

INTRODUCTION



THE FILMS in this course explore love and romance in the context of Jewish lives. The relationship between romance and Jewish identity is double-sided, for just as connection to Jewish family and community influences romantic decision-making, so too, in turn, can an individual's romantic choices significantly affect Jewish identity and continuity.

“More than Chemistry” spans 100 years of American Jewish history. Romantic choices, as presented in the films, have often been invested with larger social, economic, and psychological goals. They have often been tied in overt or subtle ways to intergenerational conflict, to social movements, to the task of acculturation, and to the love-hate relationship with the larger American culture. From turn-of-the-century immigrants to 1960s college sweethearts to contemporary Manhattanites, the film characters demonstrate that “falling in love” can be a more complicated process than it appears.

The Films: Love Stories

The Imported Bridegroom is the story of a father and daughter and their differing priorities in selecting her future spouse. The issues that complicated romantic choices in the immigrant period (and later too) – the conflicts between generations and the conflicts between American and traditional Jewish values – are explored.

Marjorie Morningstar, set in pre-World War II New York City and in an upstate summer resort, illustrates how the rapid acculturation of American Jews affected romantic choices. The heroine shares in the strong Jewish/American middle-class values of her parental home, but she is also drawn to the glamour of the theater and the freedom of a bohemian lifestyle.

Goodbye, Columbus tells the story of a poor but intellectual young man living with his Jewish caricature of an overbearing aunt in the 1960s, who meets and is seduced by a sharp, funny, ambitious, and spoiled upper-class Jewish Radcliffe “girl.” The young woman enjoys

taunting the materialistic values of her friends and relatives, but eventually capitulates to them.

The fourth session features a documentary exploration of the phenomenon of Jewish-Christian relationships, a theme in the subsequent films in the series. *Intermarriage: When Love Meets Tradition* explores sympathetically but honestly the factors that make outmarriage different from other types of boundary-crossing.

The Way We Were looks at a romance between an idealistic Jewish woman and a cool and careless gentile man. Contrary to many trends within American films, this movie captures a time and culture in which Jewish was likely to mean working class, and the most self-absorbed, upper-class characters were non-Jews.

The hero of *Annie Hall* is the archetypal New York Jew – overintellectual, oversensitive, overliberal – who is drawn to a dizzy Midwestern blond gentile woman. He both adores and disdains the non-Jewish world which cannot or will not share his intensity, pain, and neurotic obsessions, and has similar conflicting emotions about his non-Jewish lovers.

Crossing Delancey focuses on the lives and choices of Jewish singles in urban societies. It explores the conflicting pulls of feminist, careerist, and familial yearnings, as a young woman who is free to make her own decisions, romantic and otherwise, finds herself confused not only by her spectrum of choices but also by the irrationality of her own desires.

Love Conquers All. Or Does It?

There has been perhaps no more potent symbol of the reign of individual choice in contemporary American society than the culture-wide romance with romantic love. The triumph of true love over family, socioeconomic status, religious or ethnic differences is often viewed as the victory of equality and the individual pursuit of happiness over the inequalities and bigotries that have divided people in the past.

In the American media and in popular literature, individualistic romantic love has frequently been presented as “pure chemistry,” a mysterious potion. This chemistry of sexual, emotional, and spiritual attractions has often been

contrasted with marriages arranged for a purpose, such as economic gain or political considerations, in traditional societies. Thus, romantic love has been viewed as an expression of the primacy of the individual and individual freedom. In American popular culture, the union of two souls is “good,” and the attempt by outside forces to frustrate such a union is mistaken, even corrupt or evil.

However, as many writers and filmmakers know, a lot more than chemistry is operating when two individuals find themselves attracted to each other. Throughout history, people’s choices of romantic and marital partners have been profoundly influenced by factors other than sexual attraction and mutual regard. Indeed, even erotic appeal is influenced by a wide variety of social and cultural forces. People often find themselves attracted to those who seem to represent a powerful or glamorous milieu to which they aspire. Sometimes people choose mates precisely because they seem to further the rejection of families and societal or cultural ties that feel stifling. And yet, in other cases, in spite of attractions to those who are different, people choose to marry someone with whom they share a background and cultural or religious values.

Secret Agendas: Seeking Identity through a Partner

Choosing a partner marks a pivotal stage of life. It’s a new beginning, a time of confronting – or making peace with – values, dreams, and life goals, as well as issues of identity. For some, romance provides new avenues for self-definition.

It is not uncommon, in life or in the movies, for parents and children to have conflicting ideas about suitable marriage partners. Battles between tradition and change frequently are played out between generations. Often the two sides have agendas that have nothing to do with “chemistry” but instead with the lifestyle and status they hope to achieve. In *The Imported Bridegroom*, the father wishes to choose as a husband for his daughter a Talmudic scholar who will solidify his own religious standing, while the daughter desires “an uptown doctor” who will be a ticket to upward social status – and “Americanization.” Marjorie Morningstar and Brenda Patimkin (*Goodbye, Columbus*) each think they are attracted to their

unconventional beaux because of their physical appearance, wit, charm, and talent. But both women are also using their romantic involvements with these men to challenge the middle-class values of their parental homes. Similarly, the star of *Crossing Delancey* first hopes to use a romance with a glamorous figure to transport her into a more exalted realm of existence – and liberate from her an old-fashioned bourgeois Jewish mentality.

Spoiled Daughters and Neurotic Sons: Images and Stereotypes

The views of Jewish life and Jewish characters in many popular films are based on stereotypes – and may serve to perpetuate those very stereotypes. In these love stories, caricatures are plentiful.

Goodbye, Columbus presents a slice of Jewish life so vivid – and stereotypical – that the film’s name has become part of our vernacular language to describe conspicuous excess (as in “It was a real Goodbye Columbus wedding”). Neil Klugman at first believes that the wealth and elegance of his paramour’s palatial home can free him from the tribal obsessions of his relentlessly Jewish relatives, but he soon comes to believe that wealthy Jews are no more cosmopolitan than poor Jews, they just have more money with which to indulge their obsessions.

Both *The Way We Were* and *Annie Hall* make use of certain popular stereotypes about Jews and non-Jews, picturing the Jewish partner as far more cerebral, urbane, politically liberal, intense, and neurotic. Barbra Streisand (*The Way We Were*) and Woody Allen (*Annie Hall*) portray Jewish characters who somehow believe they are responsible for repairing the world’s ills, but who are each wildly attracted to the cool, casual, careless charm of a non-Jew who seems to epitomize the cool, casual, careless non-Jewish world. The tenement grandmother and the old-fashioned matchmaker in *Crossing Delancey* are appealing characters, but they too are caricatures. Nevertheless, although the films’ portrayal of both Jewish life and the characters’ romantic involvements may be simplistic – and life is always multilayered – there’s a wealth of fascinating material for discussion.

Intermarriage: The Unspoken Dilemma

For American Jews, intermarriage is a sensitive subject. But it would be an omission to speak of American-Jewish patterns in love and romance and not consider intermarriage, for in contemporary life it is a significant trend.

A session dedicated to discussing intermarriage is included in this course in order to look honestly at the issues involved and to present various points of view. The documentary provides an opportunity to view the lifestyles of inmarried, mixed married, and conversionary Jewish households, and explore what these changes may mean for the Jewish community as a whole.

The documentary looks at several appealing young couples who initially feel that the chemistry of true love has erased any differences between them. As they talk about the realities of married life, however, each discovers that religious differences are more salient than he or she had initially thought. By the end of the documentary, different couples seem headed toward divergent resolutions of their complex feelings.

Happily Ever After?

The relationships portrayed in these films take many different courses. As in life, great romantic beginnings don't necessarily result in lifelong love; life, even in the movies, is full of complexity. Some of the film endings are vague; it's up to the viewer to decide on the subsequent success of the union.

As certain films progress, the very attraction of opposites that was initially so compelling to the individuals involved becomes a source of irritation, and finally an irreconcilable difference. For some characters, their romantic involvements are a temporary challenge. When they tire of being different from their parents, they can still return to the world of solid middle-class values.

One ending that seems unambivalently upbeat is that of *Crossing Delancey*. Izzy breaks loose from a seductive non-Jewish writer and falls into the arms of a sweet, solid, working-class Jewish man instead. Like most persons on and off the screen, she must eventually make her romantic decisions based on actual options, not on notions of an

idealized human being, and she comes to understand that love may truly be more than chemistry.

Along with providing lively entertainment, including some unforgettable lines, these films offer some profound issues to ponder. Watching love develop – or evaporate, or run an on-again-off-again course, as the case may be – can prompt us to probe our own lives and family histories, and rethink our own romantic experiences, or our hopes for new romantic involvements for ourselves and our children.