



Marjorie Morningstar (1958)

Hester Street (1975)

The Way We Were (1973)

Private Benjamin (1980)

Kissing Jessica Stein (2002)

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INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

Jews have long been a presence in American film, whether on screen or behind the scenes. This series considers how Jewish women have fared in these cinematic representations. The first Jewish character appeared in an American film in 1903; the first depiction of a Jewish woman in an American film came soon after, in 1907. Although these first representations reflected antisemitic caricatures, most early films about the American Jewish immigrant experience depicted Jewish women sympathetically, as victims struggling against hardship whom the viewer was expected to pity. In 1910, the first intermarriage of a Jewish woman and Gentile man appeared on screen, launching an enduring trend in popular cultural representations of Jews in America. In the 1920s, a new image of the strong and independent Jewish woman, upwardly mobile and seeking education, replaced the characterization of Jewish women as vulnerable victims. This positive representation did not last long, however; after 1934, new regulations against discriminatory images in American film led to the erasure of ethnic characters, and Jewish women disappeared from the silver screen until the late 1950s.

This film series traces cultural representations of and attitudes towards Jewish women in American film in the past 50 years. It begins with *Marjorie Morningstar*, the 1958 film version of Herman Wouk's novel, which in many ways defined the formula for future depictions of American Jewish women. This film was the first and arguably most popular example of Jewish women's reappearance on the silver screen. It portrays an upwardly mobile Jewish daughter who is ambivalent about whether she wants independence or security, her loving but materialistic and controlling mother, the pursuit of romantic attachment as the primary goal of Jewish women, and the lure of assimilation. A return to ethnic distinctiveness in popular culture of the 1960s and 1970s made possible the appearance of more Jewish women characters in American cinema, though their Jewishness is often more implicit than explicitly developed. The series ends with a recent independent film,

Kissing Jessica Stein, in which a talented Jewish girl once again seeks romance, but in a twist for the new century, finds herself involved with another woman.

Critics and viewers have analyzed and re-analyzed the movies included in this series, trying to determine their meaning for Jewish women and the American Jewish community in general. Do these films present any role models we wish to embrace? Are they hopeful or pessimistic about the opportunities that Jewish women face? Do they advocate Americanization or ethnic distinctiveness? Independence or communal ties? Is the Jewish mother a figure to be revered or despised? Do Jewish women deserve happiness? What brings Jewish women fulfillment? The messages these movies send are decidedly mixed. Although they may not provide answers to these questions, they do offer important openings for discussion and analysis of the place of Jewish women in American culture.

MARJORIE MORNINGSTAR (1958)

STARRING NATALIE WOOD & GENE KELLY

DIRECTED BY IRVING RAPPER

Based on Herman Wouk's 1954 novel, this film tells the story of Marjorie Morgenstern, a beautiful and wealthy New York Jewish girl, who falls for the playwright Noel Airman (born Ehrman) during a summer job in the Catskills. Marjorie's romance with Airman holds the promise of excitement and an alternative to settling down with the "right" boy, but he resents what he perceives as her demand for security and his success.

Popular at the time of its release and now celebrated as a "classic," *Marjorie Morningstar* is often cited by scholars, critics, and movie lovers alike as a foundational representation of American Jewish womanhood. The fact that the non-Jewish Natalie Wood plays Marjorie does not dilute the film's ethnically specific messages about love, family, ambition, and assimilation.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What is the role of sex and sexuality in the movie? Why does Marjorie's virginity need to be protected "like Fort Knox"?
- Why is Noel Airman "the enemy of every mother in greater New York"? What makes him dangerous? Is this reputation deserved?
- Is Marjorie a "Shirley"? Is she a prototype of the "Jewish American Princess"?
- Do you think Noel is correct when he declares, "Marjorie, you are your mother"?
- What is Marsha Zalenko's view of relationships and marriage? How does her perspective differ from Marjorie's?
- Why does Noel become an advertising executive?
- Does Marjorie ride Noel mercilessly, as Noel claims? If not, why does he make this accusation?
- Why does Marjorie's relationship with Noel fail?
- How do you interpret the end of the movie? Does Marjorie get what she wants? Wouk's novel ends with Marjorie as a conventional suburban wife and mother. Why do you think the movie ends differently? Is the Marjorie of the movie also headed to the suburbs, or will she have a different fate?

HESTER STREET (1975)

STARRING CAROL KANE & STEVEN KEATS

DIRECTED BY JOAN MICKLIN SILVER

This independent film, based on a 1896 short story by Abraham Cahan, depicts the process of assimilation among the immigrant Jews of the Lower East Side. Jake, formerly Yekl, has been in New York for three years, during which time he has shaved his beard and taken up with Mamie, a stylish dance hall girl. When his wife, Gitl, arrives, he is embarrassed by her “greenness” and Old World ways. But despite Gitl’s seeming timidity, she finds her own place in America.

Written and directed by a Jewish woman, Joan Micklin Silver, this film was made on a shoe-string budget and achieved commercial attention only after earning rave reviews at the Cannes Film Festival. It found an American audience even among those unfamiliar with the cadences of Yiddish (in which much of the movie is spoken) and the Lower East Side, but reviewers debated whether the film is “a page from the album of our past” or a caricature of immigrant life.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How does this movie challenge or reinforce your perception of the immigrant world of the Lower East Side?
- What is the tone of this film? Is it nostalgic about the immigrant experience?
- What role does the dance hall and romantic flirtation play in the process of Americanization for these immigrants?
- How would you characterize Mamie? How would you characterize Gitl? Are either of them positive models of Jewish womanhood? If so, in what ways?
- What kinds of power do women have in the immigrant community?

- How does assimilation affect men and women differently, according to this film?
- Why does Gitl decide to take off her wig? Is this a turning point for her? If so, how?
- Who is the victor at the end of the film? How has Gitl changed?
- This film was made in 1975. How might it have been different if it were made in 1955? Do you think it would be different if it were made today?

THE WAY WE WERE (1973)

STARRING BARBRA STREISAND & ROBERT REDFORD

DIRECTED BY SYDNEY POLLACK

Barbra Streisand, the first unapologetically Jewish woman on screen, plays hotheaded activist Katie Morosky, who falls in love with the WASP jock and writer Hubbell Gardiner (Robert Redford). Despite their differences, they share great passion, until the House Un-American Activities Committee's witch hunt in Hollywood makes it impossible for them to ignore their disagreements about the importance of politics.

Earning Streisand an Academy Award for Best Song and nomination for Best Actress, this film has joined the annals of classics. Katie Morosky, one of Streisand's most beloved Jewish "big mouth" characters, is widely considered a highlight in Streisand's remarkable career and represents a turning point in the depiction of Streisand, transforming her from a comic figure into a serious romantic lead.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What is Jewish about this film?
- Why is Hubbell attracted to Katie? Why is Katie attracted to Hubbell? Are these familiar patterns in representations of

Jewish/Gentile couples in American popular culture?

- Why is Katie “not attractive in the right way”? What does this mean? Why can’t she have her own style and have Hubbell, too?
- Do you think this film is a condemnation of intermarriage or does it romanticize the idea that “opposites attract”? Is this movie a warning against assimilation?
- What does Hubbell mean when he says, “Katie, the day you die you’ll still be a nice Jewish girl.” Is this a compliment or an insult?
- Does Katie expect too much, as Hubbell claims?
- If Hubbell is “like the country he lived in,” as his story proclaims, what does this say about Katie’s place in America? Is she doomed always to be an outsider?
- Is Katie a success or a failure at the end? Do you identify with her? Do you pity her or admire her or both?

PRIVATE BENJAMIN (1980)

STARRING GOLDIE HAWN

DIRECTED BY HOWARD ZIEFF

Judy Benjamin thinks she has fulfilled all her dreams when she marries Yale Goodman. But when he dies on their wedding night, she doesn’t know what to do with her life. So she enlists in the army, only to discover it’s not quite what she expected. As Private Benjamin, Judy discovers new strengths and talents she did not know she possessed.

Earning Academy Award nominations for Best Actress, Best Supporting Actress, and Best Screenplay, this film delighted audiences with its winning combination of comic energy and admirable character transformation.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Do you think this movie reinforces the JAP stereotype or subverts it?
- How is Judy's sexuality portrayed?
- How does Judy Benjamin change over the course of the film? What makes this change possible? What are the turning points for her?
- How does this movie represent Jewish parents and parenting? Are you amused or disturbed by this depiction?
- How does this movie portray Jewishness? Do you think this movie suggests that Americanization (represented by the Army) saves Judy from her pampered Jewish life?
- Henri warns Judy not to turn down his offer of "a future, a home, and a name." What, according to the film, may be more important to a woman than these three things?
- This film begins with a wedding (the traditional happy ending) and ends with Judy walking away from another wedding. Does this reversal in outcome suggest a new direction for Jewish women's fulfillment?
- What do you think Judy does after the end of the film?
- How would you compare Marjorie Morgenstern (from *Marjorie Morningstar*) and Judy Benjamin?

KISSING JESSICA STEIN (2002)

**STARRING JESSICA WESTFELDT, HEATHER JUERGENSEN
& TOVAH FELDSHUH**

DIRECTED BY CHARLES HERMAN-WURMFELD

In this recent independent film, beautiful, smart, and neurotic Jessica Stein is ready to give up on the New York dating scene. But then she responds to an ad placed by Helen and embarks on an uncharacteristic experiment to see if she can find happiness with a woman. Jessica and Helen love each other, but is their relationship romance or a deep friendship?

Heather Juergensen and Jessica Westfeldt co-wrote and co-star in this film, which initially began as comedy sketch and then a two-woman play called "Lipshtick." Although a Hollywood studio was initially interested in their screenplay, Juergensen and Westfeldt ended up making the movie themselves. Its success on the film festival circuit earned the movie commercial distribution and reviews calling it a "smart romantic comedy" in the style of Woody Allen that asks the question "can a nice Jewish girl from Scarsdale find happiness in the arms of a beautiful if scrawny shiksa from south of Houston Street?"

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What is Jewish about this film?
- Why does Helen call Jessica a "Jewish Sandra Dee"? Is Jessica a stereotype? Do you think she is a sympathetic character?
- How is the Jewish mother in this film similar to and/or different from earlier depictions of the Jewish mother in the other films in this series?
- How does Jessica change over the course of this film? What prompts this change?
- How do you interpret the end of this movie? Will Jessica

“get her man” or is this another film in which the Jewish woman ends up alone?

- Jessica is Jewish and Helen is not. Is this relationship yet another in the long history of cinematic Jewish/Gentile relationships, or does the fact that Jessica and Helen are both women change the paradigm? Does the film’s suggestion that Josh Meyers is really the right match for Jessica contain a message about intermarriage?
- How would you compare Jessica with Marjorie Morgenstern (*Marjorie Morningstar*)? How would you compare Jessica with Katie Morosky (*The Way We Were*)? Are there any similarities in these varied depictions of Jewish women?
- Does the character of Jessica represent an advance in images of Jewish women in American film? How far have Jewish women come in cinematic depictions?

The Jewish Women's Archive is a national non-profit organization dedicated to uncovering, chronicling and transmitting the rich historical legacy of American Jewish women. Founded in Boston, Massachusetts in 1995, JWA was one of the first Jewish organizations to stake a claim on the new frontier of the internet, and continues to innovate in its use of the virtual world for academic, cultural, archival and educational purposes. JWA's award-winning website has the most extensive collection of material on American Jewish women on the web. JWA has become a leading advocate of and educational resource for Jewish women's history.

For more information, visit the Jewish Women's Archive website at jwa.org.

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