

# *Going to the Movies With the Theorists:* An Analysis of Love Relationships in Film

by Keeley Cultra and Mandy Harris

## Abstract

*The love relationships depicted in three contemporary movies are analyzed using the theories of Sigmund Freud, Margaret Mahler, Erik Erikson, and John Bowlby. The application of these theories to romantic relationships in film provide a more thorough understanding of both the movie relationships and the developmental theories of these prominent theorists. The authors utilize personal observation and published literature to apply the theories to each relationship within the three movies.*

## Welcome to the Movies

The vicissitudes of love are often the focal story in film, and in this edition of *Going to the Movies with the Theorists*, we have invited four renowned psychoanalytic theorists to analyze love relationships in film from the perspective of their theories. The movies we have chosen for their critical review are *The Bridges of Madison County*, *Leaving Las Vegas*, and *Carrington*. So sit back, get comfortable, and savor this most stimulating conversation about the many meanings of love from some of the top relationship experts in modern history.

## The Critics: A Brief Introduction

**Sigmund Freud** is the forerunner for the theories of our other movie reviewers and made significant contributions to the fields of psychology and social work with the development of the psychosexual stages of development. He utilizes the psychosexual stages of development to describe the various phases of life and the influences of the aggressive and libidinal drives on all individuals. In particular, Freud is known for his concept of the Oedipal stage in which a young child falls in love with the opposite-sex parent and then must reconcile those urges as a normal stage in development. Freud described the difficulties that individuals may have in different stages of their lives, which may cause them to become fixated at a particular stage and struggle to continue their psychological development (Berzoff, Flanagan, and Hertz, 1996). It is with these concepts that Freud will shed light on the relationships depicted in our three movies.

**Erik Erikson** is a very well-known theorist within the fields of psychology and social work. He also considers himself to be a lifelong lover of the movies. In Erikson's viewing and analysis of the three movies in question, he used the psychosocial stages of development he devised in conjunction with Freud's psychosexual stages of development. Erikson identified specific developmental events, key conflicts, and strengths that arise in each stage of life (Berzoff et al., 1996). His theory allows for a more complete understanding of the journey that we all must take throughout our lifetimes, as well as the strengths that we gain as we navigate each stage of life. Erikson will discuss the misfortune of the characters in the movies who, at times, become lost or stranded within the earlier stages of their development, leaving them unable to move forward.

**Margaret Mahler** is an object relations theorist who primarily postulated how individuals make attachments to others, internalize these attachments, and develop into autonomous persons through the processes of separation and individuation. These processes, although distinct from one another, together lead to the psychological birth of an infant. Mahler equates independence and autonomy with health and maturity. She defines separation as a process by which a young child moves away from the mother and learns to experience him or herself as a separate and unique entity. Through the process of individuation, a child comes to realize him or herself as an individual possessing unique qualities. In addition, Mahler described a series of phases within the separation-individuation process that coincide with specific periods in the child's life and relate to the psychological maturation of the child (Berzoff et al., 1996).

**John Bowlby**, the last of our fine movie reviewers, is well known for his theory of attachment. This theory outlines the primary importance of the attachment relationship between an infant and the primary caregiver, who is typically the mother. As an ideal, Bowlby suggests that within this relationship the child is provided with a safe and loving foundation in life, as well as the opportunity to discover and develop skills for the other relationships within the child's lifetime. Unfortunately, and as depicted by the characters

within our three movies, these attachment relationships may be dysfunctional or become strained, providing the easily influenced child with a negative perspective on relationships. Therefore, in the end, the attachment relationship may yield individuals with secure, anxious/ambivalent, or avoidant tendencies within their relationships (Berzoff et al., 1996).

## The Movies

### *The Bridges of Madison County*

*The Bridges of Madison County* is based on the novel by Robert James Waller, and was filmed in small town Iowa. The story is based on the simple life of a farmwife, Francesca, who has lived her life as expected. She has a fine husband who supports the family and two children. However, one summer she finds herself alone for a long weekend as her husband and children travel to the Iowa State Fair. It is during this brief period of time that Francesca's life is turned upside-down when she meets a traveling photographer by the name of Robert Kincaid. In him she finds her soul mate and must make a decision about her future that threatens to tear apart the very foundation of her life.

#### **Margaret Mahler, Object“ive” Movie Critic**

*The Bridges of Madison County* takes place on a dusty farm in the middle of rural Iowa. It is the story of the brief, albeit heated, affair between Robert Kincaid, a National Geographic photographer, and Francesca, a housewife who, although surrounded by a loving husband and two children, secretly yearns for “something more” in her life. Something more knocks on her door one summer day in the form of Robert, who is in the area taking photos for a series on the unique covered bridges of Madison County.

Although a reasonably healthy chap, and a member of what is certainly the healthiest of the dyads in the films under review, it appears at the onset of the film that Robert has not yet achieved object constancy, an extremely important capacity typically attained between ages two and three. Such a competence would render him capable of providing himself with self-soothing in the absence of Francesca, the love of his life. During their brief relationship, Francesca bestows upon him a pendant given to her by her grandmother in Italy. The pendant serves as a transitional object for Robert and he wears it for the rest of his life, as evidenced in the National Geographic photograph Francesca's children discover

after her death. Viewers may remember that young children in the pursuit of object constancy often use transitional objects to help them retain the warm, positive memories of their mothers in her absence.

It seems as though Robert and Francesca have both reached object permanence, which is a similar capacity, but a purely cognitive one originally discussed by Jean Piaget. This is substantiated by the manner in which the pair is able to discuss, with vividness, a small café located in Francesca's hometown in Italy that Robert once visited on assignment. As the movie progresses, however, the thought occurred to this author that perhaps they both successfully manipulated the entire separation-individuation process, including the achievement of object constancy, as they are able to retain their love for one another for the remainder of their lives, even though they never again correspond with each other. They are each able to develop a healthy self-object of the other that sustains them.

#### **John Bowlby, “Attached” to the Movies**

Viewers, be prepared for the powerful message portrayed by the relationship between Robert and Francesca. These two dynamic characters illustrate a relationship that is the result of a secure attachment and avoidant attachment, and it packs quite the emotional punch (Santrock, 1998).

Francesca is a farmwife in rural Iowa whose life is primarily focused on the care of her husband and children. Francesca enjoys a friendly and trusting love with her husband and, although the relationship does not provide much excitement, she accepts and supports her husband fully. It appears that Francesca has had the pleasure of participating in secure attachment relationships both in her adulthood and her childhood, in her tendency to express both her passionate and selfless love without self-consciousness (Santrock, 1998).

Robert, the visiting *National Geographic* photographer, on the other hand, illustrates an avoidant attachment style. He describes his tendency to avoid lasting relationships with all people, as he tends to move around frequently for his job. He expresses no regret for the loss of connection with people, and explains that he has never felt the need for emotional relationships in his life. In fact, he appears to harbor a desire to avoid the vulnerability and risk that is part of the true emotional connection between people. However, he soon finds the desire and need for them in his growing attachment to Francesca.

Robert and Francesca engage in a heated love affair

in which they experience the true depths of intimacy, passion, and commitment as part of their secure attachment to each other. In the end, after their few days of freedom to be together, it becomes necessary to end their relationship as Francesca chooses to stay with her family in Iowa rather than leaving with Robert. Although it is difficult, both Robert and Francesca are able to say good-bye knowing that they will forever be in each other's hearts and minds. It is their secure attachment to each other that defines the rest of their days, although they do not find it necessary to be together to hold that love in their hearts (Santrock, 1998). The viewer may be saddened by Robert and Francesca's separation in life, but may find solace in the joy that their secure attachment bestowed upon them in their brief time together.

### **Erik Erikson, Lifelong Lover of the Movies**

Robert and Francesca are clearly the healthiest pairing of these three films, but even they have their fair share of obstacles to overcome in their relationship. Robert appears to be experiencing a fixation at the stage of young adulthood when "intimacy vs. isolation" is the normative crisis. Robert very clearly defines his life in terms of his isolation from others, and even goes so far as to explain that he prefers to maintain his isolation as opposed to creating emotional connections with others. Robert seems to have gone the route of exclusivity in which he believes he is the only person he needs in order to survive as a social being (Bendicsen, 2002).

Now Francesca is a woman after my own heart. She does not appear to be fixated at any stage of the psycho-social model, and seems to be addressing her current stage of middle adulthood and its normative crisis of "generativity vs. stagnation" with determination and commitment. Francesca understands that her family needs her but also that she needs them as she finds meaning in her life as a mother and wife. I feel quite certain that despite her longing for Robert's continued involvement in her life, she will find satisfaction and contentment in the crises she has overcome and the virtues she has attained (Bendicsen, 2002).

"Bridges" is a worthwhile film to see in its clever depiction of an illicit affair with the clear message that there are basic expectations of individuals at each stage of their lives. In fact, what could be a better mental image of the connections between the various stages of life and the journey that these stages take us on than the beautiful covered bridges and roads of rural Iowa (Bendicsen, 2002).

### **Sigmund "sex, stages, and videotapes" Freud**

*The Bridges of Madison County* is a passionate display of love in its most primal form. The characters experience a neurotic type of love. Robert's love for Francesca fits the necessary compulsive preconditions I suggested in *A Special Type of Object Choice Made by Men*. His love object "belongs" to another man (her husband), she has a poor sexual disposition (she sleeps with Robert, who is, in effect, a total stranger), and he feels a twinge of jealousy at the idea that she will be sharing her life, love, and body with her husband for the remainder of her life. He, therefore, wants to rescue her from her existence without him and take her to all of the world's exotic places (Bendicsen, 2002). According to my drive theory, such neurotic anxiety is experienced as guilt due to the repression of sexual or aggressive wishes, memories or fantasies that are kept out of consciousness. He therefore developed this neurosis due to a conflict between the id and the superego that the ego was ill equipped to mediate (Berzoff et al., 1996).

### **Leaving Las Vegas**

The movie *Leaving Las Vegas* depicts the tortured lives of Sera, a prostitute, and Ben, a suicidal alcoholic. It is in their very darkest moments that they find each other and become involved in a relationship that is originally based on their own selfish needs for superficial human contact. However, with time, Sera finds herself becoming genuinely attached to Ben and commits herself to him despite his continued efforts to end his life. Sera's decision alters her life forever, and poses the ultimate question of whether she is willing to risk it all for love regardless of whether that love is then returned.

### **Margaret Mahler, Object"ive" Movie Critic**

*Leaving Las Vegas* is the tragic tale of Sera, a professional prostitute, who meets Ben, who is recently unemployed and alcoholic. Viewers will find the characters to be interesting case studies in the process of separation-individuation. I surmise that Sera is too individuated at the beginning of the movie. Viewers will notice the way in which she is able to remove herself from the men she sleeps with. She allows herself to be present with them in a very physically intimate manner, yet totally compartmentalizes her emotions in a separate and safe place so that she can perform without damaging her inner being. After meeting Ben, however, she is able to work through her separation-individuation fixation and indeed, develops a

strong attachment to Ben, even though he is unable to reciprocate. This experience with Ben forever changes Sera. He unconsciously helps her to work through her inability to cohere and as a result she gains the capacity to invest emotionally in her relationships.

Her partner Ben, on the other hand, has not developed the ability to successfully exist alone. He is not able to distinguish between being alone and being lonely (Berzoff et al., 1996). Viewers are left wondering if his family left due to his drinking habit, or if he has resorted to drinking because his family has left. He decides to go to Las Vegas to drink himself to death, believing he has nothing left to live for. And even then, he cannot exist on his own. He hires Sera, a prostitute, to keep him company, to talk with him, and simply to be near him to ease his pain. Viewers may anticipate Ben falling in love with Sera and learning to co-exist with her due to the neediness he exhibits at the onset of the film, but I am afraid they will be sorely disappointed. This movie does not have a happy ending, folks. Ben has established firm boundaries on the level of intimacy with which he is able to involve himself. Just when Sera lets down her guard and begins to love him unconditionally, he pulls away. He makes it apparent that he is not capable of providing her with the emotional nourishment she craves. As a result, Sera is forever changed. She is now able to invest emotionally with other people and, in all probability, will have to change her way of life.

### **John Bowlby, “Attached” to the Movies**

This movie is an excellent example of dysfunctional attachment styles, and the ways in which an attachment style can impact the relationships throughout an individual’s lifetime. The main character, Ben, provides an example of an ambivalent attachment in that he seeks out a relationship with the prostitute, Sera, and does appear to desire a secure relationship. However, he sabotages this desire by pursuing other superficial relationships, which create an environment in which his original ambivalent attachment relationship is repeated. In other words, Ben’s relationship with Sera is centered on the physical and tends to avoid the establishment of true commitment and intimacy in favor of maintaining the trivial nature of the relationship.

Sera, on the other hand, illustrates an avoidant attachment in that she strives to maintain distance between herself and the individuals who come into her life. Her relationship with Ben, in which she willingly cares for him and sacrifices to support him, appears to be a first in her life. She describes her abil-

ity to both maintain distance and control the other men she encounters and interacts with, but she experiences an immediate connection with Ben and that leads her to take the risk of allowing herself to be more intimate and committed than she has been in any other relationship.

In the end, Ben is unable to offer anything more in the relationship than his ambivalent attachment and exits both his life and the relationship with the same ambivalence that appears to characterize his entire life. Sera is left behind to pick up the pieces of her life with the realization that she has both participated in the first real relationship of her life and that it is not possible for her to return to her previous lifestyle of detachment after having been involved in her first true emotional exchange. This movie is effective in its illustration of the sadness and joy that is part of many loving relationships, but will surely leave the viewer with a saddened heart.

### **Erik Erikson, Lifelong Lover of the Movies**

The two main characters in this film have very clearly become fixated in different stages of development, and illustrate the desperate results of people who follow a damaging path. Sera is fixated in the genital stage, which is based on the normative crisis of “identity vs. identity diffusion or role confusion.” Sera is clearly unsure of her identity and how her role is related to others in her life, and has simply complied with the paths that have been laid before her. She became a prostitute because she was capable of doing the job with little emotional attachment, and simply did not have a preference as to the paths or identities that she took on (Bendicson, 2002).

Ben, on the other hand, is fixated in the latency stage, which is focused on the normative crisis of “industry vs. inferiority.” Ben illustrates the experience of inertia in which an individual experiences a lack of action or thought that hinders productivity. Ben avoids the process of completing tasks or addressing his duties in favor of drinking himself to death. He truly demonstrates the futility of life that can result when an individual doubts him or herself, and simply does nothing at all to avoid the experience of failure (Bendicson, 2002).

The one bright spot in this film can be found in the realization that Sera has perhaps gained a sense of identity in the course of her relationship with Ben, but the tragedy is paired with this realization in that her role of caretaker is no longer necessary. Ben has completed his one task of killing himself, and leaves her unfulfilled yet again. This is truly a dark film that

will leave the viewer with a feeling of incompleteness (Bendicson, 2002).

### Sigmund “sex, stages, and videotapes” Freud

*Leaving Las Vegas* is the heartbreaking tale of Ben, a former Hollywood executive, who, after losing everything significant to him, travels to Las Vegas to spend his remaining days with alcohol, the only thing that has remained faithful to him. He intends to spend his time in solitude, but discovers that his id impulses to drink and otherwise satisfy his libidinal and aggressive drives are powerfully restrained by his ego and he consequently experiences a need for companionship. In his quest for camaraderie, he meets Sera, and hires her to simply keep him company rather than engaging in the sexual acts which she is typically hired to perform.

Ben’s motivation for employing Sera is an interesting display of narcissistic love (Bendicson, 2002). Ben seeks in Sera a person similar to himself, who, beneath all of her self-destructive habits, harbors a great deal of sadness as a result of significant losses in her life. Furthermore, he sees in her characteristics that he would himself like to possess. Sera is able to separate her emotions from her daily acts and does not allow herself to be dependent on other people, because experience has proven to her that such reliance on others always results in hurt and betrayal.

### Carrington

The movie *Carrington* offers viewers a glimpse into the complicated relationship between artist Dora Carrington and writer Lytton Strachey. Dora Carrington is a headstrong woman who is known for her single-mindedness in attaining her desires, which becomes heightened when she makes an acquaintance with Lytton Strachey. The two creative individuals are instantly attracted, although their desires for intimacy within their relationship are clearly conflicting. Similar to the issues raised in *Leaving Las Vegas*, the two characters are forced to address the question of whether they are able to commit selflessly or otherwise to a relationship, regardless of the return on that commitment and love.

### Margaret Mahler, Object“ive” Movie Critic

*Carrington* is a movie depicting the unconventional relationship between the early 20th century painter Dora Carrington and the gay writer Lytton Strachey. Ms. Carrington was a gifted artist who, seemingly, devoted her life to Strachey. It is evident that Carrington had a traumatic early childhood. She is unable to

exhibit either appropriate object constancy or self-constancy, as indicated by her inability to physically separate herself from Strachey. Self-constancy, a complement to object constancy, enables an individual to think of him- or herself as a separate being and to develop a core identity. Carrington did not have the capacity to imagine herself as an individual separate from that of her dear Strachey. Throughout her life, she was unable to find a man who satisfied her intellectually and emotionally as much as he did, although she had numerous (albeit usually brief) sexual relationships with men. She felt her greatest role in life was as Strachey’s partner. She coddled him in extreme ways; she bathed him, covered her walls with paintings of him, refused to live separately from him; she ultimately found life without him to be too overwhelmingly painful and took her own life.

Strachey, by comparison, appears relatively healthy with regard to his separation-individuation. During most of the movie, he is extremely separated and individuated. Although viewers may admire the manner in which he is able to individuate himself, they will notice that for most of his life, he is too separated from the people with whom he interacts. He exists rather in his own world and is his own unique personage who doesn’t seemingly rely on anyone. The truth of the matter is that he is extremely dependent on the undivided love and attention he receives from Carrington, and actually manipulates her into pampering him as she does. He perpetuates her tendency to idolize him throughout their years together. At the end of his life, Lytton becomes much less separated and much healthier. It appears that he regrets many of the decisions he has made, including taking advantage of Carrington’s admiration of him and not expressing his love for her. His deathbed confession and the loving letter he sends her provide evidence of this.

### John Bowlby, “Attached” to the Movies

The relationships that comprise this dramatic film are an example of attachment styles at their most emotional. The main character, Dora Carrington, is a female artist who is known to avoid intimacy and passion in her relationships in an effort to maintain the protective distance that offers her a degree of emotional security, and thus depicts an anxious/ambivalent attachment. She attempts to engage in several committed relationships with men, but finds herself in a position of conflict as a result of her unwillingness to incorporate physical intimacy and passion into these relationships. It is not until her relationship with Lytton Strachey, a renowned writer of the times,

that she is willing to consider a relationship of more than an intellectual nature. However, she, very much like Ben of *Leaving Las Vegas*, insures that she will continue her pattern of anxious attachment in that Strachey was a homosexual man and not desirous of her affection. Carrington maintained her attachment to Strachey throughout both of their lives. As a result, she was always unsure of her emotional security because Strachey continued to pursue other relationships and attachments.

Lytton Strachey was another example of anxious/ambivalent attachment in the constant anxiety he expressed over the consistent presence of his love interests in his life. At those times in which it became possible that his love interest was going to cease to be a consistent presence, he would take any course of action necessary to preserve his relationships. He could be quite manipulative in his efforts to maintain the relationships he held most dear, but was also known to sabotage himself in his relationships with his distancing behaviors and quick temper.

The pairing of two individuals who primarily relate to others with an anxious attachment style made for a volatile relationship. Both Carrington and Strachey gained a great deal of support and love from each other, but it was never a relationship in which either individual felt secure or stable (Santrock, 1998). It is a relationship best described as having missed the boat in the fulfillment of basic attachment needs. However, if you're looking for a movie with drama and the true human experience, then look no further!

### **Erik Erikson, Lifelong Lover of the Movies**

Dora Carrington and Lytton Strachey provide quite an interesting study of the psycho-social model in their numerous idiosyncrasies and the roles they assume throughout their lifetime. Dora Carrington seems to be fixated at the Oedipal stage with a normative crisis of "initiative vs. guilt," which plays out in her various interactions and relationships with men. Carrington is quite unsure of the roles she should assume around or with people, and as a result tends to simply act or do as others wish. She may have gained the inhibition that can result from an inadequate completion of this stage, which is "the experience of guilt that leads to a psychological restraint of thought, expression, and activity" (Bendicson, 2002). In her relationship with Lytton Strachey, Carrington struggles with the conflict between the roles he wishes her to assume and the roles he expects her to decide upon for herself. Essentially, Carrington insures that the patterns of relationships and roles that she has

experienced throughout her childhood and young adulthood continue into her later life.

Carrington's love interest, Lytton Strachey, is an example of a fixation at the anal stage with a normative crisis of "autonomy vs. shame and doubt." Strachey has clearly gone to the extreme of legalism in which he is quite self-righteous and has a tendency to exploit others for his own gain. For example, Strachey informs Carrington that she must marry his love interest, who is threatening to leave them both, or he will leave as well. Strachey is aware that Carrington will do as he pleases, but he simply views it as necessary to attain his own desires. In fact, Strachey has truly found the ideal situation in that he can manipulate the environment to suit him without an argument from Carrington (Bendicson, 2002).

This movie is quite dramatic in its portrayal of such fixations and the lasting results of such behaviors, but we must all remember the seriousness of working through each stage of life. Just let Carrington and Strachey be a reminder to you of this very important lesson (Bendicson, 2002).

### **Sigmund "sex, stages, and videotapes" Freud**

The movie *Carrington* depicts the lives and loves of Dora Carrington, an early 20th century painter, and the primary object of her desire, Lytton Strachey, an eccentric writer and critic. It exemplifies perfectly my theory of the psychosexual stages of development. Doris Carrington had a tumultuous relationship with her mother and a very close relationship with her father. She is obviously fixated in the Oedipal stage because she was unable to resolve her Electra complex at the appropriate time in her development (Austrian, 2002). Carrington devalued her mother and harbored a great deal of animosity towards her for not providing her with a penis. She felt a profound sense of loss at not being able to experience the privilege associated with being male and was cognizant of the low value placed on the intellectual, cultural, and artistic contributions of women compared to those of men. As a result of this overwhelming sense of castration, Carrington never forgave her mother, nor was she ever able to identify with her mother and unleash her penis envy. Therefore, she did not develop many traditionally feminine traits, as is quite apparent by the masculine manner in which she dresses and fashions her hair. Because it is at the Oedipal stage of development that a child's moral conscience emerges, Carrington clearly has not developed a proper conscience that could provide her with an internalized set of moral principals.

Furthermore, Carrington suffers from poor ego control, as is witnessed in the scene in which she engages in sexual relations with her husband's best friend with her husband only yards away fishing. She is unable to understand why her suitor is disturbed by her husband's proximity and the possibility of being discovered. Apparently, her ego has not developed sufficiently in order that her id impulses are moderated, and her sexual, id-driven urges are thereby permitted to assume control.

The true object of Carrington's affection is Lytton Strachey. Although he adores Carrington, he is unable to provide her with a relationship on the level that she seeks. Contrary to the popular belief of our time, I believe that he was born bisexual as all humans are. His homosexuality developed during early childhood as a result of a strong mother and a weak or absent father. He developed the exclusively male type of homosexuality as a result of an unresolved pre-oedipal conflict, that is, the unsuccessful negotiation of the separation-individuation phase of early childhood. This, of course, is counter to the "partial homosexuality" that develops as a result of a fixation in the later part of the Oedipal phase (Current theories of the genesis of homosexuality, para 3; and Environment does not cause homosexuality, para 6).

### Conclusion

As evidenced by these movies reviews, not everything ends so happily ever after. But it sure gives us plenty to analyze. Thanks for joining us at the movies.

~ The End ~

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*Mandy Harris has completed her first year in the MSW program. Her first-year field placement was at the Juvenile Protective Association and her second field placement will be at The University of Chicago Hospital in adult oncology.*

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