

# Before Midnight: Modern Marriage, Neurosis, and Relational Overcoming

1. In *Before Midnight*, the third film of the *Before* Trilogy, Richard Linklater, along with actor-writers Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy, explore the final destination of Jesse and Celine. Idealist romantics of *Before Sunrise*, mature life-weathered quasi-cynics of *Before Sunset*, and the middle-aged couple with a marriage and twin girls to their name - the progression. The film is revered specifically for its depiction of a real romance. As opposed to the utopian one, the happily-ever-after, the romantic ideal. While I can sympathize with the condemnation of the latter, the practical romance of the film is as neurotic as its illusive counterpart. Replacing the phantastical neurosis of romanticism with the practical, virtuously imperfect neurosis of the real isn't any better of a resolution.

Analyzing the neurosis involves studying its pretext, the ideological presumptions it holds, such that it can be grasped in all multiplicity. For context, the climactic fight between Jesse and Celine is important. He wishes for Celine and their daughters to relocate to Chicago, allowing him to be closer to his son from a previous marriage. However, she wants to stay in Paris for a job opportunity that she values greatly.

2. *Pursuit of Happiness* - It appears impossible to divorce happiness from any social critiques, due to its ubiquitous role in the structural Language of the now, and even all recorded culture. When Jesse talks about the potential Chicago relocation, it is phrased as follows -

Unfortunately, we cannot go get him out of America but we could, if we wanted to, go to him. Now, I know it would be a big move, but what do you think? I mean, is there any way you could be **happy** in the U.S.? Is that just out of the realm of possibility? That you could find a comparable job there?  
(Jesse)

During the argument, the twin girls are mentioned having fought. Jesse compares the preceding happy state, twins on a trampoline, to the fight that

followed as the preferable good. Although Celine has her share of neurotic motivation, the outlook is more favorable to the truth, that she sees such anger as the girls “not letting anyone step on them or take away what they want”.

Once I remember I was watching the twins on a trampoline, you know, and they looked so beautiful. And I was happy because they were happy, you know. One of them had this hula hoop that she was using as a jump rope, but then the other one wanted it so they started fighting over it. All of a sudden I saw it all, this petty jealousy and selfishness... I remember thinking: this is the natural human state - always a little dissatisfied, perpetually discontented, you know? I mean, look at us, here we are, in a garden of Eden and we can't stop fighting. (Jesse)

3. *Rational and Emotional as Opposites* - An effortlessly assumed fact of the modern world, that reason and emotion are antithetical. Throughout their fight, Jesse reinforces this distinction, as a meta-means of defending his position.

But if you want to talk about it, I mean, really talk about it. I would prefer to have an **unemotional, rational conversation**. I mean, do you think we can do that? Would that be possible? (Jesse)

Oh, the irony - the premise is simply that he doesn't get to see his son enough, that he feels bad about it. To abstract, reason can provide the optimal means of an act, a process, given the premises that define this optimality. The premises are derived from emotions, contextually an all-encompassing term for instincts, desires, and feelings<sup>1</sup>. Even Jesse almost catches on to this oxymoronic oppositionalism.

That is a completely **irrational** response to something I am just trying to **feel** my way through.

Although Celine doesn't have a complete grasp of the fallacy, she perceives its surface boundaries.

The world is fucked by unemotional rational men deciding shit, alright?  
Politicians going to war for no reason, corporate heads deciding to wreck the environment, Cheney, Rumsfeld - very rational men.

4. *Gender Essentialism* - A perpetual insistence on human nature as determined by Gender. In the communal dining scene, Ariadni, a friend, shares a story that according to Stefanos, her husband, will tell you everything you need to know about “masculine and feminine”. As Ellie Bramley aptly writes -

Next up is a story about gender-stereotypical reactions to coming out of a coma. Evidently, the woman’s first reaction is always to ask after others; the man’s is to check his penis is still there. Delpy rouses the rabble: “Penis first, then the rest of the world.” The women around the table break into a chorus of “Penis, penis, penis, penis.” This waxing lyrical on relationships and the differences between men and women is only a few steps away from a Yorkie advert.

- Bramley, Ellie (2014)<sup>2</sup>

However, aside from the obvious gendered difference in the interpretation of self-neurosis, a relative difference in awareness can be observed.

If you can explain it all on strictly gender terms, why do you or why does any woman waste time getting mad at or bother trying to change a man? (Jesse)

He just... he leads with his elbow. He throws like a girl.

...

No, it is my fault. A father is supposed to teach you that. (Jesse, about his son)

While Jesse doesn’t project traditional masculinity, a soft, relatively normal, variant is exuded still. An apt parallel to how essentialist masculinity is accepted in a liberal culture. That the essentialist narratives are generally true, and as long as they don’t become ‘toxic’, it is acceptable. Any individual action is the unquestionable norm, a static identity. All masculine characteristics that generate neurosis - the isolated rationality, un-emotionlessness, practicality, and the like.

However, Celine’s case becomes complex. While she does exhibit neurotic symptoms of feminine gender essentialism, notably at times of overwhelming emotional conflict, at other times, a critical attitude is exhibited.

Doesn't that just say it all? Penis first, then the rest of the world. - About Ariadni’s story (Nature)

I mean, it makes me sick that he has to be with her, but I guess judges assume that women have the mother instinct. She has the mother instinct of Medea! (Conditioning)

It is in the nature of women to be the nurturer. (Nature)

I read on the fridge at work - you know those magnet words that people make sentences with? Someone had put together, "Women explore for eternity in the vast garden of sacrifice."

...

But that's enough! Okay. I don't want to be one of these women.

(Conditioning)

People expect women to have instinct that kicks in, like a female baboon.

(Conditioning)

Like Jesse, the symptoms of neurotic gender are considered part of her identity. "I just naturally feel bad about everything", mentioned amidst the argument. A fact unrealized, a close implication of her critiques on conditioning, that the caregiving essence plays a role in her guilty conscience.

5. The climax ties the whole movie together. A resolution of the couple's fight, which viewers praise for its depiction of a real relationship, one that is imperfect, involves hard work, and so on. As mentioned before, the rightful criticism of the Phantastical, an ideal romance, doesn't ensure the credibility of its opposite. A complacent acceptance of the Is, the real, the current state, the virtue of practicality, because the perfect is non-existent - unacceptable.

Jesse : You're just like the little girls and everybody else. You wanna live inside some fairy tale. I'm just trying to make things better. I tell you that I love you unconditionally, I tell you that you're beautiful, I tell you that your ass looks great when you're 80. I try to make you laugh.

Celine : Ok.

Jesse : All right, I put up with plenty of your shit. And if you think I'm just some dog who's gonna keep coming back, then you're wrong. But if you want true love, then this is it. This is real life. It's not perfect, but it's real. And if you can't see it, then you're blind, all right, and I give up.

Slowly, Celine reciprocates and plays along with the Time Machine improv Jesse made up. But, notice that none of their problems are resolved. Celine is still unclear about taking the job, and Jesse about moving to Chicago. All other conflicts that opened up during the fight are swept under. To be stuck in unresolution, the problem, until a bigger one comes up again.

And the predicament of Modern Marriage. First, the neurotic phantasy of the ideal romanticized “perfect” relationship is destroyed between the participants. Thus, leaving them to accept the neurosis of the Real, the Is, a wretched complacency, rather than pursuing resolution.

6. From critique must come construction, destruction followed by creation. And here: **Relational Overcoming**. A striving for overcoming in the intersubjective space between relational participants, romantic or otherwise. In *Before Midnight*, it is conceptually simple, a resolution of conflicts amongst desires, of each party.

**Trivial Relational Overcoming:** Take two individuals, for brevity, and their respective desires in conflict. Now, a two-step procedure

1. For each party, the set of desires in conflict is either
  - a. Modified, for non-redundancy
  - b. Erased, if unnecessary
  - c. Unchanged
2. Now, the reconditioned desires are satisfied, disregarding the emotional outcome in their pursuit, be it happy or painful, “positive” or “negative”.
3. Thus, prioritizing the emotional component of the process, of the desires themselves.

Example: A couple where one has to relocate to a different country for a while, say work. For the other, moving is not an option, constrained by various commitments. Despite its uncomfotability, long distance is the only way to satisfy the individual desires. And if the overcoming fails and the couple part ways, so be it. Suffering, pain, failure - all to be embraced as they are.

**Non-Trivial Relational Overcoming:** Take two individuals, and a sphere of overcoming, external to their personal desires. Any creative project serves as an

example. Then, Relational Overcoming is the act of Overcoming as related to the project, however, as a couple.

A historical example: Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. They may not have co-written any books, however, both developed their ideas relating to the existential project due to this constant back-and-forth, the non-published informal conversations over coffee and in bed, that helped produce their individual works.

7. Extra Remarks: Online discussion of the film also leaves an interesting observation. While broadly people agree that both are flawed, perhaps the relationship is unhealthy, the wrongdoing associated with each character is interesting. Jesse is said to have cheated in the film, and Celine's cheating is mentioned, without any confirmation. In Jesse's case, any wrongdoing associated with him is strictly due to his cheating. For Celine, aside from the unconfirmed cheating, the way she acted in their argument is perceived as widely unfavorable.

Yes, I agree that Celine and Jesse really have an uneven relationship in *Midnight*. Besides one time where Celine correctly points out that moving to Chicago makes no sense because Jesse's boy is already mostly grown up, she mostly just verbally berates him during their arguments and doesn't try to be rational<sup>3a</sup>

Yeah, Celine is just all-around awful in *Midnight*<sup>3b</sup>

Like she's on her period 24/7. Super bitchy. She isn't strong minded, she's annoying.<sup>3c</sup>

Not surprisingly, the oppositional myth of reason-emotion comes into play. For comments concerning the argument, Jesse acts in a normal, acceptable way, while Celine lashes out as a clear neurotic. Here, the othering of the woman. To borrow from Lacan - The woman doesn't exist.

For society, the Masculine has been the norm and the Feminine the other. As to why Beauvoir's framing of her seminal work as *The Second Sex*. Even the gender-neutral clothes that we wear are usually men's clothes, and the other

constituting “dresses”, the feminine, all non-neutral items of fashion. However, an elaboration on that is outside this essay.

## Footnotes

1. Arationality of Emotions
2. Before Midnight Review (Guardian)
3. Reddit Source

[https://www.reddit.com/r/movies/comments/4guppt/before\\_midnight\\_thoughts\\_spoiler/](https://www.reddit.com/r/movies/comments/4guppt/before_midnight_thoughts_spoiler/)

- a. <https://www.reddit.com/r/movies/comments/4guppt/comment/d2l3l8c/>
- b. <https://www.reddit.com/r/movies/comments/4guppt/comment/d2l84jf/>
- c. <https://www.reddit.com/r/movies/comments/4guppt/comment/jbvkqhe/>

## Citations

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<https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2014/nov/19/before-midnight-my-most-overrated-film>

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<https://niranjankrishna.in/2023/05/13/arationality-of-emotions/>