

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION



Romantic comedies, from classics such as *Trouble in Paradise* (1932) to recent hits like *Knocked Up* (2007), have been a cornerstone of Hollywood entertainment since the coming of sound. Success in romantic comedy has created stars from Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant to Julia Roberts and Ben Stiller. In spite of being popular movies with a long and continuous history of production,

romantic comedies have won only a few Oscars for Best Picture: *It Happened One Night* (1934), *You Can't Take It With You* (1938), *The Apartment* (1960), *Annie Hall* (1977), and *Shakespeare in Love* (1998). Romantic comedies are often dismissed as formulaic stories promoting fantasies about love. But these comedies have a pedigree that includes William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and Oscar Wilde. Moreover, these films reward study because they deal with dramatic conflicts central to human experience. From those conflicts arise the familiar conventions that form the foundation for the romantic comedy and portray our social manners surrounding courtship, sexuality, and gender relations.

An American Film Institute 2008 poll defined romantic comedy as “a genre in which the development of romance leads to comic situations.” Billy Mernit in his guide *Writing the Romantic Comedy* claims that the central question is “will these two individuals become a couple?” (2000: 13). He argues that the romance must be the primary story element. Film scholars explain that romantic comedy is a process of orientation,

conventions, and expectations (Neale and Krutnik 1990: 136–49). The film industry orients audiences through titles like *Lover Come Back* (1961), by casting stars identified with the genre like Meg Ryan, and with advertising and publicity. Filmmakers adapt conventions from successful films in the genre, while adding new elements to keep the movie fresh. Fans select their entertainment by drawing upon their viewing experience to anticipate familiar story turns, such as flirtatious quarreling, and a particular emotional tone shaped by humor.

Gerald Mast explains that the films in the genre create a comic climate through a series of cues to the audience: subject matter is treated as trivial, jokes and physical humor make fun of events, and characters are protected from harm. Even though the drama poses serious problems, such as choosing a life partner, the process appears lighthearted, anticipating a positive resolution (1979: 9–13). The plot of most romantic comedies could be presented with the earnestness of melodrama, but the humorous tone transforms the experience. The movie assumes a self-deprecating stance which signals the audience to relax and have fun, for nothing serious will disturb their pleasure. However, this sly pose allows comic artists to influence their audience while the viewers take little notice of the work's persuasive power.

If humor establishes the tone, courtship provides the plot. In a broad sense the subject of romantic comedy is the values, attitudes, and practices that shape the play of human desire. Mernit claims that the transforming power of love is the overarching theme (2000: 95). More than sexuality, these films portray a drive toward marriage or long-term partnership. Indeed, romantic comedy portrays the developments which allow men and women to reflect upon romance as a personal experience and a social phenomenon. As a result, scholars, such as Celestino Deleyto speak of romantic comedy engaging in the discourse of love, representing the shifting practice of, and the evolving ideas about, romance in our culture.

In cinema, contemporary genre analysis has focused on evolving narrative conventions as a dramatization of pervasive social conflicts. As Thomas Schatz explains, genre criticism treats familiar stories that “involve dramatic conflicts, which are themselves based upon ongoing cultural conflicts” (1981: viii). Guided by the practice of Schatz among others, this study will explore the patterns of meaning in the romantic comedy genre by surveying its animating conflicts, the model plot, the major characters, the function of masquerade, the use of setting, and the viewer's emotional response. With this in mind, let us follow Rick Altman's principle that “The first step in understanding the functional role of Hollywood genre is to isolate the problems for which the genre

provides a symbolic solution,” and turn to the conflicts that set the Hollywood romantic comedy film in motion (1987: 334).

Conflicts

These conflicts are as old as courtship, yet each film fashions them to contemporary circumstances. The three major fields of conflict are those between parents and children, those between courting men and women, and those internal to each of the lovers.

First, consider the conflicts between generations, that is, the parents or other authority figures versus their children as lovers and prospective mates. Parents, particularly fathers, represent the established order, reasoned judgment as opposed to the passion of the lovers. The older generation calls on social tradition, the power of the law, and the bonds of family to guide impetuous youth toward a proper and stable union. Lovers counter with the attractions of instinct, the force of their feelings, and the need for a fresh partnership which explores the unknown. In an implicit sense the confrontation between the old society and the new represents the struggle against incest: that is, the need to move outside the family toward a synthesis that will yield the unexpected and the original.

Romantic comedy has portrayed this ancient struggle since the birth of Western theater, as the works of Menander and Terence show us. Shakespeare follows this pattern in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which opens with Egeus petitioning the Duke of Athens to command his daughter Hermia to marry Demetrius, the man of his choice, instead of Lysander, who has bewitched her with verses, love tokens, and moonlight. Instead, Lysander and Hermia flee the law into the enchanted forest to realize their destiny. Rather than displaying the respect due to elders, romantic comedy is more likely to mock fathers as rigid tyrants who stand in the way of change. The contemporary cinema still finds this conflict compelling. In *Meet the Parents* (2000) Greg Focker (Ben Stiller) must endure the torments of his girlfriend's family before he can realize his engagement. The father, Jack Byrnes (Robert De Niro), former CIA interrogator, turns his professional skills on the innocent young man and almost sabotages the romance. In *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002) Toula Portokalos (Nia Vardalos) must cope with her father's ethnic pride in their Greek heritage when she introduces her Anglo-Saxon fiancé. Romantic comedy expresses its subversive social implications in that the conflict between generations results in the overthrow of the old by the young, but



PLATE 1 *Meet the Parents* (2000) poses the conflict between children and parents. Greg Focker (Ben Stiller) is interrogated by his prospective father-in-law Jack Byrnes (Robert De Niro).

its counter-tendency toward stability results in the eventual reconciliation of the feuding parties in the creation of a new family.

Second, the battle between the sexes establishes the central field of conflict animating romantic comedy. This contest evokes the distinct gender cultures within which men and women have been raised. Courting couples must struggle to find common ground upon which to build their union while also establishing sufficient knowledge of, and sympathy for, the opposite sex. In this sense lovers must struggle against the threat of narcissism and seek an identity in difference, an attraction to their opposite that complements and completes the self. As Brian Henderson explains, “Romantic comedy posited men and women willing to meet on a common ground and to engage all their faculties in sexual dialectic” (1986: 320). In darker terms, men and women need to overcome a fear of the opposite sex and embrace heterosexuality as a commanding force driving them toward union.

The genre testifies to the evolving qualities characterizing opposing gender cultures, whether it is the opposition between the rational man versus the intuitive woman in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), the masculine sports world versus a feminine arts community in *Designing Woman* (1957), or competition versus cooperation in *Jerry Maguire* (1996). Romantic comedies portray the changing status of women in modern times. As a result, the negotiation within the couple over the woman’s social role has become a prime feature of the genre (Neale and Krutnik 1990: 133). Kate’s submission to Petruchio at the conclusion of *The Taming of the Shrew*

offends many in the contemporary audience, which may be more comfortable with the legal victory of Amanda (Katharine Hepburn) over Adam (Spencer Tracy) in *Adam's Rib* (1949), but the contest, resistance, and compromise between men and women remain central to the romantic comedy.

The opposition between the gender cultures is frequently amplified by other inherited social distinctions which become a source of tension. For example, the difference in class between the unemployed journalist Peter Warne (Clark Gable) and the wealthy socialite Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert) in *It Happened One Night* is a conflict widespread in the screwball comedies of the 1930s. Woody Allen's romantic comedies, such as *Annie Hall*, present the conflict between Jew and Gentile. Regional distinctions and their attendant mores can serve as the basis for conflict, as in *The Quiet Man* (1952). In most cases these inherited social differences embellish the opposing gender traits that serve as an obstacle for the couple.

Another widespread conflict is personal development versus self-sacrifice. Both men and women need to establish an independent and mature character in preparation for a healthy marriage. In many cases, such personal growth involves achieving career goals, such as when Lily Garland (Carole Lombard) develops into an actress in *Twentieth Century* (1934), C.C. Baxter (Jack Lemmon) becomes a corporate executive in *The Apartment*, or Will (Joseph Fiennes) overcomes writer's block in *Shakespeare in Love*. On the other hand, putting aside one's personal interests for the benefit of the beloved is the crucial sign that the new partner can undertake the sacrifices necessary to form a long-term union. As Lord Arthur Goring (Rupert Everett) tells Mrs. Laura Cheveley (Julianne Moore) in *An Ideal Husband* (1999): "Love cannot be bought, it can only be given. . . . To give and not expect return, that is what lies at the heart of love." Kristine Brunovska Karnick explains, "Both partners must make some sacrifice to reach the correct balance between professional and personal concerns" (1995: 132–3). However, in some comedies, particularly the "nervous romances" following *Annie Hall* in the 1970s and 1980s, the conflict between professional and personal concerns thwarts the couple. For example, in *Broadcast News* (1987) the romantic triangle between co-workers Tom (William Hurt), Jane (Holly Hunter), and Aaron (Albert Brooks) ends without generating a couple. Each of the characters departs in pursuit of professional goals, and in the epilogue years later, Jane still has been unable to find a partner because her professional ambitions hamper her personal life. This tension between personal development and self-sacrifice serves as a conflict pervasive in romantic comedies.

The challenge of monogamy poses the conflict between a long-term commitment versus a short-term liaison. The teen Tracy (Mariel Hemingway) tells her middle-aged lover Isaac (Woody Allen) in *Manhattan* (1979), “Maybe people weren’t meant to have one chief relationship. People were meant to have a series of relationships of different lengths.” As will be discussed below, an important variation within the genre is the infidelity plot, in which one member of the couple strays and the film plays out whether the initial union will be reestablished. The sociologist Anthony Giddens writes of “confluent love” as a “pure” but contingent relationship presenting an important alternative to marriage in the late twentieth century (1992: 61–4), and this trend toward the temporary relationship rather than “living happily ever after” is evident in romantic comedies such as *Semi-Tough* (1977), *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986), and *Singles* (1992).

Along with the changing nature of heterosexual partnership comes a shift from the family to the growing influence of friends. David Shumway notes that in the contemporary romantic comedies he calls “relationship stories friends replace relatives as the chief social grouping” (2003: 164). Friendship also offers an alternative to the couple that can develop into a conflict between sexual love and platonic fellowship. *Chasing Amy* (1997) clearly poses the conflict between loyalty to one’s friend as opposed to pursuing romance. On the other hand, *My Best Friend’s Wedding* (1997) finds Jules (Julia Roberts) jealous when her best friend Michael (Dermot Mulroney) decides to marry Kimberly (Cameron Diaz). Eventually Jules ends the film dancing with her gay confidant George (Rupert Everett) rather than in love. Deleyto has argued that in romantic comedy of the past two decades “heterosexual love appears to be challenged and occasionally replaced by friendship” (2003: 168). The increasing presence of homosexuality presents a related challenge. At least as early as *Manhattan*, the gay relationship has emerged on film as a threat to partnering between men and women. Other films, such as *Chasing Amy* or *Kissing Jessica Stein* (2001), develop homosexuality as a viable option.

The third field for dramatic conflicts within romantic comedy arises within the psyche of the individual. Mernit argues that, being character-driven, romantic comedies emphasize internal conflicts. The protagonist is emotionally inadequate until she or he finds the proper mate and becomes a more complete human being (2000: 16–17). For example, in *The Truth About Cats and Dogs* (1996) Abby (Janeane Garofalo), because she suffers from low self-esteem, sends her beautiful friend Noelle (Uma Thurman) to meet the handsome Brian (Ben Chaplin) rather than going herself. Finally Brian’s growing attraction builds Abby’s confidence, and she gains

a partner who promotes her harmonious development. Motion pictures also strive to reveal interior, hidden conflicts. Rob Gordon (John Cusack) tells the audience of his secret desires in *High Fidelity* (2000), and the Jekyll-and-Hyde duality in *The Nutty Professor* (1963) portrays the split psyche of the scientist. Since the psychotherapy session has become familiar in the genre, this confessional mode has featured the expression of interior conflicts within the earnest Erica (Jill Clayburgh) in *An Unmarried Woman* (1978), the pathetic Ted (Ben Stiller) in *There's Something About Mary* (1998), and even the desperate Will in the sixteenth century of *Shakespeare in Love*. By now the therapy session has become a venue for internal conflicts and a staple source of humor in romantic comedy.

The conflict between repression and sexual desire has been central to romantic comedy and is a key to its internal struggles. As Kathleen Rowe writes, in comedy sex is part of an “overall attack on repression and [a] celebration of bodily pleasure” (1995: 104). Frequently this internal struggle becomes personified in the contending members of the couple. Whether it concerns the contest between the repressed David Huxley (Cary Grant) and the spontaneous Susan Vance (Katharine Hepburn) in *Bringing Up Baby*, the proper Jan Morrow (Doris Day) and the lecherous Brad Allen (Rock Hudson) in *Pillow Talk* (1959), or the contrasting sexual habits of Annie (Diane Keaton) and Alvy (Woody Allen) in *Annie Hall*, this conflict between sexual control and indulgence is a mainspring of romantic comedy. Frequently, institutional censorship, such as classical Hollywood's Production Code Administration, commonly known as “the Hays Office,” enforces repression, and so the genre has to work imaginatively to express desire through covert means. One pleasure of the romantic comedy arises from experiencing these discreet avenues to the erotic.

Warring gender cultures provoke men and women to exploit their suitors for personal advantage rather than embracing the bond of love. The internal conflict between exploitation and fellowship is portrayed in the mirrored opposition of the playboy and the golddigger, both of whom portray a negation of romance. On the one hand, the playboy's desire for sexual gratification without any emotional bond with his partner allows lust to prevail over love. On the other hand, the golddigger exchanges sexual favors for financial security without any heartfelt union. The battle of the sexes poses these negative types which are at war with a transcendent erotic impulse. For example, in *A Letter to Three Wives* (1949), Lora Mae (Linda Darnell) is a young working woman who flirts with her boss, Porter Hollingsway (Paul Douglas), but insists on marriage before intimacy. Afterwards, the couple become bitter because each senses a cynical

exchange at the base of their relationship. Only in the unconvincing resolution do they freely declare their selfless affection for each other.

Finally, the internal conflict between skepticism and faith in love pervades the genre. Often a film seeks credibility with its audience by portraying the trials and disappointments of courtship before maneuvering the couple toward union. *Splash* (1984) opens with Allen (Tom Hanks) having just been left by his girlfriend, and he stands in contrast to his scoundrel playboy brother Freddie (John Candy). In an extreme case, *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (1947), Lucy (Gene Tierney) experiences a disappointing marriage and a deceptive suitor before finding a satisfying union with her amiable ghost after death. *Moonstruck* (1987) finds Loretta (Cher) in a pragmatic, loveless engagement before she meets her fiancé's passionate brother. Infidelity plots, like *Twentieth Century* or *Unfaithfully Yours* (1948), depend upon the unwarranted suspicions of one partner, who must be reassured of the beloved's commitment. Rowe has recognized this delicate "balance between belief and disbelief so essential to the genre" (1995: 161–2). This internal conflict convinces viewers to overcome their own doubts and renew a feeling that love is possible.

The three major fields of conflict in romantic comedy, between parents and children, between men and women, and within the self, depict vital problems widely experienced throughout the culture. The genre thereby addresses issues of fundamental concern and maintains an audience. Through engagement with these films the audience grapples, often subconsciously, with important issues. Equally important, the conflicts establish the discourse upon which the conventions of plot, character, and setting are constructed. In turn the conventions elaborate a framework through which the conflicts are expressed.

Master Plot

The central narrative framework in film genre studies is the master plot, a series of typical events linked into a causal progression that establishes the conventions of a particular genre's story by dramatizing the conflicts at the foundation of the genre. The master plot will be larger than most fictions in the genre, and individual films will select from, vary, or add to the routine formula. The master plot incorporates the general story expectations of the spectator, and often supplies background information assumed by any particular film. The master plot is similar to Schatz's genre myth or the folklorist Vladimir Propp's collection of "moves" which constitute a tale (Schatz 1981: 264; Propp 1958). There are frequently a few prominent

master-plot patterns within a genre. For example, Rick Altman identifies the “fairy tale,” the “show,” and the “folk” as three plot variations marking the musical film; Noël Carroll posits the discovery, the complex discovery, and the overreacher plots for horror (Altman 1987: 127; Carroll 1990: 97–128). As Northrop Frye explains, the plot of the romantic comedy is ancient Greek New Comedy as transmitted by Plautus and Terence (1973: 163–4). A couple meets and falls in love. Obstacles intervene to separate the lovers. The body of the action involves wrestling with the obstacles until the couple can be united, usually in marriage. The nature of the obstacles becomes the distinguishing quality of these tales and the courtship practices, sexual mores, and gender cultures of every era establish the variables. Mernit has proposed a useful plot model which he argues follows “the intuitive logic of a credible courtship” (2000: 109–17). I adapt his model with variations and additions. The basic model bears in mind two important variations, the infidelity and the ensemble plots, which will be discussed in more detail at the close.

Move 1: Unfulfilled Desire. One or both members of the prospective couple are presented as suffering from disappointment in romance, or face a frustrating absence in their life. In *There’s Something About Mary* Ted can’t find a date for the prom. Infidelity comedies present a troubled relationship, as when Tracy (Katharine Hepburn) throws Dexter (Cary Grant) out of the house for drunkenness in *The Philadelphia Story* (1940). The opening frequently presents failure in romance and establishes skepticism toward the prospect of abiding love.

Move 2: the Meeting. The prospective lovers encounter each other and sparks fly in the celebrated “meet cute.” In *Cluny Brown* (1946), Professor Adam Belinski (Charles Boyer) meets the eponymous Cluny (Jennifer Jones) when she arrives to fix the plumbing and later she enjoys “that Persian cat feeling” after her first martini. The infidelity variation presents the rival suitor of one or both of the initial partners, as when Hildy (Rosalind Russell) introduces her fiancé Bruce (Ralph Bellamy) to Walter (Cary Grant) in *His Girl Friday* (1940).

Move 3: Fun Together. The couple confirm their attraction in initial dates, such as walking in the park, playing on the beach, candlelight dinners. The standard sequence may end in a first kiss or a declaration of love, such as the East River pier kiss in *Annie Hall*.

Move 4: Obstacles Arise. The prospective union of the couple is sabotaged by the central conflict driving the plot. Generally that obstacle is closely integrated with a parallel plot quest which establishes a competing goal and further complications for one or both of the lovers. After an impulsive kiss, Paul (William Holden) avoids any entanglement with

the millionaire's mistress Billie (Judy Holliday) in *Born Yesterday* (1950), but his assignment to educate the "dumb blonde" throws them together. The interaction between the obstacle and the parallel quest becomes a key structuring device in developing the conflicts. For example, the trial in *Adam's Rib* sparks the dispute between Adam and Amanda because of their different concepts of justice and also because the case arises over a wife taking a shot at her unfaithful husband.

Move 5: the Journey. In trying to circumvent the obstacle, the couple move to a special place which takes them outside their normal surroundings and changes their routine perception. Here they undergo a transformation which prepares them for union. Susan brings David to Connecticut in *Bringing Up Baby*; Ronnie (Nicolas Cage) takes Loretta to *La Bohème* in *Moonstruck*; a time warp traps Phil (Bill Murray) in *Groundhog Day* (1993) until he sheds his cynicism and becomes worthy of Rita's love.

Move 6: New Conflicts. At the film's midpoint, the growing bond between the lovers provokes new problems. Earl Williams (John Qualen) escapes from his cell in *His Girl Friday*, and Hildy is back on the job as court reporter. She fails to walk out on Walter as she planned because the story needs reporting. In *Chasing Amy* Holden (Ben Affleck) and Allysa (Joey Lauren Adams) become lovers, antagonizing Holden's close friend Banky (Jason Lee).

Move 7: the Choice. The protagonist must choose between the alternative quest and the romance. In *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), Annie (Meg Ryan) lies to her fiancé Walter and flies to Seattle in search of Sam (Tom Hanks). However, her failure to make contact leads her to chide herself as foolish and reaffirm her engagement to Walter.

Move 8: Crisis. The choice proves disastrous, placing the couple in jeopardy. In *Working Girl* (1988) Tess's self-esteem dissolves when her boss Katharine (Sigourney Weaver) exposes the secretary's masquerade as a financial expert. Tess (Melanie Griffith) must apologize and depart from the merger meeting. Furthermore, when Jack (Harrison Ford) discovers Tess's ruse he reconsiders his feelings for her.

Move 9: Epiphany. The process of courtship provokes a learning process in the couple which culminates in an epiphany. The insight prompts a personal sacrifice leading to the resolution. In *The Apartment* Baxter quits rather than allow Sheldrake (Fred McMurray) to meet Fran (Shirley MacLaine) in his apartment. Fran learns of Baxter's decision and runs to meet him.

Move 10: Resolution. The couple are reunited or they separate but the experience of their romance provides an important lesson for the future. A

wedding, feast, or celebration marks the close. Tracy acknowledges her failings, turns down the proposal from Mike (James Stewart), and accepts Dexter's hand in *The Philadelphia Story*. The last-minute rescue from a misguided wedding to the wrong partner is a prominent resolution suspense device in films such as *It Happened One Night* or prompts compulsive repetition in *Runaway Bride* (1999). The happy ending is a well-established convention of the romantic comedy, but films increasingly cultivate a variety of resolutions. Deleyto outlines five common revisions in the resolution of contemporary romantic comedies, including the lonely hero, the uneasy couple, a nostalgia for a more innocent past, the uncertainty of changing gender roles, and the increasing visibility of homosexuality (1998: 12).

The model is broad enough to display an outline of the romantic comedy plot while allowing for enormous flexibility. It also can accommodate the two chief variations to this basic model: the infidelity plot and the ensemble plot.

The infidelity plot begins with an established couple in which one or both members are tempted to stray. The resolution can reestablish or dissolve the relationship. This variation includes what Stanley Cavell (1981) has called the comedy of remarriage and Kristine Brunovska Karnick (1995) the reaffirmation plot, but it is more inclusive because it includes works, such as *An Unmarried Woman* and *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), in which the initial couple separates. Shakespeare already used this pattern: for example, Oberon and Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* present an infidelity episode.

The other chief variation is the ensemble plot, in which the couples multiply. Again the pattern is widespread in Shakespeare, where many comedies follow a cluster of lovers and end in numerous marriages. Here the parallel romances emphasize a comparison between the couples, rather than the linear development of a single courtship. Films like *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), *Singles*, and *Love Actually* (2003) are examples. The current trend in multi-protagonist narratives develops this variation.

"Though no single film can present the entire myth," Rick Altman explains, "the system of generic variations creates a myth, a single coherent narrative mediating cultural conflicts" (1987: 331). So a work may select from, vary, or add to this narrative pattern, but still operate within the conventions of the genre. *Sleepless in Seattle* delays the meeting of the couple until the resolution; *Knocked Up* initiates the courtship with conception; *Woman of the Year* (1942) portrays the trials of early marriage. Nonetheless, the conventional pattern serves as a reference point for the filmmakers and their audience.

Characters

The conventional characters of romantic comedy are divided into two groups: the lovers and their helpers versus obstacle figures, typically the father or others in authority. The principal allies of the obstacle figures are romantic rivals, the “wrong partners” who fulfill the standards of class, wealth, race, or whatever yardstick authorities have selected. Emotion characterizes the lovers, as the instinctual forces of sexuality drive them forward in spite of their vulnerability, inexperience, and foolishness. Rigidity characterizes the antagonists, who use reason, tradition, and force as a means of protecting virgins, quelling the feelings of the lovers, and enforcing the rules keeping eros in check.

A distinguishing quality of the romantic comedy is the dual protagonist, the man and woman whose union becomes the principal quest. Though some films, like *The Wedding Crashers* (2005), may emphasize the man, and others, like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, the woman, the dynamics of the genre encourage a dual perspective. *Sleepless in Seattle* offers a vivid instance of the dual protagonist because the film is constructed along parallel tracks, shifting between hero and heroine until they meet in the final episode. The lovers in romantic comedy strive to find common ground. Characterization in romantic comedy moves away from extreme gender traits, whether the fierce warrior or the nurturing mother, toward behavior which allows for integration. Handsome and strong, actors like Cary Grant, James Stewart, or Hugh Grant can also be elegant, witty, and express their desire for intimacy while being ready to laugh at themselves. While beautiful and playful, stars like Katharine Hepburn, Meg Ryan, or Julia Roberts can also be aggressive, sassy, and independent. He is ready for tenderness, and she can handle adversity without wilting. Finally, they must overcome a fear of union and seek genuine fellowship rather than simply sex or financial security. If lovers in romantic comedy are resistant to modifying their gender disposition, they must change their ways. For example, Phil Connors in *Groundhog Day* has to relive that February day over and over again until he has shed his cynical selfishness and is eligible for marriage.

In order to be “meant for each other,” men and women need to distinguish themselves with unusual, often eccentric, behavior that complements their partners. As Jerry (Tom Cruise) tells Dorothy (Renee Zellweger) in *Jerry Maguire*, “You complete me.” The lover, whether the fast-talking dame of screwball or the sensitive guy of post-classical Hollywood, displays a personality that stands out from the crowd. Brian Henderson claims that “there can be no romantic comedy without strong

heroines” (1986: 320). The individual, rising above the typical, needs to bond with a partner who folds his or her special qualities into the balanced harmony of a couple.

The trials of the primary couple are frequently shadowed by a secondary couple whose example serves as a guide or counterpoint. For instance, Jess (Bruno Kirby) and Marie (Carrie Fisher) in *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) serve as the confidants of the principal couple, and their wedding anticipates the final union of Harry (Billy Crystal) and Sally (Meg Ryan). On the other hand, the growing alienation of Mr. Matuschek (Frank Morgan) from his wife in *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940) acts as a counterpoint to the initial hostility and eventual union of Kralik (James Stewart) and Klara (Margaret Sullavan). Multiple couples can even broaden the spectrum for comparison, so that the problems in a trio of marriages are examined in *A Letter to Three Wives*. Sometimes the parallel romantic escapades of two women, such as Dorothy (Jane Russell) and Lorelei (Marilyn Monroe) in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), or two men, like Miles (Paul Giamatti) and Jack (Thomas Haden Church) in *Sideways* (2004), function to shift the focus from the couple and develop a comparison within a gender. The character of the primary couple is given perspective and depth with these additions.

Occasionally the primary couple expands to a triangle when an attractive alternate partner enters the field. Here, the temptation to infidelity is stronger than the attraction to a wrong partner because the triangle figures are a genuine option which threatens the couple and leaves the audience with regret that their union was never realized. For example, in *The Philadelphia Story* George (John Howard) is a “wrong partner” for Tracy, but Mike is an attractive alternative who initially appears to replace Dexter as Tracy’s beloved. In *Design for Living* (1933) Gilda (Miriam Hopkins) loves both Tom (Gary Cooper) and Charles (Fredric March) and the resolution leaves her unwilling to decide between them.

Allies of the lovers include helpers and friends. Perhaps the model for the helper is Puck, Oberon’s fairy deputy in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The mischievous Puck is dispatched to administer his magic, but expresses the vicissitudes of love in mixing up the Athenians and making fun of their passion. Wise-cracking butlers, maids, and other servants act as helpers to struggling lovers, but often add to their complications or simply offer a sounding board for their woes. Thelma Ritter specialized in these roles in romantic comedies like *A Letter to Three Wives*, *Pillow Talk*, and *Move Over, Darling* (1963). Now that servants have faded from the social scene, these duties easily pass to secretaries, cabbies, bartenders, and others.

However, the most significant allies in contemporary romantic comedy are friends. As the workplace replaces the home as a stage of action and men and women live far from their birthplace, the diminishing role of the family, as noted above, is filled by friends – fellow workers, roommates, neighbors, college buddies. Similar to the helpers, these characters serve as confidants who allow the lovers to express their thoughts, desires, and hopes. Sometimes these friends are older advisors, like Pirovitch (Felix Bressart) in *The Shop Around the Corner*, the Reverend Mr. Playfair (Arthur Shields) in *The Quiet Man*, or Dr. Dreyfuss (Jack Kruschen) in *The Apartment*. Often they are neurotic sidekicks, like Pete (Tony Randall) in *Lover Come Back* or Spike (Rhys Ifans) in *Notting Hill* (1999), whose silly behavior offers another opportunity for humor. Recently, gay friends, like George in *My Best Friend's Wedding* or Simon (Gary Kinnear) in *As Good As It Gets* (1997), combine a detached sexual perspective with the insight of the advisor. In *Friends with Money* (2006) the circle of pals shifts the focus away from courtship, so the romantic union at the close comes almost as a surprise.

The father as the ruling patriarch is the prototype for the obstacle figure in romantic comedy. Other family members and authority figures can easily take over the father's role, such as the chairman of the board, Monsieur Giron (C. Aubrey Smith), in *Trouble in Paradise*, the older brother Will Danaher (Victor McLaglen) in *The Quiet Man*, or the royal attendants in *Roman Holiday* (1953). Policemen, bosses, priests, teachers, can all assume the blocking role as representatives of authority set on inhibiting passion. The ally of the authoritarian patriarch is the wrong partner or designated rival. He or she stands as the acceptable choice for a mate, but is usually marked by conformity which undermines any sense of freedom or individuality. Ralph Bellamy's roles as Dan in *The Awful Truth* (1937) and Bruce in *His Girl Friday* crystallized the genial but boring wrong partner who embodied the promise of a dreary life in which routine would smother any sense of adventure. But sometimes the wrong partner can be a demonic adversary, like Katharine in *Working Girl*, or a series of mismatches like Rob Gordon's former girlfriends in *High Fidelity*. The prevailing culture of divorce and spent relationships has developed the former spouse or ex-partner as a new variation on the wrong partner, such as Jill (Meryl Streep) in *Manhattan*, Joe (Steven Ford) and Alice (Lisa Jane Persky) in *When Harry Met Sally*, and Victoria (Jessica Hecht) in *Sideways*. As Steve Neale has pointed out, the wrong partner provokes the learning process which the protagonist must undergo in order to realize a successful relationship (1992: 289–90, 293–4). The mismatch reveals faults the protagonist must overcome and highlights the attractive qualities of the

beloved. Sometimes friends can switch from helpers to obstacles: in *Knocked Up* the slacker lifestyle of Ben (Seth Rogen) and his mates stifles the maturity necessary for Ben to become a proper husband; in *There's Something About Mary* Ted's friend and advisor Dom (Chris Elliott) reveals himself to be a double-crossing rival, Woogie.

David Grote has identified three personalities prevalent in romantic comedy: the innocent, the fool, and the scoundrel (1983: 39–47). The innocent is childlike, unsophisticated and naïve, but open to education. This inexperienced youth is filled with feeling but unprepared for nature's cruelty and society's deceptions. Their ignorance makes them convenient straight men and their folly is a source of humor before their learning process takes over. The young lovers Hermia and Lysander in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are classic innocents. Sometimes the innocent has a refreshing purity that enables others to renew their faith in goodness: for example, Charlie Chaplin's tramp in *City Lights* (1931). Innocents are conspicuous protagonists in most romantic comedy films, such as Marianne (Kate Winslet) in *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), Barry (Adam Sandler) in *Punch Drunk Love* (2002), or Andy (Steve Carell) in *The Forty Year Old Virgin* (2005).

The fool is an exaggeration of the innocent, an idiot whose incompetence sparks laughter. As Grote explains, he is “the innocent gone wild” and leads the romantic comedy toward farce (1983: 41). As a clown he is a butt of jokes, ready to take a fall. Though similar to an innocent, the fool is immune to learning and at a loss in society. Whereas the innocent often attracts the sympathy of the audience and possesses a purity that can contain wisdom, one keeps a distance from the fool, who creates a sense of uneasiness because he is stupid and unpredictable. Bottom from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a fool. The fool's extreme personality seldom fits the lover, though Norval Jones (Eddie Bracken) in *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (1944) and Jerry Lewis in *The Ladies Man* (1961) and *The Nutty Professor* are examples of fools as lovers. Frequently the fool is an ineffectual helper, like Spike in *Notting Hill*, or a friend and rival like Jerry (Jack Lemmon) in *Some Like It Hot* (1959). The fool appears less frequently than the innocent. Though the fool is conspicuous in “comedian comedies,” many romantic comedies resist the tendency toward physical humor and extreme behavior generated by the fool.

The scoundrel is the third and most prominent personality among the comic types. The rogue makes things happen with his schemes and disguises. Constantly preying upon innocents and using fools to carry out his dirty work, this trickster breaks the law, punishes the rigid, and mocks society's pretense. His ready wit and powerful insight make him

almost invulnerable until love convinces him to give up his unbridled license. While disreputable, the scoundrel attracts our affection because of his cunning, freedom, and charm. Even if his reform is unconvincing he ingratiates himself with the beloved as well as the audience. Oberon and his deputy Puck are scoundrels in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as are Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew* and Benedick and Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*. *The Wedding Crashers* is based on the scoundrel code of John (Owen Wilson) and Jeremy (Vince Vaughn). Female scoundrels include the seducer Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft) in *The Graduate* (1967), and the con artist Jean Harrington (Barbara Stanwyck) in *The Lady Eve* (1941).

The play among these three types is central to comedy. *There's Something About Mary* features a lively interaction between the trio with an innocent couple in Ted and Mary (Cameron Diaz), a fool in Mary's dim-witted brother Warren (W. Earl Brown), and scoundrels in the various rivals: Healy (Matt Dillon), Tucker (Lee Evans) and Dom.

Masquerade

Masquerade is so widespread and significant in romantic comedy that it warrants analysis as an important aspect of characterization. Considering masquerade as the numerous disguises and deceptions employed in these courtship tales leads us back to Shakespeare. Among the most famous instances are the cross-dressing masquerades of Viola as Cesario in *Twelfth Night* and Rosalind as Ganymede in *As You Like It*. But Bottom's transformation into a beast in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the masked ball in *Much Ado About Nothing* are among the many other masquerades central to Shakespearean comedy. Masquerade in Hollywood romantic comedy takes many forms. There is the cross-dressing of *I Was a Male War Bride* (1949), *Tootsie* (1982), and *Shakespeare in Love*; women assuming an alternative self in *Desperately Seeking Susan*, *Working Girl*, and *The Truth About Cats and Dogs*; and men using a disguise to seduce women in *Pillow Talk*, *Groundhog Day*, and *The Wedding Crashers*. Alternatively, partners can create a joint deception which unites them against the world. For example, in *It Happened One Night* Peter and Ellie pretend to be a quarreling married couple at the motel in order to trick the detectives sent by her father. In addition, masquerade provokes humor through the incongruity between the actual and the assumed self, and creates suspense as to the success and the consequences of the ruse. Tamar Jeffers McDonald has identified masquerade as one of the key narrative tropes

of romantic comedy (2007: 13, 118). Jenkins and Karnick note that “masquerade and the problem of unstable identities. . . may be defining characteristics of the comic tradition as a whole” (1995: 166). The imaginative use of masquerade offers fertile options for portraying internal conflicts that plague lovers in their quest for union.

So why is masquerade so prevalent? Though this device can serve many functions in comic narrative, one key factor arises from the process of courtship. In the course of wooing, the suitor tries to present himself as attractive to the beloved and even to fulfill his or her conception of an ideal partner. The aspiration to satisfy your partner transforms the self into realizing unsuspected qualities. In the process one discovers latent aspects of the psyche. Thus, courtship can become a search for both a partner and also one’s own identity amid the variable capacities for personality. Finding common ground with the beloved develops a distinctive self within the relationship. So the prospect of trying new, and maybe exaggerated, personas arises from the fundamental dynamics of courtship. Wooing becomes a learning process in which one tries on new roles to realize one’s desire. This dynamic moves men and women toward the gender traits of their partners and is key to negotiating the union of the couple. Furthermore, passion leads one to idealize the object of desire, so the sense of transformation and exaggeration can become a snowballing exchange between the lovers. As a result, courtship shapes identity. Masquerade in romantic comedy arises from this powerful tendency to explore new identities and therefore lies at the base of the genre. One



PLATE 2 Masquerade, so widespread in romantic comedy, leads us back to Shakespeare. Viola (Gwyneth Paltrow) is disguised as Thomas Kent listening to Will Shakespeare (Joseph Fiennes) declare his passion for her in *Shakespeare in Love* (1999).

can say that a fundamental internal conflict in romantic comedy is the struggle among multiple personalities within the self which is manifest in masquerade.

The play of masquerade fosters the pleasure of romantic comedy. Masquerade allows the audience to know the truth whereas some characters are deceived. As the deception grows, so does the viewer's pleasure from the rising tension. Sensation intensifies as the viewer wonders when the ruse will be uncovered and what the consequences will be. Altman's concept of the "generic crossroads" is at work (1999: 145–56, 165). According to this idea, genre pleasure arises from counter-cultural activity, such as deception, versus socially sanctioned behavior, truthfulness. At each crossroads in the story, the genre chooses the forbidden as opposed to prevailing social standards, and excitement rises with the film's defiance of established norms. Finally the masquerade is revealed and the audience returns to the security of proper behavior, but the greater the risk taken by flaunting the norm, the greater the pleasure at the return to safety. The masquerade builds on the social practice of courtship while fostering the rising excitement of defying proper conduct. The escape from the forbidden in the happy ending allows for a return to safety, and in the process produces an exhilarating release.

The Setting

Just as masquerade becomes an instrument through which characters explore their identity in a quest for love, so too the romantic comedy constructs a setting for transformation. Deleyto argues for the centrality of a magical place special to the genre. He explains that the couple leave their routine lives and explores a comic setting, usually in the middle section of the plot, which allows for the breakdown of inhibition and the expression of desire (2009: 30–8). Here humor creates a benevolent atmosphere in which the characters wrestle with their sexuality and undergo a transformation. The exhilaration of laughter overcomes repression so that men and women can move toward union before they reenter normal life. For example, the trip to Florida in *The Palm Beach Story* (1942), the Spanish vacation in *A Touch of Class* (1973), or the excursion to Manhattan by Roberta (Rosanna Arquette) in *Desperately Seeking Susan* all represent such settings. Sometimes the special place can be on the edge of one's routine, such as the visits to the doctor's office that Jenna (Keri Russell) takes in *Waitress* (2007). Boccaccio's castle in the *Decameron*, Shakespeare's forests, and elements of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival are part of this tradition.

These settings cultivate the education of men and women as they learn about themselves and their prospective partner in the quest to become a couple.

As a result, the settings foster the conflict between passion and order. Sites of passion often include natural settings, such as woods or beaches, especially in springtime, summer, on holidays, or at night. They are the journey's destination in a flight from routine. By contrast the sites of order are the home or the workplace, locales where obstacle figures can exercise their authority and reason holds the impulses in check. Daylight and the colder seasons foster lucidity and remind the naïve that nature threatens hardship for the unwary. Northrop Frye has famously called the sites of passion "the green world," Shakespeare's woods where utopian dreams can take hold of men and women who might otherwise be more skeptical (1973: 182–4). The sites of passion are the special place where the lovers can indulge their appetites, escape from the restrictions of the social order, and seek a new identity in union. The landscape of screen romance draws on these established conventions, but each film can construct its magical comic setting in a distinctive manner.

Trips portray movement and are widely used to imply the transformation of the character in the course of the journey. *Twentieth Century* and *Two for the Road* (1967) introduce the trip in their titles. Innumerable comedies have key scenes on trains, boats, cars, or planes. The bus trip is central to *It Happened One Night* and evoked again as the newlyweds end *The Graduate* on the bus. In *The Lady Eve* Charles (Henry Fonda) meets Jean on the boat traveling back from the Amazon, suffers the disillusioning honeymoon night on the train, and finally must return to the boat again to be reunited. The model sailboat *True Love* serves as the emblem of Dexter's union with Tracy in *The Philadelphia Story*. Because romantic comedy is about the change love brings, these films use transportation settings to portray characters on a moving stage.

Temporal settings may also prompt meaningful transitions. As noted above, day and night express a key distinction for romance, as titles like *It Happened One Night* and *Midnight* (1939) suggest. Films like *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986) use memory to evoke nostalgia as Peggy Sue (Kathleen Turner) recalls her courtship in the 1950s to revive her feelings for a wayward husband, and in *High Fidelity* Rob Gordon reviews his former girlfriends in order to discover Laura's worth. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) uses a complicated time scheme to weave a maze of the past and the present in which the lovers grapple with the history of their relationship. *Groundhog Day* stops time altogether in order to reform its scoundrel protagonist. The contrast between the present and the past

establishes an important underpinning for period films like *Sense and Sensibility*, *Shakespeare in Love*, and *An Ideal Husband*, which present to the audience earlier times when courtship offered a more restrained but intense experience of love. Time serves as a flexible aspect of setting and it is a vital element in exploring the magical space of romantic comedy.

Fantasy settings develop the conflict between the ordinary and the extraordinary. The haunted house in *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, the undersea world in *Splash*, the after-life in *Heaven Can Wait* (1978), can excite a romance or provoke the lovers' union. Sometimes, even the cinema itself, as in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), becomes the fantasy device that allows the protagonist to escape from the confines of reality and attain love on another plane of existence. In spite of the lighthearted sense of the imaginary shaping these films, a melancholy often underlies the settings, implying that genuine union is impossible in the world as it exists.

Romantic comedy often uses the metropolis as its special, exotic site and New York City plays a leading role in the genre. *Sunday in New York* (1963), *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), and *Manhattan* advertise the location of their courtship. Brian Henderson claims that "The romantic comedy has always been urban and urban-oriented, aggressively, smugly assuming the superiority of city over country" (1986: 321). In *The Awful Truth* Jerry (Cary Grant) chides his ex-wife Lucy (Irene Dunne) about leaving the city for Oklahoma with her new fiancé, and Walter in *His Girl Friday* mocks the joys of Albany to Hildy. The lovers in *Sleepless in Seattle* live a continent apart, but they are both drawn to the Empire State Building to realize their destiny. Though the metropolitan/provincial opposition may leave New York for the Paris of *Ninotchka* (1939), the London of *Notting Hill*, or Spain in *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008), city streets frequently hold a provocative excitement for lovers. However, noteworthy exceptions play this conflict from the opposite side, accenting the natural landscape of love. *The Quiet Man* finds romance in an Irish hamlet, Ellie and Peter in *It Happened One Night* nearly share their first kiss among the haystacks, and Miles and Jack find partners in the California wine country in *Sideways*. What remains constant for the genre, whether it be the metropolitan or the provincial, culture or nature, is the special setting, blessed by humor and in contrast to normal life, which allows repression to fade and emotions free play.

Love and Laughter

How does laughter guide audience response in the romantic comedy? Laughter sets the tone for the genre, assuring the safety of the characters

and the viewer's pleasure. Romantic comedies have been described as "date movies," entertainment for courting couples, those who would like to be courting or those who wish to reexperience courtship. What is it about romantic comedy that links laughter with love? Laughter is exhilarating, especially in a communal setting where one shares the pleasure with others. Laughing with one's date anticipates the joy of sex. Mernit explains that in watching romantic comedy the viewers want "to feel what it's like to love and be loved. . . to be deeply moved, and at the same time they want to laugh. . ." (2000: 252). Experiencing romance by witnessing the growing bond between lovers calls for intimacy, sharing in the emotions of the character, what is commonly called identification.

For example, in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) Charles (Hugh Grant) meets Carrie (Andie MacDowell) three months after their first night together at another wedding. Initially Charles is jubilant that the American woman is back in London. Then she introduces him to her fiancé and his disappointment sends him into the dumps. But near the close of the wedding party Carrie asks Charles to keep her company after her fiancé has to leave early. They ride a cab back to her hotel.

Carrie: You wanna come up for a nightcap?

Charles [hesitating]: You sure?

Carrie [teasing]: Well, yes. I think we can risk it. I'm pretty sure I can resist you. You're not that cute.

Charles [sheepishly embarrassed]: Sorry. Yeah, great.

Cut to morning. Camera pans from London cityscape into hotel room to find the two in bed.

The episode is amusing because the cut to morning reveals the incongruity between Carrie's dismissive remark and her actual intention. The gap in the action constitutes a jump, similar to laughing at a joke that offers the viewer a gratifying leap in understanding. The scene is also satisfying because the audience has shared Charles's elation, disappointment, and finally his happiness. Here, getting the joke means sharing in love. Just as Carrie and Charles embrace, we can participate in that feeling in the jump from denial to confirmation.

In a general sense romantic comedy's counter-cultural behavior in play at Altman's "generic crossroads," explained above, is a lover's passion (1999: 145–56, 165). Romantic comedy features the risks, vulnerability, and hesitation typical of flirtation in order to rise toward the intensity of a couple's union. The genre strives to excite sexual desire and mimic its pleasure mediated through the devices of cinematic storytelling and

experienced as laughter. The self-sacrifice of love transforms the awkwardness of courtship into grace. The return to socially acceptable behavior arises with the publicly acknowledged union of the lovers, typically marriage.

Bonding in romantic comedy usually involves the man making the woman laugh, either by cracking a joke or by endearing himself through a humorous display of vulnerability or innocence. *Ninotchka* was promoted by proclaiming that “Garbo Laughs,” and indeed the Parisian playboy Leon (Melvyn Douglas) finally breaks the serious veneer of Ninotchka (Greta Garbo), the Soviet emissary. After a few failed jokes, he falls out of his chair in frustration and his grim companion surrenders to laughter. Her discovery of joy forges the lovers’ bond. Woody Allen offers a noteworthy example because his many characters lack the physical charm of a movie star, but he manages persuasively to woo beautiful women with his wit. In *Annie Hall* the romance experiences a memorable peak when lobsters escape in the kitchen. Alvie tries to corral them with a dish of butter and wry remarks, and the lovers laugh, sharing their bond with the audience.

On the other hand, there can also be a tension between laughter and love. The lover is an easy mark for humor because courtship is awkward, irrational, and exposes our vulnerability. Laughter at the obstacles to romance can make us feel shielded from them by placing us at a distance and relieving our apprehension at the expense of a fictional character. Humiliation, embarrassment, taking a fall, provokes our amusement, but keeps us apart from the butt of the joke. However, the couple in the audience who laugh together at the troubles of others strike a bond that can shield them against the pain they are witnessing. Even as laughter highlights the obstacles that separate lovers it can promote the union of those laughing together.

In *Tootsie* Dorothy Michaels (Dustin Hoffman) (Michael Dorsey disguised as a woman) consoles Julie (Jessica Lange), who is having troubles with her lover, Ron (Dabney Coleman). Julie regrets that men have to play such deceptive courtship games and ponders aloud how refreshing it would be if a man spoke frankly of his desire. Dorothy listens sympathetically while thinking how Michael can replace Ron in Julie’s affections. A few days later at a party, Michael unexpectedly meets Julie for the first time as himself. When she wanders onto a balcony, Michael approaches her and abruptly praises her beauty and tells her he wants to make love to her. Insulted, Julie throws her drink in his face and storms off, leaving Michael humiliated. Here laughter and sharing in love are at odds. Our amusement places us at a distance from both Michael and Julie

as they are alienated from each other. But the amused viewer can reflect with profit on the need for courtesy and discretion in pursuing his or her own romance.

So laughter can arise from the lovers' disappointments as well as from their triumph. But the lighthearted tone protects the audience against the hostile bite of humor. We can enjoy our laughter at the expense of the lovers, assured that they will "live happily ever after." However, if the trivial play of humor sweeps away the tender emotions, the feeling of love will be diminished, possibly lost. Therefore, the romantic comedy needs to strike a delicate give-and-take between comic distance and emotional involvement – to cultivate a balance ending in an embrace. This is a major challenge for romantic comedy and only the strongest works manage to satisfy the desire for love and laughter.

Drawing upon Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson among others, Dirk Eitzen explains that the psychology of humor has posed various theories to explain laughter which can be summarized into three models: the superiority model, the catharsis or tension-release model, and the incongruity-resolution model (1999: 94–5). Each of these models can serve romantic comedy in a particular way. The superiority model can use laughter to express hostility toward rigid authoritarians, members of the opposite sex who disappoint or harass you, or maddening frustrations, as when Richard Sherman (Tom Ewell) in *The Seven Year Itch* (1955) responds to his wife's dismissive chuckles over his sexual magnetism by visualizing stories about how he had to resist the advances of his secretary, his nurse, and his wife's best friend. The catharsis or tension-release model can trigger the relaxation of inhibition that frees sexual energy both within the fictive world and among the audience, as when Barry Egan (Adam Sandler) trashes the men's room at the restaurant where he takes Lena (Emily Watson) on a date in *Punch Drunk Love*. Finally, incongruity-resolution humor allows laughter to circumvent obstacles through a leap of understanding to make a liberating connection, as in the example from *Four Weddings and a Funeral* already noted. So laughter is linked with making love because the superiority model allows for aggression to subdue obstacles; the catharsis model releases the pressure of inhibition to allow for sexual expression; and the incongruity model circumvents repression through an absurd play of words or circumstance. All three link laughter to the pleasures of love.

The framework of romantic comedy films arises from the genre conventions: the master plot, characters, the masquerade, the setting, and audience response which grow from the cultural conflicts addressed by

the films. Though these conflicts and conventions are longstanding, the continuing popularity of romantic comedy depends upon their flexibility. The changing social context of romance and the ever-shifting mores surrounding gender, sex, and courtship spark the historical evolution of the genre, which constantly yields new opportunities for creativity.