

FILM

AN INTRODUCTION

ART

FOURTH EDITION

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■ HANNAH AND HER SISTERS

1986. Orion Pictures. Directed and written by Woody Allen. Photographed by Carlo Palma. Edited by Susan E. Morse. With Woody Allen, Michael Caine, Mia Farrow, Carrie Fisher, Barbara Hershey, Lloyd Nolan, Maureen O'Sullivan, Daniel Stern, Max von Sydow, Dianne Wiest.

In the three films we have looked at so far, one person or a couple function as the protagonists of the film. Yet many Hollywood films use multiple protagonists. A recent example is Woody Allen's *Hannah and Her Sisters*, which examines the psychological traits and interactions among a group of characters. We shall see that creating several protagonists does not necessarily make a film any less "classical" in its form and style.

The early portions of *Hannah and Her Sisters* make it difficult to tell which characters will be the most important. The initial credits give little clue, since the ten performers' names are given in alphabetical order. As the narrative progresses, we eventually discover that five of these play major roles, and they are not always the best known of the group. Once the action begins, we still must wait for a considerable time before we realize that the major characters are the three sisters and Hannah's current husband and ex-husband. These become the central figures partly because they play a more prominent role in the changes in the action, partly because they appear in more scenes than the five other characters do, and partly because they are the ones whose thoughts we occasionally hear on the sound track.

The film's refusal to single out a protagonist serves to emphasize the characters' psychological traits and the development of those traits across time. A clue to the film's strategy comes in the scene where Mickey remembers how his marriage to Hannah ended. His final remark is, "Boy, love is really unpredictable." After this line, a cut shifts the scene to the opera, where Holly is sitting in a box seat with the architect David. The last time we had seen her, she was upset because she thought David was more attracted to April than to her. Now it turns out that she was wrong, and for a while it seems that her relationship with David is progressing well. Yet after this scene, David will abruptly begin dating April. Indeed, all the main characters' relationships demonstrate in one way or another the truth of Mickey's remark.

The unpredictability of the characters' changing relationships arises from the fact that so many of the characters seem to be equally prominent. For example, during most of the film, Hannah's husband Elliot cannot decide whether to stay with her or leave her and marry her sister Lee. Since Lee is a major character, and even a little more prominent than Hannah, it seems plausible that Elliot and Lee could end up together. This is also made plausible by the fact that her relationship with Frederick seems to be ending anyway. Yet Lee eventually marries another man, a professor whom we barely see, and Elliot remains with Hannah. Similarly, the final romance between Mickey and Holly is likely to come as a surprise, since the two are hardly ever seen together; the flashback to their one disastrous date makes it appear impossible that they could fall in love. Thus the use of a group of characters roughly equivalent in prominence helps create unpredictable action. Moreover, as we shall see, each character's goals change



Fig. 10.18



Fig. 10.19



Fig. 10.20



Fig. 10.21



Fig. 10.22



Fig. 10.23

radically in the course of the plot, making it even more difficult for us to sense how each line of action will turn out.

Even the film's style reinforces the ideas that all the characters are important. Rather than using shot/reverse shot to cut back and forth between the characters as they converse, most scenes employ relatively little editing. When the characters are not moving, the camera usually keeps them together in a balanced framing, and when they move, the camera pans to keep them onscreen. In the opening scene, for example, a single shot shows Hannah and Holly talking as they set the table (Fig. 10.18), and the only cut occurs when April enters (Fig. 10.19). But then she quickly moves to the table, with the camera panning to reframe all three women (Fig. 10.20). Later, the dinner itself is handled in one long take (Fig. 10.21), as the father, mother, and Hannah all give brief speeches. This tactic continues through most of the film, as in the scene (Fig. 10.22) where four characters are lined up during a conversation. Much later, Hannah discusses Holly's play (Fig. 10.23), and the camera simply pans back and forth (Fig. 10.24) as the two women move around the kitchen (Fig. 10.25). In all these cases, the ordinary Hollywood film would use editing to call our attention to certain lines or reactions. Here Allen presents the characters as a group, much as Renoir does in *Grand Illusion* (see pp. 231–232).

Among the few scenes that use quick cutting and shot/reverse shots are those involving Mickey. The quick cutting shows the progress of the various tests in brief montage sequences, and the shot/reverse shots show



Fig. 10.24



Fig. 10.25



Fig. 10.26

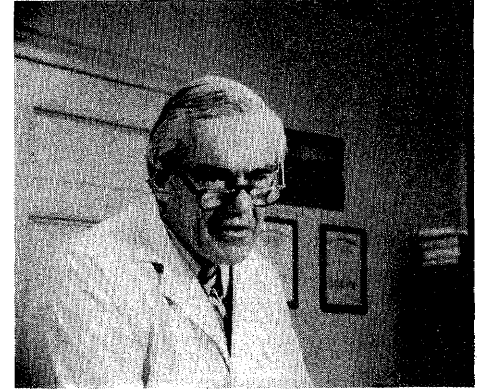


Fig. 10.27



Fig. 10.28



Fig. 10.29

him talking with minor characters, such as his doctors (Figs. 10.26, 10.27) or his colleague at the television office. This stylistic treatment sets Mickey apart as being a more isolated character. When he is with other major characters, the scenes are handled with longer takes and balanced framing, as in the flashback when Hannah and Mickey discuss artificial insemination with their friends (Fig. 10.28), a *plan-séquence*, or the final shot of the film (Fig. 10.29). Thus in general the film's style participates in the effort to make all the main characters seem equal in importance.

The film's unusually large group of protagonists and secondary characters could make it difficult to propel the plot from scene to scene. As a result, Allen uses three distinctive tactics for moving smoothly among the characters and lines of action.

First, the plot is organized around holiday parties, which offer occasions to bring the characters and their conflicts together. The story duration runs across two years, and three of the major scenes take place on Thanksgiving. The opening scene occurs at one such party, and here we meet all the protagonists except Mickey. The first climax, the resolution of the Lee-Elliot-Hannah triangle, takes place at another party, one year later. Finally, the denouement is set at the third Thanksgiving party, and here all five protagonists are present for the first time.

A second tactic for moving among various characters is Allen's use of intertitles before scenes. Of the twenty-two scenes in the film, sixteen begin with intertitles, somewhat in the style of American silent films. These are of various sorts, so that it is usually difficult to predict how they will relate to the scene. The first title says, "God, she's beautiful," and it leads into the opening party scene; this line is spoken immediately by Elliot's internal commentary. As the second scene begins, a title appears, reading, "We all had a terrific time." This time the line is not heard until well into the scene between Lee and Frederick, when she speaks it aloud as part of a longer speech. Later, an intertitle's line may not be spoken at all, as when "The anxiety of the man in the booth" leads into the scene of Mickey having a series of tests in a hospital. One intertitle is a quotation from a poem, which Lee reads aloud near the end of the scene; another cites Tolstoi, but no one speaks the text within the scene. These intertitles create a small-scale curiosity, coaxing us to ask how the line will apply to the upcoming scene. The intertitles also help signal new scenes and thus indicate that the plot will switch from one line of action to another.

A third device for moving across plot lines is the use of cyclical patterns of action. For example, Mickey usually appears in every third scene. The film's first scene involves the party, the second shows Lee at home with Frederick, and the third introduces Mickey at the television studio where he works. Next comes the scene with Holly and April catering a party; the fifth scene shows Elliot pretending to meet Lee by accident in the street and going with her to a book shop. Then, in the sixth, Mickey visits his doctor. This pattern continues through the film, with one scene dealing with Mickey followed by two scenes (or in one case three) with some combination of the other characters. Moreover, at least one of the three sisters appears in every one of these other scenes. Thus, although a scene may not relate directly to the ones that precede and follow it, we still have a sense that the plot is dealing with the various characters in turn and that the lines of action are progressing in a parallel fashion.

These rather unusual storytelling devices are imbedded in a context of far more familiar ones. *Hannah and Her Sisters* remains within the classical tradition in several respects. For one thing, the plot relies upon a strong cause-effect sequence. This is especially evident when early scenes motivate actions to come. For example, early in the first party scene, Lee remarks to her sisters that their mother has not been drinking alcohol. Nothing more is said about this here, but the dialogue sets up the later scene where Hannah has to visit her parents when her mother has drunk too much. Another instance of careful motivation is the series of scenes near the end, when Mickey and Holly meet and begin to fall in love. This twist has been prepared for in the earlier flashback to their first date. At the end of that scene, Mickey remarked that he had always had "a little crush" on Holly. We know that she has given up drugs, which he had objected to; she is also now interested in the kind of jazz music he likes, since she is looking at jazz records when he sees her. Most important, both characters have changed in the meantime. Holly's writing has been successful, and Mickey has gained a new optimism.

Similarly, though the film may have more protagonists than the standard Hollywood film does, they still function to unify the action and to drive it forward. Complex though the characters may seem to be, each is actually given only a few traits, and each behaves in a fashion consistent with those traits.

The opening party scene assigns one or more traits to each of the ten characters. As the film begins, Elliot is expressing his desire for Lee but also struggling to convince himself that this desire should be suppressed. Indeed, all of Elliot's voice-over thoughts are presented in the form of a sort of interior dialogue in which he argues with himself. Throughout the film his major trait will be his indecision, which he sums up in the scene where he talks to his psychologist. Ultimately it will be Lee who ends their affair and convinces Elliot to stay with Hannah. Lee herself is characterized mainly by her beauty, on which both Elliot and Hannah comment. At one point she mentions, however, that she enjoyed a book Elliot had loaned her; this establishes one of her major traits, her attraction to men who teach her about art and culture. Frederick has been an intellectual mentor for her, Elliot seduces her with poetry and music, and she ultimately marries a professor she meets while taking college courses.

Holly's desire to act, her flightiness, and her former drug addiction are all quickly stressed, and both she and April talk about having come to the party hoping to meet attractive single men. The parents are characterized as nostalgic, reliving their past glories in the theater, and the mother apparently has a drinking problem. Hannah is revealed to be competent, domestically oriented, and successful: As dinner begins, her parents tell how she has cooked the huge meal and has recently acted the lead in Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*.

Even the two absent characters are mentioned in ways that hint at their principal traits. When Lee mentions having seen Mickey, Hannah remarks, "God, Mickey's such a hypochondriac! I wonder how he'd handle it if there was ever anything really wrong with him." Her speculation sets up the later action, when we witness Mickey's panic at the thought that he really has cancer. Similarly, early in the scene Holly remarks to Hannah that Frederick has not come with Lee to the party, and calls him "depressive." She also says that she thought Lee was moving out, which sets up the idea that Lee's relationship with Frederick is in trouble. Shortly thereafter, Lee mentions to Elliot that Frederick has sold a painting. Thus by the time we see Frederick in person, we know basic facts about him, and he acts very much as we would expect him to. Virtually all of the film's action harks back to character traits concisely established in this first scene.

During approximately the first third of the film, the five protagonists develop goals consistent with their original traits. After we have seen Mickey wandering anxiously around his apartment and then Holly attending the opera with David, we seem to know what all the characters want. Elliot wants to have an affair with Lee, and by now he has begun actively to pursue her by giving her the book of poetry. Holly wants to be a successful actress and also to find an attractive man, and she seems to be on her way to achieving the second goal. Mickey fears that he has a brain tumor and simply wants to survive. ("Look, I'll make a deal with God. Let it just be my ear. I'll go deaf, I'll go deaf in one ear and blind in one eye, maybe. . . .")

Hannah's goal is less clear, but she seems to be working to hold her parents' marriage together; this is in keeping with Hannah's position as the stable center around which the rest of the action revolves. She is the only character who seems completely content with her circumstances, and hence her goals simply involve dealing with threats to her family's situation. Lee's goal is also vague, but we know she is aware of Elliot's interest in her, and we sense that she is attracted to him. Later, when Elliot and she begin their affair, her goal will be to get Elliot to leave Hannah and marry her.

These goals would seem to be enough to sustain the entire film. Yet, in keeping with the plot's principle of unpredictability, the characters one by one alter their goals or formulate entirely new ones. Elliot, who has succeeded in starting the affair with Lee, now struggles to decide between divorcing Hannah or staying with her. Hannah says that she wants to have another baby, and she also tries to solve whatever problem is alienating Elliot from her. Mickey, who discovers that he does not in fact have cancer, suddenly becomes very depressed and sets out to find the meaning of life. Holly discovers that David has dropped her for April and realizes that she will never succeed as an actress. She abruptly launches a career as a writer.

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.