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Not "On the Level":
The Subversion of Expectations in *His Girl Friday*
by Katherine McLeish

Genre classifications create a contract of expectations, drawing in audiences with the promise of innovation mixed with familiarity. In the Classical Hollywood model, good will prevail, evil will be punished, and the couple will overcome all obstacles to heterosexual union. Howard Hawks's 1940 film *His Girl Friday* challenges the formulaic conventions of the comedic genre, and, more specifically, the romantic comedy. While the film presents the trappings of comedy with its focus on a slapstick romantic quarrel, *His Girl Friday* still takes place in a dark world, fraught with the possibilities of execution, murder, suicide, and imprisonment. Tension arises from the subversion of generic tropes and the disrupted gender politics, including the morally questionable justification of the final heterosexual pairing. The uneasy juxtaposition of comedy and drama results in a film that resists classification. *His Girl Friday* perpetuates a 'double double-cross,' frustrating expectations at both intra- and extra-textual levels in order to question generic expectations. Just as Walter Burns (Cary Grant) manipulates Hildy Johnson (Rosalind Russell) into marrying him, the film itself manipulates the audience into initially perceiving a comedy even though the truth is much more complex. Comedy mixes with melodrama, marriage mingles with slavery, and advertisement flirts with propaganda as the film defies conventions. This is a film based around deception. Both Hildy and the audience are assaulted by a rapid-fire theatricality that raises questions about the power of expectations and its role in social issues such as gender equality and the influence of the media.

Extra-textually, *His Girl Friday* subverts audience anticipation through the mixture of melodrama and comedy. At the most general level, *His Girl Friday* is usually classified as a comedy, and more specifically is fitted into the subgenre of screwball comedy. As defined by Leger Grindon, the "Screwball Cycle" took place from 1934 to 1942 (31). Influenced by the increasing use of sound technology, screwball is dialogue-dependent, using rapid speech to progress the plot and develop character. *His Girl Friday* is exemplary in this regard, using an average of "240 words per minute, about 100-50 words faster than normal American speech" (103). The comedies in this cycle are known for featuring antagonistic romances, where the "screwball couple express attraction through aggression," engaging in lively arguments and a visceral, slapstick courtship where "bickering and insults often lead to physical battles and schemes to get even" (Grindon 33). Walter and Hildy certainly fit this mold, with their "mutual hostility" serving to motivate their private competitions, such as the repeated imprisonment and rescue of Hildy's hapless fiancé Bruce (Ralph Bellamy) (Grindon 34). Nevertheless, *His Girl Friday* does not fully adhere to the standards of the subgenre; even though genre may be seen as fluid, the incongruity between the sentiment of a true screwball film—such as *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934)—and the more conflicted tone of *His Girl Friday* is unmistakable. Walter and

Hildy inhabit a world that is much darker, having already lost the romantic idealism and comfortable marriage for which most couples strive. The film lacks the class struggles commonly found in screwball, and instead of uniting a couple, *His Girl Friday* reunites a divorced couple that has already grown disillusioned with romance.

Stanley Cavell attempts to find a more suitable classification for *His Girl Friday* in his seminal study on romantic comedy, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. In creating the new subgenre of “comedies of remarriage,” Cavell differentiates comedies where the central couple works to “recover” their mutual affections, seeking out “romance within the arena of marriage itself” (54). This class of comedies prioritizes the preservation of innocence over virginity, making it possible for the central couple to discuss the facts of marriage and their lives. Resolution depends on the woman’s ability to gain a greater self-knowledge under the tutelage of her former husband, while resisting the blocking figure of her new suitor. Ultimately, the conclusions of these comedies require the acceptance of “sexual identity [and] the acknowledgment of desire” (56). Although Cavell recognizes *His Girl Friday* as a part of the “comedy of remarriage” trend, and while it does display a number of the defining traits, it does not fit comfortably into his classification; the film frustrates typical genre categorization, and even manages to be the outlier within a subgenre created specifically with it in mind. Even while including the film in his selective grouping, Cavell notes that the tone and environment of *His Girl Friday* are so aggressively urban as to “cast doubt on the placement of this film within the genre” (169). Walter and Hildy inhabit a much more dangerous “oppressive environment” than their remarriage-comedy counterparts (Walters 90). Cavell argues that this film lacks a “green world,” a term coined by Northrop Frye to indicate a utopian location of escape and relief. Instead, the film presents a “black world” that does not shy away from death (Cavell 172). This is a world where the pending execution of Earl Williams (John Qualen), a timid and mentally unstable man, provides the opportunity for romance. The tradition of pastoral comedy does not suit a city where reporters casually dismiss the foreboding sound of the gallows and a suicide merits little more than mild concern. The tone is overwhelmingly hostile; “the setting is one of rumor, distortion, falsehood, corruption, [and] brutality” (Cavell 172). *His Girl Friday* adheres to enough of the generic conventions of comedy to be considered as a part of Classical Hollywood’s comedic oeuvre, but its classification is tenuous and uneasy.

Although comedy and melodrama are not the most compatible of genres, mixing is not unusual – a “pure” genre film is much more uncommon than a blended one. What makes *His Girl Friday* distinct is how the marked “absence of humor” in key scenes “suggests a purposeful resistance of the comedic” (Walters 95). Even while fulfilling enough of the generic traits to be classified as a comedy, *His Girl Friday* eventually double-crosses the audience, revealing an unexpected darkness. Molly Malloy’s (Helen Mack) apparent suicide could have followed the “chaotic logic” of screwball, emphasizing the absurdity of the situation while assuring the audience that

Molly survived her fall or somehow deserved it (Walters 95). Instead, the scene is powerful and dramatic, an especially dark stain in the film's tainted comedy. The other reporters first crowd around Hildy, forming a threatening mass as one of their number grabs her lapels and begins to shake. Real violence threatens the pressroom, the visceral antagonism far removed from the quaint, harmless brawls of traditional slapstick. After a cut, the next shot presents Molly in a medium long shot, the amount of perspective giving a clear view of her body language. Molly is not the confident screwball heroine; she clutches at a chair for support, taking on a defensive posture with a bent waist and slightly hunched shoulders. This is not a comfortable place like the "green worlds" of traditional comedy, and Molly steels her body in an attempted resistance. Nevertheless, the reporters begin to crowd around her, dark-suited men on either side of the frame forming a cage around Molly and pushing her back. They have literally boxed her in, suits becoming the bars to her private prison. Anxiety and tension are evident in Molly's restrained movement; she wrings her hands and her voice takes on a hysterical edge that only intensifies after she shakes off the grasping hand of an aggressive reporter. Despite her obvious distress, the reporter on the left side of the frame blithely dismisses Molly with a careless shake of his hand as he tells her to "never mind that." There is no firm community in this supposedly comic world where self-interest is placed above the needs of the less fortunate. Stricken by this casual dismissal, Molly challenges the reporters' nonchalant attitude towards death by running further into the frame and away from her interrogators. Molly chooses to leap out of the window. The voyeuristic reporters rush to the windows to see a glimpse of her body lying sprawled out on the pavement, where a bright spotlight barely manages to stave off the darkness surrounding Molly's prostrate form.

Suicide is not, and should not be, a comedic subject. The film never clarifies Molly's fate, but her absence from the jump onwards still renders her dead within the perceivable diegetic world. *His Girl Friday* does not represent Molly's suicide as a humorous event, nor does it change and interpret the event to suit a more farcical context. Molly is desperate in the "black world" and eventually surrenders to it; the spotlight will be moved to focus on another tragedy and she will be consumed by the darkness. Although it may be the most striking, Molly's jump from the window is not the only way the film dramatically resists comedy. Hildy is intrinsically linked to Molly following her leap, and as such, the female reporter's life begins to take on darker shades of the melodramatic. This connection is first implied when Hildy and Walter meet up in his office at the newspaper headquarters. Walter claims "there's been a lamp burning in the window for ya honey," to which Hildy replies "oh, I jumped out that window a long time ago, Walter." Although it seems to be a throwaway piece of dialogue in the fast-paced, witty repartee, Molly's actions give it a new context. Hildy is another potential victim in this deceptive world. Walter is associated with Hildy's destruction, offering the window to her Molly; moving toward Walter is a "suicidal" action, threatening the autonomy she has worked to establish (Roth 161). Hildy may believe that she has already jumped and survived, but Walter has not yet pushed her

to the brink of desperation. Just as the film itself tests the limits of genre, Walter sets out to trick Hildy into accepting his control as a desirable state.

Genre conventions are used to naturalize Hildy's destructive choice, making the conclusion seem inevitable to the audience as well as to the other characters within the film. As a "comedy of remarriage," the audience naturally anticipates the couple's reunion. However, the final coupling of Walter and Hildy seems neither stable, nor fully genuine, with Walter appearing to dominate over Hildy's initially strong will. On a micro-level, this complication of the fundamental comic resolution naturally follows the genre confusion, diegetically reflecting the fusion of genres. The film follows the most basic expectations for a comedy, but over time, it proves itself as something more nuanced. In parallel, although Hildy is initially presented as a strong, independent heroine, she is eventually beaten down to conform to Walter's wishes, leaving the relationship with no sense of reciprocity or equality. At the beginning, the conflict between Hildy and Walter is akin to a battle, with both combatants exchanging violent "rapid-fire" speech (Roth 171). Walter sets up a trick, such as stealing Bruce's cheque, but Hildy fires back, her wit allowing her to circumvent Walter's traps, as when she convinces Bruce to hide the cheque in his hat. However, over the course of the film, Hildy is worn down by Walter's persistence, losing her agency to the point that her "staying is patterned as a 'hooking in' to lures and a subjection to hypnotism" (Roth 168).

By the final scene, Hildy is broken, bursting into tears and laying her head on the desk as she realizes that Walter has orchestrated Bruce's arrest for the third time:

We are forced to witness the transformation of a sparkling, active character into a 'woman' or 'infant' – a crying, whimpering, pleading Hildy Johnson. As part of its gaiety, the film even calls off the honeymoon for the second time – one of Hildy's specific complaints when she was trying to make Walter see that the marriage was impossible. (Roth 162)

Hildy submits, her original complaints—such as the abandoned honeymoon and the over-dedication to work—ignored by Walter and seemingly doomed to repeat. Walter's victory is assured when Hildy is disarmed and separated from her main weapon in their war; after she begins weeping, she loses her power of speech. No longer wielding the power of the 'newspaperman,' supposedly feminine weakness guarantees her downfall. Hildy's words become slow and halting, disrupted by sobs and gasps that are in stark contrast to Walter's overwhelming loquaciousness. Only in the light of Hildy's final submission does the meaning of the title become clear. Following Walter out of the office, she is "His Girl," tamed to follow his commands and help him carry out tasks. In this act of gendered colonialism, Daniel Defoe's character Friday becomes an equivalent to a woman defeated by male power and the expectations of comedic resolution. Walter finally succeeds in double-crossing Hildy, leading her into a future

that she resisted, just as *His Girl Friday* lures in audiences with the suggestion of comedy but actually offers a melodramatic hybrid.

In an attempt to explain the presence of humor in Walter's domination, Ward Jones views *His Girl Friday* as a transgressive comedy that requires a violation of expectations and cultivates a partiality "with a perpetrator of wrongdoing" that allows the audience to laugh about actions that would normally be disturbing (92). Walter is the main source of transgressive actions within the film, continually setting up barriers and hardships for Hildy, Bruce, and Mrs. Baldwin. Although the audience is invited to laugh at Walter's wrongdoings, we still must recognize that he is severely mistreating innocent people. Upon reflection, Walter's extreme actions seem cruel and reprehensible; this is a man who is willing to falsely imprison his rival, kidnap a woman, risk a convicted man's life, and generally lie, steal, and cheat to get his way. However, Walter creates comic situations, making him an attractive figure to those who are expecting comedy in the film. The double-cross of desirable expectations is to mask natural disapproval and transform it into affection. The film's already tenuous grasp on comedy encourages identification with Walter, even though "we clearly do not find all incongruities amusing – some incongruities frighten us" (Jones 94). The uneasy tone partially arises from a 'love-hate' relationship; Walter possesses a kind of "terrible charm" that allows him to manipulate others through an anarchic theatricality (Roth 169). He can manipulate Hildy into returning, as well as manipulating the audience to laugh in the absence of conventional humor.

The marketing of *His Girl Friday* seems to promise a much more traditional film and resolution, while the reviews reflect the confusion over the actual product. In general, the advertisements portray Russell as the glamorous heroine, dressed in a gown and sharing longing glances with Grant. In the first of three examples of promotional material (*Figure 1*; see Appendix), Russell stands on the right, her hands boldly placed on her hips. This is an aggressive Hildy, perhaps suited to the beginning of the film, but certainly incongruous with the heroine's final submission. Walter's head in the upper left corner seems to gaze down at Hildy, a slight smirk expressing desire and attraction. However, perhaps the greatest disconnect from the film comes from Hildy's outfit, a long, flowing yellow gown. This poster suggests glamour and romance, not the terse competition and business appropriate attire in the actual film. However, the tagline does hint at Walter's power over his former wife; the line "She learned about men from him!" denotes his superior knowledge and the need for Hildy to be educated. A second poster (*Figure 2*) follows in much the same vein, showing Walter on the left as he speaks to the supposedly irritable Hildy. She is the image of typical feminine attractiveness, made up with bright red lipstick and wearing a low-cut top or dress. These posters suggest a more traditional screwball comedy, with an upper class, independent woman taught the ways of everyday life by the experienced American man. The final image, a newspaper advertisement (*Figure 3*), once again emphasizes the supposedly undeniable romantic attraction between the two leads,

naturalizing and creating expectations for their final reunion. Russell is reclined at the bottom of the photograph, her head seemingly resting on a pillow. Grant looks over her, and even though he appears to be fully clothed, the image has definite post-coital connotations. The image is one of Hildy lying in bed, Walter watching over her resting form. Moreover, all of these images completely exclude Ralph Bellamy in anything more than name. Seeing Walter and Hildy as a couple is inevitable – the promotional images offer no alternative. Just as Walter expects Hildy to return, the audience expects a comic romance. While *The New York Times* describes the film as a “frenzied newspaper comedy” (Nugent 20), *The Hartford Courant* reviewer claims to have seen “a streamlined melodrama” (D.M.F. 7). Confusion and dismay are rampant. According to *The Christian Science Monitor*, the film is “racy, cruelly naturalistic, aggressively indifferent to decency and humaneness” (14). *The Washington Post* review mentions the “semihorrified [sic] laughs” that the film is most likely to elicit (Harris 6). The incongruity between the promotional materials and the actual product do not go ignored. If the average viewer had expected the film’s violence, perhaps their amusement would not be tinged with “horror.”

His Girl Friday is a film that is not afraid to double-cross its audience, just as Walter is not afraid to gleefully double-cross Hildy. Instead of providing an uncomplicated romantic comedy, the film delves into social commentary, showing the hazards of an indifferent world and pervasive gender inequality. The guise of comedy is used to breach topics that could be considered offensive, especially in light of the increasing enforcement of the Motion Picture Production Code in the mid-1930s. A further exploration of Molly Malloy’s suicide seems to reveal a condemnation of media’s invasion into private life – hassled by reporters, she chooses death over their invasive interrogation. Even though it is disturbing, this incident is effectively “hidden” inside of the more typical comic elements the film represents, such as the exaggerated scheme where Walter and Hildy conceal Earl Williams in the desk. Just as the murderer Earl hides within the roll top desk, this film hides a “black world” under a veneer of comedy. Appearance does not match up with reality. As she finally submits, Hildy sobs to Walter and confesses “I thought you were on the level for once.” Walter continually refuses to be straight with her, using deception to trap Hildy and bend her to his will. In the same manner, *His Girl Friday* refuses to stay “on the level,” freely subverting expectations and never committing to an easily definable genre.

Appendix



Figure 1 - Columbia Pictures.



Figure 2 - Columbia Pictures.

AT THE CHICAGO THEATER



Rosalind Russell and Cary Grant are doing a neat bit of co-starring in "His Girl Friday" (Chicago). They are aided and abetted by Ralph Belamy and other able players.

Figure 3 – "At the Chicago Theater".

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