

# When Harry Met Sally

(Reiner, USA, 1989)

## Component: 1

### Core Study Areas: Genre

### Additional Study Areas: Context, Narrative, Representation

**Rationale for study:** *When Harry Met Sally* is a successful romantic comedy written by Nora Ephron that deals with the developing romantic relationship and gender politics between the eponymous characters. This is to be studied in comparison to *Pillow Talk* and the developing contexts between 1959 and 1989.

### STARTING POINTS – Useful sequences and timings

- Opening sequence
- The couples on a couch – looking at the 6 segments as narrative signposts
- Male/female friendship groups (23.22-28.39)
- Contrasting the New Year's Eve scenes
- Final sequence

### CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

#### Cinematography

- The film frequently frames couples in a mid-shot, such as the staged 'couch couples' who appear throughout. Harry and Sally are also centrally framed together, in mid-shots, visually tying them despite their fractious relationship. For example, in their first car journey, their diner experience and their second meeting in the aeroplane. This contrasts with the arc close-up shot used when we first see Harry kissing Amanda – this is used to subvert the conventions of the genre. The audience know Harry is not meant to be with this character, despite the declarations of love and the camerawork suggesting intimacy. Long-lasting intimacy, like the 'couch couples', is built through friendship and equality, signalled by the framing of the shots.
- Much of the action takes place during the day, with natural high key lighting used to illustrate the couple's positive friendship and blossoming relationship.
- There are many long shots of iconic New York City landmarks and backdrops, such as Central Park, reminiscent of the works of Woody Allen.

## Mise-en-Scène



Image by United Archives Gmbh / Alamy Stock Photo

- Costume, hair, and make-up is used to demonstrate the chronology of the narrative and shows the development of the characters (from student clothing to power suits, etc.) reflecting their growing social status. Settings, such as the use of diners for some of the key discussions e.g., the opening road trip, Harry and Sally discuss her 'great' sex life, mirrors her later 'orgasm' scene charting her development.
- At the wedding of Jess and Marie (their respective best friends), Marie's choice of a white traditional wedding gown reflects the conservative norms related to marriage.

## Editing

- The chronological development of the relationship between Harry and Sally is interspersed with documentary-style segments of actors recounting the moments they first met (purported by Ephron & Reiner to be based on real life accounts). Each account contrasts with the following narrative sequence. Split screen sequences are used to show the characters' phone conversations and reflects the technique used in *Pillow Talk*. A montage sequence is used to show their growing friendship.

## Sound

- The soundtrack is compiled of songs with lyrics reflecting the narrative e.g., *Two Lovers for Friends* plays as Harry and Sally realise their developing feelings for one another. *It Had to Be You* establishes the ultimate narrative conclusion and is reprised throughout. There is a nostalgic

tone to the songs selected and the arrangements, with the soundtrack consisting of *Call Me* songs by Gershwin.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS – Contexts

### Social

- Heteronormative relationships are explored throughout. The film explores friendship between genders and seems to conclude that Harry is correct in his early hypothesis, platonic friendship is not possible. In addition to Harry and Sally, we see Jess and Marie become a couple despite being set up on a double-date, and all characters are focused on finding a life partner.

### Cultural

- The film has many intertextual references to classic Hollywood film, such as *Casablanca*, used to discuss romance and creates a nostalgic tone with the use of classic music, such as *It Had to Be You*.

### Political

- The film reflects post-sexual revolution attitudes to sex and relationships. Sex is discussed openly, although the film does not depict sexual scenes or nudity. The discussion of female orgasm and the Katz diner scene reflects a more liberal and open American society. However, fidelity, monogamy, and marriage are still the aims of the characters.

### Institutional

- Columbia Pictures released the film using the platform technique, and encouraging word-of-mouth to support further distribution. Ephron based Sally on herself and Harry on Reiner and the producer, Scheinman.

## ADDITIONAL STUDY AREA

The narrative is a chronological study of the friendship and developing romantic relationship between Sally Albright and Harry Burns. The film is more overt in its discussion of sex and relationships when compared with *Pillow Talk* but ultimately delivers the same heteronormative conclusion.

## KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS

### Opening Sequence – When Harry Meets Sally (the first time) - 1977 (2.00-4.23)

- Musical rendition of *It Had to Be You* (1924) establishing the genre, nostalgic tone, and sense of romantic ‘destiny’ within the narrative (echoed in the final sequence).
- Couple on sofa – an elderly couple explain their ‘meet-cute’ setting the narrative structure for the film.
- Use of *mise-en-scène* (hair, costume, make-up) to establish the era (1977, university students).
- The camera circles the entwined Harry and Amanda, whilst Sally looks on, alone. This subverts the generic conventions (the meet cute), and the narrative is set to explore how the characters will become romantically involved.

### Developing Friendship (35.25 – 39.04)

- A sound bridge is used to tie together a montage of shots showing the developing friendship and how Harry and Sally are surviving after their break-ups. Sound tying together is the discussion of how they are coping without their respective partners.
- The sequence then moves to a split screen showing the phone conversation, and the characters mirroring one another (in bed watching tv). The use of the split screen and phone is a direct link to *Pillow Talk*.
- Harry is positioned on the left; Sally is on the right – this reflects the positioning of the couples in the documentary style segments.
- The *mise-en-scène* of both characters’ bedrooms: much of the action takes place outside of the characters’ homes (diners, ball games, bookshops, etc.) so this is a glimpse into their personalities.

### Sally’s Fake Orgasm Scene (44.46 – 47.30)

- Camera tracks the busy diner to establish the public setting of this private conversation about sex.
- The positioning and setting mirrors and contrasts with the opening sequence when a younger Sally and Harry were discussing Sally’s sex life on their road trip from Chicago to NYC, demonstrating how Sally has developed in confidence.
- Gender stereotypes are explored, and humour is created by the otherwise wholesome Sally.
- Cut to reaction shots of older male and female diners.
- Estelle Reiner (director’s mother) plays the diner who ends the scene with ‘I’ll have what she’s having’ which is a representation of female sexuality – means the scene ends with a female voice (Harry’s reaction to Sally’s demonstration are non-verbal).

### Crisis (1.13:53 – 1:15:28)

- The split screen is used to demonstrate the divide between two characters – Jess and Marie are central; Harry and Sally are further apart and are no longer mirroring one another compared to previous split screens.
- The dialogue is delivered seamlessly; females positioned to the right, males to the left.
- Jess, Marie, and Sally are in bed – Harry is calling from a phone booth, reflecting his discomfort at being in a relationship.
- The film then cuts between both characters preparing to meet. Voiceovers from both demonstrates their inner thoughts – a technique used in *Pillow Talk*.

## Realisation &amp; a Happy Ending

(1:24:47 - 1:35:32)

- Cuts between the party/Sally's date and Harry alone on New Year's Eve contrast the isolation felt by Harry (his 'punishment') and Sally's dissatisfaction.
- There is a montage of key moments of their friendship with a sound bridge taken from their dialogue in the first sequence to represent Harry's realisation that he loves Sally.
- The setting for this realisation is Washington Square Arch, where Sally dropped Harry on their ride to New York (sequence 1).
- This sequence mirrors the earlier New Year's Eve party where Harry and Sally began to recognise their attraction (as demonstrated through performance and the use of soundtrack).
- The trope of the protagonist running to his destiny/to declare his love.
- Sally's response subverts the generic expectations (her response to Harry saying 'I love you' is 'I hate you') before the close-up of their kiss.
- Sound bridge linking to them as a couple in the documentary style segments discussing their wedding.