

## **Let's Go To The Movies: Using Motion Pictures To Teach Healthy Dating And Marital Relationships**

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*Movies are especially popular to adolescents and young adults, and can therefore serve as a valuable pedagogical tool inside, as well as beyond the classroom. The purpose of this article is to describe how motion pictures with themes related to dating and marriage can be utilized in the college or high school classroom. By developing critical thinking skills, students will be better able to understand the falsehoods of how some movies portray relationships. On the other hand, additional movies, such as those discussed here, can offer useful insight and helpful understanding into many issues, such as functions of dating, gender roles, styles of loving, family of origin, marital myths, or homosexuality, concerning modern love relationships.*

Many themes in modern movies are strictly fictional--time travel in a fancy foreign car, missions to space to save the world from Armageddon, and fuzzy little creatures that, with the slightest moisture, multiply and reek disastrous havoc on an otherwise peaceful suburban neighborhood. While movies such as "Planet of the Apes" and "Star Wars" easily can be recognized as fictional, it becomes more difficult, however, to separate reality from fantasy in movies where human characters are involved in such complex issues as dating, love, gender roles, family of origin baggage, expectation of marriage, or homosexuality. All are aspects of our very human, very emotional, and very real lives.

Married couples in the United States continue to have a high divorce rate. While numbers have leveled off in the past decade, it is still estimated that approximately 50% or more of new marriages will end in divorce (Olson & DeFrain, 2000).

The impact of media on adolescents has been studied in depth regarding such issues as self-esteem and sexuality (Chapin 2000; Piper, 1994; Polce-Lynch, Myers, Kliewer, & Kilmartin, 2001). The media, especially television and film, has been scrutinized by marriage researchers for its impact on adolescent perceptions and expectations of marriage (Crosby, 1991; Markman, Stanley & Blumberg, 1994; Stanley, 2001). The movies, unlike television, are especially vulnerable to shaping romantic and unrealistic expectations. They, generally, are not viewed at home where parents may provide input, but viewed in theaters with peers who, most likely, have similar limited life experiences. Lest the baby be thrown out with the proverbial bath water, movies can be utilized as a valuable educational tool, not only because of student familiarity with them, but more importantly as a tool for bringing into the classroom themes relating to the day-to-day contexts in which students live. Motion pictures, therefore, can provide a method for utilizing students' affective knowledge domain to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills in order to evaluate the reality of dating and marital relationships portrayed in them.

The purpose of this article is to describe how motion pictures (videos or DVDs) with themes related to dating and marriage can be utilized in the college or high school classroom. The authors have developed the following generic critical thinking points which, regardless of

the dating and marriage theme, can assist students in identifying problems, cultivating deductive and inductive reasoning skills, developing selection criteria, and gathering relevant information (Way & Nitzke, 1998):

- Describe ways the main characters change through the movie. Give examples and explain what influenced their changes.
- Explain how their changes were positive and/or negative.
- Discuss any evidence of abuse that was implied or described in the movies.
- Describe healthy and unhealthy examples of love and explain why they might be considered healthy or unhealthy. Explain how outside factors impacted the couple's relationship. Analyze ways in which family of origin factors affected the main characters.

Specific themes were selected from the class syllabus of an undergraduate marriage class taught at a mid-sized Midwestern university. The topics were functions of dating, styles of love, gender roles, marital myths, homosexuality, and impact of the family of origin on marriage. Once the themes were identified, the first author utilized the "theme" search at the [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) website to assist in finding appropriate videos. The site also provides editorial comments on each video, and, therefore, can serve as an initial tool in locating appropriate movies. (For a potpourri of dating and marriage relationship issues the authors strongly recommend the Coalition of Marriage, Family and Couples' website, [www.smartmarriages.com](http://www.smartmarriages.com).) In addition to the [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) website, the authors searched for the selected themes in high school and university texts often used in the teaching of marriage and family (see Table 1). Analysis of the motion pictures (see Table 2) incorporating the themes follows.

*Table 1*  
*High School and University Texts Reviewed*

- Cox, F. D., & Canada, C. (1994). *Family living: Relationships and decisions*. Minneapolis: West.
- Crosby, J. F. (1991). *Illusion and disillusion: The self in love and marriage (4<sup>th</sup> ed.)*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Knox, D. & Schacht, C. (2000). *Choices in relationships. (6<sup>th</sup> ed.)*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Lamanna, M. A., and Riedmann, A. (1997). *Marriages and families: Making choices in a diverse society. (6<sup>th</sup> ed.)*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Olsen, D. H., & DeFrain, J. (2000). *Marriage and the family: Diversity and strengths. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.
- Ryder, V., & Harter, M. (2000). *Contemporary living*. Tinley Park, IL: Goodheart-Willcox.
- Sasse, C. R. (2000). *Families today (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Strong, B., DeVault, C., Sayad, B., & Cohen, T. (2000). *The marriage and family experience: Intimate relationships in a changing society (8<sup>th</sup> ed.)*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

## Table 2

### Motion pictures reviewed

Fischhoff, R., & Jaffe, S. R. (Producers), & Benton, R. (Director). (1979). *Kramer vs Kramer* [Motion picture]. United States: Columbia House, Rated PG.

Jordon, N., & Woolley, S. (Producer), & Jordon, N. (Director). (1999). *End of an Affair* [Motion picture]. United States: Sony Pictures, Rated R.

Karsch, A., & Streisand, B. (Producer), & Streisand, B. (Director). (1991). *Prince of Tides* [Motion picture]. United States: Columbia Pictures, Rated R.

Nichols, M. (Producer & Director). (1996). *The Birdcage* [Motion picture]. United States: MGM Universal Pictures, Rated R.

Obst, L. (Producer), & Whitaker, F. (Director). (1998). *Hope Floats* [Motion picture]. United States: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, Inc., Rated PG-13.

Pierce, F., Sellers, A., Winitzky, A. (Producers), & O'Connor, P. (Director). (1994). *Circle of Friends*, [Motion picture]. United States: Savoy Pictures, 1994, Rated PG-13.

Reiner, R. (Producer/Director). (1999). *The Story of Us* [Motion picture]. United States: MGM Universal Pictures, Rated R.

### Functions Of Dating

The process of dating and becoming romantically involved with another individual plays a very significant role in our lives, and according to textbook authors Knox and Schadt (2000) performs some very important functions. The movie, *Hope Floats*, gives a real depiction of dating, and in doing so allows viewers to see clearly the six functions of dating in the lives of the main characters. The functions are confirmation of self, recreation, companionship/intimacy/sex, anticipatory socialization, status achievement, and mate selection. Birdie, played by Sandra Bullock, is actually a newly divorced woman. While Knox and Schacht (2000) explain the functions of dating with regard to adolescent years, it is evident throughout the movie that these same functions of dating apply at any age.

Birdie's husband decided that marriage was not for him-- at least not marriage to Birdie. It seems he was looking for someone a little more like his secretary. In light of the news, Birdie packs up her daughter and their belongings, and they head back home to live with her mother. Enter Justin, the mother's handy man played by Harry Connick, Jr. As Birdie sulks and feels sorry for herself, her mother encourages Justin to pursue Birdie.

*Confirmation of social self*, the first function of dating, is a process by which individuals learn about themselves through the feedback of others-- in essence, how individuals think a dating partner sees them. Knox and Schacht (2000) explain, "when a person gives you positive feedback through speech and gesture, you feel good about yourself and tend to view yourself in positive terms" (p. 60). Justin contributes to Birdie's confirmation of social self, and gives her the confidence, not only to get out of bed and take a shower, but also to get a job and begin to move on with her life.

The *Recreation* function, or "dating, hanging out... fun" (Knox & Schadt, 2000) is

demonstrated when Justin convinces Birdie to “let loose” and go fishing, and a few days later he even gets her to dance with him. The functions of *companionship/intimacy/sex* occur when Birdie begins to truly feel comfortable with Justin. The intimacy of the relationship is clear in a scene while they are sitting on the porch swing, when they are alone and able to talk seriously about their future ambitions. (Sexual intercourse makes a dramatic appearance here, but it is important to recognize that sex does not refer only to intercourse, but manifests itself in such behaviors as kissing and touching, as well.)

Knox and Schacht (2000) define *anticipatory socialization* as the function that teaches individuals how to interact with people of the opposite sex. They explain it refers to the process of establishing what is expected in the relationship: negotiating differences, gender role patterns, and assessing a comfort level. Birdie and Justin confront these issues, not so much by discussion, but by trial and error. It takes Birdie some time to realize that Justin’s role is not to feel sorry for her and baby her. Justin helps her develop an interdependent relationship rather than an unhealthy one built on pity and dependency (Crosby, 1991).

Through her relationship with Justin, Birdie also experiences the fifth function of dating, *status achievement*. According to Knox and Schacht (2000), a relationship with a member of the opposite sex “is usually accompanied by more status than being unattached and alone” (p. 61). This concept is clearly illustrated in *Hope Floats*. Birdie is no longer a divorced single parent and one-time beauty queen who hides out in her mother’s attic bedroom. People see her differently, and it simply may be that being with Justin puts a smile on her face, and it is easier from a societal perspective to command respect when happy. It also may reflect the stigma society places on divorced women with small children or a perception that a woman is not complete without a man. Discussion of this dating function might also include the fragile nature of self-confidence, such as young women who stay in unhealthy relationships solely for the status they receive from their peer network.

The final function of dating, *mate selection*, or the pairing of two people, is achieved by Birdie and Justin. When Bernice asks her mother if she is going to marry Justin, Birdie answers that she is “not going to marry anyone right away.” She also smiles, conveying her happiness with Justin, which leaves the viewer with the assumption they probably eventually will marry. While Justin and Birdie only date each other before the supposition of marriage, most individuals do not marry the first person they date. Knox and Schacht (2000) refer to dating as a filtering process in which individuals use cultural, sociological, and psychological factors to assist in screening their marital choice. In addition to the critical thinking questions listed above, additional queries related to what cultural, sociological, and psychological issues played a role in Justin and Birdie’s selection of each other as marital partners could be developed.

## Love

Researcher and theorist John Lee conducted 120 interviews, 60 men and 60 women, to determine ways in which lovers relate to each other (Lee, 1973). He classified his results into six categories, which he called love styles. These six love styles are Eros, Storge, Pragma, Agape, Ludus, and Mania (Knox & Schacht, 2000; Lamanna & Riedmann, 1997; Strong, DeVault, Sayad & Cohen, 2000). Lee (1973) emphasized that most individuals view love in more than one way at a time and that their views of love may change over time.

The movie, *Circle of Friends*, is the story of three girls who grow up together, develop very different personalities, and handle love, sex, and relationships in very different ways. It can be used to discuss the positive and negative aspects of each style of loving. *Ludus*, the first love

style, is generally unhealthy and associated with game-playing. Ryder and Harter (2000) refer to this style of love as “passionate love...[which] is driven by nature’s desire for biological fulfillment, and it often operates without reason.” (p. 272). This carefree view of love is demonstrated by many of the couples portrayed in *Circle of Friends*. Throughout the movie we see wild parties, drunkenness, and “free love.” Commitment is obviously not a relationship necessity, as the teenagers experiment with relationships, love, sex, and freedom.

The second love style, *pragma*, involves individuals assessing their partners logically and rationally on such things as assets and liabilities and economic security. Logic would not allow for age discrepancy, long-distance, or interracial relationships. In his attraction to Bennie, Shawn portrays this style. He feels strongly for Bennie, but it seems many of his feelings are based on circumstance. Shawn works in Bennie’s father’s store and hopes to inherit the store when the old man dies. He has grown up with Bennie and assumes his will be a comfortable marriage, living from the income of the store.

The *eros* style of loving is concerned with sex and passion (Knox & Schacht, 2000; Lamanna & Riedmann, 1997; Strong, DeVault, Sayad & Cohen, 2000). While it is an important component of love in healthy committed relationships, it is empty when it is the only factor drawing couples to each other. Nan and Simon’s style of loving seems to exist solely on this type of love. Simon is attracted to Nan’s physical beauty. Their relationship is based on empty cottages, hotel rooms, wine, and candles. They do not talk, no emotion other than lust is portrayed, and their “dates” always end when the sun rises.

Bennie and Jack portray a *storge* love style, which is a love based primarily on friendship, comfort, commitment, and respect (Knox & Schacht, 2000; Lamanna & Riedmann, 1997; Strong, DeVault, Sayad & Cohen, 2000). This love style also is referred to as “philo” (Crosby, 1991) or simply “friendship” (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Recent research by Gottman and Silver suggests this style of love is the most important style for healthy long-term marriages (1999). This style is healthy because by being friends couples share similar interests and values, and get beyond the superficial attraction based on physical appearances. As demonstrated by their friendship, it is easy for viewers to recognize that Bennie and Jack *like* each other, as well as love each other. They also discern each other more realistically than others who do not utilize this love style. The directors of the movie stressed this point by making Bennie slightly overweight and Jack somewhat naive. Because of the imperfections in characters, their growing love, based on friendship, seems very real, honest, mutual, and comfortable.

The *agape* love style is characterized as a selfless, unconditional love, similar to the love parents have for their children (Knox & Schacht, 2000; Lamanna & Riedmann, 1997; Strong, DeVault, Sayad & Cohen, 2000). Eve and Nick, though they play secondary roles in the movie, seem to have this kind of relationship. The director seems to imply that their relationship needs no explanation. The couple is content with each other, and is unaffected by the scandal and drama occurring to others. Eve appears to be willing to do absolutely anything for Nick, and Nick seems more than willing to return the favor. Crosby (1991) recognizes a potential pitfall of *agape* love if it is not exhibited by both individuals in a relationship. If only one of the partners demonstrates *agape* love, the other can very likely be manipulating and exploiting the other’s kindness.

The *mania* love style, as its name suggests, explains a love that is “out of control... extremely jealous and controlling” (Knox & Schacht, 2000). While this style of love is not portrayed in *Circle of Friends*, it is clearly depicted in many other movies. One example is Maurice’s obsession with Sarah in the movie *The End of the Affair* in which his jealousy results

in having someone follow her.

Ryder and Harter's (2000) and Cox and Canada's (1994) high school texts explain Lee's (1973) styles of love using different terminology but similar characteristics. Ryder and Harter, for example, divide the six styles into positive and negative types of love. Lee's *eros* style is defined as the negative "passionate love," and the *storge* love style is explained as the positive "friendship love." The authors are uncomfortable with Ryder and Harter's depiction of *eros* as negative. If a relationship is based solely on *eros* it is shallow and negative. However, as Lee suggests, rarely is any individual only one. We suggest a healthy discussion could include *eros* as a healthy component to a long-term marital relationship. This discussion could assist in diminishing the myth often depicted in the media that marital sex is tolerable, at best, but not as exciting as pre-marital or extramarital sex.

Cox and Canada (1994) describe love using only three of Lee's terms, *eros*, *agape*, and *philos*. They explain *eros* love as a physical, sexual type of love. *Agape*, contrastingly, is explained as a spiritual love, while *philos* is described as a brotherly, neighborly love.

### Gender Roles

A primary area couples need to address in their relationship before marriage is gender role expectations. While these role expectations have become more egalitarian in the past few decades (Crosby, 1991; Strong, DeVault, Sayad & Cohen, 2000), many couples still cling to traditional dichotomous roles for males and females. Traditional gender roles are based on a male-centered society. In this manner, the strong, powerful male is regarded as the decision maker and breadwinner, while the woman's role is to care for her children and provide emotional support to her family (Olsen & DeFrain, 2000; Ryder & Harter, 2000; Sasse, 2000; Strong, DeVault, Sayad & Cohen, 2000.) According to Lamanna and Riedman (1997), males are considered to exhibit "instrumental character traits," which help them finish hard tasks and accomplish goals. Women, on the other hand, exhibit "expressive character traits," which prepare them for expressiveness of emotion and compassion for others (p. 52). The only emotion traditional society allowed men to demonstrate was anger. From the time they were young, boys received the message, "Big boys don't cry." As a consequence, for many males their nurturing compassionate component never was permitted to develop.

The movie, *Prince of Tides*, demonstrates the limitations of strictly adhered to traditional gender roles. Tom, played by Nick Nolte, has been raised by an overbearing father, who firmly believes men have control over their wives, and by a submissive, passive mother. His parental role models are a mother who stays home and cleans, cooks, and cares for the children during the day, and then is beaten by her ungrateful husband who assumes all credit for family functioning because he has been hard at work all day. As a child, Tom is conditioned not to cry when his father states if he is going to cry, he'll have to wear one of his sister's dresses. This scene reinforces the belief that crying and tenderness are solely feminine characteristics. When Tom reaches adulthood, his parents continue to articulate their traditional beliefs by expressing negativity to Tom's chosen occupation as a high school English teacher. His parents assume that teaching, especially English, is a 'woman's job'. In one scene, his mother describes teaching as a 'seemingly ridiculous career choice'.

By the end of the movie, a therapist, played by Barbara Streisand, who Tom encounters in New York, helps him learn that expressing feelings, regardless of one's gender, is much healthier than suppressing them, and that family is the most important area for them to be shared. Tom returns home to South Carolina, now able to express his feelings towards his family. He

feels free to cultivate his expressive side that allows for the growth and deepening of his familial relationships.

*Prince of Tides* also is valuable to use in discussions of family secrets and child sexual abuse. It also has received ethical criticism from the therapeutic community because of the sexual relationship between Tom and his therapist.

The 1970s movie, *Kramer vs Kramer*, starring Meryl Streep and Dustin Hoffman is a classic film to use when teaching the evolution of gender roles in the United States. Hoffman is the traditional husband enwrapped in his cultural and self-prescribed role of sole family breadwinner. Because of his desires, his wife, Meryl Streep, is a stay-at-home mom to their young son who is now a first grader. Over a period of time, Streep begins to feel that her life has stagnated and lacks opportunities for personal growth. Ultimately she becomes depressed. Her emotional and developmental wounds go unnoticed by her husband who believes his family is functioning well, and he is excellently filling his family role by climbing the proverbial corporate advertising ladder.

Even though loving her son, Streep decides to leave her family because she believes her emotional health does not allow her to be a good parent. The unprepared Hoffman is left with an expanded father role. He does not even know the grade at school in which his son is enrolled. Through the course of the movie, Hoffman evolves into a nurturing parent and recognizes the dichotomous gender roles he once took for granted were unhealthy for him as a father and were the reason for his wife's leaving. Eventually, through professional help, Streep's emotional health returns and she sues to regain custody of her son. During a courtroom scene, Hoffman's attorney, in an effort to discredit Streep for leaving, questions why she left her family. His questions articulate the role of the traditional husband: "Did he beat you?" "Did he drink alcohol to excess?" "Did he fail to provide an income?" "Did he have an affair?" To each of these questions, Streep answers negatively. At which time, Hoffman's attorney sarcastically replies, "I can certainly understand why you left him!" The scene is a powerful teachable moment to discuss how gender roles expectations are changing and the traditional breadwinner, non-abusing, monogamous spouse role is not sufficient for modern marital relationships.

### Homosexuality

Homosexuality is an uncomfortable topic for many educators and students. Unfortunately restrictions may exist on discussing the topic in public high schools, but college instructors should find their environment more accepting. *The Birdcage*, starring Robin Williams, takes a humorous look at the pressures homosexual households continue to experience in today's society, while at the same time, detailing the complexity of the issue. Val, the boy whom a gay couple Albert and Armand have raised, is now 20 years of age. Having been brought up by these gay men, Val finds it difficult to describe his family structure to his new fiancé's very conservative parents. When the meeting of the two families can no longer be postponed and not wanting to destroy Val's relationship with his future in-laws, Albert and Armand decide to conform to what the fiancé's traditional parents are expecting. They change their names to hide their sexual orientation, disassociate themselves from the gay nightclub they own, and redecorate their home to ensure removal of any identifying evidence. In essence, they completely change themselves to be "acceptable." In *The Birdcage* things work out to the good, unlike real society in which same-sex oriented individuals are often forced into secrecy and giving up their dreams to fit in with what is "normal," based on our culture's stigma of homosexuals (Lamanna & Riedmann, 1997).

### Family Of Origin/Marital Myths/Expectations

As more research is conducted on marital relationships, the family of origin has been shown to play a major role in how couples communicate, handle day-to-day interactions, create marital expectations and perpetuate myths of love and marriage (Crosby, 1991; Larson, Benson, Wilson, & Medora (1998).

The Rob Reiner movie, *The Story of Us*, starring Bruce Willis and Michelle Pfeiffer, was poorly received by movie critics (Solle, 1999), but praised by marriage educators. It won the 1999 Coalition of Marriage and Family Couples' Education Outstanding Media Award. Throughout the movie the subtle impact of family of origin, unrealistic expectations and marital myths are intertwined between the Willis and Pfeiffer characters. The family in which we were raised has a tremendous effect on our future relationships. Children observe and internalize such things as how their parents communicate to each other, how they relate to their children, and how they handle life stressors. These things are carried, generally unconsciously, into marriages the children create (Crosby, 1991). According to Larson, Benson, Wilson, and Medora (1998), family of origin issues are important to study because they form the basis of what is expected in marriage relationship. For example, the researchers suggest that pessimism as a relationship expectancy may influence how individuals behave and interpret information when interacting with their partners. We see this generational transfer of pessimism when Ben and Katie are unconsciously accompanied by their parents in the "six in the bed" scene. Everyone being in the scene together makes the amazing influences of families of origin even more obvious. Katie's desire for structure and negative attitude complaining about "where all the therapy had gone" were words directly out of her mother's mouth. Ben, on the other hand, prefers spontaneity, optimism, and fun demonstrated by his parents comments.

Another issue plaguing the everyday lives of dating and married couples is the belief in marital myths. According to a review on the Coalition of Marriage, Family, and Couples' Education website, (Solle, 1999), *The Story of Us* deals with "getting past the myths about marriage. The movie rebuffs the marital myths that good marriages come naturally and love is all a marriage needs. During the movie, it is obvious that Katie and Ben love each other but struggle over time to make their marriage work and that sometimes not even effort (both Ben and Katie put in their share of simple effort) but blatant determination and commitment is necessary to make a marriage last.

"Children cement the marital bond" is another myth to which many marriage romantics subscribe (Crosby, 1991). He, however, explains that children have a statistically negative impact on marital satisfaction. The impact of children is a major, albeit subtle, theme of the movie-- not that Ben and Katie's children hurt their marriage, but that the marriage relationship changes with children. As the movie progresses, we see the introduction of children leaves less and less time and resources for the couple to be a couple.

Katie stresses the falsehood of the "one right partner" myth in her soliloquy at the end of the movie. She says to Ben, "There's a history here and histories don't happen over night...I don't want to build another city...That's a dance you perfect over time..." The myth of a *right partner* implies that individuals need to keep looking until that person "pops up." Katie is more accurate when she uses the words "history," "build," and "time" to portray the concept of "investing" in the relationship, rather than wasting time searching the earth to "find" the right person.

Ultimately, Ben and Katie learn that taking romantic vacations in an effort to repair their

shaky relationship is not the proper medicine. They learn instead it is discussing the expectations each have of the other and looking at things on a daily basis from the other's perspective is the way to "invest" in and "build" a healthy marriage.

Entering a relationship while continuing to believe in the myths surrounding marriage can have a negative impact on a relationship before the relationship has a chance to develop. Therefore, debunking myths serves an important task of helping students to gain a more realistic understanding of what long term relationships are about.

## Conclusion

Motion pictures have been a part of our culture for over a century and will continue to be a part as the new millennium progresses. Movies are especially popular to adolescents and young adults, and can therefore serve as a valuable pedagogical tool inside, as well as beyond the classroom. By developing critical thinking skills, students will be better able to understand the falsehoods of how some movies portray relationships. On the other hand, additional movies, such as those discussed here, can offer useful insight and helpful understanding into many issues, such as functions of dating, gender roles, styles of loving, family of origin, marital myths, or homosexuality, concerning modern love relationships. They can give us insight into our own relationships as well as some varieties of diverse relationships to which we would otherwise be ignorant.

Given the time it takes to find good classroom motion picture relationship themes, creating a teacher website or chat group to post current movies and listing their specific subject matter would be valuable. As with any educational materials, and especially videos, the authors recommend previewing material prior its use in the classroom or before given as an outside assignment.

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