

# PATHWAYS

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## RESEARCH COMMENTARY

### **Women Being Groomed as Objects of Desire in Romantic Comedies**

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**Abstract:** The films *His Girl Friday*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, and *Annie Hall* are dominated by the male gaze and the men's expectations of their women partners. In "Women Being Groomed as Objects of Desire in Romantic Comedies," there is a shift in focus on how the women in these films are perceived and how they are much more like objects for their partner's pleasure.

**Research Keywords:** film, cinema, gender studies, queer analyses, literature

When considering gender thematic issues, a common conflict is often men grooming women to be their wives. This is most evident in genres such as romantic comedy films where unattainable and socially defiant women are persuaded, groomed, and even forced to be women ready for marriage. In those films, it may not always be about garnering a spouse, but rather about possessing and controlling women into conforming to the men's ideals. In the three romantic comedies, *His Girl Friday* (1940), *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), and *Annie Hall* (1977), the men in the film groom women to be the objects of their desire through mise en scène and dialogue.

In *His Girl Friday* directed by Howard Hawks, we are presented with Hildy Johnson, a reporter trying to quit her job at Walter Burns' paper. Walter Burns, however, is both her boss and her ex-husband. Viewers gain an understanding of the gender dynamics within the film in the first ten minutes. In the sequence where Hildy goes to talk to Walter about resigning, there is evident power differential between them. This is displayed not only through dialogue but how the characters are framed within the exchange's shots. In some shots, Hildy is sitting on a desk signifying that she has the upper hand while in other scenes, Burns physically towers over her, showing that he is brooding, overprotective, and possessive of his star reporter.

The significant point in this conversation is when Burns refers to the fact that he picked her “a little college girl straight from the school of journalism” and how he was the one that “made a great reporter out of her”. Hildy is not seen as an equal to Burns rather she is seen as a profit toward his empire. He does not see her as a person, but he sees her as an object and his goal for the rest of the film is to guarantee that his money-making possession is returned to him. It could be seen that Burns is only trying to guide Hildy back to her passion of reporting. However, he still claims that he’s made her that way. Burns still tries to mark what he believes is his doing.

This shift from subject to object is demonstrated through Hildy’s clothes as she is covered in a coat when she first approaches him, almost as armor against his demands all the way until the end of the film where she is seen in just her black dress and susceptible to falling back from his demands of being a news reporter and for potentially marrying him again. In this case, Hildy was not only groomed to be a reporter once but now twice for Walter’s pleasing.

She does gain a sense of freedom under this marriage, but she is still seen as “one of the guys.” She must be seen as a man and not a woman in order to continue her writing. Even then, she has an empathy that none of the other reporters have in regards to the case they are covering. They can tell she is different from her emotional expression. In *Shot/Countershot* Lucy Fischer states, “...women’s intense expectation of romance comes for her desire to share in male power.” (96) Hildy’s romance with Burns is only a desire to have this “male power,” but she cannot escape the bounds of her own femininity and how people view her femininity. Her sense of freedom is misguided as the films reminds us that her peers, particularly men, view her as an other.

In *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* directed by Blake Edwards, the audience is presented with Holly who captures the first minute of screen time perusing the streets of New York by herself, much like her stray cat. She seems to own these streets and knows the ins and outs of the world around her. She is othered when confronted by secondary characters by either being a disruption to the social norm or because she is seen as conquerable. This is where Paul Vajak is introduced. In a literary sense, he wants to capture her essence on paper, often writing about her. This is a metaphor of wanting to tame her and to make her his own; however, he is not the only one. Holly’s former husband, Doc, makes an appearance in a plea to take her back home.

If one considers for a moment that her marriage to Doc is needed for her and her family to survive, marriage in this circumstance is done out of necessity. In this case, Holly is merely an object but knows that marriage is a patriarchal bargain. The patriarchal bargain is a term coined by Deniz Kandiyoti in her 1988 article, “Bargaining with the Patriarchy.” Kandiyoti states, “These patriarchal bargains exert a powerful influence on the shaping of women’s gendered subjectivity and determine the nature of gender ideology in different contexts...patriarchal bargains are not timeless or immutable entities, but are susceptible to historical transformations that open up new areas of struggle and renegotiation of the relations” (275). For Holly, this means that she conforms to what society demands of her such as marriage in order to gain some kind of freedom. She is able to find financial stability through her marriage, which affords her a chance to leave it and to head to New York where she is not owned. However, it is a false sense of freedom as she still performs patriarchal bargains with the men around her in order to live a single lifestyle. She entertains their thoughts and flirting. while also throwing parties to renegotiate the fact that she does not fit into her gender expectations.

Paul is one of the men Holly must entertain as he continues to desire her even when she's expressed not wanting to be tied down. During the climax of the film, Paul confesses that he's in love with Holly in a cab ride back to her apartment. In this shot, the roof of the car is encasing both of them. Their conversation has action/reaction shots and Paul is in each frame, watching Holly's every move. When he does confess, he also blatantly tells her that "people belong together" and that she is in fear of that. Paul recognizes that Holly has dread toward being a relationship but still continues to pester that they must be together for his own benefit. When they briefly separate after the argument, she gives in to those demands, even though she has spent the whole entire movie not being remorseful of the life she lives. She is groomed for domestication, just as her stray cat is, at the film's conclusion.

In *Annie Hall* directed by Woody Allen, there is much more of a discussion of grooming psychologically from those Annie has encountered. First, the film is told from Alvy's perspective, so the male gaze is already contorting this image of Annie to his liking. As Laura Mulvey states as one of the key proponents of the male gaze, one factor is how the camera itself is already contributing to the gaze along with the male protagonist's desires (39). Alvy even states in the first part of the movie that his memories are unreliable, therefore Annie is constructed to fit his own mold, and does not have autonomy over these perceptions.

Alvy is also someone who is looking for a partner that fits his type of a "New York Woman" who is well educated and neurotic. Annie is none of those things until he forces these ideals upon her — chastising her when it does not fit in his image. When Alvy gives her the books he wants her to read, there is a sense of encasement as he and the bookcases crowd over her. Contrasting the sense of crowding, though, there is an ample amount of headspace implying that there is this freedom. Annie does end up being able to live her own life by taking college classes, going to therapy, and will even find stability in her singing career without Alvy's overbearing presence.

Although she does end up being controlled by her music producer as the film goes on, at the end of the film, Annie is shown to be living her own life at her own pace. She has obtained a sense of freedom she has not had before. This is pertinent because even though it is a minute's worth of time compared to the 90 minutes of the film, it is an image that is controlled by Annie and not of Alvy's wishes and hopes for her. The male gaze has been disrupted in the last second of the film, making Annie a subject and not Alvy's possession.

Romantic comedies have been known for continuing the idea that relationships make the social circle go round, but —more often than not —it is women who must give up their freedom, dreams, and even their identities in order to find some type of resolution. While romantic comedies tend to make light of the character's lives and hardships, there must be some criticism of the lenses they are viewed through regarding the fetishization, objectification, and demeaning representation of women in film.

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**About the author:**

Stephanie M. Janania is currently pursuing an M.A. at Florida International University (FIU). Stephanie graduated magna cum laude with a B.A. in English from FIU. At FIU, Stephanie was very active on campus and was both Marketing Director and President of FIU's English Honor Society. Upon graduating, Stephanie has continued to contribute to the FIU community and will be assisting current undergraduate students establish the first student-led film festival at FIU. Her research analyzes the connection between 20th and 21st century films/literature and the idea of non-normativity. She is interested in delving into how films frame diversity in relation to gender dynamics, queer character representation, and the male gaze. Her research ponders the preconceptions of the individual that controls the lens, what the lens captures, and what the audience decides to consume.