connection between these two relationships and the relationship with her father. When describing Sheba and Richard’s marriage, Barbara comments: “She had grown up with Ronald Taylor for a father. The rules for being a hand maiden to a great, pompous man were more or less instinctive to her” (Heller 124). If we accept this observation as correct, we can draw a parallel between Sheba’s choice of partners and the tendency mentioned in chapter 2.1.2 that female sex offenders initially choose a partner who resembles their father and only then form a relationship with a child in which they finally become the one in control. It certainly must have been an agreeable change for Sheba to play the role of the revered grown-up for once.

Once her life is shattered, Sheba gives up all attempts to fulfill the role of an adult and regresses into childishness, spending afternoons in her niece’s bedroom that used to be her own:

She’ll spend hours at a time handling the little girl’s things – reorganizing the vials of glitter and glue in art-kits, making inventories of the dolls’ plastic shoes. Sometimes she falls asleep up there and I have to go and wake her for dinner. She always looks rather sad and odd, sprawled out on the pink and white princess bed, with her big, rough feet dangling over the edge. Like a giantess who has blundered into the wrong house. (Heller 3)

She is encouraged in this regression by Barbara who, childless and spouseless, longs for someone she could take care of, someone with whom she could share her life after decades of loneliness.

Another characteristic that applies to Sheba is self-referentiality. The effects of her offense that she is acutely aware of are those that concern her, not the target of her misconduct. In her case, it is not so much selfishness as lack of self-reflection. Since she sees nothing indecent in her affair with Steven, she does not feel any contrition either: “What remorse she expresses tends to be remorse for having been found out” (Heller 8).

Sheba is also ambivalent about herself – particularly her achievements in life. For some 17 years of taking care of her two children, one of them with Down Syndrome, she did not go to work. She does not feel fulfilled through her role as a housewife: “[R]aising kids ... can’t possibly offer the same satisfactions as doing things out in the world. ... [I]t’s a terrible bore to have never made or done anything noteworthy, to have laboured in such absolute obscurity” (Heller 109). This may have contributed to her affair with Steven: when she started teaching, she was full of ideals about imparting the love of art to her pupils, but after a few weeks of serious discipline issues, she gave up the effort and let the children do what they want to do – read comics and listen to music. When Steven showed interest in art, she was moved: “She was impressed by how attentively he listened. He seemed interested, she thought. Interested and eager to learn. *This*, she told herself, was what she had hoped teaching would be” (Heller 42). After he kissed her, she tried to put an end to their meetings, but felt disconsolate without her only devoted pupil: “Connolly had been her one talisman against the drear of St George’s. Now that she had sent him away, she wasn’t sure why she was bothering with the job at all” (Heller 76).

Now we will try to classify Sheba within the various typologies outlined in chapter 2.1.3. We have already identified features of the *predisposed* type from Matthews et al.’s



framework, but Sheba also corresponds to their *teacher/lover* type. Her difficulties with peer relationships and her refusal to admit to having committed a crime have already been discussed. Another feature of the *teacher/lover* type is that such a sex offender perceives herself to be having a romantic relationship with her target. Sheba definitely views her affair with Steven as a romance. The extent of her naïveté and self-deception as to the nature of the relationship astonishes Barbara:

It is hard, I tell her, to interpret such drastically incautious behaviour as anything other than sexual obsession. But Sheba objects to that phrase. She says that it places undue emphasis on the carnal aspect of her relations with Connolly. ... She wants it to be known that she and Connolly were not merely engaged in 'illicit romps' and 'sex sessions'. They were *in love*. (Heller 117)

Sheba also appears to wish her relationship with Steven was sexually mentoring. Before she first touched him, she “had occasionally wondered about the extent of Connolly’s sexual experience” and “had been inclined to place him at the innocent end of the scale. Not technically a virgin, perhaps, but still fundamentally inexperienced” (Heller 48). When their relationship finally gets sexual, however, she does not seem to assume the role of a mentor, and Steven claims he had slept with five girls before her.

As a good example of *teacher/lover*, Sheba also falls into the category of the *heterosexual nurturer* within Vandiver and Kercher's framework, and appears to fit the *criminally limited hebephile* best of Sandler and Freeman's categories. This leads us to the question of her erotic age-preference. She seems not to qualify as a hebephile. Steven is fifteen – on the verge of adolescence – when she first encounters him and he turns sixteen while the affair lasts. If Sheba preferred his stage of physical development to all others, she would have to be classified as an ephebophile, but it is difficult to

establish the strength of the preference. She has been married to a man a generation older than herself for twenty years. Barbara is genuinely surprised when she finds out about Sheba's affair with Steven: “[‘Y]ou don’t even *like* younger men. You told me yourself, you go for older men.” Sheba answers in a philosophical fashion: “[T]hese labels we give our sexual feelings, they’re so silly, aren’t they? As if our tastes were that easily categorized or that unchanging.” (Heller 160). She does, however, enjoy Steven's adolescent body: “[‘I can see now that boyhood has a very distinct charm. ... I see for myself what it is that can drive you mad about a beautiful young body[’]” (Heller 160–61). She uses bizarre metaphors to describe Steven's appeal: “*The first time I saw him undress, you know what I thought of, Barbara? Fresh garden vegetables wrapped in a clean white hanky. Mushrooms fresh from the soil. No, really. He was edible.*” (Heller 1–2, italics in the original). We have to consider the possibility that she is an ephhebophile but had never before acted upon her preference. She may never have even admitted it to herself, assuming the role of a woman who prefers older men. When she found herself among boys of the age that attracts her, she succumbed. Barbara notes that Sheba's accounts of when she became conscious of having amorous feelings for Connolly are inconsistent, but sometimes “she will coyly volunteer that she ‘fancied’ him from the start” (Heller 49). She tried, however, to pass the attraction off as maternal feelings or a teacher's interest in an eager pupil.

#### **4.5 Educator sexual misconduct in the novel**

Sheba's case is in line with the tendency that teachers who work with students individually are more likely to commit educator sexual misconduct. Art is a subject in which one-on-one teaching is especially plausible, and Sheba's pottery studio is the

perfect location for clandestine activities: “a pre-fabricated hut adjoining the arts centre, which, for some years, since the departure of the last pottery teacher, had been used as a storage room” (Heller 21).

Barbara is positive that Sheba's misconduct was not conscious, that she deceived herself as to the nature of her relationship with Steven until the point where there was no turning back: when she met him in a park and let herself be led into a private spot among trees. Her misconduct was therefore a result of bad judgement and also of a misplaced sense of privilege: she was flattered by Steven's admiration. The following situation is an example:

Towards the end of his visit, Sheba was discussing the science of kiln temperatures when he interrupted her to comment on how nicely she spoke. She didn't need to be a teacher, he told her earnestly. She could get a job 'doing the weather on the telly, or something.' Sheba smiled, amused by his gaucheness. She would keep the career tip in mind, she told him.

(Heller 43)

A teacher who is serious about educating their students should point out to them that teaching is a much more valuable vocation than presenting one's appearance on television, but Sheba is eager to accept Steven's compliments, preferring the role of a courted woman to that of an educator.

The evolution of the relationship between Sheba and her pupil has several of the characteristics that are typical of sex offenders' grooming. When she first meets Steven and asks him why he does not attend her pottery class, he is ashamed to admit that he has to attend a special needs class. Barbara belittles his condition on the grounds that a whole fourth of all St George's pupils attends these classes due to literacy issues.

Nevertheless, the fact is that Sheba feels sorry for Steven and probably lets him visit her in her studio after classes at least in part in order to make up for his inability to go to regular art classes. And similarly, Steven will visit her to show his drawings to the only teacher who expressed interest in them and to bask in Sheba's praise.

Furthermore, Sheba believes Steven to have an abusive father. Barbara doubts this to be true and even accuses Steven of deliberately exaggerating his father's behavior to evoke sympathy in Sheba. In any case, Sheba's conviction that Steven's father hits him induces her to stroke his head, which is "her first gesture of intimacy towards the boy" (Heller 47), and probably provides her with an excuse for feeling protective of him.

During Steven's second visit to the studio, "they examined some of the Year Seven's pandas and lions, laughing together at the particularly clumsy ones" (Heller 42). Ridicule of other students' work must have made Steven feel special – in league with Sheba against other pupils. Details such as these help constitute the "special relationship" that many offenders consider necessary for abuse. If Sheba had been interested in maintaining the boundaries of an appropriate student-teacher relationship, she should have remained neutral and discouraged Steven from laughing at his fellow pupils.

The sexual nature of Sheba and Steven's interaction is progressively increased. While Sheba's comments and touches seem involuntary, they nevertheless introduce sex into their conversation. When Steven visits Sheba for the first time and explains that the picture he gave her earlier was a portrait of her, she comments on the unrealistically large bosom he drew: "Wishful thinking," (Heller 30), which embarrasses him considerably. During a later visit, she has a book of paintings by Manet lying around

and directs Steven to a reproduction of *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, which she uses as a starting point for a discussion of beauty ideals and almost asks Steven about his favorite type of figure in a woman. Although Barbara's narration gives the impression that this conversation developed by chance, it may also be interpreted as deliberately navigated – the painting that Sheba selected to draw Steven's attention to is a rather suspect choice given its nudity. Sheba's breaking off in the last moment before asking Steven about his beauty ideal may be either due to fear of overstepping the mark or mere affectation. The painting also appears to have inspired Steven to select a clearing among trees for his first rendez-vous with Sheba. It might even have been Sheba's intention to provide him with this inspiration.

Touching is also progressively increased. We have mentioned the first gesture of intimacy – her stroking his head. Despite Barbara's account that Sheba felt unsettled by having touched him, she touched him again when taking leave of him that evening: she “prodd[ed] Connolly abruptly in the ribs” (Heller 48), which was an entirely unnecessary gesture and may be seen as her attempt to regularize physical contact between them.

Another important aspect of Sheba's grooming is secrecy. Although she tries to convince herself that Steven's visits are innocent, she does not tell anyone about them, not even her colleague Sue with whom she is close at the time:

If everything between her and the boy was so simple and aboveboard, why had she never mentioned his visits to Sue? ... She had not mentioned Connolly to Sue, she told herself, because Sue would have been bound to respond with unnecessary anxiety. She would have said that the after-school meetings were ‘inappropriate.’ And Sheba absolutely knew that they weren't. What did it matter what other people might think, as long as she knew that the

thing was harmless? People were hypervigilant these days, because of child abuse. In the rush to guard against the sickos, the world had gone slightly mad. (Heller 49)

Of course, Sheba would never apply the words “child abuse” or “sicko” to herself. Her behavior is, however, that of a sexual predator. When her relationship with Steven finally gets sexual, she lectures him on how important it is to maintain secrecy. She even threatens him with negative consequences for himself: “‘You would be in a lot of trouble, too, you know.’ She knew this was probably untrue, but she thought it best to give him as much incentive as possible for keeping quiet” (Heller 49).

The locations of sexual misconduct are also in line with those observed in research. Sheba and Steven often meet for sex on Hampstead Heath – an outdoor secluded area – and in her pottery studio. At least once, they also meet in her house while her family is asleep, and his house while his family is away.

Due to Barbara's indifference as to Steven's welfare, the effects that Sheba's sexual misconduct has on him are not explored in the novel. One thing that is obvious is his class consciousness. The asymmetry between him and Sheba does not spring from their age and status only. Barbara describes Sheba as upper-class, although Sheba claims that she is upper-middle-class at the most. Steven, on the other hand, lives with his family on the council estate. When Sheba comes to his house, he is very self-conscious and defensive of his home. While Sheba's educated background may have heightened her appeal in the initial stages of their relationship, once they become intimate, Steven appears to feel embarrassed about his inferiority with respect to class. Hating himself for feeling embarrassed, he conceals his insecurity by outward loyalty to his working-class background.

We have mentioned in the plot overview that it is Barbara who indirectly brings about the exposure of the affair. Her motives are entirely selfish: she wants to revenge on Sheba for neglecting her. Her rage is, however, understandable. Her cat is dying from cancer and she comes to Sheba for consolation, but Sheba is impatient to get away to meet her teenaged lover. After an argument, Sheba leaves. At this point in the story, there is another significant alteration in the film adaptation: Sheba leaves Barbara for her disabled son's school play. Barbara's rage consequently appears ridiculous and her revenge much meaner. Again, this renders Barbara's character more vicious and Sheba's more sympathetic, resulting in a different interpretation of the story.

Barbara does not know exactly how the rumor of Sheba's misconduct that she initiated found its way to the headmaster, but the most likely course is that the colleague she tipped off, Bangs, reported the affair. Her understanding is that Bangs's reporting was motivated by revenge, too, because he had a crush on Sheba and felt slighted by her preference of a pupil. This might be only her cynical self again. For all we know, Bangs might have been genuinely concerned for Steven. In any case, the misconduct was finally reported to someone who could do something about it and the headmaster's conduct was much more satisfying than what statistics suggest: instead of trying to hush up the affair, he contacted Steven's parents and the police. He suspected that Barbara knew about the affair but did not report it and so he gave her an ultimatum: either to be interrogated by the police or to leave the school. He insinuated that he would rather she left the school. Barbara's interpretation of his conduct is of course cynical again: he revenges on her for her non-compliance with his "newfangled" approach. But again, his concern about the sexual misconduct may be genuine.

The media coverage of the scandal seems hypocritical to Barbara: “Good Lord, the unrelenting sanctimony! ... These reporters write about Sheba as if they were seven-year-olds confronting the fact of their parents’ sexuality for the first time. ... Have *they* never desired anyone outside the age range that local law and custom deemed suitable?” (Heller 5–6). This is the opinion that Heller acknowledged to be her own with respect to Mary Kay Letourneau's case (Mullan). We are not provided with the articles Barbara is referring to, but there is the possibility that Barbara – and Heller – are confusing the feeling of desire with acting upon the desire. The difference between the two is analogical to the difference between desire and consent which is reflected in statutory rape laws: even if the minor is a willing participant of the sexual act, they are unable to truly consent by virtue of their immaturity. The reporters may not be so revolted by Sheba's desire for the boy as by her actually having sex with him. What is so hypocritical about stating that the relationship was inappropriate? Does Heller think that it was appropriate?

Nevertheless, Barbara and her creator are probably right on another point: the double standard with which female sex offenders are treated when compared to male sex offenders. Barbara observes that female sex offenders are perceived to be much less dangerous than their male counterparts: “Oh, the official response to Sheba is very severe. They all say that she has committed a ‘despicable’ crime. But behind their hands, they’re smirking. ... Male sex offenders are never funny” (Heller 85). Barbara goes on to speculate why is that, “given that paler versions of [men’s] despised urges are so ubiquitous, so cheerfully sanctioned, in the male population at large” (Heller 85–86), and suggests that “the vehemence with which we respond to men’s sexual transgressions is proportionate to how uncomfortably common we know those transgressive urges to



be” (Heller 86). Sheba, on the other hand, is considered an aberration, and therefore the public does not feel threatened.

In contrast to Nutting (see chapter 5), however, Barbara is not concerned about female perpetrators' getting a more lenient sentence from the court: “In all likelihood, [Sheba]’ll receive exactly the same punishment as a man. The guardians of gender equality won’t stand for anything else” (Heller 86). The reality proves her wrong on this point. The guardians of gender equality appear not to have so much power as she imagines them to have. How could they: At the time of the novel's writing, UK law differentiated between male and female perpetrators of sexual intercourse with minors (as mentioned in chapter 2.1.1).

As to Barbara's own opinion on gender differences in sexual misconduct cases, she is, yet again, her cynical self: she claims that she would be just as sceptical about any harm done to a female pupil who had an affair with a male teacher as she is about the supposed harm suffered by Steven.

Thus we have addressed the effects of gender on the perceptions of educator sexual misconduct. There are no direct references in the novel to the effect that Sheba's age and attractiveness might have had on the perceptions of her crime. We can assume, however, that her attractiveness did have an influence, judging from the reaction that Barbara observes in a pub: “Sheba’s face appeared on the television screen for a second; immediately, a great roar of salacious laughter went up around the bar. ‘Dirty girl,’ I heard one man say to his friend. ‘Wouldn’t mind a bit of that myself.’” (Heller 85). The man would hardly wish for a sexual encounter with Sheba if he did not find her attractive.

Having discussed the legal and social consequences of Sheba's crime, we have to mention that the ending of the film adaptation is completely different. After finding Barbara's manuscript, Sheba returns to her husband and is accepted by him. Barbara subsequently meets a young woman, her new "victim". This ending further confirms the movie's focus on Barbara's victimization of Sheba.

The last topic left to address is the asymmetry of the relationship between Sheba and Steven. Although Barbara believes that Steven was the one who held more power in the relationship, that he actually manipulated Sheba, and that he certainly did not suffer any harm, her description does admit another reading as well. Steven's shyness and embarrassment in the early stages of the relationship and his eagerness to earn Sheba's praise indicate that he did feel her to possess a higher status than himself and that this status probably contributed to her attractiveness. One proof of his immaturity is his susceptibility to peer pressure: "[I can't be nice to you in front of the other kids,' he told her. 'They'd think I was a poof'" (Heller 67). It follows that at least before the relationship became sexual, Sheba had been the one in power, and she should have used this power to guard the boundaries of the teacher-pupil relationship. She chose to be passive and felt "strangely detached from the proceedings" (Heller 78). Having failed at maintaining the boundaries, she perceived herself to have lost her status as an authority figure: "She could hardly hector the boy about the dangers of strong drink, she felt, when she was about to take him to the park for sex" (Heller 118). She was also confronted with her middle age and at times felt old next to her teenaged lover. Steven sensed this and rudely observed: "'You're worried your vadge has gone loose'" (Heller 151). When Steven finally lost interest in Sheba, she was desperate and clung on him. The asymmetry was still there, but it got reversed in the process.

## 4.6 Conclusion

It is difficult to make any absolute decisions as to the characters, their motives, and actions, because they are doubly distorted by two unreliable narrators, Barbara and Sheba. At first sight, Sheba's involvement in the affair seems to be the result of her weakness and bad judgement. One would not call her a sexual predator. It is her pupil, Steven, who appears to be the one in control. When we look at the story closely, however, through the prism of scholarly literature, many of the patterns typical of female sex offenders and educator sexual misconduct can be recognized. One may even find details which suggest that Sheba was indeed a sexual predator deliberately grooming her target. But this is a rather extreme reading. We will accept a milder one: that Sheba was not acting with the intent to seduce her pupil for her sexual gratification, but that she became romantically attached to him due to her incapability to form equal relationships with peers.

Zoë Heller shows her readers that female sex offenders are viewed as less dangerous than male sex offenders. Her own novel, however, only reinforces this assumption, since Sheba is portrayed as pathetic. While this portrait – painted by an unreliable narrator – can be challenged, an alternative reading requires the conscious wish to overcome stereotypes. An unreflected reading of *Notes on a Scandal* upholds them. In case of the film adaptation, there is not even the possibility of an alternative interpretation, and Sheba is portrayed as the victim of both Barbara and Steven.

## 5 Alissa Nutting: *Tampa*

### 5.1 Background

Alissa Nutting is an American fiction writer. Her debut novel *Tampa* was published in 2013. The inspiration for the novel was the case of Debra Lafave with whom Nutting attended high school. Recognizing someone she knew personally made Nutting pay closer attention to the media coverage of the case and of similar cases (Breslaw). Lafave became notorious in 2004 for having sex with a 14-year-old male student and receiving a very lenient sentence for her crime. Her attorney commented at one point that sending Lafave to prison would be too dangerous for an attractive woman like her, and many people understood this to mean that she is too pretty for prison. While the leniency of the sentence – three years house arrest and seven years probation – was in fact the result of the victim's mother's wish to spare her son the trauma of a public trial, Lafave's physical appearance – and her attorney's comment on it – certainly did play a role in the degree of publicity that her case received and the way it has been portrayed (“Debra Lafave”).

Nutting was annoyed by the media portrayal of cases such as Lafave's. She finds that “female predators tend to be sexually objectified and obtain a sort of celebrity status” and that cases of pretty female sex offenders “play the best into the tendency of our culture to showcase female sexuality in the way society is most comfortable with: packaged as something for men to enjoy” (Breslaw). Society is unwilling to accept that female sexuality has its own agency and, as a consequence, that women too can perpetrate sex crimes. To challenge this stereotype, Nutting drew a purposefully extreme

character in her novel – an entirely selfish and calculating sociopath: “Any act or thought of remorse on her behalf would fall into the current trap of rendering the female predator in a sympathetic light—its relevance in the text would balloon up in a really disproportionate way because that’s what we’re used to looking for in these cases” (Breslaw). Nutting was determined not to provide any excuses for her predator, such as her own past victimization: “‘This is not a book that asks 'why' women are doing these things. It's a book that asks why we ask 'why' when women do it, and we don't care why when men do it. ... We're very used to, in our culture, looking for the ways it isn't the woman's fault.’” (A. Henry). To highlight the predatory nature of her protagonist's actions and to discourage her readers from any potential psychologizing, the novel is sexually graphic in a way that may be off-putting.

## **5.2 Plot overview**

Celeste Price is 26 years old, exceptionally attractive, and married to an equally attractive husband, Ford, but without children. Having finished her teacher education, she is just starting her first real job as an 8th-grade English teacher at Jefferson Junior High School in Tampa, Florida. She became an 8th-grade teacher with the sole purpose of having access to pubescent boys who are the only age group that sexually attracts her. She married Ford to be materially secured; now her only care is to fulfill her sexual urges. She selects Jack Patrick as the ideal candidate and proceeds to develop a sexual relationship with him. Most intercourse takes place at the house where Jack lives with his divorced father, Buck. When Buck comes home and finds Celeste there, she says that she is at the house to provide extra tutoring. Buck is attracted to her and Celeste takes advantage of this, feigning romantic interest in him and coming to the house even

more often. One day, Buck almost walks in on Celeste and Jack in the middle of their sexual play. To divert his thoughts from suspicion, Celeste has sex with Buck that evening. Jack is jealous and disturbed, but the arrangement continues. When Buck finally walks in on Celeste and Jack having sex, this time actually seeing them in the act, he suffers a heart attack. To protect her secret, Celeste waits until Buck is safely dead and only then informs Jack of his father's accident. Jack is devastated. His meetings with Celeste continue but less frequently, since he has to move to his mother's house in Crystal Springs, a place 30 miles away from Tampa. When new school year begins, Jack switches to a school in Crystal Springs, while back in Tampa, Celeste engages in an affair with another student, Boyd. She meets with Boyd at the house of Jack's father which is now empty. One day, Jack walks in on Celeste and Boyd having sex in Jack's former bedroom. He attacks Boyd and then runs out of the house. Celeste follows him with a knife and is arrested. She is charged with six counts of lewd and lascivious battery against two minors and offered a plea deal without prison time which she accepts. Her husband divorces her and she moves to a sleepy beach town where she seeks occasional sex with minors who are there on vacation, never meeting with the same boy more than once.

### **5.3 Characteristics of the narration**

The story is told by Celeste herself. Unlike Barbara's manuscript in the case of *Notes on a Scandal*, the form of relating the story or its audience are not specified. One would expect Celeste to manipulate her portrayal of herself, but in this respect, she actually seems quite reliable. She has no illusions about herself and openly describes all her scheming. If she *did* alter or leave something out, one would have hard time

imagining even more negative traits and more scheming than what she already portrayed. We will treat her narrative as truthful. After all, Nutting's ultimate goal was to force her readers to consider the possibility that women are dangerous, and we can assume that to achieve this goal she did not veil anything but lay her protagonist's character in the open.

Although we accept Celeste's actions and thoughts as objectively related, we have to allow for the subjectivity of her opinions. Despite the fact that she consciously manipulates Jack and is aware of some negative effects that the affair has on him, she still claims that protecting minors from sex with adults is “unfair”: “Wasn’t that exactly what every straight teenage boy wanted? It struck me as particularly selfish, the way the world was ignoring Jack’s need for pantied women to knock on his window at night” (Nutting 36–37). The need for such a situation is, of course, her own rather than anyone else's.

#### **5.4 Celeste Price as a sex offender**

Most of the characteristics of female sex offenders outlined in chapter 2.1.2 are possible answers to the question why a woman becomes a sex offender. Since Nutting does not want her novel to ask why (as quoted in chapter 5.1), she does not provide us with answers either. Celeste does not appear to have suffered any childhood maltreatment or sexual victimization. Actually, we know hardly anything about her past at all. Her parents are never mentioned, perhaps with the intent not to give readers the opportunity to accuse them of predisposing their daughter to abusive behavior. Celeste's sexual misconduct is not the result of substance abuse either: on the contrary, her actions are planned very soberly years in advance.

Celeste definitely has a personality disorder which has been identified in interviews as sociopathy (Breslaw; A. Henry), but it is not a condition that would evoke sympathy. While Celeste is aware of social norms well enough to pretend to uphold them, she secretly sacrifices everything to her sexual urges. She even manages to veil her selfish schemes as acts of benevolence. When none of the teachers is willing to move into an extension classroom, Celeste jumps at the opportunity: “I’d raised my hand, playing star pupil myself, and requested one. ‘I’m happy to be a team player,’ I’d announced” (Nutting 5). The real cause of her eagerness is that such a classroom is an ideal location for sexual misconduct. Later, when a colleague is about to get fired, Celeste helps her keep her job – otherwise she would have to move into a normal classroom in her place. Later still, she explains her fondness for the extension classroom with a sentimental tale: “‘It almost feels like a one-room schoolhouse ... When I was a little girl I always played that I was a teacher back in the pioneer times.’ [The Assistant Principal] absolutely loved this white lie” (Nutting 211). Cleverly deceitful, Celeste manages to stick to her isolated classroom and at the same time appears to be a devoted professional. Interestingly, she is very much aware of her sociopathy. She gives the following reason for not pursuing a modeling career: “I ... had the fear that with the right photographer, the real me might accidentally be captured—that in looking at the photo, suddenly everyone’s eyes would widen and they’d actually see me for the very first time: Oh my God—you’re a soulless pervert!” (Nutting 189).

Apart from her sociopathy, Celeste does not suffer any mental health problems. That does not prevent her attorney from including them in his strategy for the court: “We ... had psychological experts ready to testify that I had a mood disorder and low impulse control” (Nutting 260). The same goes for the absence of intimate relationships.



The only intimacy that Celeste is interested in is sexual. For the trial, however, she practises the part of a lonely heart: “‘When they came on to me ... the attention was nice. For whatever reason I felt so isolated. ... It sounds pathetic ... but I think all I really was looking for in Jack and Boyd was a friend.’” (Nutting 245). Celeste's abuse of minors is not the result of social incompetence which would make symmetrical relationships with adults unattainable. It is motivated by her exclusive sexual attraction to that particular age group. On the other hand, the fact that she exercises physical and mental control over her pubescent partners does play a role, it may actually be one of the features that constitute her sexual preference. Although she does not explicitly state that being in control satisfies her, we gather that *not* being in control is something she resents: “It wasn't so much the pain as the act of restraint itself that felt so awful, the knowledge that I wasn't physically in control” (Nutting 125).

Another characteristic that applies to Celeste is self-referentiality. It is part of her egotism and selfishness. While she does observe some effects that her affair with Jack has had on him, her observations remain superficial. She does not ponder the lasting harm that she may have inflicted on him, she merely describes the changes in his behavior and appearance that affect herself – such as his decreasing sexual appeal.

Now let us try to classify Celeste within the typologies outlined in chapter 2.1.3. As to the framework of Matthew et al., Celeste does not fit easily in any of the categories. She is neither *male-coerced* nor *predisposed*. While her relationship with Jack is sexually mentoring, other important features of the *teacher/lover* type do not apply. Consequently, she does not fit Vandiver and Kercher's *heterosexual nurturer* either. Another category of theirs, the *female sexual predator*, may be more appropriate.

Within Sandler and Freeman's framework, Celeste matches the *criminally limited hebephile* best. Although her offending is chronic and may point toward the *criminally prone hebephile*, the difference between the two categories is the number of arrests and, having managed to keep her offending secret for many years, Celeste was only arrested once – at the very end of the novel.

Sandler and Freeman's categories bring us to the issue of erotic age-preference. Celeste is an obvious hebephile. Her sexual attraction to pubescent boys – ideally between 13 and 14 years old – is not only maximum, but exclusive. Adult men repulse her. She avoids sex with her husband, whom she married for gold digging reasons, and when sex with him is inescapable, as on Christmas Day, she drugs herself by sedatives: “The next morning I woke up sore with the raging thirst that follows a night of obliteration, but with very few painful memories. That erasure was the gift I gave myself” (Nutting 155). Vivid descriptions of how disgusting sex with peers is to Celeste may inspire some sympathy in readers. After all, her erotic preference is not something she chose herself. She repeatedly complains about her predicament and expresses envy of people with normal sexual attraction: “Their urges would grow up right alongside them like a shadow. They’d never feel their libido a deformed thing to be kept chained up in the attic of their mind and to only be fed in secret after dark” (Nutting 13). Celeste's urges are a burden to her: “At times, I wished that my genitals were prosthetic, something I could slip out of. They were a constant drone of stimulation; their requests hummed aloud throughout my life like a never-ending soundtrack” (Nutting 53). Yet however sorry we might feel for her because of her deviation, it does not excuse her actions in the least. As Lurlene McDaniel puts it: “no one gets to choose what life gives to him or her; one can only choose how one responds to these happenings” (page not

numbered). If Celeste was not a sociopath, she might have found ways to cope with her hebephilia that do not harm others. She chose the opposite: to sacrifice the wellbeing of others to her sexuality.

In line with the findings of professionals, Celeste realized the truth about her sexual preference only some time after she passed the developmental stage that attracts her: “I ... embarked on a string of repulsive dates with older boys throughout high school before realizing my true attractions lagged several years behind” (Nutting 3).

Similarly to teleiophiles, who do not feel attracted to every physically mature individual, not every pubescent boy appeals to Celeste; she is quite picky about her sexual partner: “my ideal partner ... embodied a very specific intersection of traits that would exclude most of the junior high’s male population. Extreme growth spurts or pronounced muscles were immediate grounds for disqualification. They also needed to have decent skin [and] be somewhat thin” (Nutting 11). To these physical conditions add practical issues such as secrecy which will be explored later.

Although Celeste lists features of physique as the defining characteristics of what attracts her, subjective impressions of weakness are definitely a source of arousal as well: “The innocence of that thought—a frightened Jack in the middle of the classroom, wetting himself; me undressing him from his soiled clothes, his damp tender skin cold to the touch—briefly clutched me in a fantasy of erotic mothering” (Nutting 89). Celeste also enjoys contrasting Jack’s softness with roughness: “Seeing angel-faced Jack standing nude inside a room normally used for hourly blow jobs and heroin binges struck me as a delicious treat: the juxtaposition would vividly magnify all his boyish qualities” (Nutting 148). Based on this evidence, one could even speculate that the

asymmetry between Celeste and her minor partners is the primary source of appeal. This theory, however, is at variance with the fact that Celeste felt sexually fulfilled by a pubescent boy at a time when she was his peer, not his superior: “Whether or not it’s the cause, I blame my very first time at fourteen years old in Evan Keller’s basement for imprinting me with a fixed map of arousal” (Nutting 2).

Celeste's deviant adoration of young bodies is an opportunity for Nutting to satirize the idolization of youth in our society. According to Celeste, “[t]here [is] no way ... to gracefully age” (Nutting 42), and she has panic fear of aging herself. Despite her mere 26 years, she uses numerous products that are supposed to regenerate skin and she avoids facial expressions that may contribute to the formation of wrinkles. Sex, the center of her life, is only for the young. The fact that all her teenage lovers inevitably have to mature is a particularly sore point with Celeste: “[Jack's] phrase ‘when I’m in college’ made me feel kicked in the skull. It was like seeing a plate of my favorite meal that had been left out for a week and now was rotting and festering with maggots” (Nutting 127). This theme echoes again in the closing lines of the novel:

[O]ccasionally the subconscious knowledge that [Jack and Boyd] are basically adult men now is so bothersome as to make masturbation difficult. Some nights, in order to orgasm, I have to reimagine history and tell myself that neither of them made it past the eve of my arrest alive: that Jack suffered a fatal wound at my hands in the woods, and Boyd, bleeding alone from the skull in Jack’s bedroom, succumbed to shock and died. (Nutting 263)

## **5.5 Educator sexual misconduct in the novel**

Because of Celeste's specific sexual needs, a particular target can satisfy her for approximately one year only, then she has to move to another one, thus becoming a

chronic predator. Her career as a teacher is a way to get access to pubescent boys, in this respect she follows the pattern typical of elementary school predators.

Celeste's grooming patterns match many of those outlined in chapters 2.3 and 3.4. When selecting a target, the most important condition is secrecy, which is likely to be found in someone with low self-confidence: “All the alluring males in my class seemed unusable—too boisterous, overly confident” (Nutting 12); “the most willing boys were off-limits. They’d also be the most willing to talk” (Nutting 14). Celeste has to look for someone shy, even if it means a longer wait before she can have sex with him: “the very boys who likely wouldn’t kiss and tell were the hardest to kiss in the first place” (Nutting 25). Jack is perfect in this respect – timid and obedient:

There was a hesitant politeness to his movements; he started to grab a notebook from his bag, second-guessed himself, looked around to see if others had taken out notebooks and only then bent over to unzip his backpack. I could imagine him pausing with the same demure reluctance as he took down the side zipper of my skirt, his alert brown eyes frequently returning to my face to check for a contradictory expression that might indicate he should stop, at which point I would have to goad him on, say, *It’s okay, please continue what you’re doing.* (Nutting 14–15)

Another characteristic that is likely to ensure secrecy is social isolation. When looking for a replacement for Jack, Celeste focuses on a boy who “d[oes]n’t appear to have a great deal of friends nor an interest in gaining any” (Nutting 211). She expects that the less attractive she becomes with progressing age, the more vulnerable targets she will have to look for, such as “motherless boys” or “runaways hungry for cash whom [she] can buy for an evening” (Nutting 262).

A great advantage is a target who is subject to less parental oversight than usual.

After selecting Jack for a partner, Celeste hopes “for a set of working parents who d[o]n’t have time to decode lies or do micromanagement parenting” (Nutting 35). The fact that no parent attends the open house is a signal that Jack is accessible: “I couldn’t help but see it as an omen; as I drove home that evening, every intersection’s signal was green for go” (Nutting 76). It turns out that Jack's parents are divorced and he lives alone with his father who is away at work until evening – an ideal situation for a predator.

Celeste abuses her position as teacher to initiate a relationship with Jack: she looks up his address, tries to elicit information about him through specifically designed assignments in her English classes, and keeps him after class to ask him personal questions. She wants Jack to gain the impression that she cares about him and his opinions, that their relationship is special: “I’m not interested in all the guys. I’m interested in you, Jack’” (Nutting 93).

The interaction between her and Jack is progressively sexualized. The first touch is seemingly innocent, the second less so. It takes several weeks before Celeste proceeds to touching Jack's genitals, and then she has to wait again, at least a few hours, “for things to sink in” (Nutting 95) before engaging him in full intercourse. She motivates herself to be patient by chanting a simple motto: “Jack needs to know you before he can trust you. Jack needs to trust you before you can trust him. You need to trust him before you can fuck him. The end” (Nutting 60).

Celeste talks sex not only with Jack but with all her 8th-graders; her class discussions are “sex talk veiled behind a thin veneer of literary studies” (Nutting 102) that gives her some satisfaction. She uses one of these class discussions to reduce Jack's

inhibitions, implying a parallel between their impending involvement and that of the protagonists in *The Scarlet Letter*: “‘What if no one had ever found out—if they’d stayed two consenting individuals who simply got together outside the view of the uptight townspeople?’” (Nutting 90). Later, after the death of his father, Celeste again directs class discussion in order to manipulate Jack, this time to prevent the effects that *To Kill a Mockingbird* might have on him: “I didn’t want the text’s elements of morality and justice to seduce Jack into walking the misguided path of honest confession. ... I did all that I could to steer the conversation away from relevant topics of depth” (Nutting 203).

Once a sexual relationship is established, Celeste has to convince Jack that it is right, that there is nothing to worry about. When he complains that they cannot date like normal couples due to the imposed secrecy, Celeste claims that there is nothing wrong with spending their time together by having sex only: “‘We get to have the very best part of a relationship be our whole relationship. With us it’s dessert for every meal’” (Nutting 127).

Celeste employs two strategies to ensure Jack’s secrecy. Firstly, she warns Jack that if he told anyone, their relationship would be over: “‘We’re only able to do this because I know I can trust you not to tell anyone.’ ‘I won’t tell,’ he said ... ‘Of course you won’t. Not even to your very best friend. That would mean that all the fun would be over’” (Nutting 95–96). Secondly, she fosters in him the feeling of complicity: “I wanted him to feel like he wasn’t simply keeping my secret—that I was keeping one of his as well” (Nutting 92). She waits a few hours between the first touching of genitals and first full intercourse in order for “the next step to become his idea” (Nutting 95).

This strategy pays off after her arrest. Jack does not tell anyone that Celeste was in the house when his father died, saving her from charges for crimes other than sex with minors, because “[he] himself felt too implicated in it all—he’d been too much a part of the process of having done nothing in Buck’s last hour of need” (Nutting 239).

As to the locations of sexual misconduct, we have already mentioned Celeste's desperation to keep the extension classroom; it is the site of first sexual touching. After engaging in their first intercourse in Celeste's car, parked in the drive of an abandoned farm, most of the sex sessions take place at Jack's own house, with occasional trips to secluded outdoor areas, and one meeting at a cheap inn. To satisfy Jack's longings for normal dates, Celeste also takes him for a drive-in movie and to a roller-skating rink outside Tampa, where they are unlikely to be recognized.

Compared to *Notes on a Scandal*, the effects of educator sexual misconduct on targets are much more explored in *Tampa*. Very early in the novel, Celeste revels in the fact that her obscene comments cause students to lose their sense of order. The first student she attempted to seduce did not enjoy her advances and withdrew: “For the three remaining weeks, he sat near the back of the class with friends and never raised his hand. Only once did he look at me as he was leaving, a glance of pained confusion that I encouraged by not giving him a smile” (Nutting 28).

The first effect that Celeste predicts for Jack is impaired sexual pleasure in his future life:

I'd be the sexual yardstick for his whole life: Jack would spend the rest of his days trying but failing to relive the experience of being given everything at a time when he knew nothing. Like a tollbooth in his memory, every partner he'd have afterward would have to



pass through the gate of my comparison, and it would be a losing equation. (Nutting 96)

Once the affair is in its full swing, Jack's school performance deteriorates. He becomes addicted to sex and begs Celeste to meet him at every opportunity. Despite the centrality of sex in their relationship, Jack becomes deeply emotionally involved with Celeste. He expects their romance to last forever and dreams of what it will be like once they do not have to keep their love secret. His disappointments are therefore intense and lasting. The first blow comes when Buck nearly discovers them together and Celeste has sex with Buck to divert his thoughts: "Puerile buoyancy no longer poured from him like an energy source" (Nutting 175). After Buck's death, "Jack [is] broken for good" (Nutting 199). Of course, the situation where child sex abuse leads to the death of the child's parent is a plot twist designed to affect readers. Let us hope that its occurrence is restricted to fiction. In any case, the secrecy and scheming involved in a relationship with Celeste is very likely to take its toll on Jack, and his sense of betrayal after he finds Celeste with another student is likely to impair his ability to trust. At the end of the novel, Jack has gained the "understanding that the world could be a terrible place. ... [N]o one at all was looking out for him or able to fix this essential flaw in life's fabric" (Nutting 259–60).

Although the aftermath of Celeste's arrest takes up only a small proportion of the novel's length, it is crucial for Nutting's goal of pointing out the gender inequalities in treating sex offenders. The first instance is the harassment that Celeste receives at the station: an unnecessarily large number of male officers linger close to her while she is examined, and a variety of nude photos are taken. The other consequences of her gender and appearance, however, are in her favor. Celeste entreats her attorney to spare her

prison, fearing sexual assaults because of her looks. At the bail hearing, he does bring this point up. While the prosecution argues that “we’re not a society whose penal system has a sliding scale based on attractiveness”, the audience is fascinated: “the attention felt more adoring than judgmental; they relished the audacity and vanity of my defense” (Nutting 237). Whether the judge accepted the beauty argument or not, he allowed Celeste to await the trial on house arrest. She was charged with six counts of lewd and lascivious battery against two minors.

Although the prosecution knows that Celeste had sex with Jack's father as well, they do not bring it up in court because Celeste's attorney threatens them with using the circumstance as a proof that Celeste ““is a troubled young woman desperately searching for love. Not the “ravenous pedophile” the DA has been referring to her as in media interviews”” (Nutting 240). If the prosecution wants to present Celeste as a predator, they had better drop that detail.

Similarly to Heller's claim in *Notes on a Scandal*, in *Tampa* too no one is afraid of female sex offenders. While the “soccer moms” (Nutting 241) take Celeste's crime seriously and camp in front of her house waving slogans, resembling the “hatchet-faced housewives baying for blood [of male sex offenders] outside the court” (Heller 85), Celeste doubts that they really think her dangerous: “none of them actually looked fearful about anything, least of all me. It was quite the opposite—in my trial they’d found a sense of purpose that rendered them giddy and energized” (Nutting 241). Interestingly, the group of people that is most outraged by sex crimes is identified by both Barbara and Celeste as housewives. Celeste explicitly states that “[t]here were never any men among the group” (Nutting 241). In both novels, the narrators treat these

angry housewives with derision.

For the trial, Celeste and her attorney put on a show. Celeste plays the role of a young and vulnerable girl, with the aim of appearing to be her targets' peer rather than an authority figure who abused her position. She pretends to be unaware of her charms and uncomfortable with being the center of attention. She wears girly, chaste clothes and descreet make-up. These calculating preparations serve as a hilarious parody of the way our society judges by appearances: “‘If your mascara clumps on you, at this trial, it’s like, “She’s guilty.” ... You can only use the lightest kiss of it. But that tiny amount will also make all the difference in the world.’” (Nutting 247).

Nutting's conviction that female sex offender cases are unduly sensationalized (Breslaw) is exemplified by the judge's expression during trial: “Whenever the prosecution rattled off a list of the physical acts that comprised ‘lewd and lascivious battery,’ the judge’s face held a look of delighted interest suggesting he wasn’t the least bit bored by the details of my trial” (Nutting 255).

Celeste's main line of defense is the “commonsense” (Nutting 246) idea that teenage boys are not harmed by sex with a beautiful young woman, that it is actually a desirable experience for them, and her attorney steers Jack and Boyd's testimony to this effect. Jack's final look of pain directed at Celeste is easily misinterpreted by those who do not know the whole story:

“That look he gave you after testifying? It was like he wanted to crawl off the stand and into your lap! Plus the tears. The tears could not have been better. Hell, I felt ashamed for making him feel guilty about his own impulses. What that jury saw was a red-blooded American teenage boy asked to repent for nailing a hot blonde[”] (Nutting 260)

This strategy pays off, the prosecution offers Celeste a plea deal of four years' probation, which she accepts. By pleading guilty, Celeste automatically loses her teaching license.

Nutting presents us with a world where gender, age, and attractiveness influence the perceptions of educator sexual misconduct to such an extent that even a sociopathic, chronic predator can escape punishment if they happen to be a beautiful young woman. Celeste identifies a major flaw in people's logic: "because I'm pretty, they assume everything I do is pretty" (Nutting 43). If Buck had not made this erroneous assumption, he might have prevented his own death and his son's trauma, but unfortunately, finding Celeste unannounced at his home with Jack "didn't seem to be raising flags on [his] radar. Especially not when the teacher looked like [her]" (Nutting 136). Later, when he nearly discovers Celeste and Jack in the middle of sex play, his reaction resembles that of professionals who reconstruct sex offenses by women in their imagination so as to make them fit the conventional ideas about female sexuality: "he knew what he'd just seen, but he didn't want to have seen it. He wanted a loophole, a flimsy cover story he could bury his doubts under so there didn't have to be an emergency. ... These [circumstances] were puzzle pieces Buck badly wanted to rearrange so that they formed a different picture" (Nutting 158).

The last topic left to address is the asymmetry of the relationship between Celeste and Jack. Jack is portrayed as a child who is obviously unable to give informed consent. He is manipulated by Celeste from their first encounter in the classroom to the very last one in the courtroom. He is timid and has a respect for authorities – that is why Celeste chose him in the first place. She counts on his silent obedience when executing her

worst crime – waiting for Buck to die: “he’d likely stay quietly put for hours more if no one went in to fetch him” (Nutting 189). Even when Jack finds out about his father's heart attack and hopes that Buck might still be revived if an ambulance was called, he is unable to act on his own: “Jack ... continued to talk to me instead of attempting to go get the phone. I was, after all, the adult in the situation” (Nutting 192).

Celeste supports Jack's illusion that their relationship is based on love. Jack, inexperienced as he is with relationships, cannot see through the imposition and accepts their sex sessions as normal dates of a couple in love. He is sorry that the two of them cannot go to a restaurant or a sport event together but gathers it is an issue of secrecy, while in truth, Celeste would not be interested in such sex-free activities anyways. If Jack had more experience with romantic relationships, he would know that even in the privacy of his house, there are activities other than sex that a couple can do together. This lack of knowledge combines with Jack's awakening sexuality to make him particularly susceptible to manipulation through sex: “he was out of control in all the right ways, a mind steered by his body” (Nutting 164). The most poignant case of this manipulation is when Celeste uses sex to control Jack's actions immediately after his father's death: “I ... wanted to relay the last of the pertinent information while he was still naked and hopefully more vulnerable to suggestion than he might be with his genitals covered” (Nutting 195).

Celeste is well aware that arousal does not equal consent. After giving Jack his first rim job, she wonders “if he felt too out of control—too molested perhaps, his orgasms a seeming consent to acts he didn’t fully enjoy” (Nutting 149). Let us hope that Nutting's novel will help readers understand the distinction too.

## 5.6 Conclusion

In writing her novel *Tampa*, Alissa Nutting had a clear goal in her mind: to warn us that women can be dangerous predators, no matter how pretty they are, and to criticize society's susceptibility to gender stereotypes. To achieve this, she made her protagonist as extreme as possible: Celeste is a selfish, cold-blooded, and calculating sociopath who carefully grooms her targets to satisfy her hebephilic urges. While the patterns of her sexual misconduct are in line with research findings, she has few of the characteristics that are typical of female sex offenders, certainly none of those that might be adopted by readers as an excuse for her behavior. Celeste's actions eventually rob Jack not only of his peace of mind but also of his father and way of life. He is a victim in the full sense of the word. Despite her crimes, Celeste escapes appropriate punishment. Stifled by feelings of complicity in his father's death, Jack does not tell anyone of Celeste's role in it, so she only faces charges for sex with minors. For these she gets an extremely lenient sentence. The public seems to accept her attorney's suggestion that teenage boys want to have sex with their beautiful young teachers and Celeste is only guilty of giving in to them. She is spared prison time – and free to prey on more boys.

Nutting's novel is a daring piece of writing which puts its message across in a humorous and entertaining way. Viewed from this angle, it has a great potential for igniting discussion about female sex offenders and gender stereotypes. On the other hand, there is the risk that the novel's message will not be taken seriously. Firstly, the sexually graphic content may put readers off, give the impression that the book is mere porn, or that the porn is a mere publicity stunt. Secondly, the extreme protagonist may be easily discarded as too unrealistic, failing to inspire fear of real female predators.

## 6 Conclusion

The two depictions of educator sexual misconduct we are presented with in *Notes on a Scandal* and *Tampa* differ greatly. Sheba Hart, as portrayed by her friend Barbara, embodies the typical characteristics associated with femininity: she is naive, dependent, and passive. Her involvement with a student seems to be the result of bad judgment and emotional difficulties. In the course of their relationship, he appears to take over, and by the time their affair is made public, he has lost interest in Sheba. By contrast, Celeste Price is the very reversal of femininity. She is cruel, calculating, and in active pursuit of sexual gratification. She orchestrates an affair with her student for the limited period of time that he attracts her and she does not shy away from sacrificing his father to protect her secret. Jack can in no way be held responsible for what happens to him, denying the stereotype of males as active and dominant.

Despite these differences, a close analysis reveals that both stories parallel scholarly findings on female sex offenders and educator sexual misconduct. Sheba Hart has several characteristics typical of female sex offenders. Most importantly, she has a history of asymmetrical relationships, views her affair with Steven as a regular romance, and does not understand what is criminal about her actions. Her behavior resembles the grooming patterns typical of educator sexual misconduct, such as the progressive sexualization of interaction. To recognize these patterns, however, one has to see behind the portrait of Sheba as it is painted by her cynical friend. Owing to the unreliable narrator of the story, it is nearly impossible to come to any conclusions about the target of Sheba's misconduct.

Celeste Price has only few characteristics typical of female sex offenders because her creator did not want to provide any excuses for her behavior. In this respect, Celeste can appear too unrealistic to be taken seriously. The patterns of her misconduct, however, are in line with those observed in real cases. She looks for a quiet student with low self-confidence who will appreciate the extra attention and she carefully increases the sexual nature of their interaction. She succeeds in making Jack feel an accomplice to her crimes to induce him to maintain secrecy. The effects of her actions are again taken to the extreme: Jack loses his father and home.

Both novelists observe that female sex offenders are perceived to be less dangerous than their male counterparts, but they criticize different aspects of this phenomenon. Zoë Heller is annoyed by the hypocrisy of the media – by their pretended condemnation of female sex offenders on the one hand, and their relish of titillating sex scandal on the other. She does not challenge the notion that female sex offenders are less dangerous than the male ones, on the contrary: her protagonist appears to support it. By contrast, Alissa Nutting set out to fight this notion. According to her, it is a part of a larger set of gender stereotypes still prevalent in our patriarchal society. To challenge them, she presents us with a beautiful young woman who does things that we do not expect beautiful young women to do and gets away with it all.



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