

***When Harry Met Sally...* friendship, fear and orgasms**

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Published online: May 2025

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

<https://doi.org/10.70138/VUFP5320>

While working late at night on my laptop in early December 2023 with my television set kept on—on mute—I caught a glimpse of the opening titles of *When Harry Met Sally...* (1989) and the titular characters' introduction in Chicago before they drive together to New York City and begin their adult life. That was it. I left the laptop aside, got my sunflower seeds and immersed myself in the film, which has been on my top-ten list of best films ever since I watched it back in 1989.

My relationship with Harry and Sally has been a long one. In the early to mid-1990s—pre-Internet era—*When Harry Met Sally...* was a weekly rental from my local video store. I thought the movie was a superb rom-com that made me laugh, long for romance and at the same time made me anxious and afraid of ending up without that special someone. I vividly remember identifying with Sally through Harry's description of her as a high-maintenance woman disguised as a low-maintenance one (without even questioning that this label was a male construct). I also remember being afraid that my ex-boyfriend and "love of my life" would end up marrying before me, just like Sally's ex-boyfriend. You see, Sally had been in a long-term relationship whose break-up did not seem to upset her until her ex calls with the news of his upcoming nuptials. Suddenly, Sally unleashes all repressed emotion and breaks down. Harry is there to comfort his distraught friend who's afraid she's "gonna be forty" and alone while in fact she's only thirty-two! Sally's fears about the future and her despair about her ex deciding not to marry her horrified me and my brainwashed psyche. Although I never dreamed of myself in a wedding dress, society and fictional narratives had managed to create the "correct" life journey I should be following. Sally was manifesting my own terror of not checking the right boxes. Little did I know that a few years later, I would get to live Sally's drama. In 1997 or 1998, I, too, found out that my ex had gotten married through a friend (unlike Sally's ex, he didn't have the courtesy to inform me). The *When Harry Met Sally...* scene flashed before my eyes, and I broke down straightaway, and, might I add, in true drama queen fashion. Funnily—and progressively—enough, I was comforted by my then very empathetic boyfriend, while I consciously acted Sally's part and even uttered the line: "he didn't want to marry *ME*." My favorite film had contributed to my internalizing and believing

that this was the right reaction to the news I had gotten. Do not get me wrong, I was indeed hurt. Yet, I certainly did not possess the tools to understand that this reaction (both Sally's and mine) were in fact coming from a rather selfish desire to be chosen as "the one" by another human being.

My 2023 reading of the film, as a post-menopausal cisgender professor of 51 in place of a confused and panic-stricken twenty-something woman, was different. It was deeper, more emotional, and revealing. After the viewing, which almost coincided with the invitation to submit a piece for this section, I started exploring my close relationship with this particular rom-com. In the almost thirty years that followed my Sally "interpretation," *When Harry Met Sally...* keeps popping up in various moments of my life. I still find myself using direct quotes or a character's reaction and adapting it to specific real situations in front of me, and basing advice or even beliefs on the script. Why? It's not only that seminal movies have the power to help us morph into our true selves or influence our actions. I think that most classic narratives become exactly that—classic—because they come from a truthful place and encompass universal truths, thoughts, and concerns. *When Harry Met Sally...* is not just a story screenwriter Nora Ephron and director Rob Reiner crafted out of thin air. It's a story based on real failed relationships and real people. It's a story about how finding your life partner is a journey that can last much longer than the ten years it took Odysseus to find his way back to Ithaca. It's a story about obstacles, sincerity, laughter, sex, pain, and friendship. And it's a masterful piece of filmmaking with virtuoso performances, great lines, an impeccable mise-en-scène, excellent photography and a memorable soundtrack.

Personal anecdotes and production trivia aside, *When Harry Met Sally...* is, 35 years after its initial release, a paradigm in film genre studies (see Abbott and Jermyn 2009, Mortimer 2010, and Jeffers McDonald 2019, among others) and a cultural landmark as evidenced by innumerable references in television, cinema, and commercials, not to mention the number of articles that dissect its production and narrative from a variety of vantage points to prove its relevance or chastise its problematic nature. *When Harry Met Sally...* addressed heterosexual relationships with raw frankness, as only comedy allows you to do. Its major accomplishments lie in the four following discourses it initiated:

- *When Harry Met Sally...* began a mainstream discourse about the well-kept secret of how women fake orgasms in the Meg Ryan scene in Katz's Deli in New York—which has now become a go-to tourist attraction. The scene opened a new path in discussions of female pleasure and the importance of female orgasms.
- *When Harry Met Sally...* did not hide the fact that the dating landscape can be cruel and intimidating, despite belonging to a genre that by definition accepts that "the one" is waiting for you in a meet-cute scenario. When Sally's best friend Marie (Carrie Fisher) learns that she and Harry have had sex and are questioning their whole relationship, she turns to her soon-to-be husband Jess (Bruno Kirby) and says: "Tell me I'll never have to be out there again." Even though Marie's statement can be indicative of her fear of being alone, in the same way Sally's is unreasonably scared of being alone at forty at thirty-two, it is also an acknowledgment of how western society has created a set of endless rules in the arena of romance that frighten humans. What is more, Marie's line is even more resonant in today's dating world, which has become even more

confusing with dating apps, which destabilize the “rules” of the past by adding more guidelines and creating even more chaotic and even dangerous situations.

- *When Harry Met Sally...* did not shy away from representing a softer and troubled masculinity. Although Harry has his share of hegemonic masculinity traits—it’s the end of the 1980s after all—he is not the quintessential alpha male and he is not afraid to express his emotions, either his hurt from being abandoned by his first wife or his love for Sally.
- Finally, and more importantly, *When Harry Met Sally...* discussed how friendship can become the basis of a heterosexual relationship. In fact, as an initial search for this essay showed, the film can be considered the main instigator of a whole subgenre, namely the “friends-to-lovers” rom coms—as they have already been labeled online. Films such as *13 Going On 30* (2004), *Just Friends* (2005), *Definitely, Maybe* (2008), *Going the Distance* (2010), *No Strings Attached* (2011), *The Duff* (2015), *Always Be My Maybe* (2019), *Your Place or Mine* (2023) mediate how friendship can become one of the most important foundations for a healthy coupledness. As Drew Barrymore’s character says in *Going the Distance*, “The only way you’re content in life is if you marry your best friend.”

I ultimately did it (and not at forty). Did you?

Works Cited

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