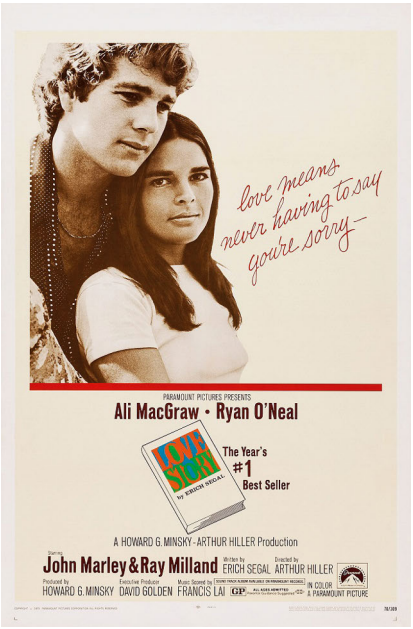
Love Story (1970)

Heike Paul

dir. Arthur Hiller; prod. Robert Evans, David Golden, Howard G. Minsky; screenplay Erich Segal; photography Richard C. Kratina; music Francis Lai. 35mm, color, 96 mins. Paramount Pictures, distrib. Paramount Pictures.



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

The most successful film of 1970, and perhaps of the decade, *Love Story* created quite a stir in its day and time. It was the highest grossing film of the year, coined a fashion style—the »college girl look« (Reid) or »Ivy-League look« (Adams), modelled on the clothing of actress Ali McGraw—and popularized Francis Lai's elegiac Oscar-winning title melody, which has since become one of the most memorable tunes in film history. Moreover, *Love Story*'s somewhat surprising mega-success led to immediate stardom for its two leads, Ryan O'Neal and Ali McGraw. With its popularity extending far beyond the United States, *Love Story* undoubtedly qualifies as a global melodrama made in Hollywood.

Love Story's first line already anticipates its end, as Oliver Barrett (played by Ryan O'Neal) speaks in the off and utters the film's famous words: »What can you say about a twenty-five-year-old girl who died?« The dead girl (or woman, rather) is Jennifer Cavilleri (played by Ali McGraw), Oliver's wife, who has just passed away. The film chronicles their life together—from their first encounter at Harvard's Radcliffe Library, their courtship and wedding, their college years at Harvard, and their post-college life in New York City, where both of them work odd jobs and Oliver pursues a career as a lawyer. Just when things are looking up for them, Jennifer is diagnosed with a fatal blood disease.

Erich Segal, writer of both the film's screenplay and source novel, studied at Harvard during the 1950s and 60s. Although viewers are led to believe that the film features a contemporaneous setting, it instead conjures the 1950s more than the late 60s or the year of its release. In fact, the film is rather escapist with regard to the times of its production. The war in Vietnam, the countercultural revolution (except for a mildly

experimental, non-religious wedding ceremony), the civil rights movement, and the women's movement—all of this is left absent from the film, projecting an environment of peaceful affluency, or, at least, of social mobility, with a tinge of nostalgia. Hence, the melodrama functions as part of a »significant political retrenchment,« and all the more so when viewed in contrast to films such as *Easy Rider* or *Alice's Restaurant*, both of which were released a year earlier (Kendrick).

As an institution and as a brand, Harvard University constitutes a background for much of this film about two kids who fall in love. Al Gore and Tommy Lee Jones (the latter playing a minor role as Oliver's roommate), both of whom were Segal's classmates at Harvard, were named by the writer as models for the character of Oliver. The iconic campus—a setting of a great many films, more comedy than melodrama—conveys to the love story an aura of respectability, while also making use of product placement. Oliver, for instance, wears his Harvard jersey at his hockey games, and both lie under a blanket with a big »H« after their first lovemaking. That's not to forget Jenny's legendary plaid mini-skirts, colored tights, knit sweaters, scarfs, and camel coat, all of which she models on the Harvard Yard. The institutional setting, like the temporal framing, projects good times, youth, and innocence—then, »Harvard was *Harvard*, and nobody had yet pointed out the unseemliness of its being also a branch office and officers' training school for the military industrial complex« (Callenbach).

The obstacle to love that this melodrama seeks to overcome is a seemingly insurmountable social divide. Oliver Barrett IV is heir to his New England family's estate and is expected to follow family tradition by becoming a lawyer. His father, Oliver Barrett III (played by a stiff Ray Milland), is well-connected and wants his son to excel. However, his stoic and authoritarian manners are dismissed by his son. Jennifer Cavilleri, in turn, is an Italian American student from a lower class background. Her mother has died and her father runs a pastry shop. While Oliver calls his father »Sir,« Jenny calls hers »Phil.« She studies music, plays the cembalo, and plans to do a study abroad in Paris on a scholarship program. The film clearly presents American society as a class-based (not classless) society. As Jenny puts it: »Ollie, you're a preppy millionaire, and I'm a social zero.« This observation does not, however, lead to a critique of inequality and social division as such, but rather serves to produce the dramatic momentum that drives the plot. Opposites attract, and in their initial verbal sparring, Jenny is witty and sharp, while Oliver, more of an athlete than an intellectual, is impressed by such eloquence. When Oliver and Jenny visit his parents and announce their wedding plans, they do not find the approval of his father, who instead asks his son to wait until after graduation. Oliver rejects this suggestion (which comes with a threat) and chooses to live *with* Jenny and *without* his father's financial support. It is only when Jenny is diagnosed with a terminal illness and Oliver wants her to have the best treatment that he borrows money from Oliver Barrett III, without letting on the reason. Whereas their love seemed able to overcome all social obstacles, it cannot beat leukemia. This is the film's final melodramatic twist. Only after Jenny is dead does Oliver Barrett III learn what the money was for, and the film concludes with a hint at reconciliation between father and son.

Apart from its straightforward, almost generic, plot (as generic as its title), *Love Story* has also been critically examined for not being a romantic love story at all, but as being first and foremost a film about a father-son relationship. Mark Spilka has convincingly shown how, in the film and even more in the novel, Jenny merely func-

tions as mediator for the dysfunctional father-son connection, and how her death is a sacrificial one that brings father and son back together—»over her dead body,« so to speak. »Love means never having to say you're sorry«—yet another famous line from the film—is uttered first by Jenny, addressed to Oliver after a fight (a fight about Oliver's father, in fact, and about making amends). The line is repeated at the end of the film by Oliver, however, who directs it toward his father. Oliver's pain and loss, it is suggested, have made him a mature adult who can at last move beyond adolescent rebellion and eventually be a suitable heir of the Barrett fortune. Reading *Love Story* as a different kind of story of love and rejection highlights the film's focus on transgenerational rather than social difference—how to bridge it, and, ultimately, how to preserve the patrilineal status quo in turbulent times of change.

Upon *Love Story*'s fiftieth anniversary in 2020, scholars and critics returned to the film to assess its status and reception (Blair). While there still lacks significant appreciation of its aesthetic merit, the film's cultural impact is nonetheless highly estimated. It has been noted that »Jennifer,« for example, became one of the most popular names for baby girls following the film's release, a trend that prevailed throughout the 1970s (Levy). *Love Story* bears semblance to both *Love Affair* (1939) and its remake, *An Affair to Remember* (1957), where fate strikes the female protagonist not with fatal disease but with a tragic accident that constricts her to a wheelchair. In turn, *Love Story* has influenced generations of college films and television series, including those in the chick-lit and chick-flick modes. Besides these resonances in the semi-melodramatic genre, and on a somewhat lighter note, *Love Story*'s parodies are countless as well. They have appeared in *The Simpsons* and *The Carol Burnett Show*, to name but two. Starring next to Barbra Streisand in the screwball comedy *What's Up, Doc?* (1972), Ryan O'Neal himself teases the film's emblematic line. When Judy Maxwell (Streisand) quips, batting her eyelids, that »love means never having to say you're sorry,« Howard Bannister (O'Neal) briefly pauses, before responding: »That's the dumbest thing I ever heard.« Parody, being »repetition with a difference« (Hutcheon), always affirms the canonical status of its object. Hence, being a target of criticism, satire, and parody has only reiterated *Love Story*'s place as a household name and cultural icon.

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