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Critiques of Five Films: It Happened One Night, Gone with the Wind, The Graduate, The Godfather, and Saving Private Ryan

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Critique One

It Happened One Night

Director: Frank Capra

Clark Gable: Peter Warne

Claudette Colbert: Ellie, Ellen Andrews



Plot Synopsis

Ellie, the spoiled daughter of a millionaire banker, Alexander Andrews, escapes from her father's yacht when he disapproves of her secret marriage to King Westley, a famous aviator. She jumps into the water, swims away, and reaches a bus station. She manages to buy a ticket by pawning her watch to travel to New York to return to her husband. Just then, a reporter named Peter Warne loses his job as a newspaper reporter and he meets Ellie on the night bus to New York. They dislike each other immediately but are forced to sit together. Ellie unknowingly snuggles to him and sleeps on his shoulder. He allows her to do so and thus begins their adventure.



Accustomed to having her own way Ellie assumes that the bus will wait for her while she shops and is shocked when she returns to the station to find it left without her. Realizing who she is through a newspaper article and recognizing her inability to cope in the real world, Peter stays behind to accompany her. They strike an agreement that Peter will help her to reach her destination, and Ellie gives Peter the exclusive rights to her story. While they travel together to New York, Ellie slowly understands that he is a gentleman, though she dislikes him initially.

Peter protects her from a fellow passenger named Shapely-- who blabbers continuously-- by saying that she is his wife. On the way, due to heavy rain, a bridge gets washed out and the bus stops. Then Peter and Ellie go to a nearby motel room to stay for one night; they pretend to be husband and wife so that nobody suspects them. Since she is a married woman, and he respects her so much, he makes a partition in the room with a blanket between their beds. He refers to it as the "Walls of Jericho." Then they both have a small conversation and introduce themselves to each other. The next day morning he prepares breakfast and takes good care of her. Some kind of friendship starts to develop between them. They pretend to be a couple when the police sent by her father come to check the room and somehow escape. After they get on the bus, Peter and Ellie meet a poor boy and his mother in the bus. The mother faints due to hunger, and Ellie makes Peter give all his money to the small boy to help them reach New York. Peter does not object. Shapely, the annoying passenger who flirted with Ellie recognizes her as the runaway socialite from the headlines in the newspaper and that he can earn a \$10,000 reward for information about where she is. When he offers to split the reward with Peter, the latter pretends to be a mobster who is kidnapping Ellie. Afraid of getting mixed up in kidnapping Shapely runs

away. Then Peter and Ellie leave the bus thinking it is risky to travel with others since the news about her escape is already published in the newspaper. Then they spend a night in a hayfield. They slowly develop and realize some kind of strong feelings for each other though they are not sure what it is. The next day, Peter tries in vain to hitchhike, but when Ellie shows off a part of her leg by lifting her skirt up, a driver stops his car but he turns out to be a thief. He takes all their belongings and drives off. Peter runs after the vehicle and somehow returns with the car. Ellie's father finally agrees to her marriage with King Westley. Ellie reads that message in the newspaper and but she has developed strong feelings for Peter and asks that they stay the night in a motel outside of New York. They again share a room in which they reset the "Walls of Jericho" blanket. Ellie asks Peter if he has been in love with any girl and tells him that he will make a wonderful husband. She then reveals her love for him, but Peter appears not to listen and tells her to go back to her bed. Feeling dejected, she falls asleep crying. Peter was listening but doesn't want to ask her to marry him while he's penniless so he slips out to return to New York and meet with this editor to get money for their marriage leaving her alone in the room. When the landlady finds that Peter's car is missing, she sends Ellie away by insulting her badly. Ellie thinks that Peter deserted her and calls her father. Just as Peter returns he sees Ellie in the car with her father and King Westley and gets angry because he feels that Ellie took him for a "buggy ride". On the day of Ellie's marriage with King Westley Peter contacts Ellie's father to ask for money and agrees to collect it from him at Ellie's home. But Peter doesn't want the \$10,000 reward, he only wants \$39.60 that he spent for Ellie on their trip to New York. When Ellie's father asks him, Peter admits that he loves Ellie. Andrews feels happy and is greatly impressed by Peter's character. He convinces his daughter that Peter loves

her and tells her to leave Westley. At the altar Ellie decides that she loves Peter and runs away to find Peter. Her father pays off Westley for cancelling the wedding. Ellie and Peter marry and even though they are now wealthy they choose to go to a motel room like the ones they shared on their trip. When they receive the telegram that her marriage to Westley is annulled they blow a toy trumpet and the “Walls of Jericho” fall.

Theme

All classes are equal in a society and love between people is more powerful than money and status.

Peter is from a normal, middle-class family. Ellie is the daughter of a millionaire. There is a huge gap between their social statuses. She is pampered throughout her life and a spoiled child. Peter is not rich, yet he is very responsible and caring. His strong values and good character are his real assets. Ellie, though she behaves like an arrogant rich girl initially, slowly recognizes how good and chivalrous a man Peter is. She develops a strong love for his good qualities and extremely caring nature. Though she initially wants to go back to her husband Westley, she understands the value of true love after meeting Peter. Her father convinces her that Westley does not love her but her property and also tells her how much Peter loves her. Ellie’s father, though he is on the extreme end of the spectrum of the social status, while Peter is on the other end, agrees to his daughter’s marriage with Peter just because he is impressed by Peter’s strong values, honesty, and good character. He is mainly impressed by Peter’s pure love for Ellie. The only reason why Andrews refuses to approve Ellie’s marriage with Westley is that Westley is money minded. From this, it is evident that pure love is proven to be the ultimate power and social and economic status has no

effect on love. This was a popular and influential theme in the 1930's during the Great Depression. It provided hope and reinforcement that it's more important to have character than money. (Cinecollage)

Symbol



The blanket hung between the beds, referred to as “The walls of Jericho” symbolizes barriers between Peter and Ellie both socially and economically.

As a nod to propriety Peter hangs a blanket between their beds the two nights they stay at “motor hotels” while on the road. He names it “the walls of Jericho” and it comes to symbolize their differences. In the end, the blanket is removed, which is also a symbol of removal of all the differences and barriers between them. It is important to the film because it not only symbolically shows the difference between the rich and middle-class (or poor rather) people's social and economic statuses, especially in the Great Depression, but also reveals how decent and good Peter is to respect a lone married woman's privacy which ultimately wins her heart. (Dirks)

Camera Choices: Shot Length and Camera Angle

Long Shot



“Long shots provide general information but keep the audience at an emotional distance.” (Ruiz-Esparza 37)

In the movie, long shots were used to shoot the marriage ceremony of Ellie and Westley. The marriage party arrangements, guests who came to attend the wedding, the arrival of the groom, Ellie’s running away from the venue were all long shots. Since the audience does not have to establish a connection with the crowd or the marriage venue, long shots were used. They used long shots during that scene to show how grand were the arrangements in a rich family wedding ceremony.

Medium Shot



*“Medium shots allow the audience to feel like we are a part of the scene.”
(Ruiz-Esparza 39)*

Medium shots were used in many contexts to encourage the audience to develop a personal connection with the characters. In the initial scenes, when Ellie has an altercation with her father since he does not approve her marriage, all the shots were medium shots. Throughout the movie, there are many medium shots used whenever Ellie and Peter had a conversation, especially in emotional scenes. The audience develops a kind of relationship with these characters and understand the love that is being developed slowly between them.

Close-up



“A Close-up forces the audience to care about the character whether to like them or to dislike them.” (Ruiz-Esparza 39)

Close-up shots were used to show Ellie’s feelings when she is not able to express her love for Peter when they both share a hotel room. She is a married woman but has developed a strong sense of love for Peter. When she is not able to express her love for him, the members of the audience are expected to care for her. So, her face was shot in close-up many times. Her feelings, especially her tears were shown in close-up shots.

Low Angle



“A Low Angle is used to give a character or object power.” (Ruiz-Esparza 41)

Low angles are used to give the characters power. When Peter gets fired by his employer he was shown in low angle. This reinforces the power the editor has over Peter’s life and livelihood.

Eye Level Angle



An Eye Level angle like a medium shot length brings the audience into the scene to allow us to feel like we are there. (Ruiz-Esparza 41)

When Peter scares Shapeley, the fellow passenger, who bargains for the reward money, the conversation between them was shown using eye level angle to take the audience into the conversation. When Ellie and Peter had conversation, when Ellie and Andrews had conversation, eye level angles are used to make the audience a part of those conversations.

High Angle



“A High Angle shot look down on a character or object making them appear weak or vulnerable.” (Ruiz-Esparza 42)

When we are first introduced to Peter on the phone in the bus station with all his buddies listening in at the phone booth he is shot in a high angle. Peter talks like he’s important which is what his friends hear when in fact he is being fired. To reinforce his weakness and powerlessness in that situation Capra chose to shoot him in a high angle.

Dolly or Crane





“The Dolly and Crane move the camera and therefore the audience’s viewpoint allowing us to go on the journey with the character.” (Ruiz-Esparza 42)

During the wedding ceremony of Ellie and Westley, a dolly shot allows the audience to walk down the aisle with Ellie as her father tries to talk her out of marrying Westley. Ellie stops to think about it, then runs away and the dolly across the yard allows us to run to the car with her.

Visual Elements

Scenery

Scenery is the walls, floors etc. in the scene to show the physical environment.
(Ruiz-Esparza 179)

The scenery in the two cabins make for an interesting contrast in design. The first cabin is light and airy. The walls are white vertical rectangles with horizontal rails for wainscoting. There are three rectangular windows and a windowed door with soft lace curtains covered by flowered ones. There’s light streaming through them – even during the rainy night. The two twin beds are pushed to opposite walls left and right and are covered in white linens. The furniture is light colored wood that is simple and

straight and only includes the two bedframes, a night stand and a table. The cabin is simple and light like the beginning of their relationship.



The second cabin outside of New York is dark in every way as a reflection of Peter and Ellie's relationship. The walls are dark and are the same color as the windows and door frame. The windows are shuttered and dark allowing no light from the outside in. The only light in the room is from the lamp between the beds which throws large shadows on the already dreary walls. There are multiple vertical and horizontal lines from the wooden framing. It makes the room seem smaller and cage-like. The twin beds in the center of the room with the headboard against the wall. There's still enough room for the "Walls of Jericho" but somehow Peter and Ellie seem further apart. This room reflects the darkness of what they think is the end of their relationship rather than the airy brightness at the beginning.

Props

Props are the objects that the artist holds to show to express the character, or mood of the scene. (Ruiz-Esparza 181)



The donuts and coffee served in simple white crockery are props used in the motel scene to make their morning seem normal. Peter gives his sweater to Ellie when she feels cold on the bus. These are props used to show that he cares for her. He also gives her his coat when she goes to take shower in the common bathroom of the motel. Thus, his caring, protective nature is revealed through his coat which he gives her to help her protect her respect. Peter eats a carrot and also offers it to Ellie--she first refuses to eat a raw carrot. The accommodating, flexible and adjusting nature of Peter is revealed through his act of eating a raw carrot.

Costumes

Costumes are the clothes worn by the characters which reveal a lot about the characters' personality. (Ruiz-Esparza 180)

Although Claudette Colbert was a major star, in this film she only wears three costumes. Interestingly the first and third look similar. The first is a white brocade lounging suit decorated with Chinese embroidered closures that she wears on her father's yacht. It is floor length, has a high collar and long dolman sleeves. It is expensive, tasteful and modest. The white fabric indicates innocence.



The next time we see Ellie she has purchased clothing on the run. It is a black pencil skirt and diagonally striped jacket. The sharply diagonal stripes reinforce the strength of her character. The jacket is form fitting, long sleeved, buttoned and belted which indicates that she is contained and constrained. The striped jacket is accented with a small white pointed collar and cuffs which slightly softens the powerful, yet busy jacket. The skirt falls below the knee which was fashionable for the early 1930's and accompanies black silk hosiery with a seam up the back (also fashionable for the time). Her black low-heeled pumps and black felt cloche hat complete the outfit. These are clothes that a middle-class secretary would wear and while modest in showing skin it is dramatic in design with the diagonal striping drawing attention to her face. She wears this interesting outfit the entire

time she is with Peter but once she returns home she returns to the same design she wore as a socialite.



The final costume however, is a white wedding gown which of course, makes her appear pure and innocent but this contradicted by the shiny satin fabric making her also look cold and aloof. The satin is cut on the bias which clings to her body making her look sensuous belying her innocence. The v-shaped bodice which should indicate power is softened with a garland of gardenias which adds a note of naturalness to the overall haute-couture look. Perhaps this is a nod to her time spent with Peter “roughing” it in nature. The sleeves are cut to act as a short cape in back which heightens the movement of the gown thereby raising her nervousity level although she tries to appear nonchalant about the impending marriage. The headpiece is a small cloche but the veil is voluminous with yards of tulle surrounding her and trailing after her to reinforce her mass and importance. She is back to being a wealthy socialite and again she rebels. As she did in the first white lounging suit when she swam away from the yacht this time she runs across the estate with her white veil trailing behind her.

Lighting

Lighting is used to show different feelings, moods, and expressions, on the characters' face in different contexts. (Ruiz-Esparza 182)

To accommodate the shortened shooting schedule much of the film was shot in day light however, the night scenes provided opportunities for depth and variety in lighting. When Peter threatens Shapeley, the fellow passenger, the backlight from the bus headlights created bright edges to their faces while allowing for shadow on the camera side to indicate mystery and secretiveness. Shapeley's face was more clearly lit than Gable's to show his fear. While in the famous hitch hiking scene strong daylight from a low angle indicates early morning. The shadows are long and Peter stands facing the morning sun so that his face and hand are well lit while Ellie's hair and shoulders are gently highlighted.



Goethe's Three Questions

What was the artist trying to do?

The director, Frank Capra, made the movie *It Happened One Night* during the time of the Great Depression. While showing the contrast and differences between the poor and the rich

classes of the society, he conveyed a strong message that pure love has no barriers. Whether rich or poor, the genuine and pure love between two people is more important to lead a happy life than anything in this world. Despite the differences between the lifestyles of wealthy and poor people, he showed the people of these two classes as good people. The director succeeded in showing how the self-reliant, honest, kind-hearted, dignified, and caring gentleman, Peter Warne (played by Clark Gable), gradually wins the heart of the spoiled--yet innocent and kind-hearted heiress of a millionaire father, Ellie Andrews (played by Claudette Colbert). Capra showed the importance of 'love' in a relationship. Though Ellie had eloped with King Westley before she met Peter, she finally chose to live with Peter after she developed genuine love for him. So, the director emphasized that just 'marriage' is not what binds two people but 'love' is the base of any relationship that leads to a happy marriage; he also conveyed a message that 'pure love' does not have the boundaries of class or status.

How well did he do it?

Capra's work was exceptionally good. He wonderfully showed how subtly and beautifully love develops between Ellie and Peter. He developed the characters so perfectly that we feel as if we are watching people in real life. The costumes, sceneries, props, and lighting as well as the dialogues were so natural and realistic. Capra, in a beautiful manner, showed how the spoiled heiress gradually understands and appreciates the great qualities of Peter and falls in love with him. The director makes a case for proving that love has no barriers. Ellie is the heiress of a millionaire; yet, she appreciates the caring and loving nature of Peter, who is just a normal middle-class person. Ellie, despite being a super-rich woman, empathizes with the poor woman on the bus who faints from hunger and makes Peter give all his money to that woman. Peter, even after losing his job, sticks to his ethics and principles. He takes only the

amount he spent for Ellie from her father. By developing Ellie's and Peter's characters in this way, Capra makes the audience relate to their characters and have an emotional connection with them. Director used a blanket between Peter and Ellie which is referred as 'wall of Jericho' symbolically to show the wall between the rich and poor classes and also the contrast between the characters. Although we don't see Ellie and Peter together in the motel room after they are married at the end Capra let us know with true Screwball Comedy innuendo that they were finally and truly married when we see the outside of the cabin with the lights burning brightly in the windows, we hear a toy trumpet sound and the lights go out. We know that the "walls of Jericho" have fallen. As film critic Andrew Sarris observed a screwball comedy is "a sex comedy without the sex". (Cinecollage.) Frank Capra made excellent choices in casting. Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert. Although it's reported that they did not get along on set their chemistry on camera is magical. Capra used natural locations and hence the film is very realistic and natural; the audience gets fully connected with the plot and the characters by relating to them. Capra is credited with changing Hollywood's established techniques of editing. Believing that pacing was essential to the success of a comedy Capra would begin a scene with action rather than entrances. He sped up the time in black transitioning between scenes and would add natural sound effects in the black to quickly introduce the next scene. (Ruiz-Esparza 129) The camera angles used are mostly eye level and many medium shots are used while shooting the scenes between the two main characters to let the audience become a part of their conversation and develop a relationship with their characters. When Ellie's father gives her a slap, Ellie's face was shot at low angle and her father's face was shot at high angle to show Ellie's weakness and her father's power. Then their faces were shown in a close-up shot to make the audience feel for

them. The father feels equally sad to slap his daughter while the daughter expresses anguish. The director clearly showed the eagerness and curiosity of the press even in those days to know what is happening in wealthy and famous people's lives. The newspaper company head shows utmost interest and curiosity to publish the story and developments of the personal lives of Ellie and her father to create sensation among public. Overall, the director did a great job in narrating the simple love story of two people belonging to two different social classes. Right from their meeting as strangers to Ellie choosing love over marriage, the screenplay was so interesting. The dialogues and costumes were natural.

Was it worth doing?

It Happened One Night was a beautiful and subtle love story that makes a personal connection with the audience. It is "a journey into a woman's heart." The story starts when two people of completely different attitudes and backgrounds meet as strangers and travel together to finally fall in love and live happily ever after. The story was so interesting that the audience travels with the two characters while they travel by a bus falling in love subtly even without realizing it. The character of Peter (played by Clark Gable) was developed in such a way that every woman would fall in love with the loving and caring nature of Peter. Peter's character was that of a typical young man struggling for a successful career during the Great Depression. Though he was in dire need of money after getting fired, he did not take even a single extra dollar from Ellie's father except for the amount he spent. His ideal character wins the heart of even a millionaire and changes his mind. The director conveyed a message that character and ethics are more precious than wealth and genuine love would win over anything. Though Ellie was a spoiled girl, her inherent compassionate heart and innocence were clearly seen throughout the film. The audience would definitely get inspired by these

characters including that of Ellie's father. I particularly loved the scenes when Peter prepares breakfast for Ellie, when he takes good care of her in the motel room, when he gives the 'piggyback ride' -- walks through water carrying her on his back-- when he makes hay bed for her, and when they walk on the road and try to stop a vehicle. My favorite character is Peter. His selfless love and compassion, his caring and responsible nature, his honesty and credibility are just fascinating. I literally travelled with these two main characters till the end. The journey into Ellie's heart certainly conveyed a message that 'love' is the most important ingredient for any marriage. Without love, the relationship is meaningless. When true love blossoms between two people, there are no barriers. No matter how rich or poor they are or how different they are by nature, love ultimately triumphs. This subject and this beautifully made film was hugely successful upon its release in 1934 and was the first film to "sweep" the major awards at the 1935 Oscars. The film won Best Picture for Harry Cohn – Columbia Pictures (his only Oscar win), Best Writer for Robert Riskin (his only Oscar win), Best Actor for Clark Gable (his only Oscar win), Best Actress for Claudette Colbert (her only Oscar win) and Best Director for Frank Capra (who went on to win 3 total). (Ruiz-Esparza 129) *It Happened One Night* was definitely worth doing.

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