I Love that It Takes You an Hour and a Half to Order a Sandwich

Bruce Mackenzie

When discussing the reasoning behind the dialogue-driven plot in *When Harry Met Sally* (Rob Reiner, 1989), writer Nora Ephron explained that, “People who live in cities aren’t in car chases. We don’t get shot at. What we mainly do is talk on the phone and have dinner” (Kimmel, 2008, p. 194). The basis of action (nearly all the climatic and character-revealing moments) in *When Harry Met Sally* occurs over mealtimes. The film follows Harry Burns (Billy Crystal) and Sally Albright (Meg Ryan) over the course of twelve years and is interspersed with documentary-like anecdotes and stories from couples to mark a shift in time.

The two begin as recent college graduates driving from Chicago to New York; they do not see eye-to-eye and after the drive, leave with mutual contempt for one another. Five years later, they meet again on a plane and recognize each other, progressing their relationship as acquaintances. After another five years, they see each other in a bookstore and agree to have dinner, the first step to start their friendship. The two remain friends for a while, straddling the line between friends and lovers. Their relationship changes for the worse after they have sex, but after Harry’s realization that he loves Sally, the two appear as the last couple in a documentary-style shot. Through the transformation of Harry and Sally’s relationship, food serves as a marker of change, coinciding with their feelings for each other.

The first meal Harry and Sally share confirms their “non-relationship.” They are driving together to New York, meeting only moments before they get in the car, and nearly everything that happens minimizes their chance of becoming friends. First, only Harry is eating grapes, establishing a mood of disharmony. He offers some to Sally, who does not like to eat between meals. When only one person is eating, there is a level of discordance, seen later at their friends’ Jess (Bruno Kirby) and Marie’s (Carrie Fisher) wedding. Eating can establish relationship through a mutual feeling of sharing, and couple’s eating habits can indicate unity and agreement (Chapman-Novakofski, 2008, p. 61). A level of disgust also develops when Harry mistakenly spits a seed at the car window, which he thought was open. Sally’s feelings of aversion continue as Harry begins to explain his recurring theory that men and women can’t be friends; this conversation continues as the two pull into the parking lot of a café.
At the café, Harry and Sally have their first conversation about sex. Harry establishes a role of power by questioning Sally's sexual relationships. She feels embarrassed as she enters the building, exclaiming accidentally loudly, “I've had plenty of good sex!” (Grindon, 2011, p. 162). Harry continues to look down on Sally when the waitress comes to take their order, and Sally rattles off a very specific order for dinner:

I'll have the chef salad with the oil and vinegar on the side and the apple pie a la mode. But I'd like the pie heated. And I don't want the ice cream on top, I want it on side, and I'd like strawberry instead of vanilla, if you have it. If not, then no ice cream, just whipped cream but only if it’s real; if it’s out of the can, then nothing.

This is the first time the audience sees Sally order, and Harry's response is disapproving. Sally's order becomes a motif throughout the film and Harry's response to her order is indicative to their changing relationship. Before they leave, Harry suggests getting a motel, reviving the subject of sex, which aggravates Sally. Harry furthers the discussion by claiming men and women can’t be friends because sex always gets in the way. They end the argument in disagreement, and as they exit the café, the song “Let's Call the Whole Thing Off” plays. The music affirms Harry and Sally's non-relationship, and they part ways as if they are strangers.

The next time Harry and Sally meet is five years later when he recognizes her food order on an airplane. The two are in a similar predicament as five years earlier traveling together, now on a plane. Sally irritates Harry with her specific food, as she did before. Harry revisits the theory that men and women can’t be friends, and then asks her to dinner. However, they are both in relationships now, and Sally declines. They leave the airport similarly to how they parted five years ago with ultimately a non-relationship. This narrative repetition, specifically through food and conversation, suggests Harry and Sally's “destiny” as a couple (p. 163).

Another five years pass before Harry and Sally meet again, during which time each has separated from their previous love interest. They see each other in a bookstore and agree to have dinner. At dinner, they talk about sex again. Sex becomes a common subject in conversation for them as they become friends, specifically at mealtime; this is partly because of the role of dialogue in the film, but also can be traced to the connectedness of primal activities such as food and sex (Iannolo 240). This time Sally talks about her beliefs that once you get married, you stop having sex. Harry shares feelings of sexual disappointment, and a friendship forms out of estrangement that draws them together after their sexual drive has been dampened (Grindon, 2011, p. 163).
First café on the trip from Chicago to New York

At the end of the meal, Sally suggests getting another meal sometime, signifying a shift in their non-relationship to friendship. She changes her opinions of Harry, moving the way they interact with each other to a more balanced state. Balance is key to their relationship. On a greater level, Sally offsets Harry's somewhat dark and cynical demeanor with her light, peppy personality and appearance (even her name is lighter: Sally Albright). Her food order reveals aspects of her personality, so balance is often highlighted during mealtimes as their relationship progresses (Kimmel, 2008, p. 194).

As their friendship grows, Harry and Sally share a high level of disclosure, increasing their closeness. Inadvertently, their talks about sex and shared mealtimes establish a level of comfort that foreshadows romance (Slatcher, 2010, p. 279). Even when they are not sitting down to eat, food still plays a role in their relationship. For example, during a scene at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Sally keeps making Harry repeat food-centric phrases. So although they are not at a table, food is still and essential marker in their blossoming relationship.

Their friendship continues to grow, especially once a sense of balance is met, which occurs during perhaps the most well known scene in *When Harry Met Sally*. The Katz's Delicatessen scene is the point where their relationship becomes balanced, with neither of them having a greater role of power than the other. In the deli, Harry and Sally talk about Harry's sexual encounters, capitalizing on his habit to leave women shortly after sex. Here, he has the role of the powerful pessimist again. However, Sally rebukes by revealing that while men may feel powerful leaving in the morning, women have power because they can fake orgasms. Harry is confident he can spot a fake orgasm, which Sally counters by loudly faking an orgasm in the middle of the deli. Harry is silenced from embarrassment and Sally's uninhibited exhibition, his silence symbolizing equality: a balance has been struck.

On an airplane five years later

Their balanced relationship is illustrated on a double date with Sally's friend Marie and Harry's friend Jess. Up until this point, Harry still denounces Sally's ordering style: There are two types of women: high maintenance and low maintenance . . . you’re the worst kind; you’re high maintenance but you think you’re low maintenance . . . waiter, I’ll begin with the house salad, but I don’t want the regular dressing. I’ll have the balsamic vinegar and oil, but on the side. And then the salmon and mustard sauce, but I want the mustard sauce on the side. ‘One the side’ is a very big thing for you." While the two are friends, before the dinner, Harry still thinks her ordering style is picky and irregular unlike his own.
Yet during the failed double date that results in Harry and Sally’s dates becoming a couple, Harry compliments Sally’s way of ordering. He says, “Not only does she always pick the best thing on the menu, but she orders it in a way it’s never been done before!” The dinner is another addition of balance to their relationship; the meal also helps them realize their compatibility. While Marie and Jess bond over more obvious conversation over the course of the meal (ie Jess’s writing), Harry and Sally do so more subtly, demonstrated by how affectionately they talk about each other. This meal helps their friendship transition into romance.

Harry and Sally begin to act more and more like lovers after the double date; however, they experience a fall-out after they have sex. After the man Sally was seeing breaks up with her, she is distraught and calls Harry to come over. Harry comforts her, but his comfort escalates to the two having sex, after years of sexual build-up. Sex is consistently a topic that lingers with the two, and neither one is prepared for how to act toward the other after they spend a night together; their friendship complicates their traditional behavior as lovers, and as Harry leaves the next morning, there is a clear tension between the two. They go to dinner shortly after and agree it was a mistake. Unlike other mealtimes where they are lively and talkative, this meal is quiet and awkward. During more conversational dinners, Harry and Sally eat heartier meals (even if Sally orders a salad, she’ll order something else, like a dessert, on the side).

The first meal they have after they have sex, though, they both order salads, complying with their quiet and unsatisfying dinner. They remain on uneasy, yet polite, terms until Jess and Marie’s wedding when the two get in a fight. Similar to the first time they met, a feeling of disharmony is illustrated from only one person eating. Sally eats the hors d’oeuvres the waiter offers while Harry declines; his choice shows a different priority of issues. He wants to talk, but Sally trivializes the matter and acts as if nothing is wrong. The disconnect leads to a bigger fight and as they stomp through the wedding venue’s kitchen, they decide to not see each other for a while.

Harry and Sally make up on New Years Eve when Harry comes to the realization that he is in love with Sally. After weeks of trying to contact her by phone, Harry is walking by himself eating an ice cream cone and thinking. The song “It Had to Be You” starts playing and Harry stops walking, throws his ice cream cone away and starts running the opposite direction to Sally. In the next scene, Harry appears at the party Sally is at. In a soliloquy confessing his love, Harry lists things he loves about Sally, one of
them being that it takes her an hour to order a sandwich. Sally admits her love too, and the couple kisses as the scene fades to black.

Throughout *When Harry Met Sally*, couples explaining how they met, while they are filmed for what appears to be a documentary, fill transitions. The last set of couples is Harry and Sally. They explain how they met and talk about their wedding, specifically their wedding cake. The wedding cake is a final example of food as a marker of their relationship, and turns into a symbol of their relationship:

“The first time we met, we hated each other.”

“No, you didn’t hate me, I hated you. The second time we met, you didn’t even remember me.”

“I did too, I remembered you. The third time we met, we became friends.”

“We were friends for a long time.”

“And then we weren’t.”

“And then we fell in love. Three months later we got married.”

“We had this...we had a really wonderful wedding.”

“It was, it really was a beautiful wedding—“

“It was great. We had this enormous coconut cake.”

“Huge coconut cake with tiers, and there was this very rich chocolate sauce on the side.”

“Right, ‘cause not everybody likes it on the cake, cause it makes it very soggy.”

“Particularly the coconut soaks up a lot of excess and you really...it’s important to keep it on the side.”

“Right.”

The couple chronicles their relationship, and indirectly addresses their changing feeling toward each other. Throughout the film, food shows this, and food shows it again in this final moment. Harry talks about the necessity of putting the chocolate sauce on the side, showing agreement with his now wife.
As they talk, they finish each other's sentences, balancing the conversation evenly and proving a found-

Reference List


40.2, 61

Wiley-Blackwell.

(pp. 239-249). Malden: Blackwell.

Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.

Slatcher, R. B. (2010). When Harry and Sally met Dick and Jane: Creating closeness between

Part of Issue 12, published in April 2015
Topics: Arts, Film

About Artifacts

Artifacts is a refereed journal of undergraduate work in writing at The University of Missouri. The
journal celebrates writing in all its forms by inviting student authors to submit projects composed
across different genres and media.

Artifacts is sponsored by The Campus Writing Program.

Published by the Campus Writing Program.
Copyright © 2015 — Curators of the University of Missouri. All rights reserved. DMCA and other
copyright information. An equal opportunity/access/affirmative action/pro-disabled and
veteran employer.