The Arranged Marriage of William Powell and Myrna Loy: How Nick and Nora Didn't Solve the Marriage Problem

A thesis presented to

the faculty of

the College of Fine Arts of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts

Courtney A. Grimm

November 2008

© 2008 Courtney A. Grimm. All Rights Reserved.
This thesis titled
The Arranged Marriage of William Powell and Myrna Loy: How Nick and Nora Didn't
Solve the Marriage Problem

by

COURTNEY A. GRIMM

has been approved for
the School of Film
and the College of Fine Arts by

________________________________________________________________________

Ruth Bradley
Associate Professor of Film

________________________________________________________________________

Charles A. McWeeny
Dean, College of Fine Arts
ABSTRACT:

GRIMM, COURTNEY A., M.A., November 2008, Film

The Arranged Marriage of William Powell and Myrna Loy: How Nick and Nora Didn't Solve the Marriage Problem (109 pp.)

Director of Thesis: Ruth Bradley

Within the extensive shared filmography of William Powell and Myrna Loy, the six films of the Thin Man series as well as *I Love You Again* and *Love Crazy* depict changes in the social expectations of modern marriage. The marriage of Nick and Nora Charles in the Thin Man series exhibits a subversive answer to the idealized structure of modern marriage. Nick is not the dominant breadwinner, and Nora is not the submissive dependent. Because of change within the marriage dichotomy, the couple is able to enjoy their relationship—until the addition of Nicky Jr. and the couple’s inevitable domestication. In *I Love You Again* and *Love Crazy*, Powell and Loy explore “the re-marriage genre”—a sub-genre of the screwball comedy that focuses on reclaiming the once-wed couple. Throughout these eight films, the pairing of Powell and Loy depicts changing marital norms while offering a universal truth: domestication is inevitable.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Ruth Bradley

Associate Professor of Film
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

As I reach the final steps in my career as a Masters student, I would like to thank my thesis adviser, Ruth Bradley and the faculty and staff of the School of Film. I have enjoyed my time at Lindley Hall immensely, and through their collective support and teaching, garnered a level of confidence I previously lacked.

I would also like to thank my parents, Terry and Barbara, for their continued support and guidance as I chart my career path. They remain my loving and steadfast supporters.

Lastly, I would like to thank my friends—both in the School of Film and out—who stuck with me while I made my way through the rocky terrain of thesis writing. Without the support and friendship of Catherine, Della, Hsin-ning, Julie, Megan, Melanie, Nicole, Seth, and Sho, I would never have made it to these final stages of writing without their continued support and helpful input.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: “I Do Believe the Little Woman Cares!”: The Subversive Marriage of Nick &amp; Nora Charles</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: “A Thing Like Divorce Can Break Up A Marriage!”: Powell and Loy in the Re-marriage Comedy Genre</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: “Hey! C’mon, Get With It! They’ll Think You’re A Couple of Squares!”: The Domestication of Nick and Nora Charles</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION:

In her book, *Creating the Couple: Love, Marriage, and Hollywood Performance*, Virginia Wright Wexman states, “[t]he models of courtship and marriage put forward in Hollywood cinema make a significant contribution to the process of structuring modern social *habitus* regarding romantic love” (8). For the everyday movie-goers, the cinema offered up a new system for portraying changes within a culture, and providing examples of possible outcomes—although these outcomes onscreen were often to the extreme. The cinema, as Wexman elaborates throughout her book, provided a visual and immediate example of the new romantic love and the modern marriage. By the time of the 1930s and the 1940s—the time period in cinema this thesis will focus on—women had obtained the right to vote and own property. Meanwhile, men began to wait until financial independence before seeking a wife. The general terms for marriage had also changed—a change that had been slowly taking place throughout different social levels and on different continents for hundreds of years. This recognizable change in marriage led to the formation of the modern marriage, a marriage based on love rather than a combining of resources. This modern marriage took a stumble in the 1930s, when divorce and separation rates increased. However, escapist cinema also increased during these years, and led to popular onscreen pairs such as William Powell and Myrna Loy. This thesis will explore the ways in which the transition and development of modern marriage was portrayed throughout the shared filmography of William Powell and Myrna Loy, and will examine interpretation of the modern, high-society marriage, an interpretation that was
most notable within the Thin Man series (1934-1947) as well as *I Love You Again* (1939) and *Love Crazy* (1941). The onscreen pairing of Powell and Loy, and their interpretation of Nick and Nora Charles, created an influential representation of a loving and committed marriage that had not been previously demonstrated in such a visible manner in Hollywood, during the 1930s.

**Legal Unions and Loving Partnerships**

Marriage throughout many Western cultures is concisely defined as the legal union between a man and a woman, but this succinct definition does not fully articulate what it means to be married. In her book *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage*, author Stephanie Coontz states that until the post-Victorian age, marriage “was not about bringing two individuals together for love and intimacy . . . Rather, the aim of marriage was to acquire useful in-laws and gain political or economical advantage” (306). Marriage was meant to serve as a societal function in which both members of the couple brought individual resources to the marriage, in order to establish a mutually beneficial union. Love and companionship were secondary to the political and economical benefits gained through the marital union. However, with the end of the Victorian era in Great Britain, the catalysts for marriage began to change. According to Coontz the wide-access to a wage labor system and the flexibility of the market economy eased the restrictions surrounding the when and how a couple could marry (146). These social changes enabled the formation of the couple and the resulting marriage to occur independently from familial intervention. Couples were now approaching marriage as something designed for love and companionship, rather than economical and political
benefit. However, this shift in marital norms led many critics to speak out against what they deemed the frivolous nature of a love-based marriage. As Coontz states, these critics worried that “[i]f the choice of a marriage partner was a personal decision [. . .] what would prevent young people, especially women, from choosing unwisely? [. . .] what would hold a marriage together if things went ‘for worse’ rather than ‘for better’?” (Coontz 149-150). The larger concern of these critics, of course, was the belief that people could not be trusted to form socially prudent lifestyles. The critics speaking out against love-based marriages believed that couples would marry to suit a passing fancy, focusing more on immediate gratification rather than the long-term commitment (149). However, the widespread social influence of this change in marital norms was not as cut-and-dry as the critics of love-based marriage would have hoped.

Critics believed that marrying for love – or, from a more cynical point of view, for lust – would lead to an increase in divorce. This assumption that a shift in the marriage norms would then create an increase in the divorce rates would not appear until well into the twentieth century. Divorce during the nineteenth century, and early twentieth century, remained rare and taboo, but by the 1930s, a significant increase was noticeable, and the fears of those opposed to the love-based marriage (149-150).

Public and Private Changes in Gender Roles before the Great Depression

Gender and marriage roles began to change as the nineteenth century was coming to an end. During the Victorian era in Great Britain, marriage had become sentimental, and exhibited characteristics that seemed to contradict the overall nature of the time
period (177-178). The wife was expected to maintain the home life—the private sphere—
while her husband maintained the community—the public sphere. However, as women
made advancements within the male dominated public sphere by gaining new political
and economic rights, the gender expectations that delineated men and women began to
change – at least on paper.

The political advancements that women garnered during the late nineteenth
century and early twentieth century gave them a more prominent voice within a society
that had previously held them within a lower status. Women were still positioned lower
within society, but were quickly gaining more political advancements such as the end of
coverture. In her text *Public Vows: a History of Marriage and the Nation*, author Nancy
Cotts outlines the system of coverture and the problems it created, stating:

> Coverture in its strictest sense meant that a wife could not use legal
> avenues such as suits or contracts, own assets, or execute legal documents
> without her husband’s collaboration. […] Upon marriage a woman’s
> assets became her husband’s property and so did her labor and future
> earnings . . . (11-12)

Coverture allowed the husband to legally absorb his wife’s identity and assets into his
own identity, thereby treating their marriage as more of a labor contract rather than
something defined and created by such frivolous emotions as love. Under the legality of
coverture, choices for marriage partners lacked any romance and instead seemed based
solely for economic gain – a joint pooling of financial assets for a stable lifestyle. For
many people of the middle and lower class, a strong financial unity was important to
maintain not only the monetary well-being of the wife, but for her immediate family as well. With coverture in place, the wife’s identity was restricted and encompassed by her husband’s identity. Legally, she was her husband’s property, without any claimable self-independence.

However, the framework of marriage began to shift in the twentieth century, and the general concept and legality of coverture fell under public scrutiny. As the new century began to unfold, people found themselves in the changing tides of public life, and the terms of marriage began to change, as well: “amidst wrenching changes in industry, technology, and the very composition of the American people—amidst what also seemed like sky-high openings to progress—public understandings of marriage were recreated” (Cotts 156-157). Marriage, and the status of women, began to allow for the wife’s public identity. However, the government maintained that the marital union was important for the economic status, for “preserving the husband’s role as primary provider and the wife as his dependent—despite the growing presence of women in the labor force” (157). It was not until women achieved complete political independence, and thereby public recognition, that coverture could truly end: “[t]he marital model in which the individuality and citizenship of the wife disappeared into her husband’s legal persona had to go, logically, once women gained the vote in 1920” (157). With the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920, women achieved an important public and political advancement—the right to vote. But, this advancement did not create an immediate and definitive end to the concept of coverture. Instead, while coverture was “unseated in social thought and substantively defeated in the law,” the American government created a
different approach towards maintaining marital unions within the population—tax incentives for the husband-provider / wife-dependent couple: “Enacting [United States] aims involved defining social categories—such as earner and dependent—and the social relations between them. In the process of broadening meanings of citizenship, New Deal policy innovations lent new support to the old economic underpinning of marital roles” (157-158). Although women had gained the right to vote, and the right to legally own their property and wages, the government remained invested in the status and benefits of the marital union. While these couples were free to marry out of love and desire, they could not completely break free from the legal interference of the government.

Although the citizenship of women had changed under this revised and modernized framework of marriage and the corresponding governmental incentives, the citizenship and expectations of men had remained constant. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, when women were achieving many political changes, there was an increase in the bachelor subculture. According to Howard P. Chudacoff’s book *The Age of the Bachelor: Creating an American Subculture*, during the years between 1880 and 1930 bachelordom was at its highest point (5). The cause of this increase in single men remaining unmarried, whether for short or long periods of time, was due to economical and cultural issues. Chudacoff states in his text that marriage was most popular within the lower classes: “the highest rates of marriage and earliest marriage ages were occurring among the immigrant and native working classes, the least economically advantaged groups of the population” (64). But some men, particularly those who had few economic or social qualms, the choice to marry were not as important as achieving
“economic, social, and sexual independence” (65). Therefore, during the early twentieth century, men and women found themselves with more freedoms, socially, economically, and personally.

However, such freedoms would not last long, as a large economic hardship befell not only the United States, but also the world, the Great Depression. During the early years of the Great Depression, divorce rates severely fluctuated: “[d]ivorce grew to unprecedented levels by the middle of the decade, but cost remained an obstacle. Frequently, couples just broke apart informally. Desertion of one’s family was not inhibited by cost, and so abandonment rates soared” (Kyvig 227). While divorce rates and abandonment rates increased, marriage rates and birth rates plummeted. Couples delayed weddings for months, and sometimes years due to the inability to financially support their wedded life (228). People were overcome with feelings of pessimism about their personal situations (228). But in response to the economic strife came President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, bringing with it an increased—nationally funded—interest in the arts and entertainment. This interest in the arts and entertainment would soothe not only pocketbooks, but would serve as an escape from such feelings of pessimism and melancholy.

The Film-Going Audience and the Screwball Comedy Genre

During the years of the Great Depression, people were cautious when spending their money on frivolous extracurricular activities such as going to the cinema. However, many movie houses offered incentives and enticements such as lottery nights and “‘dish nights,’ when each ticket came with a piece of chinaware” (Thompson 218). Once at the
cinema, the audiences were treated to films that offered an escape from their daily financial and economic troubles. The need for escapist cinema, coupled with the advent of sound in the late 1920s, allowed for several changes and genre innovations within the filmmaking industry. One important genre development of the 1930s was the screwball comedy, in which the plots were “. . . usually set among wealthy people who can, despite the hardships of the Great Depression, afford to behave oddly” (Thompson 230). These films typically followed a couple from differing social backgrounds that were then forced into a comical situation that was fueled by their chemistry and slapstick encounters.

As the decade progressed, the genre of the screwball comedy continued to shift, allowing for several sub-genres, including what Stanley Cavell deems “the re-marriage genre” which involved the previously established couple attempting to regain their marital union (Cavell 16). The screwball comedy genre remained popular throughout the 1930s, only to fall out of favor in the 1940s as the realities of World War II intensified.

The Production Code, and Cinematic Censorship

The Production Code, also known as the Hays Code after its primary enforcer, Will H. Hays, was adopted in 1930 and put into practice in 1934. The conservative sects of American culture became nervous when the morality of American citizens appeared to weaken, and they began to point their collective finger at the growing popularity of the cinema:

1 The need for escapist entertainment during the 1930s and 1940s allowed such genres and movements as the melodrama, the crime-gangster film, film noir, and the musical to develop and flourish. Similarly to the screwball comedy genre, these genres and movements also depicted gender and class differences. However, these genres approached the topics with varying degrees of emphasis, and with different conventions and techniques.
Especially after World War I, when Hollywood began spinning out film cycles devoted to the sins of wild youth, dancing daughters, straying wives, and dark seducers, the moral guardians tried their damndest to breakup the parade of wastrels marking in the vanguard of the Jazz Age assault on Victorian values. (Doherty 6)

In 1922, as a reaction to the conservative community’s growing concern, studio executives recruited Will H. Hays, “Presbyterian elder and model of probity…postmaster general from the administration of Warren G. Harding” to the position of president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) (6). Studio executives hoped Hays would “clean up, or at least put a more respectable face on, the motion picture industry” (6). After eight years of defending the movie industry and trying to bridge the gap waged by the morally questionable films of the 1920s, the Production Code was adopted in 1930 (6). Seen as the catalyst for what is now deemed classical Hollywood cinema, the Code “was written by Father Daniel Lord, a Jesuit priest, and Martin Quigley, a prominent Roman Catholic layman and editor of the exhibitor’s journal *Motion Picture Herald*” and the Code contained two parts: “a set of ‘general principles’ (the moral vision) and ‘particular applications’ (a precise listing of forbidden materials)” (6-7). These forbidden materials included, but were not limited to, the restriction of vices on screen such as excessive alcohol consumption, sexual promiscuity, and overzealous violence.

Despite being implemented in 1930, the Production Code was not completely upheld within the studio industry. Many people questioned its validity and mocked its
attempts to police the arguable immorality within the relatively new art form. However, several factors in the following years led to its enforcement. Doherty states:

> When the New Deal in Washington insinuated the probability of federal censorship, and a reformist education group called the Motion Picture Research Council published a series of reports linking bad behavior to bad movies, the studios found themselves fighting a three-front war against church, state, and social science. Desperate to negotiate a peace treaty, they agreed to reorganize the internal enforcement mechanism to ensure that the Code, so long a paper tiger, acquired teeth. (8-9)

These teeth that the Production Code acquired took visible hold of the film industry in 1934 with the creation of the Production Code Administration (PCA), who answered to the MPPDA.

Joseph L. Breen, chief of the PCA, wanted to remake American cinema into a positive force for good, to imbue it with a transcendent sense of virtue and order” (10). In creating visible changes within cinema’s onscreen virtue and order, the limitations as to what could and could not been shown in the films grew, and were more widely upheld prior to 1934 (10). The Code began to police not only what was seen onscreen, but also what occurred in the space off screen. Doherty states, “[u]nder the Code, so explicit a mental image—that is, an image not even depicted on screen but merely planted in the spectator’s mind—would be too arousing to summon up” (11). This policing and censorship of on screen and off screen space would continue until the late 1960s, when the Code was officially abandoned by the MPPDA and replaced with the ratings system.
The Significance of William Powell and Myrna Loy

During 1934, while the film studios were under the watchful eyes of Hays and Breen, Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer (MGM), released *The Thin Man*, the first installment in a series of six films that would follow the cinematic incarnation of Dashiell Hammett’s investigating couple, Nick and Nora Charles. The film, an enjoyable fusion of the screwball comedy genre and the crime drama genre, catapulted actors William Powell and Myrna Loy into more leading roles and solidified their continued onscreen partnership. Powell and Loy’s careers began during the silent era in which they were typecast as villains and tarts. In playing these parts, Powell and Loy also demonstrated the portrayal of the ethnic characters as something villainous, erotic, and most importantly secondary. In his book *American Laughter: Immigrants, Ethnicity, and 1930s Hollywood Film Comedy*, Mark Winokur argues that this onscreen representation of the ethnic characters and offers social commentary on the state of the ethnic and the apparent need for assimilation, particularly within the screwball comedy genre (179-180). Powell’s and Loy’s early film careers as these onscreen ethnics, and their acceptance into more classical leading roles after their success as Nick and Nora Charles offers up a striking social commentary on the need for assimilation within classical Hollywood cinema. According to Winokur, “[Powell and Loy’s] pairing in The Thin Man films, though perfectly typical of the genre, is, given their previous personae, a distinctly surreal representation of the desire to conform” (181). And this apparent desire for conformity plays throughout the cinematic interpretations of Nick and Nora Charles. Nick and Nora Charles are posh characters with enough money to live comfortably – a rare sentiment for
the movie audiences of the early 1930s. They also enjoy a high quantity of vodka that the watchful eyes of the MPDDA and PCA seem to overlook. As Winokur states, Powell and Loy’s onscreen personas create a sense of conformity within Hollywood by transitioning from the silent, villainous ethnics to the posh, white upper class. However, in portraying this transition between villainous ethnics to posh upper class, Powell and Loy seem to give voice to those harsh caricatures they left behind (180-181). Winokur states, “... [Powell] would seem to be the worst possible candidate for the examination of an ethnic underside in American film. He is too paradigmatic, too idealized, too perfectly and seamlessly the romantic lead” (181). Because of his ability to morph from the villainous ethnic to the dapper romantic lead, Powell serves as the perfect example of assimilation within classical Hollywood. His fluid transition between classes and groups also comes into play in *The Thin Man* (1934): “[t]he William Powell persona and *The Thin Man* are representative of the kinds of solutions to the dilemma of ethnic and immigrant acceptance that more generally characterize the American screwball comedy” (195). However, Powell’s position as ethnic hero lessens as the series of films progress, becoming understated in his non-Thin Man films, and then non-existent as he takes on more fatherly roles.

Myrna Loy’s onscreen assimilation is also notable. She is most remembered for her role as the posh and fiery wife, Nora Charles. However, her earlier career roles were most often portraying what Winokur classifies as “the Art Deco exotic” (195). According to Winokur, “[o]ne great advantage of the Hollywood Deco style is that it allowed a conflation of otherwise aesthetically incompatible foreign elements and motifs in the
body of the art Deco woman” (196). Therefore, the Art Deco woman symbolizes a combination and blending of different cultures and “…nothing was distinctly Western of American” (196-197). Myrna Loy, consequently, symbolized with ease this literal interpretation of the Art Deco exotic in both her silent era work and her Nora Charles work. Winokur outlines the Deco female form as “…a compression and elongation of the Victorian woman’s body…[s]heared away from previously accreted meanings—mother, womanhood, domestic angel and so on—this new body fit a new aesthetic of the first third of the century…” (197-198). Loy spent much of her early career portraying this lengthened Victorian form through such filmic clichés as “the Hollywood Oriental Femme Fatale”; and Loy “was the perfect Deco subject: a white woman able to pretend to the role of the Oriental. Deco style seems to imitate Loy because Loy is a Deco mold, a Deco figurine in lines and poses” (206). Winokur also states, “[e]ssentially, Loy is a reflection of Hollywood’s use of Art Deco to propagate a certain vision of women as apparently free but literally hobbled to prevent any menace”—a figure of glamorous suppression Loy is able to portray in Nora Charles. In his text, Winokur compares Loy’s Nora Charles to an Art Deco painting of a woman and dog, noting the symbolic similarities to Nora’s entrance in The Thin Man. But what is noteworthy about the sequence that Winokur fails to explore is Nora’s symbolic fall. After entering the bar with her arms full of packages, and her errant dog searching for his master. Her initial entrance, pre-fall, appears regal and glamorous, portraying her as the embodiment of the Art Deco beauty. But by falling, she becomes “safe.” Although she may appear to be the new independent female figure, with her nose in the air and the lines of her body drawn
out, that image of woman cannot last and she must be put in her place: at her husband’s feet.

The Onscreen Pairing of Powell and Loy

Although Powell and Loy both had substantial careers prior to their first filmic pairing, their careers blossomed as leading actors after the release of the crime-drama, *Manhattan Melodrama* (1934), directed by W. S. Van Dyke. No longer were Powell and Loy the supporting characters or the exotic caricatures. Van Dyke, amused by the chemistry between Powell and Loy, paired them in the adaptation of Dashiell Hammett’s crime novel *The Thin Man*. In his book *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood, from Lubitsch to Sturges*, author James Harvey states, “[f]our films released in 1934 seem to mark the real beginning of screwball comedy” and one of those films was Powell and Loy’s *The Thin Man* (108). Despite the fact that the film was labeled as nothing more than light-hearted conventionality, “‘Nick and Nora’ soon became a kind of national craze and they made major stars out of Powell and Loy” (108). This national craze would lead MGM into five more films splashing Nick and Nora Charles across the screen, as well as an additional six films.

Several texts, such as Mark Winokur’s *American Laughter: Immigrants, Ethnicity, and 1930s Hollywood Film Comedy*, and James Harvey’s book take note of the significance of the on screen pairing of William Powell and Myrna Loy during the early decades of the classical Hollywood era. One such text, Martha P. Nochimson’s *Screen Couple Chemistry: the Power of 2*, examines the different onscreen pairings and what the
author labels as the greatest form of onscreen pairing, the “Synergistic Couple” (2). According to Nochimson:

The Synergistic Couple, with its vortex of wild forces, is a natural outcome of the American mass media insofar as it has made its enigmatic, major creative contributions by what might seem to be its greatest limitations, the triumph of energy over craft . . . (2-3)

For Nochimson, this onscreen energy between the actors and characters is more notable than the on screen display of talent. Nochimson continues to state that the Synergistic Couple of the 1930s and 1940s cinema was “the most dangerous, fascinatingly powerful type of couple in commercial mass media film” and this dangerous and powerful element could be attributed to the audience’s inability to grasp where the on screen couple began and the actors began (3-4). The onscreen chemistry between these couples, “. . . is the primary element that separates the trivial from the weighty screen couple and that determines the potential for films about couples to establish meaning” – meaning such as the representation of the modern marriage derived from a need for cinematic escapism (7). As Nochimson outlines, the sociological cause behind the audiences’ interest in the onscreen characters and the off-screen actors was due to a desire for “. . . escapism—relief from particular political and economic conditions, [and] the influence of marketing pressures . . . ” (4-5). Not only was the social and economic strife important for the success of these couples, but so was the studio’s marketing tactics, which came into focus during the 1930s in terms of magazine coverage and arranged dates. But Nochimson continues to explore the significance of the onscreen couple, stating that if the audiences
were only seeking escapism from these onscreen couples, “. . . that is not the full extent of their important. They are a cultural legacy of how we thought (and think?) about desire and love” (5). This cultural legacy in terms of defining desire and love comes into clear focus with the onscreen pairing of William Powell and Myrna Loy, and their onscreen demonstration of a modern marriage becomes one of great importance. The significance of Powell and Loy’s onscreen chemistry, and their wild interpretations of Nick and Nora, aligns with their new onscreen high-class status. Similarly to Winokur’s argument, Nochimson outlines the importance of Powell and Loy’s onscreen transition from villains and temptresses into the “law-abiding, but never socially defined, Charleses” (102). This transition seems to make their interpretation of the modern marriage accessible and enjoyable—at least for the first four films of the series. The couple was able to demonstrate an accessible but subversive example of modern marriage in the early installments of the Thin Man series because of their clearly coded differences. They were not typical examples of the happily wedded couple within the structure of a patriarchal culture. Instead, the couple served as an onscreen example of the hypocrisy within the male-dominant/female-dependent structure of marriage. As Nochimson states:

The attraction of their pratfalls, mugging, and especially the imitations of something dark under the actors’ features suggests that it is not the stereotype that charms the audience but the subversion of its idealization. The power of Loy and Powell in some way, then, is that being the supposed acme of Nordic excellence, they are in the best position to
portray the artificiality of that illusion and to represent the merely human
under the mask of social desire” (108).

By attempting to perform what Nochimson classifies as “Nordic excellence,” the couple
brings attention to the deception of wedded bliss within other onscreen marriages and
coupledoms.

But because of Powell and Loy’s ironic onscreen deception, the couple was
placed within films that were beyond the Thin Man series and were more
unapologetically cliché. According to Nochimson, “[t]he well-honed performance styles
of the two actors meant that they could be used to advantage in formulaic comedies and
melodramas as a star Iconic Couple” (86). These formulaic films involved a variation on
the screwball comedy defined by Stanley Cavell in his text Pursuits of Happiness: the
Hollywood Comedy of Re-marriages as “the re-marriage genre” – a device typical of
theatre, but that was soon carried over into cinema (18-19). Marriage, as Cavell
succinctly defines it as “[t]he joining of the sexual and the social” (31). And thus, the
marriage is inevitably doomed – just as those critics of love-based marriages worried in
the late nineteenth century. For Cavell, the comedy of re-marriage can be summed as
such: the marriage encounters an internal problem which creates “trouble in paradise”
and leads to the understanding that “marriage has its disappointment [...] and this
disappointment seeks revenge, a revenge, as it were, for having made one discover one’s
incompleteness… Upon separation the woman tries a regressive tack, usually that of
accepting as a husband a simpler, or mere, father-substitute” (31-32). The original couple
encounters and quarrels over all of the faults and weaknesses within the marriage. The
husband is jealous of the new simpler man, but he does not feel entirely threatened. Because it was the woman who recognized the marriage’s incompleteness, the act of reestablishing the marriage is left up to the man within the construction of the re-marriage genre. To reclaim the original marriage, “…he must show that he is not attempting to command but that he is able to wish, and consequently to make a fool of himself. This enables the woman to awaken to her desire again…” and allows for the reestablishing of the marriage (32). The Charleses’ marriage never moves beyond the state of happiness and enjoyment—they never openly affirm each other’s faults. Instead, this state of a sophisticated by troubled marriage is played out in other Powell and Loy films such as *I Love You Again* (1939) and *Love Crazy* (1941). However, in his book *Modern Love: Romance, Intimacy, and the Marriage Crisis*, David R. Shumway criticizes Cavell’s analysis of marriage within the screwball comedy genre, stating “[t]he specific illusion that screwball comedy constructs is that one can have both complete desire and complete satisfaction and that the name for this state of affairs is marriage” (Shumway 89). For Shumway, the journey to reestablish the romantic relationship with the couple is the important task of the screwball comedy genre, and the re-marriage sub-genre of the 1930s, a time when divorce rates were high (Shumway, “Screwball Comedies” 8). In their two films within the re-marriage genre, Powell and Loy’s characters divorce, but reunite because they cannot properly function without each other, in some capacity that varies between the two films. And it seems only fair that the sociologists and critics who slammed the love-based marriage in the late nineteenth century would then be answered with a literary-turned-filmic interpretation of what it meant to be in a properly
functioning, love-based marriage, an element that this thesis will explore further in later chapters.

The first chapter of the thesis will focus primarily on the subversive representation of the modern, love-based marriage in the first three films of The Thin Man series. In analyzing The Thin Man, After the Thin Man, and Another Thin Man, this thesis will explore the ways in which the Charless’ marriage portrayed the concepts of modern marriage during the Great Depression, while exhibiting the political and personal advancements of women. In these initial films, their marriage serves as the ideal fantasy and appears as a marriage of equal partnership, high-class, and good ol’ fun. This ideal fantasy would have posed as a cinematic alternative for people during the years of the Great Depression – a relationship to envy on the silver screen. The Thin Man series lacks a mention of Nick and Nora’s initial attraction or what led to their marriage. However, the frequent mention of Nora’s money and Nick’s retirement demonstrates the shift in both gender and class roles, and troubles Cotts’ previously mentioned as “economic bargain between a husband-provider and a wife-dependant” (158). In the case of Nick and Nora Charles, Nick is the dependant and Nora is the provider. This playful subversion of gender and marriage continues throughout the first three films of the Thin Man series, and seems to be an exaggeration of the status of women in the years after the demise of coverture and the ratification of the 19th Amendment. However, as Powell and Loy’s shared filmography continued, the characters and the representation of marriage began to change into something more stereotypical, dealing with the threat of divorce, and the longing for re-marriage. This chapter will also further examine Nochimson’s
theory surrounding Powell and Loy as “the Synergistic Couple,” and will explore how this onscreen energy and chemistry affected the interpretation of a modern marriage.

The second chapter of the thesis will examine Cavell’s concept of the re-marriage genre, as well as Shumway’s criticism of Cavell’s concept, with a close examination of Powell and Loy’s *I Love You Again* and *Love Crazy*—two films that demonstrate the breakdown of the onscreen marriage and the eminent recovery of the socially acceptable relationship. Powell and Loy’s characters in these two films are similar to Nick and Nora Charles in terms of financial stability and a luxurious lifestyle that is never questioned, but immediately accepted. However, the representation of marriage within these two films is different and more tenuous—a move that Cavell believes is necessary for the re-marriage genre to have any existence at all (Shumway, *Screwball Comedies* 8). Unlike the marriage of Nick and Nora Charles, which exists as a secondary plot to the murder mystery, and therefore can be more sexualized and sharp, the marriage within these two films serves as the primary plot. These films also demonstrate the changes within gender and class roles during the late 1930s and early 1940s through the characterization of the protagonists. Powell’s character in *I Love You Again*—the unwitting amnesiac, Larry Wilson—first appears conservative and stuffy. However, after regaining the memory of his life as conman George Carey during a boating accident, Powell’s character is a far cry from the conservative persona he had adopted during his years as an amnesiac. As the film progresses, George Carey learns that his wife, Kay Wilson, has filed for divorce. However, she becomes drawn back into their relationship by his new conniving and sly persona. In the end, it is this man, George Carey, who manages to capture her love. For
Powell’s character in *Love Crazy*, saving the marriage takes top priority, and he goes so far to plead insanity during the divorce proceedings to prevent the finalization. This is particularly noteworthy due to the fact that insanity is typically a feminized illness, and an illness sometimes used against women as a control tactic. Here, Steve is controlling Susan through the insanity plea, however he is not bringing direct, malicious harm to her. *Love Crazy* continues to complicate the representation of gender and the feminization of the male when Steve dresses in drag in order to escape from the attendants of the psychiatric hospital. It is during this sequence, when Steve is dressed as “Mrs. Ireland,” that Susan finally listens to him and discontinues the divorce proceedings (this, as Cavell points out, is the husband humiliating himself for the sake of the marriage). In the end of both films, the relationship is saved and the characters achieve a happy marriage similar to Nick and Nora Charles – at least for the time being. Whether the happy marriage is sustained beyond the end of the film is questionable.

The third chapter of my thesis will examine how the Charleses fall victim to the previously avoided stereotypes of domesticity in the final three films of the series, but still manage to maintain their marriage and relationship. The largest alteration to the dynamic of the couple’s marriage comes with the birth of their son. Although Nicky Jr. is present as an infant in *Another Thin Man*, it is not until *The Shadow of the Thin Man* that his presence truly takes a toll on the subversive, fun-loving nature of the Charleses’ marriage. Nicky Jr. turns his father sober and his mother frantic. This theme of domestication continues into the fifth film of the series, *The Thin Man Goes Home*, in which the Charleses visit Nick’s parents in the country. Nicky Jr. is briefly mentioned
when the couple states they did not want to take him out of school for the visit (although they did manage to bring their dog, Asta, along). Although the couple’s visit to Nick’s family seems to call attention to the once subversive nature of their marriage and lifestyle, the couple lacks the sparkling luster it once demonstrated. Throughout the last three films of The Thin Man series, the Charleses’ marriage becomes less subversive and more normalized, in terms of a 1940s cinematic marriage, as well as an everyday marriage. Their relationship is broken down from an atypical marriage into something aligning with more popular husband and wife expectations of the late 1940s, in an America coping with World War II and its aftermath.

Throughout the course of these Powell and Loy films, the representation of marriage transitions from something that is subversive and into something more domestic and normalized. Overall, this transition in the onscreen representation of marriage aligns with the changes in marriage within the United States during the early 1900s and well into the 1940s.
CHAPTER 1: “I DO BELIEVE THE LITTLE WOMAN CARES!”: THE SUBVERSIVE MARRIAGE OF NICK & NORA CHARLES

The most remarkable, and long-lasting, aspects of the Thin Man series are the onscreen chemistry and playful banter between William Powell and Myrna Loy, particularly during the first three films: *The Thin Man* (1934), *After the Thin Man* (1936), and *Another Thin Man* (1939). Even when the series reached its less-than-great installments, it was the recognizable pairing of Powell and Loy, and the surrounding iconography that brought the moviegoers to the cinema. Now viewed as one of the greatest couples of classical Hollywood cinema, Nick and Nora Charles, and their subversive example of modern marriage, were first viewed as a box-office risk. The couple escapes the archaic structure of coverture, and in doing so they create a subversively modern marriage. In her semi-autobiography, co-written with James Lotsililbas-Davis, Loy references a statement by Samuel Marx at the time of *The Thin Man*’s release. Marx, the head of the story department at MGM, stated that the Charleses’ marriage “. . . had two unprecedented elements that scared the hell out of the whole studio: they were having fun with murder, and they were a married couple who acted with total sophistication” (Lotsililbas-Davis 90). The couple’s playful attitude toward murder made the studios nervous due to the newly enforced Production Code, which came into effect during the year of *The Thin Man*’s release. *The Thin Man* threatened to glamorize violence, making the crime-solving aspect a posh and fun game. After all, Nora gushes and encourages Nick to solve the crimes, intrigued by the prospect of seeing the seedier side of town, as well as uncovering elements of her husband’s past. But
another worrisome element of *The Thin Man*, for studio executives, was the state of the onscreen marriage. As Marx states, “[t]he matrimonial combination of Powell and Loy—ever that was a risk, because in those days you got married at the end of the movie, not at the beginning. Marriage wasn’t supposed to be fun” (Lotsilibas-Davis 90). It was a widely accepted belief that the cinematic marriage was only suitable as an *ending* to film, and not as a beginning because marriage signaled the end romance (Shumway, *Modern Love* 89). Movies—such as the typical screwball comedies—were built on the steady formula of the romantic pursuit and courtship, only to end at the altar as the credits rolled. After the wedding, the marriage was something that lacked excitement if the couple was happy. Or, the marriage contained the possibility for trauma if the couple recognized each other’s weaknesses and divorced—a set-up that then led to the couple into Cavell’s comedy of re-marriage plot (Cavell 31-32). After investing ninety minutes in the couple’s courtship and romance, audiences did not want to see the realities of relationships. Divorce was unacceptable, and happiness was boring. However, Powell and Loy’s Nick and Nora solved the problem of the onscreen marriage in screwball comedies by showing marriage from a fun yet unthreatened perspective. In her semi-autobiography, Loy states, “Ye gods! *The Thin Man* virtually introduced modern marriage to the screen. Previously, people married and lived happily ever after, but you never saw the undercurrents” (Lotsilibas-Davis 91). The sophisticated coupling of Nick and Nora Charles now portrayed these undercurrents as the Thin Man series defined the modern marriage, bringing to the surface a previously evaded option for the screwball comedy.
The already married Nick and Nora Charles complicated the structure of the typical screwball comedy, where the couple must be created and courted rather than simply observed in wedded bliss. The series’ interest resides not with the who-done-it aspect of the murder mysteries, but on the couple’s subversive relationship set within the constructs of a modern marriage. Because the couple’s marriage appeared so happily maintained, their system of courtship (which would be essential for other film couples in order to create interest) was unnecessary. Despite the absence of the courtship and the wedding within the diegesis of the film, the couple remains captivating. Critic James Harvey states, “Nick and Nora, unlike other movie couples, never have to court or break up and then come together again. All these plot things needed at the very least to keep a movie going are taken care of. . . by ‘the case’” (179). According to Harvey, and several other critics, the relationship is intrinsically happy because the murder cases and the investigations distract the couple from any possible weakness that might lead to bitterness or divorce. However, Nick and Nora seldom appear to worry about anything, even when they are not involved in a murder case. Nick Charles frequently refuses to investigate a case, insisting that he is retired and only looking after his wife’s inheritance. But Nora seems to want the adventure that the cases bring into their lives. For her, their relationship is typical and contented. It is as if without the cases and the investigations, the Charleses would have little to occupy their time—except for the nightclubs and the martinis. However, according to Harvey, the relationship of Nick and Nora appears above those other relationships they encounter. Harvey states:
Nick and Nora are untouched by action; they’re involved in a state of being . . . We never want to see their relation tested, or challenged in these films, nor do we want to. We only want to look at it, to be around it. And that’s the real point of the films themselves . . .” (179)

The wonderful aspect of the Charleses’ relationship throughout *The Thin Man* and the subsequent films is not the destruction of the marriage, but instead, the maintenance of the marriage. The threat of divorce or legal separation never appears in the Thin Man series—unless it is playfully mentioned and quickly forgotten. The structure of the relationship within the film does not allow for any marital threat beyond these bouts of playful banter.

In *Creating the Couple: Love, Marriage, and Hollywood Performance*, author Wexman states, “[b]esides serving as a guide to the creation of its staple boy meets girl-boy loses girl-boy gets girl scenarios, Hollywood’s romantic ideology of the idealized heterosexual couple has governed its creation of actors as symbols of romantic desirability” (16). Such desirability plays into what Martha Nochimson classifies as the fluidity between the onscreen chemistry and the off screen lives of the actors in memorable film pairings. In terms of Powell and Loy’s onscreen chemistry and the significance of the relationship between Nick and Nora Charles, Nochimson states that the Charleses were:

. . . a married pair who continued to enjoy each other and whose interest didn’t lie in the usual couple scenarios that inform their non-Thin Man films: how two become a couple—which is never explored in the stories
involving Nick and Nora; or how two break up and reunite which never happens to Nick and Nora. Rather, Nick and Nora, as a couple, model a successful negotiation of the conflicts that tear at families and couples around them (86).

While the Charleses investigated crimes that ripped apart other couples and families, to reveal a twisted maze of deception and lies, the Charleses remained happy and content within their marriage. But the Charleses’ marriage is able to survive because they are distracted from any possible faults in their marriage by the excitement surrounding the solving of the crimes. The greatest conflict of their onscreen relationship seems to be the damage that could come from the cultural clashes, both with each other and with the seedier people they encounter through their investigations. The conflict for Nick and Nora’s relationship, as Nochimson states, involves “. . . how they stand together to disarm the social conflicts that could destroy their marital microcosm, conflicts that do explode through the general culture macrocosm” (Nochimson 86-87). Rarely does the couple appear worried for their marriage or relationship. But, Nick and Nora seldom appear to worry about anything within the text of the first three films—until the harbinger baby booties at the close of Another Thin Man, signaling the eminent addition of Nicky Jr. (Harvey 176). Instead, the subversive relationship—or, what the audience sees of it—appears to be a relationship built on mutual love and amusement, with each member of the couple displaying a general happy-go-lucky disposition. In his book, Investigating Couples: a Critical Analysis of The Thin Man, The Avengers, and the X-Files, Tom Soter states, “[i]n the interest of entertainment, Van Dyke insisted on eight Powell-Loy
romantic scenes, usually involving affectionate bantering hinting at deeper feelings” (41). These eight scenes solidified the onscreen relationship between Nick and Nora. The scenes showcased the characteristics of the modern marriage, bringing into focus Wexman’s previously cited idea that the Hollywood cinema offers “a significant contribution to the process of structuring modern social habitus regarding romantic love” in terms of both courtship and marriage (Wexman 8). Nick and Nora’s subversive onscreen example of modern love demonstrated the happy outcome of modern love and relationships. Throughout the films, Nick and Nora encounter other couples that also represent modern love, but its more tumultuous side. But the interest of these couples is eclipsed by the onscreen chemistry between Powell and Loy, and the contented, high-class relationship between Nick and Nora.

The frequent onscreen relationship of Powell and Loy falls under what Nochimson classifies as the “Synergistic Couple”—the couple whose onscreen chemistry and energy is so potent that it is difficult for the audience to discern where the acting ends, and the reality begins (4). According to Nochimson, Nick and Nora Charles represent “... a more aware use of couple chemistry ...” than in other popular onscreen pairings of the classical Hollywood era (86). For Samuel Marx, the onscreen chemistry between Powell and Loy was a great reason for the studio to keep pairing the duo together: “[t]hey had a chemistry that came out of Myrna Loy and William Powell, plus the characters of Nick and Nora Charles. It was automatic that you would now continue to put them together. The reaction was so great it never stopped” (Lotsilibas-Davis 90-91). This great reaction created a craze surrounding them—people wanted to see Powell
and Loy together, and the studios complied for a lengthy thirteen-film (and one playful cameo) excursion (Harvey 108).

This onscreen chemistry and the repeated co-starring performances enabled Powell and Loy to frequently perform the characteristics of modern marriage—an element of daily life that was not often seen in Hollywood cinema. –At least not portrayed in happy and contented terms, such as in the Thin Man series. The first film sets up this need for a happy onscreen marriage before Nick and Nora Charles are even introduced in the narrative. Originally designed to be only an adaptation of Hammett’s novel, and not a lengthy series of films showcasing the chemistry of Powell and Loy, The Thin Man begins with the introduction of the murder victim (Clyde Wynant, played by Edward Ellis), his family, and his foes. During this sequence, Wynant is reunited with his daughter, Dorothy (Maureen O’Sullivan) and her fiancé, Guild (Nat Pendleton). Dorothy and Nat tell Wynant the news of their engagement and impending Christmas wedding. Wynant promises to return from his secret business trip in time for the wedding. Wynant, having left his wife for his alluring secretary, Julia (Natalie Moorhead), forces Guild to treat Dorothy well. Wynant demands that Guild “Take good care of Dorothy, show her that there is such a thing as a happy marriage.” A few moments later, the film finally introduces Nick and Nora Charles, the film’s example of a happy marriage.

The relationship between blackmailling thug Nunhiem (Harold Huber) and his wife, Marion (Gertrude Short) also demonstrates an unhappy marriage within the film. Their relationship demonstrates a marriage of modernity—a marriage appearing to be rooted not in financial arrangement, but out of emotion and lust. However, unlike the
Charleses’ subversive example of modern marriage, which appears rooted in love, Nunhiem’s marriage appears to be formed out of lust. Because this peripheral onscreen marriage is rooted in lust, it also represents what critics of modern, love-based marriage feared—that such marriages would not last. And by the time the audience encounters Nunhiem and Marion in the film, Marion is leaving him and Nunhiem is chasing after her. This couple is the anti-Nick and Nora, both in terms of financial wealth, and in terms of long-lasting marriage.

While other couples flounder and divorce around them, Nick and Nora promote a sense of martial bliss. Nick and Nora frequently use their jealousy-free marriage to a playful advantage by mocking the situations that break other couples up, such as adultery. An example of this playful attitude toward typical adulterous moments occurs after Nora’s first entrance to the film. The scene occurs after Dorothy encounters Nick and asks his advice regarding her missing father. According to Nochimson, this sequence “. . .introduces the attractive ambiguity of their marriage. . .” (92). Nora comments to Nick that the young girl is pretty, in a tone devoid of any malice—a tone that Nochimson classifies as Nora’s “society and wifely voice” (93). Nora’s comment and tone then promptly begins the first true scene between Powell and Loy as Nick and Nora Charles, a scene in which their marriage, and how they navigate it, is showcased. Of this scene, Nochimson states “. . .they both play with the characters that society has assigned them, Nick and Nora move easily and fluidly in and out of personae” (93). Nick and Nora are expected to play the part of high-class characters filled with jealously and adulterous intentions, and so they cheekily play with audience’s expectations. By moving between
personas, Nick and Nora also straddle the line between classes, playing both the high-
class and low-class couple throughout their exchange. For Nochimson, the sequence is
notable because it calls to attention the frequent changes in personas that Nick and
Nora—and thereby Powell and Loy—take on. She attributes this to Powell and Loy’s
onscreen synergy, the actors’ silent era flexography, and general class representations
(94).

In this scene at the club, Nick and Nora know that there is no martial threat in his
encounter with Dorothy, and instead manipulate the audience’s expected reaction through
the playful exchange regarding Nick’s fidelity:

Nora: Who is she?
Nick: Darling, I was hoping I wouldn’t have to answer that.
Nora: Come on.
Nick: Dorothy is really my daughter. You see, it was spring in Venice,
and I was so young, I didn't know what I was doing – We’re all like that
on my father's side.
Nora: By the way, how is your father's side?
Nick: It’s much better, and yours?

However, according to Nochimson, the couple must have this exchange because it
“allows them to work off the energy generated by Nick’s flirtatious moment with
Dorothy” (94). After all, the bantering sequences throughout the screwball comedy genre
serve as a stand-in for more sexualized scenes. And if Nick and Nora are the epitome of
the happily modern—yet subversive—marriage, they must have a substantial sexual
appetite (despite sleeping in twin beds separated by a night table). The scene ends on an even more playful note with Nora ordering a string of martinis in effort to catch up with Nick—much to her husband’s delight.

Another example of the playfully subversive and non-threatened nature of the Charleses’ marriage is when Nick and Nora once again encounter Dorothy. While throwing a Christmas Party with Nick’s seedier acquaintances from his past life as a police detective, Dorothy arrives on Charleses’ doorstep and confesses to a murder. Her missing father is believed to be the culprit, and Dorothy believes that confessing to the crime will protect him, and bring him out of hiding. Nick, however, confronts her and she immediately collapses into his arms – the representations of a damsel in distress, something Nora never embodies. As Nick consoles her, Nora then enters. And what would typically enable a comedy of misunderstanding is instead playfully winked away.

Of this sequence, Soter states, “[I]t shows the nature of the Charleses’ trust and maturity—despite their childlike game-playing—that Nora is not suspicious or angry. He scrunches up his face over Dorothy’s shoulder; Nora scrunches hers back” (45). Once again, there is no recognizable threat to the Charleses’ marriage. While the constant appearance of Dorothy, and Nick’s protective nature toward her, would fracture other onscreen marriages under a more conventional plot structure, the Charleses’ marriage remains unharmed. Nochimson also examines this sequence in which Nick comforts a crazed Dorothy, examining how Dorothy reacts to Nora’s sudden entrance in the bedroom. While Dorothy is “prepared to ‘explain’ the situation to Nora, as if it were a serious infraction . . . Nick and Nora make a joke of that capriciously drawn line that
establishes the socially contracted exclusive couple relationship” (108) The Charleses’ marriage is not affected by Dorothy’s interference—their relationship is too strong and content. Nochimson further states:

> While other couples are fragiley compounded of social roles and definitions, and are therefore threatened by any deviations from the role, for Nick and Nora being a couple is too profoundly organic a union to be threatened by a hug from a ‘cute chick.’ (108)

In other filmic relationships (such as the non-Thin Man Powell and Loy relationships) the jealous wife would succumb to her suspicion and break up the marriage over an innocent moment such as the scene with Nick and Dorothy. However, for Nick and Nora, their relationship remains steadfast, with Nora recognizing that Nick’s attempt to console Dorothy as non-threatening to their marriage. But Dorothy’s reaction to Nora’s appearance mirrors the audiences’ involuntary reaction—that the wife, encountering the husband and a young woman in a clinch would become tyrannical and jealous. However, Nick and Nora are not the typical filmic couple, and so their shared reaction of the situation is playfully tossed away and their union remains intact.

The lack of an outside threat, the playful banter, and the quantity of alcohol consumed signals the significance of the Charleses’ marriage in terms of other onscreen marriages. Nick and Nora clearly enjoy each other’s company, and tolerate each other’s antics. Nick and Nora do not often exhibit feelings of anxiety or worry in terms of their marriage or relationship. And when they do exhibit such feelings, it seems to come as a surprise to the characters and to the audience. An example of the characters exhibiting a
genuine love for each other occurs during the sequence when Nick is leaving the apartment to investigate at Wynn’s factory. Previously enamored with the adventure brought by Nick’s sleuthing, Nora is suddenly worried. Nora states “Nick, I won’t have you going down there” to which Nick promptly replies “Hey, it was you who got me into this!” Nora no longer finds criminal investigating exciting, realizing it is a risky manhunt with disastrous possibilities, and not a neat parlor trick. In his text, Soter states that during this sequence, Nora “tells him to be careful and reveals her fears in banter” – the couple’s signature form of communication (48). Once again, the couple takes on a more childlike manner as Nora expresses her concern by stating “Go ahead, see if I care. But I think it’s a dirty trick to bring me all the way to New York just to make a widow of me.” The banter continues into one of the most memorable exchanges of the series’ first installment:

Nick: You wouldn’t be a widow for long.

Nora: You bet I wouldn’t!

Nick: Not with all your money! – Any port in the storm.

Nora, turning her cheek, refuses to kiss Nick in punishment both for abandoning her and for his comment regarding her money. However, she immediately runs after him in an uncharacteristic display of emotion that other women openly display, but not the collected, sophisticated Nora Charles. As if to immediately realize her exuberance, Nora quickly reins in her emotions and stops from flinging herself into her husband’s arms by placing her hands in fists, at her sides. She takes on a cool demeanor, without looking Nick in the eye. However, her calm façade quickly slips:
Nora: Take care of yourself.

Nick: Why, sure I will.

Nora: Don’t say it like that! Say it like you mean it!

Nick: Well, I do believe the little woman cares!

Nora: I don’t care! It’s just that I’m used to you, that’s all.

But when Nick moves closer to her, her last bit of restraint falls away and she collapses into his arms, embracing him in a kiss. – A kiss that seemed to have caught even Nick off guard. In his text, Soter further states that during this sequence “beneath the surface wisecracks, we see a deep love, when Nora runs to Nick and embraces him, one of the few times emotion is expressed clearly and honestly”; however, this emotional exchange is quickly balanced out “by a wisecrack (of course) directed at Asta” (48).

But, an interesting element of this sequence that Soter fails to recognize involves the mention of Nora’s money—a common toss-away subject for Nick. Throughout the film, Nick mentions Nora’s money and his position “watching” it. Frequently, his comments seem to create the idea that Nick married Nora for her money; however, this could be Nick once again playing into the cultural expectations Nochimson previously stated (93). The marriage between Nick and Nora does not appear to be one based on financial need, and Nick’s playful toss-away lines seem to allude to the idea of societal expectations. Here, Nick seems to play into the idea that his role as a smooth talking gumshoe, and social-class chameleon duped Nora into marriage. However, Nora does not fit into this expectation—she is far too intelligent and enlightened to have fallen for Nick’s pseudo-trickster tactics. Instead, her inherited wealth seems to be a running joke
between them. After all, *The Thin Man* comes from the post-coverture era, and so Nora’s property is rightfully her own; Nick would have little control over it, beyond “watching” it. Nora, the embodiment of the modern woman both in fashion style and political advancement, remains unfazed by Nick’s cheeky comments regarding her inheritance. Instead, they maintain a comfortable, posh lifestyle, which enables their marriage to remain unharmed by the financial woes that less financially fortunate couples would encounter. Nick and Nora do not bicker about money, instead they banter about more frivolous subjects such as imaginary summers in Venice. Because the Charleses are wealthy, they can do whatever they want—they are not financially tethered to the social norms.

Once the crime is solved and lawyer McCauley (Porter Hall) is proved to be the villain, while Wynn is proved to be dead, not missing, Nick and Nora return to their life of high-class, vodka-drenched frivolity. Nick and Nora are on a train bound for home, where they encounter the newly married Dorothy and Guild. Dorothy, strangely cheerful despite her father’s murder, and Guild appear blissfully content within their new roles as wife and husband. They appear to represent the typical couple that is formed by the end of a more conventional screwball comedy. However, because *The Thin Man* is an amalgamation of the screwball comedy and the murder mystery genre, Dorothy and Guild had to overcome more tragic and darker roadblocks than they would have under a conventional screwball comedy. The screwball comedy antics are left up to Nick and Nora Charles and their more happy-go-lucky, subversive relationship.
Late in the evening, after Nick and Nora separate from Dorothy and Guild, Dorothy comments “I’d thought they’d never leave” and then the newlywed couple embraces in a kiss. However, in their sleeping compartment, Nick and Nora also embrace in a kiss, but not before engaging in another moment of brief, playful banter. With a mischievous gleam, Nora tells Nick to put Asta in bed with her for the night—effectively kicking Nick out of her bed. Nick, however, laughs off her request, places Asta on the top bunk and leans over her for a kiss. As Soter then points out in his text, in the final sequence, “the camera stays on Asta, who covers his eyes with his paws. Then there is a cut to the phallic symbol of the train speeding along the tracks to the strains of ‘California, Here I Come’” (51). – This allusion to sexual intercourse will become ironic at the end of the second installment After the Thin Man, in which Nora reveals her newly discovered pregnancy to her husband. But, in true screwball comedy fashion, Nick and Nora seal The Thin Man with a kiss and a happily-ever-after ending. But, unlike the typical screwball comedies, there is no possible threat of divorce or separation—nothing can break the marriage of Nick and Nora Charles.

Although The Thin Man was initially intended as a stand-alone film with no sequels, the onscreen chemistry of Powell and Loy created a need for more installments that the studio eagerly fulfilled. The next two films of the series, After the Thin Man and Another Thin Man, continued in the same fashion as the first installment: a crime occurs, Nick and Nora investigate, and Nick cheekily solves the crime while Nora looks on, bemusedly. But the two films also continue to demonstrate the representation of the modern marriage. After the Thin Man, begins where The Thin Man ended, with the on the
train to California (with even “California, Here I Come” playing in the background). As they move about the train, packing up their belongings, Nick and Nora share a kiss, a kiss that is not the typical long embrace of the onscreen couple but rather a quick, companionable kiss of a happily married couple. Out the window of their train car, a man spots their kiss and wags his finger at their private display of affection. As if to callback the overt reference to sexual intercourse at the end of the *Thin Man*, Nora cheekily comments, “It’s all right, we’re married.” Just as the marriage is saved for the end of the film, so is the kiss. But Nick and Nora, again, complicate the narrative norms, sharing a private kiss at the beginning of the film.

Their oddly matched marriage becomes a running joke throughout the second film, and several subsequent films within the series. Often times, Nick and Nora encounter shady characters from Nick’s past career that mistake Nora for Nick’s mistress. On the ride home from the train station in *After the Thin Man*, Nora says hello to an old, well-dressed couple. When Nick questions their identity, Nora replies, “Oh, you wouldn’t know them, Darling—they’re respectable.” When saying hello, Nora’s tone is childlike and uneasy, as if she is unsure as to how to address the older couple. But when she replies to Nick, Nora’s tone reverts back to what Nochimson previously classified as her “society and wifely voice” (93). Once again, as Nochimson points out, Nick and Nora straddle the line of societal roles. She also appears uneasy because of her husband’s presence. While she loves and accepts him, she is aware they are of different classes and others might be so open to his social background. However, Nora also seems more self-aware and comfortable with Nick, as opposed to other high-class people.
Similarly to the peripheral relationships in *The Thin Man* that depict examples of rockier modern marriages, *After the Thin Man* also contains examples of shaky unions. One early example of a shaky modern relationship involves the Charleses’ terrier Asta, who returns home to discover his ‘wife’ with a new puppy—a puppy with a black coat. Next to the pen, are a black terrier, poking his head through the fence, and seeming to mock Asta. Defending his home, Asta runs after the black terrier. Infidelity in the Thin Man series travels all the way down to the pet world. No couple but Nick and Nora Charles seem immune to such adulterous behavior.

The primary plot of the film involves the most adulterous relationship the Charleses encounter throughout the entire series. The film’s mystery involves Nora’s cousin, Selma (Elisa Landis) and her adulterous husband, Robert (Alan Marshall). Before the film begins, Robert has left Selma, but soon ends up dead. All suspicions lead to the distraught and medicated Selma. However, by the end of the film, the murderer is revealed to be David (Jimmy Stewart), Selma’s old sweetheart who resented Selma for abandoning him for the womanizing Robert. Throughout the film, David appears supportive and defensive of Selma, but his ultimate betrayal is even more stinging than Robert’s infidelity.

As these relationships flounder around the Charleses, Nick and Nora remain contented, and unaffected by the failings of the other relationships. Even when Nick’s class status is repeatedly called to attention, the couple remains strong. An early reminder of Nick’s lower class status occurs when the Charleses first learn that Nora’s Aunt Katherine (Jessie Ralph) has repeatedly phoned the house, in search of them. Nick bids a
sarcastic farewell to his wife, only to learn that his presence has also been requested. Upon learning this news, a shocked Nora states, “—There must be some mistake. She wouldn’t want you!” Nick agrees, eventually adding, “I wouldn’t go through that again if you had twice as much money”—a reflective comment regarding his previous encounter with Nora’s aunt and family. This statement allows for the possibility that Nick met Nora after her inheritance, rather than before. Throughout the Thin Man series, Nick often appears to be the perfect embodiment of dandyism, a movement that was once again appealing and on the rise in popular culture during the 1920s and 1930s (Todd 168-169). His statement also reminds the audience of Nora’s wealth, and Nick’s infatuation with her money. While the more typical modern marriage involves the husband as the primary provider, and the wife as the financially dependent, Nick and Nora break from these social norms. Nick has little problem with his wife as the source of income (although her money is inherited, rather than worked-for), and he as the financially dependent. The couple remains blissful within their posh lifestyle of no work and all play. However, their posh lifestyle soon comes into question as the second film draws to close.

*After the Thin Man* ends with the revelation that Nora is pregnant, and as James Harvey states, “[t]hus begins a process that continues by degrees through each of the subsequent films in the series: the taming and safe domesticating of Nick and Nora” (176). With the addition of Nicky Jr. in the third film, *Another Thin Man*, the nature of Nick and Nora’s marriage begins to break down due to their new roles as parents. However, this breaking down is not as apparent in the third film as it is in the later films. At first, the addition of Nicky Jr. seems to have changed little in the Nick and Nora
dynamic—the couple still enjoys nightclubs, vodka martinis, and snappy banter. For example, the opening sequence, Nick and Nora are reintroduced to the audience through an exchange in which Nick teases about having an affair with the telephone operator. Nora replies, “I don’t know what I always take it for granted you’re joking.” Their banter about fidelity demonstrates that little has changed in their marriage (at this point) with the addition of Nicky Jr. And Nora takes Nick’s joking for granted because she has no reason to feel threatened, and remains confident in her desirability as a wife and as a woman. Their modern marriage is able to sustain their relationship, their finances, and therefore, their happiness. They have little to seek outside of their relationship, except for the adventure the crime solving offers.

However, as the series progresses, Nick and Nora frequently fall victim to their new roles. Often, it is Nick who uses Nora’s role as mother against her. An example of this in *Another Thin Man* involves Nick’s attempt to ditch Nora by claiming that the baby is fussing in the nursery. As Nochimson states, in regard to this sequence, “Nick tricks Nora into staying home instead of coming with him to Smitty’s with the police by obnoxiously playing on her feelings for her child” (115). However, as Nochimson also points out, Nora manages to scoop the investigation *because* she is left behind when she receives information from an informant; and therefore “Nicks’ attempts to turn Nora’s maternity into a weakness end up being counterproductive. As a result of Nick’s ploy, Nora is not out of the way, but instead way ahead of him . . .” (115) The sequence in the nursery is one of the first moments of the series when Nora’s new status as a mother is used against her in an attempt to protect her from possible harm. In previous installments,
Nick frequently ditched Nora to protect her, but his excuses were always weak and not as chauvinistically deceptive. However, Nora still manages to outsmart Nick, surprising him at the nightclub where their separate clues led them.

The sequence at the nightclub becomes one of the most revealing sequences of the film because the couple, separated at the start of the scene, quickly reaffirms their status as a unit by the end. Nick discovers a crowd of attractive men surrounding a woman who turns out to be his wife. Throughout the Thin Man series, it is Nick who encounters other woman, such as his frequent moments with Dorothy in *The Thin Man*. Seldom do other men approach Nora, despite her stylish and attractive features. When other men do notice Nora, they infer that she is Nick’s mistress, and not his wife. This absence of other men around Nora could be because Nora is seldom on screen without Nick, and their interaction is so well constructed, other men cannot cut in. Nick and Nora are so synchronized that they often fail to notice the advances of other people, and when they do notice, they remain amused, but unthreatened. In this sequence at the nightclub, Nick approaches, and scares away the crowd of men by declaring, “Why, Mommy! You know better than to come to a place like this your first day out of bed. What if the health officers find you? They’ll put you right back in quarantine!” Nora quickly responds that she does not care, she will not return to quarantine. As Nochimson states in regard to this exchange, “Nick and Nora’s connection defies the limits of language, time, and place. They use language in play to create their own special meanings . . .” (117). Despite their new parental status, the couple remains fun and playful. They do not entirely succumb to their roles of mother and father. While other maternal figures in Hollywood cinema fall
victim to their parental status, and become peripheral characters, “Nora remains front and center, very much alive, and, though possessed of fluctuating degrees of influence, she remains a focus of desire” (Nochimson 112). Again, Nora’s desirability illustrated through the crowd of men that gathers around her at the nightclub. And it is Nick who calls her ‘Mommy,’ reinstating her status, as if to remind her as well as the audience of her changed position from sexualized woman to maternal figure. However, his tone is so absent of malice, and his disposition toward her playful, that his actions fail to be those of the domineering husband. In regard to Nick’s demeanor and Nora’s reaction, Nochimson states, “Nick is obnoxious in his humorously toned manifestations of power, but she is quite equal to the task of giving as good as she gets” (Nochimson 112). The marital relationship between Nick and Nora remains somewhat equal, with Nick often attempting to enact a domineering status, but Nora remains unfazed, barely humoring his attempts. After all, she is holder of their wealth, and her position counters Nick’s’ domineering attempts, bringing balance back to the couple.

An earlier example of Nick’s attempt to act as a chauvinistic husband, and Nora’s act of “giving as good as she gets” occurs at the start of the film when Nora is attempting to unlock a large luggage case. She is having difficulty with the lock, and throws her whole body into it. Nick, idly sipping a drink, comments, “Mommy, you shouldn’t try to figure out a highly complicated problem like that. You’ll strain yourself.” With a simple flick of wrist, Nick unfastens the lock and acknowledges his accomplishment, stating, “Hi-ho, seems like man’s work is never done.” A bemused but annoyed Nora puts him back in his place by playfully tossing Nicky Jr.’s Panda bear at his turned head. Nick only
falls out of frame, surprised and equally amused. The irony of the situation—the man of leisure, Nick Charles, noting the archaic delineation of gender roles in terms of work and intelligence—is not lost on the audience, nor is it lost on Nora. By tossing the bear at Nick’s head, Nora regains her equality as his wife and as a woman. This scene also marks Nick’s first reference to Nora as “Mommy”, a name that will replace his previous term of endearment, “Darling” for most of the remaining series. His consistent use of the term serves a reminder to both Nora and the audience of her change in status. However, Nora remains a strong female figure and the marriage does not suffer too much from the addition of Nicky Jr. in the first film that shows the Charleses as parents.

In Another Thin Man, a second significant sequence that brings attention to Nick and Nora’s status as parents occurs at the end of the film. The couple believes Nicky Jr. has been kidnapped, but discovers he has been replaced with a different child. The catalyst for this sequence occurs when Nick’s criminally reformed acquaintances decide to throw Nicky Jr. a birthday part, celebrating his first year. The reformed criminals all bring their toddlers – some are biological, and some are borrowed. Inevitably, this leads to mayhem and misunderstanding. During the climax of the film, as Nick reveals the killer’s identity to a room full of suspects, the victim’s daughter Lois MacFay (Virginia Grey) is revealed to be the murderer. Nick pieces together, outlining the woman’s double life and shady dealings. Lois makes a sudden threat to the safety of Nicky Jr., blackmailing his parents (and a room filled with random people) with the warning “You like that brat of yours, don’t you? All right, you let me walk out here and I’ll send him back in a half hour.” Frantic, Nora runs out of the room to find Nicky Jr. However, she
discovers that the baby in Lois’s room is not Nicky Jr., but someone else’s child from the birthday party. Although foiled, Lois’ attempt to blackmail the couple serves as an early example of how Nicky Jr. quickly becomes the albatross around Nick and Nora’s posh relationship. During the climatic reveal of the previous two films, Nick and Nora remained calm, cool, and unaffected. Now, however, their child has been used against them, an issue they would not have encountered previously. The couple’s shifting status from posh sophisticates to frantic parents signals a change within their individual characterizations, as well as how they interact together.

During the first three installments to the Thin Man series, Nick and Nora Charles exhibited a posh, high-class modern marriage. While less fortunate couples succumbed to marital strife throughout the series, Nick and Nora’s union remained strong and blissful. This stability is due to the financial independence they are guaranteed because of Nora’s inheritance. Because they have few problems to worry about beyond the crimes they investigate, the Charleses’ marriage is an excellent example of a happy and content love-based union. Myrna Loy biographer Karyn Kay perfectly sums up the dynamic of the Powell and Loy as Nick and Nora:

Under the protective umbrella of a respectable, upper-class marriage, Nick and Nora share the fun of fast living—a lifestyle usually reserved in the cinema for singles. [. . .] They are the perfect couple in the perfect marriage. They did the outrageous—they enjoyed each other as man and wife. (78)
These first three films demonstrate a subversive example of the idealized modern marriage—an uncommon sight for Hollywood cinema. Their characters, Nick and Nora Charles, remain blissfully content within their marriage, and this contentment continues through the series as evident by their playful interaction and their general equality.

The couple remains as biographer Kay defines them, openly enjoying each other as husband and wife (even after the addition of Nicky Jr., although the dynamic begins to shift). Nick and Nora Charles find desirability and equality within their marriage, while remaining married. While the onscreen marriage is typically seen as the cinematic kiss of death for any other screwball comedy, the Thin Man series manages to overcome this cinematic cliché by combining genres and producing a couple so happily married that they can playfully banter and interact. By showcasing the happily married couple, the Thin Man series fills a void left by previous films that were strictly aligned to the screwball comedies genre. Nick and Nora Charles are sophisticated, and free of any threat of divorce or separation. They begin as the perfect cinematic couple, building and sustaining their modern marriage on notions of love, desirability and equality.
CHAPTER 2: “A THING LIKE DIVORCE CAN BREAK UP A MARRIAGE!”:
POWELL AND LOY IN THE RE-MARRIAGE COMEDY GENRE

While William Powell and Myrna Loy are most remembered for their subversively modern married Nick and Nora Charles, the stars also ventured into the popular cinematic realm of the unhappily married couples. These films were separate from the Thin Man series, but were MGM’s attempts to market on Powell and Loy’s joint popularity. Of their seven non-Thin Man films, *I Love You Again* (1940) and *Love Crazy* (1941) are the two films that showcase a married couple, on the verge of divorce. According to Stanley Cavell, the repeated use of divorce in the 1930s screwball comedy genre signals the creation of a sub-genre, which he labels “the re-marriage genre” (Cavell 1). As defined by Cavell, the plot of the comedy re-marriage genre, “. . . shifts emphasis away from the normal question of comedy, whether a young pair will get married, onto the question whether the pair will get and stay divorced, thus prompting philosophical discussions of the nature of marriage” (85). A few of the films that Cavell cites within his book include *The Awful Truth* (1937), *His Girl Friday* (1940) and *The Philadelphia Story* (1940). Powell and Loy’s two ventures into the realm of the re-marriage comedy genre were also released during the later years of the 1930s and the early years of the 1940s, when the United States’ involvement in World War II was beginning. However, just as these three films depict Cavell’s definition of the re-marriage comedy genre, so do Powell and Loy’s lesser known *I Love You Again* and *Love Crazy.*

While marriage is often touted as the completion of a couple in the screwball comedy, the re-marriage involves the understanding that couple is incomplete (Cavell 31-
According to Cavell, the re-marriage genre is rooted in the knowledge that there is “trouble in paradise,” and this trouble signals the marriage is a disappointment, and to overcome the disappointment, the couple (typically the wife), seeks out a revenge for “discovering one’s incompleteness” (31-32). That incompleteness leads to a legal abandonment of the couple, and “[u]pon separation the woman tries a regressive tack, usually that of accepting as a husband a simpler, or mere, father-substitute” (31-32). This simpler man is typically less charismatic than the ex-husband. However, the ex-husband remains jealous of the simpler man because he holds the ex-wife’s affections or interest (albeit, a misconstrued interest, since she is clearly better matched with her original husband). Because the husband is more charismatic, the new man does not threaten him—he is only jealous that is wife is distracted by this interfering character. Meanwhile, the original couple argues and battles over past grievances from their marriage, with the new man promising a better, quieter life for the wife. However, as previously cited, the only clear option for the couple is to reestablish the marriage because the couple is a “. . . rich and sophisticated pair who speak intelligently and who infuriate and appreciate one another more than anyone else” (Cavell 18). But because the wife is the member of the couple who first recognized the marriage’s incompleteness, and left, the act of reestablishing the marriage is left up to the husband. To reclaim the original marriage, the husband “. . .must show that he is not attempting to command but that he is able to wish, and consequently to make a fool of himself. This enables the woman to awaken to her desire again . . .” allowing for the reestablishment of the marriage and the couple (32).
The wife often abandons the new man when he acts out against the ex-husband. She remains loyal to the original husband, despite their separation or divorce.

Once the couple accepts their weaknesses, and the wife discovers her husband’s softer side, the couple reunites in marriage. However, just as the screwball comedy ends with the establishment of the couple, and stops before uncovering true martial difficulties, so must the re-marriage film. The re-marriage film ends with the reestablishment of the couple, but avoids exploring the complexities of maintaining the marriage. The film ends before the audience is exposed to the gritty realism of the marriage and the relationship. Such martial realism is something unsuitable for the typically playful genre; the audience has little interest in seeing such truths. While the audience of the screwball comedy invests in the establishment of the couple, the audience of the re-marriage film invests in the reestablishment of the couple. Therefore the audience has little interest in seeing the relationship fall apart, once again.

Although Cavell’s genre appears valid and well constructed in terms of the iconography, David R. Shumway examines Cavell’s establishment and characterizations of the re-marriage genre throughout much of his own work. In the article “Screwball Comedies: Constructing Romance, Mystifying Marriage,” a text that appears to be a precursor to his 2003 book Modern Love: Romance, Intimacy, and the Marriage Crisis, Shumway states:

Where Cavell goes wrong—and it is hardly a peripheral place—is his position that the screwball comedies he discusses succeed in enlightening us about marriage itself. My argument is that they do just the opposite:
they mystify marriage by portraying it as the goal—but not the end—of romance. The major cultural work of these films is not the stimulation of thought about marriage, but the affirmation of marriage in the face of the threat of a growing divorce rate and liberalized divorce laws. (7)

Shumway’s belief that marriage within the screwball comedy genre “mystifies marriage” and reaffirms the status of marriage in a time of high divorce and separation lends itself to the idea that the medium serves as a reflection of the time period. –This is another factor of the screwball comedy genre that Cavell seems to choose to ignore, stating that:

The explanation I have heard for this historical phenomenon . . . is that thirties comedies were fairy tales for the Depression. This can hardly be denied if what it means is that in a time of economic depression romances were made in Hollywood that took settings of immense luxury and that depicted people whose actions often concerned the disposition of fantastic sums of money. (Cavell 2)

For Cavell, the screwball comedy of the 1930s was not focused overtly on money, and the exchange of it. Therefore, the economic state of the nation during the Great Depression, and the widespread belief that the genre was created out of a need for escapist fairytales, was unrelated. Instead, Cavell believes that “[t]he thirties were more than the Depression” and that the advent of sound is what most openly led to the formation and need of the screwball comedy genre (Cavell 16). While it is important to note that the 1930s was not limited to the Depression, and that the advent of sound led to significant changes in cinematic storytelling, Cavell ignores the value of the
representation of marriage within the screwball comedy genre. Shumway readily examines what Cavell fails to acknowledge, that marriage is an important feature within the 1930s screwball comedy because it serves as a sociological tool, reflecting the increase in failed marriages, and demonstrating that happiness within the marriage was attainable (Shumway “Screwball Comedies,” 11). Shumway also states:

. . . screwball comedies represent an innovation in the discourse of romance. They take the familiar elements—the obstacles, the love triangle, courtship, adultery—and combine them in a new way. Like historical romances, screwball comedies typically position the viewer as the subject of their romance so that he or she must feel marriage as the thing desired. (Shumway Modern Love, 82)

In the instance of these films, it is the re-marriage that is desired. The couple must reunite to reaffirm their happily modern relationship. As the 1800s drew to a close, the critics of the love-based modern marriage argued that divorce would flourish. These films illustrate the possibility for reunion after separation or divorce (although the chain of events portrayed is playfully unrealistic). And it was the onscreen representation of divorce and reunion—through hi-jinx and laughter—that demonstrated a modern solution to the modern troubles of love-based marriage.

Although Nick and Nora Charles demonstrate the subversive and happy modern marriage, the relationships within this genre were more realistic, offering a broader examination of marriage that included the possibility for divorce or destruction. While other screwball comedies sought to ignore or avoid the possibility of unhappiness or
misunderstanding, the re-marriage genre embraced it. In his article, Shumway states, “between 1910 and 1940, the divorce rates nearly doubled, in spite of a slight decline in the early 1930s” (8). Because of the severity of the increase in divorce, and the light-hearted nature of the screwball comedy, marital strife fit well into the genre. The modern notion of achieving personal happiness within relationships and marriages were then reaffirmed in the face of martial strife. According to Shumway, “[t]he project of the comedies of re-marriage is to reaffirm this romantic view of marriage in the face of the fact of its failure” (“Screwball Comedies,” 8). In regard to the analysis of marriage and re-marriage within in these films, Shumway further states:

Hollywood films take up this cultural work not only out patriarchal interest and ideology, but for the coincident reason that films that participated in this ideology were popular. A majority of the film audience doubtless found it pleasurable to be reassured about the possibilities of marriage. (Shumway “Screwball Comedies,” 8)

But, while the re-marriage genre reassured audiences about troubled marriages, the relationships remained light-hearted and the couples remained upper class. The genre did not account for marital trouble within the lower classes. According to Shumway, the focus on the relationships of the upper class in the screwball comedy genre, and therefore the re-marriage sub-genre, is because “. . . their world is a metaphor for the reward that romance promises of love” (Shumway “Screwball Comedies,” 10). The members of the upper class have the financial freedom and the time to pursue romance and to do it humorously. They must rediscover their perfect mate and re-establish their position
within the social class structure. The decadent sets and high-society lifestyles thereby metaphorically demonstrate that not only is it possible to attain a happy marriage, it is also possible to achieve financial stability. However, if the re-marriage genre—filled with divorcing and bickering couples—followed lower class couples, the humor of the situations would become darker and tragic. But, by placing the narrative in the realm of the higher class, the films remain light-hearted and playful with a simpler solution to the marital problem: reunion.

In the interim of the high-class and playful Thin Man series, Powell and Loy made two films representative of the re-marriage genre. These two films, *I Love You Again* and *Love Crazy*, display the married couple on the verge of divorce. The couple is then predictably reunited during the last sequence of the film. The onscreen chemistry between Powell and Loy carries over from the Thin Man series, however, the relationship transitions from Nochimson’s classification of the “Synergistic Couple” to the “Iconic Couple” (130). Nochimson defines the “Iconic Couple” as “a powerful form of Hollywood illusion, lending to stereotypes a seductive charm. Energizing the clichéd plot of the typical Hollywood movie, the Iconic Couple gives enchanting bodies and faces to the gender stereotypes that the mass media catered to” (10-11). Although Nochimson limits her analysis of the “Iconic” Powell and Loy pairing within the dramatic *Evelyn Prentice* (1934) and the comedic *Double Wedding* (1937), her analysis of the Powell and Loy pairing outside of the Thin Man series remains relevant to *I Love You Again* and *Love Crazy*. In regard to the “Iconic Couple” films of Powell and Loy, Nochimson states:
The chemistry of Powell and Loy in their non-synergistic performances often facilitates a delightful use of a formulaic script by two powerhouse performers, using only a small percentage of their full range of performance techniques, resulting in a couple of star turns as an Iconic Couple that in the end support Old Hollywood clichés. (130)

While the first three films of the Thin Man series exhibited an onscreen relationship that shook up the portrayal of modern marriage in film, *I Love You Again* and *Love Crazy* display Powell and Loy’s regression into the more predictable narratives of the Hollywood screwball comedy. However, even at in most cliché incarnation, Powell and Loy’s onscreen pairing surpasses other onscreen pairings of the re-marriage genre.

In his text, *Romantic Comedies: in Hollywood from Lubitsch to Sturges*, the only reference author James Harvey makes to Powell and Loy’s two re-marriage films is in terms of “passable” (*I Love You Again*) and “almost unwatchable” (*Love Crazy*) (176). Although these two films lack the inventive narrative of the Thin Man series, they are not as miserable as Harvey states within his text. The purpose of the two films seems rooted in the studio’s need to place Powell and Loy once more in films of marital hi-jinx, while testing the non-Thin Man waters. The films are entertaining because of the pairing of Powell and Loy.

The first of these two re-marriage films, *I Love You Again*, by W. S. Van Dyke (director of four of the six Thin Man films), displays the estranged marriage of Larry and Kay Wilson. The film was a box office success for MGM and a tongue-in-cheek reference to Powell and Loy’s ongoing onscreen pairing: “[t]he title was something of a
private joke to Loy and Powell, who began to think they were not going to be free to ‘love anyone else ever again’ on the motion picture screen” (Francisco 208). The film begins with uptight Larry suffering a concussion while rescuing a drowning drunk, Ryan (Frank McHugh) who had fallen overboard. Once he regains consciousness, Larry realizes he is not Larry Wilson, but George Carey. In 1931, con man and gambler George Carey suffered a concussion, and woke up to the reformed lifestyle of Larry Wilson. Now, in 1940, he decides to maintain the persona of Larry Wilson in order to return to his home in Habersville and clean out his well-maintained bank account. However, after returning to land, Larry encounters his soon-to-be ex-wife, Kay Wilson (Loy) and her dim-witted beau, Herbert (Donald Douglas). Larry spends the remainder of the simultaneously wooing Kay and scamming the townspeople. But, in true screwball comedy form, Larry regrets his scheming ways, and reunites with his wife by the conclusion of the film.

One sequence that demonstrates Larry’s attempts to reconnect with Kay, takes place late at night, in the kitchen. After suffering a scolding from her mother about her un-wifely treatment of Larry, Kay is forced to cook her estranged husband’s snack of scrambled eggs. The kitchen setting appears cozy, with gingham printed curtains adorning the windows. The kitchen appears to be a stereotypical small-town kitchen for a typical small-town couple. But the cozily, intimate setting belies the tension between Larry and Kay, which culminates when Kay dumps the scrambled eggs on Larry’s head.

As evident in the scrambled egg sequence, the couple must work through their marital troubles before they can reunite. Through the use of Larry’s amnesia, the film
creates an advantage for overcoming their marital troubles that other re-marriage films lack. His teetotal persona is easily replaced by the more refreshing, yet cunning persona. Powell’s character becomes an amalgamation of Larry Wilson’s achievements and George Carey’s charisma. Through this amalgamation of his personas, he is able to reestablish his marriage to Kay. He becomes a more exciting character—a man willing to fight for his wife. However, Larry’s initial reason for maintaining the relationship is to avoid scandal and suspicion when trying to scam the townspeople into a duped land deed. But while he is initially interested in regaining his marriage to avoid gossip, he quickly and whole-heartedly falls in love with Kay.

When the newly charismatic Larry Wilson first spots Kay, as the ship docks, he comments to Ryan about her physical appeal and his jealousy for the man she is there to fetch. Once Kay approaches Larry and Ryan the confusion regarding identities and relationships begins:

Kay: Larry, you seem strange.

Larry: That’s just because you haven’t seen me for a while. Before you know it, we’ll be right back . . . er, where we were.

Kay: That’s another thing I came to see you about.

The ‘thing’ that Kay wants to discuss with an unsuspecting Larry involves their divorce proceedings—of course, at this moment, Larry is not aware they are married. Throughout this sequence, Kay is treated as if she is a conniving vixen—the persona from Loy’s earlier film career. As Larry retrieves his luggage, ‘Doc’ Ryan attempts to ditch Kay, treating her as if she is a dame chasing down his new buddy. Kay, however, in a poised
manner that is slightly brusquer than the high-society, wifely stature of Nora Charles, promptly informs Ryan she is Mrs. Larry Wilson. Immediately, Ryan’s attitude toward her changes—he even takes off his hat in a show of dumbfounded politeness. Once the news reaches Larry, his manner also changes toward Kay. In fact, he becomes even more lecherous—almost gleefully. Posing as Larry’s doctor, Ryan tells his ‘patient’ that he needs bed rest. This comment prompts Larry to charismatically leer at Kay and reply, “Oh-ho, I’m alright, just a day or two in bed . . .” From this point on, their banter in the film becomes charged with playful innuendo that was not uncommon for the era, despite the policing of the Production Code committee. Instead, such innuendo in the screwball comedies was so well crafted (and yet, heavy-handed) that it served as a playful reminder of the Code’s watchful—and near-sighted—eye.

Another example of the playful commentary regarding the Production Code’s influence, as well as a nod to Powell and Loy’s previous onscreen couple involves Ryan defending the Wilsons’s marriage to dim-witted Herbert. Worried that Kay will fall under the control of her pocket-pinching husband, Herbert charges into the hotel suite only to find she has already left. However, this does not stop him from putting Larry in his place:

Larry: . . . I asked why should she want to divorce me?

Herbert: You know why.

Larry: Ah, yes. I do, but, uh, do you?

Herbert: I’ll say I do! And so does everybody else that knows you. It’s written all over you. Kay was never married to you.

Ryan: Keep it clean, keep it clean!
Larry: No, she was married to the Rotary, the Kiwanis, the Lions, the Moose, the Elks, and the Greater Habersville Committee!

Ryan: Boy, is that bigamy!

Throughout the film, Ryan serves as the lower-class sidekick to Larry, but in this particular sequence he also serves as the voice of morality, although somewhat ironically.

_I Love You Again_ continues to display elements of the re-marriage genre through the use of the love-triangle formed by Larry, Kay, and Herbert. As Cavell states, “Upon separation the woman tries a regressive tack, usually that of accepting as a husband a simpler, or mere, father-substitute . . . This is psychologically an effort to put here desire, awakened by the original man, back to sleep . . .” (31-32). Herbert serves as this simpler husband figure. He frequently interferes with the couple’s attempts to reunite—whether or not their attempts are premeditative. However, unlike the substitute husbands in other re-marriage films, Herbert seems to have the possibility to become possessive or abusive, frequently raising his voice angrily, and shrugging of Kay’s attempt to corral his attitude. Larry notes this character flaw while at dinner, when Herbert quickly becomes angry. Larry states, “Here’s a man who gets loud on no drinks…” Herbert’s true nature comes to the surface by the film’s conclusion when he attempts to double-cross Larry, to Kay’s dismay.

Cavell further states that in order to reclaim the wife, the husband must humiliate himself, and demonstrate that he is “not attempting to command but that he is able to wish, and consequently to make a full of himself” (32). Enacting this characterization of the re-marriage genre, Larry “humiliates” himself several times throughout the film. An
example of Larry’s willful humiliation occurs during the dinner sequence with Kay and Herbert when Kay refuses to dance with Larry. In a free-spirited manner that uptight Larry would not have exhibited, this new and charming Larry begins to dance around the floor without a partner, to the confused amusement of the on-lookers. Kay, bewildered by her husband’s sudden change in attitude and his willingness to make a public spectacle, quickly steps into his empty arms. The reunion of the couple, however, does not last long. Kay quickly returns to her awaiting dim-witted fiancé, and she and Herbert leave the restaurant. But the charismatic Larry begins to recognize his true feelings for Kay, and his desire to maintain the marriage.

The interference of Kay’s mother (Nella Walker) serves as a nod to the older traditions of marriage and family life. Kay’s mother criticizes the couple’s living arrangements:

Mother: Now, Larry, about Kay—I know the whole story. It’s ridiculous.
Larry: I hope you brought her to her senses, Mother.
Mother: The idea, you in here, her in there for a whole year. I don’t see how you could do such a thing!
Larry: Ah, neither do I.
Mother: But we’re going to change all that. I’ve come to stay for a while.
Larry: Ah, neither do I.
Mother: I’m taking the porch room—which should’ve been a nursery long ago.

This sequence reveals that the mother’s true alliance lies not with her daughter, but with her son-in-law. She wants to correct their wronged marriage, a marriage that lacks the characteristics of a happy modern marriage. While Nick and Nora Charles thrive in their
great, companionable marriage, and sleep in the same bedroom—albeit in separate beds—the Wilsons fail to fully embrace a subversive modern relationship. Instead, the original, teetotal Larry Wilson appears to have ruined his relationship by restricting it to Victorian sentiments out of a self-righteous need for propriety and honor. However, with the aid of Kay’s mother, and with his new carefree persona, Larry Wilson is able to save their marriage, and bring it into the realm of a modern, loving relationship.

One way in which Larry demonstrates his new love for Kay, to Kay, is by professing his love to her in her bedroom. After a day of extravagant shopping—something his old self never would have done so willingly—Larry tells Kay the story of the lovebirds:

Larry: You know, I knew a case once where a female lovebird locked the male lovebird out of her nest. And he stood outside and whistled, and he whistled, and he whistled: like this... ‘Coooo—Please let me in. Cooo.’

Oh it was pitiful. Then finally, he lost his temper. So he kicked the door of the cage in, and what do you suppose the female did then?

Kay: Gave him a sharp peck at the base of the skull?

Larry: No, she spread her soft little wing around him, and she sighed:

‘Coooo’—And she laid him an egg.

Larry’s story serves as an allegory for the film and for the genre as a whole. However, the possibility for a laid egg, or rather, the possibility for a child, is left open. This reference to the laid egg, coupled with Mother’s pointed remark regarding the lack of a nursery illustrates that every successful marriage leads to parenthood. As the sequence continues,
Kay grows tired of Larry’s attempts to woo her, and states “You’re losing me, so suddenly I seem worth holding on to. It’s not me. It’s just the idea of giving up anything that’s ever belonged to you. You don’t love me, you never did . . .” However, when Larry counters her argument, she completely breaks down, confused by his sudden change in temperament. Larry is beginning to show his changed persona to Kay—a side willing to fight for their marriage. After this encounter, Kay begins to soften towards Larry, enabling the possibility for a reunion.

But the comedy re-marriage genre, as outlined by Cavell, contains certain narrative elements that must occur in order for the successful reunion. A key element involves “. . .the narrative’s removal of the pair to a place or perspective in which the complications of the plot will achieve what resolution they can” (29). By this, Cavell means that the couple must be isolated from exterior factors that are ensuring their marital separation. Once they are isolated from these factors, they are able to remember happier times within their relationship, and these memories lead to the reestablishment of the marriage. In *I Love You Again*, Larry and Kay rekindle their romance while on a moonlit walk. As the couple begins their stroll, Kay states, “You’re the only honest one in the whole crowd . . . you’re really too good for this town.” – This statement signals a change in Larry’s demeanor; he wants to become that man.

During the walk, Kay takes Larry to a hilltop, overlooking the town. At this point, Kay has left Herbert, and so the couple is one step closer to reuniting. Now that the hindering love-triangle is null, the reunion is a viable possibility. The couple reminisces
about their past courtship—or rather, Kay reminisces, while Larry plays along. On the hilltop, Kay remembers Larry’s proposal:

Kay: You said, ‘Kay, Darling, marriage is the soundest investment two people can make.’

Larry: Yeah, that’s right. . . . Kay, why did you ever marry me?

Kay: Because I felt that, back of those stuffed trophies and lodge pins, there was another person—an exciting person. The sort of man I’d dreamt of marrying.

Larry: He wasn’t really there, though, was he?

Kay: Yes, Larry, I finally found the man I’d thought I’d married.

During this exchange, Larry appears vulnerable, with Kay dominantly positioned higher within the frame while he is spread out near her feet. His manner towards her in this scene is also on the edge of vulnerability, as she speaks of the man she thought she had married. What is most interesting about the marriage in *I Love You Again* is that Larry Wilson is truly a changed man. He has unwittingly reformed his ways, and regained his wife’s love in the process. The man that Kay had thought she married—the man who she believed existed behind the stuffy formality—truly *did* exist, but was kept dormant due to an unwitting bout of amnesia.

As the film draws to a conclusion, Larry realizes he does not want to lose Kay, and so he feigns another amnesia attack. During this faked attack, he pretends to not know of the oil scheme, and so the townsmen are left in the cold. Having just found out that about the George Carey amnesia issue, Kay is now saddened that her husband has
reverted to his dull ways. Once everyone exits, Kay stays behind and contemplates bonking Larry on the head with a blunt object, in hopes of setting him right. But Larry coos in the manner of the lovebird, signaling his true identity. This allows the couple to happily reunite in their refigured marriage. *Love You Again* contains several characteristics that classify it as a re-marriage film, and the most important characteristic is that the couple reunites into a loving, modern marriage.

The second re-marriage film starring Powell and Loy, *Love Crazy*, is somewhat painful (but not as miserable James Harvey previously stated), however, it fulfills the characteristics of the re-marriage film to a clichéd end. *Love Crazy*, directed by Jack Conway, can be viewed as the end of the re-marriage genre—or perhaps, the beginning of the end for the Powell and Loy pairing. Although Powell and Loy made three additional films for the Thin Man series, *Love Crazy* represented the first film that began to drain the wonderful attributes of Nochimson’s “Iconic Couple” (Nochimson 10-11). The re-marriage plot of the film becomes even conventional than the plot in *I Love You Again* because the couple must clearly reunite and the roadblocks they encounter vary from frivolous to idiotic. The characters Steve and Susan Ireland appear to be blissfully wedded as they celebrate their anniversary. However, after Susan’s mother interferes—much like Kay’s mother in *I Love You Again*—the couple heads for divorce court.

The film begins as Steve arrives in a cab outside their townhouse, a portable record player sitting on his lap. As the doorman offers to help him out of the car, Steve sings along to the spinning record: “It’s delightful to be married, to be-be-be-be married. There’s nothing quite as jolly as a happy married life.” As he steps from the cab, he then
poses a question to the doorman that frames the state of Powell’s character, and the overall plot of the film:

Steve: Yes, sir, Jimmy, it’s certainly delightful to be-be-be-be married.—
Don’t you think so, Jimmy?
Jimmy: Well, well, sometimes.
Steve: Oh, always. There’s nothing wrong with anyone’s life that a good marriage can’t cure.

Steve’s comments and general mood in this opening sequence immediately frame the film’s stance on marriage: that marriage brings happiness, and a happy marriage is a socially recognized necessity. When Steve states that there is not a problem “marriage can’t cure” this appears to be a knowing nod state of marriage in the 1940s, when divorce rates were rising.

The reason behind Steve’s uncontainable joy is that it is his fourth wedding anniversary, and to celebrate the couple is planning a romantic dinner, at home. For a fourth wedding anniversary, the couple seems overly excited—perhaps this is due to the idea that every year of marriage is a remarkable milestone. This sentiment is further illustrated by the Irelands’ maid, Martha (Fern Emmett), when she states, “Well, well, well, look at the lovebirds. And after four years!” The couple in the screwball comedy genre is not meant to remain happy after they are married, and therefore, their continued bliss is notable. They live in a lavishly decorated hotel suite (much like the Charleses) that was garishly decorated in a late Art Deco fashion. This decorative structure seems to support and exhibit the Ireland’s financial stability. But despite their financial stability (or,
because of their financial stability, as the case may be for the screwball couple), the couple quickly becomes fractured. This fractured marriage seems to serve no other purpose than to enable the film’s necessary plot and to showcase the continued onscreen partnership of William Powell and Myrna Loy.

The marriage begins to falter on the evening of their anniversary, when Steve convinces Susan to reverse their itinerary. Every year, on their anniversary, the couple retraces the steps and actions they took on their wedding day; but this year, Steve believes it is time for a change, and that they do everything backwards—literally. Their plans are quickly crashed when Susan’s mother, Mrs. Cooper (Florence Bates) arrives. She is equally pleased the couple has reached the fourth-year mark, and plans to dine with the couple. At this point, the catalyst for the couple’s separation begins. Steve runs into Isobel Kimble Grayson (Gail Patrick), a woman from his bachelorhood, while running an errand for his mother-in-law. Isobel comments on Steve’s martial status, and he reassures her that he is happily married to Susan. The couple then becomes stuck in the elevator, and the only way out is through the roof. Steve then ends up with Isobel’s high-heeled shoe in his jacket pocket, and this proves to be the downfall of his marriage.

In his text *Modern Love: Romance, Intimacy, and the Marriage Crisis*, Shumway states, “Cavell thinks that the screwball comedies he discusses succeed in enlightening us about marriage itself. My argument is that they do just the opposite: they mystify marriage by treating marriage as if it were an adulterous affair” (82). Shumway’s argument comes from the belief that in trying to reunite the fractured couple, the couple becomes forced to hide their true feelings from the wife’s new boyfriend, the interfering
mother, and other involved characters. Therefore, the marital magic is rekindled by the secrecy. However, in *Love Crazy*, the phrase “adulterous affair” takes on a more exact connotation, when Susan and her mother believe Steve is having an affair with his old flame. Isobel’s actions towards Steve also appear to be similar to the femme fatale figure, and she immediately poses as a questionable threat. She is the exact opposite to Susan Ireland.

In an attempt to seek revenge on Steve’s supposed infidelity, Susan seeks out Isobel’s husband—or at least, the man she believes to be Isobel’s husband, Pinky (Donald MacBride). Instead, she enters the wrong apartment and encounters the outdoorsman Ward Willoughby (Jack Carson). The comedy of errors continues to erupt, until Steve is left standing alone. That night, after a mix-up regarding a taxicab, Susan decides that her husband has lied to her too many times to be forgiven. As she tearfully runs from the bedroom, Susan proclaims, “I’m not crying, and if I am crying, it’s because I think that twelve o’clock at night is a pretty rotten time to start my life over again.” Susan’s comment signals the couple’s complete destruction. If Steve had not changed the order of their anniversary events, the marriage would not have ended. On any other anniversary, the couple would have dined together at midnight. They would not have been faced with the destruction of their happy marriage. The mother-in-law would not have meet up with them, and the entire screwy evening would not have occurred. However, if the couple were as happy as they stated, they would not have broken up so easily. Within the couple, Susan appears to be the weaker person. Because she jumps to conclusions regarding Steve’s interaction with Isobel, the marriage ends. Once again, this
reflects Cavell’s idea regarding the wife and the fractured relationship. Susan is the one to recognize (somewhat irrationally) that they are not as married as they portray. However, Steve—who was singing the praises of marriage earlier in the evening—struggles to fight for their marriage, and does so without the interference of his pride. When Susan immediately begins the divorce proceedings, Steve attempts to dissuade Susan by feeding the lawyer his dialogue:

Steve: . . . Why there’s everything in the world to say. Say, that divorce is something that you never stop regretting. Let her know how many lives are wrecked by it. Tell her that marriage is too important a thing to be broken up a trifle.

Steve’s pro-marriage, and anti-divorce tirade demonstrates what Shumway cites as the re-marriage genre’s desire to reaffirm marriage during a time of growing divorce (Modern Love 82). Predominantly, divorce is undesirable for the husband—the patriarchal figure. Through Steve’s comments, Love Crazy openly states what other re-marriages films cheekily alluded to: that only marriage and reunion for the couple are acceptable, and that divorce and total separation are undesirable.

Steve represents a strange change in the screwball comedy’s representation of the husband, and in William Powell’s filmography. While the abandoned husband in the re-marriage film is typically a man of great pride, Steve Ireland unabashedly chases after his deserting bride. But neither Steve nor Susan appears supportive of the divorce. Susan appears to be divorcing Steve because she should, not because she truly feels wronged. Her reaction appears based on of Cavell’s previously cited argument that the wife in the
re-marriage genre discovers that her marriage is not perfect, and immediately seeks separation (31-32). Her actions are not entirely her own, instead, she is doing what is expected of the broken-hearted wife. She has moved on, having found her necessary dim-witted man in Ward Willoughby.

Steve is swept away with notions of love and marriage, and his devotion to the principle of marriage leaves him desperate to reunite with Susan. He delays their divorce by claiming to lack the mental state to willfully divorce from his wife—thereby, becoming legally love crazy. While Cavell’s characterizations of the re-marriage genre claim that the husband must humiliate himself to prove he has changed, Steve not only humiliates himself to prove he has changed, but he also humiliates himself to make his wife see his innocence. Steve must delay the divorce and make a spectacle in the process. However, Susan becomes equally manipulative and commits her husband to a sanitarium.

For Cavell the reunion of the couple within the re-marriage genre rests on the husband’s necessary humiliation, a humiliation that is meant to remind the wife of the softer side of her husband’s personality. Throughout Love Crazy, Steve unabashedly humiliates himself so effectively that he is committed to a hospital. Therefore, it is evident that little can stop Steve from reuniting with his wife—if only she would listen rationally to his argument. When sneaking into his apartment, Steve is forced to don a disguise—a dress. His level of willful humiliation increases to the point of figurative castration when he must shave off his mustache to fulfill the female charade. When Steve, now dressed as a woman, encounters a surprised Susan, he dramatically clutches her in his arms:
Steve: Susan! I’m in a terrible jam!

Susan: I know! But what are you trying to prove?

Susan’s question directly points to Cavell’s theory surrounding the husband’s need for self-inflicted humiliation. Within the film, Steven’s cross-dressing is posed as the ultimate humiliation, and Susan is forced to listen to Steve’s story:

Susan: Steve you might have known something like this would’ve happened, I still can’t understand why you—

Steve: Oh, Susan, are you going to quarrel with me now? I’ve the most terrible time just trying to get to you. I’ve been chased, scalded, drowned, look—I even had to shave off my mustache. Doesn’t that prove I love you?

Susan: Perhaps, but it doesn’t prove why you didn’t use that taxicab the night of our anniversary . . .

Still, Susan cannot fully forgive Steve for his lies—until he confesses he was so enamored with Susan that he forgot he had called the taxi that night. He had spent his time with Isobel gushing about his wife. His crime was not that he was adulterous, but that he was in love with his wife to the point of losing sight of his surroundings.

Dressed as an older woman (Miss Ireland, Steve’s non-existent sister), Steve proposes that they take a second honeymoon in Canada. At the point, the film poses an interesting element not present in other Powell and Loy films, or within other re-marriage films—the representation of gender identity. The film takes on an implication of sapphism through the onscreen framing of ‘Miss Ireland’ and Susan Ireland, and the
romantic nature of relationship. ‘Miss Ireland’ is an older, unmarried woman which immediately codes her as a subversive female figure, and thereby, a lesbian. Mrs. Cooper frequently comments to Susan that she does not approve of the ‘Miss Ireland’s’ influence. Mrs. Cooper’s fears regarding the faux sister-in-law reinforce ‘Miss Ireland’s’ position as the Sapphic threat.

During this climatic sequence, the couple’s interaction continues to playfully manipulate the strict gender roles and Mrs. Cooper’s worries. Believing Susan has returned to him, Steve, still dressed as ‘Miss Ireland,’ moves in for a dramatic kiss. However, Susan stops him—not because of his appearance, but because he misunderstood her offer to hide him from the authorities. Once the authorities invade the apartment, Steve is forced to maintain the persona ‘Miss Ireland’, and Susan must play along. The charade allows for many jokes and gags centered on the differences of gender, and ‘Miss Ireland’. One occurs when Ward makes a negative comment about Steve. ‘Miss Ireland’ comments, “Why if I were a man I’d knock you down for that.” Steve then proceeds to punch Ward in the face, toppling him backwards. This is Steve’s first and only use of masculine force throughout the film, and notably, it occurs when he is dressed as a woman. Steve frequently brings into question the roles of gender and gender expectations. When he is in a suit, he is highly emotional, and when he is in a long dress, he is physically domineering.

The tongue-in-cheek references to Steve’s gender-bending continues in this sequence when Mrs. Cooper comments, “You feel this, you feel that, anyone hear you talk would think you were the only woman in the world with feelings.” Throughout the
film, Steve has been the overly emotional and frantic character, a character in love with being in love—traits typically attributed to women. The implication of sapphism is exaggerated and manipulated further in *Love Crazy* when ‘Miss Ireland’ attempts to go to Steve and Susan’s bedroom for the night. With her mother still present, Susan forces ‘Miss Ireland’ into the guest room:

‘Miss Ireland’: Susan, Dear, if you get lonely during the night I do hope you’ll feel free to come to me. I’ll leave the door unlocked. You’ll find I can be just as comforting as Steven.

Susan is flabbergasted and amused by these comments. But the sequence’s play on gender and sapphism grows stronger once Susan learns the truth about Steve and Isobel’s forgotten taxi. After shoving her mother into her and Steve’s bedroom, Susan knocks on the guest room door. Although ‘Miss Ireland’ remains off screen (undoubtedly for the sake of the Production Code, which did not favor overt onscreen lesbianism), Steve answers Susan with a feminized voice, inviting her into the room. Susan enters the room, and the scene dissolves into the next sequence: a clear implication of sex. The implication of sex continues when Ward calls the Ireland apartment. Only Susan’s arm is visible, as she reaches for the phone on the night table. Near the telephone is ‘Miss Ireland’s’ hairpiece—which serves as the tongue-in-cheek equivalent to the hat on the bedpost. The reunited couple, in the form of Steve and Susan Ireland, never appears in frame. Instead, the audience (and Ward) is left with Steve’s disembodied voice and the click of the telephone receiver. Although Powell and Loy’s Nick and Nora Charles serve as their
modern onscreen marriage, the Irelands reach a subversive level that even the Charleuses failed to reach: cross gender role play.

The re-marriage comedy film, as outlined by Stanley Cavell and re-figured by David R. Shumway, serves as a sub-genre of the screwball comedy. According to Shumway, the prevalent use of divorce and marital reunion within the sub-genre was enabled by the divorce increase during the 1930s, and the needed to illustrate the importance of a happily reunited relationship. The reunion within the re-marriage film was not easily obtained. During the course the film, the couple must overcome the plot-point obstacles. Powell and Loy’s two re-marriage films exhibit the necessary characteristics of the genre, from the wife’s chosen separation, to the husband’s self-humiliation. The need for these characteristics within the re-marriage film aligns with the social need to cinematically demonstrate a happy resolution to the heartbreak of divorce, the ever-present threat within the love-based modern marriage.
CHAPTER 3: “HEY! C’MON, GET WITH IT! THEY’LL THINK YOU’RE A COUPLE OF SQUARES!”: THE DOMESTICATION OF NICK AND NORA CHARLES

The domestication of Nick and Nora Charles is a popular topic in many discussions of Powell and Loy’s shared filmography because their transition from a subversive example of modern marriage, to the more domesticated cliché is so unsettling. While the couple does not fall victim to divorce or separation, they do succumb to the perils of parenthood and the changing American priorities. Popular culture was forced to adapt with these extreme national and global changes within society, during and after World War II. According to Kyvig, “World War II would . . . have a significant impact on the United States, transforming its economy and society, elevating the status of its women and people of color, advancing its technology, and propelling it into a position of international leadership” (257). The sarcastic and high-society Charleses had little place in this changed world, and it was beginning to show. In a time period so heavily affected by the brutality of war, marital and familial relationships were becoming a more serious topic. As Loy states in her semi auto-biography, “[t]he essentially comic treatment of marriage and murder belonged to a more cynical, satiated prewar era. The novel, self-sacrificing Minivers and Curries supplanted the flippant Charleses. The whole world’s sense of values had changed . . .” (Lotsilibas-Davis 192). The importance of families was becoming more prevalent, not only in American society, but in American cinema, as well. The addition of Nicky Charles Jr. in the 1939 Another Thin Man allowed for the further exploration of family and domestication in the final three Thin Man installments:
Shadow of the Thin Man (1941), The Thin Man Goes Home (1944), and Song of the Thin Man (1947).

The Charleses’ forced domestication demonstrated the universal need for societal conformation. No longer was the Charleses’ whimsical and subversive approach to the idealized marriage acceptable. The clear illustration of the couple’s domestication was more appalling to the subversive status of modern marriage than the push of reunion within the re-marriage genre. In the re-marriage genre, it was the husband who was forced to humiliate himself in an effort to bring the wife back into the marital fold. This offer of self-disgrace contained the possibility that the couple would not return to their previous status quo lifestyle, but would embark on a more equal partnership. However the re-marriage film ends while the couple basks in the glow of reunion, and for a moment they are able to dreamily exist outside of the societal norm. It is unlikely and socially unacceptable that the couple remains blissfully untouched from society’s grasp. The conclusions of the films—particularly the conclusion of Song of the Thin Man—foreshadow the necessity of parenthood.

In the re-marriage genre, the couple’s venture into parenthood was off-screen and after the role of the credits. However, in the final three Thin Man films, the stifling presence of parenthood becomes a cornerstone of the plot. In these last Thin Man films, the couple returns to the societal norm, a marriage that has been re-appropriated into the culturally expected husband-provider/wife-dependant roles, while firmly defining the couple as parents. As film critic James Harvey states, Nora’s cheeky use of baby booties as a pregnancy announcement at the end of the second film serves as the kiss of doom for
the couple (176). This realization was not lost on the actors Myrna Loy and William Powell. In her book, Loy states, “[t]hey’d added Nick Charles, Jr., to the script, leaving Bill incredulous. ‘Why do we want this kid?’ he groaned. ‘First thing you know, he’ll be in kindergarten, then prep school, then college. How old will that make us?’” (Lotsilbas-Davis 162). Powell’s displeasure with the young addition demonstrates the understanding that the child would pigeonhole the couple in a more domesticated parental role. The Charleses’ previous example of a modern, yet subversive, marriage was significant because the couple did not follow the social norms—Nick Charles was not the breadwinning husband, and Nora Charles was not restricted to the stifling wifely duties. This couple did not function within the normal confining roles of husband and wife. However, once they had a child, the tone of their relationship shifts from a carefree example of a modernly fun marriage, into a more clichéd domestic relationship. In the first three films, the Charleses’ revolutionary example of a modern marriage was rife with sexual chemistry, and playful banter. But with the addition of Nicky Jr., the couple is confined to their parental roles, and the couple finally begins to exhibit the socially expectable modern marriage—a marriage that was focused on producing children, and maintaining a household. Nicky Jr. posed a greater threat to the Charleses than the laughable seductress Dorothy Wynant, or other men and women the couple encountered in the earlier installments.

The Charleses’ transition to the domesticated cliché is most apparent in fourth film of the series, *Shadow of the Thin Man* in which the couple must investigate the murder of a popular horse jockey while coping with a precocious young son. Through the
duration of the investigation, the couple demonstrates signs of succumbing to the social pressures they had previously avoided—such as embracing parenthood and limiting alcohol consumption. Now that the couple has a young child, the pressure to normalize their relationship becomes stronger. As Martha Nochimson states:

> The problems of hierarchy and patriarchy plague Nick and Nora in this film, and they do negotiate them with grace and charm, but the trajectory of the film beings here to move Nick and Nora toward the more formulaic wife and husband that both Loy and Powell went on later to play with other acting partners in postwar Hollywood, making the film less captivating than its earlier series mates. (99-100)

Although the film offers a few delightful interactions between Nick and Nora, the strongly subversive charm that was present in the earlier films fades under the formulaic structure of both the plot and the onscreen marriage. Previously, the onscreen marriage of Nick and Nora had demonstrated a happy example of the modern marriage through a subversive lens, but in the later films the couple is forced to conform to more socially acceptable gender roles.

The pressure for the Charleses to conform to the socially accepted roles derived from political pressure from film-going audiences and the PCA, as well as a change in the production set-up. As Loy previously stated, the value structure in the United States was changing in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The American public was now more focused on familial relationships, and this focus was now encompassing popular culture and entertainment. As Nancy Cotts states, “[i]n public sentiments and popular culture the
American way of life was signified and virtually constituted by marriage and family ties” (188). People wanted their own ideals reinforced through the entertainment they sought, and while the subversive status of Nick and Nora Charles had been ideal during the earlier years of the 1930s, the cheeky relationship was now losing some of its appeal as the severity of World War II came to light. Because of this shift in ideals, Nick and Nora Charles were forced to comply with the changing public interests and standards. In doing so, they were confined to a stereotype they had previously avoided—the domesticated married couple. According to Nochimson, “[t]he flattening of the Charleyes’ energy . . . was probably less a matter of the ability of the PCA to enforce its code, as many think, than it was a matter of increased societal demand for war propaganda” (132). Nochimson elaborates that because of the burgeoning Communist paranoia and the resulting Red Scare, the couple was further doomed in post-war America. And the paranoia caused Hollywood to exist in constant agitation: “[t]his frenzy coerced Hollywood into depicting life in unambiguous, hard-edged terms that simplistically polarized good and evil. . . .” (Nochimson 132). The previously idealized and subversive Nick and Nora Charles had “settled down” just in time—before the policing eyes of society began to question their patriotic alliance.

The addition of Nicky Jr. to the Charles brood did little to further the narrative or plot of the series; yet, the addition seemed to be the natural progression for a happily married couple. Nicky Jr. also saved the couple from questioning glances during the beginning of the Red Scare. While Nick and Nora Charles were allowed to function outside of social norms for the first two films, by the third film, they were beginning to
exhibit acceptable characteristics, such as those of the stereotypical parent. As James Harvey summarizes, “Nick’s liquor consumption, for example, is gradually scaled down. So are Nora’s wit and sharpness” (176). This reformation of Nick and Nora’s subversive characteristics continues—to an alarming degree—throughout the remainder of the series, resulting in watered down characters and a clichéd onscreen relationship.

The opening sequence of the fourth film, *Shadow of the Thin Man*, playfully exhibits Nick Charles’s established fatherhood and his attempts to cope with the changes that come with a child. The establishing shot opens on a park filled with children, prams, and mothers; the sequence then cuts to a strolling Nick Charles, hiding the horse race coverage in a book of fairytales. Nick Charles, the subversive dandy figure, is doing his best to dapperly retain some of his pre-baby persona, while still appearing to have normalized within the social expectations of fatherhood. The fact that Nora remains at home while the other mothers are present at the park also demonstrates couple’s attempt to subvert social expectations within the domesticated marriage. However, as the series progresses the couple fully succumbs to the expected normalization and these subtle attempts at rebelliousness are rendered futile.

Early in *Shadow of the Thin Man*, the film attempts to maintain footing on subversive ground by demonstrating a different father-son relationship than previously seen on screen. During a walk with his father, Nicky Jr. (Dickie Hall)—who in this film appears to be five or six years old—refuses to sit on a park bench, and after much cajoling from his father, finally sits down. The father entertains his son by creating a new fairytale constructed around the horse race coverage. Nick has momentarily dubbed his
son, using elements of his life not suitable for a young boy. — This is a point that Nora’s disapprovingly arched eyebrow solidifies when Nicky Jr. recites his new fairytale. The sequence contains a hint of subversive nature through Nick’s presence (and Nora’s absence) and with his masking of the newspaper with a book of fairytales. But the sequence also attempts to bring a subversive level to Nicky Jr. when the son refers to his father as “Nick”—in a tone that is reminiscent of Nora’s amused wifely voice. In referring to his father by his first name and not by a socially acceptable paternal moniker, Nicky Jr. brings attention to the fact that this father-son relationship is different from other father-son relationships. —And this relationship must change into something more widely acceptable within society.

The opening sequence of the film continues to demonstrate the series’ conformity while clumsily attempting to revisit their established subversive status. The film cuts back to the hotel suite where Nora is present—but with the family maid, an element previously unexplored in the Thin Man series. Nora’s presence at home is both culturally acceptable, since the home is the wife’s domain, and surprising because she is not with her son in the park. However, the allure of Nora brings father and son back to the unlikely urban homestead—the hotel suite. Despite the couple’s domestication, they have not fully embraced their changed roles by purchasing a house or an apartment. Instead, they still live out of a hotel suite, just as they did before the birth of their child. However, the hotel suite appears to have changed in terms of décor. Previously, the rooms were decorated in terms of high fashion, with furniture that was built with strong lines and plush cushions. But now, with the addition of Nicky Jr., the couple’s furniture and décor
has transitioned into something that appears more frilly and homey. Chiffon curtains adorn the window treatments, allowing in the sunlight—as if to make a point that Nick and Nora are now often awake and functioning during the day. They no longer sleep late, and therefore have little reason to shield the invasive sunlight. The dining room also serves as the primary focal point of the floor plan. The room often remains in frame throughout several sequences that take place in the family’s hotel suite. Previously, the dinning room table was not an important feature of their home life, since the couple seldom had reason to use the room beyond the occasional dinner party.

Another surprising element of the hotel suite is the sudden presence of the Charleses’ black maid. Her presence is both shocking and abrasive because the previous Thin Man films had been somewhat devoid of such ethnic stereotypes (Nochimson 119). Her presence seems to serve as a heavy-handed attempt to regulate the couple within the stereotypical cinematic cliché. In this opening sequence, the couple’s iconic drinking is highlighted when Nora decides to lure Nick home. The sequence then cuts to Nick who stops abruptly and declares, “Nicky, you know something tells me something important is happening somewhere. And I think we should be there.” The joke is visually capped off with an immediate cut to Nora, shaking a mixer of martinis. —Nora is luring Nick back to the domestic home front with the symbol of his wild and carefree past. This tongue-in-cheek sequence illustrates an element of the Nick Charles iconography audiences expected: the vodka martini.

But despite this visual joke, the presence of the vodka martini seems to take on a wicked connotation in the domesticated context of these later films. It seems improper for
a family man to over-indulge in alcohol; therefore, Nick’s vodka intake is limited and replaced with a family-friendly beverage: milk. During the family dinner, it is Nicky Jr. who regulates his father’s alcohol consumption, protesting until his father replaces his vodka martini with a glass of milk.

Nicky Jr.: Daddy, drink!

Nick: Oh, thanks Pal. – Mommy’s he’s a great kid, I’m much obliged.

Nora: Oh, it was nothing. Anytime.

When Nora begins to play along with Nicky Jr.’s protests, even encouraging him and cornering her husband, Nick grows bewildered. He attempts to put his parental foot down, stating, “But, Darling, we mustn’t let me become headstrong.” –Nick’s playful remark seems to belie the truth: a headstrong son could serve as the downfall for his subversive, fun-loving relationship with Nora. However, Nick’s efforts to smooth-talk his way out of fulfilling his son’s desire fails as a smiling Nora further complicates the situation:

Nora: He’s made up his mind. He won’t drink it unless you do, too.

Nick: But I can’t drink milk, I’m a big boy, now. I wear long pants. I go out with girls.

Nicky Jr.: No, drink milk!

Nora: If you let him down now, you’ll kill all his respect.

While Nora’s comments about maintaining Nicky Jr.’s respect appears to be playful, it also demonstrates that Nick must conform to the domesticated expectations of not only society, but of his son, who often serves as the voice of society throughout the series. In
the opening sequence, as well as the dinner sequence, Nora appears to have domesticated into the stereotypical figure of motherhood. She appears to exist only within the house, outlining chores for the maid, Stella (Louise Beavers) and dotting on her son. But despite her clear domestication, Nora maintains some of her previous fun-loving, high-society status, enjoying nights out on the town with her husband. However, her role in these nights out has also diminished and she now carries an air of frivolity in the situations. According to Nochimson:

> During the racetrack murder mystery, no longer as playful about the devices of mystery films, no longer as playful about social mores, Nora’s desires are held up to ridicule much more than they are granted validity, as previously. During the course of Nick’s investigation, Nora is effectively sidelined, thought she continues to exist on her own terms as a person who does not accept Nick’s bullying, and certainly as a woman who is both desiring and desired. (119)

Nora’s presence in *Shadow of the Thin Man* begins the decline of her subversive status. While Nora has previously existed as a subversive example of the modern woman within a modern marriage, she now begins to exhibit clichéd and normalized characteristics, such as her desire to sober up her husband. In previous films, she appeared supportive of Nick’s drinking, offering to match him drink for drink, and even acting as a pickpocket to retrieve the key to a locked bar case. But because she is now someone’s mother, such actions are classified as inappropriate. The couple’s deterioration into domestication continues throughout the film, and is marked by the unsettling position of Nora at the
film’s end. During the usual gathering of suspects, the suspect, Major Sculley (Henry O’Neill) pulls a gun on Nick. Believing she is protecting her husband (and by extension, her son), Nora jumps in the way of the gun. She is so fraught with panic over Nick’s safety she puts herself in harm’s way. Nora’s previous concern for Nick’s safety was restrained and laced with sarcasm. However, in this instance, Nora exhibits the characteristics of the overly emotional female—a stereotype at which the original Nora Charles would have turned up her nose. In regard to Nick and Nora’s shift in personas, Nochimson states, “[t]he balance is shifting between them toward an ominously dominant patriarchal stance on Nick’s part . . . ” (121). This shift from subversive relationship into the oppressive domesticated marriage becomes even more alarming in the final two films, as Nick and Nora become caricatures of their previous personas.

According to the no-nonsense Myrna Loy, Shadow of the Thin Man was not a stellar film: “I don’t recall much about The Shadow of the Thin Man except that Bill’s prediction about Nick Charles, Jr., came true. He was already off to military school . . .” (Lotsilibas-Davis 167). The film is forgettable and bogged down by the presence of the Charlesees’ child. He served his purpose of domesticating the couple, and was then sidelined for the fifth film, The Thin Man Goes Home. The film opens upon a common setting for the Thin Man series: the train station. They are embarking on a trip to the country to visit Nick’s parents. Also noteworthy of the film is the fact that Asta is present while Nicky Jr. is absent. The son’s absence seems to stems from the couple’s attempt to regain their previous status as a fun-loving, free-spirited childless couple. His absence enables the couple to revert to their previous popular formula: Nick, Nora, and Asta.
However, in this film the couple’s transition into the domesticated cliché is more apparent because the couple is “. . . keeping up with the times, as well as the creeping sanctimony that was overtaking much of Hollywood (especially MGM)” (Harvey 177). The domestication of the film is not limited to the interactions and characterization of Nick and Nora, but also in the set design. According to Harvey, the film “looks like an Andy Hardy film: the art deco sleekness of the series’ furnishings is now replaced by the chintz and polka-dot look, done with the usual MGM amplitude” (177). Despite Nicky Jr.’s absence from the film, the attempt to domesticate and normalize the couple remains at the forefront of the story, from setting the film within the countryside, to the drastic changes in Nick and Nora’s relationship.

The couple’s previously subversive status is highlighted—albeit painfully—within the opening sequence of the film, when it is discovered they have smuggled their beloved Asta onto the passenger compartment. While they squeeze down the crowded hallway, the couple is able to move more freely once the other passengers believe the bundle in Nora’s arms is a baby. This confusion seems to play on both Nora’s expected position as a mother and Asta’s position as the couple’s pseudo-child. For this sequence, Nora once again appears to be a subversive figure, exuding the posh, quick-witted characteristics she possessed in the earlier films. However, as she becomes more involved in Nick’s relationship with his father during the film, Nora becomes less subversive and more the cliché wife figure (Harvey 177).

_The Thin Man Goes Home_ explores Nick’s relationship with his disapproving father, Dr. Bertram Charles (Harry Davenport). One of the primary causes of strife
between Nick and his father involves Nick’s heavy drinking. Throughout the film, Nick and Nora comment that he has replaced vodka with cider. But the father is not amused. This commentary on Nick’s drinking seems to be a more pointed response to the inappropriate consumption of alcohol in the previous installments of the Thin Man series. But the generation gap between the two men remains important throughout the film, whether or not Nick has sobered up. On the train ride, Nora comments about the strained relationship between the two men:

Nora: Won’t it feel good to get a pat on the back from your old man?
Nick: Pat on the back? What will I do with it?
Nora: Ah, don’t kid me. If your father ever gave you a pat on the back you’d pop your vest buttons all over the parlor rug.
Nick: Hmmm, you just don’t know my vest buttons.

Nora’s comment signals her desire to heal the strife between father and son. Her meddling soon becomes uncomfortable for an audience familiar with the posh, sharp-tongued Nora Charles. Instead, Nora becomes a shell of her former character in effort to force the couple back in to the normalized social expectations. Because the fifth film takes place in the country, classically recognized as the setting for normal and domestic, Nora’s transition is even more abrasive and alarming. As Nochimson states, “[m]ade toward the end of World War II, The Thin Man Goes Home mirrors the desperation in the country to hang to the myths of bedrock America, and alas, what Nora found was a falsification of the series in which she had participated in for ten years” (121). All of the advancements made on the behalf of modern women with subversive representation
modern Nora Charles are pushed to the wayside, and Nora instead “becomes sidelined as a cheerleader for Nick” (Nochimson 121). She seeks to make him happy, buying a painting of his favorite childhood hideout, and cajoling him into a reunion with his father. She is now a shell of the former Nora, and despite Nicky Jr.’s absence, she has been fully domesticated.

Another element of the film that demonstrates the couple’s domestication involves their costuming. The once glamorously dressed couple now wears more conservative clothing, befitting the changed setting of the story. Because the couple is no longer in the city, but is crime solving in the countryside, their appearances must match that changed scenery. Although Nora’s outfits are made of expensive looking glossy fabric, the cut becomes more conservative in terms of high-necklines and long-sleeves. As for Nick, his suit coats morph into a fabric that appears to be constructed out of a checkered tablecloth. This countrified coat marks Nick’s acclimation to his changed setting, as well as his overall normalization.

One of the most alarmingly non-subversive sequences of the film involves Nick’s attempt to “bully” Nora, treating her as other husbands treat their wives. The sequence becomes with Nick arriving at his parents’ home early in the evening. His actions throughout the sequence demonstrate a sense of quasi-domestication. – He opens the white picket fence, retrieves the newspaper from the bush, and casually walks up the front steps. To look at Nick Charles, it would appear as if he were arriving home to be greeted by his dutiful wife and his houseful of child. When Nick opens the door, he is positioned atop the foyer stairs, looking down on to his seated parents and wife. In this
framing, Nick appears dominant over not only his parents, but also his wife. His previous position within frame illustrates his momentary dominant power, and foreshadows his treatment of Nora. She quickly subtracts his dominant power by standing up and greeting her husband with a kiss. However, just as Nick’s walk through the white picket fence is symbolic of his domestic transitions, so is her greeting. In welcoming her husband home with a kiss, Nora portrays a wifely duty. However, her greeting is an attempt to distract Nick from discovering her newspaper quotation. But attempt soon backfires as Nick scolds Nora for her interference in his investigation, putting her across his knee and whacking her bottom for her transgression. Nora shouts, “Oh, Nick, no! Not here in front of your parents!” Her embarrassed comment demonstrates a true sexual nature of Nick’s actions, and Nora’s humiliation at having an audience present. However, while the situation is somewhat sexualized through Nora’s comment, it also appears to be a throwback to previous marital relationships in which the husband enacted his power on the wife. Nick’s actions, and the parents’ reactions symbolize the once subversive Nick and Nora’s alignment with an older generation—but a generation older than even that of Nick’s parents. In returning to the country, the couple has traded their posh city personas for gruffer country personas. But, despite Nora’s changing persona, the sequence still offers a slight sense of the empowered woman when Nora and her mother-in-law put down the men, clearly denoting the spouse with the true power within the marriage:

Nora: A fine son you’ve brought up! A wife beater!

Dr. Charles: A brave boy, I wanted to do that to Mother for forty years.

Mrs. Charles: I dare you.
However, as this film continues, Nora’s persona continues to weaken, and her place as Nick’s wife moves from *at his side* to *behind him*. Nick’s treatment of Nora seems to stem from his desire to prove himself to his father and to the townspeople—a fault he hardly succumbs to while in the city. He appears to *want* to fall into social norms if it will guarantee his acceptance within his hometown, and more importantly, within his family.

In response to the further domestication of Nick and Nora, and the lack of energy between the couple, Nochimson states,

> The flattening of the Synergistic Couple into the same realm of reality as Nick’s supposed small-town family in this disastrous part of the series proves by exception what is important about the Nick and Nora films, for they almost cease to exist here, falling to the level of George and Gracie or Dagwood and Blondie. (122)

In *The Thin Man Goes Home*, the couple has fully aligned themselves with the more stereotypical onscreen relationships of the 1940s, in which the couple consisted of a dominant husband and a ditzy wife. And for the previously subversive Nick and Nora Charles, an onscreen couple who had (according to Loy), “virtually introduced modern marriage to the screen” this was an alarming and disheartening shift—but one that was inevitable for the paranoid time period in which subversive behavior was deemed inappropriate and questionable (Lotsilbas-Davis 91).

The domestication of Nick and Nora Charles continues in the sixth and final film of the series, *Song of the Thin Man*, but it is not as intensely depressing as in *The Thin Man Goes Home*. The film begins aboard the S. S. Fortune, during which Nick and Nora
encounter two reformed thugs from Nick’s past. When asked why the respectable couple is aboard the gambling ship, Nick replies, “Mrs. Charles thinks that we should cultivate some people who haven’t served time. She wants to create the proper atmosphere for Nicky Jr.” According to his mother, Nicky Jr. (Dean Stockwell) has gained the ability to crack safes from the couple’s reformed criminal friends. This opening sequence offers hope that the couple has revitalized their relationship and overcome the domesticated stereotypes previously embodied in *The Thin Man Goes Home*. The couple’s transition back to their previous personas, while restricted, is somewhat successful. However, as Nochimson states, “[i]n the last film . . . the couple regains some of its energy and oppositionality, but the postwar changes in Hollywood and in the country have created a new environment in which Nick and Nora have become obsolete” (122). The endearing and comforting charm of Nick and Nora Charles is now lost in a society overcoming the brutality of World War II. Studios now have little interest in the frivolity of the playfully posh couple, despite their continued popularity with audiences. According to Loy, she and Powell also had little interest in maintaining the couple and the series: “*Song of the Thin Man* was a lack-luster finish to a great series. I hated it. The characters had lost their sparkle for Bill and me, and the people who knew what it was all about were no longer involved” (Lotsilibas-Davis 209). But despite Powell and Loy’s feelings towards the final installment, the film was popularly received—particularly in Great Britain (Lotsilibas-Davis 209).

Although the couple had overcome the upsetting representation of marriage from *The Thin Man Goes Home*, the couple is still forced to conform to the proper social
norms in *Song of the Thin Man*. In this film, the voice of society returns to their son, Nicky Jr. who spends much of the film “. . . lecturing his guilty parents about not spending more time at home with him” (Harvey 177). But before Nicky Jr. can lecture his parents, he must cope with a lecture from his mother and a scolding from his father. After breakfast, Nicky Jr. attempts to sneak out of the house to pitch a baseball game, despite his mother’s wishes that he practice his piano lessons. Nicky Jr.’s behavior puts the couple in an awkward position—they must enact discipline on their son for his poor behavior:

Nora (to Nicky Jr.): I think you’re going to have to have a good spanking.

Nick: Spanking?

Nora: Spanking.

Nick: Very well . . .

Nora: Oh, no, I’m his mother. *You’re* his father.

Nick: I wouldn’t have it any other way.

This sequence is an example of Nora’s forced normalization illustrating a change in her persona that is steadily linked to her role as Nicky Jr.’s mother. In order to properly raise her son within the social norms she and Nick had previously avoided, Nora must now conform to the expected role of motherhood, taking on the stifling maternal persona and shedding her fun-loving posh persona. Nora, a figure who had previously demonstrated characteristics of the enlightened modern woman in the earlier films, now bluntly points out the expected social and gender delineation between the sexes when she states, “Oh, no, *I’m* his mother. *You’re* his father.” In pointing out the differences of their social roles,
Nora has not only limited herself, but also Nick, who is now forced to take on a changed persona under Nora’s watchful eye. Nick, however, has not fully accepted the persona change and finds the shift difficult to navigate, as evident when he must spank his son. Nick states “Come here, son. I regret that I am going to have to take a certain corrective action.” And as he brings the confused Nicky Jr. across his knee he states, “I think this is the way they do it.” – The ‘they’ Nick refers to is the other parents, not Nick and Nora Charles. The Charleses are not the type of parents, who spank their child. And Nora’s decision to align with these other disciplinarian parents has forced Nick to comply and adapt under these social norms. But while Nick has difficulty playfully disciplining his son under Nora’s influence, he had little difficulty spanking Nora in *The Thin Man Goes Home* for stepping out of her wifely status. The sequence becomes even more awkward when Nick, unable to spank his son, suffers a series of flashbacks involving important fatherly moments, such as Nicky Jr.’s birth, his first haircut, and his first bicycle. However, he is finally able to spank his son after recalling Nicky Jr.’s laughter when Nick had fallen from the boy’s bicycle during a demonstration. Nick’s bruised ego and desire for respect enables him to discipline his son.

The couple’s awkwardness within the film is not limited to their son’s discipline. The couple is outdated for their surroundings—what was in vogue for the 1930s pre-World War II audience has now becoming archaic. Nick and Nora Charles were not only becoming domesticated, but they were showing their collective age. The couple is beginning to show their age in terms of lighting and camera positioning. Seldom, are Nick and Nora framed within a close-up. Instead, they often remain positioned within a
medium shot or a medium-long shot. This cinematic choice seems to rest on the fact that Powell and Loy are beginning to physically show their ages. Even within the medium shot, Nick’s age lines are showing, and the salt-and-pepper color in his hair is noticeable on black and white film stock. As for Nora, she too is showing her age. Her eye makeup has been subdued—although she often manages to wear a dark lip color while out with Nick. Her hair also appears matronly, at times, as it is cut short and curled under in an age-appropriate style. In the presence of the young nightclub crowd, Nick and Nora have clearly aged. Another example of the couple’s age is demonstrated through their inability to conform to the changing cultural times. As Nochimson states, “. . . for a good deal of the movie, they both seem lost, adrift in a context in which they don’t understand the language: the jazz lingo of the musicians among who the murder was committed” (123).

The couple’s uncomfortable nature is demonstrated when they visit a jazz party with Clarence ‘Clinker’ Krause (Keenan Wynn) and attempt to blend in with the younger crowd. When Clinker tells them to “get with it” the couple moves disjointedly to the rhythm of the music. While at the jazz party, the age gap between the Charleses and the jazz musicians is further demonstrated by Nick’s inability to procure a drink. Noticing the approaching tray of cocktails, Nick’s face lights up, as if to say, “here is something familiar!” But he moves too slowly when putting his cigarette case back into his inside coat pocket, and smoothes out the front of his coat. By the time he looks up, the younger people have all snatched up the offered cocktails. Nick’s face fails, realizing that he not only has failed to obtain a cocktail, but that he can no longer move in sync with the night
club scene. Throughout the jazz party, it becomes clear that Nick and Nora have outgrown the nightlife they once sought out.

However, this change seems inevitable with the addition of Nicky Jr. Their attempts to maintain their previous lifestyle involves the unwillingness to fully adjust to the domesticated position of mother and father. When the couple returns home from the jazz party, Nora looks in on a sleeping Nicky Jr. However, Nicky Jr. does not remain asleep for long, and seeks out his parents in their bedroom:

Nora: What are you doing up, Darling?

Nicky Jr.: I heard your voices. I hardly ever get to see you. Look at what time it is!

Nick: Oh, that clock’s fast!

Nicky Jr.: Who’s going to ride me to school in the morning?

Nora: Your father.

Nick: Your mother.

Nora: We’ll both ride you to school.

Nick and Nora are attempting to maintain their previous lifestyle while serving as proper parents to their son—a failing attempt, as evident by Nora’s lack of sleep. Immediately after sending Nicky Jr. off to bed, the alarm goes off and the couple must start their domestic day, unlike the earlier films in which the couple could sleep off their hangovers and laze about the apartment.

But despite the normalization of Nick and Nora Charles once they have a child, the couple remains an example of the subversive nature within the ideal modern
marriage. Although they have fallen to the necessity of normalization in the 1940s, they were subversive once. As James Harvey states:

No matter that Nick and Nora soon have a “real” child (or even that Nora does finally become conventionally “feminine”) [. . .] By that time the point had been made. Who remembers or cares about Nicky Jr.? And who forgets Asta? (181)

While Nicky Jr. remains an important facet of the final installments of the Thin Man series in terms of the couple’s domestication, he is not a widely remembered element of the series. As Harvey points out, when recalling Nick and Nora Charles, audiences remember their ever-present playful pup, Asta.

The film ends with the ultimate image of familial happiness and domesticity as Asta crawls into bed with a sleeping Nicky Jr.: “’[i]ts concluding image—and the final image of the series itself, once known for its risqué fadeouts—shows the child actor in bed with Asta” (Harvey 177). This lack of a risqué fade out, however, was not entirely by choice, but rather deemed a necessity for the time period. According to Nochimson, “[t]he original script had called for the film to end in their bedroom, but the PCA, empowered by the wartime desire for simpleminded, unambiguous images, was able, sadly, to prevail in its rejection of the final image . . .” (124). But, despite the tamed ending in which Asta sneaks into bed with Nicky Jr., and is scared off by Nick and Nora only to then climb back into bed with Nicky Jr., the film manages to firmly subvert the restrictions upheld by the PCA for one last time. As Nochimson states, the ending serves
as a reminder of Nick and Nora’s inability to appropriately display a subversive modern marriage in the final installments of the series:

Asta’s triumph over the rules, a triumph Nick and Nora couldn’t’ achieve, is both a pathetic last visual for this depleted series, and a sad in-joke made by the creative team about censorship and sexuality. (124)

The closing sequence serves as a final attempt at subversion, but because it is so heavy-hand and adorably cliché, the true subversion is lost. Instead, the closing sentiment of the Thin Man series focuses on the boy who brought down posh and sophisticated Nick and Nora, domesticating them within the confines of a world they no longer understand.

Through subtle framing and plays with dialogue, Nick and Nora Charles exhibit the deterioration of their previous subversive status in the final three films of the Thin Man series. Initially, their status as parents to a young son does not appear to be the couple’s symbolic downfall. They maintain their nightclub lifestyle, and manage to find their needed adventure within the crime solving. However, as Nicky Jr. ages, the previously subversive characteristics of the couple disappear, and Nick and Nora Charles transition into a normalized representation of a modern married couple. The addition of a child to the idealized modern marriage of Nick and Nora Charles brought a domesticated predictability to the stories and mysteries, while extracting what had previously set the films apart from other murder mysteries: a couple who openly enjoyed their marriage, their relationship, and crime-solving. To properly raise a child, the couple must reform their carefree lifestyle and conform to the domestic structure avoided previously. However, the couple’s deterioration was not limited to their changed status of parents,
but rather a change in culture in which Nick and Nora were no longer relevant. Nick and Nora Charles were too posh for the changing lifestyle of 1940s America.
CONCLUSION

Throughout the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the social definition of marriage was shifting from something previously upheld as a labor contract to something built on love and companionship. Arranged marriages and familial intervention was beginning to decrease, allowing people the freedom to court and marry on their own independent terms. But many critics spoke out against this transition from a financial-based marriage system to a love-based marriage system, believing that forming relationships out of love would lead to an increase in separation and divorce. These critics believed that members of society could not be responsible to lead socially prudent lifestyles, and would instead marry on a whim without fully examining their choices. However, despite these social concerns, the modern form of the love-based marriage remained popular throughout Western culture.

Other issues that lead to the modernization of the marriage structure involved the second wave surge in the Women’s Civil Rights Movement, which saw the passing of the 19th Amendment and the end of coverture. The system of coverture involved the husband’s right to his wife’s property and assets—leaving the wife with no public identity outside of her husband’s identity. The end of coverture brought women a degree of independence within the male-dominated public sphere. But despite these changes in the status of women, the government remained invested in maintaining marital benefits. The government feared that people would become too self-sufficient and independent, which would then lead to an end to marriage and the downfall of the state. While women were becoming more politically independent, men were delaying their own marriages,
opting to become financially independent and successful before entering serious relationships. However, one of the most catastrophic moments in national and global history soon changed the reception of marriage. Divorce rates and abandonment rates decreased, but so did the marriage rates. People became wearier of entering into marriage as well as ending marriages because of the financial burden.

Although people were cautious with their money during the Great Depression, they did spend their money on escapist forms of entertainment such as the cinema. The need for escapist entertainment led to the several innovations in terms of film genre. One such innovative genre was the screwball comedy, which focused on the frivolous and fun lifestyles of the wealthy upper class. The majority of these screwball comedy films focused on the courtship and burgeoning relationships between men and women. These wealthy members of society were able to spend time on love and courtship because they were financially established. Lower social classes did not have the financial stability or free time to seek out a mate through quirky situations. But one onscreen couple was able to avoid the courtship aspect of the screwball comedy, instead portraying the marriage in progress: Nick and Nora Charles.

Portrayed by William Powell and Myrna Loy in the Thin Man series, the couple demonstrates a posh high-society relationship that was a subversive example of the modern marriage in the 1930s. Although Powell and Loy had substantial silent film careers prior to their success in The Thin Man, they are most remembered for their portrayals of Nick and Nora Charles. The Charlines were not the typical example of the
happily wedded couple, but instead served to demonstrate the hypocrisy within the idealized love-based modern marriage.

Initially viewed as a box-office risk, Nick and Nora Charles and *The Thin Man* demonstrated a couple able to escape the archaic structure of coverture, and manage to create a subversive example of modern marriage. Previously, marriage was only suitable as an *ending* to the screwball comedy—not at the beginning of the film. Marriage signaled the end of romance in the screwball comedy film, not the continuation of the romance. The sophisticated coupling of Nick and Nora Charles brought to surface a previously unexplored screwball comedy plot: the marriage comedy. The couple complicated the structure of the typical screwball comedy because they had courted and married *off screen*, rather than *onscreen* within the diegesis of the film. But despite the absence of the courtship, the couple remains enchanting. The intriguing element of the Charleses’ marriage is not the formation of description of the marriage, but the maintenance of the marriage. The couple is never threatened by divorce of separation. The Charleses find interest and equality within their marriage, while *remaining* married—particularly in the initial three installments in the series (*The Thin Man*, *After the Thin Man*, and *Another Thin Man*). While the onscreen marriage is typically seen as the cinematic kiss of death for any other screwball comedy, the Thin Man series managed to overcome the cinematic cliché, producing a couple so happily married that they are able to playfully banter and interact. By showcasing the happily married couple, the Thin Man series explored a previously ignored story. Nick and Nora Charles was a sophisticated example of the couple free from the threat of divorce and separation. The
Charleses were the perfect cinematic couple, building and sustaining their modern marriage on notions of love, desirability and equality.

However, during their shared filmography, Powell and Loy did explore the breakdown of the marriage through the screwball comedy sub-genre the re-marriage comedy film. The re-marriage film, as outlined by Stanley Cavell and re-figured by David R. Shumway, serves as a sub-genre within the screwball comedy. The increase in divorce during the 1930s and the need to showcase the happily reunited marriage enabled the creation of the sub-genre. The reunion within the remarriage film was not easily obtained. During the course the film, the couple had to overcome several plot-point obstacles. Powell and Loy’s two remarriage films, *I Love You Again* and *Love Crazy*, exhibit the necessary characteristics of the genre, such as the wife’s abandonment and the husband’s self-humiliation. Within the remarriage films, the couple had the great possibility of re-establishing the relationship on the grounds of renewed sexual chemistry, whereas the domestication of the onscreen couple is often rooted in the lack of sexual chemistry. However, in re-establishing the couple in the remarriage films, and domesticating the couple in the final Thin Man films, Powell and Loy’s subversive onscreen pairing transformed into the more acceptable societal norm.

During the final three Thin Man films—*Shadow of the Thin Man*, *The Thin Man Goes Home*, and *Song of the Thin Man*—the once subversive couple became normalized out of cultural necessity. Throughout these final three films, Nick and Nora Charles exhibit the deterioration of their previous subversive status. Despite having a small child, the couple maintained their nightclub lifestyle and solved crimes. However, as Nicky Jr.
aged, the characters transitioned from subversive figures of modern marriage, to the domesticated representation of a married couple. In order to correctly raise their child, the couple had to reformed their lifestyle, conforming to the necessary domestic structure that would ensure the fruitful continuation of the state. However, the couple’s deterioration was not limited to their changed status of parents, but rather a change in culture in which the frivolous Nick and Nora were no longer appropriate. Nick and Nora Charles were too posh for the changing lifestyle of 1940s America. This domesticating of the once high-living Nick and Nora Charles seems to parallel the conservative shifts within the American society, as well as more conservative shifts within the film industry.

Powell and Loy’s representation of marriage throughout their shared filmography demonstrated the changes within the structure of marital relationships, covering the happy marriage, the imperfect marriage, and the normalized marriage. Throughout the course of these films, the representation of marriage transitions from something that is subversive and into something more domestic and normalized. Overall, this transition aligned with the changes in marriage within the United States during the early 1900s and well into the 1940s.
WORKS CITED


