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Behind the Veil: 
Inspecting and Interrogating Marriage 
in the Form of Fiction

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by Dr. Debra MacComb

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The Content of the Form

John Singer Sargent’s late nineteenth-century painting “Mr. and Mrs. I.N. Phelps Stokes” has long been a favorite of mine: jaunty and self-assured, Mrs. Phelps Stokes seems to step forward to greet me, some wry observation on her lips, and invite me for an energetic walk. She so dominates the viewer’s focus, clad in her dazzling white skirt and just fractionally off center within the picture’s frame, that one may forget that this is a double portrait, a portrait of a married couple, a Mrs. and Mr. Indeed, the painting’s title seems extraordinarily out of kilter with the representation it captions: Mr. Phelps Stokes seems a late arrival to the portrait session, sneaking behind his wife and into her shadow, his neutral-toned suit blending in to the background, his body partially out of frame or hidden by the Mrs. whose fashionable boater becomes a modern day fig leaf. What can it mean? How do the painting’s formal elements tug against that conventionally realized idea of “Mr. and Mrs.? Against the fundamental meaning and purpose of the coordinating conjunction “and?”

One of the most difficult concepts to address in the seminar on Marriage and Literary Form is the notion that form—textual “architecture”—conveys meaning in and of itself, meaning that supplements considerations generated by plot, character, setting, etc. In the painting of the Stokes Phelps, the social and legal conventions governing marriage and a historical tradition of marriage portraiture are challenged by Sargent’s use of space, perspective and contrast—formal attributes akin to those authors deploy in developing their representations. What does it mean, for instance, that Hawthorne provides three evenly distributed scaffold scenes in _The Scarlet Letter_? What does it mean when Austen substitutes a series of walks in the second half of _Pride and Prejudice_ for the dances that punctuated the first? Why does How-
ells nearly abandon the narrative principle of exposition in *A Modern Instance*, jumping almost immediately into the betrothal of his main characters—an action that generally caps the trajectory of the marriage plot rather than begins it. “Reading” form is a tricky endeavor, but one that amply rewards the effort.

The essays in *Behind the Veil: Inspecting and Interrogating Marriage in the Form of Fiction* reflect the parallel interest that the students in the Spring 2015 Senior Seminar had with marriage plots from both the center and the margins of literary and social tradition. Their engagement with often thorny structural issues as a path to meaning in the novels, films, and television shows about which they wrote not only elevates their analyses of these texts, but also demonstrates that the fruitful “marriage” between form and content endures.

Dr. Debra MacComb
May 2015
Going, Going, Gone
CAROL EATON is in the final stages of a 30 year old Bachelor of Arts in English. On the way to her degree she has managed bookstores and movie theatres and has a great collection of stories she would like to write down one day. Did you know they save popcorn overnight? She has worked the last 16 years in a law library and can practically recite portions of the Constitution.
Frankly, My Dear, I Don’t Give a Damn: Scarlett O’Hara’s Battle Against Traditional Southern Gender Roles During the Civil War Era in the Film Gone with the Wind

by Carolyn Eaton

Webster’s Dictionary defines marriage as the “state of being united to a person of the opposite or same sex in a consensual and contractual relationship recognized by law” (761). Interestingly enough the word love is not found in two major definitions of marriage. Joseph Allen Boone states that “the marriage rite in almost all cultures plays a central role in sustaining a structured social order” (36). In the movie adaptation of Gone with the Wind, Scarlett O’Hara embodies the Webster’s definition by marrying three men, consensually and contractually with no thought of love. She uses her second and third marriages to preserve her status through financial security. But what does that say about Scarlett? Is she a person who is devoid of love or simply someone who does not understand it? It can be argued that Gone with the Wind is a love story; however, it is more a testament to what marriage means to

I wish to Heaven I was married, she said resentfully as she attacked the yams with loathing. I’m tired of everlastingly being unnatural and never doing anything I want to do. I’m tired of acting like I don’t eat more than a bird, and walking when I want to run and saying I feel faint after a waltz, when I could dance for two days and never get tired. I’m tired of saying, ‘How wonderful you are!’ to fool men who haven’t got one-half the sense I’ve got, and I’m tired of pretending I don’t know anything, so men can tell me things and feel important while they’re doing it . . . I can’t eat another bite.

Scarlett O’Hara, Gone with the Wind
one person and a lesson in how inner strength and obsession can cause one to overlook love. It becomes a bildungsroman as Scarlett moves from a child’s infatuation with the unattainable to the understanding of a woman’s love for someone who is her perfect match. Scarlett uses her marriages to express her frustration with her situation and as a way to acquire things that she is unable to accomplish as a single woman. The Civil War allows Scarlett the opportunity to become a powerful woman in business and she uses her marriages to further her ability to move beyond the traditional gender roles in the Civil War era. Scarlett fought against the genteel Southern woman role that was expected. She fought against eating like a bird, and never having an opinion. She fought what she felt was against her nature and the Civil War gave her the ability to step beyond the Southern belle.

During the pre-Civil War period, young women and men were “expected to acquire funds to establish their own independent household” prior to marrying (Hacker 2). For women, this meant finding a rich man to marry. This structure was inherent during Scarlett’s time. Being married was necessary to maintain the ways of the Old South. Scarlett O’Hara is not like all the other Southern Belles. Scarlett at the beginning of the movie shows little interest in anything other than flirting. While Margaret Mitchell’s book gave us an in depth look into the mind of Scarlett, the movie gives viewers an abbreviated view. While everyone around her wants to talk about the War, she doesn’t want to hear about it. When everyone else dresses properly, she wants to wear something that “shows her bosom before three o’clock.” When everyone else is taking a nap, she is in the library throwing herself at Ashley Wilkes. Her nature is willful and she conducts herself in a way that battles against the traditional gender roles of her time. When she learns that Ashley is to marry Melanie Hamilton, she confronts him and declares her love. Much to her dismay he cannot be dissuaded from his course and Ashley tells Scarlett that she is “so young and unthinking that [she doesn’t] know what marriage means.” This statement draws our attention to Scarlett’s youth and ignorance in the ways of relationships. In her mind, she is in love with Ashley because he fits into the structured order of the Old South. As a representative of the romantic values of Southern society, he stands for everything with which she is familiar. She sees Ashley as the choice to secure her future and refuses to believe that he could love someone like Melanie.

When Ashley explains his feelings for Melanie, he tells Scarlett that “Melanie is like me. She’s part of my blood and we understand each
other.” Melanie is all that is genteel and mannered in the Old South. She is the perfect match for Ashley. In essence, Scarlett’s love for Ashley is a romantic love which “depends on obstacles: internal, external or both. It is impeded love. Usually the impediment involves some kind of sexual prohibition” (Baruch 28). As Ashley’s betrothed, Melanie is the impediment to Scarlett’s desire. In considering Melanie as the impediment to Scarlett’s desire, one must also consider Ashley’s guilt in never definitively dissuading Scarlett’s advances. Not only must Scarlett battle her dislike of Melanie, she must also fight Ashley’s inability to say no. Margaret Donovan Bauer suggests that Ashley’s response to Scarlett’s declaration of love is indicative of his [having led] her on” (22). His response of “love isn’t enough to make a successful marriage when two people are different as we are” only serves to make Scarlett believe he does love her. Scarlett defies the traditional role of the passive female who sits waiting to be courted. Her pursuit of Ashley continues the fight against traditional female roles until the end of the movie.

Scarlett’s first marriage to Melanie’s brother, Charles Hamilton means very little to her. She coolly accepts Charles’ proposal while watching Ashley and Melanie kiss through the window. Her motivations at the time can only be guessed at; however, in a later scene she confesses to Ashley “I only married Charles to hurt you.” Becoming Mrs. Charles Hamilton provides Scarlett with the ability to be closer to Ashley through Melanie. Contractually, she garners the preservation of her status through the Hamilton name as Aunt Pittypat Hamilton describes during Christmas dinner. After Charles dies, she is a widow of a Confederate hero, which gives her greater social status. Her respectability is heightened because she is the widow of a dead soldier who fought for the cause. As she laments to her mother “I’m too young to be a widow. Nothing will ever happen to me again.” This status as a widow is the beginning to Scarlett’s transformation into womanhood. In Atlanta, Scarlett bucks tradition by attention at a bazar. During the bazar Scarlett discards her wedding ring with casual indifference to help the Confederate cause, but only after Melanie gives her with the sentiment that “it may help my husband more off my finger.” This scene contrasts vividly how little Scarlett thinks of her marriage to Charles and how deeply Melanie cares about her marriage to Ashley. As the Civil War progresses, a breakdown of traditional gender roles does also. Scarlet is allowed to shed the conventions of Southern womanhood and she is able to behave in ways that highlight her strong inner character. For example, during the auction of dancing partners at the bazar, Scarlett accepts Rhett’s
bid for her company and ends up “[shocking] the Confederacy.” Aunt Pittypat’s fainting spell serves to illustrate just how the established Old South views Scarlett’s radicalism. In going against the traditional feminine role in mourning, she shows her disdain for the practice of wearing black, not attending parties and not dancing.

As Scarlett moves through her widowhood, so too does the South move through the Civil War; both must learn to navigate through adversity. Scarlett becomes a survivalist. The South sees the Civil War as the monster that is tearing their society apart. The war is destroying the economy and way of life Scarlett with which Scarlett is familiar. Traditional roles in society are changing and Scarlett is forced to change as well. Scarlett briefly accepts the role of devoted Southern woman and helps nurse wounded at the hospital. Additionally, she looks after Melanie at Ashley’s request. However, when Sherman comes to Atlanta, she is ready to go home to Tara. She declares to Dr. Meade, “I’ve had enough of smelling death and rot and death.” To her the only safe haven is Tara. But Dr. Meade reminds her of her responsibility to Melanie with “You must stay here.” When Aunt Pittypat mentions Scarlett won’t have a chaperon he exclaims, “Good heavens Madam! This is War not a garden party.” These two statements sum up the juxtaposition between the Old South and the developing New South. The Yankees are coming and burning everything as they go. Sherman is burning the Old South down and Scarlett must stay because Melanie needs her. There is no room for the old Southern conventions regarding women; Scarlett must fight to save herself, Melanie and Ashley’s son. There is no waiting for a chaperone or relying on a man to save them. Once Melanie has her baby, it is time to leave Atlanta and Scarlett must figure a way to get home to Tara and seeks Rhett Butler to help her get home. Even in this, Scarlett learns that she must rely on her own strengths, because Rhett too has decided to join the cause.

After arriving at Tara, Scarlett finds that her home is a shell of its former self, her father on the verge of insanity and her mother dead. These factors push her to further remove herself from the traditional Southern feminine role. She must become the head of the household; only she has the practicality and will to act in the post-Civil War world. Scarlett replaces gentility with the will to act. She faces death, starvation and poverty as she moves toward maturity. She also faces the necessity of money to pay the taxes for Tara. Realizing that she must find a solution, she is willing to barter her body to pay the taxes. Failing to acquire the money from Rhett, she coldly marries Frank Kennedy for
expedience and financial gain. Her marriage to Frank further pushes her away from the traditional Southern feminine role and places her in the role of businesswoman and entrepreneur. She breaks the tradition of female solidarity by marrying her sister’s fiancé and illustrates her ruthless masculine nature to preserve the home at all costs. Her ability to kill the Yankee soldier and bury him to preserve the lives of her family are poignant examples of how far removed she has become from her days as a Southern Belle. Further, she breaks the traditional balance between husband and wife. Carole Patemen explains that “no husband can divest himself of the power he obtains through marriage” (158). She does not defer to Ashley for his opinion on running Tara; she simply makes the decisions and expects everyone to follow. As Scarlett becomes ruthless in her business dealings, she wields the power and not Frank. He is referred to by Scarlett as an “old maid in britches” and she rules over him. He openly defers to her and asks what her wishes are. This marriage means little more to Scarlett than a means to an end. Once Tara’s taxes are paid, Scarlett sees an opportunity to further solidify her social structure by using Frank’s store to open doors into ‘Yankee society’. The people of Atlanta feel she is unladylike, but she proves that she is more business savvy that any other man in the film. Frank laments that he never wanted the lumber business, Ashley urges her to change her practice of using convicts as labor and Melanie worries that she is doing business with the same people against whom the South fought. In this marriage, Scarlett exerts her strength of will and her masculine proclivity for business while her feminine peers return to their traditional behaviors like sewing and keeping house. Scarlett reduces Frank to being an observer as she assumes her position as head of household. Pateman describes the marriage contract as something where husbands “depend on the voluntary compliance of their wives for their pleasure” (159). It is obvious in several of the scenes that Scarlett is not compliant to Frank’s wishes for pleasure. She is focused on business and angrily snaps as Frank when he calls her “sugar” and sends him home. She has turned Boone’s point that marriage is at the “center of social order” upside down (36). Her marriage to Frank secures the future of Tara for her family and begins rebuilding the wealth of the plantation, but it has destroyed the traditional social order instead of preserved it. Her struggles against the traditional marriage structure reflect the struggles she undergoes to remain true to her inner self. Her marriage to Frank affords her the finances to secure Tara; however, she fights her traditional role and not only becomes a business woman, but succeeds in the lumber business.
that Frank saw as a sideline. Her war with society’s ideas of a woman’s place is reflective of society’s struggles during reconstruction.

Scarlett’s final marriage to Rhett Butler is the culmination of their rather confrontational relationship throughout the preceding scenes. There is tension from their first glimpses of each other. Scarlett is intrigued by the dangerous mystery of Rhett and seeks to know more about him. Rhett stares at Scarlett as if he knows something about her and he sees how similar they are. Rhett Butler is characterized to be the polar opposite of Ashley Wilkes. Their physical appearances are opposites. Rhett is dark haired and characterized as an opportunist, a scoundrel and someone who has been disowned by his family; Ashley by contrast is light haired and characterized as chivalrous, honorable and a true gentleman. Rhett is representative of the New South and what develops after the war. He is Scarlett’s future and people like him are the future of the South. Scarlett and Rhett’s bellicose relationship is reflective of the struggles the South faces after the Civil War. Joseph Allen Boone states that “love-making in both lyric and narrative courtly literature is constantly imaged as a siege or battle” (41). The battle between the sexes in Gone with the Wind is fought on multiple battlefields. Emotional battles between Scarlett and her feelings for Ashley are most prevalent. Her inability to recognize that Rhett is her match is a parallel to the South’s inability to recognize the error of slavery. Scarlett’s efforts to win Ashley’s love will ultimately be the undoing of her marriage to Rhett because she also fails to recognize the love and support Rhett has given her over the years until it is too late. It is prudent to mention that Ashley is equally at fault in Scarlett’s fixation as he never fully comes right out and tells her that he doesn’t love her. Helen Taylor says it best: “Ashley was not straight with Scarlett and thus contributed to ruining her life” (110). Margaret Donovan Bower further clarifies that some of the male characters forsake their girlfriends to be with Scarlett – “all of these people’s behaviors are shortsighted and self-centered betrayals of others to whom they are obligated and yet only Scarlett’s elicits social censure” (21). Both Charles and Frank leave other women for Scarlett and these defections injure her relationships with other women. India Wilkes creates strife in the social circle of Atlanta after Scarlett’s marriage to Charles. Her sister Sue Ellen grows to hate Tara because of Scarlett’s marriage to Frank. Scarlett battles for her place in society over the censure of her female peers and at the expense of her reputation.

Boone states that “medieval writers and their literary heirs have tended to conceive of sexual union as a balance wrested from oppositional forces
considered inherent in male and female genders” (40). The sexual tension between Scarlett and Rhett reaches a climax as they flee Atlanta ahead of Sherman. Rhett leaves her on the road to Tara to join the Confederate forces and he declares his love for her:

“There’s one thing I do know. That is that I love you Scarlett. In spite of you, me and the whole silly world going to pieces around us, I love you. Because we’re alike. Bad lots the both of us. Selfish and shrewd, but able to look things in the eyes and call them by their right names. I love you Scarlett, more than I’ve ever loved any woman. And I’ve waited longer for you than I’ve ever waited for any woman.”

Ending his declaration with a passionate kiss, Scarlett’s reaction is to slap Rhett because of her anger that he is leaving her to continue to Tara alone and out of fear that she can’t make it on her own. Scarlett remains in a state of tension with Rhett because of her feelings for Ashley. Rhett continues to remind her that Ashley is married to Melanie and does not hesitate to point out that Ashley is unable to adapt to the realities of the New South. These criticisms cause Scarlett to pull away in anger. At several times, Scarlett is forced to fight against outside forces and go against the traditional female role. In each case, she must use her ability to act without support to preserve her status. She must battle the tax collector as well as straggling soldiers bent on harm. She must also battle the opinion of her family as well as the society that surrounds her.

The effect of war on marriage the South cannot be understated. During this time, the South saw a decline in marriageable men creating a dilemma for Southern women. In his study on Civil War marriage patterns, J. David Hacker explains that the prospects for marriage partners diminished due to the great loss of life on the part of the Confederacy. After the war factors such as reduced wealth, savings, incomes and the poor economy were contributing factors in marriage patterns (2-7). These factors played a part in Scarlett’s decision to marry Frank. The movie does an excellent job of portraying the sense of devastation in showing the destroyed Twelve Oaks and diminished Tara which parallels the devastation of human life shown in the hospital scene at the train depot in Atlanta. Loss of home and life were contributing element in many marriages and in Scarlett’s case, these were very real factors which contributed to her fight against the traditional gender role she played prior to the Civil War. She lost her first husband to the War and with
Tara in danger of being wrested from her hands due to tax debt; Scarlett must fight against forces seeking to destroy her home. Before the War, she threw Rhett out for suggesting she become his mistress and after the war she makes a dress of window coverings. She will essentially prostitute herself to Rhett for the three hundred dollars she needs in order to pay the taxes. This shows her willingness to place survival of family and home over honor.

Another aspect of the battle/siege nature of Scarlett and Rhett’s relationship is the denial of sexual union. Sexual tension is present between them at each meeting and Boone says that the avoidance of union “prolongs the ecstatic state of desire” because the parties have a “subconscious awareness that total union can never occur” (39). The antagonistic nature of their relationship grows at each meeting. Rhett pushes her buttons and at each meeting the tension heightens. Each of Scarlett’s first two marriages represents a blocking force to the ultimate sexual union between her and Rhett. He forces himself on Scarlett and as she fights back, Rhett says:

“I want to make you faint. I will make you faint. You’ve had this coming to you for years. None of the fools you’ve known have kissed you like this, have they? Your precious Charles or Frank or your stupid Ashley . . . I said your stupid Ashley. Gentlemen all—what do they know about women? What do they know about you? I know you”.

Rhett’s nature is defined with this statement. He illustrates his disdain for the gentlemen of the Old South and at the same time lets Scarlett know that he understands what she wants. Both Rhett and Scarlett fight against the conventional and traditional ideas of relationships. Scarlett must live in the New South and Rhett is determined that she live in it as his wife. Rhett’s proposal to Scarlett is also less than romantic and somewhat antagonistic: “I’m going away tomorrow for a long time and I fear that if I wait till I return you’ll have married someone else with a little money. So I thought, why not me and my money? Really, Scarlett, I can’t go all my life waiting to catch you between husbands.” He sarcastically states his frustration in waiting for Scarlett and gives her the incentive to marry him in the form of money. Rhett has always been less than chivalrous toward Scarlett and that his being a scoundrel is what draws her to him and why she doesn’t just send him packing. She has defied her gender role from the start of the movie and Rhett has been
witness to her battle. He is as much like her as Melanie is like Ashley. Their marriage defies the traditional roles because Rhett allows her to keep her business and run Tara as she sees fit.

As part of Scarlett’s battles against traditional female roles, the movie takes Scarlett on several journeys through which she must learn that sometimes there is no one to depend on but herself. She also learns that when independence is forced upon her, it is difficult for her to return to the passive dependence and security that existed prior to the War. While the men fought the War, Scarlett and other women of her time were left to fight battles on the home front like famine, lack of resources and the destruction of their homes and way of life. Scarlett is forced to run the household, work in the field, support her family financially and find enough food for everyone. She has moved beyond any semblance of what her life was before the War. The movie does an excellent job of showing the contrast between the idyllic life of the plantation before and after the war. Wide shots of the pristine Tara and countryside full of trees and flowers illustrate plantation life before and a Tara that is dirty, on a hill barren of trees and anything green after the War. The movie shows the change that Scarlett undergoes as well. She no longer wears the frilly garments of the barbecue; she is just as dirty and just as barren of the accoutrements of civility before the War. Another journey that Scarlett must go on is when she learns to understand that she has to adapt to the post war South. The war destroyed the traditional economic and social systems and it is left to the strongest and most adaptable to become the new business owners. Scarlett is criticized by the traditional Atlanta society for running her own business and as her unladylike behavior. The war has given her the opportunity to grow in a way that would have been unthinkable before. She talks and acts like a man according to Old Southern society. She now runs Tara and supports Ashley and his family. She does not want children—which is the ultimate rejection of the traditional female roles of wife and mother. She must also learn to navigate without the enforced labor of slaves. Her lumber business must have man power, so she seeks out the non-traditional labor of convicts. This choice sets her at odds with not only Frank, but Ashley as well.

Scarlett’s final battles come from her inability to let go of her fixation on Ashley. She fails to understand what love is until the end of the movie and chooses to believe that at some point Ashley will return her feelings. Upon her marriage to Rhett, she is rewarded with a honeymoon trip to New Orleans. Rhett wines and dines her allowing her to shop,
thus showing her a return to the lavishness prior to the War. Scarlett is unsettled and in her dreams fights against an unknown fear. After having her daughter, Scarlett quickly rejects her female role by declaring that she will not have any more children when she finds that her waist won’t be seventeen inches ever again. This declaration illustrates that she does not feel maternal instincts that were thought to be an integral part of traditional feminine roles. When Rhett discovers her staring at a picture of Ashley and hears her desire to not have any more children, he fights against Scarlett’s lack of feminine instinct and tells her that: “I feel sorry for you Scarlett. Sorry for you because you’re throwing away happiness with both hands and reaching out for something that will never make you happy.” Instinctively, Rhett knows that Scarlett does not truly understand Ashley. He knows that she could never have happiness with Ashley because they are so different from each other. After she and Ashley are observed in an innocent embrace, Rhett’s civility begins to deteriorate. He roughly pulls her from the bed where she is feigning illness and sends her to Ashley’s birthday party forcing her to face society alone. His antagonism is exacerbated by his drinking and an argument leads to him taking Scarlett by force. Boone calls this equating “the sexual act of love with the violence of war” (41). Her reaction is not as expected and is one of the big controversies of the film. Feminists argue that this is a rape which is romanticized. In the context of the argument that Scarlett is constantly at war with Rhett, this assault fits into their battles with each other. She is somewhat pleased with his treatment and enjoys the sexual encounter – another point in the defiance of traditional gender roles of her time. At the time, sex was to be borne and not enjoyed. This attitude aligns with Pateman’s view that the man has the power in the relationship and the woman’s duty is to “voluntarily comply with the husband’s desire for pleasure” (159). Scarlett’s happy behavior the morning after what Boone refers to an assault on her “castle” is evidence that her views of sex are not in keeping with her feminine peers (41). Scarlett’s acceptance of Rhett’s physical advances diffuses Pateman’s idea that “men who physically ill-treat their wives [. . .] do so with impunity” (161). Her initial resistance is overcome by Rhett’s physicality and she surrenders.

Scarlett’s continuing battle with Rhett comes at the cost of everything. Her fall and miscarriage create the scenario in which she loses not only the illusion of her love for Ashley, but her best friend and supporter, her child and the only man who ever truly loved her and understood her. Melanie’s death causes Scarlett to realize that the best of everything
that a woman could represent is lost to her. Melanie, while she lived, embodied the gentle strength that Scarlett in her ruthlessness lacked. The loss of her unwavering support leaves a void in Scarlett’s life. Ashley is bereft in his grief and Scarlett finally realizes his weakness; the man that she loved was an illusion. In losing her child who was a physical embodiment of her union with Rhett, she loses the physical symbol of her marriage. Finally, in Rhett, she realizes that she has been fighting against herself. Scarlett resists years of Rhett’s support and love, and while she made it through famine, war and poverty, she has never lost a husband that she loved. Only at the end does she realize that Rhett is strong and that he is the one who gives her strength. At cross purposes, she runs home in search of Rhett. When he finally wins Scarlett’s love, he throws it away in a fit of careless disdain and walks away saying: “I’m through with everything here. I want peace. I want to see if somewhere there isn’t something left in life of charm and grace” indicating that he is done fighting battles with Scarlett. In answer to her question of “Where will I go? What shall I do?” he responds, “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.”

Scarlett’s war against her feminine role led to the destruction of her relationships. She defined marriage in terms of material needs and saw them as contracts to acquire financial security. She did not consider love to be of importance in the context of relationships other than her obsessive love for Ashley Wilkes. Because of the conflict during the Civil War, Scarlett defied traditional women’s gender roles and discarded the solidarity of women’s relationships in order to protect her family and survive the destruction of the Old South. Furthermore, she went against the traditional belief that women were not fit to be entrepreneurs and proved that she had a head for business and could run one as good as any man. She also fought against the place women had in marriage by being in controlling. In her journey to womanhood, she comes to realize that being strong isn’t everything. She learns that obsession can blind you to the true love of someone who has stood by you through the tough times. Her battles with Rhett, while reflective of her strong nature, served to destroy her relationship with him. Her childish obsession with Ashley blinded her to the love of both Rhett and the devoted friendship of Melanie. For Scarlett, her mantra of “I’ll think about it tomorrow. After all, tomorrow is another day” only served to put off the inevitable reality that without love, a marriage cannot survive the many battles it faces.
Works Cited


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Fifty Shades of Mocking Gray
JESSICA BELL fears airborne illnesses and when something tickles her skin the way a bug’s legs might. If she brewed some Amortentia potion, it would probably smell like lavender, coffee, and burning leaves. She is always slightly disappointed when people understand her references, and slightly pleased when people miss her jokes. She enjoys worrying, fretting, panicking, over-thinking, and synonyms.
Suzanne Collins’ *Hunger Games* series joins many other young adult novels growing in both popularity and production volume. As young adult literature increases in demand, the serial novel gains more commercial viability. Young adult series—especially trilogies—now follow the trend of including an epilogue in the last book. Typically, the epilogue offers readers a glimpse into the future where the teenage protagonists integrate into society as fully functional adults. Just as J.K. Rowling’s *The Deathly Hallows*, the last book in the *Harry Potter* series, offers in its epilogue a future where Harry and his friends marry and have children, Suzanne Collins’ *Mockingjay*, the final novel of her *Hunger Games* trilogy, provides readers with an image of Katniss, Peeta, and their children in District 12 over twenty years after the main events of the series. Collins allows her protagonist to enter into a relationship and birth and raise children as evidence of Katniss’ socially sanctioned—or, at least, socially permitted—entry into fulfilled adulthood. In *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Bruno Bettelheim discusses the history of children’s literature and how, at its earliest, literature written specifically for children intended to provide a moral education and teach cultural heritage (269). While contemporary young adult fiction takes many forms and serves many purposes, these texts still tend to support societal expectations and operate as moral educators, particularly through their epilogues. Through both form and content, *Mockingjay*’s epilogue illustrates a traditional courtship marriage plot, one perhaps unfitting for the series’ protagonist.
The bulk of the trilogy’s narrative follows Katniss, first as she volunteers to replace her sister in the Hunger Games—an annual battle royal where each of the twelve districts of Panem provides one boy and one girl to participate—and then as she reluctantly but somewhat altruistically becomes the spokesperson for the revolution, representing the modern version of the self-sacrificing woman. The *Mockingjay* epilogue provides the continued story of Katniss, Peeta, and their children with only small hints of other characters and their well-being. It offers next to nothing in terms of how the reformed, post-war Panem operates. The intense focus on Katniss’ traditional domestic life—coupled with the fact that she remains in exile for assassinating the new President of Panem—suggests that Katniss’ future is simply not paradigmatic of the new Panem; rather it emphasizes her inability to escape from the old system. In the main plot, Collins characterizes Katniss as a protagonist galvanized to join the rebellion out of a wish for revenge and a need to protect the lives of her family members. Katniss only ever desires an outcome where her freedom allows her to experience as little anxiety and fear as possible. Katniss, as Collins writes her in the epilogue, seems uncharacteristically to accept Peeta’s long-held belief that quiet home life represents the ultimate motivation for social change. The novels expose and critique contemporary American cultural issues such as segregation, poverty, and overconsumption, but in narrowing the focus of the epilogue to Katniss and Peeta’s children, the epilogue assigns unequaled significance to the relative safety of procreation and family life in the new Panem.

Collins’ *Mockingjay* epilogue follows many of the tropes of a fairy tale happy ending while also upsetting what the reader expects from the novel’s heroine. Mike Cadden’s discussion of the epilogue as it appears specifically in the *Harry Potter* series leads to his assertion that authors “use the specific feature of epilogue as a way to ensure completion for an audience they perceive to have different needs (desires) than themselves” (345-46). *The Hunger Games* trilogy also falls into that category of storytelling for a young target audience, and so the inclusion of an epilogue may seem like a natural device to reassure the child reader that the characters they have now followed for several years can enjoy a “happy ending.” If Collins had written her novels for an older audience, her epilogue may have ended differently, or she may not have felt the need for an epilogue at all. When it comes to including that happy ending in an epilogue, Cadden says, “it’s as if there is a moral compulsion that seizes the writer here” (345). Cadden suggests that in writing for a young audience, some authors provide an ending with fairy tale qualities
and values—even if such an ending contradicts or complicates the preceding narrative—because children require the comfort it supplies, and because the novel’s epilogue works as a socializing agent. If *The Hunger Games* epilogue contains fairy tale qualities, then it functions at least partially to teach its readers a moral lesson. Bettleheim grants fairy tales the power to teach young people “about the inner problems of human beings, and the right solutions to their predicaments in any society” (270). For Katniss and Peeta, the right solution to their Capitol designed relationship involves their confinement to District 12 and their devotion to family life, even if that family enters a world that still experiences the effects of the violent rebellion. Lynette Felber examines the epilogue in serial novels more generally, and she claims that “because an expectation of continuation has been established, the ending of the final volume is particularly problematic; the final motionlessness of closure is antithetical to its flowing narrative” (61). For Felber, many epilogues compress several years down into a short amount of time to give the reader the impression he or she experienced this time with the characters to some degree. While Felber’s explanation provides solid reasons in support of an epilogue, Collins’ decision to have her epilogue end with Katniss and Peeta’s children requires further analysis. Cadden says, “we seem to want to give children [readers] as much security as we can, which includes assurances that all will be well, not only now but in the future” (346). In terms of *The Hunger Games* trilogy, Collins’ epilogue accomplishes giving readers the security that Katniss’ role as protector has taken on a new dimension—that of mother. While Katniss leaves readers with a lingering sense of anxiety over the completeness of her future happiness, the pastoral language and imagery in the epilogue creates feelings of peace and calm to counter the apprehension. Her children play and take “for granted” (454) the words of the pastoral lullaby Katniss sings to Rue as she dies in the Hunger Games arena. The *Mockingjay* epilogue offers some security for young readers in its adherence to traditional marriage plot structures, even as it suggests the impossibility of a true happy ending for Katniss.

Before Katniss settles down with Peeta in *Mockingjay*, readers witness the different ways the old Capitol imposes its values on Katniss and the other citizens of Panem’s outlying districts, particularly regarding heteronormative gender roles and heterosexuality. When Katniss introduces District 12 in *The Hunger Games*, she illustrates her relatively small and completely isolated district as a place seemingly divorced from the Capitol’s gendered cultural standards. District 12 citizens value their
neighbor’s community service to fellow citizens or their occupational contribution to the district over all other social markers, and their occupations seem to escape gender classification. One can work as a merchant, miner, hunter, baker, or an apothecary regardless of sex or gender and without stigma or expectations. In this way, the citizens in District 12 create a kind of utopia where the community places value on ability rather than any gendered assumptions of worth. When Capitol representatives visit each district every year for the Hunger Games reaping, they bring their gendered and heteronormative values with them by selecting one boy and one girl from each district to participate in the Games. The districts never make such distinctions between their children without Capitol interference. On the morning of the reaping in *The Hunger Games*, Katniss narrates, “to my surprise, my mother has laid out one of her own lovely dresses for me. A soft blue thing with matching shoes” (17). Katniss, who normally wears the practical clothing best suited to hunting in the woods, dresses up for the televised Capitol event, looking “nothing like [her]self” (18), and everything like the Capitol expects young girls to dress. On reaping days, the Capitol designs its district citizens around its own heteronormative values, and as Aubrey Mishou mentions in her analysis of gender in *The Hunger Games*, the Capitol imposes gender even down to Effie Trinket’s yearly reaping catchphrase “‘Ladies First!’” (*HG* 24, Mishou 138). The Capitol imposition of gender on Katniss establishes the heteronormative foundation that leads to her relationship with Peeta.

While the citizens of District 12 possess a utopian view of gender, many readers understand Katniss’ gender role in District 12 as performance of masculinity. In her examination of gender in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, Vera Woloshyn suggests that contemporary society traditionally assigns most of Katniss’ non-gendered traits in District 12 to men. When Katniss’ father dies in a mining accident, Katniss recalls, “At eleven years old, with Prim just seven, I took over as head of my family. There was no choice” (*HG* 27). Katniss replaces her father as hunter and provider, but Woloshyn says, “while female characters may take on masculine tasks and roles, they only do so in exceptional circumstances usually involving the absence of a father figure, reinforcing the idea that this behavior is not normative” (154). With the dangers of the mines in District 12, many children cope with their parents’ deaths, so when Katniss takes her father’s role, she does not occupy a unique position within District 12—yet she represents for readers the trope of the young
heroine’s necessary and tragic call to power. Katniss’ father dies so that she may perform masculinity in her household.

Katniss’ position as head of household supports a masculine reading of her character, and her persistent protection of Prim positions Katniss as a husband figure in their relationship. In the first chapter of *The Hunger Games*, Katniss, when considering Gale’s offer to run away from District 12, thinks, “how could I leave Prim, who is the only person in the world I’m certain I love?” (10). Later in the same novel, Katniss volunteers to take Prim’s place in the Hunger Games. She makes an effort to actually win the Games, not out of any desire for self-preservation, but because Prim asks her to try (*HG* 44). In *Catching Fire*, when the Gamemakers use jabberjays—a genetically altered bird that mimics human speech—Katniss hears Prim’s voice calling to her for help (410). When, in *Mockingjay*, the Capitol bombs District 13, Katniss nearly misses the evacuation because she searches for Prim (169). Katniss’ relationship with her sister fuels nearly every decision she makes in the series. Katniss fulfills the traditional role of the husband in her physical protection of Prim. Through Prim’s death, Collins constructs the circumstances that lead to Katniss’ acceptance of Peeta. Katniss’ role as metaphorical husband prevents her from accepting Peeta, not just because Katniss devotes herself entirely to Prim, but because their relationship takes on spousal qualities. While never sexual, Katniss and Prim’s relationship mirrors the qualities of their mother and father’s marriage, particularly in Katniss’ response to Prim’s death. Katniss distrusts her mother due to the mother’s mental instability after the death of Katniss’ father. Katniss acknowledges that her mother suffers a mental collapse, yet still blames her for “clock[ing] out” (*HG* 43). Katniss’ anger with her mother leads readers to suspect that, if ever in a similar situation, Katniss will respond differently, but when Prim dies, Katniss mourns her sibling the same way her mother mourns Katniss’ father. Katniss experiences Prim’s death as a severe emotional trauma that prevents her from speaking and turns her into a “hopeless, shell-shocked lunatic” (*MJ* 442), while her “grief buries [her]” (*MJ* 411). After Katniss takes revenge on Coin for her involvement in Prim’s death, Katniss shifts into a mental space where she can eventually accept Peeta’s “proposal” for a life together.

Collins writes Katniss with traditionally masculine traits, but at the same time Katniss attempts to disassociate herself from gender identifiers as often as possible because she associates those markers with the Capitol and Capitol oppression. In “*The Hunger Games* and the Failure of Dystopian Maternity,” Aubrey Mishou claims that Katniss’ “sense of
self exists outside of a reproductive identity, just as she finds the means of survival only outside the District fence” (134). Mishou suggests that Katniss opposes motherhood not just because the Capitol values or desires it of her, but also because her gendered identity exists only through Capitol influence. For Katniss to have children of her own, she accepts the gendered ideals of the old Capitol, even as she eschews the Capitol’s political agenda. In “Burn with Us: Sacrificing Childhood in The Hunger Games,” Susan Tan analyzes the significance of childhood for Katniss and other citizens of Panem, and she recognizes violence in the act of growing-up, since each year increases a child’s chances of the Capitol selecting them to participate in the Games (56). For the children in The Hunger Games, adulthood offers the only relative safety one can ever hope to acquire. Tan argues that because every child who lives outside of the Capitol must face the possibility of entering the Games, the “home not only provides no respite from the violence of Panem’s society, but in fact, becomes one of its more dangerous spaces” (56). Katniss grows up associating family with loss and understanding it as an institution the Capitol encourages for its steady supply of Hunger Games tributes. The epilogue presents a space no longer controlled by Capitol politics, but Katniss’ anxiety over family life persists even after she gives birth to her own children. Katniss enters into an arrangement that heteronormative culture prescribes for her, but she never quite fits in.

For Katniss and Peeta to couple after the rebellion overthrows the Capitol suggests that the couple’s relationship in the epilogue maintains the same kind of value system President Snow and the Capitol held in terms of heterosexuality, marriage, and family. Katniss begins her romantic relationship with Peeta during her first Hunger Games as a performance to garner viewer support and sponsors. When the Capitol sets precedent by having the next Hunger Games tributes selected from the pool of existing Hunger Games victors, and Peeta and Katniss re-enter the arena, Peeta announces his “marriage” to Katniss during their televised pre-Games interview in Catching Fire in order to gain sympathy and support from the audience. The capitol citizens value Katniss and Peeta’s (fabricated) love story, while many viewers in the outlying districts recognize it as a performance. When, in the first Hunger Games, Katniss defies the Capitol by threatening to kill both herself and Peeta in the arena—denying Panem a Hunger Games victor—President Snow forces Katniss to continue her “star-crossed lovers” (HG 164) performance until she convinces the district citizens of her love for Peeta. Haymitch—Peeta and Katniss’ Games mentor—tells Katniss, “you’ll never, ever be able to
do anything but live happily ever after with that boy” (CF 44). As long as Snow remains in power, Katniss and Peeta must perform—at least publicly—as a couple. From the very beginning of Peeta and Katniss’ relationship, even when Peeta throws the bread to Katniss in order to save her life, the Capitol crafts or makes allowances for their union. The Capitol designs Peeta and Katniss’ marriage, and Katniss continues to participate in the system even after she defeats the Capitol during the rebellion and even though her relationship with Peeta evolves entirely from Capitol imposed values.

The apocalyptic qualities of Panem after the new president Coin takes control begin the movement of plot toward its romantic end. When the rebellion allows Katniss the honor of executing President Snow, it appears the narrative leads toward what Northrop Frye calls the sixth phase of comedy. The most romantic and least ironic of his six phases, the final phase includes narratives which depict “the collapse and disintegration of the comic society” (185). Under typical comic circumstances, the reader may expect Panem to collapse with the president’s death, and for Katniss to emerge in the final stages of the narrative with even more singular, apocalyptic focus than before. *Mockingjay* complicates this reading in a couple of ways: first, as a dystopian series, *The Hunger Games* trilogy seems like the natural sequel to a sixth phase comedy rather than one itself—when Katniss’ story begins, it describes Panem as the apocalyptic remnants of a comic society; second, Katniss never kills President Snow—she shoots the new president, Coin, instead. For many of the citizens of Panem, Coin represents a positive change in politics, but Katniss stops the new regime in its early stages.

The apocalyptic qualities of Panem under Snow and the fact that Katniss assassinates the new president do not, however, prevent a practical reading of *Mockingjay*’s ending as sixth phase comedy. By the time the rebels capture President Snow, he has lost all control over Panem. The apocalyptic society Snow created disintegrates before Katniss even receives orders to execute him. In the weeks before Snow’s execution, Coin takes over the presidential role and garners enough support that her sudden assassination leaves Katniss blindfolded, in handcuffs, and in weeks of solitary confinement. Katniss narrates, “as the gray uniforms begin to converge on me, I think of what my brief future as the assassin of Panem’s new president holds. The interrogation, probable torture, certain public execution” (*MJ* 435). In this way, Coin’s short regime represents the comic society, and the “collapse and disintegration” that Frye mentions only occurs when Katniss shoots Coin. While

“The Girl on Fire” Now in the Hearth  29
Katniss never narrates her specific reasons for killing Coin, the reader understands that while Coin promises a better Panem, her early private executive decisions present her as ruthless and violent, like Snow. Only the surviving Hunger Games victors know that Coin plans to implement one last Hunger Games using the children of ex-Capitol leaders as tributes, and only Katniss suspects that Gale designed a bomb trap for Coin, and that Coin used that trap to kill Prim. If *Mockingjay* represents a sixth phase comedy, Peeta and Katniss’ relationship hearkens back to old Panem as opposed to the Panem readers get in the novel’s epilogue. Katniss accepts her role as spouse and mother to make a place for herself in the apocalyptic remains of Coin’s short presidency.

Katniss, who only ever desires freedom for herself and her family, somehow accepts the Capitol’s values of marriage even though she feels anxiety over her decision. Katniss, who throughout the trilogy makes decisions motivated almost entirely by her own survival needs or by her sister Prim, says in the *Mockingjay* epilogue, “it took five, ten, fifteen years for me to agree [to have children]. But Peeta wanted them so badly” (454). Katniss concedes to parenthood not because she feels more fulfilled as a mother, but because Peeta wants children. Prior to the epilogue, the novel shows Katniss’ fleeting ability to make her own decisions, when after she shoots President Coin and then tries to kill herself using the poison nightlock pill encased in her uniform—because Katniss believes at this time that the nightlock pill will free her, Peeta stops her (MJ 436). After this moment, Katniss exists as the person who will eventually resign herself to marry Peeta. Peeta arrives in District 12 just before the epilogue and immediately reinserts himself as a key figure in Katniss’ life. The two never discuss their relationship, but rather fall back into old habits. Katniss exits her home in the Victor’s Village and finds Peeta planting evening primrose in honor of Prim (447). Peeta’s concession to Prim leads to Katniss’ acceptance of him, and the two begin their post-revolution lives together. Peeta and Katniss reclaim their roles prior to the revolution: Katniss says, “Peeta bakes. I hunt” (452). The two return to the district value system of vocation over gender, yet Katniss refers to her children as “the girl” and “the boy,” invoking that anxiety the Games created in requiring one boy and one girl from each district. Katniss and Peeta’s children serve as constant reminders to their parents that they raise the ideal pair for a Hunger Games reaping. In her description of her first pregnancy, Katniss says that she “was consumed with a terror that felt as old as life itself” (454), and when she imagines the day she must tell her children about her “nightmares. . . . Why
they came. Why they won’t ever really go away” (455), she describes an emotional state not very different from the terror and fear she experiences when thinking of family in pre-revolution Panem. When Mishou discusses Katniss’ unease in the epilogue, she says, “this lack of peace is the antithesis of Katniss’ hopes for the future, and by forcing her into the emotionally vulnerable role of motherhood, the series proves a failure to its protagonist” (140). Mishou’s description of the role of motherhood as “emotionally vulnerable” applies more to how it affects Katniss and less to motherhood in general. For Katniss, childhood still represents a time of death, particularly since the novels’ main events all happen before the protagonist turns eighteen. By the end of The Hunger Games trilogy, Katniss seems “still half in the arena” (HG 432), a repetition of the way she feels at the end of the first novel. Her inability to move far from the past interferes with her ability to fully accept her domestic role, but for Katniss, motherhood feels like her only option.

Collins juxtaposes Katniss’ unease over her children’s future against the pastoral imagery of the children playing in the meadow in District 12. This image mirrors Rue in the meadow in the first Hunger Games arena, and Katniss makes the connection more explicit when she mentions the same lullaby she sings to Rue:

Deep in the meadow, under the willow
A bed of grass, a soft green pillow
Lay down your head, and close your sleepy eyes
And when again they open, the sun will rise
Here it’s safe, here it’s warm
Here the daisies guard you from every harm
Here your dreams are sweet and tomorrow brings them true
Here is the place where I love you. (455)

The lyrics calm Rue as Katniss sings her death song, and the song functions as a peaceful lullaby for Katniss’ children. The promise of safety and warmth, for Rue, only occurs through death, and while Katniss’ children experience relative safety in post-revolution District 12, Katniss worries that her children “play on a graveyard” (455). Katniss’ concern over her children’s future leads readers to question the stability or lasting promises of safety in the epilogue version of District 12’s meadow. In “Worse Games to Play?,” Susan Tan considers Rue’s death scene and argues that “in Katniss’ world, this scene seems to suggest the child can only remain ‘good and safe,’ secure in the pastoral, natural world,
through death” (33). Rue’s death occurs before the revolutionary change in Panem, but Katniss carries many of the same fears for childhood innocence even in post-revolutionary District 12. Tan’s argument, when applied to Katniss’ children, suggests an amount of fear that Katniss may find herself unequal to overcome. While Panem no longer hosts Hunger Games and the Capitol no longer exists as a threat to her children, her children play on a graveyard and their mother suffers from severe post-traumatic stress disorder. The epilogue’s District 12, while arguably safer than pre-revolution District 12, fails to promise the continued safety Katniss needs for her children, and so her reluctant decision to have children at all seems forced.

The epilogue suggests to some readers that Katniss and Peeta now exist in a world safe enough to have children, and that Katniss could never marry until she secures that safety. In the epilogue, Katniss narrates, “the questions are just beginning. The arenas have been completely destroyed, the memorials built, there are no more Hunger Games” (454). While the Hunger Games certainly represented the biggest threat to parenting in Panem, the lingering “questions” over twenty years after the end of the rebellion hint toward an unstable and uncertain Panem. The readers receive no acknowledgment or reassurance that the new government revokes Katniss’ court ordered exile, and so Katniss, Peeta, and their children live on the fringe of the new society. When the new Capitol sends Katniss back to District 12 after she assassinates President Coin, Katniss remarks, “the truth is, no one quite knows what to do with me now that the war’s over” (MJ 442). Katniss fulfills her symbolic public role once the rebellion captures President Snow, and now a quiet home life with a husband and children waits for her in District 12. In the final page of the main narrative, Katniss says, regarding her relationship with Peeta,

I know this would have happened anyway. That what I need to survive is not Gale’s fire, kindled with rage and hatred. I have plenty of fire myself. What I need is the dandelion in the spring. The bright yellow that means rebirth instead of destruction. The promise that life can go on, no matter how bad our losses. That it can be good again. And only Peeta can give me that. (MJ 453)

Katniss decides that in order to survive her exile to District 12, she needs Peeta as a reminder that life goes on. Peeta and Katniss’ children, therefore, also stand as reminders to the continuation of life, even if it concerns Katniss that their young lives must eventually learn about the
past and worry over the future. Katniss must first undergo a change before she can accept Peeta’s love, and that change happens when Prim dies. Peeta still accepts Katniss after she assassinates Coin, and only he understands the full force of the Capitol’s misuse and abuse since he joined her in the Games and in the rebellion, so their compatibility rests entirely in resistance to Capitol influence.

The changes that allow Katniss and Peeta to couple take the form of a kind of double-proposal marriage plot. In *Plots and Proposals: American Women’s Fiction, 1850-1890*, Karen Tracey outlines the double-proposal marriage plot of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and says, “the double-proposal plot enabled writers and readers to have their independent heroine and marry her off as well” (8). While not a true double-proposal, Collins’ series offers two separate “marriages” between Katniss and Peeta. In *Catching Fire*, Peeta and Katniss fake an engagement in order to convince the citizens of Panem that Katniss defied the Capitol out of love. While Peeta wants a real engagement, Katniss only agrees in order to protect her family and friends from President Snow. When Peeta and Katniss couple in the epilogue, Katniss accepts Peeta’s “second” proposal. Tracey recognizes that, in general, the characters must undergo a change between the first and second proposal so that the heroine can now accept the proposal when she could not before. For Katniss, that change occurs after Prim’s death, but for Peeta, the change comes in the form of his torture with tracker jacker venom—a poison designed to brainwash. When the Capitol injects Peeta with the venom while showing him images and videos of Katniss, they condition him to believe that Katniss wants to kill him. The torture corrupts the pure and total love he felt for Katniss before they inject the venom, and Katniss feels that Peeta now better understands her true nature and no longer idealizes her. Katniss and Peeta eventually change enough to suit each other, which convinces readers that the two work well as a couple. The double-proposal courtship plot in *The Hunger Games* series illustrates Collins’ impulse to end the trilogy with a coupling that reinforces reader expectation and provides a relatively uncomplicated example of marriage as the ordering institution for any society.

In *Tradition Counter Tradition*, Joseph Allen Boone describes *Pride and Prejudice* as a traditional courtship marriage plot, and since *Pride and Prejudice* shares several plot structure elements with *The Hunger Games* series, the works merit close comparison. Boone discusses Elizabeth and Darcy’s “asymmetrical marital dynamic” (96) in *Pride and Prejudice* in ways that mirror Katniss and Peeta’s relationship dynamic. For Boone,
Darcy falls in love with Elizabeth because she ignores propriety and cultural expectations in what he views as appropriate situations and appealing ways. Katniss’ fiery personality distinguishes her from other girls in District 12, and Peeta admires those qualities in her. Darcy’s stoic character and Elizabeth’s free personality seem at times “asymmetrical,” just as Katniss’ abrasive demeanor seems at odds with Peeta’s gentle manner. The narrative amends the differences by allowing the characters to undergo some kind of transformation or growth before they marry. The double-proposal allows for this change, and, as Boone argues, “the carefully orchestrated sequence of final events imposes a sense of closure that ensures the happiness of Elizabeth and Darcy and the perpetuation of a better world (hence the harmony of the microcosmic community shown grouping around the two)” (96). In *Mockingjay*, Katniss and Peeta also experience a grouping of a “microcosmic community” around them, and while Katniss worries over the future, the readers get a sense that the new world offers more safety than the old—at least for the duration of the narrative. In terms of the social and political composition of the “better world” in courtship plots, Boone says of *Pride and Prejudice* that, “if Elizabeth expands the range of female possibility through her activity and energy, she does so without radically challenging the structures of power governing her society” (96). In *The Hunger Games* trilogy, Collins endeavors to, in a way, “expand the range” of female young adult protagonists. Katniss effectively challenges the powers governing her society until the epilogue, when she submits to the old Capitol marriage value. Katniss’ position in the domestic sphere at the end of the novel does not erase or devalue her explorations into the sociopolitical sphere—still, her entry into the home supports the notion that she belongs there. Boone says of Austen, “[she] creates the illusion of an ordered world that is contained and complete, and, insofar as her text reproduces this ideology, she stops short of questioning the necessity of marriage as the primary ordering desire of society itself” (96). The *Mockingjay* epilogue presents readers with a complete and ordered community created entirely around Katniss, Peeta, and their children. Like Austen, Collins uses marriage as the ordering structure for her society, showing how even reluctant mothers eventually accept their fate. While the epilogue shows a “dancing girl with the dark hair and blue eyes” and the “boy with blond curls and grey eyes, struggling to keep up with her on his chubby legs” (454)—figures that stand in great contrast to the horrifying images of children in the arenas and the war—the epilogue only offers scant glances of the society’s movement
toward “good.” On Katniss’ apparent lack of happiness in the epilogue, Cadden says, “perhaps given the state Katniss is in at the end of the book, we might not believe that she can be happy; the epilogue makes a case for how she can be happy over and through time...as happy as she can be” (354). Katniss’ nightmares and continued uncertainty regarding the future suggest a tenuous happiness at best, yet her status as mother and spouse justifies the reader’s acceptance of Katniss’ “happy” ending.

Before the epilogue, Katniss repeatedly rejects notions of family life outside of her relationship with her sister, Prim, and she only entertains ideas of traditional domesticity following Prim’s death. The series presents Prim as the motivation for most of Katniss’ decisions, and before she makes choices on her own, Katniss considers how they will affect her sister. The novels provide Katniss with two potential male love interests, but despite their interest in her, Katniss finds them more useful as simply friends—until the end of Mockingjay. Shortly before Prim’s death, Peeta asks Gale how he thinks Katniss will choose her mate, and Gale says, “Katniss will pick whoever she thinks she can’t survive without” (385). Katniss overhears their conversation and thinks, “I can survive just fine without either of them” (386). At this point in the narrative, Katniss still occupies her position as leader of the rebellion, and Prim offers Katniss the emotional support she needs to carry out the task. While several events affect Katniss’ actions between Peeta’s discussion with Gale and the epilogue, Prim’s death influences Katniss the most. Katniss accepts Peeta’s proposal to live together, and the two carry out the Capitol’s plan for their domestic family. Following the death of Katniss’ sister, the epilogue in Collins’ Mockingjay accomplishes what the main narrative cannot—it removes Katniss from her position as adventurous heroine and places her in a home with Peeta and their children, allowing readers to witness Katniss fulfill her societal function as wife and mother. Collins’ choice to place Katniss back in her home in District 12 provides young readers the security and satisfaction of their fairy tale expectations, even while Katniss’ discontent leaves some readers questioning Collins’ narrative decision.

Works Cited


TAYLOR BOLTZ spends the majority of her time daydreaming. She mindlessly flips pages of books and pretends to pay attention. Her heart and brain lie out of body, particularly in a small village in Haiti and a walled in town in Italy. Preferably, she’d spend the rest of her days drinking espresso (or beer), eating cold candy corn, and re-writing her old poetry drafts.
In 2011, E.L. James exploded onto the writing scene with the erotic romance fiction trilogy, *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The series intermixes and discusses the tension and connection of a Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism (BDSM) relationship within a “vanilla,” or hetero-normal relationship. The term BDSM became popular around 1969, and it serves as an umbrella term for sexual forms that involve any kind of power play. According to David Ortmann and Richard Sprott in their book *Sexual Outsiders: Understanding BDSM Sexualities and Communities*, the term erotic derives from the Greek story of Eros, who caused gods and mortals to fall in love and became a “child-like god of love … color[ing] outside the lines, not obeying social norms and rules” (2). The mythic story corroborates some of the views on sex today, described as everything from a sacred act between two people in a monogamous relationship to something to be enjoyed with everyone and anyone, no matter how kinky or traditional; sex should be beyond the social norms and rules. However, it was not until after the Marquis Donation Alphonse Francois de Sade emerged in French Revolutionary period as one of the best known erotic writers, and “acquaint[ed] [readers] with all phases, nuances and characteristics of the sexual life in France” (Bloch 247), that sexual perversions became part of the dialogue of sexuality.

The Marquis de Sade described many sexual deviancies, including sadism— receiving sexual pleasure from inflicting terror or pain, whether voluntary or involuntary—and continuing where the mythos of Eros
left off (Bloch 244). Much like the heroine, Ana, in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, De Sade’s novice Eugenie in *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, “eagerly and ardently heard the theories [of vice and sexual perversions] and placed them into practice” (Bloch 240). James’ depiction of BDSM, despite being deemed incorrect by most critics, offers the reading that Ana’s love interest, Christian Grey, drags her down the rabbit hole of deviancy with his seductive charms; this offers what Jessica Benjamin asserts is a submission out of “complicity with their own deepest desires … for an elusive spiritual or psychological satisfaction” (55-56), implying the choice for this relationship.

Many feminists understand BDSM to be oppressive, arguing that “a woman is … reinforcing the legitimacy of power imbalances outside the bedroom” by playing the submissive, though other women find it empowering. Another group of feminists believe that female submission “can never be consensual” because the depiction of violence against the submissive (“Thinking Kink: Does Female Submission Mean Oppression”), plays into a series of gender role issues that determine the amount of power a woman has. Some feminists tell those who enjoy BDSM that they are “duped” by the patriarchy, but the submissives have the “right to choose … the right to change their mind, the right to say no, the right to pleasure,” thereby underlining the consensual nature of BDSM (“Thinking Kink: No, Female Submission Doesn’t Mean Oppression”). The feminist’s equation of BDSM acts to violent acts such as rape, disregards the submissive’s autonomy.

Within her *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy, E.L. James toys with marital ideology and its social and formal implications by front loading a seduction and subverting a courtship, allowing for an ending similar to those found in more comedically traditional plots, which include an epistolary narrative, external unrequited lovers, and satisfactory closure; this intermingling of two different marital plots deconstructs (the theory of) a simple and straight trajectory “belonging to a traditional courtship, arguing that the binary of sexuality remains faulty and separate from the institution of marriage.

Literary texts begin, traditionally, with the introduction to the heroine or hero. The first paragraph of *Fifty Shades of Grey* describes a “pale, brown-haired girl with blue eyes too big for her face…[with] wayward hair in a ponytail”; that is Anastasia Steele (*Grey* 3). The seemingly plain heroine juxtaposes the “young … attractive … tall, dressed in a fine gray suit, white shirt, and black tie with unruly dark copper-colored hair and intense, bright gray eye[d]” Christian Grey (*Grey* 7). These two charac-
ters represent, immediately, an opposition between the virgin and the seducer, or the novice and the master, for the remainder of the text. James sets up this binary to place an emphasis on what develops as a seduction plot. Boone outlines the seduction narrative as one in which “lovers are revealed as sexual antagonists and the witty verbal sparring of suitors is transformed into ritualized physical combat”; James allows precisely that (100). Ana and Christian find themselves immersed in sexual tension from the moment she walks through his office door, though they refrain from contact until further on in the text. Christian growls at one point, “fuck the paperwork,” before he pins his lips against Ana’s in a heated moment in the elevator, revealing both his and her physical desire for the other (Grey 78). The mention of paperwork, however, creates a hitch in the typical romance plot, hinting at an inherent hazard to the potential relationship. The paperwork turns out to be a literal contract, binding him and Ana together in a BDSM relationship, something he seduces her into via his charms and her curiosity.

The heroine “typically attempts to halt action, to remove herself from the hazards of narrative time and narrative desire, in order to escape the seducer’s plots,” as the seducer “expend his libidinal energies…till… the deflowering and breaking of his victim’s will—is attained,” (Boone 100). Ana, on multiple occasions, deems Christian almost a stalker. He shows up at her place of employment, before she told him where she worked; he sends her first editions of Tess of the D’Urbervilles, a seduction plot narrative in and of itself; he tracks her cell phone to a bar where she had been drinking, all to swoop in and rescue her. He desires one thing at this point in the text: Ana. Boone mentions that texts like Tess and Fifty Shades of Grey “stage a woman’s initial fall quite early in the narrative in order to dwell at greater length on the protracted stages of her degradation” (102); in James’ text, Ana quite literally—and later figuratively—falls for Christian very early on, beginning the study of “degradation.”

Though Ana asks herself multiple times, “what am I doing here” (Grey 94) or attempts to pay Christian back for the gifts, he brushes it aside, warning her simply to “stay away from [him],” as though she would follow his directions (Grey 72). Boone refers to the “woman who willingly lapses from a moral code that upholds the sanctity of marriage,” as one who “suffers the worst punishments,” being the “contradiction embedded in social order,” and one who disregards the male-female hierarchy (101). However, though Ana embarks on the relationship with Christian on her own accord, she does not necessarily usurp the social
order. Instead, she upholds the social expectations as she takes on the submissive role as best she can, and demonstrates the lack of autonomy about which feminists rant by following the contract Christian lays out for her.

Critics state that BDSM “reinforces the legitimacy of power imbalances outside of the bedroom,” or that women who enjoy BDSM “are socialized into actually getting sexual pleasure through their powerlessness” (“Thinking Kink: Does Female Submission Mean Oppression”), though the BDSM relationship between Christian and Ana results in a give and take, thus allowing Ana to become the “seduced heroine…no longer devastated by her loss of virginity” (Boone 113). Instead, she finds herself comfortable with filling the role of Christian’s 16th submissive because of her remnant of autonomy. Within the contract, something that does not occur quite as literally in the more comedically traditional plots, Ana finds herself disagreeing with some of the requirements, such as exercise, where she states:

‘I don’t want to exercise four times a week.’
‘Anastasia, I need you supple, strong, and with stamina. Trust me, you need to exercise.’
‘But surely not four times a week. How about three?’
‘I want you to do four.’
‘I thought this was a negotiation?’

He purses his lips at me. ‘Okay, Miss Steele, another point well made.’ (Grey 107)

This point in the text, though not the complete negotiation, illustrates Ana’s glimmer of strength as she disregards the role of a flippant participant, attempting to enjoy what is deemed a “liberating—and appealing—exercise…that threatens to spill over the ‘fixed’ boundaries of stable, socially defined identity,” something the male in the seduction plot promotes (Boone 101). This seduction allows the dominator overall power because of the desire to exceed the socially defined lines within their relationship.

A BDSM “marriage” adheres to all the same conditions of a traditional one, once contracts are negotiated: the husband makes all the demands and decisions for the wife, who follows in his tracks. The contract places limits and rules on what can occur in the relationship, much like a typical marriage where certain restrictions are placed on the wife by a husband. Carole Pateman asserts that “all social relations should take a
contractual form” (40) and notes that Contract theory “justifies subjection by presenting it as freedom,” arguing that one must inevitably agree to be dominated, or ruled, by another human being (40). In a BDSM relationship, these contracts remain key to maintaining the consensual nature of the relationship, as they are “negotiated, drafted, and framed in much the same manner as conventional contracts” (“Nonbinding Bondage”).

These are pseudo-contracts though, meaning they cannot hold up in a court, unlike a typical marriage document. Pateman notes that “there is no paper headed ‘The Marriage Contract’ to be signed…the unwritten contract of marriage…is codified in the law governing marriage and family life,” which “constitutes” the act of marriage (164); however, it is consummated through two acts, one being the saying of “I do,” a “performative utterance,” and the other being sex (164). The contract, much like the performance that goes into a marriage, lays out the roles each person must play in the relationship. Pateman notes that “the only contract that can be entered into safely is one in which agreement and performance take place at the same time,” explaining why Christian does not touch Ana—in the way he truly desires—until she gives him written consent (45). A dominant, just like a submissive, must uphold a sense of his allotted power, similarly to husbands over the wives in traditional marriages. If that balance becomes broken, or if “a male individual manages to conquer a female individual…[then] she…becomes the servant of a master” (Pateman 48). This grows further when Pateman argues that differences between sexes does not remain “sufficient to ensure…natural mastery,” but rather there must also be a business contract where one individual’s will fails (51), asserting a political right, as well as sexual, over the submissive.

As stated earlier, a fine line exists between the levels of power allowed in a BDSM relationship, especially the one in Fifty Shades of Grey, which resides in a period of time focused on the binary of sexuality—normal and deviant. BDSM, and sexuality itself, “acts as a theater of conversion, ostentatiously reenacting roles from the everyday culture of power in order to expose, parody, and challenge the seemingly ‘natural’ hierarchies they represent,” in this way, contracts and marriages are presented as power play (“Nonbinding Bondage”). Power is “the ultimate pleasure, the final human fulfillment” within a BDSM relationship (Burgess 282), and the contract allows for a legalistic preservation of that power. When Christian offers the nondisclosure agreement, he states that there are two options for them, “some impossibly high ideal…or debas[ing]”
(Grey 95) and either way, his lawyer “insists on it” (Grey 95), offering the legal side to the argument that subtly affirms that the seducer must be “reined in by the appropriate masculine authorities” (Boone 101).

Such masculine authorities, as in the comedic traditional plots, emerge in the patriarchal figures, the religious figures such as clergymen, or the judiciary or legal figures such as law enforcement. Pateman asserts that “men’s right over women has a natural bias,” arguing that no matter what, there remains no individual masculinity (41). However, in Fifty Shades of Grey, the masculine authority appears to be out of the picture. The only authority left to rule over Christian resides in the legal system and therefore, the contract—which plays metaphorically through the marriage of the hero and heroine in comedic traditional plots, where neither the hero or heroine physically signs anything— restructures social harmony as a place where deviancy is not deemed immoral or incorrect, as traditional social unity would have them believe. James’ seduction narrative, in order to protect the creation of harmony and avoid the certain death of the heroine, morphs into a courtship narrative and proceeds through the traditional marriage tract from there.

Though the seduction plot traditionally ends with the heroine’s physical death, Ana’s break up with Christian at the end of Fifty Shades of Grey reflects a metaphorical death from his way of life, leading to her rebirth and inevitable re-degradation, or second fall back into his lifestyle in Fifty Shades Darker; this time however, Christian works not as a seducer, but as a courtier, eventually turning away from a “civilized form of contractual slavery” (Pateman 71) to the thought of marriage. Not until Fifty Shades Freed, though, does the reader see Christian as substantial husband material, not only because of the actual marriage that occurs between Ana and himself, but also because of his changed demeanor. He says multiple times that he “[would] lay [his] world at [Ana’s] feet,” and proposes because “[he’s] finally met someone [he] want[s] to spend the rest of [his] life with,” underlining a change in character made post-breakup (Darker 454) and reflecting what Benjamin notes as the dialectic of control— where “the self requires the opportunity to act and have an effect on the other to affirm…existence,” implying a necessary union between two independent selves regardless of the tension and domination, in order to achieve a sacrificial self (53). Ana’s second fall, when she returns to Christian and stays with him, confirms Benjamin’s assertion that “in losing her own self, she is gaining access, however circumscribed, to a more powerful one” (61). The more powerful identity, though, resides in a place of previously projected aggression.
and omnipotence, causing “complete assimilation of the other and the self” (Benjamin 67), thereby destroying the individual identities until one fights back.

This identity issue resides in Boone’s list of obstacles for lovers, which also includes wrong suitors. In Fifty Shades Darker, Ana’s boss, Jack Hyde, functions as this wrong suitor, coming on to her in the office and inviting her out for drinks. Towards the end of the book, he states that Ana is “so turned on…[and has] really led [him] on,” as he expected some gratitude (Darker 368). He makes moves to rape her, but Ana knees him in the groin, allowing an escape. Another unrequited lover is Leila, who stood outside Ana’s work when she left one evening. She previously: “[makes] a haphazard attempt to open a vein” after breaking into Christian’s apartment and scaring his housekeeper (Darker 84), breaks in to his apartment again, and slashed the tires of Ana’s car (Darker 170), finally takes Ana at gun point in her own apartment (Darker 308). After Christian asserts dominance over the situation, Ana states that she’s no good for Christian, that she “can’t be everything [he] need[s],” and prepares to leave him again, until he “drops to his knees…head bowed…hands spread out on his thighs” in submissive mode—something he has not done in his relationship with Ana (Darker 320-321).

The scenes function as “delayed gratification,” or the idea that the true lovers need to be kept apart in a courtship, so as to keep the story moving forward (Boone 80). As stated earlier, each narrative plot ends with some harmony that reflects the society’s outcome from this relationship. Christian remains torn between “pathetic and erotic urges,” something that presents challenges for the relationship and reflects the “similarity between conventionally tragic and comedic ends of love” (Boone 85).

De Sade noted that “every exchange is—has to be—a challenge,” especially when it comes out of a rejection, where he asserts that it becomes a “combative exchange, the reciprocity of partners engaged in a duel” (Hénaff 221). The unrequited lovers factor into this because they act as a hindrance to the exchange, getting between Ana and Christian. The epistolary form, an important factor in the courtship narrative, acts as a development of the challenge De Sade discussed as well; it requires work and thought from both sides of the relationship, something not needed within some of the marriage plots. Letters allow for a disembodied conversation to occur, where there might be more emotion conveyed than through verbal exchange. The Fifty Shades trilogy features an epistolary approach. In Fifty Shades Darker, the epistolary form takes a modern form with the use of email, where Ana and Christian write emails back
and forth while he courts her back to him. In these emails, Christian remains both professional and loving, stating that “[he] notes that tomorrow is the gallery opening for [Ana’s friend’s] show…sure [Ana’s] not had time to purchase a car, and it’s a long drive,” he then goes on to offer to drive her (Darker 7).

Though this reads like his reversion to charms, it actually demonstrates a distinct shift from the flirtations in the emails after Christian bought Ana the computer to research phrases and words on the BDSM contract. He stated then things like “I’d like to award another A. The first one was so well deserved. ;)”—for a blow job Ana had performed, suggesting he desired another one, or that he wanted her to please him in some other fashion— or “Lucky Charlie Tango”—responding to Ana’s email about the blow up helicopter, Charlie Tango, tied to her bed, insinuating that he wanted to be tied to the bed, or in keeping with the dominant nature of his personality, that he wanted her tied to his bed (Grey 184, 310). These emails, occurring during the seduction phase, did just that—seduce. The emails at the beginning of the second book demonstrate that he wants to see Ana again and will do anything to keep them in contact; he also wants to remind her what he’s like in a form she would be likely to respond to. Though the emails shift back to a more seductive and flirtatious tone later on, other obstacles remain in the way, reiterating the fact that no matter what, the two must be kept apart for the story to continue.

The interesting aspect of the courtship, then, lies in the end marriage. In order for this, Christian has to undergo a “transformation into a worthy suitor,” which seems to occur gradually throughout the books (Boone 95). Fostered by Ana, his growth seems most illuminated by the amount of personal details shared. In the beginning of Fifty Shades of Grey, Christian could hardly get through a platonic interview without dodging certain questions, such as “would [his] friends say [he’s] easy to get to know,” to which he responded that he “[goes] a long way to protect [his] privacy…[and doesn’t] often give interviews,” (11-12). He dives deeper into his personal feelings when he responds to Ana’s questions about early memories with the fact that he can recall his mother, “the crack whore” baking a birthday cake, that his adopted mother saved him and how he “thought she was an angel when [he] first met her,” and finally, when he states that he loves Ana and she’s his “lifeline” (Darker 291, 326). James recognizes that the only way for Christian to really change “depends on our ‘seeing’ him in a changed context…provided for
by narrative ellipses” (Boone 95), which comes into play in Fifty Shades Freed, where the reader sees a legitimate marriage between the two.

Nothing changes drastically for the couple, in terms of the BDSM or their relationship, until the moment that Ana winds up pregnant. Here, a new context, and a new side of the relationship, forms for the pair, continuing the courtship narrative. Now, in the emails sent back and forth between husband and wife, there’s a shortness, curtness, to them and they lose the intimacy factor. Ana notes in an aside that “[she is] not going to tell [him] [about the baby] via e-mail,” which implies a growth to her character (Freed 415). Where before she could barely speak to him about the BDSM aspect of their relationship via e-mail, now she prefers to speak about darker, more dangerous topics face-to-face, resulting in her “undergo[ing] the cause and effect of personal growth in narrative time” (Boone 95). The narrative time remains important because Ana centers as the narrative frame of consciousness—the reader understands the book through her point of view and, without this real-time growth, the actions of Christian would not make sense. It remains her job to “wait rather than initiate,” setting up the epilogue at the end, where Christian develops into a closer version of both the father and husband Ana desired and knew him to be.

Though they never lose the sexual nature of their relationship, the BDSM develops into a more substantial relationship, where love can attempt to grow and survive. As in Jane Austen’s comedically traditional marriage plot, Pride and Prejudice, where she gives the reader narrative closure by offering the presumption of a wedding without showing a wedding, James offers a semblance of the childbirth without actually writing it into the whole story. The narrative courtship/seduction ends on the lines, “life is never going to be boring with Christian, and I’m in this for the long haul. I love this man: my husband, my lover, father of my child, my sometimes Dominant,” demonstrating Christian’s time-lapsed change (Freed 530) and, therefore, their successful courtship. Boone asserts that “the major impediment to successful courtship plotting … [is] the sexual ideology structuring its ends,” as adult, female identity inherently comes with sexual awakening (96). By front loading a seduction narrative onto a courtship plot, James understands the juxtaposed issues and how they mesh together, “enforcing a closure pattern of transcendence...that works to reinforce both cultural standards of morality and literary ideals of poetic justice” (Boone 99). Though Ana subscribes to the destiny of most female characters—motherhood and domesticity—the route she took to arrive there—a BDSM relation-
ship—rebelling against sexual rules, allowing for both a seduction and courtship to occur.

Inherently, narrative logic in the courtship thrives on the contradictions of the reformed “rake,” which develops directly from the Marquis de Sade. His belief of the literary subject “is rational, focused on self-preservation…treat[ing] material objects in a mode of pure subjection,” and then “reveals that not only is Reason unable to provide a moral guide to behavior…it is the very mechanism that alienates us from the world…others…and…ourselves,” where consent only makes sense if in corroboration with Reason (Illouz 79). By marrying the inherent seduction further into the courtship narrative of her Fifty Shades of Grey trilogy, E.L. James actively grapples with the ideology of marriage and its social and formal implications, allowing for more comedically traditional plot conclusion, which include an epistolary narrative, external unrequited lovers, and satisfactory narrative closure; the extensive intermingling of two different, yet similar, marital narratives asserts a required unity of plots, even as it demonstrates that the binary of sexuality, deviant or normative, remains faulty, fluid, and altogether separate from the institution of marriage.

Works Cited


Everybody Loves Downton Abbey
DANIELLE SMITH spends her time reading, writing, and running. She pretends she is a mad scientist as she dissects piles of articles and then sews them back together with the thread of her own ideas. She loves travelling and family and wants to find a way to show her family the world.
When creating a courtship plot in a fictional text, the marriage becomes a fixed goal to which the narrative reaches. The trials that come throughout the intended couple’s relationship enhance the audience’s anticipation and yearning for that union. While the courtship may have a tragic result where the pair does not end with marriage or the couple finds themselves in an unhappy union where they feel trapped together, the end of the text comes with a resolution of either a successful union or a failed pairing. And so, in a narrative medium like television that focus on courtship and marriage as a central theme, but which do not have a specific ending the plot drives towards, the writer must approach the subject differently. A television series that does not run from a pre-published text needs to find ways keep to the audience interested with continual hurdles to overcome for its protagonists, but it must also satisfy to some degree the audience’s need to see hard-fought-for courtships come to an end, whether in success or failure. The emotional investments to the characters which the audience spends many hours developing enhance the desire to see important milestones of their lives unfold. Downton Abbey, a dramatic series produced by ITV and directed by Julian Fellowes, focuses on the lives and romances of the inhabitants of Downton Abbey, both the upper-class family and the servants for the estate. While other themes like war and politics play important roles in the series, the complex social, political, and historical issues that come up through the series often serve to drive character development and courtship plots. The historical backdrop for the show
influences how the romances unfold and interacts with the characters’ attitudes, but in the end the history comes second to the relationships built within the home.

The writers of *Downton Abbey* approach writing an ongoing narrative of courtship by creating a central marriage plot that drives the story of the family and the house while allowing time to develop shorter plots that go on concurrently to the larger narrative. Though the nature of a television drama allows for the plotline to become considerably lengthened, the courtship must arrive at a particular goal. The writers choose to follow the eldest child of the house, Lady Mary Crawley, through her journey to find a suitable marriage. To secure a place within British society in the early 20th century, Mary needs a marriage to a respectable, upper-class man. Mary risks losing her home and financial security when her betrothed, who is also the next heir to the estate, dies aboard the Titanic crash. Her story after this exposition, while compelling, follows a more traditional marriage plot of the double proposal when she first rejects the proposal of the next heir in line to Downton only much later to accept a second proposal from the same man. The blame for why it takes Mary so long to finally end up with her intended spouse, Matthew Crawley, rests solely on the actions of the pair of lovers and not on society around them. Mary even has a number of other suitors who would satisfy the requirements of social status but do not fulfill the role of companionship and she must reject them. In juxtaposition to their central relationship, the show creates a number of other courtships and marriages at different social levels and speeds of development that can satisfy the urge for resolution for the audience. These sub-plots reflect the central marriage plot and provide insight and a place to question the culture itself. And while the central plot relies on familiarity and a stable view of the society of the time, the counter-traditional marriage plots surrounding it allow for an examination of the times and the class structure. These sub-plots also allow for the central plot to be lengthened and spread out over several seasons. The story of Mary’s courtship and marriage acts as a familiar center for the audience, while the other marriage plots allow for the audience to question the society and institution of marriage.

In the traditional marriage plot, the question of the success of a courtship or marriage comes not from the institution of marriage or the society endorsing the standards of marriage, but from the people participating in the courtship. Romantic novels, like the works of Jane Austen, developed a tradition of imagery, plot development, and char-
acter traits that feel familiar and comfortable to audiences when they reappear in *Downton Abbey*. Marriage works to define the boundaries and standards of society and often reinforces the class division. As the audience learns throughout the course of the series, Lord Robert Crawley, the head of the estate, and Lady Cora Crawley, his wife, married for convenience instead of any affection towards one another. Cora comes from a rich American family while Robert has the land and title but was financially destitute. By combining her finances with his position as landed gentry, the pair works together to form a balanced and stable family. As a couple, they uphold the social and family traditions and eventually come to love one another. As Joseph Allen Boone writes in his work *Tradition Counter Tradition: Love and the Form of Fiction*, “… as a brief detour into sociological and anthropological theory makes clear, the marriage rite in almost all cultures plays a central role in sustaining a structured social order” (36). *Downton Abbey* begins in the year 1912 and for the British nobility of the era, maintaining social status and order through their marriages was the most important issue alongside maintaining the household. The nobility represented a social status for the community and so their job was to represent a stable and cohesive household. The need for social structure only strengthens as the series goes into and through the First World War and the world “moves on” as the characters often refer to it. As the way of life for the upper-class is threatened through rationing and changing social ideals, marriages uphold the older class structure. And so, when the fate of the household comes into question at the beginning of the first season, obtaining reputable marriages for the daughters takes on added importance to help navigate the financial difficulties ahead. This balancing of the societal needs and uses of marriage also hearkens back on the traditional marriage novel, as Sally Palmer notes when she writes about the series’ similarities to *Pride and Prejudice*, “In addition to setting, the major themes of both Austen’s novels and Julian Fellowes’ series are likewise closely aligned. These themes arise from and relate to the central motif of the family estate. Financial insecurity is an ongoing common topic” (An Heir Presumptive 246). *Downton* creates a familiar base for its viewers to associate with a traditional novel concerning the marriage plot. But as a television series, a simple linear progression that serves to solve the dilemma of the household does not have the ability for fruitful development to sustain the series through multiple seasons, particularly when no end for the project is in sight. And so the writers portray a richer sense of the culture by developing characters
outside of the central focus. Mary’s parents, the heads of the Downton household, come to show the older society and the most traditional views of marriage.

Robert, Earl of Grantham, and Lady Cora Crawley, the parents of the daughters living in the estate, represent the wedlock plot of the traditional marriage. Boone while defining the two portions of “wed” and “lock” in the wedlock plot, states, “…the former pattern, tracing the process of the lover’s conversion to a socially viable perspective, emphasizes the ‘wed’ of wedlock as its goal, while the latter variant focuses on the ‘locked’ condition of marriage as that which generates the complications to be resolved” (76). The couple upholds the marriage ideal within their society while showing a potential path the daughters could take, complete with its hazards. Robert and Cora represent an older method of marriage for convenience and not for preexisting feelings of love or companionship with the expectation of love coming later. But showing a totally harmonious couple would not only be unrealistic, it would be against the tenets of the genre. If the show had portrayed a perfect couple, the audience would not invest the same amount of attention and care towards these characters, effectively stymieing any scene the couple shared alone. And so the pair faces a series of obstacles similar to their courting daughters so that the relationship can be reestablished as a valuable trait in society. As Julian Fellowes noted in a recent interview, “Happiness is quite a difficult concept when you have an ongoing drama. What you can’t do is have everything go right. Then you’re just left with a couple saying, ‘Did you have a good day, darling?’ ‘Terrific, why don’t you sit down while I get dinner?’”. Showing troubles within the marriage does not mean that the individual marriage or the institution of marriage is necessarily troubled: in this case of the elder Crawleys, it allows for character development, audience interest, and a reaffirmation of their marriage when they solve their current dilemmas. But because of Robert and Cora’s place as a representation of the older methods of marriage, the troubles the pair faces must represent personal mistakes and not a problem with the institution. As Boone writes on the place of wedlock plot within the traditional marriage genre, “…the narrative of wedded life lacks the teleological finality or courtship and seduction movements, and partly because too complete a representation of the married state runs the risk of becoming… a deconstruction of its ideality” (113). And so Fellowes must allow for troubles to arise within the relationship to expand the narrative time frame and to establish the traditional marriage as viable and functioning. As the eldest children
and the heir to titles and fortunes, Mary and Matthew live and operate under the rules of the traditional marriage that Mary’s parents represent.

The courtship and marriage of Mary Crawley to her cousin and the heir to the Grantham estate, Matthew Crawley, becomes the central movement throughout the series. Their relationship represents an unthreatening link between the audience and the traditional literary marriage plot but introduced with a modern presentation. Mary and Matthew participate in a double proposal, similar to many in Austen’s work, where Mary initially rejects Matthew’s advances so that the pair may grow and solve their personal and financial issues before the pair can become one. Karen Tracey writes on the purpose of the double proposal that, “Double-proposal novels pose questions and problems about courtship and marriage in the rejected proposal(s) and then partially answer those questions or solve those problems with the accepted proposal” (7). But while Mary’s initial refusal seems to promote female autonomy by asking whether or not a woman can refuse to marry and stay respectable in the society, her reason for the initial refusal is because of a personal mistake, taking a lover, and not because of a question of whether marriage best suits her situation and desires. An emphasis on only partially answering the questions that arise between the two proposals is important particularly for a television series which needs the potential for conflict buried within earlier texts. So Mary and Matthew come to represent a split between an older tradition of courtship of need while presenting their situation in a modernized fashion that allows for personal autonomy and questioning.

While the previous generation searched to find mates who would complete or elevate a person’s social status, Mary and Matthew represent a newer tradition of marriage in which upholding social values is equally as important as finding love and companionship in a partner. This means that for a complete union between partners in the traditional marriage plot, the two must be compatible in social status and personality traits, with love coming before the marriage can take place. As Boone writes,” … the yearning of lovers to reach a total ‘oneness’ of being—enduring in the courtship plot’s momentum toward the ‘happy ending’ that simultaneously functions as a return to a narrative immobility or ‘oneness’” (Tradition 38). That desire for oneness drives the pair together against the mounting obstacles that separates them, because as they overcome one obstacle—such as when Mary almost steeps the family in scandal with her secret affair with the Turkish diplomat—another obstacle arises, as Matthew risking paralysis during World War I or his engagement to
another woman. The pair are “meant to be” as his soon to be brother-in-law, Tom Branson, directly tells Matthew before he delivers the final proposal, the reservations are caused solely by the characters actions (2011 Christmas Special). Mary feels guilty hiding her affair from Matthew as she tries to protect the household and Matthew likewise experiences his own guilt over his fiancé Lavinia’s death “of a broken heart”, both times when their feelings and actions prevented their union (2.8). While the pair handles contemporary topics, such as pre-marital affairs and the right of women to inherit, the way the show handles the subject and the appearance the characters present falls back on traditional motifs. Fellowes presents imagery that harkens back to dramas akin to Austen and the Bronte sisters with sweeping landscapes and grand estates and adherence to social rules. The pair remains faithful to the traditional courtship plot, but they are presented to the audience in a modernized style: “Today’s television audiences appreciate the scrupulous attention to period authenticity in props and costumes but still expect characters to exhibit modern preferences in figures, makeup, grooming, and orthodontia” (Palmer 253). This presentation allows modern audiences a familiar plotline while not alienating the audience with antiquated visual cues. Mary and Matthew anchor the series, their marriage plot driving the series through the first several seasons. But while a novel tries to solve the obstacles so that the couple can come together, a central relationship in a television series prolongs the action, introducing new obstacles alongside side plots to provide compelling action. The central plot of Mary and Matthew does not question the society but instead focuses on presenting a modern version of the traditional plot: the stories and relationships of the rest of the household inhabitants provide both closure and satisfaction in their plots and the room to question society.

_Downton Abbey_ uses counter traditional marriage plots alongside the main storyline to extend the time it takes to unfold the double proposal plotline. This allows the audience to see miniature conclusions to romantic plots while they wait for the main plot to come to fruition. The subplots also allow an outlet where the drama can question the institution of marriage and society’s rules that pertain to it without overthrowing the whole genre. Placing Mary and Matthew at the center of the series establishes that, in the grand scheme of things, the series will work to uphold courtship and marriage as the idealized center of society. But to appeal to a broader, more modern audience than just the readers of traditional romantic novels, the writers of this series spend a significant amount of time developing personalities and romantic plots for char-
acters of varying social status whose marriage plots are complicated by boundaries set by society. The shift from the traditional marriage plot which upholds the idealized version of marriage to a presentation of marriage that questioned not only the character’s actions but marriage as a whole began around the second half of the 19th century, so it is only appropriate that Downtown Abbey, which bridges the gap between upholding and questioning, would begin in 1912, not long after the shift begins. As Boone describes at the beginning of his section discussing the counter traditional marriage plot:

Eliot and James were to join a select group of novelists whose reaction was to translate the unease of marital discord into the text itself. By developing techniques that involved the temporal and spatial dislocation, duplication, juxtaposition, and irresolution of various narrative “parts,” their texts began to counter the formulaic trajectories, converging lines, and climactic “discharge” endemic to the prototypical Anglo-American love-plot. (142)

Downton uses many of these techniques to develop the romantic lives of the secondary characters of the household. These other relationships run concurrently with the main plot and while they come to the next stage of their progress sooner than Mary and Matthew, the relationships often reflect the main story.

The relationship of Mary’s maid, Anna Smith, and John Bates, Robert Crawley’s valet, begins during the same time frame as Mary’s relationship to Matthew and the pair faces troubles that run in juxtaposition against the main storyline to question the fate of a couple when social status matters. From the beginning of Anna and John’s interaction, the pair struggles to create a union. Though the couple was relatively open with their affection to one another because a relationship between the two would have no long standing effect on the home or community, Anna and John face troubles first to their marriage in general and then to creating a happy home after they do finally marry. But for Anna and John’s situation, the development of their plot focuses on miniature resolutions followed by further conflict, keeping the audience in a state of concern over their relationship while allowing small releases in scenes of bliss between the pair. While Anna and John only enjoy brief glimmers of happiness before more turmoil occurs, in contrast Mary and Matthew deal with comparatively minor personal issues while dragging through their grand decision of who to marry. This leads the audience
to question the amount of weight given to the upper class marriages. Often, Anna and Mary discuss their relationships privately in Mary's bedroom, showing Anna desperately in love but unable to move in the situation while Mary approaches her relationships with the attitude of a shrewd businessman, considering what each suitor can provide along with her personal feelings. And the writers take care to leave the Bates' as an admirable pair throughout their ordeals so that the audience connects, as Fellowes says in an interview, “Bates and Anna have that, with a key difference, which is that they have a very strong love with each other. Anna is one of the most admirable characters in the series” (The New York Times). Their relationship takes a beating because of outside forces and uncontrollable circumstances, sometimes relating directly to their station in life. But sometimes within the series even social status and the willingness to work for a relationship, certain things cannot manage to form a successful relationship.

While the writers portray Anna and John Bates as a loving couple who must constantly battle to keep their love alive, other characters find themselves in a loop that will never be resolved. Mary enacts scenes of replication throughout the series where the similar events occur with minor changes that help to progress the plot and signify character development. On the other hand, Lady Edith, the second of Robert Crawley's three daughters, shows scenes of duplication without the growth between acts or any change in outcome. The plot continuously delivers Edith with hope for a happier future within a marriage, or at least teases her with its image and potential. As Fellowes says on the character, “I think in life there are people who are unlucky — the bread always falls with the butter side down. Edith is an example of that” (The New York Times). While the situation will fall through until she can finally unite with Matthew, Mary keeps finding herself with suitors and proposals, but Edith instead finds herself at the end of each encounter with a new man in at least the same situation if not worse. Blacker says, “The Aristotelian theory that the conflict must be large enough to change the central character remains valid in the film script. If the problem is not important enough to change the character, the viewers' reasons for watching it have been removed” (13). Mary gets to grow and change through her experiences but Fellowes chooses Edith to become the punching bag of society. First Edith finds herself in a romance with an older man who is scared away by Mary, then in an unsuccessful love affair with a farmer which lands her back at home without a job again to wait to be married off, then the older man comes back only to run away from the
altar because of the age difference, and finally Edith gets pregnant out of wedlock by a man who then immediately leaves the country and is murdered. Instead of fulfilling the hopes of the viewers, any suitor leads Edith back to Downton to wait and languish. And while Edith desperately wants to uphold a traditional system of marriage and contribute to the society like her parents and sister, Mary, other characters search to buck tradition and question society which subsequently becomes the center of their courtship plot.

*Downton Abbey* presents a politically active and progressive pair that spans the gap of different socio-economical stations with Lady Sybil, the youngest of Robert Crawley’s daughters, and Tom Branson, the Irish chauffeur for the family. The introduction of this couple questions the implication of social spheres in English culture. Sybil’s storyline begins relatively traditionally when, in the first season, she goes through her formal presentation to society as a woman old enough to begin courting. But as the series develops, her views evolve on political opinions on class and gender equality and she begins to actively pursue her beliefs. She first enters the field of political progressives when she attends highly charged and dangerous political rallies, with Tom as her guide and accomplice. And later during the war, she works as a nurse despite the image it may cast to have a nobly born lady in the midst of the death and dismemberment. Sybil begins, much like her sisters, as a woman waiting to be wed because, as Carole Pateman writes in “Feminism and the Marriage Contract,” “Social custom and law deprived women of the opportunity to earn their own living, so that marriage was their only hope of a decent life” (158). But she wants something more and attempts to find it through political and social work. Through this process of self-growth and a deeper understanding of social order, Sybil catches the attention of Tom Branson, an outspoken Irish socialist with plans to level the field between the upper and lower classes. While the pair wants to enact real change in the social system, they find themselves pulled back towards the upper-class life at Downton because the writers believe the audience, much like the Dowager Countess puts it, “Do not like Greek dramas, where everything happens off stage” (2.1). Tom and Sybil leave the estate for Ireland at the end of season two only to return early in season three because of implications of Tom’s involvement in violent Irish revolutionary actions. Normally for the upper-class, securing the marriage is the most important part of a young woman’s life, especially when her name carries a title with it. As Pateman goes on to say, “’Wife’ is the only position that [women’s] upbringing, lack of education and training, and
social and legal pressures realistically leave open to them” (161). And so, Sybil, trying to break free from the grasp of her social class tries to fill in the gap with an education, not to become more valuable as a wife but to gain some personal experience. Sybil comes back and instead of separating herself as less desireable, finds herself in a marriage because of the traits she develops through her education. While the relationship is based on companionship and compatibility, Sybil still falls into the role of wife and mother until her death during childbirth. Pateman later says, “To contract a marriage was to consent to a status which in its essence was hierarchical and unalterable” (166). But in the case of Sybil and Tom, she cannot break free from her social status through an act of rebellion but instead brings him up to hers. This allows audiences to see the shifting, tenuous atmosphere and let it develop the characters over the years represented in the series without leaving the home. While it would be likely for a noble woman to be exiled for running away with a servant or at the least it would be unusual for her to be welcomed home, the sacrifices to authenticity help to continue the relationship between the viewers and the characters. And while the society emphasizes the importance of marital unions, the show also portrays unions outside of marriage that continue to help form a functioning society.

Beyond the courtships and struggles to maintain a marriage that fill the household, *Downton Abbey* shows a series of unions, or metaphorical marriages, between people who cannot ever get married within this society to show the bonds created by running the household and the strength of unions needed to run what essentially is a small community under a single roof. Some of the most intimate relationships developed within the show form between the family and their personal servants. Mary finds in many circumstances that the only person she can talk to about her troubles and the only source of complete non-judgment is her maid, Anna. Even when the Turkish diplomat, Kamal Pamuk, dies in Mary’s bed, Anna is the first person Mary turns to and she keeps the secret to herself. For Robert Crawley, his relationship with his valet, John Bates, not only revolves around the intimacy of dressing and undressing and talking through life’s situations, but the two have a history together fighting in the Boer War. These relationships form metaphorical marriages in which the pair develops a deep level of companionship with dependency on one another. The two people still enact the unequal relationship of husband and wife, using their socio-economical position to reflect their respective gender roles in the marriage. In these marriages, the lower class servant takes the role of the wife, who is dependant for
her livelihood on the other half of the relationship while providing advice and emotional support; the family members fill the role of the husband, providing financial stability and recognition in society. Or, as Pateman would write, “A married couple cannot contract to change the ‘essentials’ of marriage, which are seen as ‘the husband’s duty to support his wife, and the wife’s duty to serve her husband’” (Feminism 165). While Pateman was literally referring to the gender stratification within the marriage, within *Downton Abbey* the social class of the character trumps gender in many extents and therefore the hierarchy of the marriage is determined by social status. So, within the household, *Downton Abbey* manages to show a series of marriages that follow the tenets of a traditional, hierarchical marriage with non-traditional same-gendered participants. This allows the audience to see meaningful interactions and develop interest across the lines of social status while not diminishing the drama and tension developed through the relationship of Sybil and Tom.

*Downton Abbey* relies on presenting a relatively traditional depiction of the marriage plot, at least through the main story with of Mary and Matthew which drives the plot for the first several seasons. But to appeal to a modern audience, the show needs to rely on contemporary filming styles, with quick scenes and multiple concurrent storylines, as well as present the characters in an updated fashion. The characters inhabit a previous era in history, but their actions and reactions must speak to a contemporary audience and create a bond that can last through an extended amount of time. The time frame of a television series can be a blessing or a curse in that the viewer has ample time to build an emotional attachment to the characters, but if that character does not have a compelling story, then the viewer could lose interest in the show as a whole. Palmer writes:

While Austen characters disappear when the movie or miniseries ends at the conclusion of the novel’s trajectory, Downton’s inhabitants must continue to interest and attract viewers week after week, through multiple seasons. Without a historical text to restrict divergence, its writers have therefore felt freer to create modern and continuously malleable characters in period costumes and settings, in essence creating their own world rather than the one lost in the past (Heir Presumptive 253).

The text is influenced by the history of the time, its politics and wars and social customs resonate with the real historical context given for
the show and influence the way the characters act but just as strongly as the history bolsters the events of the show and drive the plot, the literary customs of this sort of drama drive the show just as much. The show is set beginning in 1912 and is currently in season 5 running to 1925, years of great tumult and upheaval with the First World War, the Spanish Flu, and several important political fights; the characters of the household could not avoid these changes. Downton manages these major movements in history by allowing the audience to see how the characters react and change, sometimes in surprising ways., “The stuff of drama is the character who does not react exactly as expected” (Blacker 38). These surprising reactions, like Matthew initially refusing Mary’s returned affections after Lavinia’s death though he admits his love to her, drives audience excitement and brings viewers back to the estate for another episode, season after season.

Tying together everything from the series is the image of the home, the castle which gives its name to the series and the center of all of the action and drama. No one truly owns the castle, though many call it home. As Robert says to his daughter Mary, “My fortune is the work of others who labored to build a great dynasty. Do I have the right to destroy their work or impoverish that dynasty? I am a custodian, my dear, not an owner. I must strive to be worthy of the task I’ve been set” (1.4). Not even the head of the household feels that he may lay claim to Downton and so through the representations of gender and social class, everyone within the building works to create it into a working home and a microcosm of the larger society outside of it. The servants build the hearth and food and the family provides for it in a marriage to each other, a marriage to the home, and a marriage to the rules for the society.

Works Cited


SARAH ROBERTSON is a passionate, petulant, and perpetually over analyzing achiever, feminist, wife, and mother who loves Disney and watching cartoons, often without the excuse of her daughter. She enjoys cooking and is inspired by Food Network shows, but don’t ask her to bake - it’s too much like math. Her frequent use of curse words, or “textual flavor enhancers,” combined with her penchant for finding the phallic in everything, probably barred her from one or two PTA meetings.
Patricia Heaton’s glowing retrospective on her time with Everybody Loves Raymond is as bizarre as the media trend that the series precipitated. Looking upwards, downwards and off to the side, her repeated avoidance of direct eye contact with the camera’s gaze complements her stance of universal generalizing in which she begins with “Like most women who - ” (TVLEGENDS). From there, she finds rhetorical strength to continue her reflection by reaching for a stock sitcom conflict, observing that “It’s not enough that their husbands go out and earn a living. They also have to be sensitive and help with the kids and change diapers and go grocery shopping and remember your anniversary…” thereby blurring the line between anecdotes, assumedly shared wifely experience, and her character on the series, Debra Barone. However, Patricia Heaton’s conclusion intimates an ironic distance from her and American wives’ own entanglement of sitcom fiction with sitcom reality. With a momentary wincing shrug, perhaps rehearsed from her time spent as Raymond Barone’s belabored wife, she offers that for husbands the previously numerated tasks are “too much to ask.” Her smiling summation of the marriage experience represents all that is sitcom; the purposefully unhelpful bad husband is delineated from one who is “just an idiot” and “can’t help it,” thereby mixing pity and patience into criticism. The uneasy bedmates of criticism and acceptance reveal a tension – a lack of cohesion that involves both the form and content of situational comedy. Whatever critique Heaton may be subtly offering on sitcom or social gender roles, her professional smile remains for it is a
smile that acknowledges that television comedy success lies in continu-
ance. The plot contrivances and stereotypes present in Everybody Loves
Raymond are the fuel that kept the series running.

Marriage, like that of Raymond and Debra Barone, however, is also
about endings. Whether in the exemplars and progenitors of the classic
marriage novel listed with exhaustive thoroughness and organizational
skill by Joseph Allen Boone in Tradition Counter Tradition: Love and
the Form of Fiction or in Disney films and romantic comedies, marriage
is the (happy) ending. Marriage, through the convention of its use and
form, signifies a resolution and thus combats the very nature of a sitcom
which relies on rehashing of old conflicts ostensibly and traditionally
solved by the institution of marriage itself. Though a sitcom like Every-
body Loves Raymond uses the archetypes and other structural elements
from traditional marriage novels, it fails to achieve the intended cultural
and aesthetic resolution of the form. Understanding that the marriage
plot is often part and companion to comedy, more specifically the New
Comedic attributes masterfully categorized by Northrop Frye in his essay
on comic fictional modes, the lack of cohesion and resolution in sitcom
marriages brings an element of unexpected and ironic tragedy to the
sitcom genre. The term tragedy, that while both pointedly referencing
the Shakespearean refining of both comedy and tragedy in the Bard's uti-
lization of the dramatic forms and the nearest, albeit polarized, neighbor
in Boone's and Frye's historicizing of fiction, more qualifies a resulting
unease and discomfort of the modern audience who struggles to conceive
of episodes' happy or humorous endings. In fact, the complicating and
often impotent efforts of Everybody Loves Raymond to use traditional
comedic and marital forms to work towards a comically cathartic happy
ending earns the sitcom a place in the tradition of counter traditional
marital works, assuming a retrospective, modern audience and adopting
a lens of social critique, bolstered by a feminist perspective.

Comedy is not to be equated with humor, at least not in respect to
its tradition in fiction. As forewarned by media critic Antonio Savorelli,
“The idea of comedy as something that ‘makes one laugh’ is not only
reductive but not necessarily true” (5). Such an exclusive understanding
relies too heavily on the modern reader's experience with the media
genre of the same name and fails to honor the history of comedy as a
form, especially in in regards to its earliest incarnation in classical lit-
erature. Nothrop Frye, however, offers a much more traditional and yet
simultaneously inclusive summation of comedy; to him, “The theme of
the comic is the integration of society” (43). From the plays of Greco-
Roman antiquity and Elizabethan Shakespeare and on through early 20th century novels, the “comedy” of a text comes when unmoored, undesirable, or non-contributing members of a fictional society are neatly organized into social roles and smaller social structures like the family. The “catharsis of corresponding comic emotions, which are sympathy and ridicule” complement the redemptive act of this incorporation in steps: the reader/audience ridicules the (yet) unintegrated members of society and their efforts towards inclusion while sympathizing in joyous relief when the happy ending finds the characters belonging to their world and community, perhaps the progenitor of the laughter reflexively, yet reductively, equated with comedy (Frye 43). Taking these two markers of traditional comedy together as a framework – social integration and an audience-felt catharsis of ridicule and sympathy— the other various tropes and characteristics of comedy fill in as smaller structures that work together towards meeting those directives.

Comedy includes a set of plot formulas that direct the narrative movement towards social integration. Frye valorizes New Comedy and its respective tenets in his research as will this study for the purpose of clarity, focus, and in respect to New Comedy’s multimedia prevalence. As neatly summarized by Frye, “New Comedy normally presents an erotic intrigue between a young man and a young woman which is blocked by some kind of opposition…and [is] resolved by a twist in the plot” (44). Playing once again on the modern reader’s bias with certain concentratons in genre and intimating the fluidity of genres, the plot of a New Comedy resembles a typical ‘boy-meets-girl’ romantic formula, yet with significant emphasis on obstacles and their surmounting. The obstacles specific to New Comedy are “usually parental, hence comedy often turns on a clash between a son’s and a father’s will” and emphasize the generational conflict that often accompanies works in the tradition (Frye 164). More broadly understood, the general conflict is symptomatic of a greater contest of forces between two opposing societies, one of which must win to enact the catharsis of comedy. Frye notes that “the movement of comedy is usually a movement from one kind of society to another,” a movement that only happens when the hero and heroine succeed in asserting their own society by overcoming the contemporary society of their oppressors and antagonists (163). Expanding the notion of a contest of willed societies, Frye imagines this conflict as “the action of a lawsuit” in which each party, that of the hero and that of his father/rulers, must prove the rightness of their worldviews and values (166). Conceit aside, comedy is a battleground between two societies. The
catharsis expected of the genre arrives when the hero’s society subsumes that of his forefathers and is accepted as the new, morally correct world order. The metaphorical battle is fought and won with a battalion of stock characters, archetypes that later anticipate and precipitate the emergence of sitcom stereotypes.

Comedy relies on a litany of stock characters, however static and one dimensional. Frye excuses the stock character’s limited nature by identifying that “characterization depends on function” and the function of a comedy necessitates that a comedic stock character or archetype is not “the character but it is as necessary to the character as a skeleton is to the actor who plays it” (171, 172). The comedic stock characters and archetypes have specific roles necessary to fulfill the comic action and create the comedic mood; they are defined by these roles. The types of comic characters include: the “alazon or imposter,” the “eirons or self-deprecators,” and the “buffoons (homolochoi)” as well as other more specific subsets including the “tricky slave (dolosus servus),” the “agroikos or churlish,” the “sennex iratus or heavy father,” the “vice”, and of course the hero/heroine, who fall under the eirons/self-deprecators (Frye 172, 173, 175). As a point of further organization, Frye also delineates that the tension between the alazon and eirons forms the comic action while the buffoons and agroikas determine the comic mood (172). These characters form the most accessible basis for comparison between traditional comedic form and that of the sitcom for the archetypes easily translate into stereotypes. This comic cast of characters is usually all present in the integration that must attend a comedy’s end—in keeping with the overall goal of the fiction in this tradition—and most frequently takes the form of a marriage.

The pairing of comedic and marital forms is intuitive and grounded in tradition. Comedy’s conclusion requires that characters are socially integrated, and marriage serves as a logical avenue. Frye identifies of comedy that “the appearance of this new society is frequently signalized by some kind of party or festive ritual, which either appears at the end of the play or is assumed to take place immediately afterward” and that “[w]eddings are the most common” (163). Marriage operates within comedy as fulfilling the happy ending portion of the plot. Marriage ensures that all the characters, especially the hero and heroine, are tidily placed within containing social roles organized around the married family unit, for “the marriage rite in almost all cultures plays a central role in sustaining a structured social order” (Boone 36). Marriage acts as a structure on which to lay the characters and their narrative action.
Marriage is the happy ending to a comedy, a happiness that signifies order, predictability, and the ability of the new, triumphant society that emerges in comedic conflict to survive and continue by “harnessing… female biological productivity” to birth new generations whose “legitimate progeny” ensures a safe transfer of power and goods (Boone 36). Just as the comedy that encapsulates marriage has set characteristics, so does marital form and literary structure itself.

Marriage is the order that maintains order. Marriage “fosters the illusion of a fixed external ‘reality’ whose natural operation or order is not open to question or contradiction” (Boone 78). While saving the mention of illusion for a discussion of the effectiveness of marital and comedic catharsis, the elements of “order” and fixedness ally themselves with an understanding of marriage as an ending. A traditional love plot in marriage “serves an ultimately familiarizing and stabilizing function, binding and connecting” textual elements and members of a fictional society which in turn “inculcates a vision of a coherence or stability” (Boone 77, 78). The marriage that ends the comedic plot crowns the triumph of a new society and proves its permanence. It “becomes the ultimate signifier of this immutable worldview,” that is, the comedic hero’s triumphant new society (Boone 78). Marriage is the necessary completing portion of a comedic plot in that it cements the success of its overall goal – social integration.

As previously delineated, comedy should not be wholesale equated to the humorous genre as modern viewers know it to be through multimedia experiences; comedy contains its own characteristics and goals, sometimes complimentary to that of traditional marital and comic forms, sometimes not. Media researcher and author Bret Mills endeavors such a focus in *The sitcom*, which tracks and details comedy in its modern incarnation of the sitcom genre. Mills, while qualifying that “sitcom has often [falsely] been understood as an ‘obvious’ and ‘straightforward’ form… which is easy to spot and simple to define,” whose “characteristics are evident and unchanging,” nevertheless attempts a tentative iconography of the sitcom in respect to its televised nature and offers a borrowed, conventional definition of sitcoms. The two understandings of the genre taken together define the sitcom as “a half-hour series focused on episodes involving recurrent characters within the same premise” whose “episodes are finite” and “performed before live audiences”; when filmed, these episodes utilize techniques like “stings (short pieces of music to link scenes)” and three-camera shooting techniques that faithfully capture reaction shots of its comic characters.
(24, 27, 28, 38-39). However, in his quest to sketch his own, more inclusive and broad definition, Mills explores a list of traits that offer direct comparison to both traditional marital and comic literary forms. For example, he offers through cinematic history how High Comedic archetypes were translated into sitcom stereotypes. Since “sitcom arose from the broadcasting industries’ desire to make comedy programmes’ using existing [stage and theater] stars”, they “simply imported those stars’ acts wholesale” which meant that “acts…of the theatre seemed shallow and repetitive in the domestic, serial arena of television” (Mills 35).

While giving comedy performers more narrative depth seemingly solved the problem, they still operated on “reoccurring characteristics,” thus cementing them as stock characters (Mills 35). Savorelli also explores the presence of archetypes and stock characters in sitcoms. He notes that sitcoms “thrive on stereotyped characters” for “the relative immutability of the characters’ features is a guarantee of [a] kind of stability” (26, 27). Just as comedy relied on these characters to develop and enact the comedic plot, so does the nature of sitcom necessitate their renewed presence. Moreover, in further comparison, just as comedy is marked and maintained by a certain adherence to clear forms and structures, “sitcom maintains a certain degree of fixity…in order to keep its narrative structure working” (Savorelli 28). The most intuitive method to maintain fixity is the use of stock characters, turned stereotypes in the artifice of sitcom. The available lists of sitcom stereotypes are innumerable and wildly varied, indicating their pervasiveness in media, yet for the purposes of this essay and to focus comparison and contrast on Everybody Loves Raymond, I offer a stereotyped vision of the traditional, nuclear family: the belabored, nagging, and endlessly patient wife, the inept and clumsy (both emotionally and physically) husband, and their children, who inconsistently retain narrative importance or familial affection.

The sitcom is a modern meeting of traditional marital and comic form. In the words of Savorelli, sitcom is “a borrowed language” (31). This close relationship is evidenced by continued structural and characteristic parallels between the genres of comedy, marriage plots, and sitcoms. The humor of a sitcom relies on the idea that “the literary imitation of ritual bondage…is funny,” for despite the reoccurring, episodic marital miseries that accompany the star spouses, the mismatched couple nonetheless remain in the bonds of wedlock (Frye 168). The repetitive, continual unhappiness of a sitcom couple foregrounds the final nexus in which sitcom attempts a blending or negotiating of comedic and marital forms: structural repetition versus closure. For comedy, “the principle of humor
is the principle that unincremental repetition…is funny” or “repetition as the basis of humor” (Frye 168). The repetition most accessibly manifests itself in comedy’s repertoire of stock characters. The ending of a comedy also implies continuance, for although the defeat of the humorous society and the triumph of the hero’s society suggests a definitive end and beginning, the hero’s victory is neither established nor understood as enduring by the audience until he proves his ability to promulgate it through a festive ritual, usually a wedding (Frye 163, 164). The marriage that ends a comic tale and marriage in its own literary tradition is most readily understood as an ending. As previously iterated, marriage is the happy ending, and in being so, less prone to receive its own prolonged attention in fiction for “it is far safer for the writer to close his or her eyes to the ‘drama’ of married life unfolding on the other side of the novel’s countless ‘happy endings’ in marriage” (Boone 114). That sitcom takes the prolonged attention to the afterward of marriage builds upon the acknowledgement that, contrastingly, marital form courts a level of continuance and repetition as well. Marriage, in fiction, wants to delay itself. As explained by Boone, “the inverse side of the urge toward romantic union is the equally strong compulsion…to avoid union and prolong the ecstatic state of desire in and of itself” (38). Marriage is delayed through a predictable, formulaic series of obstacles, enumerated by Boone as “the same situation of impasse in a given text,” a “mode of structural repetition” (Boone 77). Conflicts, just as stock characters, may be repeated to facilitate the closure and stability of marriage and comedy. “The reasons for avoiding union…a subconscious awareness that total union can never occur; the fear of the disappointment…[and] a selfish fear of loss of self” evidences the nagging, disharmonious presence of tragedy in comedic, sitcom marriages (Boone 39).

Sitcoms marry the dual presence of continuance/repetition and closure through its own variances on traditional structure. Boone, in his analysis of narrative structuring in marital plots, presupposes this blending by asserting that:

[Although] the author envisions the event of marriage as the happy ending beyond which no comment is necessary because nothing more happens: all is serene. Yet, as we have seen, the impulse toward such stability, consonance, or equilibrium – whatever one’s metaphor – is almost necessarily a falsification of the mimetic claim of fiction purporting to record “reality.” (79)
Sitcom understands and explores the lack of serenity that often follows marriage vows, pushing beyond the happy ending. However, the episodic nature of television sitcoms demands closure. Savorelli negotiates this conflict by suggesting the term “serial closure” to describe how sitcom episodes have their own, self-contained resolved conflicts that do not necessarily extend to the plot or narrative thrust of the entire series (17-18). While episodes might resolve smaller issues like a husband forgetting his wife’s anniversary or the wife struggling to garner her husband’s sexual affections, they are merely symptomatic of a larger, yet unsolved misery inherent in sitcom marriages.

*Everybody Loves Raymond* stands as a cultural hallmark of the sitcom genre. While not the first in the tradition nor arguably possessing the highest aesthetic quality, the series yet functions as a readily available, common reference point for viewers of sitcoms. A modern, widely popular animated sitcom, *Family Guy*, references it in a cut scene meant to lambast the main couple’s continual misery, yet *Family Guy* ironically fails to achieve satire by uncritically reproducing and exacerbating the same tropes (wikia). *Everybody Loves Raymond* ran at the zenith of sitcoms’ evolution in the past three decades for it did not exist during the genre’s formulation period and yet did not display the self-awareness and impetus for evolution that more modern sitcoms possess (Savorelli 32, 33). *Everybody Loves Raymond* contains the most undiluted exemplars of sitcom stereotypes and characteristics as modern viewers know them to be, and thus acts as an appropriate grounds for their study. The season one episode “Fascinatin’ Debra” seemingly enacts a metatextual study of its own sitcom forms and structures. The family, specifically wife Debra Barone, is asked to consider herself as a wife and mother when a famous radio psychologist chooses her and her family for study. Unhappily, she finds herself overshadowed by the over the top eccentrics of her husband and in-laws, whom the psychologist finds exciting and interesting. Ironically, the oddities of Debra’s extended family members come from their roles as highly predictable archetypes: her husband Ray, his brother Robert, and his parents Doris and Frank are all stock characters turned stereotypes. Ray is the “comically bumbling patriarch” and bland, everyman comic hero (Siskind). His brother, the inept male, “schlemiel” and agroikos with his mother, the overbearing mother in law who humorously holds undue authority and thus represents the comic old order, and her husband, the henpecked aging patriarch and sennex iratus complete the stock character cast (Buchbinder 231). The episode’s opening dialogue suggests a justification for the utilization of stereotypes
and stock characters when Raymond is talking to a football player about to add appeal to his written works. He is told to announce the quality of his work by putting festive emphasis on how he presents it to others. When Ray protests, “That’s showboating,” he is told, “No, that’s letting the people know you got something special.” In their interaction, the pair thereby justifies the exaggeration of character found in stereotypes by alluding to the appeal of their transparency and entertaining use in fiction. The manner in which the episode is introduced also alludes to the use of stock characters. The episode begins with Raymond directly addressing the camera and introducing himself with “Hi, I’m Ray.” His family members, however, are presented as devalued, impermanent figures by passing behind him as though on a conveyor belt. They are introduced as their roles, not their names. Debra, for example, is presented as “my wife” before she is given a name. The other members of the family – Ray’s parents, children, and brother – do not get names at all but are rather referred to in terms of their familial relationship to Raymond.

In “Fascinatin’ Debra,” she is told by the psychologist that she is part of a “vanishing breed – the housewife.” Ray remarks she takes umbrage when he calls her that. The term “housewife” possesses a negative connotation that is mediated by the psychologist, either by virtue of her being a respected woman and thereby offering female solidarity and approval to a frequently emotionally isolated Debra, or because she is simply an outsider who can objectively categorize the stock characters in a sitcom marriage. Debra’s unhappiness in her marriage, suggested in her reticence with the term “housewife” when used by her husband Raymond, is verbally pronounced when she initially talks to the radio psychologist on the phone. However, even while she complains about being underappreciated, the delivery of that line is quickly followed with a smile and a kiss to Raymond, allying with the feminist critique that within sitcoms “masculinity remains unapologetic, whereas femininity is presented as accepting and nondemanding” (Aden 162). Debra is divided in her role as a housewife evidenced by both her discomfort and willingness to take the role and manifested when she decides to try to be more like a housewife in front of the psychologist. She must perform an exaggeration of her own familial role, thereby showing the unnatural fit of the stereotype upon women.

The falseness of the stereotypes – indicated by Debra’s acting and ironically counterpointed by the psychologist’s lauding of the other family members’ appeal and interest – is suggested by numerous lines of dialogue in the episode. For example, Debra tells Ray that he has to “look
like someone I’d be with,” thereby divorcing reality from appearance. Before the psychologist arrives to visit her at home, Debra forewarns the family “We have to get our stories straight,” alluding to the artificiality of stock characters and their motivations. Furthering the episode’s ironic play with fact and assumption, Doris does not recognize the psychologist from her physical appearance and name but must hear her speak aloud to give her identity. The identity of a character is not as important in the artifice of the sitcom as their performed role. Performativity is simultaneously critiqued, however, when Debra, in preparation for their visit by the psychologist, rushes to turn off the TV, remarking she doesn’t want the doctor to think “it’s the focal point of our lives.” Early in the episode, Raymond humorously remarks of his silent yet unhappy wife, “I’m no expert in body language…but stop yelling!” The fact that she was not speaking at all is devalued in favor of assumption, whether of her justly displeased temperament or her assumed role as the angry, henpecking wife.

The sitcom’s narrative in “Fascinatin’ Debra” lauds Debra as being uneasily placed within or totally rejecting the housewife caricature. Raymond tells Debra “You’re not boring, you’re normal. That’s good,” thereby distinguishing between performed archetypes and actual identities while valuing the latter over the former. He even goes on to say that a multidimensional presentation of a housewife is more appealing by insisting “If you’d been yourself, she’d be more interested.” He comforts her by confirming that by not being an exaggerated stock character, she is more realistic. However celebrated she may be by her husband and the narration by not aligning with stereotyped characteristics, she still must conform to one role – the serving wife. Raymond insists that she must be normal to balance out his and his family’s eccentrics. Her normal and therefore useful nature allows her to clean up after her husband’s and in-law’s messes, both social and physical. However, his comic bumbling that leads to such messes is symptomatic of a modern stock character, evolved from comic tropes: the idiot father and husband. Feminist critic Sarah Siskind offers a concise history of the stereotype by tracing that “in the 1990’s, a trend turned the tide on this genre; the father became a child…The wife[‘s] exasperation is a foil to his immaturity,” identifying that a large number of modern sitcoms “all feature the same comically bumbling patriarch with his continually exasperated wife…the main source of comedy comes from the father”. However, fellow feminist article author Kali Tal remarks that far from inversely raising women by lambasting the idiocy and immaturity of sitcom men, the modern
stereotype of the inept sitcom father enacts its own gendered pressures upon women for “these guys are stupid about ladygirl stuff . . . but how stupid is it really to be (or to pretend to be) awful at the sort of work that guys aren’t ‘supposed’ to do anyway? And to have the ability to get someone else to do it for you?” When Raymond and other sitcom patriarchs are shown as domestically incompetent, it further perpetuates the idea that Debra and others wives must take care of their husbands, even if that means taking on extra work and emotional burdens. Her husband, however, offers a last, quick appraisal of wifely subservience in the episode, remarking that Debra must be “sick” or “twisted” to stay with him and thereby tolerate his comic and gendered mishaps. While not a wholesale rejection of sitcom stereotypes, Everybody Loves Raymond at least questions the digestibility and suitability of their roles in people’s lives. In “Fascinatin’ Debra,” the artifices of marriage and comedy, including the usage of stock characters, create interior artifices within the fictional family that reveal themselves through a disharmony between reality and appearance, identity and role.

One of the most important episodes in a sitcom is the one in which a flashback reveals how the couple got engaged and were married. In the season two episodes twenty four and twenty five, the overall view of marriage within the sitcom is given shape and articulated. The notion of a flashback itself is multivalent – both emphasizing the past, and therefore tradition, by highlighting it for clarity and interest and devaluing the actual marriage by placing it later in the series and through an abbreviated narrative space. Before the flashback occurs, modern day Raymond is struggling to fit into the suit pants from his marriage, thereby suggesting he too is unfit in his role as a stereotyped sitcom husband or even that the role itself is unfit. The opening montage that follows continues the depersonalization of Ray’s family but takes on a highly unrealistic, fantasy-quality. Undoubtedly suspended on wires, the cast members are made to appear as if floating above a seated Raymond as he introduces them. While Raymond remarks that his family “defies gravity for him,” thus displaying the inherent patriarchal constructs of the sitcom family, the overall effect is a lack of realism. The characters are made to fantastically float because they are unmoored from reality in their roles as stock characters and archetypes. Such a depiction divorces realism from sitcom and, in doing such, critiques the lack of real life applicability and appropriateness of the genres’ conventions – comedic, marital, and sitcom.

The marriage episode makes it clear that in marrying, Ray and Debra inherit a long history of marital unhappiness from Raymond’s family.
Though ironically trying to comfort Ray before the ceremony begins, his visiting mother and father bicker about their own parents’ reservations about their marrying one another. Raymond’s father gives the entire union a negative connotation by suggesting to Raymond that he be drunk throughout the marital proceedings, revealing he did the same for his wedding. Their unhappy history is inescapable. The viewer knows that although the elder couple imagines that Raymond and Debra will move far away to build their own wedded home, they will instead be constantly intruded upon by their often unwelcome neighboring in-laws. The marriage itself is steeped in patriarchal continuance and it’s implied negative effect on future generation’s unions. As a younger Raymond prepares to ask Debra to marry him in the confines of his parents’ living room, she mistakes his intentions and protests “I’m not having sex on your Mom’s plastic couch.” The fertility, or, more generally, potential of a youthful coupling and possible marriage is stunted within the confines of the older generation, whose “plastic” furnishings indicate an outdated artificiality. However humorously flawed the old generation, Frye’s prevailing comic society, is, it yet imposes itself upon the marriage of the newer couple of Raymond and Debra. As a nervous Raymond struggles to verbalize his proposal through the mediated artifice of his recently published sports article, his father, Frank, accidently reads it aloud, thereby proposing to Debra for him. The father proposing for his son continues the understanding that in society, marriage is “a specifically patriarchal formation” and “transaction between men, solidifying their own territorial bonds” which “helped enforce the secondary status of women” (Boone 64). The proposal accompanies Raymond’s new job as a sports columnist and the close pairing between the two events suggests that marriage to Debra is merely an accompaniment to that success. Raymond proposes to Debra in part to “advertise his successful achievement of a domestic kingdom” with a “delicate, ‘ladylike’ wife”, celebrated as such by Raymond’s bachelor friends who emphasize her beauty and charms before Raymond proposes (Boone 60). However, far from resisting and eventually triumphing above the ruling comic society, Raymond and Debra’s marriage is snared in its traditions and structures, their prospective new society “swaddled and smothered by the society it should replace” (Boone 185). They are thereby denied the cathartic joy that accompanies the triumph and installation of a new comic order, which in turn imparts a level of tragedy, as contrasted with comedy, to the sitcom.

The proximity of tragedy and comedy highlighted in Everybody Loves Raymond has roots in the traditional forms of comedy and marriage in
fiction. Boone attests to the “reversibility of comedic and tragic endings to the courtship narratives,” thereby prefiguring their sitcom interplay (98). Marriage must court tragedy with the “idealization of the pain of love” rooted in the courtships forms that precipitate union (Boone 40). Even in the modern form of the sitcom, there is a blending of genres wherein comedy can accompany drama in certain subgenres (Mills 31). When the efforts of the sitcom to produce comedy instead impart a tragic resonance, the series enacts a theoretical and structural junction between the two, exploring and exacerbating their close relationship in fictional forms.

*Everybody Loves Raymond* retrospectively operates as a counter traditional marriage text. The persistent, assumedly comic unhappiness of the series’ main couple is not enough to warrant this label for traditional marriage plots can and do contain negative unions. The counter traditional text however, acts as “a critic of the conventions residing in the marital ideal” — the institution of marriage itself and its values are problematized (Boone 151). The counter traditional text’s “concept of love as war,” “the unnatural consequence of social constructions of sexual roles and power within wedlock,” is enacted through the constant back and forth bickering of Debra and Raymond within their marriage, who fight to both valorize and escape their familial roles (Boone 143, 144). The structure of the sitcom itself is counter traditional by displaying “one quarrel begetting another in an ever-widening circle of discord” through episodic conflicts that never resolve the foundational disparity between Raymond and Debra (145). The pervasiveness of wedded despair within *Everybody Loves Raymond* suggests the impossibility of a happy, functional marriage. Although Raymond declines the alcoholic cushion and seemingly marries Debra full of joy and genuine affection, their marital vows seal their unhappy future when Raymond says “I promise not to be a jerk, if you’ll help me” to which Debra agrees with an unflinching and earnest smile. From the preacher who hesitates to marry them in the first place to their arguments on their wedding day and finally to the continued, unescapable reminder of marital unhappiness in the presence of Ray’s parents, the episode “Marriage Flashback” envisions a hopeless future for marriage, beget from unhappiness.

Neither Raymond’s nor Debra’s parents are happily wedded. Additionally, marriage and its promised bliss constantly evades bachelor Robert, even when married himself. In fact, every marriage depicted on the series is mired in conflict, however humorous. The failure of anyone on the series to achieve a happy union indicates no one can, and thus
shifts the blame of marital tragedy from individuals to the institution itself, highlighted most conspicuously in the episode “Marriage Flashback” but suggested throughout the series through constant bemoaning of marriage life – its constraints, its lack of sexual fulfillment, and its destruction and stagnation of its participants’ potential.

The fact that much of what accounts for tragedy in the comedy of Everybody Loves Raymond, which condemns marriage and therefore allows labels the series as a counter traditional work, is primarily understood through a retrospective, modern, and heightened socio-critical lens is a non-issue. Comedy has traditionally depended upon audience reaction for meaning. “The resolution of a comedy comes, so to speak, from the audience’s side of the stage” for “the final stage reached by comedy” has to be one that “the audience has recognized all along to be the proper and desirable state of affairs” (Frye 164). A work’s ending depends on the audience’s cathartic, positive emotional response to be deemed comic. This necessary audience participation in comedic interpretation becomes heightened in the construct of a sitcom, wherein often that participation must be literally heard instead of merely understood for the sitcom. For the sitcom, audience reaction becomes a necessary “textual element” (Mills 101). The phenomenon of the sitcom laugh track is singular in that it centralizes audience reaction in the construct of the series’ comedy which is “added afterwards in order to boost a programme’s perceived funniness” (Mills 102). What is perceived as funny represents a “collective experience,” a majority understanding of what is and not funny and therefore what is and is not socially acceptable (Mills 103). However, as Mills notes, the collective experience of sitcom humor, appealing as it does to the majority demographic, still does not inhibit critique, for “by including its audience in the text, sitcom at least makes explicit the audience position being offered…and, in doing so, encourages me to notice when I’m responding differently” (Mills 104).

Sitcoms, rooted in the audience participatory traditions inherent in marital and comedic forms, are open to a retrospective, critical reading, which rediscovers Everybody Loves Raymond as a counter traditional text. Such a reading lends the sitcom genre both dynamism and use for modern readers as a microcosm for the study of the social values inherent in and promulgated by traditional structures.

The archetypes and plot configurations of marriage and comedy so strongly recalled in the 21st century sitcom Everybody Loves Raymond evidence the ability of traditional literary forms and structures to survive through multiple artistic eras and mediums. Moreover, the traditional
forms’ endurance testifies to their potent ability to satisfy a cultural desire for social structure. Regardless of whatever small level of transformation is present in the sitcom’s use of those tropes, their original purpose remains: social order. Social order is valued in comedy and enacted in the marriage, the resulting societal cohesion enforced through rigid conventions manifested in gender codes, stereotypes, and the overall narrative and social sense of falling into place. As narrative tools of social order, comedic and marital forms reside uneasily in modern media, whose equally modern-minded audience finds the forms’ inherent values archaic at best, a dated cultural malignance at worst. To them, the continued, relatively unchanged presence of traditional structures and forms, social and literary, hopelessly suggest the inability to escape their prescriptive and oppressive powers. However, this cultural despairing has its own comedy as well. For just as the Greco Roman theatregoers and sitcom audiences must recognize the comedy of a work for it to earn that genre label and just as the members and consumers of a fictional marriage must implicitly agree to its suitability to earn its “happy ending” status, so are modern audiences invited into the creation and enacting of structure, both fictional and social. In fact, their presence is necessitated. As long as the comedic and marital audience is invited into the endeavor towards literary meaning and social effect, so is their inevitable critique, which functions in its own tradition of destabilizing structure.

Works Cited


Girls Gone Neverland
MICHAEL CHISHOLM hails from the beating heart of Georgia and is a lover of tattoos, Frank Sinatra, comic books and fantasy fiction. Struggling for seven years in both the restaurant industry and college, he aspires to work in the film or comic book industries, utilizing his major in English and minor in Film by writing and reaching beyond the stars... or at least the Mason-Dixon line.
The fundamental question in any relationship is “Who are you?” This is a simple question, but it delves deeply into the soul and requires serious examination to get to the truth. It is not an easy question to answer. The value of the answer relies heavily on the willingness to be honest. The intimacy of the relationship dictates the honesty of the answer given. A friend, for instance, will not answer in the same manner as a spouse. David Fincher’s movie interpretation of Gillian Flynn’s novel, Gone Girl, is a film that hinges on the volatile relationship between a husband and wife. The film presents the perspective of Nick Dunne, looking at his wife Amy, as she lies with her head on his chest. His voiceover provides a glimpse into their relationship.

NICK. When I think of my wife, I always think of her head. I picture cracking her lovely skull, unspooling her brain. Trying to get answers. The primal questions of a marriage: What are you thinking? How are you feeling? What have we done to each other? (Fincher 1.1-9).

Nick’s curious focus on his wife’s cracked skull immediately raises alarms. Despite his calm demeanor, as he speaks he exposes a dark desire to mutilate Amy, in order to understand her. As he lies there, stroking her head gently, he wonders what is going on in her mind. He wants to know what she is hiding. Amy looks up at him toward the end of the

Seduction of the Gone Girl

by Michael Chisholm
scene with a simple smile. Her serene expression implies she has many thoughts in her mind, but they will remain hidden.

*Gone Girl* tells a story of a marriage gone awry. It is told from Nick's viewpoint, in the present, and then from Amy's perspective, through flashbacks that stem from diary entries. Amy Dunne turns up missing, and the nation labels her husband, Nick Dunne, suspect number one. Amy later reveals herself to be alive and well, as well as the mastermind behind Nick's downfall, months after discovering that he cheated on her. After a series of bloody re-unions and political scandals, Amy returns to Nick and they appear as America's Sweethearts. In reality, Amy holds Nick hostage in their marriage, with her manipulation.

Modern society idolizes the concept of marriage. When celebrities and other newsworthy individuals across the globe violate their sacred vows, they make headlines. Those hearing the news express disappointment, even disdain, toward the fallen spouses. Marriage remains one of the most interesting plot elements among the various forms of media. Joseph Allen Boone's work, *Tradition Counter Tradition: Love and the Form of Fiction*, dissect the various marriage plots that grip readers and viewers alike. Boone establishes the normal or traditional marriage plot as a “perfect union,” when the couple ceases to exist as separate beings to become one unified unit, in keeping with the standards of the society. An alternate concept of marriage, one that fails to achieve the normal standard, was conceived. This non-traditional plot is a union not based on a unification of two minds in an attempt to reach a level of oneness with someone else. Instead, it is based upon a purely personal need. Such motivations result in what Boone calls an “uneasy wedlock,” wherein an unspoken but inevitable struggle of one over the other exists between husband and wife. Boone states “Indeed as a brief detour into sociological and anthropological theory makes clear, the marriage rite in almost all cultures plays a central role in sustaining structured social order” (Boone 36). In many works this claim is true. In looking at Jane Austen for example, almost all of her stories deal with marriage and the assumption that marital success remains vital to the plot and the structure of the society. But, *Gone Girl* is not presented in a Jane Austen format, with gentle and subtle satires about marriage. Indeed, Fincher’s interpretation of the story shows the polar opposite of a happy marriage and the traditional marriage plot. The term “til death” takes on a completely new meaning.

In keeping with Boone’s theory, one particular traditional plot is the seduction plot, as is presented in the movie *Gone Girl*, directed by David Fincher. The film follows an unexpected twist in that the marriage plot
transitions to, rather than from, the traditional marriage plot. This is highlighted by Boone as the seducer’s plot in his story as seen through the viewpoints of the main characters. Nick and Amy Dunne both assume the roles of seducer and victim. The couple begins their relationship as an unconventional pairing and delude themselves into believing that they are above the traditions of a normal marriage. In the section, “Trajectories of Doom: The Seducer’s Plot in Clarissa and Tess of the D’Urbervilles,” Boone writes, “On its most basic level, the seduction plot reads like a tale of courtship gone awry: stripped of the veil of social prosperity or moral constraints, would-be lovers are revealed as sexual antagonists and witty verbal sparring of suitors is transformed into ritualized physical combat” (Boone 100). Within the seduction plot, the sexual nature of the relationship is emphasized and remains the focus of the union. In a manipulation of Boone’s seduction plot, Nick and Amy’s marriage begins as an unconventional one but at the end of the story they uphold the “traditional marriage plot”. They act out their roles in satire, showing the lengths to which people will go to achieve the idealized marriage.

_Gone Girl_’s marriage plot begins in a manner similar to many traditional plots. Amy experiences a flashback, heard through her diary voiceover, and she reminisces over her first encounter with Nick. They met at a party in New York City and immediately shared a similar interest in word play and social critique of anyone not like them:

NICK. So tell me, Amy. Who are you?
AMY. A. I am an award—winning scrimshaw hander. B. I am a moderately influential warlord. C. I write personality quizzes for magazines.
NICK. A. Your fingers are far too delicate for real scrimshaw work. B. I am a charter subscriber to Middling Warlord Weekly—I’m sure I’d recognize you. So: C.
AMY. And you? Who are you?
NICK. I’m the guy to save you from all this awesomeness (Fincher 7.38-50).

He comes in like a valiant suitor for a fair damsel and wins her over with simple charms and wit. The film introduces Nick and Amy as couple following, at least in the beginning, a traditional plot. Amy describes, in her voice over, her happiness with Nick. They may have begun their relationship in the traditional manner, yet they live as though pushing against a current. They show no immediate desire to build a family and
seek to only please themselves. Jessica Cohen, of Jezebel, was entranced by the idea of marriage itself as the primary antagonist in the film. Her article, “Gone Girl’s Biggest Villain Is Marriage Itself”, explains this in detail: “Granted, the spectacular disintegration of the Dunne union is not the stuff of your average unhappy marriage…Even when Nick and Amy meet for the first time, the question looms: “Who are you?”” (Cohen). This question forms in the beginning and hangs over the couple. They try to sort through their own personal desires, wishing to remain as individuals, but still united. They remain in a sort of puppy love romance and behave as teenagers looking for a good time. For their anniversary, Amy chooses a theme and creates a scavenger hunt for Nick to follow. While other couples would simply exchange gifts of flowers or cards, Amy challenges Nick to earn her body. His reward for solving the hunt would always be her.

Nick presents an indifferent attitude regarding his wife. From the beginning to the end of the film, he is blindsided by everything in his life and his marriage. He subjects Amy to a masculine gaze that is designed to rob her of her identity and femininity. In “Deconstructing the Male Gaze…and Basic Instinct”, an article on film theory, Miranda Sherwin refers to the cinema’s male dominated perspective: “…..masochism as a central mechanism of spectatorial viewing for women. Female spectatorship was theorized in light of assumptions about the primacy of the male gaze and of a perception of masochism that stressed victimization and passivity” (Sherwin 174). Nick’s gaze, from the camera’s view, turns Amy into a victim of his charms and desires, and him into the seducer; as part of the seduction plot. Nick falls right into the role of the bringer of sexual violence. Their first night together again leads them right into the bedroom, under the notion that their sexual relationship is more important than any other aspect of their marriage. Their scavenger hunts follow the same route, as they simply lead up to sex. Amy entices Nick with dirty fantasies and poetry, leading him like a puppy. It is likely that this attitude stems from her parent’s denial of a puppy of her own, when she was a child.

Amy feels that she is unimportant within her own family, remembering how her parents constructed a character and profited from their daughter’s failures.

AMY. When I was 10 I quit cello. In the next book, Amazing Amy became a prodigy.
NICK. You don’t play volleyball.
AMY. I got cut freshman year. She made varsity.
NICK. And how long did you have a dog?
AMY. She got a dog. Puddles made her more relatable.
NICK. I love your parents, but they can be assholes (Fincher 28.10-18).

Amy’s parents built a dream child for themselves, unknowingly setting their daughter up to be a victim. Though Amy appears unbothered by this reality, it altered her perception of life. Because of the constant comparison between the pretend Amazing Amy and the real Amy, her adult values were affected. She grew up unable to determine what is truly worthy and important. Her parents seduced her with opportunities for greatness, yet she always fell short of their expectations. As a result, Amazing Amy becomes a driving force behind the pent up rage within her. Amy seems to be trapped in what Jaques Lacan calls the mirror stage, a stage of mental development taken from his model of the imaginary order. According to George Bressler’s *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, “In this stage, we literally see ourselves in a mirror while metaphorically seeing ourselves in our mother’s image. Observing this mirror image permits….separate from our mothers” (Bressler 134). The departure from Lacan’s theory is that the mother from which Amy is trying to relate to and identify with is Amazing Amy. Amy’s parents later drain their daughter financially and take money that was meant for her to live her life with Nick. Despite the hardships Nick and she work to keep themselves united. All of the energy and time she puts into creating her non-traditional marriage with Nick turns out to be a waste.

Before falling into indiscretion and exposing his own more traditional side, Nick fights to stay on the unconventional side and avoid becoming his father. He starts out as a typical masculine character sort and fits the husband motif that appears in many seduction plots. It seems to be in Nick’s character to immediately objectify the women in his life. But when he starts to be objectified himself, he immediately takes a defensive stance and becomes the vulnerable one. Brody points out a key moment for Nick in the film: “In the course of Nick’s travails—his subjection to televised character assassination, police interrogation, and street harassment—he speaks the movie’s key line, with its Euripidean wink: “I’m so sick of being picked apart by women”” (Brody). When Nick says this, he acknowledges that he has become Amy’s victim. Just before this point in the story, he was revealed to be in the midst of an affair with Andy, one of his twenty-something year old creative writing
students. Nick becomes and remains unclean, as his affair with Andy would cause further descent into the traditional. His father is revealed to be an adulterer by his twin sister Margo and, like father like son, Nick becomes one as well. As society has changed, so have the expectations of the modern tradition of marriage, so a spouse cheating on his or her significant other has become commonplace. More interesting though is Nick’s complaint that he is being picked apart, as if he bears no blame himself. He places the blame squarely on the women that critique his actions and his character. One of his critics is his mother-in-law, Marybeth. Early on in the film, Amy’s parents, Marybeth and Rand Elliot, travel to Nick’s hometown in Missouri to setup a task force to help find her. Marybeth witnesses Nick’s behavior as he is friendly and nice toward his neighbors, misunderstanding his gestures:

MARYBETH. It’s like you’re the goddam Homecoming King.
NICK. My mom…it was a big deal to her. That I be polite. Courteous. A gentleman.
MARYBETH. It looked like you were having fun.
NICK. Marybeth, I’m in a nightmare here. I’m just trying to be nice to the people who are trying to find Amy.
MARYBETH. I’m sorry, you’re right (Fincher 76.1-10).

Through her heckling, Marybeth confronts the uncaring attitude on the part of her son-in-law toward his missing wife. While everyone else seems distraught and frantic in their attempts to find Amy, Nick seems almost indifferent and appears irritated at being in the spotlight. In relating the events back to his own mother, he demonstrates his lack of responsibility as he continues the pattern of placing blame on the women in his life. This is also a sign that he feels trapped in a traditional marriage, albeit one that he never sought, and is seeking to make his own existence easier. The first sign of Nick’s resistance to the traditional appears earlier, when money becomes a trial in their marriage.

Amy, in seeking out and pursuing the non-traditional marriage plot, wants to separate herself from her parent-authored storybook series counterpart, “Amazing Amy”, whom she always seems to remain one step behind. Amy’s and Nick’s happiness is suddenly cut short when they both lose their jobs as magazine contributors. With the loss of both incomes, money problems challenge their unconventional marriage, as Amy herself says in another diary entry,
AMY. Want to test your marriage for weak spots? Add one recession. Subtract two jobs. It’s surprisingly effective (Fincher 69.1-4).

The economy becomes the first real test of their relationship and the first attempt of the social order to realign itself. The unconventional marriage plot came literally, at a price. Both are writers and critics of sorts, as Nick wrote for a men’s magazine and Amy worked as a quiz writer for a magazine. Now, they have no choice but to fall back on Amy, relying on a trust fund left to her by her parents. Nick implied early on, that if they both were to lose their jobs, her money would be all they had to live on. Nick’s reliance on Amy begins to wear on his mind and he questions his ability to please her. Realizing that he was failing to give her the lifestyle in which she was raised and that she expected caused him to feel threatened by his wife. The seduction plot begins to take shape as the sexual side of their relationship is threatened by their monetary needs.

AMY. Let’s swear we will never be like them.
NICK. Who?
AMY. Every other couple we know. Wives who treat their men like hapless puppies: to be trained and broken.
NICK. Husbands who treat their wives like eccentric dictators: to be appeased and contained (Fincher 61.1-9).

They both resent the traditional marriages to which they have been exposed, those of their parents and others around them. But monetary stress starts to build and causes a rift until, Nick’s sister, Margo, calls and tells her brother that their mother is dying. For Nick, Amy willingly settles into a suburban neighborhood in Missouri, despite her misgivings. She walks around her home as though she does not really belong there. Her colors are faded and her face vacant, as though she is a ghostly haunt in her own home. The wake is held at their house, where Amy wanders aimlessly while no one talks to her, or even notices she is there. Everyone is gathered around Nick and Margo, causing Amy to feel the funeral could just as easily have been for her. Amy sees this as a reason to look for an escape. Nick’s infidelity proves to be her launching point for the escape.

Amy’s dark and repressed personality is brought to the surface with the revelation that she is the mastermind behind her own kidnapping. As highlighted by Boone, Nick and Amy became each other’s “sexual
antagonists.” Their relationship seems to be completely based in sex, as by the end of their first night together they are seen in bed together. Amy comments on how much she likes him and he only responds with a look and resumes his conquest. As stated by Boone: “by reducing women to anonymous objects of sexual conquest, the seducer no less than the legitimate suitor attempts to erase those signs of female autonomy and otherness that threatens his own identity as the superior and more powerful sex” (Boone 100). There is a scene in the film where this objectification is highlighted:

AMY. Nick uses me for sex when he wants. Otherwise, I don’t exist (Fincher 91.1).

The scene has Amy looking at herself in the mirror while Nick is behind her and pleases himself at her expense. The entire time his eyes are closed and he simply kisses her when he is finished and leaves her there to stare at her reflection. The passion of their sexual relationship is reduced to concern for only his own satisfaction, with her in the place of an observer. Just as Nick reduces Amy to a sexual object, he does the same to his young lover Andy. This becomes another mark of the seduction plot, but as a double seduction. He seduces Andie in the same manner as Amy, resulting in Amy’s violation of the seduction plot. While faking her kidnapping in rural Missouri, she befriends hotel neighbors, Greta and Jeff. While with them, she enjoys portraying the victim, masquerading as a beaten wife. She shares a private moment with Greta and tells her story of witnessing Nick and Andie.

AMY. I went to the bar where he works. To surprise him. And out he comes with this girl who had no business being in a bar. On our very first night together, we walked by a bakery…Well, I followed them—and guess what?
GRETA. No.
AMY. He did the same thing to her (Fincher 167.1-18).

After witnessing Nick’s infidelity, Amy finally snaps and loses control of the rage she had been holding back for years, toward her family, and toward him. She fakes her kidnapping and apparent murder. She frames Nick for the whole thing by setting him up, staging him, and predicting his every movement to the most minute and insignificant detail. Amy follows the seduction plot as the victim turning seducer at this point,
as she then takes her leave and goes into hiding. As Amy plans how to frame Nick, she actually commits an infidelity herself. She seduced the entire state and later the country with her false story, all while hiding in a remote part of the state. She wrote the perfect tale, convincing to the point that local news stations eventually broadcast it repeatedly for days, on major stations. Boone refers to Amy’s action in leaving the union as necessary for the resolution to occur: “The female protagonist, in contrast, typically attempts to halt action, to remove herself from the hazards of narrative time and narrative desire in order to escape the seducer’s plots.” (Boone 100). Nick seduced Amy in the beginning, then he seduced Andie. Amy seeks to escape the seducer by fleeing. By causing Nick to be blamed for her murder, she halted the seduction plot. She took drastic action to ensure that he received a punishment she deemed to be worthy.

Amy muddied the line separating victim and seducer. It is a big turning point for her character as she is revealed to be alive and well, while on her way to a life away from Nick. She sees the flaws in the marriage she shared with Nick. She resents everything about their traditional courtship and marriage, realizing she just thought they were different at the time. She proclaimed her beautiful and perfect rant on the supposed “cool girl” that men all want when they are dating:

AMY. When I met Nick I knew he wanted Cool Girl. For him, I was willing to try. I wax—stripped my pussy raw and blew him regularly. I drank bourbon and bantered. I laughed at my mistakes. I was game. Nick teased things out in me I didn’t know existed (Fincher.154.9-17).

This marks her first and most blatant rejection of the traditional marriage forged between Nick and her. At first she believes Nick is worth it, she had found her match and they were enjoying each other’s company. But, after five years of stagnation and increasing unhappiness, she feels unappreciated. Her plan to cause Nick’s downfall acts as a non-traditional gesture, in that she is a wife usurping the power of her husband, at the possible expense of her life. The opposing argument would seem to be that her own death would certainly rob her of her own power and identity. Nevertheless, she makes the conscious choice to follow through with her plan. She silences Nick by disappearing, thus taking the power for herself. Later, she is robbed by Greta and Jeff and backed into a corner. She then decides to utilize all of her power in a mini seduction plot by reuniting with an old flame.
With a simple phone call, Desi’s entrance marks Amy’s final transition from victim to the seducer in the seduction plot. Desi is revealed to be a less than stable character from Amy’s past. The two of them were together in college, and she broke his heart. He could not handle the pain and stalked her, leading her to file charges against him. She puts on the victim façade, mastered after years of practice, and persuades Desi to hide her in his lake house. There she watches as Nick gives an on air interview. Nick is encouraged by his lawyer to go on live TV, to admit his mistakes with Amy and thereby reform his image to the public. Amy sees Nick apologize to her in front of millions and beg for her to come back. This reignites her love for him and she resolves to return to him and adapt yet another victim façade. She takes on the appearance of a porcelain doll, living with Desi for weeks, all the while manipulating the cameras in his mansion. The scene that best illustrates this takes place as Desi is leaving. Amy bites his lip, tousles his hair, and untucks his shirt, to create the sense of a struggle. She makes herself appear to have just been raped, screaming at a soundless camera with fake blood on her clothes. Amy has mastered the image of the victimized female Boone talks about, and at the same becomes a seducer, as she works up to the point where she slits Desi’s throat during sex as a final act of defiance and symbolic in the “execution.” Her desire to reconstruct the traditional marriage plot consumed her to the extent that she was willing to kill Desi, an embodiment of her unpredictable past, to get it back.

Amy comes home to Nick, who is facing charges for her murder, and with a simple swoon in his arms, she undoes all the damage the public has witnessed. As far as the public knows, Amy literally fought through hell to keep her marriage intact. She returned to her husband, who only wanted to see his precious and beautiful wife alive and well. Yet after all that transpired in the past weeks, will the seduction plot be resolved? Nick is backed into a dangerous corner when Amy returns. Instead of accusing her of anything, Nick decides to act slowly. The evidence against him is clear and the people looking on are full of questions. Amy has the media on her side and could easily turn the tide against him. She makes it clear that if he leaves her, she’ll ruin him. Ty Burr, of the Washington Post writes in his article, “In ‘Gone Girl,’ A Twisted View of Modern Marriage,” “Think of the husband and wife who look rock solid for years before splitting into take-no-prisoners warfare, each lining up their respective audiences. Think of the little tiffs you have with your own spouse about who said what when, the lower-case grievances, the wondering why he or she just can’t see it your way”
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(Burr). Burr comments on the surface of marriage and what lies under it. Traditional marriage plots are pretty straightforward, yet the Dunne marriage itself is not as clean and porcelain. The traditional marriage plot has been upheld and reestablished by Amy and her actions. Amy and Nick have been reconditioned as America’s reunited golden couple, this year’s Will and Kate. Joshua Grotham of The New Yorker comments on what the underlying meaning of the film’s interpretation may state about marriage in his article, “What Gone Girl is Really About.” He writes, “In “Gone Girl,” it’s the mythos of coupledom, not the mythos of masculinity, that’s oppressive. But the imagined solution is the same: “We’re so cute I want to punch us in the face,” Amy says” (Rotham). Rotham followed Boone’s theories, in words at least, as the film acted to critique the entire structure of “coupledom” to use his word. After reuniting, Amy and Nick play the traditional marriage plot out in real time, as now they live it to the fullest extent. Societal standards rose up and forced the structure as a perfect union is reestablished through the continuation of Amy and Nick, and a legacy.

The seduction plot has been wrapped up and reestablished with Amy’s return to Nick and her revealing to him her self-impregnation.

NICK. I haven’t touched you.
AMY. You didn’t need to.
NICK. The notice of disposal. You threw it out.
AMY. The notice, yes (Fincher 270.4-8).

Amy became a mother without Nick. She stole his frozen sperm sample and injected herself. She assumed both a masculine and feminine role, effectively making Nick an extension of Amy herself. Nick now only exists to her as father for her child, his power gone. “If the seduced heroine…. is no longer devastated by her loss of virginity, the narrative of seduction ceases to produce the same kind of voyeuristic sexual gratification cum tragic moral” (Boone 113). Amy has The plot dissolves on the surface to an idealized American household, young husband and wife on the road to become parents. In an article from the New Yorker, Elif Batuman states that marriage itself is an abduction: “An independent, expressive single woman is taken from New York; her beautiful body is disfigured, or threatened with disfigurement; and her accomplishments are systematically taken away or negated, rendered worthless by comparison to that all-trumping colossus of meaning, childbirth” (Batuman). Batuman’s article refers to the situation Amy created for Nick. She faked abduction, but

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in the end kidnapped Nick from the world he knew. Nick claims that he only wants to stay with Amy for the child. Yet he has become enamored with Amy all over again. He sees her resolve against his leaving. Amy has the media in her back pocket. A simple phone call will have him once again in the news, this time as a husband abandoning his pregnant wife, a rape victim. Marriage can no longer be looked at as solely traditional or non-traditional. It’s an enigmatic entity that evolved with society, as highlighted in Boone’s theories and through the film itself. Amy and Nick enter the traditional marriage plot in a formal manner, together at the announcement of their pregnancy, but were in reality a part of it already in the moment they met. They would never avoid convention.

Amy returned to Nick, immortalized by the media in her blood-soaked white garments, not unlike a virgin sacrifice to a pagan god. She carved out a new form of the seducer by refusing to allow herself to be victimized in any manner except for appearance. She became the inflictor of female violence on male victims and thereby assumed a masculine identity, an antithero of sorts. Gillian Flynn, herself, commented on the character of Amy and the nature of women in an interview and article “Gone Girls, Found: Talking With the Authors of ‘Gone Girl’ and ‘Wild’” on the film with Cara Buckley of the New York Times, “Of course, it’s not misogynistic.” Women shouldn’t be expected to only play nurturing, kind caretakers. That’s always been part of my goal — to show the dark side of women. Men write about bad men all the time, and they’re called antiheroes” (Buckley). Amy essentially became a dark mascot for the traditional marriage plot. She was the perfect wife, the kidnap victim, and the woman who killed for her husband. Amy had become what Amazing Amy could never become. Her novelistic sister/counterpart was trapped by the rules of society’s expectations of reality. Amy took those rules and contorted them in all except appearance, but it is appearance that is important in the eyes of the society.

Works Cited

JESSICA FOUNTAIN spends most of her time trying to convince her two cats to cuddle. She is not often successful. In her downtime she dedicates herself to writing short fiction, reading junky YA novels, and binging shows on Netflix. She likes to tell people she’s a yogi, but what that really means is she typically dusts off her mat once a week and spends an embarrassing amount of time in child’s pose.
In a 1911 novelization of his earlier play, *Peter and Wendy*, J. M. Barrie explores and eventually subverts traditional Victorian and Edwardian ideas about gender. Barrie follows in the footsteps of writers such as Charlotte Brontë by giving Wendy Darling, the female protagonist, a true chance to develop as a character. Over the course of the novel, she must come to terms with herself in the early twentieth century as girl, woman, wife, and mother in a political and literary landscape changing rapidly for women at the time, though she is not aware of it herself. Julie Shaffer, a feminist scholar, describes the negative attitude critics have towards this kind of development in an article advocating for the feminist potential in eighteenth and nineteenth century marriage plots: “Even when such attempts have been made, the genre remains capable only of representing women as relational creatures and as objects of other’s desires—not as desiring, acting subjects with their own autonomy” (Shaffer 51). Barrie carefully weaves his tale to allow Wendy to navigate the treacherous waters of maturation herself, showcasing her own desires and agency along the way. This subversive text comes just after the turn of the century, and Barrie seizes the opportunity to highlight the new challenges for women in society, casting Wendy as his champion. Neverland, nestled in Wendy’s psyche, becomes the perfect setting for the battle which rages inside Wendy while Tinker Bell, Peter and Hook become the players. Wendy begins her journey as a young woman on the brink of adulthood, adopts the simultaneous roles of mother and wife while in Neverland, and eventually returns home to become a real
wife and mother in England. Notably, she does so as a result of her own agency and against Peter’s wishes, thus breaking free of her ties to traditional gender roles and expectations for marriage.

At the beginning of the novel, Wendy is on the very precipice of adulthood, though she still sleeps in the nursery with her brothers, John and Michael, and remains under the care of her nurse, a Newfoundland dog named Nana. However, as Barrie describes, “Wendy was every inch a woman, though there were not very many inches” (Barrie 26). The image created with this quotation is one of a fully-grown, albeit very petite woman, which embodies the very paradox of Wendy’s current situation. At this point in the novel, Wendy is a woman in the body of a child—or, possibly, a child in the budding body of a woman. Barrie depicts Wendy as being in a constant state of admiration for her mother: “Mrs. Darling had come in, wearing her white evening-gown. She had dressed early because Wendy so loved to see her in her evening-gown […] She was wearing Wendy’s bracelet on her arm […] Wendy so loved to lend her bracelet to her mother” (Barrie 16). Clearly, Wendy idolizes her mother and loves seeing her totally put-together for a grown-up night out. However, Wendy also loves seeing herself this way, and longs to make herself a part of this picture somehow, so she lends her mother her own bracelet. Barrie implies that Wendy often lends the accessory to Mrs. Darling, so that although Wendy is not yet a part of the adult society where mothers and fathers go to dinner parties down the street, she admires it and inserts herself into it when she can.

The moment that Peter enters the picture, Wendy begins to change, no longer content with being simply the daughter at home. Wendy asks Peter if his mother gets letters in Neverland, and he responds that he does not have a mother. Barrie writes, “Not only had he no mother, but he had not the slightest desire to have one. He thought them very over-rated persons. Wendy, however, felt at once she was in the presence of a tragedy” (25). In this scene, Wendy believes that Peter’s ragged appearance indicates that he needs a mother, and the void needs to be filled. Without so much as a moment’s hesitation, Wendy unconsciously jumps to fill that void herself. She knows exactly what to do to reattach his shadow: “she was exulting in his ignorance. ‘I shall sew it on for you, my little man,’ she said, though he was as tall as herself” (25). Despite their apparent similarity in age, Wendy adopts a patronizing attitude towards Peter. She acts as though he is her son who needs a patch sewn into his trousers, and Peter even allows himself to be mothered, petulantly proclaiming that he will not cry even if it hurts.
In the following scenes, Peter begins to take advantage of Wendy’s desire to play the role. Barrie describes him as “frightfully cunning” as he begins to lure Wendy to the windows. He promises adventure, but also promises her the role of mother amongst the Lost Boys (31). The role of storyteller, for instance, is held by her mother at home in England, but Wendy proclaims, “Oh, the stories I could tell to the boys!” (31). She longs to be mother to them, and Peter encourages her: “[…] how we should all respect you […] you could tuck us in at night […] None of us has ever been tucked in at night […] And you could darn our clothes, and make pockets for us. None of us has any pockets” (31). Barrie’s tone in this scene intrigues. While in Edwardian England, motherhood was seen as something inherent and natural for women, Barrie uses these ideas against Wendy. He portrays Peter as a very sinister figure who impishly lures Wendy away from her home by promising her respect and joy in motherhood. Barrie describes “a greedy look in his eyes […] which ought to have alarmed her, but did not,” and also calls Peter “sly” and “cunning” more than once (31). Wendy’s notions of motherhood are naïve, and Peter’s devilish use of her ideals against her suggests that these ideas will change during her time in Neverland.

Barrie’s idea of Neverland brings to mind the human psyche and sets an appropriate stage for Wendy’s cognitive development. Barrie prefaces his initial description of Neverland by saying, “I don’t know whether you have ever seen a map of a person’s mind,” which establishes Neverland on an internal, psychological plane (9). He goes on to say that each Neverland is different, and that “When you play at it by day with the chairs and tablecloth, it is not in the least alarming, but in the two minutes before you go to sleep it becomes very nearly real” (9-10). This idea of Neverland as a place that is closest to being real upon the onset of slumber brings to mind Sigmund Freud’s theory of the subconscious mind, and how the subconscious can come to life during sleep. If this invocation is intentional, then it can be inferred that Neverland, in the context of the story, is Wendy’s subconscious mind, where she can explore herself on a deeper, sub-surface level. Here, Wendy can grapple with themes of sexuality and gender, tradition and progression, youth and age, and how all of it relates to her.

Lucy Delap, in her article on feminism in Edwardian Britain, describes a key element of Edwardian feminism which directly relates to Wendy’s introspective and emotional journey through Neverland. Delap states, “An ‘introspective turn’ can be identified in Edwardian feminism, a desire to seek liberation not through ‘externals’, such as
rights granted by men, but through internal transformation of one’s psyche and sexual being. It was a widely accepted belief within the women’s movement that ability to achieve emancipation depended on will or character” (Delap 116). This theory of an introspective turn can easily be seen in Wendy’s narrative, as represented by her descent into Neverland and her interactions with the characters she finds there. Although Barrie’s tale is populated by many colorful characters, Wendy’s central development hinges upon her relationships with the following three: Peter Pan, Captain Hook, and Tinker Bell the fairy. As Wendy’s relationships with these characters change and evolve, so does her sense of self. She discovers pieces of herself reflected in each of them, and so emerges from Neverland more complete.

One subtle facet of Wendy’s development comes in the form of Tinker Bell, the other chief feminine influence in Neverland. Although Tinker Bell is a fairy, she hardly paints a picture of innocence. On the contrary, she frequently refers to Peter as a “silly ass” and generally seems quite crass in her demeanor (29). Tinker Bell is fully grown, contrasting with Wendy’s child body at the beginning of the text. She sees a potential in Wendy that Wendy does not at first recognize within herself. When Wendy tries to give Peter a thimble—really, a kiss—Tinker Bell goes wild with jealousy. She tugs Wendy’s hair as hard as she can, and says that she will continue to do so every time that Wendy tries to kiss Peter. To the audience, it is immediately obvious that Tinker Bell is extremely possessive of Peter. Her jealousy knows no bounds. When Wendy first enters Neverland, Tink hatches a scheme to be rid of her for good. She enlists the help of the unwitting Lost Boys by telling them that Peter has instructed they shoot down the great white bird flying through the sky, which is, of course, Wendy. Barrie writes that Wendy “did not yet know that Tink hated her with the fierce hatred of a very woman” (46). This line highlights Wendy’s naïveté, but also the reason why Tink hates her so much. It suggests that their interactions are competitive, even if Wendy is not fully aware of it yet, and that Tinker Bell must acknowledge Wendy as a threat. If Wendy is bold enough to kiss Peter, after all, there would be nothing to stop her from usurping Tinker Bell’s position in Peter’s life. Tink sees the potential within Wendy to develop into a woman herself, and if allowed to do so, she may take Peter’s affections away.

Barrie establishes the early differences between the two characters artfully, using spatial imagery to get his point across. When Wendy settles into her new life with the Lost Boys, Barrie makes a key differentiation
in the ways that Tinker Bell and Wendy integrate themselves with the boys. Wendy fits herself right into their lives, sharing with them the main room, which serves as their living, dining, and bedroom area. As such, she has little to no privacy, but that does not appear to bother her at all. Moving in with the Lost Boys is, presumably, not much different from sharing the nursery with her brothers back at home. However, Tinker Bell’s living situation is much, much different. Privacy is everything. Barrie describes: “There was one recess in the wall […] which was the private apartment of Tinker Bell. It could be shut off from the rest of the home by a tiny curtain, which Tink […] always kept drawn when dressing or undressing. No woman, however large, could have had a more exquisite boudoir and bed-chamber combined” (68). Whereas Wendy must share a room with the Lost Boys and Peter, whether she is getting dressed or not, Tinker Bell is assured privacy when dressing, indicating a decided difference in their bodies. Wendy's body is that of a child, not much different from the boys’ at this point, but Tinker Bell, by contrast, must have the body of a woman. Barrie mentions Tink's boudoir, which casts the fairy in a sexual light. He forces the audience to consider Tink as a grown woman whose body needs to be concealed, and as a sexual being with a private bedchamber. He further exoticizes this concept by even calling it a boudoir, which originates in the French language and is generally seen as an erotically-charged word. The distinctions between Wendy and Tinker Bell are polarized, and set Wendy up for some kind of sexual awakening later in the novel.

Upon entering Neverland, Wendy immediately assumes the role of mother for the Lost Boys. In their hideout, she tells them stories, and Barrie describes “The bed was tilted against the wall by day, and let down at 6:30, when it filled nearly half the room; and all the boys slept in it except Michael,” because “Wendy would have a baby, and he was the littlest” (Barrie 68). Wendy adapts very quickly to the role, performing the basic tasks that any traditional mother would do, mending their clothing and cooking both real and imaginary dinners. She gives herself over to the fantasy nearly entirely: “Wendy’s favourite time for sewing and darning was after they had all gone to bed. Then, as she expressed it, she had a breathing time for herself; and she occupied it in making new things for them,” Barrie writes (69). This scene says quite a bit about Wendy’s perception of motherhood. Even though Wendy declares that the time spent sewing is actually time for herself, in reality she still spends it creating things for her children. Even during personal time, then, a mother is constantly preoccupied by her children and their needs.
Wendy even goes so far as to say, “Oh dear, I am sure I sometimes think spinsters are to be envied!” (69). This declaration indicates that at this point in the novel, Wendy is still naïve and willing to go along with the charade of housewifery, no doubt parroting a phrase she hears at home. The thought does not appear to be organic or original. She envies the life of a spinster, but has never been truly married herself. However, it appears that she does consider herself married, in a sense, to Peter.

After saving princess Tiger Lily, Peter becomes renowned by the redskins, who refer to Wendy as a squaw and treat her poorly. Following this, Peter does not treat Wendy nearly as well as he did when she first came to Neverland, and the metaphorical honeymoon period comes to an end. Here, Wendy’s presuppositions about marriage come to light: “she was far too loyal a housewife to listen to any complaints against Father. ‘Father knows best,’ she always said, whatever her private opinion must be. Her private opinion was that the redskins should not call her a squaw” (88-89). This passage highlights traditional views about marriage upheld by Victorian and Edwardian societies: that men knew best and the duty of the wife was to submit to her husband’s knowledge and authority, and stay within the domestic sphere. Her opinions should not be expressed. Again, Wendy laments, “I’m sure I sometimes think that spinsters are to be envied” (90). This occurs in Peter’s absence, and Wendy’s patience for her children wears thin, especially without the support of the father figure. When Peter returns home, he affectionately calls her “old lady,” and says, “there is nothing more pleasant of an evening for you and me when the day’s toil is over than to rest by the fire with the little ones near by” (92). It seems that Peter is content to play the role of father, but he quickly grows confused, “blinking, you know, like one not sure whether he was awake or asleep” (92). The truth of it soon comes out.

Although Peter plays at being father, he becomes increasingly uncomfortable with the idea and seeks reassurance from Wendy, who must come to terms with Peter’s true intentions toward her. She asks him how he thinks of her, and he replies that he feels like “a devoted son,” then goes on to speak of his relationship with Tiger Lily: “there is something she wants to be to me, but she says it is not my mother” (92). If, until this point, Wendy has any doubts about the role she plays in Neverland, her disillusionment begins here. She cannot truly be Peter’s wife, as he cannot grasp what a wife is. His only experience with women seems to be with mothers, and even that experience is limited. In addition, he does not appear to be able to see women in a sexual light at all. At this
moment, Wendy begins to realize that Neverland is only a fantasy, and that although the fantasy is tempting, it is simultaneously sobering. Over the course of the next events, Wendy recognizes that she wants to be a wife to someone, and eventually a mother, too, and she cannot do that in Neverland. The night of her departure, she tells Peter and the boys a story about three children called Wendy, John, and Michael who fly away to Neverland and then return to the nursery window, still kept wide open by their mother. She imagines the children as older upon their return, and thinks of herself in particular as “an elegant lady,” whom she cannot become while still in Neverland (97).

Following this story, Peter’s true attitude towards mothers comes out, and quite contrary to the respect and loving he promised Wendy earlier in the novel, it appears that he has a very good reason to loathe the mothers. He says, “I thought […] my mother would always keep the window open for me […] and then I flew back; but the window was barred, for mother had forgotten all about me, and there was another little boy sleeping in my bed” (98). Peter’s bitterness is somewhat surprising, given his childish nature, but it makes perfect sense in conjunction with the notion that he represents an unforgiving society that leads and encourages women into motherhood, but simultaneously degrades women and condemns them for maternity. In fact, Peter becomes homicidal. Upon Wendy’s announcement that she intends to leave Neverland with her brothers, Peter returns to the tree hideout and begins breathing very quickly, which Barrie explains: “there is a saying in the Neverland that, every time you breathe, a grown-up dies; and Peter was killing them off vindictively as fast as possible” (99). With this reading, it can be interpreted that as a society, Edwardian England—represented in the story by Peter—encourages young girls to become mothers, but upon entering adulthood, the society immediately begins to tear the women down for the very ideals they are conditioned to uphold. It does so viciously and indiscriminately, just as Peter wishes to kill as many adults as he can.

Barrie presents his audience with two marriages in the novel: the already-mentioned pseudo marriage between Peter and Wendy, and the literal marriage of Wendy’s parents. Mr. and Mrs. Darling represent the ideal marriage in Edwardian society, but Barrie portrays the couple as extremely dysfunctional. Dr. Heather E. Shipley addresses the Darling family phenomenon in her essay, “Fairies, Mermaids, Mothers, and Princesses: Sexual Difference and Gender Roles in Peter Pan.” In this essay, she psychoanalyzes Disney’s 1953 adaptation of Barrie’s tale, and says this about Wendy’s parents: “the parental figures in the narrative are
not comforting or consoling; they are either terrifying or they abandon the children. Even in the Darling household, the children are tended by their nanny, a sheepdog named Nana. Therefore, it would appear that the parents of the "real world" are remote figures as well, leaving an animal in charge of their children" (Shipley 153). While Shipley's interpretation of the family dynamic is not entirely unfair—the Darlings do have a sheepdog taking care of their children—it is a bit of a stretch to call them non-consoling and non-comforting. Mr. Darling appears more incompetent than tyrannical, like Captain Hook. Before the children set off on their adventures, Michael and Mr. Darling get into a very childish argument about medicine. Neither Mr. Darling nor his son wants to take his medicine. "The point is, that there is more in my glass than in Michael's spoon," he says, and he eventually calls Michael a "cowardy custard" following a similar remark from Michael (Barrie 19). So, while there may be a sense of incompetence surrounding Mr. Darling, and potentially a lack of respect for him on the part of the children, it is not exactly fair for Shipley to claim that the parental units in Peter Pan are terrifying. Mrs. Darling comes over as an ideal Edwardian mother, loyal to her husband despite his faults, and entirely dedicated to her children. Before bed each night, she performs a task which Barrie indicates all good mothers should do: "It is the nightly custom of every good mother after her children are asleep to rummage in their minds and put things straight for next morning [...] When you wake [...] the naughtinesses and evil passions with which you went to bed have been folded up small and placed at the bottom of your mind" (8). Barrie outwardly refers to Mrs. Darling as a good mother, and unlike Peter's mother, she keeps the nursery window open and eagerly awaits the children's return. Barrie gives no indication that Mrs. Darling is an incompetent mother or wife other than her allowing Peter to take her children away from her. The picture Barrie pants is dysfunctional, but not abusive or neglectful, and it critiques the Darlings' marriage more than it critiques their attitudes as parents.

Besides Wendy's father, the other major adult male in Wendy's life is Captain James Hook. The Hook and Wendy relationship is a favorite focus amongst Peter Pan enthusiasts particularly because the roles of Hook and Mr. Darling are double-cast in stage and film productions, so the same actor plays them both. This detail obviously lends itself to a Freudian reading of their relationship, where Wendy's budding sexuality leads her to desire her father in this form within her subconscious mind. The Freudian reading is not as readily present in the novel, but it must
be acknowledged that Wendy’s first face-to-face encounter with Hook reads as a sexual interaction. The pirates besiege the tree hideout and pluck the Lost Boys from their trees as they ascend, then roughly throw them to the ground and tie them up. However, “a different treatment was accorded to Wendy who came last. With ironical politeness Hook raised his hat to her, and, offering her his arm, escorted her to the spot where the others were being gagged. He did it with such an air […] she was too fascinated to cry out” (108). This fascination Wendy feels for Hook no doubt comes from his adult, masculine presence coupled with the courtly way he treats her. In this scene, he treats her very much like the elegant lady she desires to become when she grows up. The scene plays out as though he is courting her: the tip of the hat, the arm-offer, the escort. For the first time, a man treats Wendy as though she is a proper woman, and she is, according to Barrie, “entranced” (108).

Hook’s appeal as a viable romantic interest for Wendy is fleeting, as his villainous nature quickly reappears. Hook intends to have the Lost Boys walk the plank, but he wants Wendy to watch. He has her brought up from the hold. Barrie writes, “Fine gentleman though he was, the intensity of his communings had soiled his ruff, and suddenly he knew that she was gazing at it. With a hasty gesture he tried to hide it, but he was too late” (120). The façade Hook upholds begins to crumble in this scene. Whereas earlier in the story, Wendy might have been drawn to him, she does not appear to have any illusions about his character now. The symbolism of his soiled ruff suggests that Wendy now has the ability to see through his exterior to see his rotten core, however he may try to hide it. In addition, his true character begins to show more and more. He no longer treats her with respect. Wendy has truly come to think of the Lost Boys as her children during her time in Neverland, but Hook purposefully wishes to have Wendy watch as he kills off her children one by one. It is an act of extreme cruelty, which serves to show Wendy that although adult men may be enticing, they can also be dangerous and vindictive. That Wendy can now see through Hook’s mask signifies Wendy’s growth as a character as well as her newfound responsibility as a woman to be critical of men who may come into her life.

Of course, Wendy ultimately chooses to leave Neverland following the final battle, during which Hook perishes, inadvertently, by his own hand. Hook’s death represents the final stage of Wendy’s development in Neverland. Hitherto, the battle between the pirates, the Lost Boys, and the redskins has gone on uninterrupted, but now, the boys lay waste to nearly all of the pirates. If Wendy were to leave Neverland without
resolving one of these battles, the forces inside her mind would not be balanced, and her development would not be complete. Until the very end of the novel, Hook lives in fear of the crocodile with the clock in its belly that constantly follows him, hungering for another taste. This symbolizes a fear of death which comes with adulthood, but when death finally does come for Hook, Barrie writes: “He did not know that the crocodile was waiting for him; for we purposely stopped the clock that this knowledge might be spared him; a little mark of respect” (132). By silencing the clock, Barrie allows Hook to go “content to the crocodile,” establishing that death, when it comes, does not do so with warning (132). Witnessing this death prepares Wendy to come to terms with her own fears of mortality, and signifies the metaphorical death of childhood irresponsibility for Wendy. It serves the final marker of Wendy’s development so that she may leave Neverland at last and accept the responsibilities of adulthood.

The final chapter of the novel details Peter’s eventual return to London, where he finds that Wendy has grown up and has a daughter of her own. Barrie ends on this note to suggest a kind of cycle: all women need to come to Neverland as children in order to finally pass into adulthood. When Peter at last returns for Wendy, he is grief-stricken at the fact she is no longer a child. He sobs on the floor, and when Wendy leaves the room, at a loss to comfort him, her daughter Jane approaches him instead. Her words mirror the very first words Wendy ever said to Peter in the nursery so long ago: “Boy, why are you crying?” (152). So continues the cycle. Barrie writes, “Jane is now a common grown-up, with a daughter called Margaret; and every spring-cleaning time, except when he forgets, Peter comes for Margaret and takes her to the Neverland […] When Margaret grows up she will have a daughter, who is to be Peter’s mother in turn; and so it will go on” (153). The thought of the cycle is an interesting one, which, once examined, couples well with the notion of Neverland as a psychological battlefield. Each Neverland is different, after all, and will change depending upon the child who visits it. While Wendy undergoes her development with the help of Peter, Hook, and Tinker Bell, her daughter Jane will not have the same experience, as Hook is dead and so, as far as Peter knows, is Tinker Bell. However, although the journey will be different, the result must be the same, for each of these children eventually decide to grow up and become mothers. First, though, they choose—of their own agency—to go to Neverland and participate in the adventures and maturations that occur there.
By the end of the novel, Wendy represents a new and subtly formidable kind of mother. She is only able to do so because of her time in Neverland, where Barrie beautifully illustrates her development. As a real mother, Wendy takes charge of her own nursery rather than having a dog as Jane’s nurse as her mother did. When Peter returns, she is present, and although she longs to return to Neverland with him, she recognizes that she cannot go: only children can. She “allow[s] [Peter and Jane] to fly away together” in the end, which, although it is a subtle difference, stands in stark contrast to the method by which Peter lured Wendy away initially (152). Whereas Mrs. Darling does not give her consent for Peter to take Wendy away, Wendy consciously allows Peter to take Jane. She could stop him if she wished, but she does not, and openly encourages Jane’s cognitive development. As a character, Wendy recognizes that the development she underwent while in Neverland is important, and she wants her own daughter—the next generation—to benefit from it as well. Also notable is the lack of the husband’s presence. Barrie mentions offhand that Wendy is married, but that throwaway line is all that the husband gets. His presence is negligible, allowing Wendy to become the soul authority in the nursery and the house. Wendy represents a new kind of woman in Edwardian England; one who thinks critically about her role as mother rather than blindly accepting it, who does not rely on her husband’s authority, and who encourages future generations of women to do the same.

Wendy’s development heralds the beginning of a new society, where women have voices and opportunities to explore their inner selves. In his vision of the comedy, Northrop Frye suggests that comedies move towards a new society, and end with a celebration that welcomes it. He claims that during this celebration, “the tendency of comedy is to include as many people as possible in its final society: the blocking characters”—those who impede the heroine in her quest for a new society—“are more often reconciled or converted than simply repudiated,” (Frye 165). When Wendy, John and Michael return from Neverland, they bring along every single Lost Boy in order to reintroduce them into society. Not only do the Lost Boys accompany the children back to England, but the adult Darlings reject their previous, conservative Victorian attitudes in order to adopt all of the boys themselves, creating a new, ridiculously large family. With Frye’s idea of the implementation of a new society in mind, Barrie’s novel becomes a call-to-arms for Edwardian-era girls and women to step up and seize the reins of their cognitive development.
In *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Bruno Bettelheim writes, “[Fairy Tales] speak about […] severe inner pressures in a way that the child unconsciously understands, and—without belittling the most serious inner struggles which growing up entails—offer examples of both temporary and permanent solutions to pressing difficulties” (Bettelheim 5). For perhaps the first time, J. M. Barrie utilizes the fairy tale to offer the opportunity for complex psychological development to a female character. Wendy undergoes a massive psychological transformation over the course of the novel: she grows from an inexperienced child to a competent woman and mother. Wendy is permitted to explore how she can interact with societal pressures without dire consequences, and so emerges from Neverland better prepared for grown-up life in England. By giving Wendy a voice and complexity to boot, Barrie opens the door to Neverland for other young girls so that they might explore their own inner workings and get to know themselves better before jumping straight into adulthood, marriage, and motherhood.

Works Cited

A Blonde Valentine for a Han Chinese Girl
COURTNEY GRIEB is future-focused and ready for her next step in life. Born in Ohio, to two New Yorkers, she is not a Southern girl. She loves baseball, rainy days, and Ed Sheeran. One day, she’ll teach students not only the value of literature but also how their lives impact the work still to come. Until then, she subsides her wanderlust by planning trips around the world that she hopes to one day take.
In the traditional marriage plot, a man and woman meet, fall in love, face an obstacle in their relationship, overcome this obstacle, and reach their happy ending. This plot appears in many texts, illustrating its social significance, appeal to writers, and importance to the literary canon. However, there are also many texts that utilize other elements of a traditional plot structure such as the double-proposal. This occurs when the hero proposes to the heroine, yet she refuses. The heroine often bases her refusal on her distaste for the hero’s behavior or personality and her desire that he change. Later in this plot, the hero attempts another proposal and the heroine finally agrees to the marriage arrangement. This shift from one proposal to two allows the author to create a space between the proposals during which the hero and heroine undergo changes to become more suitable as marriage partners. During the second proposal, if the heroine judges the hero’s changes as positive and, as a result, her feelings towards him as a potential partner also change, she accepts the proposal and they begin their way towards a happy ending.

A variation on the double-proposal marriage plot occurs in Robert Luketic’s 2001 film *Legally Blonde*. Upon first glance, the movie appears as merely a comedy portraying a story of female power as the protagonist, Elle, ventures to law school; however, when viewed from a literary perspective through the courtship plot, the movie also takes on a traditional portrayal of marriage. Through its double-proposal plot and Elle’s transformation in the time between the two “proposals,” *Legally Blonde* transforms from a comedy as defined by possessing humor to a comedy
as defined by Northrop Frye as a plot that deals with social integration (43). While she attempts to persuade her love-interest, Warner, to take her back, Elle learns about herself and develops a passion for law. This newfound interest leads her away from Warner and she begins to sense her independence and success growing as the story continues. By the end of the film, Elle no longer desires Warner after discovering his lack of intelligence and morals, and instead chooses to focus on her passion for law. Read as a variation of the double-proposal text, *Legally Blonde* illustrates how Elle changes from accepting to rejecting her relationship with Warner and ultimately finds her own sense of independence and success during the time between the two “proposals.”

In the first proposal of the double-proposal plot, the female usually declines because of a dissatisfaction with the male. The “heroine refuses the hero not because of misunderstanding but because she prefers to remain unmarried or because she disapproves of the hero” (Tracey 7). For example, in one of the most famous double-proposal plots, *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth rejects Darcy’s initial proposal because he is arrogant and rude. In *Legally Blonde*, however, the proposals take a turn and throughout the film the hero’s and heroine’s roles often become flipped. Instead of the male proposing marriage, as Elle assumes Warner will, he proposes to end their relationship. Warner’s proposal to break up and Elle’s acceptance of a marriage proposal occurs at the same time, illustrating Elle’s assumption that Warner will propose marriage instead of separation. In this situation, it appears as if Elle is not declining Warner’s marriage proposal, but Warner declining Elle’s. As Warner ends their relationship, typically the female’s role in the double-proposal structure, Elle parallels with the defeated male character who must undergo changes, becoming more suitable in order for the heroine to accept the second proposal. The couple’s separation allows time for the denied proposer to change to meet the needs of the proposal denier. Warner begins to explain the reason that he cannot marry Elle when he says, “I need to marry a Jackie, not a Marilyn.” Warner reveals that he needs someone serious like Jackie Kennedy, whose appearance many people considered classy and respectable, instead of what he believes to be an insignificant, fun girl like Marilyn Monroe, who served as a sex symbol during her time. Elle interprets Warner’s statement as a critique of her image, accusing him of breaking up with her because her hair is “too blonde” and her “boobs are too big.” Elle assumes that, because he references women whose appearances many people often discussed, her appearance is the problem. Karen Tracey clarifies that the first proposal generally occurs
because of the heroine’s sexual attraction or appeal (36). The couple’s conversation, when discussing Elle’s appearance, illustrates their focus on physical rather than emotional qualities, highlighting their misunderstanding of a successful marriage. Warner, and even initially Elle, endorse the cultural assumption that attractive and intelligent are two separate categories that cannot both appear in one person. When faced with the notion of not being serious enough for Warner, Elle responds, “But I’m seriously in love with you. Isn’t that enough?”. At this stage in their narrative, Warner realizes the importance of his future and the seriousness of his career while Elle remains focused on their relationship.

The duration between the two proposals serves as the most important time in the text. Allowing the hero and heroine opportunities to undergo changes, the author creates the possibility of a “double trajectory, responding to two questions: What would happen if the heroine remains unwed? What would happen if, after all, she marries the reformed hero?” (Tracey 19). These questions fuel the narrative, allowing the viewer to imagine alternative plot lines for the characters. The heroine often uses this time to analyze her own happiness and feelings towards marriage. Tracey describes that the heroine may engage in furthering her own education, obtaining a job, or creating friendships that would have been hindered had she accepted the first proposal (Tracey 23). She can analyze her feelings for the hero and determine what he must do in order for her to accept the second proposal.

Double-proposal novels give the heroine the opportunity to find or create a new version of herself. Because of this newfound ability to create an identity outside of marriage, double-proposal texts are often “given readings as potentially powerful feminist texts” (Tracey 4). They allow the heroine to venture onto her own path and create her own future. The heroine does not depend solely on the hero but instead works to create her own life and renegotiate her desires for her future. The narrative space between the first and second proposals allows the heroine to become more independent and successful and realize that she desires rather than needs marriage. She no longer relies on marriage as her source of success but can instead create success on her own.

After Warner’s first “proposal,” Elle visits a nail salon where she realizes the changes she must make in order for Warner to propose again. Seeing Warner’s older brother and his fiancée in a magazine, she realizes, “This is the type of girl that Warner wants to marry! This is what I need to become to be serious! . . . A law student.” When she petitions her parents with the idea of attending law school, a male figure in Elle’s life
again categorizes her as not “serious.” Her father tells her, “Sweetheart, you don’t need law school. Law school is for people who are boring and ugly and serious. And you, Button, are none of those things.” While attempting to comfort his daughter, he implies that she is not serious because of her appearance, similar to the critique that Warner gave her during the breakup. Her mother also adds to this assessment by prioritizing Elle’s appearance over her intelligence by stating, “Honey, you were first runner up at the Miss Hawaiian Tropics contest. Why are you gonna throw that all away?”. Her statement suggests that attractiveness is something that can not only sustain Elle but can also be lost when pursuing an education. The time between the two proposals “prolongs control of [the heroine’s] life beyond scenes that might have ended her self-determination” (Tracey 15). If Warner had proposed marriage to Elle in the initial scene, she would not experience this new determination to gain more knowledge. While at this point Elle focuses more on winning Warner back than her education, she eventually discovers her passion for law, something that would have been lost if the first proposal were for marriage. These moments critique society’s interpretation of the polarity of appearance and intelligence for women.

During the time between the two proposals, while the male tries to change for the female, the female often undergoes changes of her own. This is a time when Warner and Elle fulfill their typical roles as hero and heroine, respectively. Typically related to changes in friends and education, the female uses her additional time as a single woman to broaden her abilities and connections. Kelly A. Marsh clarifies how, early in Elle’s experience at Harvard, she learns the definition of serious during the orientation with fellow students David and Enid who describe that they “de-worm[ed] orphans in Somalia” and “single-handedly organized the march for lesbians against drunk driving.” These experiences are juxtaposed to Elle’s who focuses on fashion and cosmetics, exemplifying Warner’s accusation that she is not serious enough. Elle takes her path towards seriousness through her education to an extreme by not only engaging in a new educational experiences but also accepting a new career goal. Tracey explains that “the goal of women’s development may be more than to fit them for the domestic sphere” (41). For Elle, her education allows her to prepare for the public sphere instead of a domestic life. Her experience is not without struggle, however. On her first day at Harvard, Elle realizes that she is unprepared for Professor Stromwell’s class. Once the professor notices, she promptly asks her to leave class and “return only when she is prepared.” Beginning on a rough
note, Elle feels like a failure and wonders if she is ready for law school. Throughout the film, however, Elle begins to learn more about herself and the practice of law. Later in the semester, the same professor asks her a question which she answers to the professor’s satisfaction. This also occurs in Professor Callahan’s class when she answers another question correctly and Callahan displays a smile at Elle’s success and growth. Hillary Radner explains that “romance and marriage, while providing the pretext for the plot and Elle’s quest from success, are soon superseded by Elle’s desire to prove herself to her own satisfaction in the new and untried arena of Harvard Law School” (68). Elle begins to focus more on her success than her relationship with Warner, growing beyond the roles of a traditional heroine.

In the film, Elle befriends a nail artist, Paulette, who has undergone an intense breakup herself. After learning about Warner’s engagement to Vivian, a fellow law student, Elle visits Paulette and reveals her problems. Paulette suggests that Elle “steal the bastard back” from Vivian. Throughout the rest of the film, Paulette becomes Elle’s best friend, confiding her own marital problems in Elle. After eight years of marriage, Paulette’s husband, Dewey, tells her that he met someone else; he wants her to move out and leave her dog behind. As Marsh identifies, Elle can “see the value in ‘trifles’” (203) and pretends to be “Miss Bonifante’s attorney . . . to discuss the legal situation at hand.” Often mistaken for knowing unimportant information, such as beauty and fashion, Elle sees the importance in Paulette’s relationship with her dog and the injustice that has taken place. Elle uses her newfound, yet sometimes improvised, knowledge of law to help Paulette retrieve her dog. Afterwards, Elle seems to reflect on the power she had gained from her legal knowledge. Elle’s service to Paulette serves as one of the first moments when Elle begins to realize her love of law.

Elle’s relationship with Vivian changes drastically throughout the course of the film. Initially, Elle meets Vivian during Stromwell’s class. Stromwell asks Vivian for support in her decision of asking Elle to leave class after Elle reveals that she is unprepared. Gordon Alley-Young explains Elle’s negative reaction to Vivian’s support: “Elle’s sorority background leads her to believe in a sisterhood of women so when Vivian rules against Elle she is shocked,” causing Vivian to appear “opportunistic and vindictive” (17). Elle believes that because they are both women learning in a male-centered atmosphere, Vivian should support her. Shortly after, Elle learns of Vivian’s engagement to Warner, which only increases her dislike. Taking Paulette’s advice to steal Warner back from
Vivian, Elle appears defensive towards Vivian in Professor Callahan’s class. When Callahan asks Elle whether she would prefer “a client who committed a crime malum in se or malum prohibitum,” Elle initially responds that she “would rather have a client who’s innocent.” However, after hearing that Vivian would prefer a client who did not commit a dangerous crime, Elle responds by changing her answer to: “I’d pick the dangerous one ‘cause I’m not afraid of a challenge.” Elle’s defensiveness towards Vivian illustrates her desire to essentially beat her rival by winning Warner back. Further on in the film, however, her attitude towards Vivian shifts during their internship with Brooke Wyndham’s case. Brooke Wyndham, one of Elle’s sorority sisters and a fitness trainer, admits to Elle that she had undergone liposuction, a secret that would ruin her career, while her husband was murdered. After Elle discovers Brooke’s alibi but refuses to reveal it to Callahan and the other associates, Vivian visits Elle in her dorm and tells her that it was “very classy” of her to keep the trust of their client. Unlike Warner’s encouragement to divulge the alibi in order to further her career, Vivian views Elle’s withholding of Brooke’s alibi as a demonstration of Elle’s good character and female solidarity. Vivian and Elle begin to bond, their relationship illustrating how Elle begins to focus less on her relationship with Warner and more on her friends and legal education.

When seeing Warner for the first time after their separation, Elle pretends that she doesn’t remember him. After reacquainting with one another, Warner appears confounded that Elle was accepted to Harvard, to which she replies, “What, like it’s hard?” As shown in scenes before this, Elle studies intensely to pass her LSAT and films an application video; however, Elle believes that if her effort appears easy then she will appear more intelligent and serious to Warner, allowing her to win him back faster. However, as the film progresses, Elle reaches a tough realization about Warner. When they discuss their busy schedules and balancing school work, Elle mentions her desire to be one of Callahan’s interns. Warner, who still does not take Elle seriously, tells her, “You’ll never get the grades to qualify for one of those spots. You’re not smart enough, sweetie.” After already telling Elle that she is not serious, Warner now insults her intelligence. Elle, who can now fight back because of her new found independence, retorts, “Wait, am I on glue or did we not get into the same law school, Warner?”. She resists Warner’s insults, finally realizing that she will never be “good enough” for him. Walking off, Elle shouts, “I’ll show you how valuable Elle Woods can be!” Once she receives a position in Callahan’s internship, Elle tells
Warner that the internship will be “so much better” than one of their past romantic experiences, illustrating Elle’s transition from a love for Warner to a love for law.

In a double-proposal text, the heroine is not the only character who is expected to change. Tracey illuminates that “it is not enough that the suitor ‘loves’ the heroine passionately; he needs to be reformed, humbled, or otherwise transformed” (23). During their time in the internship, Elle begins to see Warner’s true identity. When discussing Brooke’s alibi, which Elle still refuses to reveal to her associates, Warner tells her, “If you tell him, he’ll probably hire you as a summer associate . . . . Who cares about Brooke? Think about yourself.” Elle expresses her disgust at this comment and begins creating a negative image of Warner. Warner seemingly undergoes changes during the time between the two proposals, however it is not his intent to change. While his personality may not actually change, Elle’s view of him does, ultimately stopping her from vying for his love and instead focusing on her own career.

During the time between Elle’s double proposals, she creates relationships with two other men: Professor Callahan and his associate Emmett. As one of Elle’s professors, Callahan experiences the improvements that Elle makes in her law education first-hand and shows almost immediate interest in her. He prompts Elle to apply for his internship after she “[wins] her case” during class. Hopeful that she can be one of his interns, she applies, assuming that his encouragement results from her performance; however, while discussing her future as a law student, Callahan attempts to receive a sexual favor from Elle, asking her “How far will Elle go” to become a lawyer while moving his hand up her thigh. Elle is disgusted at his behavior and quickly decides to quit the internship and law school. Prior to this scene, Callahan overtly exhibits his sexism by constantly asking Vivian to get his coffee, again attempting to show his dominance over females. Callahan appears in the film as a suitor for Elle, offering to guarantee academic success in exchange for a romantic relationship, while filling an overtly masculine and sexist role. Joseph Allen Boone explains that by “reducing women to anonymous objects of sexual conquest, the seducer no less than the legitimate suitor attempts to erase those signs of female autonomy and otherness that threaten his own identity as the superior and more powerful sex” (100). According to Boone, Elle’s success in his class and in the court system threatens Callahan and he makes advances on her, attempting to remove her self confidence. He tries convincing Elle, and does so successfully, that her achievements and position in his internship are based on her appear-
ance rather than her intelligence. As seen early in the movie when Elle decides on pursuing an education over attempting to succeed from her appearance, Elle values her education and knowledge more, demonstrating her dedication to law school. Therefore, she rejects this “suitor’s” proposal because of her own standards for herself.

Emmett, Professor Callahan’s associate and the first person whom Elle confides in while at Harvard, becomes another suitor for Elle during the film. His purpose, however, is quite different than Warner’s and Callahan’s. As shown relatively early in the film while talking to Callahan, Emmett tells him that Elle has “a lot of potential.” From such an early point in the movie, Emmett can see Elle’s dedication for law and for her personal relationships, finally casting her in a positive light from a male’s point of view. Eleanor Hersey explains how, “Emmett never doubts that Elle can make it as a law student, unlike Warner who denies her ability to win an internship” (156). Emmett sees the strength and passion within Elle and knows that she will be successful. Later, when investigating the spa, Emmett tells her, “Being blonde is actually a pretty powerful thing. You hold more cards that you think you do. I personally would like to see you take that power and channel it towards the greater good.” This scene illustrates how Emmett sees Elle as a powerful woman and encourages her to focus her power on her own passion for law. He acknowledges the positive aspects of Elle while still maintaining a balance between appearance and knowledge. Unlike the other men in Elle’s life, Emmett encourages her to embrace her appearance and use its power on something positive. This is different from Warner, her father, and Callahan, who all view appearance as something that trivializes education; they believe that because Elle is attractive, she does not need to further her education. Emmett, however, believes that she can harness the power of her attractiveness and use the determination she has gained from rejecting the numerous critiques of her in order to advance her education and career.

The second marriage proposal typically occurs after the male character has undergone a change that allows the female to view him as more acceptable. In this film, however, Elle is the one who has undergone the most change, becoming more serious and studious in order to regain Warner’s affections. After Elle wins Brooke’s case, Warner approaches Elle and tells her that she is the girl for him and that he loves her. Elle responds, “I’ve waited so long to hear you say that, but if I’m gonna be a partner at a law firm by the time I’m thirty, I need a boyfriend who’s not such a complete bonehead.” Elle realizes that “she would rather be
a lawyer than a society wife” (Hersey 151) and can reject Warner’s proposal because of her newfound sense of independence and success. The rejection of Warner’s proposal is also an example of the repetition often found in the double marriage proposal plot. Texts often use repetition to signify a similar situation, such as the proposal, but with a change in either the characters or the circumstances. Elle uses Warner’s initial proposal phrase, “If I’m gonna be a senator by the time I’m thirty . . . I need someone serious,” to emphasize the changes she herself has undergone. Now, Warner views Elle as serious enough for him; however, after finding independence and her own passion for law, she sees the flaws in Warner. This highlights Elle’s developed “sense of [herself] that does not rely on the hero’s confirmation and approval” (Tracey 39). While Warner finally does accept Elle’s changes, the scene does not focus on this. Instead, the film highlights Elle’s newfound independence and her ability to reject Warner because of it. Repetition also appears in the final scene of the film when it reveals that Elle and Emmett have been dating for two years and that he will propose the night of her graduation. Beginning and ending with the same song, “Perfect Day,” the film repeats the idea of preparing for a marriage proposal. This repetition allows the viewer to see how “Elle’s life had come full circle” (Hersey 156), while still illustrating the changes that Elle has made. While Elle’s story does end with a marriage proposal, the film focuses more on her independence and success than her relationship with Emmett.

Released in 2001, the movie’s take on feminism and female power was not a surprising new concept; it had been portrayed in earlier movies such as Miss Congeniality (2000) and Charlie’s Angels (2000). Culturally, the world had begun to acknowledge women’s abilities to break the molds of female standards towards career and family roles, allowing them to begin creating and achieving their own dreams. Legally Blonde uses this idea of female power within a traditional narrative with a double-proposal element to illustrate the power that the heroine has in the ability to deny a proposal and find herself. Because the ending of the movie does not contain a marriage between Elle and Warner as expected, but instead ends with Elle’s true happiness in her relationship with herself, the “happy ending” of the movie demonstrates Elle’s transformation from a dependent girlfriend to an independent career woman.

It is also important to notice that Elle experiences this time between the two proposals in a place that is often gendered male. Graduate education, especially law school, often resembles a male space into which Elle inserts herself, similar to the way that she inserts herself into Warner’s
experience at Harvard. Alley-Young explains the “stereotype that school is a diversion for women who are really searching for a husband” and, in the beginning of the film, Elle meets this stereotype. Attending law school to rekindle her love with Warner, she is not there for her own education. However, as Katherine M. Lasher argues, Elle is a “female protagonist who is able to overcome her personal life and succeed professionally” by the end of the film. She no longer reflects the stereotype of the female searching for a husband at school but instead a female who advances her career and professional life with law.

Essentially, Elle rejects Warner’s proposal because she has already found a positive relationship with the law. Not only has she been able to find independence through her new-found knowledge, but she has also been able to view the people around her and determine their importance and value to her. Celestino Deleyto describes how, as a liberal feminist film, “a world in which the only possibility of happiness for women was provided by the pleasures of home and romance of subordination to men is slowly but firmly dwindling into oblivion” (49). Elle no longer must rely on a man for her happiness but can instead find it in herself and her career. Brooke’s trial strongly symbolizes Elle’s metaphorical marriage to the law. When Brooke presents Elle as her new lawyer, David, a fellow law student, escorts Elle down the aisle while everyone turns to look at her, a scene that closely resembles a wedding march down the aisle. This moment allows Elle to publicly profess her love for law and illustrates her independence and knowledge found from it. In her final speech during her graduation ceremony, Elle explains her position towards law when she says, “Passion is a key ingredient to the study and practice of law and of life.” Using “passion” as something that more closely resembles dedication rather than romantic interest, Elle’s “discussion of passion is unusual for the ending of a romantic comedy, because it refers less to romantic desire than to the feminist lawyer’s passion to seek justice for her clients” (Hersey 156). Elle views her life as full of passion for her career and relationships with the people she has met instead of the passion she felt towards Warner in the beginning of the film.

Works Cited


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The New Deal: A Need for Renegotiating the Marriage Contract in *Blue Valentine*

by Alex Thompson

The consideration of a marriage plot changes drastically when bringing this form of narrative into a contemporary setting. The marriage plot and many of its characteristics or conventions are frequently scrutinized under the lens of a traditional text, where the narrative reflects cultures of the time period in which the text was created. Naturally, these conventions are based on works from time periods that possess values and social rules that differ from our own. By adapting the marriage plot for a modern or even post-modern setting, several changes may need to be made to those conventions, but often are not and these narratives attempt to ascribe to traditions of the marriage plot that their time period and newly manufactured cultural norms may not allow for. Derek Cianfrance’s film *Blue Valentine* (2010) is an example of a contemporary film that tackles the subject of marriage and manipulates the structure of the marriage plot in order to dissect the true problem behind bringing dated constructs of things such as the marriage contract into a current context. The film follows a couple—Dean and Cindy—as they meet, fall in love, marry, and eventually divorce. Cianfrance’s experiment with traditional elements of the marriage plot within his own post-modern text leads to an understanding of why their marriage fails. The employment of a counter-traditional narrative structure within *Blue Valentine* (2010) illustrates that the marriage contract cannot function properly within a contemporary setting, and cannot result in a successful marriage. Cianfrance sets out to highlight that flaws in Dean and Cindy’s marriage that are presented in the film are not flaws with either spouse,
but are problems with the institution of marriage itself. As a result, the marriage contract or even the institution itself needs to be reimagined in order to be considered useful in a modern setting.

*Blue Valentine* deliberately deviates from the traditional marriage plot, not for the sake of being different or attempting to be counter-traditional, but it does so in an effort to illustrate the counter-productive nature of implementing a traditional marriage contract in a contemporary setting. The traditional marriage plot and the marriage contract are tied together within literature. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye states early on that a major theme is the “integration of society,” (43) into the relationship at the center of a text. Frye’s examination of a typical marriage plot includes that there is some obstacle keeping a couple apart, “but after a discovery in which the hero becomes wealthy or the heroine respectable, a new society crystallizes on the stage around the hero and his bride,” (44). *Blue Valentine*’s deviations from the typical structure of marriage plots serve to highlight the harmful nature of the new social order brought about by Dean and Cindy’s union. The new social order that the marriage brings on is one that—like the marriage contract—is non-negotiable and throws both husband and wife into pre-determined roles for marital life. These roles that the new social order places both Dean and Cindy into are determined by the traditional marriage contract and immediately changes the dynamic of their relationship from a mutually beneficial and equal partnership into a skewed power struggle. This is even acknowledged later on during and fight Cindy has with Dean when one of Cindy’s coworkers tell her, “Don’t let him brainwash you.” There is an assumption by society that the husband, due to the power given to him by society within the marriage, places him in a position to abuse that power whether he chooses to or not. *Blue Valentine*’s movement away from the traditional structure of marriage plots serves as a critique of the overly simplistic nature of most marriage plots and the lack of consideration given to the changes that take place once the union has occurred.

*Blue Valentine*’s structure sets the narrative up as a clearly counter-traditional text which proves to be extremely important in the consideration of its marriage plot. The counter-traditional text is a step in the direction of the post-modern text. Derek Cianfrance’s film is extremely aware of itself within the context of other marriage plots and adjusts itself to fit among those narratives and also within a contemporary setting. *Blue Valentine* distinguishes itself among other marriage plots through its brutally realistic depiction of the seemingly inevitable por-
tion of marriage where the relationship ends unhappily. Dean even states his pessimism early on in the film, “I feel like men are more romantic than women. But it seems like girls get to a place where they just kind of pick the best option. ‘Oh, he’s got a good job.’ I mean they spend their whole life looking for Prince Charming and then they marry the guy who’s got a good job and is going to stick around.” Dean’s notions of marriage are in line with tradition that society expects of married people but just as Dean attempts to challenge those conventions after he marries Cindy, he tries to fill both the role of the charming husband, and the responsible adult.

There are several tropes of the marriage contract that *Blue Valentine* interrogates. Whenever a situation arises that requires either Dean or Cindy to fulfill a normal gender role or space within a traditional marriage contract structure, they do so. However, Cianfrance manufactures a sense of disingenuousness throughout these scenes through lingering close ups that allow for a dramatic view into what either character is thinking. This takes place throughout the entire film and most of the time is spent looking at Dean or Cindy in extreme close up to expose their reactions to each other. However, the cinematography is not stylized in a manner of putting the audience’s perspective in a way of viewing what either Dean of Cindy view, but rather that we are viewing them independently. For example, at the beginning of the film we see similarly framed shots of both Dean and Cindy driving from their jobs. The framing allows the audience to draw a connection between the two shots and highlight the differences between how Dean and Cindy utilize their time apart, allowing for a kind of escapism from their relationship. Cianfrance takes care not to favor either perspective over the other, and this leads to a very important aspect of the film: there is no clear reason for the destruction of the marriage and no one is clearly at fault for the divorce at the film’s conclusion. The act of playing out either role proves to be emotionally draining for both Dean and Cindy, leaving an added layer of resentment towards each other. This gradual fulfillment of traditional marriage roles proves to be ineffective as the story progresses into the timeline that takes place five years after Dean and Cindy’s marriage. The degradation of their relationship suffers directly from their insistence that the marriage operate according to societal norms. Their unhappiness with each other serves as an indicator that the traditional marriage structure—one shown to be inherited from their parents—is an unsuccessful model in the contemporary world. Cianfrance sets up the scene depicting Cindy’s parents’ unhappy marriage as a foreshadowing
of her own unhappiness with Dean. Her parent’s argument spawns for seemingly no reason at all, just as many of the conflicts between Dean and Cindy do later on.

The traditional marriage contract the society implements once a union occurs immediately disjoints the link between husband and wife. The initial relationship between Dean and Cindy is a very natural, loving relationship and this is due primarily to the fact that it is a private relationship. Once Dean and Cindy enter the next phase of their relationship through marriage, their relationship becomes public and control is taken away from them and given to society. One major problem within the marriage contract that Pateman makes note of is its inequality, dealing with the assertion that, “If marriage were a proper contract, women would have been brought into civil life on exactly the same footing as their husbands” (155). Cianfrance plays with this construction and how the dynamic between Dean and Cindy changes drastically as soon as the marriage takes place. As Pateman states, many feminists have argued for reform of the marriage contract or the implementation of other forms of structuring a marriage. However, the disparity in their social inequality from men prevents women from gaining the ability to properly negotiate these changes. In a similar manner, society maintains the ability to dictate the process by which a contract is negotiated and this leaves each spouse on a different status level within their marriage. As previously noted, Blue Valentine carefully executes an unbiased approach to each spouse’s perspective on the marriage, focusing equally on both Dean and Cindy’s points of view. Because of this, the film appears to carry Cindy to a point where her “voice” within the film is heard equally as Dean’s. However, the narrative’s construction of an equal footing within the relationship is a façade and fails to achieve a sense of reconciliation between Dean and Cindy. Dean’s position within the marriage gives him, from society’s perspective, an entitlement to his wife. Pateman’s consideration of the marriage contract focuses on the idea that, “husbands and wives contractually acquire for their exclusive use their partner’s sexual properties.” Dean being deprived of the ability to engage in sexual activity with Cindy in a meaningful way in Blue Valentine serves as a step towards the dismantling of the marriage. Dean becomes increasingly frustrated towards Cindy when she turns him away and he asks, “How much rejection am I supposed to take?” Before the marriage, there was no entitlement to sexual contact or property. Once the union occurs, Dean—in accordance with the societal definitions of the marriage contract—feels that he should be given access to sexual contact with Cindy.
Loss becomes a subtle but a very important theme throughout Cianfrance’s film and he makes its implementation most explicitly known through Cindy’s loss of agency over her body. Just as the traditional marriage contract states, Cindy must give herself up sexually to her husband once the union take place. Even so, Cindy’s loss of agency over her body becomes an issue even earlier than that, starting from the beginning with her unwanted pregnancy and being thrust into the prison of motherhood. The traditional view of obligation—and sexual obligation—to a husband is a societal convention that Cianfrance illustrates Cindy feels and acquiesces to during her time with Dean during the present-day time period, after their marriage. In the hotel room, however, she makes it explicitly clear that he can have her body but that having her there in the role of his wife would not be something she would willingly hand over. This act serves as a borderline kind of sexual victimization for Cindy. This scene most clearly depicts Cindy’s refusal to play into her role as a wife as that role is defined by the marriage contract. Her emotional connection to the union is severed and her “duties” as a wife are performed in the same manner as Pateman’s article describes the true contractual relationship: a slave-owner relationship. Cindy’s daughter, Frankie, becomes a symbol of the reclamation of the body within the story. Cindy initially tries to take control of the situation and her body by having an abortion, but in a manner, she takes control once more by making the choice to follow the pregnancy through to its full term. The fact that Frankie is not Dean’s child also serves as a further separation of the act of Cindy reclaiming her body to distancing herself from Dean. Sex and the refusal of sex becomes a manner of taking control in the story for both Dean and Cindy, illustrating even further the power struggle taking place between them in the modern day time period. Cindy uses it selectively but always to assert herself within a given situation. Dean’s ability to have sexual contact with his wife is a means for him to reassure himself of their connection and he becomes furious when he refuses him that contact, because it’s what he expects of their marriage. Dean’s inability to have any kind of sexual relationship with his wife deprives him of his role as a man and more importantly, a husband, within the contract and detracts from his masculinity.

The typical marriage contract operates on the assumption that the husband will fill out exclusively dominant, masculine gender roles and the wife will do the same with feminine, submissive roles within their relationship. Through the fulfillment of these gender roles, the husband and wife are entitled to certain privileges of their married life, because it’s
the expectation of society that they do so. Cianfrance challenges these ideas through Dean who constantly upsets the established order of the marriage plot and questions the structure that it’s supposed to follow. Early on, Dean even suspects that traditional marriage plots and love stories have become too impactful on modern culture when he states his fear that, “maybe I’ve seen too many movies.” Initially, Dean states that he does not want to be married or have kids, because he feels that “it’s for suckers.” Dean’s resistance to the idea of a traditional marriage are set in place early on but as things progress he begins to ask Cindy “what does that mean? ‘Be a man?’”; he questions why he should be the one in the relationship that needs to try and be the breadwinner for the family and have aspirations based off his talents and potential. The climactic fight scene at the end of the film brings up several questions that Dean must confront, such as the expectations that society places on him and the ideal image of successful masculine figures. Cianfrance employs Dean as the key tool in the counter-traditional narrative to examine society’s expectation of each gender role within the marriage, why each gender is privileged when it comes to various subjects and why there can be no deviation from that established structure. Dean also struggles with the fact that Cindy does not question these societal norms and expects for him to be the masculine figure in their marriage. Immediately after Cindy and Dean enter a serious relationship in the earlier timeline, her ex-boyfriend finds Dean and fights him to prove his dominance and masculinity, resulting in Dean losing the fight tremendously. In addition to this, after Cindy sees her ex-boyfriend at the store five years later, she feels the need to attempt to reassure Dean of his own manliness in the wake of being confronted with this opposing male figure. As the figurehead of his family, Dean feels the necessity to prove himself, especially since he is being confronted by the biological father of their daughter, Frankie.

In Boone’s examination of counter-traditional marital texts, he delves into the idealization of the pain of love and that—given a context or a canon of marriage plots—people in a contemporary setting expect love to be frustrating and painful. This could account for Dean’s unwillingness to settle down and have kids; he even reasserts that he didn’t want a traditional relationship during a small fight he has with Cindy. Cianfrance dedicates much of the end of his film to this aspect of the love story. Reviewers of the film took the time to describe the film as depicting a, “volatile relationship as it flowers in the past and wilts in the present, looking for clues about what went wrong” (Tobias). The
main question many reviewers seem to be asking by the conclusion of the film is one that Cianfrance insist on not answering directly: what went wrong. The final scenes of the film are the most jarring in the sense that the tone shifts dramatically with the jump to each time period. The flashbacks are extremely intimate moments leading up to the wedding ceremony between Dean and Cindy, while the present-day scenes are dimly lit and create an abundance of space between the characters.

Marriage serves as a point of conflict within *Blue Valentine* (2010) due to its divided timeline. The film operates through massive flashbacks that bisect the plot-line between when Dean and Cindy first meet, and then it moves forward to five years after their marriage. The marriage divides the two sections of the film’s plot and it marks several repetitions of action that occur when the film’s focus jumps between each side. The movement between each time period occurs at moments where key actions take place that contrast to similar actions undergone in the opposing time period. The film employs these repetitions of action within the story to better highlight the shift in tone and attitude between each character. The disparity between the emotions and mindsets of both Dean and Cindy become painfully apparent when these shifts occur. Cianfrance frames his actors in similar positions or mimicking courses of action across both timelines in order to make the connections completely and show the difference in mood through his frequent extreme close-ups. One of the most important reversals that take place is the sexual contact between Dean and Cindy. Photographed in a similar pose in both scenes, Cianfrance showcases the pair in an intimate position with Cindy playfully hitting Dean as he makes advances toward her. In the later time frame, in the hotel room five years later, Cindy hits Dean in a similar but more intentional and violent manner when in that same intimate position and it spurs an argument. This reversal reinforces the change that the marriage has brought onto their relationship and how it affects their contact. Marriage creates an expectation for them so that sex is no longer a signifier of intimacy and connection, but it’s an obligation and brings a sense of entitlement with it. Cianfrance uses the reversals to frame that the idea of marriage affects every seemingly insignificant detail of Dean and Cindy’s time together and manifests itself into a kind of bitterness that they bring out toward each other.

The disparity between the traditional marriage plot and the counter-traditional trajectory that *Blue Valentine* undertakes is reinforced through several film techniques that Cianfrance employs to subconsciously, visually, illustrate the issues within the film. The flashback sequences are
generally bright with very high key lighting, which reduces shadows and makes the entire frame generally brighter to give these scenes a more optimistic and even dream-like quality. The present-day time period is very dark by contrast as Cianfrance relies more on natural lighting and using shades of blue to give off a melancholy tone. As a result, these competing tones create an extremely jarring effect when the film jumps back and forth between time periods and makes it extremely easy to distinguish the two time periods. The contrast between the lighting in both the flashbacks and present day sequences also further illustrate the clashing moods in Dean and Cindy during the present day timeline, with Dean’s romantic notions making him oblivious to the real problems taking place with his marriage and Cindy’s inability to continue to live an unsatisfying and broken due to its structure.

In addition to the reversals in plot, Cianfrance employs shots that place the camera in positions to force Dean and Cindy to mimic each other’s poses, such as framing each character similarly if they are both driving cars. This technique allows for them to be viewed similarly but also focuses their perspective and allows the audience to note key differences in each shot. These techniques add to the mis-en-scene of Cianfrance’s film to make his oddly structured narrative much more apparent due to its unorthodox use of various filmmaking techniques and practices.

One of the symptoms of the failing marriage that Cianfrance focuses on during the secondary time period is a sense of stagnation within the marriage, and more importantly, the realization and acceptance of that stagnation within the relationship. The dynamic of Dean and Cindy’s relationship takes a turn as soon as they are married and once they fill out their marital roles, they must become the husband and wife that the contract demands they become. Because of this, any true development or maturation of their relationship becomes impossible due to the non-negotiable nature of the contract and they both become trapped in their situation. During their dinner in the themed motel in the present-day time period, Cindy inquires about Dean’s aspirations and his talents and why he doesn’t seem to have any drive or motivation to follow his potential for a career or even so much as a hobby. When Dean questions why potential and talents have so much weight on the decisions a person makes with their life, Cindy realizes just how stagnant their relationship has become. Dean’s complacency with his life stems from the fact that he’s been forced to settle for a relationship that lacks the capacity to grow in any way. Cindy’s acceptance of Dean’s lack of ambition or desire for change—in a way—sets the termination of the marriage in
stone and refuses it to allow for any further growth between Dean and Cindy. With Dean’s constant questioning of what it means to fill his role as a man and his inability to do so, Cindy takes up the responsibility of fulfilling the masculine role for him. Cindy’s realization that her relationship with Dean can no longer function properly under the control society serves as a motivation to instigate change within their relationship and she rebels against the established conventional rules of the marriage contract. By doing this—even without the divorce—Cindy begins to dismantle her marriage to Dean because she alters the foundation by which she and Dean began their marriage. She goes on to demand a divorce from Dean the next day, telling him, “I’m the man now.” Cianfrance sets up their stagnation through an illustration of their home and the rituals performed in their leisure time and how marriage destroys Dean’s ambition or drive to further himself due to the institution’s inability to mold to his desires concerning a marriage or even simply a romantic relationship.

Cianfrance acknowledges at the conclusion of his film that there is a necessity for the institution of marriage to change. The film’s attitude is adapt-or-die, leaving both Dean and Cindy in positions where they make a realization that their marriage cannot be salvaged. That realization proves to be symbolic, as the characters make the same connection that the film argues in favor of: a movement needs to be made outside of the institution of marriage. When Dean and Cindy accept that their marriage is unsuccessful and they cannot make their relationship work, they move to operate outside of the institution through divorce. Dean demonstrates that he understands a shift needs to take place through even the physical space that he and Cindy occupy. In a desperate attempt to make a connection to Cindy further, he takes her to what she calls a “cheesy sex motel” in hopes of having an intimate evening. The necessity Dean feels to get out of the house mirrors this requirement for a movement beyond marriage. Their home represents a shared space brought into Dean and Cindy’s lives through their union. Cianfrance utilizing the hotel as a separate space for Dean’s plan reinforces the idea that in order for some success to be potentially gained in their relationship, they need to move—even if only symbolically—away from their marriage. Cianfrance’s argument becomes explicitly clear here that he disagrees with Pateman’s notion that divorce is a part of the marriage institution. Until the marriage contract or other conventions of traditional marriage are changed to better accommodate a contemporary culture, then marriage cannot be the true resolution or destination for relationships to be successful.

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The questions left unanswered by the end of *Blue Valentine* are indicators of the inability to determine a true cause for the destruction of a marriage by two individuals. The true cause of the failed marriage lies within the inability for the institution to function properly due to society’s insistence on a broken system. The marriage brings about a brand new set of expectations that—even when partners are aware of the terms of the marriage contract—bring about a new dynamic that fundamentally changes the relationship between spouses once the marriage takes place. The new order sets the husband in a position of power over the wife and when this is introduced to modern couples and unions, the structure of the contract becomes even more problematic. The problems that follow the union don’t directly result from failures on the husband’s or the wife’s part but due to inherent problems with the very idea of marriage. As a result, the question must be asked if the marriage contract needs to be reimagined or if marriage would even continue to be considered at all in a contemporary setting. The realization of a stagnation within the marriage due to the contract becomes apparent after the union. The structure of the contract does not allow for any kind of growth or development to take place within the new relationship, it merely allows for each spouse to fill out the pre-determined roles that society dictates. Derek Cianfrance’s film’s counter-traditional marriage plot illustrates this best. His refusal to give any preference to the male perspective, or even the underprivileged female perspective, puts husband and wife both on equal footing and eradicates any indication that the perspectives are unreliable. The presentation of the failed marriage here shows that with the inability to truly determine a reason behind the failure of the marriage, the dismantling of the marriage is simply the next step in the process. The divorce that takes place at the end of the film serves as an unwritten final place in the marriage plot and if that is to change, the marriage contract must be renegotiated or done away with. Cianfrance’s film challenges society’s ability to dictate the functions of other’s relationships and makes a point to say that if they can, those relationships may cease to exist at all.

Works Cited


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Let’s Get Down to Business:
The Double Proposal Narrative in Disney’s Mulan.

by Megan Shirley

Marriage; a word that, in the literary world, grabs the attention of longstanding critics and undergraduates alike. In Northrop Frye’s 1966 publication of “Anatomy of Criticism” he discusses the “Mythos of Spring” (Frye 165) otherwise known as comedy. Comedy is historically identified with tales which end in a marriage or celebration, and relies on specific plot points to reach the comedic end. This idea of the study of the marriage plot gradually leads to critiques of the traditional formulas in which these storybook marriages take place. Karen Tracey’s “The Renegotiation of Marriage” chronicles and analyzes the concept of the double proposal—a plot device used within narratives in which a marriage is proposed not once, but twice. The first proposal is rejected on the grounds of fault with either marriage traditions or character flaws, and the second proposal is accepted when these issues are resolved. The utilization of this type of narrative brings old marital traditions forth into the light non-traditional courtship plots such as Pride and Prejudice is (one of the many works specifically mentioned by Tracey in her exploration of the concept of the double proposal narrative), among other classic courtship plots and older works the critique the traditional formations of marriage within their social structures. While focusing on established classic literature offers a foundation for this new theory, it is important to look beyond these boundaries in order to ensure its validity in regards to changing social structure and values. Far beyond these classical beginnings is the Disney film Mulan (1998), an animated version of a classical Chinese tale. Mulan is the tale of a young woman
who dresses as a man in order to take her father’s place in the Chinese army in a war against the Hun army. Even with just this basic plot summary, the tale identifies itself as non-traditional in the aspects of power structures within the world of gender constructs. The double-proposal narrative is slightly more difficult to spot, however, but reveals itself through these more obvious critiques of power and gender. The use of the double-proposal narrative in this tale is significant because it implies that the union between Mulan and her commander, Shang, is impossible until she learns to grasp the strength granted to her through womanhood, and use the traits granted to her by this social station to place herself on equal footing with the male characters found throughout the story. Because this is a Disney movie, and therefore presumably made for children, the film is used to promote these values to its younger audience members. The film pushes for feminine equality that was occurring outside of the world of the film in American culture (which makes up the majority viewers of this and most other Disney films) during the time of its release at the end of the twentieth century.

Double-proposal narratives use their structure to critique some aspect of the institution of marriage and oftentimes attempt to grant female characters equal footing in a marriage through these critiques. Though this particular film is based in Chinese culture, it is most popular among American children, thanks to the large Disney fan-base that exists with the country’s border. What, then, is this particular double-proposal narrative seek to critique in American marital traditions? On June 29, 1998, the same year that the film was released, *Time* magazine produced an issue titled, “Is Feminism Dead?” *Time*, as a rather largely-known and socially important magazine, and normally provides a fairly accurate barometer regarding social movements of the various time periods in which it publishes. If there was an issue of feminism disappearing off of the map during the late 1990’s, is it a simple coincidence that Disney produced their version of Mulan, which has undeniable feminist influences, and critiques the traditional institution of marriage? In the film industry, the concept of such a situation being merely circumstantial is unlikely, considering the amount of money and work that goes into cutting a final film product, paired with the fact that Disney, during the 1990’s was going through major expansions in globalization (“Disney History”), perhaps lending to the quick accumulation of more mainstream values. The message of female empowerment in Mulan is fairly explicit, and its message then clear in connection with the larger surrounding society that led to birth of the work.
Not only does *Mulan* represent a non-traditional marriage narrative through its utilization of the double proposal found within, but is not a traditional double-proposal narrative either. Karen Tracey, the critic who coined the term “double-proposal novels,” writes that the they, “can be identified by the heroine’s rejection and acceptance of proposals from the same suitor [. . .] and the inherent contrast between rejected and accepted marriage conditions” (Tracey 4). While *Mulan* does not adhere to the conditions of a literal proposal of marriage set by Tracey’s own definition, it fits the formula for the double-proposal novel in another way: its structure. Double-proposal novels contain a structure which supports two climaxes. This first, smaller climax occurs during the first proposal, which is most often followed by the rejection. The second climax is larger, and normally culminates with the marriage which the audience has begun to hope for, and provides a strong sense of satisfaction. Tony Bancroft, the director of this particular version of Mulan, has ensured this structure in his forming of the Disney version of the traditional Chinese tale through Mulan’s discovery and eventual romantic connection.

Fa Mulan is first exposed to her looming conflict when her father, Fa Zhou, receives a command to report for military service for the Imperial Army, which has recently become aware of the approaching invasion of the Hun army. Mulan, worried for her sickly father’s safety, rushes out to request a reprieve of his service, and in turn is met with rather misogynistic retorts from the man handing out the commands, Chi Fu. Upon being interrupted in his duty, Chi Fu tells Fa Zhou that he “would do well to teach your daughter to hold her tongue in a man’s presence.” Not only does her father respond to this scolding by telling Mulan that she has disgraced her family, but later, when the argument arises once more, he exclaims, “I know my place, it is time you learned yours.” These remarks come shortly after Mulan’s failed meeting with The Matchmaker, who was supposed to organize a marriage with her for a suitable husband before various accidents prevented this from occurring successfully. All of these separate discouragements combined may well lend Mulan the sense that being female places her in a position in which she is less valuable than men and a drain on the health of her family. Women in the society in which this tale takes place are truly only valuable through their ability to be married off, through the connections formed with other potentially important or wealthy families that marriage forms. As Mulan has also failed in this aspect, she is in the interesting position of meeting neither the requirements of being
a man (through physical differences) nor those of being a woman (due to failure to subscribe to her duties). Interestingly, the force that drives Mulan to steal her father’s armor and pose as a man among the ranks of the Imperial army contains both male and female influences, seemingly in equal balance: the female aspect is born from Mulan’s concern for her elderly and sickly father, for whom she often cooks and gives medicine, actions which place her in a somewhat maternal role. The male aspect of the driving force reveals itself through her taking on of the role of the protector, not only over her father but also over her country, and her family’s reputation and honor. In this decision, she begins to abandon her old identity as a woman and take on her new, self-selected role in life that, though outwardly visible as male, consists of motivations associated with both sexes.

This dual-identity that Mulan develops continues to surface throughout her training. However, it occurs less and less often as she delves into the public sphere of men. During her initial entry into the training camp, Mushu, one of Mulan’s ancestral guardians, begins to teach her how to behave in a manly way that will support her newly-adopted appearance. The climax of this training appears when Mulan decides to bathe, which of course involves her undressing herself and leaving herself vulnerable—particularly so in her precarious situation. Though Mulan has continued to exhibit her dual-identity up until this point, the audience finds that she is continually criticized due to her feminine habits. Mushu brings the issue to the forefront once more for a brief moment when, upon keeping guard of the situation at hand, complains, “Stand watch Mushu while I blow our secret with my stupid girly habits.” Mushu states this in a mocking, high-pitched tone meant to imitate a woman, and the pairing of this and the utilization of the term “stupid” serves to once again belittle the status of womanhood and female habits. This time, Mulan demands that her wishes are respected, rather than resorting to tears as she previously did when confronted by her father. Thus Mulan reveals that, though she hides her female identity, she still holds it sacred to herself in some small ways. However, if this is the case, why hide it to begin with? Aside from the obvious risks of her discovery, Mulan must suppress her female identity in order to insure the appearance of strength that she has worked so hard to build while pretending to be Ping, the pseudonym for her male identity. These two identities must be kept separate in order to maintain the validity of each individually. This, of course, is insured by Mulan’s cross-dressing, which seems to become acceptable during this time of training. How-
ever, cross-dressing generally is not highly-favored, particularly within the domain of children’s films and books. So, then, what makes Mulan so special in this aspect? It is, in fact, her very status as a woman that allows her to escape most of the scrutiny attached with cross-dressing. According to critic Roland Altenburger, female-to-male crossdressing seems to be more socially acceptable than the reverse form of cross-dressing because, “female-to-male dressing up was perceived as dressing ‘up,’ as an upgrading in social status, hence a willful transgression toward more power and freedom” (Altenburger 171). Because Mulan is cross-dressing in order to maintain her male identity for noble causes, there seems to be no threat nor transgression on her part, and allows her to escape the situation with her life intact. Therefore, it is simple for the audience to perceive Mulan in both her male and female roles simultaneously without condemning her for either. However, despite the relative ease in which female-to-male cross-dressers within this tale seem to keep themselves a secret with minimal effort, cross-dressing is still not entirely socially acceptable, and this system comes crumbling down around Mulan during the first climax of her story.

Shang’s discovery of Mulan’s true sex constitutes the first climax of the double-proposal novel, and subsequently the initial rejection. Throughout the course of the film until this point, the audience sees Shang slowly but surely gain an affection and respect for Mulan as a comrade, though he knows her as a male soldier by the name of Ping. Likewise, Mulan builds this same affection and respect for Shang, leading to the perception of a potential romance between the two characters, despite the lack of romantic contact in their interactions. However, upon Shang’s accidental discovery of Mulan’s true sex, which would seem to open up the possibility of the transformation of a friendship into a romantic relationship, he rejects her and she is sent away from him. This is where this particular double-proposal narrative differs widely from those in classic texts. Generally speaking, with double-proposal novels, one expects to see the female partner doing the rejecting, and the male as the one who is rejected, and needs to reform himself in order to make a romantic union viable. However, in this case, it is Mulan who is rejected. Why? The surface answer to any viewer might be the observation that Shang dislikes Mulan in this moment because she has lied to him about her identity, and he is disappointed that his growing affections of comradeship have been misplaced (in his own perception at this moment in the text, at least). However, when one looks at the symbolic motions and dress surrounding the scene, the issue quickly becomes less simplistic. In this particular era of Chinese culture, women
were not allowed in the royal army, and, according to the film, to enter in through secrecy and lies would be blatant treason. The punishment for this is death. Due to his affection for Mulan/Ping, however, Shang is unable to kill her, instead harmlessly driving the sword meant for her neck into the ground nearby. After his harmless act, he grudgingly states, “A life for a life” (*Mulan*), which reveals that, though he respects her less as a woman, he is still able to respect her as a fellow life form, stripped of all gender identities through their previous comradeship and the new discovery, which may cancel each other out to, once again, leave Mulan in an ambiguous sphere of sexual identity. Throughout this interaction, Mulan is somewhat exposed, wearing only bandages wrapped about her breasts from the waist up. The presence of bandages and absence of breasts in this scene seem to contain a great deal of significance beyond mere discovery, allowing the tension of the moment to escalate for the two main characters involved. By ridding herself of her breasts (in effect, anyways) during her service in the military, Mulan further emphasizes her inability to link her womanhood and the possibility of physical strength and suitability for her post. The use of bandages to do so also imply some type of wounding that has taken place on Mulan’s body—possibly, an emotional or mental wound resulting from the warring male and female aspects of Mulan’s identity. The phallic image of the sword, the penetration, and the semi-nudity—which serves to both reveal and conceal sex, and mark of the pain of being devalued as a woman—come together to create a rather sexual scene, and emphasizes the new availability of a sexual and romantic relationship between the two characters. It is not until Shang sees Mulan in this vulnerable state—in his mind doubtlessly associated with her newly discovered femininity—that he shows her any sort of leniency, or believes her unable to handle the consequences of her actions. The moment he finds her female-ness, he also seems to perceive her as weak, and though this leads him to show mercy towards her, he cannot see her as worthy as being in the presence of a man, which recalls the former misogynistic comments made by both Chi Fu and Mulan’s father at the beginning of her tale. It appears that Mulan has come full circle in the debate about her identity, and effectively has made no real ground in understanding herself nor in changing the social structure that surrounds this sort of questioning. This is why she is left behind the troops, to be sent home to her father’s house, the natural end to the first climax of the film.

After Mulan takes her leave of her former Imperial companions (still dressed as a man, but covered with a blanket for most of the scene so that the audience cannot truly see her apparel), she shares a brief but
significant scene between her comrades Mushu, and Cri-kee (the lucky cricket). During this scene, both of her companions reveal in turn their various lies and deceits, as if in response to the discovery of Mulan’s own dishonesty. Cri-Kee is not lucky after all. Mushu was not sent by Mulan’s ancestors to protect her, but rather only came to her in order to remedy a mistake that he made, and in search of fame and honor. During this revelation, Mushu tells Mulan, “I mean, you risked your life to help people you love. I risked your life to help myself.”. This mention of loved ones returns Mulan to her former maternal motivations and, devoid of the necessity to take on the identity known as Ping, she is able to grasp this aspect of her womanhood once more. She seems ready to face her father and to reintegrate back into her former life. However, when the Huns make a second appearance shortly after Mulan has re-embraced her womanly attributes, she is forced to make a decision: let the Huns rampage unchecked, or re-insert herself into the identity of Ping in order to warn others. However, the identity of Ping is no longer available to her, so the strength which she has learned to wield may only express itself through the female aspects of Mulan. This is the moment in which she begins to embrace her female identity, and to think herself capable of strength without having to emulate male-ness in the process. This lays the stage for the success of the union in the second climax of the film.

During the second climax, the audience finds Mulan dressed as a woman once more, her clothing akin to that in which we first meet her in the beginning of the film. It is this change of costume that clues the audience in to her acceptance of her female identity. In fact, Mulan is not the only character who dresses in traditionally female costume during this portion of the text. She convinces three of her former companions from the Imperial army to dress as women as well, in order to assist her in her plan to sneak past the guards and into the room in which the Emperor is being held hostage by the Hun leader. In a wonderfully ironic twist, the men who are now dressed as women begin to utilize their “feminine” qualities in order to effectively lure guards away from their posts, allowing for a quick and calculated maneuver on Mulan’s part. While this provides a great deal of comical relief for younger audiences upon their seeing a mustached man with one eye stuffed haphazardly into a pink silk kimono, this scene also identifies the changing attitudes not only towards Mulan herself, but towards the female identity which she had been so recently shunned for. What has constituted this change of heart? While it seems relatively harmless and humorless for Mulan to dress as a man, the men who dress as women
in order to assist her are criticized and meant to be laughed at. This is because “A man who willingly acts the role of a woman denies by this act the normalcy of existing gender relations” (Altenburger 171). While this double standard poses its own problems, this theory also serves to enforce the view that an acceptance not only of Mulan personally but of the general strength of womanhood is being portrayed by the willing participants in the scene. This is an interesting moment in which male soldiers (who are usually depicted as the epitomes of masculinity) acknowledge this power, thereby validating its place and purpose in the world in which Mulan has found herself. This interpretation is also important because it reveals a view of the marriage plot outside of the two lovers themselves, allowing the marriage plot of the tale to transition from a mere non-traditional form, in which two characters are simply not suited for one another in the beginning of the tale, to a counter-traditional form in which the values held by the institution of marriage are themselves being questioned.

The second climax occurs directly after Mulan’s second confrontation with and subsequent defeat of Shan-Yu, the terrifying leader of the Hun army. However, as previously discussed, this time Mulan is dressed in women’s clothing, much like the clothes we see her in during the beginning of the film. Though her victory over the invader is won in a rather masculine and militant manner (using the skills she learned under Shang’s training), her initial entry into the violent reach of the Hun leader is obtained with the utilization of her feminine strengths, such as beauty and sexuality, persuasion, and a sense of cunning that seems to set her apart from her fellow soldiers, even before this confrontation. Shang, after Mulan is rewarded for her service by the Emperor and forgiven of her crimes, begins to more openly (if still rather shyly) reveal his romantic affection for her, no longer as Ping the companion but now as Mulan the woman. Though the relationship does not result in a marriage at this exact moment in time, Shang later approaches Mulan with a wish to meet her family, which is in turn thrilled at the opportunity to meet him, which implies the strong possibility of a future marital union between the two characters. This, finally, satisfies the expectations experienced by the audience since the initial meeting between the two characters, and provides a deep sense of relief through the aftermath of the resolution of the rather tense situation. It also completes the condition for the second climax of the double-proposal narrative, as the “proposal” seems to be entirely expected and wished-for on Mulan’s end of the budding relationship.
Though a happy ending is normally enough closure for the young audiences for which the film was intended, there are many more complications regarding the acceptance of the second proposal than may initially meet the eye. For example, why, exactly, is the marriage viable now when it was so adamantly rejected beforehand? What has changed? The answer to that would be that Mulan herself has undergone a fundamental change through her experience of rejection and her return to female, domesticated life by coming to a realization of the ability to be both strong and a woman simultaneously. During Mulan’s initial journey into the world of men, the public and military sphere which they traditionally inhabit during this period of time, she grows in physical strength, something that is normally labeled as a masculine quality. Prior to this, she is shown as a woman who fails even in her primary duty of obtaining an acceptable and beneficial marriage, which marks her as a failure in the female sphere during this time period. However, she finds that she excels in the more “manly” activities she experiences through her training, more so than the world of marriage and beauty in which she was previously pressured to succeed. While she exhibits little or no interest in dressing up in silk dresses and visiting the Matchmaker herself, she continues with such behaviors out of a sense of honor to her family anyways. She continues to pursue physical strength through her imitation as a man, and builds her combat skills accordingly within the new male identity of Ping. However, we later find that this interest in physical strength is not merely due to Mulan’s interest in becoming a soldier, or the development of strength as a mere addition to her metaphorical resume, but a need to protect those she cares for. This protective quality may be attributed to either female or male societal expectations, and serves to bring the two halves of Mulan together peacefully by the end of her journey. However, she does not reach this realization until after her unfortunate discovery in the aftermath of her first encounter with the Hun army. As a result, when Shang discovers that Ping is only a mask of Mulan, she becomes disconnected with the strength and physical prowess that she has established within her masculine identity, not only for Shang and her former soldier companions, but for herself as well. This is shown as she returns home submissively, according to the orders of her superior officer (who she blatantly defied on occasion when assuming the identity of Ping). This unhinges her learned strength from her social station as a female, and recreates her as weak. It is only when she is able to exemplify her strength while grasping her identity as the woman she is that she is able to create a sense of genuine respect for herself with Shang and her former soldier.
companions. This exemplified strength allots Mulan the respect that she forfeited when she was forced to claim her feminine identity. This allows her to respect herself as well, in a manner in which she never has been able to before. It is this acceptance that not only allows Shang to show her his affections, thereby completing the conditions necessary to claim a double-proposal plot, but also makes this particular double-proposal narrative counter-traditional in nature. Mulan must grasp her identity in order to place herself on equal footing with her male “superiors” in order to make a true partnership possible. By representing this type of arrangement as ideal, the tale seeks to overturn prior gender constructs and ideals relating to marriage as an institution. It calls for the end of the “matchmaker” type services and seems to urge young women to find their own identity and strength. A desirable relationship, therefore, should not be one rooted in societal expectations, nor even family honor, but in discovery of the self and the utilization of one's strengths to gain equal footing with their intended partner. However, many of these aspects of the tale might have escaped the younger audiences for which the film was chiefly made. Therefore, the question begs to be asked: why would Disney create such a counter-traditional film for audiences still young enough for exclusively G-rated films?

To begin to excavate this issue, let’s return to the previously mentioned issue of Time magazine. With a title like “Is Feminism Dead?” one can hardly expect to escape the fury and strong protestations from those who aim to prove that it is indeed very much alive. In fact, even if feminism as an entity had been on the decline during this point of time, according to journalist Erica Jong, who reported on this phenomenon, “[Feminism] would heat up almost instantly in the wake of a Time story about the movement’s demise” (Jong). Needless to say, the fluctuation of the feminism’s popularity would cause a great strain on the social relationships between the members of school of theory and those who think it unnecessary. However, the fact that Mulan makes an appearance during this tense period of time seems no mere coincidence when this tension is taken into account.

The fact that Mulan is geared towards children, then, is still more interesting than its timely emergence into the world of animated film. During these times of stress on feminist values, it could very well be perceived as a type of pro-feminist propaganda. However, the production of the film may also be seen as an attempt to encourage young women to look beyond their traditional barriers in order to obtain their happiness. It is important that such desires and identity-building avenues are
opened to children at an early age because, “Identity messages circulate through merchandise [...] and communicate gendered expectations about what children should buy, how they should play, and who they should be” (Wohlwend 57). When the majority of identity is being built through merchandise and the world of film and stories, society must keep an eye on what values these types of influences portray to children. Mulan, even at basic plot level, is very different from the majority of its Disney forefathers, such as the generally more popular and canonized *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and *The Little Mermaid* (1989). These early Disney classics are released prior to the seemingly wild fluctuations of Feminism in the 1990’s, and each of these films portrays comparatively weak women who simply await rescue by their “Prince Charming,” and seem well aware of the fact that their situation can only better itself through their entering into a marriage with a handsome and rich young man. *Mulan* is among the first of the Disney animated films to break this mold, offering young female viewers not just another potentially pleasant viewing experience, but a glimpse into the possibility of the strength contained within their sprouting ideas of womanhood, and what exactly it means to be a woman. Though there is some small focus on the marriage plot in *Mulan*, it is oftentimes passing or even condemning, and ultimately the love tale within the text seems to posit that a woman should become independent before finding the correct mate, and even then she should not settle for less than she deserves. Rather, she should find someone who may treat her as an equal, and respect that she has her own type of strength. This is opposed to the aforementioned earlier Disney films, in which the heroine is expected to fall in love with the first princely figure which she meets, without question or doubt. Mulan, in its fight against the previously held-social values in order to provide its audience of younger females with options when forming their identities.

Though it is a children’s film, Mulan is a work that has a great deal to offer anyone who bothers to interpret it. Specifically its utilization of the double-proposal narrative to comment on the counter-traditional relationship contained within may shed a great deal of light on the context of the societal issues surrounding the film in the 1990’s. The film utilizes Tracey’s concept in order to battle the popular concept of the search for Prince Charming that Disney has, until this point in 1998, seemingly placed their reliance on entirely. Consequently, it attempts to establish a new facet of identity-building for the youth to which Disney films constantly cater. By doing so, the film opened the gateway for many more
recent feminist-oriented Disney texts which have so recently become popular, which allows the concept of strength through womanhood and the right to choice and happiness to become more widespread among young children and adolescents. Slowly but surely we are pulling away from the Prince Charming era in which, like Mulan, young women were expected to marry whoever might take them out of a sense of honor and duty, and instead posits that, also like Mulan, women are strong beings who deserve happiness and independence, and to be treated as equals not only on the battlefield but also within the realm of marriage. Though, in the end, perhaps marriage is it’s own kind of battlefield.

Works Cited: