

Pratfalls, Seduction and the Farce of Marriage:
How the Screwball Comedy Redefined American Preconceptions of Traditional Feminine
Morality

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Fletcher Parrott Thornton IV

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It was January 18th, 1940, and director Howard Hawks' *His Girl Friday*, starring Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell, had just been released to American theatres.¹ Such as any media publication desired to publish timely reviews of such a star-studded film, American critics flooded the newspapers the very next day about Hildy and her ex-husband's misadventures through divorce and almost impossible to discern quick-witted banter. This on-screen dynamic between Grant and Russell yielded a wild spectrum of reaction from reviewers. For example, Frank Nugent from *The New York Times* perceived the film as a wild and strenuous affair with little value to be witnessed from the bantering dialogue from the couple. He firmly dismissed Russell's independence and sense of empowerment as "a wild caricature [which] should not be taken seriously."² However, a juxtaposing opinion of the film came from an entertainment magazine, *Variety*, whose reviewer greatly enjoyed the amusing dialogue and sexual tension which people had come to expect from the genre.³ Based on these reviews alone, the behavior and themes presented in this film are clearly radical enough to differentiate the readers of the more elite *New York Times* and the readers of popular publications such as *Variety Magazine*.

This would not be the only film that viewers would see with this same dynamic and these same themes though. Beginning in the early 1930s, a series of social and economic movements occurred in America which would create an environment which was ideal for a film genre which idolized the wealthy and mocked the morally upright. Out of this period, the screwball comedy genre was born, which served as not only a snapshot of a decade that

¹ *His Girl Friday*, directed by Howard Hawks (Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures, 1940).

² Frank S. Nugent, Review of *His Girl Friday*, *New York Times*, January 12, 1940, p. 1.

³ *Variety* Staff, Review of *His Girl Friday*, *Variety*, January 10, 1940, pp. 2-3.

was defined by the Depression, but also marked the inauguration of the abandonment of several antiquated notions of family life and gender dynamics.⁴ During this period, the screwball comedy would demonstrate the rapidly changing notions of moral codes including marriage and divorce, male patriarchy, and female sexuality. These wildly changing dynamics would directly oppose the exceptionally conservative Victorian code of conduct which sought to maintain order within society among well established gender and moral lines. As it gained prominence as early as 1934 in *It Happened One Night*,⁵ the screwball genre was on the forefront of demonstrating this changing popular culture. Therefore, some scholars like author Marjorie Rosen have argued that the characters in these stories are inherently conservative in their development because they rarely progress past the notion of traditional marriage. However, this genre served as an ideal representation of society as women grappled with traditional notions of marriage and divorce, the long kept notion of sexual purity, and the female presence within heterosexual relationships. Furthermore, the act of marriage itself during this period was completely rebranded to represent the changing priorities and youthfulness of social life.

As a writer and scholar who witnessed this social transformation in the early twentieth century, Ludwig Lewisohn gave a symposium on love and marriage in 1925 in which he argued that the institution of marriage was in a state of crisis because of the soul-

⁴ Wes D. Gehring, "Screwballs of the Silver Screen: a Treasured Comedy Genre Turns 70", *USA Today Magazine* 132, no. 2706 (March 2004), pp. 62-65.

⁵ *It Happened One Night*, Directed by Frank Capra (Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures, 1934).

crushing behavioral conduct people were expected to live by.⁶ With marriage increasingly considered to be a prison rather than a bond of passion, rebellion through divorce, adultery or other illicit behavior became increasingly more desirable as an alternative to the shackles of marriage. While screwball comedies would continue to either imply or explicitly feature a marriage at the end of the film, the agenda was undoubtedly to undermine much of what traditional marriage stood at the time. Film scholar Kathrina Glitre suggests in her interpretation of the screwball genre that marriage is often the end result; however, it is not the focus of the film. The true objective of the film was to highlight the antics of the characters as they negotiated divorces or false marriages through rapid and intelligent banter intended to highlight a fun and sexually charged relationship that defied traditional conventions but was still inherently conservative. This representation of a fun and passionate relationship was attractive to both the men and women of society who felt stifled in the bonds of marriage and was heavily a reflection of a social trend already in motion. From 1910 to 1940, divorce rates had doubled and marriage and birth rates dropped, thereby indicating a rapidly increasing lack of confidence in the established moral bounds.⁷

This reconstruction of traditional concept of marriage was only possible because of the tremendous strides that women took in shifting the power within relationships back from the men, particularly in film. In the screwball comedy, Katherine Hepburn and

⁶ Ludwig Lewisohn, "Love and Marriage," in *Our Changing Morality: A Symposium*, edited by Freda Kirchwey (London: Kegan, Paul, Tranch, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1925), p. 198.

⁷ Kathrina Glitre, "The Same, But Different: The Awful Truth About Marriage, Remarriage, and the Screwball comedy", *CineAction* 54 (Winter 2001), p. 3.

Rosalind Russell were two particularly potent examples of women who could equal and even outperform the men who they acted alongside in their films. These women were no longer simply objects intended to be won by the male lead. As the scholar Maria DiBattista argues, the leading women of screwball comedy became the face of the feminist movement by “openly mocking traditional notions of femininity”⁸ and “balk[ing] at traditional gender roles.” These women accomplished this not only by engaging these men on an intellectual and verbal level, but for the first time they began to break female expectations of sexuality and engage men from a sexual standpoint as well.

Under the long-standing Victorian code of conduct, the expectation of women was to remain sexually pure and docile while men pursued them.⁹ However, the fast-talking female leads of the screwball films were unsatisfied as objects of affection to their male leads. These women would deliver lines often laden with sexual innuendo and otherwise implied sexual desire. Women were capable of making meaningful and groundbreaking decisions within relationships when films previously portrayed them as prizes to be won. Therefore, despite strict production morality codes in place to prevent the explicit discussion of sex, actresses of American comedy had become paragons of sexual empowerment. Accompanying this movement made by Hollywood starlets was an increased social demand for the engaging and quick-witted women who could match the wit of Cary Grant and William Powell, who acted as symbols of the modern man. Therefore, the screwball comedy genre continued to flourish through the Depression when

⁸ Maria DiBattista, *Fast-Talking Dames* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 9, 11.

⁹ Glitre, “The Same, But Different,” p. 3.

little else did. While scholars like Marjorie Rosen and Heather Gilmour argue that this genre reflects a stagnation or regression of the status quo for young married couples, I argue that it truly served as a progressive representation of a social progression which pitted women against traditional notions of marriage and divorce, long kept conventions of sexual purity, and the female presence within relationships. Furthermore, the act of marriage itself was completely rebranded during this period to meet the changing priorities and expectations of a young generation in a post-Victorian society and this genre skillfully ties these expectations together to create a genre relevant to a socially progressing American public. However, the genre still retains some identifiers of traditional morality, often being forced to strike a balance between the two camps.

The Era

This code and its relevance in American film must be critically understood in order to explore the motivations behind the emerging rebellion against marriage as defined by the Victorian code of morality. As the social landscape diversified and stratified in the industrial era, so emerged distinctly gender-based spheres within the household. Within these spheres, men were expected to achieve economic success, whereas women were to become the arbiters of morality for their families, and by an extension the future of society, within the confines of the home. Among the moral consequences that accompanied this dynamic were the limitation of sexuality to procreation and a strictly held sense of sexual propriety amongst women. Contrary to the comedies of the 1930s, the ideal Victorian household stressed domestic order and peace, frequently at the expense of personal

happiness or fulfillment.¹⁰ Under this domestic order, the maintenance of the established social and economic order was paramount, thereby resulting in the universally accepted opposition to divorce. However, this family dynamic would also produce a moral landscape which elevated men to the position of a patriarch, whilst suppressing women to remain in charge of domestic upkeep. This patriarchy would extend to a social acceptance of men's sexuality and passion within relationships; however, still within the confines of a heterosexual monogamous relationship. A dynamic which both grants men sexual dominance, and forces women into a role of sexual purity is reflected in films by creating establishing a world in which "sexual desire was also a distinctly male prerogative ... [and] the 'cult of true womanhood' placed the morally and sexually pure wife on a pedestal."¹¹ In the film *The Awful Truth*, the sensibilities and niceties of the traditional Victorian marriage are witnessed crumbling before the viewers' eyes in a scene between a lawyer and a woman intending to divorce her husband. Clearly representing archetypes of diverging perceptions of marriage in society, the lawyer attempts to lecture Lucy on how "Marriage is a beautiful thing," while having a bitter argument with his wife about a very trivial matter.¹² It is in this biting and subtle criticism of traditional marriages which made American screwball comedies such a popular means to serve as a vehicle to reflect the

¹⁰ Heather Gilmour, "Different, Except In a Different Way: Marriage, Divorce, and Gender in the Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage," *Journal of Film and Video* 50, no. 2 (summer 1998), p. 27.

¹¹ Glitre, "The Same, But Different," p. 3.

¹² *The Awful Truth*, Directed by Leo McCarey (Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures, 1937).

growing demand to rebrand the outdated relationship dynamics which defined the institution of marriage.

A second critical social development, which underlined the crisis of socially and morally acceptable behaviors, was the passing of the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930, or The Hays Code. As films began to gain extraordinary popularity following World War I, a number of progressive reformers took notice of emerging controversial themes which had emerged in film culture including: criminal violence, drinking, sexual license, and race relations. Although these critics often only received sporadic success in curbing depictions of these issues on movie screens, the larger problem had been identified as the film industry in its entirety, which served as an artistic outlet on which the impressionable youths of society could witness “the flashing shadows of life on a screen.”¹³ In other words, films had become a symbol of all that was objectionable to those who still clung to a society based on traditional Judeo-Christian moral values. The Catholic Church in the United States actually took on a central role in this debate by championing the demonization of film, deeming it a negative influence on America. However, besides their participation in the drafting of the Production Code, a number of competing factors also cooperated in the creation of this document, resulting in the creation of “the [first] major effort by the film industry at self-regulation.”¹⁴ Of course the regulation process was facilitated by and pressured by a number of powerful special interest groups in the United States, giving Hollywood little recourse.

¹³ Stephen Vaughn, “Morality and Entertainment: The Origins of the Motion Picture Production Code,” *The Journal of American History* 77, no. 1 (Jun. 1990), p. 41.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

The first step in the process which led to the censorship of films came from a technological development during the late 1920s, which moved films out of the silent era and into an era of unparalleled expression through the use of sound and speech. While film executives saw this technology as transformative, making films far more lifelike and vibrant, it also became possible to communicate more sinister and inappropriate ideas through the double entendre and the subtle turn of phrase. While local censorship bodies had appeared in various states to regulate the content of films as early as 1907, “the new sound technology posed an even graver threat to the status quo than silent pictures, with the result that public demands for government censorship intensified.”¹⁵ In the face of this intensifying demand for the increased censorship of the inappropriate material in films, Hollywood began to fear the inevitable external government regulation of the film industry. As a result in 1922, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association was formed, seeking to serve as a self-regulating agency within Hollywood which would placate a skeptical public and put forward a positive image of Hollywood.

The final piece in this puzzle was the MPPDA’s placing of a William H. Hays as the position of president, crystallizing this pseudo-self-regulating entity as a true agent of film censorship. Hays was a Presbyterian and a political conservative, but most importantly, Hays was optimistic about cinema’s potential as an agent of good and in his position, was vocal about “emphasizing film’s educational and inspirational value,”¹⁶ in hopes of preventing governmental regulation. However, despite Hays’ voice of confidence, the call for government control of the film industry came from too many

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

sources including the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, the General Federation of Women's Clubs and several Protestant and Catholic groups. Therefore, with critics closing in on Hollywood, Hays needed to publish a sufficiently comprehensive and conservative list of regulations which the film industry would strictly adhere to. To ensure his regulations would silence his critics, Hays worked closely with Martin Quigly, a correspondent at a Hollywood trade journal and a Catholic, as well as a young reverend named Daniel A. Lord. While this relationship was tenuous at best, the emphasis of the Production Code was drafted to limit morally reprehensible material, as determined by Quigly and Lord. However, Hays managed to ensure an enumerated list of "Do's, Don'ts and Be Carefuls" was also drafted as a means to oppose the imposition of artificial moral standards, which stood to inhibit natural and vibrant storytelling that talking films promised.¹⁷ This list included elements relating to the removal of drugs, profanity, and any sexual perversion, but also resolved that care be exercised when treating other subjects like the deliberate seduction of women and the institution of marriage. This gray area of "special care" gave Hollywood producers the means by which they could introduce plot elements that could effectively bend the wording of the Production Code by remaining subtle and intelligently subversive in their depiction of marriage and seduction.

In the years following its passing, the code was hardly enforced, with producers granted the power to green light productions, thus resulting in such controversial films as Howard Hughes' *Hells Angels*¹⁸ (1930) and *Confessions of a Co-ed*¹⁹ (1931). Both films

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁸ *Hell's Angels*, Directed by Howard Hughes (Beverly Hills, CA: United Artists, 1930).

portrayed divisive themes of sexuality and adultery. *Hells Angels* chronicled Jean Harlow's explicit seduction of a pilot which, aside from the spectacular aerial battles, made Harlow the film's center of attention. *Confessions of a Co-ed* was an equally shocking narrative of a young, unmarried college student who is impregnated by her lover and because circumstances prevent their marriage, is forced to marry another man she does not love, only to have her lover return. The result is that she is forced to choose between the two men and is placed in the socially unacceptable situation of dealing with pregnancy out of wedlock and divorce. Both films not only investigated these controversial themes, but appeared to glorify them in the eyes of the MPPDA, giving the organization great concern for the effect it would have on the public and on the youth of America.²⁰ Feeling the pressure of external enforcement creeping in, Hays sought allies within the public and sought to crack down on internal enforcement of the Production Code between 1931 and 1934. These efforts failed to impress Hays's opponents, resulted in the creation of the Catholic based Legion of Decency and saw the MPPDA transformed into the Production Code Administration newly under the direction of Joseph I. Breen. Under Breen, the code finally became an effective tool of film content censorship and arbiter of American morality in cinema. An unexpected consequence of this seemingly draconian censorship of artistic expression would be that the Production Code, even in the height of its enforcement, would hardly eliminate racy humor and sexual innuendo in American cinema. The code soon became a jumping-off point from which the PCA and filmmakers

¹⁹ *Confessions of a Co-Ed*, Directed by David Burton and Dudley Murphy (Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 1931).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

could negotiate the content and delivery of film content, making the Hays Code and those enforcing it part of a living ecosystem. This ecosystem of content experimentalism was one in which producers tested their freedoms of expression by sneaking subtle risqué humor into the romantic comedy genre. The PCA's variable reaction to this humor placed a human interpretation on the Hays Code, which played a fundamental role in developing the subtle, sexually charged, or morally taboo humor which would come to define the screwball romantic comedy.²¹ For example, in the film *Bachelor Mother* (1939)²², Polly (Ginger Rogers) finds a baby on her doorstep and is forced to keep it, with all of the characters believing the baby is her illegitimate child. Many jokes in the film are based on the disconnect between the audience's knowledge and the characters' knowledge of her connection to this baby and are largely jokes made at her expense. The fact is that to entertain the notion of a woman bearing an illegitimate child and to then joke about it without a compensation of moral values was very unsavory for the PCA, which objected to many jokes predicated on these misinterpretations. Producers were capable of coercing censors that the audience is aware of the dramatic irony in these situations and that the end result was not a glorification of the illicit behavior involved in having a baby out of wedlock. The sanctity of film for the sake of maintaining the traditional moral status quo; thus, the PCA could be placated when it believed that end could be achieved, and as a result, Hollywood producers created a tenuous relationship with the PCA censors.

²¹ Jane Greene, "A proper dash of spice: screwball comedy and the production code," *Journal of Film and Video* 63, no. 3 (fall 2011), p. 45.

²² *Bachelor Mother*, Directed by Garson Kanin (New York: RKO Radio Pictures, 1939).

While social criticism of the film industry was a primary force which drove policy within Hollywood prior to and during the years of the screwball comedies, the concurrent effects felt by the stock market crash of 1929 and the succeeding Great Depression would shape the storylines of these comedies and would completely redefine the status quo of social life in America. This era of economic turmoil would determine the hierarchical positioning of women from the perspective of the home, the workplace, and as a result, would be reflected in cinema.

Prior to the Depression into 1920s, women began leaving the home and becoming participating members of the workforce. This led many sociologists to expect that this would lead to the demise of the core family unit, due to the woman's central role as a moral figure in the traditional family. However, according to the National Center for Health Statistics, divorce rates maintained at a constant level between 1920 and 1930, suggesting that the family unit still remained largely intact.²³ The aforementioned shift of economic power within the family gained significant gravity during the Depression years as it became increasingly difficult for men to procure steady employment, whereas several women had increased opportunity in a less-crowded job market. Furthermore, those women who chose to remain at home or who could not get jobs were much less affected by the Depression, as they were concerned with the moral welfare of the family rather than economic welfare. Thus, it was in this economic power shift which forced conflicts regarding economic control of the family, loss of masculinity, and subsequent feminine

²³ U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. *Vital Statistics of the United States, 1950*. Prepared by the National Office of Vital Statistics, Public Health Service. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1954, p. 86-87. http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsus/vsus_1950_1.pdf (accessed February 18, 2014).

power within the household which drove traditional marriages apart and inspired the content for romantic comedies of the time. A poignant representation of this is seen in the film *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) where a character David is dressed up in female clothing, thereby emasculating himself, and as a part of the gag, is overtly pointing to how such behavior would cause one to question his masculinity at the time.²⁴

The Depression would be the perfect vehicle for the traditional family dynamic to be utterly transformed, and would serve as the ideal backdrop on which to create a new social order. Hollywood was acutely aware of the social and economic developments which were occurring during this period, and was forced to respond to the draconian Production Codes. Therefore, scholars generally agree that upon the release of the film *It Happened One Night* (1934) with Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert, the screwball comedy had risen to prominence.

The Genre Defined

In a time fraught with economic uncertainty, the romantic comedy needed to continue to change in order to reflect the desires of an evolving society. The Depression had already forced a wedge into the homes of Americans, but the economic divide would also emerge among class lines in a very big way. Many households still suffered across the socio-economic spectrum, but many wealthy capitalists remained financially stable, securing themselves as the American elite, thereby forcing an income gap between the upper and middle classes. Hollywood responded to this trend by drafting films which both

²⁴Gilmour, "Different, Except In a Different Way," p. 33.

mocked and fetishized this elite American culture, while also reflecting on developments which had transformed gender dynamics within relationships and society as a whole.

Enter Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* in which an heiress marries a money-seeking "King," regardless of her father's protests. The heiress (Claudette Colbert), runs away to meet this man and soon encounters an unemployed reporter, Clark Gable, who she makes a deal with to help her find her soon-to-be husband. Wacky antics and deception ensues, resulting in the unexpected couple falling in love and ultimately literally running away to get married. Throughout the film there are several very humorous scenes, including the use of crude gesture when trying to hitchhike, and finally getting the attention of a driver by purposefully utilizing Colbert's sexuality to her advantage by lifting her skirt and showing her leg. What separated this film was its unprecedented amalgamation of humor and irreverence and romance and wit that was unlike anything that had ever been seen before. As a result, the film was initially panned, the actors were reticent about even participating in it, and attendance of the release was poor. However, as with unexpected changes in culture, the response to this performance changed remarkably because of how it abandoned long-trodden Hollywood notions of romance to create what film critic Stanley Cavell deemed "the comedy of equality."²⁵ In this sense he praised this film for containing a relationship built upon reciprocal desire for acknowledgement as autonomous human beings, particularly in how that granted a consciousness to women.²⁶

²⁵Sidney Gottlieb, "From Heroine to Brat: Frank Capra's Adaptation of *Night Bus (It Happened One Night)*," *Literature Film Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (June 1988), p. 128.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 129.

With the rise in popularity of films like *It Happened One Night*, which won five Academy Awards, the screwball comedy was born out of the ashes of the stock market crash of 1929 and the collapse of the American family unit. What made this genre particularly unique was how it subverted typically held conventions of marriage, gender dynamics within relationships on screen, and female sexuality. While often presented in very comical situations, screwball comedies presented the public with a variety of plotlines which involved divorce as a key element of the story, initially making these films very controversial. Many of these films begin with the two leads either as divorcees, in the midst of breaking an engagement, or pretending to be engaged, generally at the expense of a foil that represents the traditional and tired moral values which have been questioned in the Depression era. Though the initial setup indicates that the protagonists are heading for a disaster due to their irresponsibility and absurd antics, the couple reconciles and marriage is ultimately implied at the end of the story. In this tale, the woman takes an active role in establishing herself as a dynamic and powerful agent in how she participates in the story. In films like *His Girl Friday* (1940), the lead, Hildy, is a top reporter for a newspaper who decides to quit the business and get married for her own reasons and on her own terms. This movement for female empowerment on film was also extended to dialogue, and resulted in the characteristic quick-witted and often subtly inappropriate banter which would be exchanged between the leads of these films that made the genre so popular. What this relationship dynamic and form of communication highlighted was that women had gained access to power in households across America and that the patriarchal relationship dynamic which had prevailed to maintain the previous status quo no longer applied.

Therefore, Hollywood's reflection of how women had changed the balance of power in society began to attract attention, and point to further deconstructions of the feminine image. What truly separated screwball comedies from any romantic comedies before them was the depiction of female sexuality and how greatly it differed from any other time period of American film. While plain sexuality was severely limited due to the Hays Code, the change had come more overtly from a social perspective, granting women agency to pursue men, which to many traditionalists, was still considered rather taboo. This development illustrated a social desire for both genders to own the capacity to determine their roles within relationships, thereby ringing the death knell for couples silently trapped within unhappy and chaste relationships. This also popularized the notion of women as masters of their own sexuality, a notion which ran directly contrary to the beliefs of those who believed that women were sexually pure and should remain untainted by such desires.

Perhaps most remarkable about the screwball comedy was how Hollywood's interpretation of social and economic developments resulted in a genre which effectively united a society under a pretext of fundamental social shifts in American life. Individuals familiar with economic and family struggle were amused by the zany and eccentric portrayal of the battle of the sexes.²⁷ Heavily influenced by slapstick comedy teams like the Marx Brothers, screwball comedies also openly mocked the upper class. Already captivated by the American elite, audiences of all backgrounds adored the combination of the sophistication of high society and the ridiculousness of the foolish antics of these characters on screen. A highlight of this slapstick craziness is evident in *My Man Godfrey*

²⁷ Gehring, "Screwballs of the Silver Screen," p. 63.

(1936) when William Powell places a clothed Carole Lombard into a running shower to sober her up. The mastery of the body language and control in this scene is what keeps William Powell from appearing as a brute or a bully. Instead of acting this scene out in any sort of domineering manner, Powell simply walks Lombard over to the shower as if he had been asked to do it and turns on the shower. The unexpectedness of the situation and manner in which both characters understand of the how the audience would react to such a sequence is what makes this scene so hilarious and so far from a display of male force or violence. This scene is also exceedingly controversial because it takes place in a bathroom, thus further making suggestions of intimacy that traditionalist censors generally sought to avoid. Each of these moments appears to represent a breaking-down of long-held notions of traditional respectability or modesty, particularly between genders, as they frequently take place between the male and female leads.

The Screwballs

Beyond the content and the social demand for this type of film, this genre attracted rising stars who became representatives of a social revolution. The adaptations of their personalities onto the silver screen would give Hollywood the resources to achieve their visions of these films and give the screwball genre the life it needed to truly develop its own identity.

Many male leads stepped into the spotlight, proving to be well adapted to the quick-witted brand of humor, most notably Clark Gable, Henry Fonda and William Powell. The genre did stray outside of its strict guidelines, granting each of these actors an ability

to develop personas which suited their acting styles. However, the actor who most perfectly encapsulated the spirit of the decade and of this genre was a young actor from the slums of Britain named Cary Grant. Both extroverted and restrained in his performances, Grant became an idol of the genre, while keeping his sensibility and humility. What made Grant so desirable was in his strength and gentleness, making him the perfect representative of a society in which men no longer had a sense of place. Cary Grant was an actor who could confidently engage with the newly empowered women of the post-Victorian age, and become a model of civility and equality which would define gender dynamics in the coming years. It was fortunate that an actor as talented as Grant arrived in Hollywood, because in many ways, this genre would be most impacted by the talent and gravitas which the starlets of the screwball comedy brought to the genre.²⁸

Also affectionately known as “dames” in American cinema, these leading women became the champions of the American democratization of power between genders. They would accomplish this by developing a range of expressiveness through speech and liveliness which they brought to their characters, which captured how the social and moral status quo had come unglued. An actress in a comedy genre of this era “could be petulant or confiding...erotically curious or sexually knowing”²⁹ based on the character or face they wished to create. Thus, in this genre, women including Claudette Colbert, Barbara Stanwyck and Katherine Hepburn could often dictate the trajectory of a film because they held every emotional and expressive card. Claudette Colbert in *It Happened One Night* can keep a bus from departing by simply having a stern word with the driver, or can stop a car

²⁸ Pauline Kael, “The Man from Dream City,” *The New Yorker*, July 14, 1976, p. 43.

²⁹ DiBattista, *Fast-Talking Dames*, p. 12.

with a quick lift of her skirt. And beyond this physical capacity to dictate narrative pace, Colbert demonstrates her emotional control of events because she can make the ultimate decision to leave her prospective husband at the altar in the final few minutes of the film once Clark Gable admits to his love for her. A staple of the genre, the dynamic nature and inconceivably fast speaking of these women resulted in leads which genuinely challenged men on screen, forcing actors to maintain the quick pace of wit and conversation. Also, the propensity of women to speak while men were speaking forced the audience to decide who they should listen to, often resulting in comical and very sexually charged conversation. These factors resulted in an American genre of film which was dramatically alternative to traditional tenets of masculinity, granting women the powers of sexual and personal autonomy. In *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), this is perfectly illustrated by the lead woman, Susan Vance, and the object of her desire, Dr. David Huxley. In a scene where the two go golfing, Susan steals David's car from the golf course and chides him, "now, don't lose your temper," to which David replies he is "merely trying to play some golf!" Susan counters by suggesting off-hand that "[he] choose[s] the funniest places; this is a parking lot."³⁰ Susan appears to have a firm grasp of the emotions and the reservations of this museum curator and how to make a mockery of them. In this film, Katherine Hepburn is determined to secure the doctor, arguably on a whim, and because of her apparent control and self-reliance on her sexual destiny, Hepburn was illustrating and preparing the nation for a new model of gender dynamics.

Women, Sexuality, and the crumbling perceptions of feminine morality

³⁰ *Bringing Up Baby*, Directed by George Cukor (New York: RKO Pictures, 1938).

Thus, to meet the demands of a new moral and social status quo, traditional stereotypes of female sexuality and passivity were undermined by the portrayal of the fast-talking, intelligent and sexually independent women of American screwball comedies. Women had long been relegated to utilizing what tradition perceived to be their natural gifts of morality and compassion to maintain the structure of the home. During the 1920s, the feminist movement had gained considerable notoriety by creating an identity for female equality in American society. However, following the Depression, economic issues began to take priority over political feminism as the need for men to seek jobs rose and women's involvement in politics remained static, despite their recently acquired suffrage. Consequently, a demand for a master of the family sphere arose, asking for women to abandon the movement for sovereignty for the sake of preserving the home. The result was the splitting of expectations of women in society, and the divergence of what many women felt that they were expected to behave in American society. This social conflict of what the "modern woman" will look like is often encountered in the screwball comedy, creating a genre defined by both its radically progressive and also conservative expectations of women of the time. Where the genre highlights the evolution of society's perception of the feminine morality in depictions of sexuality, and the economic power which women wielded in these films; however, a persistent conservative sentiment remains in several noticeable ways.

While women of the 1930s witnessed the results of the feminist movement of the previous decade, radical transformation of the perception of female sexuality and its portrayal in American cinema became one of the most prolific indications of a post-

traditionalist notion of femininity. At the center of this new paradigm are the women who were already participants in a shift which had begun in the late 1920s, in which women left the private sphere and developed a culture of their own. While retaining elements of conservatism, post-Victorian women became increasingly open to pre-marital sex, an otherwise still very taboo idea. With women beginning to dictate their sexual preferences and behaviors, popular culture around sex began to develop, granting women agency to choose partners and equality in encounters of seduction. This movement toward sexual liberation was still met with considerable concern from traditionalists as demonstrated by the portrayal of this movement on film. Irene Dunne demonstrated herself as an ideal match for this controversial subversion of feminine morality in the film *The Awful Truth* (1937), while still maintaining facets of feminine social correctness.³¹ Dunne had acted in a number of films previously, each with very diverse themes and expectations for her as an actress. Thus, by the time she played Lucy Warriner in *The Awful Truth*, she had an acute awareness of expectations of social correctness, and utilizing this knowledge, completely dismantled it by gracefully, yet comically, undermining every aspect of her female propriety. Dunne masterfully accomplishes this through a thoughtfully dismissive attitude toward potential suitors as well as the very controversial end to the film in which she seduces the male lead, Cary Grant, into her bed. Dunne embodied the heroine of the screwball comedy and libertines of the era. Perhaps just as telling about the depiction of feminine sexuality is Cary Grant's character who acts as a backdrop onto which the heroine directs her sexual energy. Grant portrays a character named Jerry Warriner, who is

³¹ DiBattista, *Fast-Talking Dames*, p. 204.

a fashionable gentleman and is, in many ways, representative of who the modern man desired to be. As Maria DiBattista writes, this “new masculine ideal [was] one that prized verbal fluency as well as physical or moral charisma.”³² However, elements such as moral charisma took on new meaning in an era where the defined moral code was currently evolving. A gag that playfully implies this attitude is when he asks his sister “if [she] heard the gag that’s been going around town lately – ‘Who was that lady I saw you with?’” to which she responds, “Oh, you mean ‘That’s no lady, that’s your wife?’”³³ Grant suggests his propensity to go out with women frequently and perhaps make a joke at the expense of monogamy and marriage. For Lucy to be interested in a social libertine illustrates a proclivity to engage in a more sexually explicit lifestyle, perhaps a commentary of a development of relationship dynamics of the time.

However, critics of genre point to Hollywood’s expression of feminine sexuality and instead of regarding it as a reflection of an embodiment of the strong, independent, modern woman, “...[saw] it as a comforting delusion more than a clear-cut reality.”³⁴ Film scholar Marjorie Rosen believes that, while these actresses did embody several elements of a self-possessed woman, several were actually exploited as sex symbols and are defined by their sexuality rather than empowered by it. A powerful example is the starlet Mae West, who “brought sex to the box office with nary a passionate kiss.”³⁵ West starred in several screwball comedies, proving herself to be a master of the double entendre and the

³² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³³ *The Awful Truth*.

³⁴ Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies & the American Dream* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1973), p. 154.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

smouldering glance, thereby demonstrating to an audience how to laugh at sex. However, in this constant attention placed on her sexuality whilst wearing costumes often too tight and paralyzing, West almost became a faux representation of the modern woman. West created a veneer of comfort with her femininity, when that was far from the truth, and in her attempt to trademark her character, she ended up at the opposite end of the spectrum.³⁶ Rosen points toward a greater potential flaw in the representation of women during this period of time by suggesting that the genre displays them as sort of caricatures of self-possessed and empowered women. Mae West had, in fact, thoroughly studied a 1927 play about transvestites called *The Drag*, from which she drew her inspiration to purr and pout in an almost superficial way. This effect also extended into her dialogue as well, as evidenced by a notable quote from the 1936 film *Klondike Annie*. With very little sexual reservation and very overt innuendo, West states that “Between two evils, I generally like to pick the one I never tried before.”³⁷ In comparison to attempts at seduction from her peers, which largely were restricted to stolen lustful glances and a near kiss for the majority of the film, this came across as rather unrealistic and overstated. I argue that in order to effectively reflect how feminist movements had taken hold in a palatable tone while also openly mocking traditional notions of femininity, female ridicule of sexuality and the utilization of innuendo were the perfect tools in a comedy setting to echo this social reality.

³⁶ Rosen, *Popcorn Venus*, pp. 153-154.

³⁷ *Klondike Annie*, Directed by Raoul Walsh (Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 1936).

Women of this era also redefined how much economic power they controlled on a personal level in an evolving economic atmosphere that existed during the Great Depression, and screwball comedies also went to many lengths to reflect this. During the 1920s, women had been steadily gaining access to desirable jobs and by 1930, over 10,000,000 had entered the workforce.³⁸ While in the coming years these numbers would dramatically decrease, men also felt the effects of the Depression, many of whom lost the patriarchal dominance that being the only provider for the family offered. Screwball comedy films generally reflected this in an exaggerated manner by frequently having the lead female role be the primary source of income of the relationship. In the case of *My Man Godfrey*, Carole Lombard is a part of a very wealthy family who meets the male lead (William Powell) and offers to employ him. Not only does Lombard utilize this dynamic to gain leverage in their relationship, she also is free to pursue him and make advances with the confidence that she has gotten him. The relationship between these two demonstrates that there are many households within the United States during this time in which women are becoming a dominant force in many respects.

Perhaps what traditionalists feared most about this sexual independence was how it opposed the traditionally held belief that women were morally and sexually pure, leaving men to contain their base and impure passions. While men struggled to fight these passions, “the cult of pure womanhood” placed this morally and sexually pure woman on a metaphorical pedestal.³⁹ The most glaring example of this was evident in the scene of Frank Capra’s *It Happened One Night*, when the two leads are sharing the small cabin and

³⁸ Rosen, *Popcorn Venus*, p. 134.

³⁹ Glitre, “The Same, But Different,” p. 3.

Clark Gable is hidden on one half of the room, presumably undressed, continually singing “Who’s afraid of the big bad wolf?” Gable perhaps intends this to be an innocent gesture to tease a sheltered heiress who has never spent the night with a man, even when they have a makeshift wall separating them, but it comes across as incredibly suggestive that he could conceivably submit to his “inner wolf” at any moment. As female sexuality became increasingly acceptable in the 1920s and 1930s, this sentiment of female purity still remained, even amongst advocates of female sexuality.

A leader in the birth control movement named Barbara Sanger “was concerned primarily with women’s vulnerability to unrestrained masculine passion and the perils of excessive child bearing...”⁴⁰ Sanger’s statement carried two powerful messages with it which give a powerful indication of the cultural landscape during this time. As an advocate of birth control, and with birth control being such a new phenomenon to arrive in the United States that can be closely linked to women’s sexual liberation, Sanger clearly had an agenda which was in support of gender equity and feminine self-determinism. However, in stating that she still feared for women’s subjugation to the ravages of masculine passion, and the high potential for excessive child bearing, Sanger seemed reluctant to abandon beliefs of masculine dominance and female purity, thereby doing little to subvert the status quo on any meaningful level. In so doing, she implied that even believers in the women’s equality movement shared a lingering sense that perhaps women are vulnerable to men’s desires and morally pure as society wanted to believe they were. In an attempt to reconcile this and reintroduce order back into a seemingly eroding social system, individuals

⁴⁰ Gilmour, “Different, Except In a Different Way,” p. 28.

associated with the University of Chicago, School of urban sociology suggested that companionate marriage with access to birth control, availability to mutual consent divorce, and marriage counseling would be much more effective.⁴¹ This struck most as a means by which sociologists could introduce solutions to an already existing problem, which they no longer could contain within the realm of a morally sound notion of femininity. By building a system to maintain companionate marriages, perhaps it was feasible that relationships could be stabilized and social order be restored.

Marriage: A Bond Rebranded

However, the most revolutionary social developments that underlined the decade and became the defining elements of the screwball comedy were the ways in which these transformations in gender paradigms resulted in a completely new model for marriage. Considered to be the most traditional institution, a Victorian marriage bore with it the modesty and propriety that frowned upon sexuality outside of procreation, limited displays of romance, and promoted a patriarchal power dynamic with separate spheres of influence in the house. Ludwig Lewisohn, contemporary writer of the time, compared monogamous marriage in 1925 to putting on a shirt or coat that must be worn forever despite it being ill-fitting or unclean or even dangerous.⁴² Because of traditional moral standards, divorce was considered either incredibly taboo or sinful; therefore, many felt it had become a trap for a number of reasons. During the 1920s, the life of industrialized cities and pop culture began to inform couples that their sexless marriages could, in fact, involve sex outside of

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴² Lewisohn, "Love and Marriage," pp. 198-199.

procreation, particularly with the proliferation of birth control in the 1920s. Furthermore, the Great Depression resulted in severe conflict amongst couples, as mass unemployment greatly affected the economic power dynamic and therefore patriarchal mastery, of the home.⁴³ Both of these developments resulted in increased gender equity and sexual freedom for women, but they also resulted in a dramatic rise in divorces over a short time period of time. Disillusioned by the current state of marriage and enticed by the notion of potential romance, Americans began to seek divorces at a rapid rate, with divorces doubling between 1910 and 1940.⁴⁴ From these traditional marriages of institutional moral values arose a new brand of marriage which resonated with a new generation of Americans.

This new brand of marriage would demolish old notions of moral propriety by embracing romantic desires and modern notions of gender equity; however, popular culture would reflect that heterosexual marriage remained a standard scaffold for this new relationship. Thus, American culture would both remain rooted in an inherently conservative institution, but would tread new moral ground which moved beyond sustaining a family and championed desire and ultimately the elusive promise of love. This prompted the evolution of the “remarriage comedy” storyline which defined the screwball genre.

⁴³ David R. Shumway, “Screwball Comedies: Constructing Romance, Mystifying Marriage,” *Cinema Journal* 30, no. 4 (summer, 1991), p. 8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

To represent this evident tension between these desires and the ultimate result of relationships ending in marriage, Hollywood wove narratives of broken engagements, an unlikely and madcap relationship, culminating in the eventual promise of remarriage. To the screwball world, marriage was no longer a confinement, nor a simply moral and respectable institution. Marriage had become an institution which society felt comfortable with making the object of farce and Hollywood could not pass up the opportunity to exploit.

Marriage is depicted as farce in the central plot of every screwball comedy film by creating situations in which the couple pretends they are not married (*The Palm Beach Story*, 1942)⁴⁵, or the couple pretends that they are married (*If Only You Could Cook*, 1935)⁴⁶, or that engagements can be broken at will (*My Man Godfrey*, 1936).⁴⁷ In every variant of these themes, marital infidelity and madcap misadventures define the characters' behavior, pointing toward a desire for freedom from moral restraint and judgment ubiquitous in contemporary society. However, this gleeful and zany romp often reveals its true dual nature at the end of the film, when social convention, along with the Production Code, dictates that the film should end with the implication of a "happily ever after" type ending. In the phrasing of the Hays Code, "The sanctity of the institution of marriage and

⁴⁵ *The Palm Beach Story*, Directed by Preston Sturges (Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 1942).

⁴⁶ *If You Only Could Cook*, Directed by William A. Seiter (Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures, 1935).

⁴⁷ *My Man Godfrey*, Directed by Gregory La Cava (Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 1936).

the home shall be upheld.”⁴⁸ To those drafting the code, this also meant maintaining the sanctity of marriage as an institution from a sexual perspective; however, from the developing social perspective, a stable marriage was still part of their relevant world view, while sexual repression was not. What was so subversive about how Hollywood chose to represent these “happily ever after” moments was very telling about the society’s attitude toward marriage and how women’s roles would be redefined within it. The end of *It Happened One Night* (1934) excellently illustrates the transformation of the morality of marriage and ultimately represents how tradition becomes replaced by romance and the acceptance of sexuality. In the film, the characters Peter and Ellen highlight the limits of their developing romance through stolen fanciful glances and limited physical contact. However, a scene in the film implicates the depth of their desire when they are sleeping together separated by the “Walls of Jericho,”⁴⁹ or simply a blanket hung up between their beds, as a means of suggesting metaphorical adultery as well as chastity. On both sides of this wall, the pair respectively undress and prepare for bed, with the sexual tension present in the room utterly palpable. The scene references the bible story in which the Israelites surround the city of Jericho and use a horn to topple the wall separating them from the city. This metaphor serves as an exemplary representation of the paradox presented the film in which social morality as well as the Hays Code stated that adultery could not be condoned, which included the scandalous sharing of a room between two unmarried individuals. However, this scene captures the social deference to the abhorrence of this behavior, while

⁴⁸ The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930.

<http://www.artsreformation.com/a001/hays-code.html> (accessed April 30, 2013).

⁴⁹ Shumway, “Screwball Comedies,” p. 11.

at the same time, destroying its true intent by framing it in a scene wrought with sexuality and indirect form of chaste adultery. This paradox seemed to effectively parallel the contradictory conclusions which were being made regarding the effect these desires and social evolutions had on the morality of American society.

To illustrate how female empowerment and freedom of sexuality was the critical element which permitted this reimagination of the institution of marriage, Hollywood skillfully crafted stories in which women and their own personal desires were frequently the catalysts for the story's plot. Stories like *His Girl Friday* begin with Barbara Stanwyck demonstrating that she (as Hildy) will be the individual who will be dictating the course of the events of the film as soon as she enters the room in the first scene. In a matter of moments, Stanwyck declares her intentions to marry a man named Bruce (Ralph Bellamy), who she utterly emasculates on a regular basis, and that she means to bow gracefully from the newspapering businesses in lieu of pursuing a family life. Thus enters her ex-husband Cary Grant, and while she does become involved in a dangerous change of heart which results in her ultimate romance with her ex-husband, at no point does Stanwyck lose any sense of control of her destiny or emotional sense. After being jailed a number of times and finally being fed up with Hildy's disinterest in him, Bruce declares that he is going to leave for home. Meanwhile, Hildy essentially just decides that she isn't interested in Bellamy anymore and breaks off the engagement to continue following her news story and ultimately marry Walter instead. This creates the opportunity to give viewers a glimpse of what relationships and marriages have the potential to be in a post-Victorian age. With Barbara Stanwyck representing the self-possessed, confident and sexually independent

woman opposite Cary Grant's fashionable, intelligent yet gentle demeanor, films like *His Girl Friday* sought to suggest that the viability of marriage was still greatly intact and was, in fact, revitalized by women's new social standard of morality, sexuality, and individuality.

Scholars such as Gilmour still largely criticize this genre because while the women of these genres are often quite progressive, the defining feature of nearly every female character is that their romances, or the pursuit of one, become their entire lives.⁵⁰ This legacy of romantic single-mindedness has evidently continued for the majority of romantic comedy history. Films like *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993)⁵¹ and *You've Got Mail* (1998)⁵² both feature Meg Ryan as a character who is defined by her infatuation with a love story she heard on a radio show or relationship with her pen-pal respectively. An exception to this rule is evident in a film like *Something's Gotta Give* (2003), which features Diane Keaton and Jack Nicholson as both financially successful and charmingly witty equals. The comical, zany, and endearing romance that evolves greatly echoes the screwball comedies of the 1930s and early 1940s and was universally acclaimed, making the style one that resonates with a society that has experienced the effects of movements in the screwball era.⁵³ Even to the most self-driven woman who is working as a respected reporter, Hildy Johnson's only desire through *His Girl Friday* is to leave the industry and get married. Only a few minutes into her exchange with her ex-husband she resolutely

⁵⁰ Gilmour, "Different, Except In a Different Way," p. 36.

⁵¹ *Sleepless in Seattle*, Directed by Nora Ephron (Culver City, CA: TriStar Pictures, 1993).

⁵² *You've Got Mail*, Directed by Nora Ephron (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., 1998).

⁵³ Kelli Marshall, "Something's Gotta Give and the classical screwball comedy," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 37, no. 2 (spring 2009), p. 9.

states, "I am getting married and [getting] far away from newspapers as I can get," only to continue, "I want to go where I can be a woman." This apparent contradiction appears to suggest a decline in women's independence or social equity by indicating that society is clinging to notions of separate social spheres and that women are limited to traditional social spheres. Perhaps in this allegation, scholars like Heather Gilmour direct their attention to the plot elements which implicate social regression rather than development, such as those which suggest female leads focused their attention on marriage rather than their own individual empowerment, perpetuating notions of traditional gender roles. However, women in these films are uniquely a reflection of feminism and progressive notions of femininity because they were often the agents of the decisions to marry, often possessing far more economic and sexual resource than their male counterparts. This creates a dynamic which does ultimately result in marriage, but it is on their terms and once entering a relationship, it is one of partnership and mutual romance.

A Genre Revered

The era of the screwball comedy was one of significant social evolution of gender dynamics and sexuality, and as a result, held witness to the social transition to the post-Victorian age. Women were granted freedom from the fetters of an established feminine moral code, and in this restructuring of power dynamics between genders, a new rebranded model for marriage was born. Through these social transformations, Hollywood met social demand for a genre which mocked the socially upright while reflecting the modern definitions of marriage and romance and sexuality, creating a genre of farce and social contradiction. These contradictions were powered by progressive cultural forces which

called for women's sexual and social equity, while conservative forces desired a return to the female cult of feminine morality in a post-Victorian, mid-Depression society. While the elements of conservatism in the genre underscore the final radical expression of female empowerment which runs throughout these films, the regular mocking of these traditional themes and the constant subversion of censors to communicate potentially contentious or explicit ideas is very telling about the genre. Hollywood was acutely aware of who their audience was and what the future held for the cult of feminine morality. Conservative themes became showpieces for ridicule and with a laugh, the screwball comedy pointed toward the future of women's equality as well as the modern marriage.

The significance of this genre resonates amongst scholars and fans alike because of what it represented to a society and how it directly affected a society's perception of their own moral values. With the attempts to censor material being emitted from Hollywood in a collaborated effort for the first time, this represented an age in which there was a firm belief that film had the power to institute or facilitate social evolutions. American society had shown its movement toward women's emancipation and moral self-determination for a number of years, as well as a desire to emerge from under restrictive Victorian sensibilities, but with a widespread art medium to capture those sentiments could illustrate these desires and undermine efforts to combat them. Not only does this set a precedent for film as an incredibly powerful medium for communicating social change, it is also a medium which is perfect for visually illustrating the variety of sources that contribute to conflicts that result from these developments. This results in compelling and complex

storytelling which is capable of making overt social or political statements, while remaining subtle and intelligent.

While the screwball romantic comedy was revolutionary during its time, the utilization of sharp banter and biting criticism of established social standards only would last as long as there was an audience to rally around it. The Depression made an excellent backdrop on which these narratives could be painted in Hollywood films and during this time, American society had no option but to look at itself and the social change that the Depression brought. However, with the outset of World War II, American wartime films reigned supreme, and the time of the screwball comedy had come to an end. In the modern era, romantic comedies frequently contain a number of similar elements that the old screwball films had, including scenes of physical comedy, relatively witty banter, and often placing the woman in a setting of sexual empowerment. For example, In the film *Notting Hill*⁵⁴(1999), Julia Roberts turns out to be a very successful and attractive film star, while Hugh Grant plays an average, bumbling and lovestruck man who ends up somehow befriending this woman because he seems to strike her fancy. On the surface, one suspects that she is simply dragging him along emotionally, and the film dramaticizes that significantly, only to end in a finale where Julia Roberts gets up in front of the public and says that she is quitting filmmaking to get married to this dopey pink-shirted man. The implication is that love triumphs and that Julia Roberts had the personal agency to make the decision to quit her career. However, considering the trajectory of the plot, I argue that audiences have become too accustomed to a typical happy ending , regardless of how

⁵⁴ *Notting Hill*, Directed by Roger Michell (Universal City, Universal Pictures, 1999).

improbable the events have been which led them there. Films like *Something's Gotta Give* certainly subvert this trend and don't fall prey to the same traps that other films of the genre do; however, despite the acclaim of these films, many more typical romantic comedies are released that fall prey to these traps.

It is unlikely that the genre can ever look like what it did in the Depression era because the screwball comedy was both the result of a particular era, and was a way to reflect a particular representation of society on the audience of the 1930s. In an era which followed the women's suffrage movement and was during the Great Depression, women's independence and sexuality were major topics in society. In modern society, we see romantic comedies like Judd Apatow's *Knocked Up*, which looks beyond the comedy of infidelity and chronicles the authentic challenges in a relationship between a young couple who accidentally conceive a child.⁵⁵ With modern society making sexuality so explicitly entertaining, we may likely see the development of romantic comedies which increasingly emphasize sexuality, but in a far more overt and explicit manner. However, film enthusiasts can always look back to the screwball comedies of the 1930s and 1940s and relive the golden age of the romantic comedy.

⁵⁵ *Knocked Up*, Directed by Judd Apatow (Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2007).

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