

SESSION FIVE



When Opposites Attract: *The Way We Were*

Feature film, 1973

Director: Sydney Pollack

Screenplay: Arthur Laurents

Katie Morosky: Barbra Streisand

Hubbell Gardiner: Robert Redford

Length: 118 minutes

The unforgettable theme song about memories, sung by Barbra Streisand, won an Academy Award.

Streisand's Katie Morosky and Robert Redford's Hubbell Gardiner make a striking couple, and theirs is an unlikely romance. Differences can play a big role in sexual attraction; the greater the difference, sometimes, the more exotic and desirable a man or woman may seem, and the more dangerous and thrilling the pursuit.

In attempting to convey the emotional realities of such an attraction between opposites, some storytellers simplify the nuances and complications of human character. They purposely emphasize the differences between socioeconomic and religious groups, so that the viewer can clearly understand both the vigor of the attraction and the inevitability of its demise. This simplicity can create a powerful viewing experience, whatever its artistic flaws.

The Way We Were relies on such simplifying techniques. In a self-conscious attempt to document and recapture the historical idealism of large numbers of American Jews and also to rehabilitate the character of the American Jewish woman, this film divides the world neatly into passionate, generous, socialist Jews and cool, urbane, capitalistic gentiles. Katie and Hubbell represent the two very different worlds.

The film gathers together many themes and provides a very useful antidote to popular portraits of Jews as craven materialists. Moreover, it is one of the few films that attempts to portray the impulse toward interfaith marriage from a Jewish woman's point of view.

The Way We Were looks back in time at their romance. Katie and Hubbell attended the same college in 1937 but moved in very different circles: She worked to support her studies and spearheaded campus activism, while he earned

Hubbell: *You do it, you know. You make yourself feel out of place.*

Katie: *Your friends make me feel like I'm invited for drinks and everyone else is staying for dinner.*

several varsity letters. They shared a writing class and in a few encounters seemed drawn to each other, but it is only years later, during World War II, that their romance begins. Katie is working at a New York radio station and Hubbell is in the military, and they meet again, by chance, in a New York City night club. For a while, at least, the two enjoy each other and their differences, and life seems idyllic.

Katie is a kinky-haired, exuberant, food-obsessed, hyperactive socialist with a great sense of humor. However, unlike many other stereotypes of Jewish women, Katie comes to love as an inexperienced and somewhat puritanical virgin with a sweet, generous, and open heart, wanting only to feed and nurture her beautiful gentile boy. Redford's Hubbell sees a kind of authentic and powerfully humanizing intensity in his very Jewish lover and then wife, but he never quite loses his ties to his buddies and their girls, who swim in a sea of alcohol, brittle elegance, superficial charm, and financial and social privilege.

In portraying Katie, Streisand draws on other stereotypes of the Jew, an interfering "fixer," unable to mind his or her own business, who is drawn to socialism and other utopian movements. She also draws on the stereotype of the Jew as a person who always tries too hard. The image of Hubbell, conversely, draws on the stereotype of the wealthy non-Jew who assumes that life owes him everything he has and will acquire. Moving only among similarly blessed aristocrats, such "golden boys" mature with an ethic that discourages them from throwing too much effort into anything.

In *The Way We Were*, Katie and Hubbell represent two divergent values systems, as well as two very different personalities. A nonromantic formulation of a similar opposition is found in the splendid film *Chariots of Fire*, which contrasts the intense, competitive, driven son of a Jewish tradesman; an elegant, laid-back son of British nobility; and the clean-living son of a Scottish clergyman. At one point, the headmasters of their boarding school scornfully deride the Jewish boy for trying too hard. They note that such sustained effort is unseemly and distinguishes the "son of a tradesman" from a true "gentleman."

Eventually the differences between Katie and Hubbell override their affection for each other. Katie cannot stop trying to perfect the world. The Jewish concept of *tikkun*

Hubbell: *Katie, the day you die you'll still be a nice Jewish girl.*

Katie: *Are you still a nice gentile boy?*

olam, bettering the universe which God left only half completed, is interwoven into the very fiber of Katie's being. One of the things she can't stop trying to perfect is Hubbell, and Hubbell cannot bear Katie's incessant attempts to remake him and the world. Eventually, they break up and find partners more like themselves.

In Depth:

A Paper Doll that I Can Call My Own

The prevalence of the motif of materialism in films and fiction about Jews has been and continues to be striking. A visitor from another planet might imagine that Jews are defined by wealth and consumerism. Ironically, the experiences of many American Jews are quite different. Rather than being preoccupied with acquiring wealth, numerous American Jews have devoted their lives to creating a more egalitarian society; rather than being preoccupied with consumerism, a disproportionate number of American Jews donate their energies to fighting for the rights of others. The commandment "Be kind to strangers because you were strangers in the land of Egypt" retains its strength in American Jewish psychology, as Jews feel responsible even for cycles of oppression that were begun long before they came to American shores.

From the creation of the unions, especially the garment workers union, in the early twentieth century, to marching for civil rights for African Americans in the 1960s, to the creation and maintenance of the contemporary feminist movement in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, to the international human rights movement, American Jews have displayed enormous altruism and, at times, a prophetic fervor for justice.

The early decades of the twentieth century were a time of extensive Jewish activism, an activism that is striking, especially among women. In 1909-1910 about two-thirds of the women employed in the garment industry were Jewish; within that industry, Jewish women – depicted with admiration as *vunderbare farbrente meydlekh* (wonderful, fervent girls) – provided the primary leadership and support for the emerging unions, partially because many had brought socialist values with them from Eastern Europe and Russia. Newspaper reporters and other observers of

Katie: *It's because I'm not attractive enough, isn't it? I know I'm attractive, sort of. But I'm not attractive in the right way, am I? I mean, I don't have the right style for you, do I? Be my friend.*

Hubbell: *No, you don't have the right style.*

Katie: *I'll change.*

Hubbell: *No. Don't change. You're your own girl. You have your own style.*

the scene described the ferocity and eloquence of Jewish girls who lead the strike of 20,000 shirtwaist workers on November 22, 1909.

Education was a tremendously important factor in transforming the lives of American Jews, and once again, the impact of education on women was particularly striking. Education not only enabled the children of immigrants to make enormous personal strides, but also exacerbated the intergenerational gap, and often opened up chasms between mothers and daughters. A study of working girls in evening schools in New York City in 1910 and 1911 showed that a larger percentage of the women attending evening school were foreign-born Jewish women than women who had been born in America. Those who were successful were able to go on to get jobs as secretaries, bookkeepers, or sales clerks in the finer stores; these jobs were seen as highly desirable – and indeed they represented a very different form of life from twelve hours a day of factory work. Many educated second-generation Jewish women became schoolteachers and social workers in numbers far disproportionate to their place in the immigrant population; early on, teaching and social work came to be considered “Jewish professions.”

In politics, Jewish liberalism is a kind of tradition. In many elections, middle- and upper-class Jews continue to vote like Blacks, Hispanics, and unemployed persons rather than like other affluent white Americans. Even after the point of being eased out of leadership positions in the civil rights movement, American Jews continued to identify with the downtrodden of their country and the world, carrying on an idealistic political consciousness and activism. While the number of conservative, Republican Jews has increased with each decade, the majority of American Jews continue to be identified as liberal.

Disturbingly, few contemporary films or novels have presented in a positive light the liberal passions of American Jewish men and women. Some notable exceptions include the novels *Davita's Harp*, by Chaim Potok, and Meredith Tax's *Union Square*. Both explore in a fictional setting the fiery devotion to prophetic ideals that often motivated Jewish socialists and communists in a less disillusioned era of American history. Tillie Olsen writes

movingly of working-class women and their constricted choices, as well as their revolutionary fervor. Grace Paley's elliptical short stories, especially those that focus on her alter ego, Faith Darwin Asbury, explore the developing social consciousness of a divorced young mother. Several of the heroines of these stories and novels, who often see themselves as citizens of the world, are involved in interfaith romances. In film, *Norma Rae* and *Running on Empty* present activist Jewish men, in the former a union organizer and in the latter a former radical.

In *The Way We Were*, director Sidney Pollack creates a retrospective romantic fable about a deeply idealistic, liberal Jewish woman who works for the communist cause and falls in love with an aristocratic non-Jew. Although it simplifies many things, this film has historical interest, and it serves as a useful antidote to the seemingly ubiquitous popular image of Jews as successful (and often money-hungry) business and professional people.

The Way We Were not only turns popular images of the crass businessman Jew upside down but reverses the popular picture of the Jewish woman as well. A comparison of Katie with Marjorie Morningstar – who ostensibly lived during the same historical period – is useful. Marjorie is not careless about people's feelings, in the way in which Hubbell and his friends are, or in the way that F. Scott Fitzgerald's Daisy Buchanan (*The Great Gatsby*) is. But Marjorie does take for granted the good things in life that her father has provided her. Marjorie never stops being aware of wardrobe, even in her most anguished moments. Most substantively, Marjorie tries for a while to change her own personal world, but she never even thinks of trying to change the world at large.

Streisand's Katie is, in certain ways, as much a "good little Jewish girl" as Marjorie is. But Katie is about as remote from a "princess" as possible: she cares nothing for material things (except for good food, which she makes herself), and she finds the "good life" empty and boring. One musical theme that serves as an effective foil for the heroine is "I want a paper doll that I can call my own." Katie is no ornamental, empty-headed, docile paper doll; she is a flesh and blood woman who is animated entirely by intellectualism, idealism, and love.

Katie: *Wouldn't it be lovely if we were old. We'd have survived all this. Everything would be easy and uncomplicated the way it was when we were young.*

Hubbell: *Katie, it never was uncomplicated.*

Katie: *But it was lovely, wasn't it?*

Hubbell: *Yeah. It was lovely.*

While you watch, consider:

- ◆ How does the film inform the viewer that Katie is Jewish and Hubbell is gentile?

- ◆ What draws Katie and Hubbell together?

- ◆ In what ways are their differences most evident?

- ◆ How does the outside world view Katie and Hubbell as a couple?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ Katie and Hubbell joke about their religious differences. Do their concerns run deeper than that?
- ◆ Do you think this relationship could work under different circumstances? If so, what would those circumstances be?
- ◆ What are the advantages of being involved with someone similar to yourself? Someone different?
- ◆ How do you picture Hubbell's and Katie's parents and how would they view the relationship? What role, if any, does parental approval or disapproval have in relationships today?
- ◆ This film looks back. How does nostalgia color relationships?
- ◆ In the end, Katie and Hubbell part and find partners more similar to themselves. Is this a likely ending for some of the couples in the *Intermarriage* film? For interfaith relationships we may be familiar with? What kind of endings do we hope for?

SUGGESTIONS FOR READING AND VIEWING

Books and stories

- ◆ Fox, Meredith. *Union Square*. New York: Avon Books, 1988.
- ◆ Glen, Susan A. *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.
- ◆ Gold, Michael. *Jews Without Money*. New York: Carol and Graf Publishers, Inc., 1985.
- ◆ Goldman, Emma. *Living My Life*. New York: New American Library, 1977.
- ◆ Paley, Grace. *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1974.
- ◆ Paley, Grace. *Later the Same Day*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985.
- ◆ Potok, Chaim. *Davita's Harp*. New York: Knopf, 1985.
- ◆ Sinclair, Jo. *The Wasteland*. New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1987.
- ◆ Wald, Alan. *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987.

Films

Chariots of Fire
Norma Rae
Running on Empty
Tell Me a Riddle