

## SESSION TWO



Very Precious Love”:  
*Marjorie Morningstar*

Novel, 1955

Author: Herman Wouk

Feature film, 1958

Director: Irving Rapper

Screenplay: Everett Freeman

Marjorie: Natalie Wood

Noel Airman: Gene Kelly

Mr. Morgenstern: Everett Sloane

Mrs. Morgenstern: Claire Trevor

Marsha Zelenko: Carolyn Jones

Uncle Samson: Ed Wynn

Wally Wronken: Marty Milner

Length: 123 minutes

Many women who were teenagers and young adults at the time can remember exactly where they were in life when they first saw this movie.

The publication of Herman Wouk’s *Marjorie Morningstar* in 1955 and the release of the film in 1958 can be seen as a watershed in the public image of the American Jewish woman. While Wouk certainly should not be blamed for beginning a trend, after the appearance of the novel and movie the American literary and cinematic scene proliferated with books and films that ridiculed the ambitions of Jewish women. *Marjorie Morningstar* had an enormous impact on young female viewers.

Wouk fully develops the character of the upwardly mobile Jewish daughter. In the novel, a very beautiful and ambitious young woman falls in love not with the bourgeois young men her parents would have her marry but with a bohemian, thirtyish dramatist and musician, Noel Airman, born with the more pedestrian and identifiably Jewish name of Neil Ehrmann. Airman describes the “princess” stereotype to the young and inexperienced Marjorie early in the novel, calling this princess “Shirley” (and causing many young woman named Shirley to want to change their names).

For Noel, women are predators; men are the prey. He is afraid of respectability and imagines that marrying a Shirley will have a deadening effect on his life. He seems to think that young women who say they will become a somebody and then give up their careers for marriage and families are deliberately deceiving prospective suitors. The youthful appearances, lighthearted personalities, and ostensible career aspirations of unmarried Jewish women are all a sham, Airman insists, because they really are after what women have always wanted. Although they insist that they

**Noel:** *Shirley. It's a trade name for the respectable middle class girl who likes to play at being worldly.*

**Marjorie:** *And that's your label for me?*

**Noel:** *It's monogrammed all over you the way parents sew camp initials on children. Hands off. Decent girl. Object matrimony. . . . I know you. I know everything about you. I've gone out with hundreds of Shirleys. A different dress, a different body, but the same girl.*

despise domestic dullness, he believes that in the end they – the Shirleys – marry dentists, doctors, woolen manufacturers, and lawyers, and settle in for a lifetime of shopping and bourgeois social events. Marjorie correctly resents Airman's caricature of the Shirley, and spiritedly tells him he is a “damned intellectual snob . . . and a bit of an antisemite.”

The film omits many of the complexities that make the novel interesting. Wouk's Marjorie has something in her of Thackeray's Becky Sharp (*Vanity Fair*) and Mitchell's Scarlett O'Hara (*Gone with the Wind*). She is a highly intelligent woman who uses her mind and her physical attributes as tools. In the novel Marjorie plans her outfits and her behavior meticulously in order to get men to react to her exactly as she'd like them to. Her long love affair with Noel Airman, and very brief one with Mike Eden, tear her apart, and for the first time make her confront the fact that deep emotions and other people cannot always be controlled. Out of her pain grows her ability to see life and people realistically. Nevertheless, even in despair the Marjorie of the novel always plans her wardrobe carefully – just one of Wouk's many insightful touches.

At the end of Wouk's long novel, Marjorie Morningstar walks down the aisle on her wedding day and looks into the face of the man she almost married, her beloved nemesis, Noel Airman. At that moment, Marjorie sees her wedding through Noel's eyes, as if she were looking through a ghastly green filter. She imagines that he sees her wedding as nothing more than “a blaze of silly Shirley glory.” In order to view her family and the man she really loves and wants to marry through her own affectionate eyes, she must brush away the green filter of Noel's hateful attitudes.

In the novel, Airman is a true Don Juan type, using and discarding women with no real feeling for them, and causing one woman to commit suicide. His disdain for the values with which Marjorie has been raised confuses her and misleads her for a very long time. His feelings toward the Jewish religion and Jewish community are openly hostile and resentful – very much tied in with his feelings of hostility and resentment toward his father, Judge Ehrman, whom he finds to be a most demanding judge indeed.

**Noel:** *Do you know what I've been asking myself for the last three days? Who am I?*

**Marjorie:** *You're the man I love.*

**Noel:** *I've searched my soul truthfully and honestly for the first time. I ask myself: Do you want to marry Marjorie . . . There's no other girl I've met who even comes close to you. But Marjorie, love of my life, we're through.*

Because the movie somewhat softens both Wouk's satiric portrait of the Jewish community and Noel Airman's disabling self-hatred, it presents a romantic vision of star-crossed love. In the film, Marjorie's one true love is Noel Airman. She falls in love with the theater and with him, and her love is sincere, unwavering, true, and devoted.

Marjorie is recast in the film as the ideal romantic heroine. She is never shown as a social-climbing adolescent; never shown manipulating her many boyfriends; never shown loving another man. Her purity of heart, as well as her dark-eyed beauty, is breathtaking, and no small part of the attraction which she holds for almost every man who meets her.

In the film Noel Airman is weak and unreliable, but he is not a total cad. He is terrified of being trapped in a bourgeois existence, but he is always respectful of Judaism and Jewish family traditions. His decline and fall in the novel are far more graphic and ugly than in the film.

Despite the fact that the film version of *Marjorie Morningstar* was cleansed of its characters' uglier attributes so that it would be more appealing to the general American viewing public, it is a valuable document of the ideals of American Jews in the 1950s. The character of Marjorie is presented as American Jews would have liked to have seen their daughters, and as daughters would like to see themselves: honest, sincere, and capable of true devotion. Wouk marries Marjorie to a solidly bourgeois Jewish professional and makes her into a good Jewish mother, loyal to the Jewish people and the Jewish religion. In the film, Marjorie does not entirely abandon the theater. A bus pulls away in the final scene carrying only Marjorie and the patient, brilliantly successful playwright Wally Wronken.

### **In Depth: What Women Have Always Wanted**

The antisemitic, sexist nature of Noel Airman's caricature of "the Shirley" – the ambitious, spoiled, manipulative Jewish American Princess – is far from unique. In the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, many American Jewish writers and filmmakers satirically depicted young women whose parents were grooming them to fit into upper-middle-class American norms. The attitude of Jewish authors toward

**Noel:** *Your mother would be happy if I wore a gray flannel suit and made \$20,000 a year.*

**Marjorie:** *I love you just the way you are.*

**Noel:** *Marjorie, you are your mother.*

Jewish women was in many ways symptomatic of their attitude toward middle-class Jewish America. Some of the most widely viewed and read mid-twentieth-century American screenwriters and novelists, like Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Woody Allen, were second-generation American Jewish men whose lives had been permeated both with a consciousness of their Jewishness and with an acute awareness of the differences between Jewish and American mores and values. While some Jewish writers satirize Jewish men as well, depicting a variety of vulgar, aggressive, materialistic Jewish males, their discomfort with Jewish family life is more often channeled into a preoccupation with Jewish women.

In the hands of male Jewish screenwriters and novelists, Jewish women seemed to personify the foreignness of Jewish culture. They were different from American-born women. Apple-pie America might be represented by a blond, sweet woman with the childlike prettiness of Debbie Reynolds or Doris Day, a woman who always supported her man and seldom contradicted him. Conversely, America might be embodied in the glorious, uninhibited sexuality and putative stupidity of the ubiquitous “sex kitten” or “blond bombshell,” an Ann-Margret or Marilyn Monroe.

The world had changed dramatically for American Jews, and different female qualities seemed more necessary and admirable in this changed world than in the demanding, poverty-stricken Eastern European and immigrant societies of their parents. Most American Jewish women during and after the Second World War lived in pleasant neighborhoods, not in grimy tenements. They had 2.8 children, not eight or ten children. They washed their clothes in laundromats or in their own washing machines, instead of boiling vats of water on the stove. But they were as smart and as aggressive and as articulate as ever; like their immigrant grandmothers, they dramatized their lives and were on the lookout for ever-present dangers which might threaten them and their families.

But because the very real dangers of Jewish life in Europe had disappeared from the American Jewish environment, the Jewish mother’s level of anxiety seemed inappropriate. In lieu of outside employment and in the

absence of external challenges such as war or poverty, many American women became caught up in a cycle of consumerism that was easily satirized and mocked. In the hands of American Jewish novelists, both the consumerism and the satire were given a Jewish flavor. In the film version of *Marjorie Morningstar*, for example, Mr. and Mrs. Morgenstern argue on the morning of their son's Bar Mitzvah: He had wanted a small affair with just family members; she had insisted on a fancy catered affair. He complains about her spending; she retorts that many important people will be coming to their celebration.

Marjorie Morningstar struggles valiantly with a culture that sends her mixed messages about the nature of femininity, sexuality, and the purpose of life. Herman Wouk tries to have it both ways. In his novel, he uses Noel Airman to satirize the materialism of Jewish women – but, on the other hand, Wouk does not want Marjorie to abandon Judaic values or lifestyles. The author has Airman call Marjorie “a good little Jewish beauty,” and that is what Wouk believes she is as well.

Wouk indicated that Marjorie has done the correct thing, that she has followed her inescapable and life-affirming destiny, when she ultimately discards inappropriate dreams of glory and chooses the traditional religion and values she has grown up with, a stable man she has grown to love, “and children, and a warm, happy home.” While contemporary readers may well find troubling Marjorie's abrupt abandonment of her career dreams, as well as her obsession with virginity, there is no doubt that Marjorie's feelings accurately reflect normative attitudes among American Jews in the 1950s.

**Marjorie:** *That's really what I am. Just another girl.*

**While you watch, consider:**

- ◆ How do Marjorie Morningstar's values differ from those of her parents? From Noel's?
  
- ◆ How do Marjorie and her friend Marsha Zelenko see romance and marriage differently?
  
- ◆ What sorts of mixed messages does Marjorie receive about her role in life?
  
- ◆ How do the different characters feel about making commitments?

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- ◆ Compared to some of the other couples you'll encounter in this series, Marjorie and Noel are very much alike – same religion, similar socioeconomic backgrounds, similar interests. Given all this, why does their relationship fail?
- ◆ Is there any truth to the “Shirley” stereotype, and is there a male equivalent of a “Shirley”?
- ◆ What attracts Marjorie to Noel? What does she learn?
- ◆ Marjorie's mother has wishes for her, and gives her advice, that may seem quaintly old-fashioned today. What kinds of challenges do parents see in their children's lives today, and what advice might they want to give them at important turning-points? Can such advice be helpful?
- ◆ How would a film made about a Jewish woman and her options today differ?
- ◆ Marjorie fell deeply in love with Noel, but married another. How may we seek different qualities in a boyfriend/girlfriend, lover, and mate?

## SUGGESTIONS FOR READING AND VIEWING

### Books and stories

- ◆ Piercy, Marge. *Small Changes*. Garden City, New York.: Doubleday, 1973.
- ◆ Wouk, Herman. *Marjorie Morningstar*. New York: Little, Brown, 1992.

### Film

*Sheila Levine Is Dead and Living in New York*