

Megan Lonergan

Professor Weidman

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Romanticizing Romantic Comedies

Kat Stratford, standing in front of her class and reciting a poem titled “10 Things I Hate About You,” delivers the title drop moment of one of the most famous romantic comedies of the past several decades. In that scene, Kat (played by Julia Stiles) recites her poem in front of Patrick (Heath Ledger), the boy who broke her heart. Her performance forces him to see the error of his ways, and as a gesture of love he gifts her a guitar before they kiss and, presumably, live “happily ever after.” Many of us watched that scene and dreamed its easy romantic makeup could become a reality for us, too, no matter how harmful the boy’s actions were. All is fair in love and war, right? Yet just like the Shakespearean plot the movie is based on (*Taming of the Shrew*), this idealized, abusive depiction of the ebbs and flows of heteronormative love has a long history. The romantic comedy genre lures people in with its fun take on relationships and instinctively makes them inhabit an unhealthy “role” in their own relationships. Romantic comedies have changed and evolved throughout time, of course, representing different relationship ideals, but they’ve always compelled viewers to ignore or mimic the toxic behavior by romanticizing the toxicity and treating bad behavior as an inevitable barrier needed to be overcome to achieve a “true love” story.

Ellie Andrews, Peter Warne, Annie Hall, Alvy, Harry, Sally, Kat Stratford, and many others remain popular, fictitious rom-com characters that many have grown not merely to fall in

love with, but also to idolize and mimic as mentors in budding relationships. As a genre, the romantic comedy follows “the relationship of a heterosexual couple beset by altercations and misunderstandings which resolve in a happily-ever-after ending” (Feeney 14). However, most, if not all, romantic comedies follow the same story outline and the same romanticized myths of “love at first sight” and “love conquers all.” And these stories have real-world effects: when people are “continuously exposed to similar plotlines and narrative themes [of romantic comedies, their tropes] may well generate and reinforce similarly distorted conceptions of intimacy” (Sadeghi 6). In fact, social cognitive and cultivation theories support the notion that people will copy the actions they see in romantic comedies. Social cognitive theory “suggests that human behavior is determined by environmental influences and internal dispositions” (Hefner 377), while cultivation theory “addresses the relationship between television content and viewers’ beliefs about social reality” (Segrin 248).

Although the research and terminology of romantic comedies are rather new, the idealization of the movies is not. Throughout the lifecycle of American romantic comedies, they have reinforced the social standards and beliefs of relationships during the historical moment of their production. The genre has evolved over time from several subgenres, all of which share similar features of love-run-amok, and each of which can help us understand the history and impact of rom-coms more fully: screwball comedy, sex comedy, radical comedy, and neotraditional comedy.

During the entirety of the 1930s, America was in one of its most extreme times of economic suffering, the Great Depression. During this time, the values of marriage and the traditional roles of men and women were challenged. The 1930s followed a decade of liberal values and ideas of social and political change. People did not take lightly to this, though, as the

'30s continued with “pressures on family life and a return to more traditional gender roles and an emphasis on family values” (Shumway, *Modern Love*). The screwball comedy era emerged in the 1930s and continued until the 1940s. This romantic comedy category is best known for the fast-talking, banter, and “zany situations” characters would partake in (Shumway, *Modern Love*). It provided an opportunity to disconnect from the disordered world and enjoy a fun and playful movie. However, David Shumway reminds us that the genre was not the “simulation of thought about marriage, but the affirmation of marriage in the face of the threat of a growing divorce rate and liberalized divorce laws” (“Screwball Comedies” 7). Within most screwball comedies, the couple is “mismatched, representing more than just a battle of the sexes, but a collision of lifestyle, values and social class” (Mortimer). The woman, or heroine, also “tended to be strong, outspoken and independent, a radical representation for the times, although the narrative would see her brought back into line to some extent, as she settled down to become part of the couple” (Shumway, *Modern Love*). Therefore, the films brought relief to the audience as they viewed an abnormal social situation being brought back to a culturally traditionalist standard. A prime example of a screwball comedy is *It Happened One Night* (1934). The film begins with Ellie Andrews, the heroine, escaping her father’s yacht and wealth to marry the “man of her dreams.” Along the way, she meets a man, Peter, who was recently fired. They spark a connection through their journey, and after several nights spent together, Ellie confesses her love to him. Due to some classic romantic misunderstandings, though, Ellie initially leaves to marry her first love, only to return to Peter where they share their “happily ever after” moment. The film not only portrays all elements of an early, comedically screwball romance, but it also gives reassurances to the audience that even through social hardships (like the Great Depression), “normal,” orthodox, marital love was still attainable. In a stereotypical way, the genre (and its audience)

requires that *It Happened One Night*'s events, which might have focalized a wealthy woman's romantic independence, instead follow a social tradition that was in danger. Thus, showcasing the allowance of men's ability to control women through love.

After being sluggish for a decade, romantic comedies returned in the mid-1950s in a subcategory scholars now term sex comedies. During this time, traditional heteronormative marital roles were still a crucial part of American life. However, with new post-war freedoms, the culture had an "increased emphasis on sex, and the consequent threat of pregnancies out of wedlock" (Mortimer). Following the fright of premarital sex, sex comedies were created to control people's (read: women's) outlandish ideas. In the films, both the man and the woman wanted sex, but the woman, illustrated as a "sexy virgin," would insist on "marriage first," while the man was a "wolfish playboy" who just wanted his freedom (Feeney 15). In this way, sex comedies had several love lessons to share: romanticizing women's "purity" and innocence, ignoring the uneven responsibility of hetero-sex partnership between male subjects and female objects, and—in turn—reestablishing the more conservative societal standards set in place during the 1950s. Creating a gorgeous-bodied virgin who draws men in wherever she goes (yet still insists on getting married) first highlights that it is certainly possible to not partake in premarital sex, as the culture would insist. Furthermore, the films often "conclude with marriage and children, as if to reassure the audience that the desirable virgin and the virile bachelor are now the same as them, with the trapping of a respectable American family unit" (Mortimer). *The Seven Year Itch* (1955) illustrates the basics of the sex comedy genre. When Richard Sherman is home alone after sending his wife and son off to Maine for the summer, he meets a new neighbor, a commercial actress. He starts to fantasize about them together and even spends a night flirting with her. In the end, despite her sexual draw, he decides to favor his current

marriage and leaves the unnamed lady. The film showcases the ever-strong ideals of a traditional relationship and marriage between a man and a woman, and like most sex comedies, was made in response to anxieties of women straying from “proper” marital norms.

After the sex comedy era ended, radical comedies emerged in the 1970s. Radical comedies, also called “nervous” romantic comedies, were released after/during the height of Women’s Rights Movement, at a time when this proto-rom-com “renegotiated the rules of romance once again, incorporating the sexual revolution and the liberated woman” (Feeney 15). As we know, throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, women campaigned for equal rights and rebelled against gendered social norms, and romantic comedies reflected so much of the movement’s “civil unrest” that the characterization of the heroines was rewritten (Feeney 15). Perhaps the perfect radical comedy example is *Annie Hall*, released in 1977 and directed by Woody Allen. In the film, Annie represents a “dynamic woman who knows what she wants”: she is “ambitious and self-centered, indifferent to sex,” and she even “dresses like a man, in stylish trousers, shirts, ties, and waistcoats” (Mortimer). Annie, the heroine, and Alvy, the hero, begin a relationship, but it does not last long, as the two have separate ideas of what they want in a romantic relationship. They go through periods of being together and apart (and comedic hijinks ensue) but ultimately decide to forgo their romance entirely. As an evolution of the rom-com genre, the film presents ideas that just started to blossom during the 1960s and 1970s of a woman being able to take on other roles besides being a mother or taking care of the household. However, the movie does still import certain norms that feature harmful aspects of hetero relationships, including a woman dealing with sexism and struggling in her career and so having to rely on a man in a higher-class position. Still, radical comedies were quite possibly the largest shift in the modern romantic comedy genre, as they present the changes America was going

through (like women starting to make their own choices, but nonetheless falling out of necessity into marriage) in accordance with American relationship beliefs and standards.

From this trajectory of film representations of everyday romance, the most current rom-com iteration is called neotraditional romantic comedy. Its characters are generally “confronted with more pragmatic everyday relationship problems and face the challenges of resolving them through direct negotiations” (Sadeghi 3). Instead of the films focusing on just the relationship of a man and woman, they have diversified, paying attention to other issues in the lives of the characters while also allowing them narrative space to get to know themselves better (Mortimer). Although neotraditional romantic comedies changed the outlook on certain aspects of a relationship, as always, the genre presents some toxic ideas rendered as healthy, normal behaviors. In these movies, which include the likes of *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), women still usually have an “ideal” body type and act or dress certain ways to appeal to the men: they’re stereotypically feminine, always monogamous, and deeply heterosexual. They regularly result in the end goal of creating a long-lasting relationship through a “love conquers all” or “one true love” trope. Most of the time, the featured couple is so quickly immersed in a relationship that we, as viewers, are made to assume their romance is the preferable (or the only) option, even if the two partners are “deeply incompatible” (Conan). Movies like *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (2003), *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), and *Hitch* (2005) evolved to reach more audiences by diversifying their scripts, by introducing women protagonists who are more representative of US diversity, and even through partners who are not heterosexual (think recent films like *I Feel Pretty* (2018) and *Love, Simon* (2018)). Even given the generic history of hostile, unbalanced romance, and the fact that there are still aspects of the genre that support types of toxic romantic

behavior, the changing romantic ideals of American audiences have changed the stories films tell about what's possible, preferable, or desirable in love.

A variety of scholars have studied the history of this effect, in fact, to gauge how romantic comedies affect their viewers' ideas about romantic relationships. Veronica Hefner conducted an experiment on the effect of watching romantic comedies on viewers' romantic beliefs and relational satisfaction, concluding that "romantic comedies influence viewers positively in terms of satisfaction with life, but only when the content of those films is predominantly idealistic. Furthermore, negative portrayals of romance can cause viewers to report weaker endorsement of love" (Hefner 383). Other researchers support this latter conclusion, among them Yasaman Sadeghi, who proves that the "perfect" romances in films "reinforce or enhance unrealistic expectations about love and relationships, which can lead to relational dysfunction in the real world" (Sadeghi 3). So, on the one hand, because romantic comedies conform to the social standards relevant during the period of their production, audiences are more likely to envision their own romantic futures in a positive light; yet, on the other hand, they do so through the false idealization of real-life romance, ultimately encouraging a vision of "acceptable" behavior and serving as a long history of traditionalist love propaganda. In other words, romantic comedies, although addicting and fun to watch, have had such sustained success in part *because* they create "ideal" relationships out of the otherwise harmful views and events that plague real-life romance. The history of these films reveals that, by design, they reinforce the false idea that there is only one right way to have a relationship, including who your partner can be and how you both should act. These movies showcase harmful and toxic character traits, like stalking or gaslighting, as simply part of the process of finding love's happy ending. Viewers then romanticize this "ideal" relationship—without understanding its complicated,

evolving history—and seek out versions for themselves, causing their own harmful relationships to emerge, but without the tidiness required by the limited run time and profit motive of movies.

Although the genre has created some “realistic” films, there is still a long way to go before its films are fully representative of the un/healthy spectrum of actual American relationships. Kat Stratford is one of the most independent fictional women seen in a romantic comedy—that is, until she crosses paths with her unexpected, once-in-a-lifetime love. Kat’s change in personality and her own view on relationships was a crucial part of her character development and the movie’s plotline, written and directed to achieve the most valued (and most unrealistic) ending for viewers. Although we see the pain and suffering Kat sustains, the genre attempts to force viewers to idolize and fantasize about her relationship. The unhealthy behaviors demonstrated across the history of romantic comedies is a mirage that has real effects on viewers, who feel happier when they believe in love’s certainty, but who, like Kat, cannot achieve similar happy endings without the abuse, regret, and suffering the films hide. Is this romantic and comedic, or tragic? Maybe the rom-com's next version, whatever it is, will finally give us the happy ending it always promised, but I wouldn’t hold my breath.

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