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The Modern Mr. Darcy: An Analysis of Leading Men
in Contemporary Romantic Comedy Film

Amanda Rebekah Roskelley

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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Benjamin Thevenin

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ABSTRACT

The Modern Mr. Darcy: An Analysis of Leading Men in Contemporary Romantic Comedy Film

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Master of Arts

This thesis is an observation and analysis of male performance in romantic comedy films released between 2005 and 2015. As a lasting genre, rom-com, like all forms of media, has the potential to influence society. Gender plays a vital role in the generic template of these films. Because women are the dominant consumers of this genre, what they observe as gender performance is important. This genre has been dissected under the eye of feminism and female gender performance but the changes in masculinity have been largely overlooked.

This paper identifies common characteristics in leading men of this decade's rom-coms. After establishing the roles that gender, and men specifically, have played in the historical establishment of the genre, the modern man is proven to be significantly different than his predecessors. This research has identified three common facets of the modern leading man that are in stark contrast to the portrayals of the past: he is emotionally vulnerable, he is pointedly tender and domestic, and he is a strong proponent of the romantic relationship throughout the film. In response to the more autonomous and career-driven female leads of these modern films, the men have filled the genre-necessary void of domestic nurturers. This is seen through actions and characteristics such as their artistic careers, interactions with children, and commitment to the relationship.

Keywords: film, romance, romcom, gender, masculinity, film history, film genre

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Chapter One: An Introduction and Review of Literature.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Genre and Gender.....	6
A History of the Genre.....	9
Early Talkies, before 1933.....	9
Screwball Comedies, 1934-1942.....	10
World War II, 1942-1946.....	12
Post World War II, 1947-1953.....	13
Sex Comedies, 1953-1966.....	14
Counter Culture, 1967-1976.....	16
Nervous Romance, 1977-1987.....	17
Reaffirmation of Romance, 1986-1996.....	19
Grotesque and Ambivalent, 1996-2005.....	22
Contemporary, 2005 – present.....	23
Chapter Two: Research and Observations.....	25
Hitch.....	31
The Proposal.....	37
The Holiday.....	39
Music and Lyrics.....	39
Just Like Heaven.....	42
No Reservations.....	45
(500) Days of Summer.....	47
Observations.....	47
Chapter Three: Two In-Depth Analysis Examples.....	49
The Holiday.....	51
Graham.....	51

Miles	56
(500) Days of Summer	61
Chapter Four: Conclusion and Discussion of Further Research.....	70
Conclusion.....	70
What Men Want	71
How Men Are.....	72
Suggested Implications	74
Influence on Society	74
Influence from Society	75
Further Research	76
Bibliography	78
Filmography.....	83

Chapter One: An Introduction and Review of Literature

Introduction

“I am single because, apparently, the only good men are fictional.” Jane, the protagonist of the 2011 Sundance audience favorite, *Austenland*, wholeheartedly believes her declaration. It is her infatuation with the fictional Mr. Darcy that leads her to spend several weeks on a Jane Austen role-playing vacation meant to rid her of her distracting obsession with fictional men. This film directly addresses the concern that fictional portrayals of men, especially in romantic roles, is affecting the expectations women have for the real men in their lives. Navigating the world of dating and love in the twenty-first century is difficult enough without the added pressure of fulfilling an unrealistic template. Concern over presenting the perfectly constructed dating profile or selecting the most “right-swipe-able look” for your Tinder account often leads to disappointing results, and a slew of singles more interested in one night stands than the potential of a lasting relationship.

While this may not be a universal experience, it’s a trend I’ve noticed in my single friends and even in myself. In *While You Were Sleeping* (1995), Bill Pullman’s character is, perhaps, the perfect man. Jack is sweet, funny, attentive, and totally in love with Sandra Bullock’s Lucy. If only I could find a man like that! Jane, in *Austenland*, thinks this same thing about Mr. Darcy. It’s only after she’s offered a fictional version of her dream does she realize that what she wants more than her fantasy is “...something real.” (*Austenland*, 2011).

What is this real man, though? Are there men in reality who have the same traits as a Jack or a Mr. Darcy? Are men falling short of their potential, or are movies setting

impossible, unobtainable standards? What are these standards, and how have they changed over time?

One of the most prolific and enduring genres in the history of film is the romantic comedy (Grindon, 64). Vilkomerson and Breznican, writers for *Entertainment Weekly*, explain that the genre remains popular because "... relationships are the one subject that everyone knows something about" (1). Romantic comedies, or rom-coms, are light-hearted comedies whose main focus is on the relationship of a couple. Because of this simple and far-reaching definition, many of the early silent films, including those of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and their contemporaries, are technically examples of the prevalence of this genre. Classics such as *City Lights* (1931), *The General* (1926), and *Trouble in Paradise* (1932) all work comedy and romance together to create some of the earliest rom-coms. As its own entity, unique from slapstick or drama, the rom-com genre in Hollywood began with screwball comedies of the 1930s. If media is a reflection of our society, then romantic comedy films can be observed as an indication of the current state of relationships (Krutnik, 57-58). Just as important as the way society influences media is how media informs our society (Perse, 3). Because of this, the content of films has been studied for decades (Grant, 15). The genre of romantic comedy is no exception, being analyzed within the framework of feminism and gender performance, for example (Dowd, Schreiber, Abbott). How men are portrayed in this genre, however, has been largely overlooked. Scholars such as John Alberti and James Dowd have examined the decline of romance and, thus, the changing role of men in the genre, but have neglected an analysis of the portrayal of these male characters.

Because of the influence media has on society, the way genders are depicted in films becomes significant. As a genre created for a predominantly female viewership, romantic comedies' portrayal of masculinity may create an impossible standard for actual men to achieve in their relationships. Or is it more accurate to say that the changing representations of men in film are more heavily influenced by the society around them? This concern led me to the specific question of exactly *how* are men portrayed in this genre; as a realistic reflection of reality, or as an impossible fantasy meant to appeal to female viewers?

John Alberti's *Masculinity in the Contemporary Romantic Comedy* explores what he notes as a decline in traditional masculinity in the romantic comedy genre (2-6). Men's roles in these films have been changing over the last 80 years and have been growing away from traditional displays of ruggedness, dominance, and autonomy. Using gender and narrative genre theory, Alberti theorizes the shifts in men's and women's roles in these films represent more fluid and less rigid construction of gender. He believes that generic experimentation in mainstream cinema has "destabilized the centrality of masculinity" (18). Speculating that men's roles in these films are changing, signaling narratives with more egalitarian and less rigid constructions of gender, he asks, "What use are men in the contemporary romantic comedy?" (3). More than specifically answering the question, Alberti uses it as a rhetorical question to pique interest in his observations of a "crisis of masculinity," which he sees as part of contemporary experimentation with narrative and gender (4). He discusses the general trend as symptomatic of larger social changes:

The genres of masculinity in the contemporary romantic comedies can be read as a form of growing pains, of the ongoing pressure to develop narrative and gender genre conventions that connect with the larger cultural struggle involved in the development of a more egalitarian understanding of gender identity and relationships in the United States.

He adds: “Contemporary rom-coms of all kinds oscillate between generic unconsciousness and self-consciousness, between wish-fulfillment narratives that try to disguise their generic machinery and self-conscious meta-narratives that foreground that machinery” (3). Finally, he argues that these sometimes contradictory tensions “reveal the strains of constructing new genres of masculine identity” (4).

Alberti poses a rhetorical question: “What use are men in the contemporary romantic comedy?” Instead of simply answering, this thesis will explore a slightly modified question, one equally important: What *are* men in the contemporary romantic comedy? If, as Alberti suggests, the role of men is becoming less defined and more flexible, how does that translate into current films in a more tangible sense? Recent research suggests that the clear-cut romance story of boy meets girl is no longer sufficient for demanding audiences (Evans, 49; McDonald, 6). While there have always been variations on the traditional heterosexual coupling, like the homosexuality of 1999’s *But I’m a Cheerleader*, or the unclear ending of *Annie Hall*, the frequency and popularity of non-traditional pairings has never been what it is today. Unlike the American musicals of the 1950s and wartime propaganda of the 1930s and 1940s, female protagonists are finding fulfillment in careers and independent accomplishments instead of marriage and emotional stability. Though the genre celebrates women’s autonomy and individuality,

what role has Hollywood and society created and allowed for men in this changing genre?

Before an extensive study of current constructs of masculinity within this genre can be attempted, the framework of the research must be established. This chapter begins with a brief overview of the complex socio-cultural effects of media. This then leads to a brief summation of the history of the genre, from the screwball comedies like *Trouble in Paradise* (1932) to rom-coms of the new millennium like *Legally Blonde* (2001) and *Miss Congeniality* (2000), discussing the major changes that take place throughout the genre's more than 80-year history both in the films, and historically within Western society. These observations will bring to light the significant changes in gender roles, construction, and performance within the history of the genre, establishing precedent for gender performance variation. An analysis of the portrayal of the male gender would be incomplete without a firm base of knowledge in how the construction of female characters has been affected as well, and a look at the relevant literature will be presented. An in-depth look is given to the specific changes in romantic comedy masculinities throughout the years. Tracking the significant shifts in performance of and roles played by men mirrors similar changes observed in Western society. By understanding the significance of media in our culture, becoming familiar with the history of the genre and its likely indication of and influence on our own philosophies of gender, the importance of analyzing the roles men play in popular culture becomes apparent.

Genre and Gender

Claire Mortimer notes simply that, “Genre is about mass entertainment” (2). Hollywood studios and producers use tried and true narrative formulas in order to appeal to the widest possible audience and secure a return on the multi-million dollar investment that is a studio motion picture¹. These generic formulas are familiar to audiences and are plainly displayed in advertisements for the ease of recognition. Having a potential viewer easily identify a film as a certain genre establishes expectations and an understanding between filmmaker and film viewer. This expectation can help guarantee a certain success for the studios, and a certain experience for the audience.

Not every film produced in a genre is identical, no matter how strictly a certain formula is adhered to. What actually makes a genre film successful is its ability to stay true to form while also embracing changes (Mortimer, 3). No matter how repetitious a genre film may appear, Tom Ryall contends that, “Even the most sharply delineated genres include considerable variety” (22). As stated above, the romantic comedy’s identifying characteristic is a light-hearted, love-centered plot. While these films traditionally end happily with the couple overcoming obstacles to be together, even this isn’t a necessary rom-com element. Any film that is produced, and especially those set contemporaneously, necessarily reflects the societal norms of its time (Mortimer, 3). Significant social and cultural changes like women’s suffrage or the Civil Rights movement are rightfully mirrored in more recent films, but so are smaller changes. The state of the nation’s happiness and security, political leanings, and even popular culture

¹ Cost to make romantic comedy in 2007, \$100 Million USD (Investopedia).

dramatically affect the content of a film. According to Rick Altman, “Generic meaning depends on a correct alignment of text and audience. If the text fails to serve as a memorial both to a collective past and to a current collectivity, then it is not fulfilling a generic role” (188). Any genre film, however true it remains to the established formula, will not translate well to an audience unless popular opinion is reflected. Many films within the horror genre, for example, have shifted from an alien-monster-villain focus like *Godzilla* or *King Kong* to the more psychological terror of *Memento* and *Shutter Island*. During the world wars, our greatest enemy was the unknown and the foreign, causing audiences to respond most passionately to the aliens of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and foreign monsters like *Dracula* (1931). With the pervasiveness of melding cultures as a result of advanced technology, ease of communication, and the Internet, our greatest threat is perhaps no longer “the other” but that we ourselves become “the other.” The recent influx of zombie movies, *I Am Legend*, *World War Z*, *Zombieland*, reflects the fears of a more self-aware society. This shift in national concern from outward to inward is reflected in every genre.

Alberti compares the performance of genre to the performance of gender. Much like the flexibility of genre films, the displays of masculinity and femininity are constantly reinventing themselves. Judith Butler argues, “Because there is neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes, nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all (522).” Gender, unlike the biological term “sex,” is a social construct, and, as such, behaves in much the same way as genre itself. Without expectations of what gender is, gender might cease to exist.

In the romantic comedy genre, the role of gender plays a crucial part. Because the focus is on the relationship, the performance and individuality of each character's gender becomes a significant narrative point. Expectations of personality traits, behavior while dating, and even roles within a family can cause contention or create harmony between the two protagonists, and these expectations, as Butler points out, are constantly changing. One of the most significant shifts in gender performance can be credited to the feminist movement. An increase in working and autonomous women naturally affects the type of women seen in movies, resulting in confused relationships of the 1970s such as Woody Allen's neurotic obsession with his own relationship in *Annie Hall*. Angela McRobbie points out that even after the nation seemed to settle into this newfound gender equality, the post-feminist movement of the 1990s forced women back into a position of objectification while appearing to be forward-thinking in films like *Sleepless in Seattle* and *When Harry Met Sally*, where Meg Ryan is an unhappy career woman whose happiness and fulfillment cannot be realized without a heterosexual relationship (62).

While the evolution, devolution, and changes in feminine roles have been analyzed, most notably by scholars such as Laura Mulvey, Angela McRobbie, and Patricia Erens, the shifting roles of men have been largely ignored. This genre, by definition, suggests equal importance of the presentation of both the male and the female leads, and should be explored. These shifts in gender performance can most clearly be seen in this genre by observing the characteristics that denote "masculinity" and how those characteristics have changed over time, as witnessed through the genre.

A History of the Genre

Early Talkies, before 1933

The earliest movies often had a romantic element to them, but did not always make relationships the focal point of the film's plot. Instead, they were gag-heavy, featuring comic bits and routines that served as the central means of entertainment. After the First World War and before the infiltration of "talkies", Cecil B. DeMille and Ernst Lubitsch produced some of the first comedies featuring romantic plots (Grindon, 26). Although well-made and positively received by audiences, the genre was still a sub-genre of comedy, struggling to emerge as an independent category. With the introduction of sound, however, and the subsequent transition of live theater hits to film, the romantic comedy began to gain momentum (Mortimer, 6).

This era proved difficult for the romantic comedy, as well as other emerging genres, as writers, directors, and performers struggled to find their voice. Not only the use of dialogue, but the delivery of lines provided frustration and experimentations for filmmakers. Lubitsch, Mae West, and Englishman Noel Coward emerged as the loudest romantic comedy voices of this early time, but with very little agreement. Lubitsch's films used the pacing of dialogue to infer significant differences between characters while West gave herself the wittiest retorts, which lent a feeling of stand-up comedy to her films. Coward's liberal use of language came at the expense of physical humor, which was a staple in the silent films that audiences had grown accustomed to (Grindon, 27).

The increasing pressures of The Production Code, Hollywood's strict moral guidelines enforced from the 1930s through 1968, also affected the content found in these films (Harvey, 4). In response to the enforcement of censorship, many of these films

focused on infidelity and skepticism about love (Grindon, 29). Some of the more notable films from this era include *Trouble in Paradise*, *Platinum Blonde*, and *She Done Him Wrong*, which all leave their protagonists in relationships riddled with uncertainty.

With the advancement of technology, along with major policy shifts in women's rights, and in a country still reeling from the First World War, a sense of confusion in American cinema prevailed. The medium was still so new that the regulated form of usage was still being developed. This led to experimentation not only with filming styles but also with content. The uncertainty of the nation was reflected in the status of relationships, often ending on a note of discordance or uncertainty, like Stew leaving his wife in *Platinum Blonde*. Men were unsure what they wanted and women even less so. A wide spectrum of gender performances are apparent in these early films, but such performances seem to find a more stable footing as the genre moves on.

Screwball Comedies, 1934-1942

In 1934, *It Happened One Night* was released and ushered in a new era for the genre: screwball comedies. Inspired by both the national optimism from Roosevelt's New Deal and the strict enforcement of The Production Code, these films gave a far more positive spin to romance and marriage. The happy union of man and woman was the ultimate goal and was always achieved. Because these films were produced in the midst of a crippling depression, protagonists were often down on their luck, like Peter Warne (*It Happened One Night*) who had just been fired. The overwhelming optimism often came in the form of a rich woman running from her oppressive but financially well-off upbringing. The happy reconciliation between classes served as hopeful foreshadowing of the American future.

With the threat of censorship hanging heavy overhead, filmmakers of this era found multiple ways around it. The most common in screwball comedies, and a significant factor in their classification, is what Grindon calls “attraction through aggression.” (33). Instead of using physical touch or explicit dialogue, characters would exhibit sexual tension through seemingly insignificant, though thinly veiled, subtext. Far-flung insults and violence, or at least the threat of it, characterize the screwball comedy (McDonald, 20). Stanley Cavell refers to these films as “comedies of remarriage.” As another way to avoid the wrath of official censors, the protagonists were divorced so that they were able to flirt with others and, eventually rekindle their love (7).

The most telling element common to these films is the inversion of normalcy. *It Happened One Night*'s Ellie Andrews is no longer living the sheltered, rich life of her youth, and Tracy Lord's wedding is crashed by Spy Magazine reporters in *A Philadelphia Story*. Throwing caution to the wind or living on the edge inspires both the male and female protagonists to imagine a world different from their own. This leads to a kind of vulnerability, and, because they are both uncomfortable and unfamiliar with their circumstances, they find comfort and familiarity with each other (Glitre, 25). By the end of these films, the often stuffy male has learned to loosen up while the screwball female has accepted that an equal marriage is what she's been missing. The agreement that both are better off together, in a traditional family unit, re-establishes the patriarchal order that had been flipped upside-down at the film's start.

Interestingly, the screwball comedies portray more equality of gender than in the coming films of the 1940s and 1950s. While male characters reflected the society around them by being the breadwinners, it was often the woman who controlled more of the

relationship. In the end, both leads would accept that their lives are better off for knowing each other and, more importantly, committing to each other. Much like Katherine Hepburn and Cary Grant in *A Philadelphia Story*, the two come to the mutual decision that their relationship can work, if based on mutual love and not a societal expectation.

World War II, 1942-1946

With the outbreak of World War II, however, the popularity of light-hearted films plummeted (Grindon, 38). Scripts that were written and filmed before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor did not address war, and with war now an all-consuming presence in the average American's life, such films were sorely needed. Early romantic comedies of the war fell flat as they were seen as offensive for making light of such a serious matter (Crowther, 28). Creating films that took place in Europe seemed risky, but ignoring the war altogether was inexcusable. The 1942 film, *The Major and the Minor*, is often cited as the closest thing to a romantic comedy success during the early years of the war. The romance happens stateside just before the hero is shipped off to Europe. The romance and comedy happens while removed from the violence of war, yet still concludes with a positive affirmation of the war effort (Grindon, 39).

The most conspicuous difference in the genre during this time was its opposition to the wildly popular screwball comedies of the decade before. The equalizing of gender took a giant step backwards and placed women in domestic roles or, even more pointedly, as career-women who give it up for romance (Grindon, 40). Popular characters like Betty Boop were domesticated after the 1934 Production Code enforcement. While men fulfilled their masculine duty of going to war, women were left to take care of the home front. As is made obvious by the universality of *Rosie the Riveter* as both propaganda and

representing an actual need, women did not just stay in the kitchen to fulfill their duties. As men returned from war, however, women were encouraged to give up their jobs and go back to their positions as wives and mothers (Martin). Films like *No Time for Love*, *Christmas in Connecticut*, and the one that started the trend, *Woman of the Year*, show the "...high flying independent woman brought finally and comically to ground by the solid, complacent, implacable man" in direct opposition to the outcome of the screwball films (Harvey, 409).

Post World War II, 1947-1953

By the end of the war, films produced in the romantic comedy genre had declined in quantity and quality due to disinterest and enlistment of the most notable filmmakers (Schatz, 230). The return of men from war-ravaged Europe and the subsequent replacement of female workers led to an identity crisis reflected in the genre. On the issue of the gender divide in the country, Henry Jenkins states, "The separation between masculine and feminine spheres seemed enormous; men felt a perpetual threat to the stability of their masculine authority, while women were beginning to question the normalcy of traditional feminine roles (253)." Hollywood also suffered from declining ticket sales, the popularity of television, and the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings of 1947 (Grindon, 42, Schatz, 235).

These factors combined led to myriad romantic comedies, none of which seemed to set a real standard for the time. Most of the films dealt with estrangement and death, most notably in the unlikely romance between a living woman and the ghost that haunts her house in *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, and the infidelity of the protagonist's wife in

Unfaithfully Yours. The emergence of the femme fatale of this time may have impeded the progression of the rom-com by discouraging love and infatuation.

Gender roles in society were not as concrete as they had been in the past, which did not translate well to romantic comedies of the time. Without clear definitions of what constitutes a man or a relationship, many of these films flopped in favor of genres like film noir, which seemed to capture the emotions of the American public more accurately (Altman, 31). Some attempted to define gender the way it had been during the war, and others embraced the confusion. Hits like *Roman Holiday* and *I Was a Male War Bride* came years after the end of the war, marking the end of the post war romantic comedy and ushering in the Sex Comedies of the 1950s and '60s.

Sex Comedies, 1953-1966

In 1953, the stringency of The Production Code was beginning to relax, due to many factors but most notably by a new and sudden public interest in sex (McDonald, 39). Marilyn Monroe, who had held supporting roles in the post war films, emerged as the most recognizable sex symbol. Filmmakers were releasing films without Code approval, and a controversial book, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* was released, containing shocking information about women's sex drives and infidelity. The nation's relative wealth and security, along with this new sexual freedom, led to an audience who was more interested in indulging themselves (Grindon, 46).

Far from pornographic, these films discussed sex and seduction openly, but never realized them (McDonald, 43). *The Moon is Blue*, one of the first major films produced without Code approval, paints the picture of the typical plot: a man and woman discuss sex and use seduction. The man's aim is simply sex while the woman's goal is the

stability that comes with marriage (Grindon, 47). Instead of working together and forming the equal partnerships found in the screwball comedies, men and women are pitted against each other, often working towards very different ends. The female characters in *Some Like it Hot*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, and *Sabrina* wish for a luxurious and rich life, aided by a wealthy husband. In the end, they marry for love, but the motivation is almost always money, as made abundantly clear by Monroe's big hit from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" (Grindon, 47).

This era also marked the emergence of the "Spunky, respectable working professional who wants to fall in love and raise a family with a devoted husband (Grindon, 49)." In almost direct opposition to Marilyn Monroe's sex appeal, Doris Day guarded her virginity. In films like *That Touch of Mink* or *Move Over, Darling*, Day's characters are faced with the temptation of extra-marital relations but overcome the urge until it is proper (McDonald, 38; Walker, 223). Her self-assurance, however, mirrors that of the seductive Monroe. Both characters know what they want but they use different means to obtain it.

This is the era where Alberti's concern on the diminishing role of men in the genre seems to take shape. The films released at this time are dominated by women and their motivations. Those motivations were always men. Aside from their interest in sex, the men of this time seem to be there mostly in order to aide the woman's story arc. In the end, they are "conquered" by the determined woman and are confined to a married life. Instead of being truly engaged in the relationship, the men have resigned themselves to a married life as the price they pay in order to receive the physical intimacy that they desire.

Counter Culture, 1967-1976

The early 1960s led to the emergence of the Sex Comedy. With the widespread acceptance of the contraceptive pill came the disinterest in overtly sexual comedies (McDonald, 55). Sex was no longer taboo and, as such, was no longer that interesting. Foreign films and more risqué genres were able to recapture the shock value by being more frank and revealing, but mainstream Hollywood focused, instead, on the emotions associated with sex. The beginning of the women's movement brought the institution of marriage into question, leading to confusion in Hollywood of how to portray courtship (Grindon, 50).

The cultural turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s threw Hollywood for a loop. All genres, not just the romantic comedy, found themselves falling flat at the box office. Audiences were no longer content with traditional formulas that had entertained in the past and the confusion of audience responses led to opportunities for lesser-known filmmakers (Grindon, 51).

While the Sex Comedies of the 1950s and early 1960s were, clearly, focused on sex, they viewed the act as a means to an end. Sex was an important step and element in the creation of relationships and families. The 1960s and 1970s, however, observed a major shift in societal attitudes toward sex, marking sex as an end within itself (McDonald, 60). This change was reflected in Hollywood by the replacement of The Production Code with a new rating system that allowed for more flexibility of content. This ability to not only discuss sexual behavior but show it, and show it as nothing more than an act, has led some to question the state of the romantic comedy genre. If sex is no longer a subtext or a question, can the genre exist at all? (Henderson, 324).

Many films of the genre pulled from the past while still utilizing their newfound sexual freedom. *What's Up Doc* echoes the screwball comedies while *The Taming of the Shrew* went all the way back to the 1500s in search of romantic templates (Grindon, 52). One of the biggest hits of the 1960s, and the most successful romantic comedy of the time, was *The Graduate*. It didn't offer a set formula for the era, but did serve as a bridge between the screwball comedies of the past to the nervous romances of the next decade (Grindon, 53). The film doesn't fit nicely into the romance or the comedic genres. The romance is with an older woman and her daughter instead of one age appropriate love interest, and the comedy comes mostly from the discomfort caused by the odd pairings, not intentional jokes or gags. This departure from traditional coupling and exposure of more complicated relationships opened the doors to the nation's changing and experimental attitudes toward courtship, sex, and love.

Leading into the films of the 1970s and 1980s, the construct of masculinity was changing. A large pool of inspiration to pull from in terms of narrative structure also brought with it a variety of gender performances. *What's Up Doc* brought with it a Cary Grant-esque man who had to be corralled into a relationship with a free-spirited woman, while *The Graduate* introduced a confused young man who wasn't sure what he wanted from life, let alone women. This confusion led the genre into the nervous romances of the late 1970s and 1980s.

Nervous Romance, 1977-1987

Woody Allen's pivotal film, *Annie Hall*, ushered in a new kind of romantic comedy, known now as the "nervous romance" (McDonald, 62; Grindon, 54). Films of this era are colored by the significant historical occurrences of the time, most notably the

Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and the ruling of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. The free optimism of the 1960s had morphed into identity politics and created the “me” decade. McDonald points out that it is an obsession or emphasis on the self that is the key element in the nervous comedies (McDonald, 67).

As made evident by the confusing relationships in the era’s movies like *Annie Hall* and *Semi-Tough*, the era is marked by an uncertainty surrounding love and courtship. Not only are social attitudes towards marriage and relationships changing, but the expectations surrounding certain gender roles are also causing unease. Roles in relationships are questioned and tried while the idea of soul mates or a “happily ever after” quickly dissolve. Instead of *romance* movies, the nervous romance produces *relationship* movies, replacing marriage with many relationships over the course of a life (Shumway, 157-87). Sex is no longer a symbol of union but is instead a means of self-discovery and relationship understanding (Grindon, 56).

Gender differences overtly inform these films. It is the shifting gender roles, especially those of women in power, which create such tension and unease for the male leads. Grindon asserts, “...In comedies of seduction from the fifties women wanted marriage and men resisted; in the nervous romance men seek emotional stability in marriage and women resist, guarding their freedom” (57). Instead of being motivated by a need for emotional connection, the men of this era are confused and unsure of what their role in the world is, as they are being replaced in the workforce by powerful women. They are reaching for traditional normalcy by searching for a woman to marry so that they can then occupy the role of “husband” and gain a sense of clear purpose. This

confused and apparently weak man is a source of comedy throughout these films, shedding light on the somewhat abrupt disturbance of traditional gender roles.

Perhaps most significantly, this nervous romance trend brought an element of realism to the genre. The need for a happy ending was discarded and replaced with a variety of possible endings, more accurately reflected in the lives of actual viewers. Still using comedy, the genre had accepted that perhaps instead of love, its focus needed to be on relationships.

Reaffirmation of Romance, 1986-1996

This realist, or pessimistic, approach to the genre came with its fair share of naysayers and influenced the response found in the 1980s and '90s. Grindon refers to it as the “reaffirmation of romance” (60). McDonald refers to it as “the neo-traditional romance” (102), and Neale calls it “the new romance” (294). No matter what name is attached, this era of romantic comedies marks a clear return to the more traditional emphasis on courtship.

Commonly noted as the pinnacle of the era, *When Harry Met Sally* is a textbook example of the genre. Krutnik argues that the film is essentially the same as *Annie Hall*, except with a happy ending (56). Beginning with an awkward car ride, newly graduated young twenty-something Harry (Billy Crystal) and Sally (Meg Ryan) discuss relationships. Harry insists that men and women can never just be friends because the sex gets in the way. Sally believes that they can. Over the course of the next 15 years, the two run into each other at different points: in relationships, married, broken up, divorced. Their opinions on relationships change and develop. The film is broken up by documentary-style interviews with older couples. The interview subjects tell their love

stories, often citing “fate” as a significant factor. Having older couples refer to the past contributes to a sense of nostalgia for a more romantic era. Grindon points out that even these films’ soundtracks aide in establishing a longing for romance of the past. Classic songs like *It Had to Be You* or *They Can’t Take That Away From Me* are covered by artists of the time and set against a 1980’s New York. They also highlight the certainty of Harry and Sally being together instead of perpetuating the doubt so commonly found in the films of the 1970s. *Sleepless in Seattle* uses the film *An Affair to Remember* as a reference throughout the movie, again reaffirming the romance of a bygone era.

While the social impacts and general trends of the genre are more or less agreed upon up to this point, it is the romantic comedies of the 1980s and 1990s where scholars begin to disagree. The outbreak of AIDS in the 1980s served as a reminder of the dire consequences that reckless sexual behavior could have, which led to an arsenal of films encouraging more than just a physical relationship. Instead of having a man be coerced into a relationship like the sex comedies of the 1960s, these films display a man just as much in need of emotional connection and romance as a woman. Working women are an established fact in these films but they still long for the stability and comfort of a “soul mate.” Due to the rise in conservative politics, McDonald, Neale, and Krutnik all argue that this movement was a step backwards for the genre and for women. These films are produced as if the sexual revolution and neurotic romances had never happened, still trying to get women to fulfill their socially appointed role as wives and mothers.

Kathleen Rowe and Grindon see it differently. Rowe cites *Moonstruck* as an example of autonomous women who are not being forced into the kitchen (202). Grindon also references *Groundhog Day* and Andie MacDowell’s position as Bill Murray’s boss as

further proof that the strides made in gender equality throughout the 1970s has not been ignored in this era's films.

The men are often portrayed as successful but still unhappy for some reason. While they may spend a majority of the film convinced that they don't need the same emotional intimacy that the women of the film seem to crave, they always come to accept that fact in the end.

Most notably in *When Harry Met Sally*, Harry tells Sally that after a couple has sex, the woman wants to stay in bed while the man is wondering how long he has to hold her before he can leave. This suggests that men are only interested in sex, nothing more than that. What Harry realizes after sleeping with Sally, however, is that he does want more than that and famously declares, "...When you realize you want to spend the rest of your life with someone, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible." Similar realizations occur for men throughout the films of this era including Tom Hank's almost mystical attraction to Meg Ryan in *Sleepless in Seattle* and Sandra Bullock's pull for Bill Pullman in *While You Were Sleeping*.

Displays of masculinity take a significantly different approach at this time as well. While financially successful and self-assured men are still the romantic leads, this era ushers in a foreshadowing of the more domesticated man to come. This softening and domestication of men can be contributed to the woman's more domineering position in the workforce and in control of the relationship. Tom Hanks as a single father in *Sleepless in Seattle* and a reluctant mogul with obvious daddy issues in *You've Got Mail* opens the door to a man with vulnerabilities, which seems to even the playing field of the sexes.

Grotesque and Ambivalent, 1996-2005

Writing in 2007, Jeffers McDonald clumps the early 2000s with the reaffirmation of the romance of the 1990s. She notes a marked change in the couples' approach to sex: that it's only significant in committed relationships. Which, she claims, is not true of reality, further propagating an oversimplified and oppressive point of view of the genre (98). William Paul, however, disagrees. He notes that films towards the end of the century use these traditional tropes, gender roles, and classical references to undermine the status quo in the genre and bring to light a confusion over sexual identity and a disbelief in the all-encompassing power of love (74).

This departure, Grindon argues, has taken romantic comedies in two directions: grotesque and ambivalent. The beginning of the grotesque in this genre, he offers, is found in *There's Something About Mary*, where vulgar physical humor replaces any semblance of sincerity of heart, and the ambivalence can be clearly seen in *My Best Friend's Wedding* in which Julia Roberts is unsure whether to fight for her ex-boyfriend or let him marry another woman (63). The grotesque serves to distance the viewer from the antiquated notion that love is all you need. By mocking the genre's constructs and the stereotypical roles of men and women, films like *The 40 Year Old Virgin* and *Wedding Crashers* make the audience more comfortable with the let down traditional romance has been, as evidenced by a rising divorce rate. Ambivalence seems to follow in the footsteps of the nervous romances, although with uniquely modern motivation. The uncertainty about romance surrounding the films of the 1970s was sparked by a sexual and gender-based confusion. Women were more independent than ever and both genders were struggling to figure out how that affected relationships. The ambivalence in the early

2000s is used mostly as a necessary obstacle to the couple's union. "With the fading of many of the conventional obstacles such as parents or prohibitions on extra-marital sex, ambivalence often expresses a psychological barrier" (Grindon, 64). This skepticism surrounding love more accurately reflects the views of the audience, which then gives the film the freedom to either move towards love or a less resolved ending.

Men during this time are often slovenly and directionless, especially those in the gross-out comedies. The abundance of slacker films and stoner films creates a man who is not only unsure of what his sexuality may entail, but often too lazy to figure it out on his own. Even the ambivalent films feature men who are not confident in their decisions regarding love and relationships. *My Best Friend's Wedding* features a questioning and almost cheating love interest while *Notting Hill* has Hugh Grant decide not to start a relationship with the ultra-famous Julia Roberts, only to allow conventions of the genre to push them together again.

Contemporary, 2005 – present

I contest that this general trend of the grotesque and ambivalent is changing and can be seen most pointedly in the way men are portrayed. Romantic comedy films of the early 2000s often feature independent women whose fulfillment comes through careers or personal achievements. Leading ladies like Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde* and Gracie Hart in *Miss Congeniality* both have a love interest, but it's such a secondary storyline that it's hardly worth mentioning. Looking at these films, Alberti's concern over a disappearing male role seems founded. What's happening in contemporary films, however, is a shift to men who are surer of what they want which includes a committed, emotional relationship with a woman.

The portrayal of gender in media has always reflected the same trends in society, and contemporary films are no different. Significant social movements towards LGTB rights and gender equality in the past decade have opened society to a much more flexible definition of gender than has been experienced in the past. It has also created a man who is more confident in what he wants, not just what society expects him to want.

By observing a collection of romantic comedy films produced in the last decade, certain trends and patterns begin to emerge regarding the representation of men in relationships. How they construct their sexual identity, or the way the film constructs it for them, can be seen as a clear departure from the masculinity of the past. And this newfound flexibility in gender performance is also reflected in the story arc and motivations of the male romantic lead, who is now much more willing to actively pursue love.

The remainder of this paper will explore a sampling of the genre's most popular contemporary examples to extrapolate the characteristics common to most of the men portrayed. Two examples will then be thoroughly analyzed, considering the commonalities these contemporary men share and what differentiates them from romantic leads of the past. In the end, Alberti's question, "What use are men in contemporary romantic comedy?" is answered beyond his rhetorical comment on their decreasing importance and, instead, shown to be a growing force in the continuation and evolution of the genre.

Chapter Two: Research and Observations

Scholars commonly separate the history of the genre into “cycles and clusters” of similar films that seem to follow similar constructs and rules (Grindon, 26; McDonald, 12). Each cycle is roughly a decade and can therefore be easily identified as “the screwball comedies of the 1920s” or the “nervous romances of the 1960s.” While I contend that there should be a time of separation from a group of films before clear themes can really be identified, I believe that by beginning to identify patterns in contemporary films we can witness social developments.

As historians often divide events into decades and the bulk of this research is being completed in 2015, I have established “contemporary films” to encapsulate all romantic comedy films released in the 10 years between 2005 and 2015. I have also limited my observations to films produced by Hollywood. A broad selection of films needed to be viewed so as to collect the most accurate data. After viewing dozens of films that met the criteria set forth, I concluded that seven films would be enough to display a fair sampling of the genre, but few enough to provide a thorough analysis.

My process of film selection was as objective as I could make it with the limitations of accessibility and data. Beginning with box office revenue, I narrowed down my search to the top 100 grossing films self-identified as, or generally accepted to be, romantic comedies that were released in the last decade. In this case, ticket sales translate loosely into a further-reaching impact. Although popularity and critical response to a film are subjective, box-office revenue is less so. I then eliminated any films that qualify within the recent trend of ensemble movies such as *He's Just Not That Into You*, *Valentine's Day*, and *New Year's Eve*. While unquestionably important and worthy of

mention, these ensemble films muddy the data collection by providing too many protagonists, too many storylines, and too many different motivations to use for this research.

From there I consulted IMDb.com and RottenTomatoes.com to determine the critical and audience ratings of each film. After collecting the data, I concluded that the audience scores provided on RottenTomatoes.com would be far more useful than the critics' responses. The audience being the ones who buy tickets, tell filmmakers what kinds of movies they like or don't like. Based on a 100% scale, I eliminated any film with an audience rating of 60% or lower.

Now down to 24 films, I removed any obvious outliers such as *Pride and Prejudice*, a period piece that has been made multiple times over; *Sex and the City*, which is based on a television show that had clear influences on the film's story, themes, and character development of which I feel incapable of fully exploring at present; and *Knocked Up*, which represents a significant shift towards gross-out comedies with an emphasis on romance, but didn't seem to be in the same light-hearted realm with the rest. With a final tally of 18, I then looked at the films' plots and opted for the widest variety. I settled on a few films with a clear female protagonist, some with clear male protagonists, and the rest with, more or less, an equal status of male and female leads.

The final seven chosen for analysis were:

FILM	Box Office Gross	Audience Rating	Year Released
<i>Hitch</i>	\$179,495,555	62%	2005
<i>The Proposal</i>	\$163,958,031	68%	2009
<i>The Holiday</i>	\$63,224,849	80%	2006
<i>Music and Lyrics</i>	\$50,572,589	68%	2007
<i>Just Like Heaven</i>	\$48,318,130	75%	2005
<i>No Reservations</i>	\$43,107,979	62%	2007
<i>(500) Days of Summer</i>	\$32,391,374	84%	2009

After a simple overview of these films, certain patterns emerge. Upon further analysis, these patterns become clear and definable. The contemporary romantic comedy male character is vastly different from his predecessors in three distinct ways: his increased emotional vulnerability, his more common domestic qualities, and his eagerness for the relationship.

The first, the man's tendency towards emotional vulnerability, is constantly fluctuating and evolving. Historically, the genre has not revelled in men being emotionally exposed. The screwball comedies played mostly with wit and sexual tension without delving too deep into legitimate feelings. The postwar films created a stoic, autonomous male figure, like Rock Hudson in the late 1950s and 1960s, whose main objective was sex, not emotion. In the end, these men succumb to marriage out of feelings of obligation or even a superficial lust that is mistaken for or confused with love. Contemporary men, however, are either emotionally vulnerable throughout the film or

learn to become authentically so before his female counterpart agrees to a relationship. The films of the 1950s often feature a woman, like Doris Day, who wants marriage. She longs for the economic, social, and emotional stability that family life promises. The man, however, doesn't admit the absence of emotional connection in his life. He is after sex and fleeting encounters, valuing his autonomy above all else. A common contemporary trope, however, is that of an emotionally closed off female lead who needs the support and encouragement of the man who loves her in order to take a risk and allow her heart to influence her decisions. In this case, the man is more willing to express his feelings from the beginning. It is almost an exact reversal of gender roles presented mid-century.

This vulnerability is displayed in multiple ways. It can be mirrored with physical weaknesses, or significant traumas in the characters' back-stories. A pattern that is new to today's films is the importance of sex in the emotional journey of the man. While the films of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s treated sex flippantly or as an end in its own right, today's films use it as a way of establishing an emotional connection. Men of the past may have celebrated intercourse as a conquest, but the men represented in these seven contemporary films see it as a physical manifestation of their emotional resolves. The men are more attached after sex and it's usually the woman who tries to play it off as nothing of significance. If used in the films at all, sex is the moment where the man realizes his emotional attachment and his resulting vulnerability. There is often a scene where the man's defenses are down, due to intoxication or an overwhelming emotional toll, and the woman is able to see past whatever walls he's built up. This gives her the

courage to become emotionally vulnerable as well. The information she gleans in these moments leads to the second commonality: tenderness.

Contemporary men are shown as softer, caring, and more nurturing beings who desire a relationship with their partner. The autonomous, stoic, professional men of the post war films, and the self-concerned goofballs of the 1980s and '90s were far more concerned with themselves and their own ends than contemporary men are. The neurotic romances of the 1970s were born from a man's concern about his role in society and in relationships. The 1980s and '90s produced male characters who were discovering their own predilection for significant relationships. Contemporary men, however, exhibit a concern for others that the woman finds endearing. This is seen clearly with an increase of characters being single fathers, having sweet interactions with the elderly or sick, and showing compassion and forgiveness towards people who have wronged them. Their view of the emotional importance of sex is another manifestation of their softer side. This characteristic is underpinned by an increase of men in artistic professions in these films. Instead of CEOs, bankers, and executives, men are writers, musicians, and artists. Their careers suggest an understanding that love and family are more important than money and business. This is not only different from the successful breadwinners of the postwar films, but a contrast to how modern women are portrayed. Women are executives at ad agencies or vying for partnerships in law firms. Their motivations are far more career-driven than the Doris Days and Katharine Hepburns of the past. Instead of wanting marriage and family, they are often fierce and competitive workers. The tender and domestic man is a direct response to the more cynical and autonomous female. Romantic comedies have always thrived on the differences between men and women. As women

behave more like traditional men, with no interest in emotional relationships and a focus on career goals, the men react by becoming domestic, artistic nurturers.

Unlike romantic comedies of the past in which the women were the main instigators of relationships, the women of today have to be won over. In order to do this, the men are responsible for proving their commitment to the relationship. Male leads of the screwball comedies, much like those of the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, would compromise their motives of sex and the playboy lifestyle for marriage and a steady relationship. Love was never what they wanted; only what they needed. It would take the influence of a knowing woman to convince him of her necessity in his life. Commonly in today's films, men want an emotional relationship upfront and they want it with the female romantic lead and no one else. To prove their devotion they offer what I have identified as "the grand gesture." While in the past, sex may have been the ending that audiences needed, their stories need more than that now. The climax of the story arc consists of the man doing something romantic, dangerous, risky, or stupid, usually in front of other people, to show that his feelings aren't temporary. Scenes of running through airports and interrupting weddings are the standard for these climactic moments. This final act, combined with a vulnerable and tender man, is the formula needed to make the two leads fall in love. Unlike Shakespeare's comedies, a wedding is no longer the typical ending of these films. The grand gesture is enough to satisfy audiences that they are committed to each other. In a society that values marriage less and less, it seems cliché to finalize these characters' journey with a traditional ceremony. Reflecting the rising marriage age and rates of unmarried couples cohabiting in society (Dallas Morning News), romantic

comedy couples use the grand gesture and positive reaction to it as proof enough that the relationship is stable, without the need of a legal marriage.

These three elements: vulnerability, domesticity, and commitment to the relationship, stand in almost direct opposition to the men of the past. Stoic men of the postwar films, self-centered neurotic leads of the 1970s, and passive victims of screwball leads of the 1930s are very different, even at times exact opposites, of the depictions of men we have today. To prove the superiority of the modern man, contemporary films often contain an ex-boyfriend who is self-centered, obsessed with business, or unfaithful. The films analyzed for this research all contain at least one, sometimes two, men who portray all three elements to different degrees.

Hitch

Alex Hitchens, portrayed by Will Smith, easily meets the qualifications of the modern romantic comedy male lead. Throughout the film he experiences a return to vulnerability, a domestic and tender side that endears women to him, and proves his commitment to Sara and their relationship with a grand gesture.

Through flashbacks, Hitch's character is revealed to be a disappointed optimist. As a young college student he fell hard for a beautiful girl and is shown as too needy, too desperate for her affection. This "clingy"-ness is what he blames for her eventually cheating on him. He begins his love life completely open and vulnerable. He hides nothing from his first girlfriend, liberally telling her that he loves her and expressing how happy she makes him. These built up expectations are dashed as he stands outside of a car in the pouring rain, watching his girlfriend steam up the windows with another man. Perhaps a little on the nose, this scene is in perfect contrast with the bright, sunny day

they met. Once his notions of love, relationships, and happiness are kicked to the curb, he turns his attentions to the superficial. Keeping himself and his clients guarded behind a set of rules and protocols makes it so that he won't be hurt like that again. Of course what he learns over the course of the story is that it's these exact vulnerabilities that endear women to him and every other man.

The moments where the female lead, Sara (Eva Mendes), feels a real connection with him are the moments when his guard is down and his phony guidelines to the world of love are in pieces around him. Their first date is a disaster. Besides his jet ski running out of gas, and then kicking his date in the head, knocking her into the bay, he finds her ancestor on the books at Ellis Island only to discover that he was a serial killer and a shameful part of her family's history. The date ends with his shirt ripped from his body, stuck in the taxi door as Sara rides away. In Hitch's experience, there are few things that leave him more vulnerable than utter embarrassment. Their second date provides an even more pointed moment of weakened defenses. His unknown allergy to the meal they're having causes a horrendous reaction. Again: embarrassment. To remedy the horrible swelling of his face, however, he drinks copious amounts of Benadryl, rendering him incredibly drunk by the end of the night. Sara even says to him, "I bet you'd tell me anything right now" to which he responds by telling her anything she asks. His answers, though, surprise her. Because of his drunken state it's assumed that his responses are completely honest and candid. When he rambles on about what a great guy Albert is and how much he loves Allegra instead of gossiping about his celebrity friends, Sara knows that he is a genuine and nice guy. It's this revelation that causes her first feelings of love.

Without the influence of heavy medication, his guard would not have been lowered and their relationship would not have formed in the way it does.

He consciously realizes that this openness is the basis of a relationship after talking with Allegra. She informs him that the things that made her fall in love with Albert weren't the steps that Hitch assigned for him, but his dorky, embarrassing quirks. With this knowledge Hitch literally runs to Sara's house and confesses his true feelings to her. Through the peephole Sara observes a frantic and distorted version of Hitch, but it's the most genuine version we've seen the whole film. Through this physical lens, the façade that Hitch has created for himself is removed and he is free to tell Sara exactly how he feels, mirroring the confessions he made to his first girlfriend. The difference is that Sara reciprocates. It's only through his shedding of the artificial that he and Sara are able to form a relationship based on trust and honesty.

That honesty exposes Hitch for who he really is: a big ol' softie. Recognizing his domestic and tender characteristics is what causes Sara to develop feelings for him. His sincerity about Albert's friendship is the most pointed example of his nurturing tendencies. Albert is portrayed as a helpless mess throughout most of the film (more on that later), and Hitch's investment in his success goes far beyond a job. It's so obvious that Hitch's concern is genuine that the issue of money isn't even broached by Albert in their final, comedic, confrontation. Albert points out Hitch's intimacy issues but never doubts that Hitch's intentions for him were genuine. For a brief moment he accuses Hitch of trying to steal his girl, but that accusation is meant purely for comedic effect and lasts just long enough for a slapstick tussle before Allegra assures him of her real affection.

Hitch's moral high ground is displayed when the anti-Hitch, Vance, elicits his services in order to have a one-night stand. Once learning that his intentions are not pure, he refuses to work with him. The misunderstanding by Sara about this interaction leads to their falling out, but when he clarifies the circumstances, it's this ethical choice that solidifies her feelings for him.

Sara is attracted to this lover of underdogs because she herself is so hardened. Her career is the most important thing in her life, even prompting her boss to publicly deride her for not vacationing enough. Her cynicism and career-driven lifestyle are made obvious by her mockery of her southern girlfriend who is always finding herself in unfortunate dating situations, for example: Vance. She expects that relationships will fall apart so she is quick to assume the worst of Hitch. Once he has proven her wrong, however, it is his genuine tenderness that softens her heart.

Like most contemporary romantic leads, Hitch proves his commitment with a grand gesture. Because this film borders on the ridiculous, this grand gesture is jumping onto a moving car to talk to her through a sunroof. He runs to her apartment and gives a comedic yet touching speech about his feelings. When that doesn't work, he forces her to listen by not allowing her to drive away from him. After he's thrown from the car, he tells her that love makes people do stupid things and that it's called a leap of faith because it hurts when you fall. This extreme gesture shows her that he is willing to do crazy things in order to make a relationship with her work. He loses his career, almost loses a friend in Albert, and yet he still wants to make things work with Sara. His willingness to, and realization of, losing everything for her is the proof she needs to pursue a relationship with him.

Although a secondary character, Albert still embodies the significant characteristics of a modern heartthrob. His grand gesture as proof of his commitment is a marriage at the end, but it is his constant embarrassment and vulnerability that endear him to the billionaire heiress, Allegra.

Albert, depicted by Kevin James, is not a good-looking man. He's short and overweight, making him the perfect underdog. The film sets up Allegra's ex-boyfriend early on, explaining that he was rich, handsome, and "...owned, like, France." Unlike most of the would-be-suitors after the beautiful heiress, Albert insists that he's interested in her for her personality, not her piles of money or supermodel looks. As an audience, we are quick to believe him because of how pathetic he is. As far as vulnerable characters go, Albert may take the cake. Our first introduction to him is as he spills his lunch on his pants, attempts to use a soda to clean it up, and then kicks the can all over the public stairs. Unsure of what to do, he sheepishly slides over a few feet to escape the mess he's made. Much like his meal, Albert's personal life is a complete mess that he doesn't know how to deal with. His physical gracelessness reflects the awkwardness he experiences around Allegra. He has asthma, is a terrible dancer, and a constant klutz. Hitch tries to help him hide these seeming flaws but it's these exact imperfections that Allegra falls in love with. In her confrontation with Hitch at the end of the film, she accuses him of staging the embarrassing dancing and the throwing of the inhaler right before their first kiss. When Hitch admits to not condoning any of that behavior, Allegra realizes that it was the unique and awkward parts of Albert that she has fallen in love with, not the front that Hitch created for him. Again, this shows that women react positively to men who

don't hide behind autonomy, perfection or stoicism, but who are open about their shortcomings and their feelings.

Because he is part of a secondary storyline, there isn't a lot of time to develop Albert's domestic qualities. That doesn't mean, however, that he doesn't have them. The most pointed display of his nurturing characteristics is when he teaches Allegra how to whistle at the basketball game. Unaware that she had been teased at school for not being able to, he is more than willing to take time away from the game to kindly and patiently teach her. He is even distracted from the mustard on his shirt when she succeeds in whistling loudly and they are both genuinely excited. His concern for her well-being, much more than his own, is made clear in this one scene, which is enough to pacify viewers and convince Allegra of his genuine kindness and, therefore, worthiness of her.

His show of commitment, as stated above, is a wedding. To a lesser degree, Albert proves his loyalty by being willing, in a fit of insanity, to fight Hitch when he mistakenly thinks he and Allegra are together. Knowing full well that Hitch is easily stronger and more agile than him, he's full of rage anyway. More than to convince the audience of their stability, this scene is used as a catalyst for Hitch to initiate his own grand gesture. It's Albert and Allegra's awkward and embarrassing dance at the wedding that convinces the audience as well as the characters themselves, that this couple is firmly together. It's never expressed blatantly, but it's clear that throughout the film Albert is looking for a long-term commitment and, eventually, marriage with Allegra. His role as a committed man, yearning for a romantic relationship, falls perfectly into the definition of a contemporary romantic lead.

The Proposal

Men don't need to be in love from the beginning to demonstrate these contemporary characteristics. The oft-employed model of bantering opposites falling into an unlikely relationship goes as far back as William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Within this structure, as illustrated in *The Proposal*, Andrew (Ryan Reynolds) wins the heart of his boss as well as the audience with a similar display of vulnerability, compassion, and commitment to the relationship as seen in his contemporaries.

Being in a professional position of submission automatically creates an underdog character in Andrew. When his eagerness to please his dominating female boss (Sandra Bullock) lands him in an awkward position, he is finally able to gain some control. Using the fake engagement as an opportunity to blackmail Margaret into giving him his well-earned promotion, Andrew inadvertently causes her to fall in love with him.

Margaret recognizes more than just her errand boy as Andrew's hostility towards her is weakened. A physical manifestation of the couple's vulnerability is seen through nudity. Andrew prepares to take a shower, unaware that Margaret is just finishing hers. After inadvertently exposing themselves to the other, they end up falling over and landing on top of each other on the floor. The image of baring themselves physically mirrors and foreshadows the emotional levels they are starting to uncover. Andrew's most vulnerable moments are when he allows Margaret to see his father disapprove of his life choices. Andrew's obvious offense at these accusations leaves him wounded and exposed. When he talks to her about the contention he and his father have always had, he's showing her trust. Margaret, who herself learns to be vulnerable, tender, and in love throughout the

film, recognizes his internal pain and instead of exploiting it, sympathizes with his struggles. This marks a significant turning point in their relationship. Not only are they talking about more than work, they are trusting the other not to use the weakness to their advantage professionally.

Seeing Andrew outside of the office shows Margaret that he has a caring and gentle side. Besides the obvious interactions with his mother and grandmother, it's actually Andrew's inclination to take care of Margaret that most pointedly exposes his tender nature. At work it is his job to ensure that Margaret's needs are met. While in Alaska, he takes advantage of his freedom, making her carry her own bags and find her own way around. His aversion to taking care of her quickly wears off. Not only does he revert back to taking care of her physical and work-related needs by procuring another cell phone for her, but he comes to her defense emotionally when she opens up to him and rescues her physically when she falls off the boat and is unable to swim. Without a thought of himself, Andrew cares for Margaret almost as he would a child. Instead of being condescending, though, this helps to fill the void Margaret's parents left when they died during her childhood. It's this fatherly and selfless nature that makes her, eventually, sacrifice her entire career for him.

Both Andrew and Margaret fit the mold for the contemporary male lead. They are hardened, learn to open up, recognize kindheartedness in the other, and prove their feelings in a climactic grand gesture. In an ironic turn, Margaret proves that she loves Andrew by calling off the wedding and agreeing to be deported to Canada. She has given Andrew the freedom to be with his ex-girlfriend and, more importantly, not be arrested for fraud. Her sacrifice is not only the pinnacle of her personal character development;

it's the confirmation he needs in order to reciprocate. He's willing to give up his young, cute ex-girlfriend and, potentially, his freedom to be with Margaret, which he proves by running to the airport. When that doesn't work, he confronts her back in the office in front of the rest of their coworkers. Bookending their story with the opening and closing scenes at the office substantiates the legitimacy of their relationship. Andrew's timidity and Margaret's dominance have found place in the other, surprising all of their coworkers when Andrew demands that Margaret "shut up," and she complies. Realizing their relationship in a familiar setting pacifies not only the characters but the viewers that their feelings are not fleeting nor a result of extraordinary circumstances.

The Holiday

The Holiday provides two examples of the contemporary male lead. Although Graham and Miles, portrayed by Jude Law and Jack Black respectively, appear to be complete opposites, they both exhibit all of the necessary traits to qualify as the modern man. Graham is a single father who identifies himself as a "major weeper," and Miles is a chubby music composer who is caring towards Iris' elderly friend. A more detailed analysis of this film is provided in the following chapter.

Music and Lyrics

Hugh Grant's Alex in *Music and Lyrics* does not fulfill these requirements as blatantly as others might. He is not a single father, a poor artist, or a hopeless romantic. His actions, though, more than his obvious characteristics, show that he is as vulnerable, tender, and committed to the relationship as every other male character addressed in this chapter.

Alex initially identifies himself as a “happy has-been,” who is content performing at venues like amusement parks and high school reunions. He acts as though his fall from fame and his ex-bandmate’s ascension into stardom is of no consequence to him. He admits that this isn’t true, however, when he shows Sophie (Drew Barrymore) his unsold solo album. By admitting that he does question his songwriting ability and confessing how personally he takes hurtful reviews, Alex is allowing Sophie to potentially hurt him as well. It’s when the façade of cocky confidence is shed that Sophie is able to write with him. The song they spend the majority of the film working on comes to symbolize their relationship. Only once they’ve opened up to each other are they able to progress with any depth or significance in their lyrics.

Although Alex claims to enjoy performing in small venues, once he’s told Sophie about his solo album, he’s embarrassed for her to see him performing at an amusement park. He’s obviously upset by how pathetic he appears, especially compared to the huge star he once was. She is able to convince him to fulfill his contractual obligation of singing an encore by recognizing his intense vulnerability and stroking his ego. Watching him admit weakness and being able to help makes Sophie feel good, thus making her love Alex more.

This act of kindness causes Alex to respond with a thoughtful sacrifice himself: he goes to dinner at Sophie’s sister’s house. Sophie is caught staring at Alex as he plays a goofy dance game with her niece and nephew. Although he’s insisted that he isn’t good with children, this is obviously another lie he’s used to build up his reputation as a musical elitist. Similarly, he states that he only has plants in his house because women like to see a man be nurturing, not because he is actually nurturing. But this isn’t true

either. Sophie has no idea what she's doing with the plants and waters mostly the fake ones. Throughout the film the responsibility for care of the plants slowly shifts from Sophie, who is doing a terrible job, to Alex who is able to care for them better than she can. It's not that he can care for the plants that is significant, it's that he does. Pretending not to care about the plants just proves to be an emotional wall he's built up that Sophie is able to see past by spending time with him and recognizing his vulnerabilities.

His kindest moment, however, is when he comes to Sophie's rescue with her old professor. Having heard her traumatic story, Alex is aware of how terrifying this encounter must be for her. When she is unable to give him the pointed and condemning speech she has prepared, Alex steps in and recites, word for word, Sophie's prepared speech. This action shows that not only does he care in this moment about Sophie's security and happiness, but that he cared enough to memorize the speech the first time she told him. Again, his actions betray his indifferent and uncaring disguise, revealing a kind and tender nurturer under those layers of self-loathing and feigned confidence.

Alex's grand gesture to prove his commitment to Sophie is one of the grandest from this selection of films. Choosing Sophie over, potentially, his career, he convinces Cora to sing their song as it was originally written, without the over-production or "sticky and steamy" embellishments she has added for her album. This sacrifice proves to Sophie that he is fully committed and finally willing to put aside his feigned arrogance. The performance of this song is the push that Sophie needs, but to prove to himself and the audience that he's actually willing to commit he writes and performs a completely original piece. *Don't Write Me off Just Yet* opens with these lyrics:

It's never been easy for me

To find words that go along with a melody.

This time there's actually something on my mind

So please forgive these few brief awkward lines.

Alex admits to Sophie that he's never been able to write on his own before. This song is simple and sweet, reflecting the simplicity and genuineness of his feelings for her.

Singing his completely personally written song for the first time in public is a big enough risk that Sophie recognizes the authenticity of the gesture. To pacify the audience one step further, however, the film ends the same way it starts: with the music video of *Pop Goes My Heart*. The Pop-Up Videos-style trivia summarizes how Alex and Sophie met and reveals that they are still writing music together.

Just Like Heaven

David, portrayed by the timid Mark Ruffalo, easily satisfies all three points of the contemporary male by being a widower in mourning. Although it's not revealed right away, his recent loss makes it clear that he is committed to love, he is a caring man, and he is wounded.

The tension between David and Elizabeth (Reese Witherspoon) at the start of their story is misleading on purpose. His cold front makes the knowledge of his tragic past a more significant reveal. Elizabeth, the workaholic doctor, assumes that his anger towards her, his apparent laziness, and his tendency toward alcoholism are simply symptoms of a lazy bachelor. His apparent apathy towards hard work is a personal assault to her determined lifestyle. Their arguments border on, and cross into, the immature with regularity. But no matter how hard Elizabeth tries, even belting show tunes while he's watching TV, David continues to ignore her. It's not until a third party informs Elizabeth

of David's late wife that she thinks their relationship could be more than yelling. She apologizes for jumping to conclusions and encourages him to talk with her about his loss. He is still hesitant to discuss it with her and lashes out. Instead of reciprocating with anger, Elizabeth treats him with kindness and pity. Although he's behaving the same towards her, she can tell by his obvious pain that he's not actually a contentious person. It is this pain and vulnerability that endear Elizabeth to him.

His continued vulnerability is evident throughout the film in more ways than just his response to losing his wife. When Elizabeth walks him through the procedure needed to save the man in the restaurant, he is more than flustered: he is terrified. Rather than feign confidence, he openly tells Elizabeth, and the small crowd gathered around, that he can't do it. He downs the vodka to calm his nerves, and is more surprised than anyone when the patient begins breathing again. He allows Elizabeth to teach him something, or rather, to guide him in doing something she can and he cannot. This exposes his willingness to learn and improve by her influence, suggesting that he needs her. Directly after this heroic feat, however, he passes out at the sight of blood. Meant mostly as a humorous moment, this also serves to highlight his vulnerability. Traditionally a habit of women, fainting at the sight of blood implies weakness. Not only does it add to his vulnerable character, but the fact that it's never mentioned by Elizabeth or David makes it clear that it's not something he's ashamed of. He sees certain weaknesses in himself and is okay exposing them to her.

When he lowers his cynical and angry guard, David's personality as a tender nurturer is unmistakable. The most evident proof of this is in his career as a landscape architect. Short of having children, caring for a garden implies the most nurture one could

expect. The garden he shows Elizabeth is not only stunningly beautiful, it's the same garden she's seen in her dreams, meaning that the two were destined to meet. Not only does he create beautiful gardens, he cares for them too. When he tours the shared apartment for the first time, he finds his way immediately to the empty roof. There are several abandoned flowerpots on the ground, one with an obviously dead plant in it. Almost absent-mindedly, David pours some rainwater into the pot. While this foreshadows David's hopeful outlook in bringing Elizabeth out of her coma, it also suggests that he's not willing to give up on fostering life. Being unable to bear children as a man, David is able to create life in his garden, which mirrors his ultimate role of bringing Elizabeth back to life. Being the creator, or gifter, of life fulfills the role of a domestic and nurturing contemporary man.

Once David's vulnerabilities expose his tender side, his commitment to the relationship is never in question. When they find Elizabeth's comatose body in the hospital, he reluctantly leaves her spirit there. The morose montage that follows shows his regret and depression in letting her go. This is also confirmed when her return elicits genuine joy and relief from David. While the audience is quickly convinced of his feelings, she is doubtful. He spends the rest of the movie proving his commitment to her.

It starts when he rejects the overtly sexual advances of his neighbor. Obviously, sex is not his objective. Not only does he spurn her advances, he chooses a woman whom he physically cannot touch. Although he risks prison and his own safety to steal her body from the hospital, this moment is not the grand gesture. She's lost all memories of him and he has accepted that his previous efforts were all for naught, but he still makes her garden. Before moving out, he transforms the roof into the beautiful retreat she's always

wanted, even without the expectation of any return. This sacrifice shows the audience that he will not forget her or give up on her. When their hands finally touch, she remembers everything and is convinced of his dedication and love.

No Reservations

In 2007's *No Reservations*, Aaron Eckhart's portrayal of Nick fits squarely into the definition of a contemporary romantic lead. Not only is he comfortable with a female boss, he admits his weaknesses and makes up for them by knowing exactly what to do with Kate's niece.

Nick's vulnerability is the least obvious of his traits. Kate's (Catherine Zeta-Jones) first impression of him is as the cocky chef who is running her kitchen. He is loud, funny, and encourages the rest of the kitchen staff to stray from Kate's strict precedent. Viewers are introduced to Nick the same way Kate is, meaning that we believe him to be conceited and arrogant as well. As she discovers things about him, we do too, making the discovery of his kind, soft side a satisfying revelation. The moment of openness that finally forces Kate to confront her feelings for him is when he admits to struggling at the restaurant without her. Although he's told her, and other characters have confirmed, that his objective in joining the staff was to learn from her, she is suspicious. This admission to weakness and flaws, while also flattering her ego, shows her that he isn't the conceited frat boy she accused him of being.

The most obvious trait Nick possesses is his domesticity. Although the job is portrayed as a cutthroat, high pace, and competitive one, Nick's position as a chef is a clear sign of his natural inclination towards care-giving. The thought and care he puts into the creation of his dishes rivals that of Kate, making them perfectly matched and

perfectly at odds. Even when given the chance to take over her job, he is too concerned with her feelings and well-being to take advantage of her for the sake of his own career.

More so than his domestic career, his love of Zoe (Abigail Breslin) is what exposes his nurturing side. When Kate struggles to get her newly orphaned niece to eat, Nick finds a fun way to trick her into eating spaghetti. Instead of treating her like a child, Nick is funny and sweet while making her comfortable in her new situation. While she frequents the kitchen, Nick takes her under his wing and teaches her much more than cooking. A telling montage builds their relationship by cooking, singing, and dancing through the kitchen. Not only is he a sweet friend to Zoe, he is much better with her than Kate is. His natural ease with Zoe is such a stark contrast from Kate's cold attempts that both Kate and Zoe realize they need Nick in their life.

The grand gesture of the film is actually performed by Kate when she quits her job and goes to Nick's apartment to beg him not to leave. Nick, however, has his own gesture as proof of his commitment and love. The restaurant owner offers Kate's job to Nick. Kate's worst fears seem realized when she learns of the betrayal and she forces Nick out of her life. Throwing his insecurities back in his face, she asks him why he couldn't be brave enough to open his own kitchen instead of stealing hers. When she gets home he leaves a simple message on her answering machine, "By the way, I turned her down." The fact that he was willing to put aside what would have been a huge step in his own career for her is something she has a hard time fathoming.

Instead of a marriage to satisfy the audience's need for lasting commitment, the film ends with the two opening a restaurant together. Their mutual willingness to sacrifice for the other, and passion for cooking, culminates in a new kitchen where they

are forced to work together amicably. Nick's residence in New York, instead of San Francisco is proof of his commitment to the relationship.

(500) Days of Summer

The love story between Tom and Summer doesn't end the way romantic comedies are meant to. Tom (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) is single and Summer (Zooey Deschanel) is married to someone else. Just because it doesn't end happily, however, doesn't mean that Tom doesn't still adhere to the characteristics of a vulnerable, domestic, and committed man. He is much more invested in the relationship from the beginning than Summer ever is which he shows through an obsession with labeling the relationship, his openness about his feelings, and his complete collapse when the relationship ends. His career as an architect and rapport with his little sister suggest a kinder and gentler man than the rough gym rats he imagines Summer to be interested in. The relationship doesn't work out and it could be argued that his failings to comply completely with these qualities could be to blame. The nuances and possible character flaws found in Tom are explained further in the following chapter.

Observations

These patterns seem to suggest that while roles assigned to any given gender are not set in stone, the roles themselves still permeate the formula of romantic comedy films. There need to be opposing and opposite characteristics in both leads in order for the relationship to struggle, overcome, and thrive. As female protagonists are becoming more autonomous, independent, and stoic, their male counterparts are adopting domestic and nurturing characteristics to aid in balancing the relationship.

In the next chapter, two of the seven films analyzed, *The Holiday* and *(500) Days of Summer*, receive a more in-depth look at the plot devices, portrayed characteristics, and gender performances. By examining these two films and three examples of contemporary leading men, the three distinguishing characteristics of a modern rom-com man become apparent.

Chapter Three: Two In-Depth Analysis Examples

Romantic comedies are fundamentally films about romantic relationships. As such, the role each partner plays in forming, nurturing, or breaking that relationship is paramount. Traditionally in film, women play a specific role in the encouragement of the relationship. From the screwball comedies of the 1930s to the return of the romance in the 1980s, women have longed for love and marriage, spending most of the film hoping for it, wishing for it, or dreaming about it. These romantic ideals are usually supported by a few friends who encourage the blossoming relationship. The male romantic lead, however, is often stoic, hardened, and disinterested in love. He rarely has supporting characters and if they do exist, they are unhappily married and warning him about the shackles of matrimony. His role in the mid-century rom-coms was usually nothing more than a means to an end. The woman needed to get married in order to solidify her role in society as a wife or a mother and the man was a convenient way to accomplish that.

As evidenced by the above selection of films, these set parameters for men and women in relationships have changed dramatically. It is the man, often the protagonist, who longs for a relationship. Like the women of the 1940s and '50s, the contemporary man now spends most of the narrative attempting to convince the woman that being in a relationship is the best course of action for both of them. Unlike their female predecessors, contemporary men are not entering relationships for practical reasons or because of societal pressures. These men have friends, homes, and careers that could easily fulfill them. What they are missing is the emotional intimacy that comes with what the films portray as committed relationships.

While the motivation and goals of men in romantic comedies is significantly shifting, perhaps a more significant change is happening in how masculinity is being portrayed. Traditional views of masculinity include heterosexual, physically strong, in-control men who value their careers and can provide for a wife and children. An analysis of contemporary films shows that this antiquated ideal of masculinity is changing. No longer are men required to be heartthrobs like Cary Grant or Rock Hudson. While being attractive is always a staple in Hollywood, being a stoic he-man is not, necessarily.

The qualities and attributes found in the male leads of contemporary romantic comedies are shifting, opening a space for more complex examples of gender. Leading men can be kinder, more emotionally vulnerable, sensitive, and domestic than they have been in the past. These aspects of their character produce a much different relationship between the two leads. The most interesting implication this produces is a shift in what constitutes the ideal male. Stoicism and work ethic are no longer driving factors. In a world where women are just as capable of taking care of themselves as men, the attributes more highly sought after are emotional connection and sensitivity.

To establish these factors in movies, filmmakers create male characters whose back-stories are explored, giving them emotional and psychological depth. This insight into their pasts often elicits sympathy in the audience and their romantic interest. Most notably, there is an increase of men who are portrayed as single fathers or otherwise nurturing and caring. Women in these films no longer need a man who can support them financially; they are looking for a man who can support them emotionally. In the same vein, these men are less likely to be high-powered executives or hard-nosed businessmen. Such aggressive careers would suggest a conflicting duality in their characterization.

Instead they are given jobs like chefs, musicians, or writers. These jobs suggest a personality that is more open to emotional connection and less likely to be consumed by work or competition.

To highlight their availability and suitability for emotional connection, male protagonists or love interests are pitted against an antiquated caricature of traditional masculinity. This is sometimes seen overtly in a physical altercation but more commonly, just as a comparison. Their tender differences win the girl in the end.

As explored above, the three clear attributes of a contemporary man; vulnerability, domesticity, and a commitment to the relationship, reflect these societal changes. They produce a far more complex male character and, as a result, more complex films. Two examples that underscore these important developments in the characterization of men are *The Holiday* and *(500) Days of Summer*.

The Holiday

The Holiday is an excellent example to analyze more thoroughly. Both of its two male leads cover a large breadth of circumstances and personality differences while also fulfilling the kinder and more gentler construction of masculinity common to contemporary films. Even though the film is told through the perspective of the female leads, their male counterparts' attitudes towards relationships, and significant personality traits are easily identified.

Graham

It's clear that Graham is extremely interested in an emotional relationship. Even though their initial connection is purely physical, the introduction of Graham's children and the emotionally charged conversations he and Amanda share suggest that to Graham,

at least, their sexual encounters are only physical manifestations of a deeper, emotional bond. On Amanda's last night in the country Graham confesses that he's in love with her. He admits to the complications that their lives offer but he is desperate to try and make something long distance work. It's clear that since the death of his wife, he has been missing the romantic element to his wild sexual trysts. Amanda pragmatically decides that their fling will have to be enough because the effort to make any relationship work, let alone a long distance one, is not worth the risk. She, of course, changes her mind in the end and she and Graham end with nothing officially decided except a mutual understanding of their feelings and their need to be in each other's lives.

Graham is an example of the rom-com man's newfound acceptance of love, marriage and family. He is the one who needs to convince the overworked and cynical Amanda to take risks and allow her vulnerability to forge an emotional connection with him. Aside from his attitude towards love, Graham also embodies many of the new characteristics so often found in the contemporary male lead.

The biggest reveal of the film is that Graham is a father. After a passionate few nights together, Amanda surprises him by showing up with wine and an apology for not inviting him in earlier that day. When a little girl opens the front door, Amanda is surprised, as Graham had previously kept this from her. Her first thought is that he's married or divorced but he quickly quells those concerns by telling her that he's a widower. The nature of their relationship immediately changes. As evidenced by the music in this scene, Amanda sees Graham in a different light. Quite opposite from the charming playboy she thought she had slept with, this news makes him someone that she cannot just sleep with and forget about. Her stated goal at the beginning of their

relationship was to try not to make it complicated. After meeting his daughter she declares, “I think we just went way past complicated.”

The next scene includes his interactions with his daughters, a revelation that he shares something emotional in common with Amanda, and his confession that he sews and he has a cow in the backyard. Starting with hot chocolate, the girls insist that Graham introduce Amanda to Mr. Napkin-Head. This consists of Graham putting a napkin over his face, under his glasses, and talking with a funny voice, adopting the persona of Mr. Napkin-Head. This act of relative silliness is a stark contrast to the sexy macho-man Amanda thought he was. It's this revelation that causes Amanda to feel more for him than just surface-level physical attraction. Earlier in the film Amanda opens up to Graham about how difficult her parents' divorce was for her. She is an only child and felt very close to the two of them, even calling them the three musketeers. While playing with Graham and his two daughters, one of them mentions that they also call themselves the three musketeers. Linking Amanda and Graham emotionally, this simple line changes Amanda's entire perception of Graham.

After the girls go to bed, she and Graham discuss why he kept this from her. He says that because she was going back to the States he didn't want the girls to get attached to her just for her to leave. He then opens up about his confusion regarding his identity as a single father, telling her that he sews tutus, reads cookbooks, and has a cow in the backyard. He's not sure how these facts should, and do, affect his behavior with women. His concern is how to appear masculine while fulfilling the role of a nurturer. His concern, however, proves to be unmerited since it is exactly those tender and domestic qualities that make him a likable character for both Amanda and the audience.

As mentioned, Graham tells Amanda that he's not married or divorced, he's widowed. Of the three options presented (married, divorced, widowed), having a deceased wife elicits the most sympathy and forgiveness from the audience. When we're first introduced to Graham he is drunk and incredibly flirtatious. He kisses Amanda and admits that he kisses strangers all the time, implying that he also has sex with strangers with regularity. In general, this is not a likable trait. Promiscuous characters, even men, are often viewed as cruel, flaky, or selfish. It is only by learning that his back-story is tragic that his current follies are forgiven.

Had he been divorced, it could have easily been explained by his philandering habits. And married, of course, is even worse, implying that he is unfaithful to a wife and unfeeling toward Amanda and his children. Widowed, however, suggests that he is willing to settle down and remain in a faithful relationship until death do you part. It explains his eagerness in seeking out constant companionship in order to fill the emotional void left by his late wife.

Another important plot point is that Amanda can't cry. She admits to Graham that when her parents divorced, she cried herself to sleep for months. After forcing herself to stop, she hasn't cried since and now believes that she is physically unable to show such emotion. Graham responds by telling her that he cries all the time, even referring to himself as "a major weeper." He admits to crying at movies, books, and even well written greeting cards.

When Graham confesses that he loves her and it is not requited, his pain is obvious. Although he doesn't cry at this point, it's clear that he's fighting back tears and pretending not to be incredibly hurt. Compared to his thinly veiled emotions, Amanda

seems cold and unfeeling. She's obviously disappointed to be leaving him, but not as deeply hurt as he is. Her car ride to the airport shows her finally crying and she is inspired to return to the house and try to make something work with Graham. When she arrives, Graham is completely disheveled, eyes red from sobbing. His somewhat pathetic demeanor is enough to tip Amanda over the edge and realize that she is in love with him too.

Although he alludes to sleeping with a lot of women, his first experience with Amanda makes him behave differently than he usually does. He admits to having the "classic problem of no follow through." She assures him that she doesn't expect a follow up phone call or to ever see him again, especially because she's having a terrible time in London and is planning to leave that evening. Their sexual connection obviously sparked something deeper in Graham and he, out of the blue, asks her to stay and meet him and some friends that night. She does and they get so drunk that, although they go home together, they do not have sex. The next day Graham insists on taking her out so that he can get to know her. For him, the sex was the key to a flood of feelings that he is hoping to explore before she leaves.

As mentioned earlier, when Amanda confronts Graham about why he kept his children a secret, he tells her that he didn't want them getting too attached to her just for her to leave. He seems to be alluding to the fact that he is attached and is already dreading the pain he will feel when she leaves. She says, "Right, because I'm just someone that you had sex with once and slept with twice," to which Graham quickly retorts, "I thought *I* was just someone *you* had sex with once and slept with twice." This shows that, to Graham, Amanda is much more than just a passing fling. Amanda's

attachment doesn't seem to be as extreme as his since she's the one who decides to break it off and go home. While she does eventually come to her senses, it's Graham who is emotionally linked to her from their first night together.

Graham's thoughtful and tender qualities are a clear foil to Ethan's, Amanda's ex-boyfriend. Amanda's story begins with her throwing Ethan out of her house and accusing him of sleeping with his secretary. He is unapologetic and quite defensive about his supposed infidelity, finally admitting that... "[He has] been sleeping with her." He mocks Amanda's inability to cry and blames her for his wandering ways, citing her obsession with work and easily stressed personality. That stress is exemplified by esophagus spasms that Amanda occasionally gets that last only a few seconds. During their break up she bends over in pain from a small spasm, insisting that she's all right. Ethan responds, "I know, I was thinking about me." His selfishness and disregard for her feelings sets him up as the exact opposite of Graham.

When Amanda and Graham first meet and she uncharacteristically invites him to sleep with her, she warns him that she's not very good at sex. Although Graham insists that that can't possibly be true, she tells him that Ethan mentioned it a couple times and it has clearly warped her perception of her own performance. The rude and thoughtless remarks by Ethan seem laughable in Graham's sweet response the next morning: "In my opinion your ex was extremely mistaken about you."

Miles

Miles, the goofy love interest of Kate Winslet's character, isn't looking to start a relationship with Iris because he's already in one when they meet. In fact, when they are first introduced, Miles' girlfriend, Maggie, is there too. He is a nonthreatening male

presence that Iris is fortunate enough to have. When Miles comes back to pick up some of Ethan's things from Amanda's house, Iris invites him to stay for dinner with Arthur and some of his friends. Miles is asked how he's doing socially and is presumed to be "a man about town." He quickly quiets those assumptions by proclaiming himself a "one woman at a time kind of guy." This line, though brief, catches Iris' attention. Her only experience has been with men quite the opposite. Miles' monogamy and complete devotion to his girlfriend are refreshing qualities to Iris. He further exposes his support of deep and lasting relationships by proclaiming, "I don't know what she sees in me, but I know I'm the luckiest guy in the world." He is clearly in awe of Arthur and his other geriatric friends who were with their wives for dozens of years and expresses interest in following suit.

Even after Maggie is revealed to be unfaithful, Miles never loses hope in forming more than a superficial relationship. He emotionally supports Iris when she opens up about her manipulative ex, Jasper, and he is willing to fly all the way to London at the end of the film just for a chance to go on a date with her. It's never suggested that their attraction is based in physicality since their relationship was founded while Miles was committed to Maggie.

Like Graham, Miles displays many sensitive characteristics and personality traits that make him more attractive to Iris and are in perfect contrast to Jasper.

Miles is not a particularly good-looking man. Played by Jack Black, Miles is a little overweight with unkempt hair and an unremarkable sense of fashion. His easygoing and hilarious personality, however, are what make Iris feel so comfortable around him. His everyday, or ordinary, appearance doesn't intimidate Iris while she's in L.A.,

surrounded by movie stars and models. The comfort of someone who looks real, and not like an actor, is much more likely to encourage emotional vulnerability and honesty, which is exactly what happens with Miles and Iris.

Miles tells Iris early on that he is a film composer but the audience's first hint at that is during the opening credits. A beautiful score is playing while Kate Winslet narrates the complications of love. It is revealed that Miles is the one playing the melody. This job pegs him as artistic, creative, and talented right away. Throughout the film his aptitude for creating and appreciating a powerful piece of music is repeated. Perhaps the most telling scene between the two happen at a Blockbuster where Iris has gone to rent a movie. Miles comes with her and begins to sing the themes from some of his favorite movies as he passes by. He doesn't just hum them, though, he makes a big show of it in order to make Iris laugh, which she does enthusiastically. While it's obvious that it's a bit of a game, his genuine passion for the music that he's singing inspires Iris to rent several of the films he recommends with promises to pay special attention to the score.

In the end, Miles's admission of love could be credited to a song he writes for Iris. Tasked with creating an inspirational melody for Arthur, he goes on to write a song that he says sounds like Iris. He assures her that he's, "Only used the good notes" and plays a soft, sweet, beautiful melody. The song is similar to the opening song that Miles was recording. The film he was setting the first song to was on a monitor in his studio where a couple romantically kissing could be clearly seen. This seems to suggest that his feelings for Iris are more than just friendship.

Miles doesn't have any children of his own, but the way he interacts with the elderly can convey the same characteristics. His sincere love of Arthur and investment in

his success show that he is kind and open-hearted. Being friends with Arthur is of no direct benefit to him socially or financially, which means that he isn't just looking out for himself. A similar nurturing and caring component of his personality is exposed, as that of Graham's around his children. This is shown most overtly as he runs to make it to Arthur's honorary ceremony after finally cutting things off with Maggie. When Arthur successfully walks up the stage stairs on his own, Miles points out to Iris that, "...He's a rockstar." His sincere joy in seeing Arthur so respected shows that he is selfless and kind.

Many of the antagonistic men in contemporary films and the leading men of the past seem to have difficulty expressing their emotions. In 2001's *Kate and Leopold*, Kate and her boyfriend break up at the beginning because of his inability to open up to her, and his secretive behavior. Iris's ex-boyfriend, Jasper, was obviously not comfortable opening up to her about the aspects of their relationship that he felt were lacking, which is why he eventually cheats on her. Even when he flies to L.A. to try to win her back, she asks him if he's leaving his fiancé, and instead of discussing it he brushes it off by saying, "I wish you could understand how confused I am."

Miles, however, is completely open with Iris even before the romantic portion of their relationship starts. While he is dating Maggie he is clear in his feelings for her, never shying away from a kind word or compliment directed towards her. He is even open with Arthur and his other aging buddies to express his disbelief that she is with him and his commitment to her. When he learns about Maggie's infidelity, he tells Iris everything that he's feeling, even admitting to knowing that Maggie "wasn't good." This allows Iris to tell Miles all about Jasper, and this shared situation brings them closer than ever.

Miles, much like Graham, is a clear opposite of Jasper. Jasper hides his manipulation and control in a feigned state of desperation. He cons Iris into being at his beck and call by convincing her that he needs her. The desire to be needed is something that drives Iris throughout the film, and Jasper's exploitation of her takes advantage of that fact. Iris' story begins at her company Christmas party where she is hoping to get back together with Jasper. She gives him a Christmas present and he claims that he's left hers somewhere but promises to find it eventually. Iris brushes off this thoughtless act and is even happy to volunteer to read some of Jasper's new book and give him notes. He's flirtatious and very complimentary in their conversation and this gives Iris hope. Once outside her office and into the main party, however, Jasper announces to the company that he is engaged to another woman. His inappropriate behavior with her and this alarming proclamation shocks Iris to tears and she, in dramatic hysterics, goes home and books her trip to L.A.

Even though he has clearly hurt her, Jasper still tries to elicit her help in editing his book. He emails her while she's leaving to ask how to get a hold of her, he calls her while she's in L.A., and when she doesn't respond to any of that, he shows up. This grand gesture of flying to the other side of the world is interpreted by Iris as romantic until she learns that he's still engaged and not planning to leave his fiancé. Everything that he does is self-serving, and Iris, with Miles to compare to him, finally realizes that she's better off without him and kicks him out.

Miles, on the other hand, is always concerned about Iris' feelings and emotional well-being. While he's dating Maggie, his and Iris' relationship is completely platonic and he never manipulates her into doing anything. He offers his company and a guide

around town. His ability to read her emotions and react accordingly, while simultaneously being open with his, is something that Iris isn't used to but concludes that she needs in a romantic partner.

(500) Days of Summer

This shift in motivation for male characters is also clearly seen in the 2009 film *(500) Days of Summer*. Unlike *The Holiday*, the protagonist is a man. While the characteristics of Graham and Miles could potentially be explained away because of female perspective, the same trends and changing conventions hold true in this overtly male-led film. The story itself was written and directed by men and so it shows that these changes in male characters are not a result of feminine ideals, but of shifting societal norms.

In one of the film's earliest scenes, Tom's inebriated friend points out that Summer "...is a dude" when she expresses her hesitation regarding marriage and exclusive relationships. It's obvious from the beginning of the film that Summer is occupying the traditionally male role established by romantic comedies of the 1950s: being persuaded into a relationship. She's cynical and not interested in any kind of relationship beyond the physical. This shift in narrative responsibility causes a similar shift in the male lead. Through initial observation it's clear that the lead character, Tom, does not behave the way leading men in the 1950s or even '70s or '90s did.

This film begins with the narrator explaining that, "...[Tom] would never truly be happy until the day he found 'The One.'" Blaming it on his parents' divorce, early exposure to sad British pop music, and a "total misreading of the movie *The Graduate*," the narrator establishes that, for many years, Tom's only goal in life has been finding his

soul mate. In the past, the female role is consumed with this need to end up in a stable relationship. Media in the 1950s encouraged women to find stability in their home and their family, convincing young women that love, or marriage, was the ultimate goal, and a man was the answer to all of life's problems. This need for exclusive companionship and the sense that a person is not complete without "The One" are traditionally reserved for women.

The first day he meets Summer, Tom believes it is fate. Before knowing anything about her, Tom projects his high expectations onto her and then experiences a wide range of emotions as he learns that he may have been more in love with his fantasy of her than with the real her. While this film is only about the relationship between Tom and Summer, it's obvious that this cycle of desperately trying to find "The One" is not new. His 12-year-old sister, Rachel, is called in to help him through the initial breakup and she reminds him that he's "...broken up with girls before and girls have broken up with [him] before." He claims that this one is different because it's Summer, meaning that she is "The One" while those other girls were not. Rachel's eye roll, and his friends' reference to other breakups undermines Tom's opinion and shows the audience that this breakup is very similar, if not exactly like, the rest.

This preoccupation with romance is at odds with Summer's own opinions throughout the entire film. His first real conversation with Summer is about love. After Summer confesses her opposition to exclusive relationships and marriage, Tom simply asks her, "Well, what if you fall in love?" She scoffs at him and he quickly defends himself by declaring, "It's love, it's not Santa Claus." No matter what Tom or Summer say, the other will not be swayed in their opinion on the matter. In this early scene with

Tom and Summer, it becomes clear that Tom is the one who must convince Summer of the reality and importance of an emotional connection.

Tom is so invested in this idea of love that he trails along behind Summer for the majority of the film. Too afraid to risk the potential of the soul mate he's been searching for, he lets her call the shots in regards to the nature of their relationship. Tom has no control over the speed or direction that he and Summer progress. Although he is definitely the first to show any interest, it's Summer who propels the relationship forward. She asks Tom outside the bar if he likes her, "... You know, as friends." He, being unwilling to admit his true feelings, says, "Yeah. As friends." Summer has established the nature of their relationship and Tom is unwilling to rock the boat by daring to disagree. Unlike the films of the past, specifically the 1970s and '80s, it's Tom, the man, who has to succumb to the will of Summer. Even as recently as 1998's *You've Got Mail*, Meg Ryan's character is unwittingly being manipulated into a relationship by Tom Hanks. He controls when they meet, where they go, and how much information is passed between the two secret online lovers. This kind of masculine control over the state of the relationship is even more overt in 1987's *Overboard*, in which Kurt Russell convinces an amnesiac Goldie Hawn that she is the mother of his children and convinces her to take care of the house. The complete lack of control that men have over the outcome of the relationship is something much more recent in romantic comedies.

Tom and Summer's first romantic encounter is in the copy room at their office. Tom, obviously harboring an enormous crush on Summer, awkwardly says hello and she, seemingly out of nowhere, kisses him passionately. Tom is too stunned to speak and Summer leaves. While this was something Tom wanted to happen, he does nothing to

invite it, control it, or end it. The entire moment is controlled by Summer. Tom, just pleased to get any positive attention from Summer, is happy to go along at whatever pace she sets.

Not only is the film about the relationship between these two, it seems to be the central focus of Tom's life as well. Tom doesn't exhibit any hobbies, interests, or even obligations outside of Summer. He does have friends, but their purpose within the narrative of the film is to comment on the relationship, offer advice about the relationship, doubt the relationship. Even Tom's job is used only as a means of meeting and interacting with Summer.

After the breakup, Tom goes somewhat comatose. He spends days in bed, consumes nothing but Twinkies and alcohol, and yells at affectionate couples on the street. When he returns to work after what appears to be an unannounced leave of absence, his boss doesn't fire him for his behavior. He has him channel his depression into another aspect of the company. While this gesture in reality would be uncommonly kind and forgiving, Tom is not grateful. He begrudgingly returns to his job writing greeting cards, still pining over Summer. He finds no happiness in work and feels no obligation to his co-workers or company. In the end when he quits to *again* pursue a career as an architect, it's not even clear that this career is what he really wants.

Summer asks him at their first meeting if he always knew he wanted to write greeting cards. He retorts, "I don't even want to do it now." She asks him what he wants to do. His response is not a direct answer. While it's implied that he wants to be an architect, his exact wording is, "Well, I studied to be an architect." What's made clear from the very beginning of the film, however, is that Tom doesn't want to be anything

but in love. Because of this singular goal and obsession, Tom's world is completely run by Summer. Even the decision to quit his job and pursue architecture is as a result of Summer suggesting he do something else.

His obsession and motivation in the film are clearly defined by both the narrator and Tom himself. Throughout his search for true love, his character is exposed, also fulfilling the trend of more sensitive and emotionally aware male leads. Unlike Graham and Miles, Tom's flaws are clearly displayed. He's shortsighted, selfish, and assuming. These qualities, however, do not change the other aspects of his character, suggesting the fluidity of masculine construct.

The manner of approaching sex in this genre has drastically changed throughout its history. The early films, still strictly monitored under Hay's code, would allude to it with clever wordplay and innuendo. Even films in the 1960s and '70s wouldn't talk about it outright. With the return of romance in the 1980s and '90s, sex became a symbol of love. Perhaps most pointedly in *When Harry Met Sally*, Harry points out that, "...Men and women can never really be friends because the sex always gets in the way." They go on to complain about the way the other feels about intercourse. Harry thinks it means nothing and Sally thinks it means everything. Sally famously proves to Harry that female sexual pleasure can be faked, but that women do not fake an emotional connection which is what leads them into bed in the first place. This idea that sex is more significant for the woman than for the man is something common and expected. In *(500) Days*, however, Tom turns that notion upside down.

While flirting at Ikea, Summer tells Tom that she's not "looking for anything serious." Tom agrees to her "casual" relationship, promising that they'll take it slow, not

get too excited. They then go back to his apartment and are about to initiate sex when Tom excuses himself. He talks to the mirror, reminding himself that this is casual sex, not to get too attached. The next scene shows him happily exiting his apartment and walking to work. In perhaps the most well known scene of the movie, his walk is underscored by Hall and Oates' *You Make My Dreams Come True* and turns into a choreographed dance through the park, complete with animated birds and marching bands. This scene implies much more than Tom's elation from having intercourse, however. He clearly feels a strong, emotional attachment to Summer. Her blasé treatment of him afterwards, and the film's blunt cut to a later time where Tom is horribly depressed, suggests that the significance of their sexual encounter is completely lost on Summer. She warns him that their relationship is casual, meaning there should be no emotional bond, and she holds true to her word.

Tom's belief that their relationship is much more solidified because of the physicality is reiterated later in the film. During a fight, Summer tries to remind Tom that he's not her boyfriend and Tom insists that he is, citing the "shower sex" they have as something you don't do with someone who's just a friend. Tom's definition of "friendship" and "something more than friends" is a common topic throughout the film. He talks with his sister frequently about their labels and his confusion as to the status of their relationship. His sister advises that he should just ask Summer what they are. Summer's response is characteristically vague. She says she doesn't like labels and then asks, "Who cares? I'm having fun. Aren't you having fun?" Still unwilling to ruffle any feathers, he agrees, though he still longs for that confirmation that his feelings are reciprocated. This need for something more than sex establishes that Tom is hoping for a

more emotional relationship. Unlike the precedent set by *When Harry Met Sally*, it's Tom who falls in love after sex, not Summer.

Like most romantic comedy protagonists, Tom has a group of supportive friends and confidants with whom he discusses his relationship. This support group consists of his very young sister and two clueless male friends. One hasn't been in a relationship in many years, the other has been with his girlfriend since the 7th grade. He points out multiple times throughout the film that neither is an expert on romance or relationships and, as such, are not qualified to provide advice. Although Tom points out their shortcomings, he still consults with them on how to proceed with his relationship.

His most trusted advisor, though, is his 12-year-old sister, Rachel, who is uncommonly mature and insightful. Her advice is defensive and cautionary, proving to be almost prophetic. The fact that she's a girl proves less important than her age. As a stark juxtaposition to Tom's own fantastical ideals at her age, her often cynical but accurate advice reaffirms Tom's obsession with love, romance, and Summer. His relationship with his sister is not overly cute. As mentioned, Rachel behaves much more like an adult than Tom does at certain points in the film. His dependence on her for advice and support, however, shows that he isn't too proud to ask a woman or a less experienced person for help and advice. This vulnerability shows a soft and caring side of him that seems characteristic of most of the male leads of the genre's contemporary films.

Tom's own identity as a man is called into question, at least his position as a traditional man. Others in the film question him and he begins to confuse himself. There is one moment in the film where Tom is pressured into displaying overt manifestations of traditional masculine behavior. While the two are at a bar, a man hits on Summer. She's

not interested and politely turns him down. He doesn't give up and tries harder to buy her a drink. Summer says she's flattered but not interested. When the man sees Tom, he expresses disbelief that Summer is there with such a weak, unintimidating display of masculinity. Tom then punches the man in the face. Tom is shocked at what he's done but is quickly elated by his actions. In that brief moment, the man gets back up and hits Tom back. It's implied that Tom lost that fight. His adrenaline is high and he's excitedly talking about it to Summer as they enter her apartment. This is obviously something that he has never done before and he thinks that it was the right thing to do as a man.

Instead of being impressed by his outward exertion of force and violence, Summer is offended and can't believe that he would do that. Tom claims he was defending her honor to which she replies that she never asked him to and implies that he had no right to since he's not her boyfriend. Tom sees the situation as a damsel-in-distress moment, reflecting his confusing view of masculinity and how a man is to behave in a relationship. His overly romantic and chivalric mindset leads him to believe that he would be rewarded for defending her honor and fighting for her. Instead, his antagonism and uncharacteristic display of aggression is what leads to a huge fight between he and the woman he was attempting to defend.

After a romantic night together, Tom asks Summer about her previous relationships. Each one that she describes, Tom imagines as a strong, athletic, aggressive man. Tom assumes that he's different from the kind of antiquated man that women have traditionally been drawn to, like the studs of the 1940s and '50s with rippling muscles and possessive personalities. When summer reveals that they were all very different, Tom is surprised. Rather than actually being compared to Summer's exes, Tom compares

himself to what he assumes they would be. Had his assumptions about her past boyfriends (or girlfriends) been correct, his naïve trust in fate or destiny would prove that it's exactly his differences that will ensure a lasting relationship between the two. This further reveals his confused and, perhaps, oversimplified, view of masculinity. In a way that's not quite so on-the-nose as *The Holiday*, this still shows that Tom's characteristics, and those most commonly sought after by contemporary women, are not the stoic standards established in the past.

Chapter Four: Conclusion and Discussion of Further Research

Conclusion

What has been made clear from this research is that the contemporary romantic comedy male follows a pattern of vulnerability, domesticity, and a commitment to the relationship seldom seen in romantic comedy genre films of the past. It's naive to think that, with the obvious shift in female representation, the portrayal of men would go untouched, or at least inconsequentially so. The contemporary resurgence of the feminist movement and openness regarding sexual orientation have produced a less concrete definition of gender in Westernized culture. This flexibility is clearly seen in the roles both men and women are occupying in popular media. The emergence of independent and free-willed female characters, while important, cannot be exclusively observed at the expense of their male counterparts' parallel changes. This reaction is clearly seen in the romantic comedy genre as the reconstruction of masculinity and male character's attitudes about relationships and romance are explored.

The answer to Alberti's rhetorical 2013 question, "What use are men in contemporary romantic comedies?" is more complex than one might imagine. Traditionally, men like Cary Grant and Rock Hudson served as foils to their more emotionally sensitive and loving female counterparts. In the end, the woman would win out by convincing the man to get married or changing his cynical views on love (McDonald, 12). While it's true that their historic purpose is no longer strictly necessary, this paper has demonstrated that a man's role has become much more than just the object of a female protagonist's desires. Men have needs and desires of their own and, frequently, those desires are for romance and emotional connection. With the

reaffirmation of romance in the 1980s and '90s, and the emergence of the grotesque or ambivalent romantic comedies of the late 1990s and early 2000s, men's need for emotional connection was featured. They were still hesitant and in denial, however. Billy Crystal's character in *When Harry Met Sally* and Tom Hanks' in *Sleepless in Seattle* and *You've Got Mail* are clearly in need of a fulfilling emotional connection. They deny this need for most of the film, however, and have to come to terms with it as their character develops. Films of the late 1990s and early 2000s also explore less traditional relationships, most notably the "bromance". Films seemed to be acknowledging men's need for emotional connection by removing the overtly sexual aspect of relationships and fostering heterosexual intimacy between friends. This acceptance of a need for emotional intimacy, much more than simply conceding to marriage, foreshadows the most significant trend in contemporary films: that men are aware from the beginning of the film that they want and need more than physical intimacy with a romantic partner.

What Men Want

Perhaps the most conspicuous shift for men in these contemporary films is their attitude toward relationships of any kind, and especially romantic relationships. Male characters are not merely means to a happy ending for women, nor are they hardened and cynical, in need of a woman's soft touch as many popular films of the 1940s and '50s might suggest. More often than not, it seems, contemporary men are the protagonists who long for deep and meaningful relationships. This desire is not controlled by physical demands but instead by emotional needs. Sex is not a feat or accomplishment for men by itself as it had been popularly portrayed in the 1960s, but only as a signifier of a much more meaningful relationship, founded in emotional connection. Conversely, there is a

clear trend towards women who are more independent and career-focused. Women are frequently workaholics (Amanda from *The Holiday*) or motivated by sexual intimacy (Summer from *[500] Days of Summer*) and are often the ones in need of a man to convince them to give love a chance. In this way, the roles taken on by either gender are far more complex than the traditional roles assigned to them in the 1940s and '50s. In fact, it's tempting to say that there is an almost perfect reversal of roles in today's films from those in the past. While it is true that men are predominantly the characters who search for or instigate a relationship much like the women of the 1950s, their motivation for doing so is much more profound. The characters portrayed by Doris Day and Marilyn Monroe were focused on marriage in order to help them solidify an identity as wife and mother. The need for physical or even emotional intimacy was secondary to the functional demands of society. Contemporary men are far from a similar situation. Often with successful careers and fulfilling home and social lives of their own, men's desire for relationships stems solely from a need for emotional intimacy, nothing overtly functional or pragmatic. These shifting and fluctuating narrative responsibilities assigned to either gender suggest a newfound complexity of character development within the genre.

How Men Are

Much more than just their attitudes towards or motivations for relationships, the way a male character and the film he's in choose to depict his masculinity is shifting. Along with his more accepting attitude towards love, men are given more sensitive, domestic, and traditionally feminine qualities as part of their character. Reaching much further than stereotypical portrayals of gender, these films challenge what it means to be a man. Romantic comedies of the past tended to skirt around emotional vulnerability or

gloss over defining characteristics of both men and women, opting instead for shallow characters fulfilling the conventions of the genre. Contemporary films, however, relish in the complexity of human emotion. Traditional heartthrobs like Cary Grant or Rock Hudson are having their stoicism replaced by a soft-spoken Mark Ruffalo and vulnerable Jack Black. To establish men as having a significant emotional range, they are more likely to be single fathers; have less domineering careers; and be seen vulnerable, hurt, or crying. Establishing a male character as a single father not only demands he show a nurturing and caring side, but also invites the idea that he has been hurt. Films accomplish this by making him a widower or abandoned, as either approach is equally effective. Both the audience and his female counterpart immediately deem him pitiful and deserving of some form of affection.

Instead of working in stuffy office jobs or as high profile executives, men are chefs, writers, musicians, artists. These occupations, while not often lucrative in the real world, are in contrast to the woman's high-powered career in advertising or marketing that she seems to occupy so often. It suggests that he is sensitive and not preoccupied with a demanding career, leaving him time and energy to focus on family or more emotionally significant pastimes. A man who cries is a man who cares, and that's what these women want.

Strength and aggression are not the preferred characteristics of a desirable man anymore. In fact, those traits traditionally lauded in men of the past are given to antagonists and punished. Male protagonists' main competition is usually a bigger man whose personality is characterized by a devotion to his work or a territorial or jealous

persona. Passive and peaceful men who express their emotions are received much more favorably by contemporary women than a man who can kill a wolf with his bare hands.

Suggested Implications

Influence on Society

There is no question that popular culture can influence everyday behavior. This research was sparked by concern over how much my own generation's preferences and expectations of men has been influenced by the viewing of romantic comedies. While we'd like to believe that we are independent thinkers who can decide these things on our own, we have to admit that we often take our cues on appropriate social behavior from examples found on television and in the movies (Perse, 4).

The trend of men in contemporary romantic comedies seems to reflect a gentler, more sensitive man than in the past. The characters in these films are artistic, domestic, and vulnerable. This is reflected not only in their behavior but also in their physical persona. Current leading men aren't always bodybuilders or gym rats, they're often slim men with messy hair and glasses. While Hollywood still employs attractive actors, the new standard for beauty isn't bulk, but fit. This style is seen in men today with the ubiquity of the hipster movement and the acclaim garnered by nerd culture.

These characteristics not only threaten to influence how a man behaves in life, but also how women expect the men in their lives to behave. The inspiration for this research was a concern about unrealistic expectations. Mr. Darcy, Jane Austen's most famous heartthrob, is obviously a work of fiction. Millions of women, however, have fallen in love with him and are looking for their own version. This expectation of how men are to

behave towards women and in relationships may reflect a small number of men but cannot represent them all.

This research suggests that contemporary films may be having a similar effect on real-life romantic expectations. With leading men like Alex Hitchens (*Hitch*), Tom (*500 Days of Summer*), and Graham (*The Holiday*) as examples, female viewers expect the men in their lives to reflect similar characteristics or behaviors. These men are kind, tender, and completely devoted to the women in their lives. Yes, these traits seem desirable and even expected in real-world relationships, but the way they are expressed in the films aren't how they appear in society. Men's bodies, careers, and forms of emotional expression vary just as women's. Women cannot watch *Twilight* and expect a man who will watch them sleep at night, for example.

Influence from Society

Admittedly, the media we consume is not just there to influence behavior. A large portion of the representations seen on screen is as a result of society, and not the other way around. As has been explored in the history of the genre, major historical events and social movements can clearly be seen as having an influence on the media produced. Post-WWII, during the sexual revolution of the 1960s, and even the American economic boom of the 1980s are all reflected in the films of the time. This pattern is no different today.

In the past 10 years, our society has taken huge steps towards gender equality and social reform. Celebrities like Emma Watson and Geena Davis have dedicated their lives to gender equality, the recent riots in Baltimore and Ferguson are bringing to light residual racial biases, and the United States has legalized gay marriage. These major

societal shifts in society are clearly seen in all media, including romantic comedy films. A study of this genre from a sociological viewpoint, both historically and contemporarily, can enlighten scholars on movements of the past, current trends and possible future implications.

While the behavior of men represented in these films may have some influence on those who view them, it's just as important to note that these characters would likely not exist unless they were already being reflected at some level in society. With the onslaught of women's rights activists, there has been a reactive movement towards men's rights, perhaps most publicly with the #HeForShe movement, spearheaded by Emma Watson and UN Women. The campaign encourages not only the political, economic, and societal rights of women, but encourages the right to emotional vulnerability and gender flexibility for men. The shifting of traditional gender roles is happening, whether it's being reflected in media or not.

Further Research

While major societal shifts may happen more or less independently of the contemporary media surrounding them, I have no doubt that media has a more focused and individual influence on those who consume it. The role of men, especially in a genre so heavily marketed towards women, is something that can no longer be overlooked. The genre itself is commonly ignored or dismissed as inconsequential, frilly, or trivial. Like most professional fields, the gender gap in the entertainment business is significant. The portrayal of women has been explored and analyzed, even in this genre. How these women of power choose to portray men, though, is intriguing.

This research has barely scratched the surface of not only masculine representation in romantic comedies, but the influence of this genre and of media as a whole. It has done less to answer any questions than to reveal so many other avenues of potential inquiry. Media Effects has an academic history, but a focus on this specific genre and gender performance seems necessary. Because the romantic comedy genre is often overlooked academically, I believe that its analysis is even more prudent. The one thing we have in common is the necessity to interact with others, form relationships, and nurture those relationships. This genre that focuses on one of the most fundamental needs of life can no longer be pushed aside or deemed “less than.”

The foray into displays of masculinity suggests a need to look further into queer studies, especially in light of the recent gay rights movement in western society. Sexuality and gender expression are often related. A more fluid definition of gender displayed on screen could lead to an acceptance of no definition of gender, which warrants attention and academic analysis.

What this research has made clear is that the socially accepted constructions of gender have been, and still are, changing. Contemporary romantic comedies show a history of variety in the way men and women relate to each other and the way they embrace their gender. By viewing a sampling of contemporary films in comparison to their historical predecessors, a clear pattern of change and societal reflection can be seen, revealing the contemporary man as a more domestic and tender person, longing for emotional connection.

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