

FILM

AN INTRODUCTION

ART

FOURTH EDITION

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Lee decides to leave Frederick, saying, "I want a less complicated life, Frederick. I want a husband, maybe even a child, before it's too late." It seems apparent that this is her goal, whether or not the man she marries is Elliot. These various new goals are the ones that carry the action through to the end of the film. Interestingly, the characters alter their goals at different rates: Some are still working on their original goals when others have already switched. Thus the two cycles of goals do not seem to be schematic as they might in our listing here.

All these goals are achieved in some fashion during the two climactic sequences, the second Thanksgiving party and the series of brief scenes between Mickey and Holly. The third Thanksgiving party, introduced by the title "One year later," serves mainly to confirm that all the main characters are now happily situated. Mickey's dialogue with Holly also reiterates the notion of the unpredictability of love. He says, "I was talking to your father before, and I was telling him, it's ironic, I used to always have Thanksgiving with Hannah, and I never thought I could love anybody else, and here it is years later, and I'm married to you, and completely in love with you. The heart is a very, very resilient little muscle." He then suggests she write a story based on that idea, adding, "How're you going to top that?" She responds, "Mickey, I'm pregnant," adding one more surprise to the plot.

When Holly tells Mickey she's pregnant, the music that her father is playing offscreen on the piano is "In Love Again." This is the song that the jazz musician Bobby Short had sung during Holly and Mickey's first date. At that time Holly had disliked it; now it returns as a motif to link the two scenes, stressing how unpredictable it had been that these two would ever fall in love. This musical motif is one more example of how *Hannah and Her Sisters*, despite its distinctive innovations, draws on the principles of the classical Hollywood cinema to create a unified narrative.

■ **DESPERATELY SEEKING SUSAN**

1985. A Sandford Pillsbury Production, distributed by Orion. Directed by Susan Seidelman. Script by Leora Barish. Photographed by Edward Lachman. Edited by Andrew Mondshein. Music by Thomas Newman. With Rosanna Arquette, Madonna, Aidan Quinn, Robert Joy, Mark Blum, Laurie Metcalf, Will Patton.

In all the classical films we have examined so far, groups of characters interact to create causes and motivations. Their actions, added together, steadily push the action forward. In *Desperately Seeking Susan*, however, the two protagonists, the staid New Jersey housewife Roberta and the wild, streetwise Susan, initially seem to have little connection to each other. The early portion of the plot alternates sequences involving the two women, but, although Roberta reads about Susan in the personals column and becomes fascinated with her, they do not interact directly. Yet the two women's lives gradually begin to intertwine, until they finally meet at the end. The form of the film depends on devices of parallelism that point up how the women are actually somewhat alike.

The posters and advertisements for *Desperately Seeking Susan* hint at this mutual transformation by cueing audiences to see the women as alike. They feature a picture of the two stars with the slogan: "It's a life so outrageous, it takes two women to live it." This stress on the similarity of the two represents the situation at the end of the film. Yet we could easily imagine an advertising campaign that stressed the contrast between the two: Roberta could be shown in her original housewife role, looking nothing like Susan. The advertisement, however, emphasizes parallelism. (Both women wear a distinctive jacket that features prominently in the action, though there is only one such jacket in the film.)

As *Desperately Seeking Susan* begins, the narration stresses the contrasts between the women's situations. It then follows the process of Roberta becoming more like Susan and Susan becoming more like Roberta. Indeed, the overall aim is the elimination of the most extreme character traits of the two. In the course of the plot, Roberta turns into a less outlandish version of Susan. She rejects the dull life she has led but does not adopt Susan's promiscuity or irresponsibility. Similarly, at the end there is even a strong hint that Susan and her occasional boyfriend Jim are going to settle down together. Thus ultimately the film creates a compromise between two women with very different ways of living.

Normally we have not analyzed our sample films in chronological order, but here we shall do so. This is chiefly in order to show how the revelation of contrasts and parallels between the two protagonists progresses steadily across the narrative.

The plot's opening section alternates between Roberta and Susan but without creating any causal connection between the women. The alternations characterize them as sharply different persons: Roberta's boring existence as a New Jersey housewife will drive her to act out her fantasies, while Susan's life is all too full of excitement. The film uses a variety of contrasts between the two women's lifestyles to link their alternating scenes. As the narration moves back and forth between them, it highlights their traits, which will in turn motivate events later in the plot.

The initial scene in the beauty salon establishes that Roberta is naive and romantic and that she lives in a well-to-do middle-class milieu. She reads a personal ad from a man named Blackie who is trying to contact a woman he saw in Washington Square: "Give love a chance," he concludes. Roberta remarks, "I hope she gives him a chance." Roberta's sister-in-law Leslie replies cynically that the man is probably a pervert. The advertisement establishes an association between romance and Greenwich Village, where Washington Square is located. Roberta also reads a message from Jim to Susan, setting a date to meet in Battery Park. Susan is linked to Roberta's romantic fantasies by the phrase in the ad, "Desperately seeking Susan." Roberta says, "Desperate, I love that word. It's so romantic." Leslie scoffs, "Everyone I know is desperate, except you." Roberta is annoyed: "I'm desperate . . . sort of," and circles the ad in red pencil. At this point our curiosity is aroused concerning why Roberta should be desperate, and we may form a vague expectation that it has something to do with her conventional, bland life.



Fig. 10.30

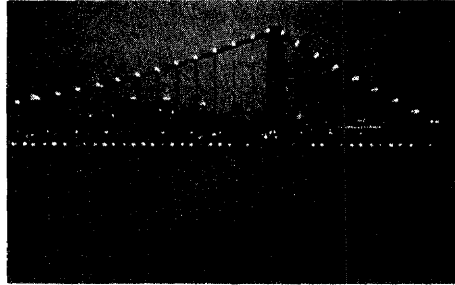


Fig. 10.31

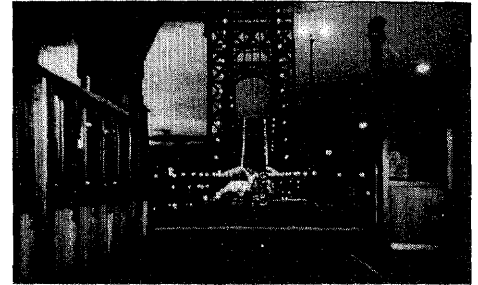


Fig. 10.32

A cut moves the action to a hotel room in Atlantic City, where we are introduced to another woman. The link between this scene and the previous one quickly becomes clear as she reads the same ad and draws a heart around it. She is Susan, the person whose romantic life Roberta envies. We also learn that the man she is with is not Jim. During this scene, several of her traits become clear. She is promiscuous, irresponsible, and a thief (jamming her suitcase with articles pilfered from the hotel and from her lover, Bruce—most importantly, a pair of earrings). Her amorality is reinforced immediately when she uses a locker without paying for it and when her friend reluctantly allows Susan to stay in her apartment, begging her not to make long-distance calls on her phone. Even on such brief acquaintance, we can sense that Roberta's and Susan's character traits seem radically opposed.

After Susan leaves the hotel room, she is spotted by a gangster, who sees her only from the back and notices the distinctive pyramid design on her jacket. Already two major motifs of *mise-en-scène* that will later link Susan and Roberta have been introduced: a series of personal ads and the jacket.

Now the plot shifts back to Roberta. She and her husband are giving a party, during which he and his guests watch an advertisement for his spa store. As Gary turns on the TV, the news is ending, with the announcer mentioning a recent robbery of Egyptian artifacts. The earrings which we just saw Susan take were part of that robbery. Thus there turns out to be an element in common between the two scenes, but there is no indication so far as to how the earrings might create a connection between Roberta and Susan.

During the advertisement, Roberta moves to the window and looks out sadly. Offscreen, we hear Gary's voice, on the TV, say, "Gary's Oasis—All your fantasies can come true." Roberta moves out onto the balcony (Fig. 10.30), and we see her point-of-view of the skyline of southern Manhattan (Fig. 10.31) with a bridge prominent in the foreground, followed by another shot of her wistful face. These shots reinforce the idea that she is discontented with her bland suburban life and that southern Manhattan will be where her romantic fantasies are acted out. A cut takes us to another view of the same bridge, but from the opposite end (Fig. 10.32). A bus drives up (Fig. 10.33) and Susan gets off, walking past an ad for Atlantic City (Fig. 10.34).

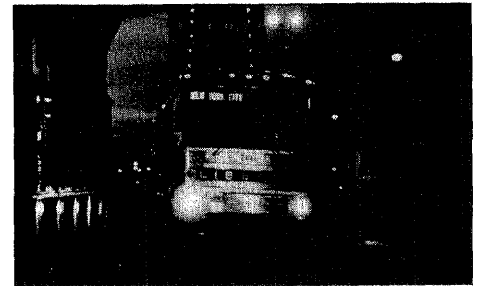


Fig. 10.33



Fig. 10.34

There is still no causal link between the two protagonists, but this transition reveals some specific differences and similarities between them. Susan behaves like an utter hedonist, grabbing whatever she wants, while Roberta dreams passively of escape. Initially they are both in New Jersey: Susan has been having an affair in Atlantic City, and Roberta, as we learn from her view of Manhattan, lives in New Jersey. Yet Susan returns to Manhattan immediately, and Roberta's romantic fantasies are focused on New York. Thus the film draws on the social stereotype that New York is sophisticated and exciting, but that New Jersey, though just across the river from New York, is uncultured and dull. In terms of narrative motivation, the use of Atlantic City in the first scene involving Susan later becomes important. As one of the few places in America where casino gambling is legal, it is associated with organized crime; this stereotype motivates Susan and Roberta's brush with gangsters.

The scene in which Susan puts her suitcase in the locker also motivates later causal links between her and Roberta. The postcard for the Magic Club will provide a clue that brings them together. Susan also puts on only one of the earrings, leaving the other, so that at the end of the film the similarity between the two women can be stressed by the fact that each is wearing one when the gangster pursues them.

At this point, however, the significance of these objects is still unsettled, and the transition from Susan back to Roberta is again based on a contrast between their traits. Susan uses a nail file to avoid paying for a locker, while Roberta passively watches a scene from Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* on television. The film's hero says to his wife, "It's gone forever. That funny, young, lost look I loved." This line stresses Roberta's naiveté by comparing her with the film's heroine and also suggests her longing for romance. Both traits contrast completely with the cynical, experienced Susan.



Fig. 10.35

The next scene, in which Susan goes to the Magic Club (Fig. 10.35), is linked by the postcard, not to the previous scene, but to an earlier one. In our analysis of *His Girl Friday*, we saw how classical films typically create a transition between two scenes by setting up a cause at the end of the first, then leaving it dangling until the beginning of the next, when its effect is made clear. A similar sort of scene progression is common in films using parallelism to contrast two protagonists. Here a cause is left dangling at the end of one scene, not mentioned during the next scene or two, and then brought up again to motivate an effect in a later scene. The resulting progression is still linear and comprehensible, but we shuttle back and forth, with two or more lines of action simply interrupting each other. (Another example of such a pattern would be *Amadeus*, which also involves a character who becomes fixated on someone very different from himself.) Here the introduction of the Magic Club postcard at the end of a scene suggests that Susan will go there, but a scene involving Roberta follows, and then in the third scene we switch back to Susan arriving at the Magic Club.

Backstage at the club, Susan gets permission to stay in her friend's apartment. By this point in the film, we have acquired most of the basic information we need to understand the situation. A fade-out and -in signals a major break in the film, and the next section begins with Roberta driving

across the same bridge we had earlier seen; she is on her way to witness the meeting between Jim and Susan (Fig. 10.36). A rightward pan reveals a view (Fig. 10.37) opposite to the one seen when Susan arrived by bus. Up to now the film has stressed the differences between the two women, but once Roberta responds to the ad and goes to the meeting place, the similarities between them become more apparent. True, Roberta is still passive, simply spying on the happiness of Jim and Susan, but now she seems determined to try and do something to change her life. At the end of this scene, staging in depth places Roberta in the foreground and Susan beyond her, with the two women walking in synchronization with each other (Fig. 10.38), and for the first time it is suggested that the pair might be more alike than we first thought. This increasing stress on parallelism prepares the viewer for the moment when Roberta buys Susan's jacket in a second-hand clothing shop.

Roberta's purchase of the jacket signals the beginning of another new phase in the film. From this point on, all the characters will become involved in searches. Susan is looking for her suitcase (which Roberta gets by using the locker key she finds in the jacket pocket), Gary is looking for Roberta after she bumps her head and loses her memory, Jim is looking for Susan, the gangster is trying to recover the earrings, and Roberta and the projectionist Dez, who helps her when she gets amnesia, are trying to figure out why the gangster keeps following her.

Whenever the plot needs to move one step further, an object or message turns up to act as a clue in these searches. The jacket becomes the first direct tie between Susan and Roberta, and hence the progression from scene to scene stops depending on parallelism and begins to be motivated by direct causal connections. The most important causal motif is the key that is in the jacket pocket. After Roberta returns home wearing the jacket, the key falls out of the pocket and she finds it. Immediately after this she takes a bath, with the key beside her; this is apparently when she decides to try to meet Susan by placing an ad.

The scene now shifts to Susan in the clothing shop, inquiring about the jacket: "You sold it! I had a key—it was really important!" She leaves her name and address. This sets up the scene much later where Gary calls Susan and they become allies in the search for Roberta. Finally, the act of her writing provides a transition. A cut leads to Roberta writing the advertisement telling Susan to meet her "Regarding key," and signing it "Stranger." Immediately there is a cut to Susan reading the ad and saying: "Good going, Stranger." The key serves to tie all these scenes together and move the action swiftly along to the point where Roberta develops amnesia and assumes that she is Susan.

That moment, when Dez calls Roberta "Susan," and Roberta hits her head, marks a shift in the narrative. Now the story becomes concerned primarily with Roberta's search for her identity and her flight from the gangster. The motif of the locker key continues as a major factor, as Roberta and Dez find Susan's suitcase and assume that Roberta is really Susan. For a long stretch of the action, Roberta and Susan again appear in separate scenes. Now, however, Susan is a less important character because we concentrate on the process of Roberta's loosening up and becoming more like Susan. During this section of the film, the characters conceive their



Fig. 10.36

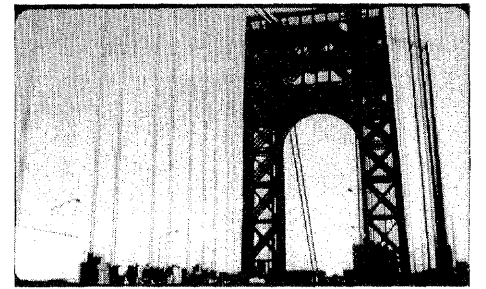


Fig. 10.37



Fig. 10.38

various goals, setting up the lines of action that will drive the narrative forward. Susan wants her suitcase back, Roberta must recover her memory. Roberta's husband Gary also becomes more prominent here, as he searches for her.

In shifting among these various characters, however, the film cannot always find any direct parallelism or dangling cause that links one scene to the next. In many cases, then, one scene will end with some sort of action that will be echoed in the new scene, even though there is no causal connection between the two. This kind of transition is common in Hollywood cinema, since it lends an impression of continuity to scenes which are intrinsically unrelated. Thus when Dez discovers that his previous girlfriend has taken most of his belongings, the scene ends with a shot of the empty space where his refrigerator had been. A cut moves us to Leslie's house, showing her refrigerator. At the end of this scene, Gary, Leslie, and her boyfriend discuss Roberta's disappearance, while the two men eat delicatessen food. A cut then moves the scene to Roberta and Dez, dining on Chinese takeout food on the roof of his apartment building.

In a sense, however, the two eating scenes are connected. The film has suggested that Roberta may be romantically linked with Dez. In the scene where Dez and Roberta had come to his apartment for the first time, his former girlfriend, Victoria, had been moving her furniture out. At that point she had assumed that Roberta was Dez's new girlfriend. Now Dez and Roberta seem attracted to each other, and she even kisses him; their growing love motivates his willingness to continue helping her, despite the dangers involved. Just as important, however, this rooftop scene further emphasizes the parallels between Roberta and Susan, for both are in love with similar men. Dez strongly resembles Susan's boyfriend Jim. Roberta asks what Jim looks like, and Dez replies, "Sort of my build." Yet, just as Roberta never adopts Susan's irresponsible lifestyle, Dez is less wild than Jim. Dez has a steady job as a projectionist rather than roaming around the country with a band. He represents the modest but romantic lifestyle that will ultimately be seen as ideal for both young couples.

After this rooftop scene, the film continues to be structured around searches, with the dangling causes consisting of clues that various characters find at the end of one scene, then follow up at the beginning of the next. Roberta finds a matchbook from a coffee shop in Susan's suitcase, so she and Dez immediately go to the coffee shop to see if it will help Roberta regain her memory. There it turns out that the gangster is still following her. Similarly, after Gary sees the shopping bag from the store where Roberta had bought Susan's jacket, he goes to the store to track down Susan's name and phone number. He enlists her in his search for Roberta, and we realize that he is somewhat dissatisfied with his marriage. Susan enjoys the luxurious lifestyle in New Jersey far more than Roberta had, telling him, "You know, I could get used to a place like this." We already knew that Roberta wants to be like Susan. Now it becomes clear that Susan might aspire to Roberta's comfortable suburban lifestyle. Susan, also, however, finds Roberta's diary and learns from it that Roberta reads the personals. This discovery leads Susan to place the third and final ad, asking "Stranger" (i.e., Roberta) to meet her at the Magic Club.

The plot's climax occurs when the characters gather at the Magic Club. All of them have been desperately seeking either Susan or Roberta, and all find what they have been looking for. Now the phrase "desperately seeking Susan" loses the romantic aura that Roberta had initially ascribed to it. It becomes literal as the gangster grabs Susan and drags her through the backstage area of the theater. During this chase sequence, the film could have taken a conventional approach by having all the characters chase and capture the villain. Instead, it keeps the male characters in the background. Jim responds to kidnapping by simply looking around in confusion; Gary passes a window and fails to see the gangster outside with Susan. In the end, Roberta saves Susan, and the film concentrates on the two female protagonists. Similarly, in the brief epilogue, we see them both being hailed for having recovered the stolen Egyptian earrings (Fig. 10.39). Roberta's dreams of romance and excitement in New York have been fulfilled.



Fig. 10.39

Despite the fact that *Desperately Seeking Susan* is an independent feature, made outside the Hollywood production system, it conforms to the tradition of the classical narrative cinema. It carefully motivates narrative events by planting information ahead of time. As with the other films we have examined, it creates unity through the repetition of motifs. And like other classical films, it comes to an unambiguous, closed ending. At the beginning, Susan had been attractive but too wild; she imposed on her friends, lived for the moment, and endangered herself and others by her recklessness. In contrast, Roberta had been too bland and settled, living a prosperous existence with little romance. By the end, they have given each other a taste of a different mode of behavior and in the process have become quite similar, meeting halfway. Despite the advertising's emphasis on Susan's extreme lifestyle, the film's slogan could have been, "It's a life so outrageous, it takes two women to tame it."

NARRATIVE ALTERNATIVES TO CLASSICAL FILMMAKING

■ DAY OF WRATH (VREDENS DAG)

1943. Palladium Film, Denmark. Directed by Carl Dreyer. Script by Dreyer, Mogens Skot-Hansen, and Poul Knudsen; based on the play *Anne Pedersdotter* by Hans Wiers-Jensen. Photographed by Karl Andersson. Edited by Edith Schluessel and Anne Marie Petersen. Music by Poul Schierbeck. With Lisbeth Movin, Thorkild Roose, Sigrid Neiiendam, Preben Lerdorff Rye, Anna Svi-erkier.

The films analyzed so far pose few difficulties for viewers who like their movies straightforward and easy to digest. But several films we will be examining from this point onward are not so clear in their form and style. In these films our uncertainty becomes central. In films like *Day of Wrath*, the questions we ask often do not get definite answers; endings do not tie everything up; film technique does not always function invisibly to advance