

# **Guess Who's Coming to Dinner Film Summary**

**Guess Who's Coming to Dinner by Stanley Kramer**

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## Context

*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* was filmed during the height of racial tensions in the United States. In 1967, the summer it was released, there were more than 40 race riots in the States, including the famous Detroit riots. America was in turmoil, and the film was a statement on race relations in the United States.

Although Mr. Prentice tells John that "You'll be breaking the law in 17 states. You'll be criminals," this wasn't true by the time the film debuted. The United States Supreme Court had recently ruled on *Loving vs. Virginia*. On June 12, 1967, the Court declared anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional; however, many of the laws remained on the books for years. Even fifty years later, interracial marriages are considered bad taste by many Americans, especially those in the South.

The film was still showing in theaters when Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. There is one line in the movie where Tillie, the maid, asks John, "Who do you think you are, Martin Luther King?" After King's death, the studio called all theaters showing the film and had the scene cut from the movie.

Having such a strong cast helped this movie become a popular classic. Both Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy were extremely popular actors, and they had starred in several successful movies together in the past. Additionally, although the Catholic Tracy was married and never divorced his wife, he and Hepburn had a love affair from 1942 until his death in 1967—only 17 days after completing filming. The public loved the couple and embraced every film they made together. Sidney Poitier was also a popular actor by this time, known for his roles in such shows as *A Raisin in the Sun*, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, and *In the Heat of the Night*.

During the filming of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, Spencer Tracy was ill with multiple health problems, including lung congestion. The studio worried that Tracy would survive to finish the film, so Hepburn had to use her salary as backing. Hepburn was not ill during the filming, although she can be seen shaking in some scenes, such as when she pours a drink for Mr. Prentice. This shaking was due to a hereditary condition Hepburn inherited from her grandfather.

Katharine Houghton, who plays Joanna Prentice in the film, is actually Hepburn's niece. Because of the tense race relations of the time, the studio worried that having a famous actress kiss a black man could send the country even further into shock, and possibly even cause riots. Thus, the studio chose to hire a little-known actress who agreed to do only this one film. While Houghton eventually took a few more roles, especially in the early 1990s, she never became a famous actress like her aunt. She did appear in many on- and off-Broadway shows and became a playwright.

*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* was nominated for seven Academy Awards but only won two. Hepburn won the award for Best Actress, which she later attributed to the death of Tracy, her longtime partner. In addition, William Rose won the award for the

Best Original Screenplay. Although the film was also nominated for seven Golden Globes, it did not win any of those awards. However, its success has lasted for years, and the film is now considered a classic.



## Summary and Analysis

We watch a lovely couple - a black man and a white woman - get off a plane and walk through the airport together. In the background, "The Glory of Love" is playing. The couple gets their baggage and catches a cab. In the cabby's mirror, we see the two kissing and cuddling.

In the taxi, the man, John Prentice, tells the woman, Joanna "Joey" Drayton, that he should go to a hotel to rest while she finds her parents. However, she tells him that the "sooner we get it over with, the better." He explains to her that she may be shocked by her parents' attitudes when they arrive. She responds that she should know her parents after 23 years, and he simply says, "I hope so." "There's no problem," she replies, not imagining the obstacles she will meet. The couple drops by her mother's office. When Joey introduces the secretary to Dr. Prentice, the secretary looks confused. We find out that Joey has been in Hawaii and has returned early.

After leaving the office, the couple heads to Joey's family home, a beautiful mansion. Prentice pays the cab driver, who gives him a skeptical look. Joey introduces John to the housekeeper, Tillie. Tillie gives him a cruel look and asks why Joey is home early. John sees Dorothy, a girl who helps Tillie, and Joanna quickly pulls him outside. John then goes to call his parents. When Joey asks if he is going to introduce them over the phone, he says he'd rather write. Then she asks if they will simply keep their marriage from them, and he jokingly says that's a good idea.

As Joey waits for John, Tillie tells her that she doesn't want one of her own race to get above his standing. Joey says she never expected Tillie, of all people, to feel that way. In Joey's words, "You know I've always loved you, and you're just as black as he is. How could it be all right for me to love you and wrong for me to love him?" Joey begs Tillie to make her best dinner for this special night.

Christina, Joey's mother, has rushed home, worried that something is wrong since her daughter returned from her trip early. The secretary had told her that Joey might have a surprise for her. Joey is bursting with energy and can't wait to tell her mother about John. Joey says that "she fell in love with him in 20 minutes." Meanwhile, in the office, John is talking to his parents on the phone, and they are complaining that he didn't come to see them. His father is very excited to find out that he met a girl. However, we get the impression they might not be pleased that she's white. When his father asks about the age difference, we learn that John is 37, while Joey is 23. John's father seems to see no problem with that the age difference. John goes on to say that there are a couple of problems that he will write to them about on his way to New York.

In the other room, Joey tells her mother all the wonderful aspects of John. Joey finally tells her mother that John was married before and had a son, but both his wife and son were killed in a train accident in Belgium. As Joey tells her mother John's full name - John Wade Prentice - Christina repeats it after her. The moment she says "Wade," Christina looks up to see John coming out of the office and is shocked. She stares at



him in disbelief as Joey begins to tell her that John has been deeply concerned for another reason - a reason that we have already guessed - he is black.

As they are introduced, Christina stutters a hello. John finally tells her that in his medical opinion, she should probably sit down. Joey promptly translates and tells her mother that "He thinks you're gonna faint because he's a Negro." Although she doesn't admit to being on the border of fainting, Christina does sit down. She tries to kindly register the shock by saying simply, "My goodness." Then, Joey asks what John's parents said when they found out she wasn't "a colored girl"; he quickly replies that it felt like too big a shock to share over the phone.

John is flying to New York that night, so Joey asks if her father, Matt, could come home early. Christina says he will definitely do so. Joey also explains that John is flying to Geneva the next week to work with the World Health Organization, and she will follow the week after so they can get married. Joey tells her mother that John is being silly, worrying what her parents will think, since he is black. He insisted that they come to see her parents first. Although John thinks they should break it to her father slowly, Joey doesn't understand why he shouldn't be told immediately.

As Matt walks in, Tillie corners him and begins telling him that "all hell's done broke loose." When he finds out a doctor is there, he becomes even more concerned. Joey tries to break her news to Matt gently, telling him that she and John just met and flew back together. Matt is in a hurry to go play golf, and is not listening to his daughter. However, Joey tells him that he will be seeing a great deal of Dr. Prentice, and Christina shares that John will be there for dinner. When Joey points out that they have a lot to talk about, Matt seems a bit confused. He stops as Joey enters the house, then turns around to go back inside and ask what is happening.

John decides to explain the situation to Matt himself, saying, "We have this problem: I fell in love with your daughter. And, as strange as it may seem, she fell in love with me." John explains that they wanted to see if Joey's parents would have a problem with their marriage. Matt sits down slowly and gazes at Christina. John explains that Christina has not yet voiced her objections, as there hasn't been enough time.

Joey, in her innocence, is thoroughly convinced that there will be no problem with her family, but Matt tells her that she must give him time to think about it, as there is a big problem with the situation. Then, Joey and John explain that John is leaving soon, and Joey will be following him. Joey wants her parents to say that everything's okay, and she wants them to say it today. Matt goes to his office to cancel his golf game.

Matt calls Edie, his secretary, asking her to cancel his game and to call the library and the medical association to get information about John Wade Prentice. Matt asks Christina if she ever thought this would happen, and she says it never occurred to her. Christina says John and Joey mean what they're saying and know what they're doing, but Matt replies that they may mean it, but they don't understand.



John interrupts Matt and Christina and tells them that nothing is settled unless they approve without reservations. John has not told Joey about this decision, which he made because he cares for Joey so much. John explains that he never expected such a thing to happen, but then again, he hadn't met Joanna yet. In his words, "It's not just that our color difference doesn't matter to her. It's that she doesn't seem to think there is any difference." He also tells them that he already has enough "special problems," and is not prepared to take on any more than they will already have to face. He doesn't want Joey to damage her relationship with her parents, because she probably wouldn't get over it. Finally, he reminds Matt and Christina that he loves Joey, but they make no sense as a couple without her parents' consent. Matt replies that this seems like an ultimatum, but John reminds him that "All you have to say is good-bye." John then leaves them to talk.

Christina says that John is right about Joey, that she is quite simply acting the way they raised her to act: believing that the white race is not superior to the black race or anyone else. Never, in all that time, did they tell her to not fall in love with someone of another race. Edie calls back and tells them what an upstanding and important man John is and about the deaths of his wife and son. In the office, Matt finds \$2.20 that John left for the telephone call he made to his parents.

A delivery boy brings the food Joanna had ordered, and Dorothy leaves with him. Tillie goes into the kitchen and sees John and Matt talking. All she can say is "Civil rights is one thing. This is something else." Back in her room, Joanna tells Christina about how she met John. Joanna also tells her that they haven't been to bed together, because John was concerned that she would somehow get hurt.

Down on the porch, John explains to Matt that colored kids aren't innately better than white kids at dancing, but that the blacks brought the music and the dancing to America - "It's our dancing." Matt shares that when he was young, his sports editor told him that Negroes would never play baseball, and they laugh at how ridiculous the thought is. Matt asks if John has thought of the problems their children would have, and John says yes, but that they still plan to have children. Matt asks about Joey's feelings, and John tells him that Joey thinks every child will grow up to be president. Matt asks about John's feelings, and John admits that he thinks Joey is a bit optimistic-he'd settle for Secretary of State.

Matt explains that he is scared for the couple, but understands that things are changing. John then tells Matt that Joey is convinced her parents are different; her parents will welcome John and invite him in; her parents will not need any time to decide how they feel. John receives a call from his parents in Los Angeles, who explain they are coming up for the evening. Joey walks in and invites them to dinner, so they decide to fly up. John is terribly concerned about how his parents will react, but Joey continues to think there is not a problem in the world.

Out on the deck, Matt tells Christina about John's plan to help people in Africa by bringing them medical knowledge. Matt further explains that John believed he had done so well because no one he met wanted to think they were prejudiced. Christina then



tells Matt that John's parents are coming for dinner. Matt becomes upset about the pressure Joey is putting on them to make a decision.

Monsignor Ryan, Matt's golf partner, comes to visit and check on the family. Ryan meets Dr. Prentice and treats him kindly. Joey hurries out of the room to tell Tillie John's parents are coming to dinner, which shocks Tillie. It turns out that Ryan has read about John in a magazine. Ryan says he is not at all shocked, and most of the interracial marriages he's known have worked out well. Joey comes in to tell Christina that Hilary, her secretary, is there to see her. Hilary is shocked when Joey tells her the news, and does a terrible job of masking her shock. We quickly discover that Hilary is a nosy gossip. Christina drags her out of the house, putting up a good front and standing up for her daughter. Hilary is quickly fired in a most classy way. When Christina comes back in, Joey tells her she thinks Hilary should be fired. Christina warns John that Joey has a ruthless streak that she gets from her father.

Out on the back porch, Christina joins Matt and Ryan in time to hear Ryan's advice. Ryan points out that if John and Joey really want to go through with their marriage, then they must love each other very much. Although Ryan laughs at Matt's dilemma as he faces his own principles, Ryan is invited back for dinner. As he leaves, Ryan stops and tells the couple that he will be back for dinner and that they make him feel "extraordinarily happy." When Joey tells Tillie that Ryan will be staying, she also tells her, to Tillie's chagrin, that John wants to shower and change before dinner.

Matt and Christina go for a drive, stopping for ice cream and coffee at a drive-in. Christina shares that their best times together were the times when things were a struggle and she knew she was helping him. Although Matt is shocked when he sees the ice cream he ordered (he thought he was ordering something he had enjoyed in the past), he finally decides he likes it. As they pull out of the drive-in, Matt hits a young black man's car. The men have a yelling match, then Matt hands the guy fifty dollars and drives out quickly. Matt is angry that he can't seem to get away from colored people today. As they return home, Matt and Christina get into an argument as Matt says he cannot make this decision in one day.

Back at the house, Tillie confronts John and lectures him about marrying Joey. John and Joey then go to a bar to meet her friends, who talk about how wonderful Joey's parents are. Her friends ask why she isn't flying with John, and Joey decides this is a grand idea. John, however, looks a bit hesitant.

After they leave the bar, Joey and John go to the airport to meet John's parents. At the airport, Joey calls to tell her mother that she wants to fly with John that night. Then, John's parents finally arrive. He tries to tell them that Joey is white, but she makes her appearance just as he begins explaining. If possible, John's parents are even more shocked than the Draytons.

Christina tells Matt that he can't break John's and Joey's hearts before dinner and then expect them to stay. Matt then says he'll talk to John after dinner. Christina also warns





Matt that Joey will not accept his word and may never accept his word again, and that she will be on Joey's side.

In the car on the way home from the airport, the Prentices ask how Joey's parents reacted to the potential marriage, and they second the Draytons' opinion. John's father says he needs more than a few hours just to list all the problems he has with the situation.

Ryan is the first guest to arrive, and Christina fixes him a drink. She begins crying, and tells Ryan that John will not marry Joey without their approval. Ryan is shocked that Matt has decided not to approve of the marriage, and Ryan goes up to talk to him. Tillie asks Christina when they're going to put a stop to this "nonsense foolishness," but Tillie can't deal with Christina's answer. Ryan accuses Matt of becoming confused about who he is and what he stands for. Matt yells at Ryan, and Ryan tells him that John and Joey will change the country and the world. Finally, John and Joey arrive home with John's parents..

After Matt comes downstairs, the men began discussing the plane ride. Joanna pipes in, telling them that she and John want everyone to fly to Geneva for the wedding. Matt asks Mr. Prentice if it seems the couple is rushing into things, and Mr. Prentice agrees. Christina invites Mrs. Prentice out to the terrace while the men talk with John and Joey. Christina explains the situation and previous events to Mrs. Prentice. Both women realize that their husbands will not approve of the marriage. Mr. Drayton and Mr. Prentice go to Matt's study to further discuss the situation. Outside, John talks to his mother and tells her his feelings about Joanna, until Matt comes out and says his father wants to see him.

On the balcony, Mrs. Prentice explains to Matt that John and Joey are going to be hurt much more than he or Mr. Prentice could possibly imagine. Inside the study, Mr. Prentice lectures his son and tells him he needs to stop and think about what people will think. His father feels that John owes him something for sacrificing so much for John's education. Back on the balcony, Mrs. Prentice tells Matt that men forget everything as they grow old, and that he and Mr. Prentice do not understand the couple's love. If they did remember such a passion, they wouldn't do what they are about to do.

In the office, John tells his father exactly what he thinks about being told how to live his life. John says that his parents did only what they were supposed to do, but they do not own him. John also tells his father he loves him, but that John's father thinks of himself as a colored man while John thinks of himself as a man. John asks his father to check on his mother while he tries to make a difficult decision. Upstairs, Joanna packs. As Joanna gushes about her love for John, Christina tries not to break down.

Matt leaves the balcony and goes in to get John. Upstairs, Christina begins to explain part of the situation to Joanna when Matt calls them downstairs. Matt gets everyone together, including Tillie, and makes a speech. He recounts the events of the day and everyone's attitudes and actions. Finally, he tells Mrs. Prentice that he does remember how it feels to love a woman the way John loves Joanna, because that's the way he



feels about his wife. He also tells John that it really doesn't matter what Matt and Christina think: what matters is how John and Joey feel about each other. Matt says, "If it's half of what we felt - that's everything." He lets the couple know that although the problems they may face will be difficult, they will have no problem with him or, eventually, the rest of the family. As he terms it, they happen to have a "pigmentation problem." Finally, the whole family goes in to dinner.



# Characters

## Matt Drayton, played by Spencer Tracy

### Description

Matt Drayton is an older, wealthy man living in California with his wife, Christina. Matt is a life-long liberal who runs a newspaper. However, when Matt finally has to face his own morals, he is stunned at the difficulty he experiences. In determining not only what he believes but what is best for Joanna and his future grandchildren, he finds that talking the talk is far easier than walking the walk.

Matt is the most logical, pragmatic person in the family. Joanna is optimistic and somewhat naïve, while Christina tends to get caught up in Joanna's excitement. Matt looks at reality and sees the difficulties that Joanna will face, so he cannot quickly become excited about her new love.

### Analysis

Matt's liberal background makes the viewer certain in the beginning that he will be shocked but okay with the situation. However, when actually confronted with his own beliefs, Matt struggles to make a decision that not only agrees with his values, but is also the best decision for his daughter's future.

Most of the film's action centers around Matt's uncertainty as to what his decision should be concerning John and Joanna. Matt is a practical man who is slow to make a choice, weighing the options carefully. By creating this sense of uncertainty, the writer and director created a film that delved deeply into the issues of race relations.

## John Prentice, played by Sydney Poitier

### Description

John Prentice is a well-educated black doctor. He has created a program that helps countries in Africa educate people, giving them medical knowledge so people will not die of easily treatable injuries and illnesses. When Matt hears John's list of achievements, he says it is no wonder John doesn't tell anyone about himself-no one would believe him!

Although John tells Joanna that they will be married no matter what, he tells her parents that he will not marry her without their consent. John is considerate of their feelings both for their sake and Joanna's; however, he is also concerned that he could never make up for it if her parents quit speaking to her.



## Analysis

John is almost too good to be true. One must wonder whether a black man has to be practically perfect for a white woman to fall in love with him. In many ways, we see that message coming through in the movie, however unintentional it may be. At this time, miscegenation was so unheard of that the only way for the movie to be made was to make sure that John was above reproach.

John cares for the feelings of Joanna and her family. Because he has experienced racism and hatred firsthand, he knows the difficulties he and Joanna will face. John knows that without her family's support, these trials could be almost unbearable.

## Christina Drayton, played by Katharine Hepburn

### Description

Christina is a beautiful, charming woman who owns her own decorating business. She lives with her husband, Matt, in California. Her 23-year-old daughter, Joanna, is the apple of her eye, and even when Joanna brings home a shocking surprise from Hawaii, Christina still gets excited for her much-loved daughter.

### Analysis

Christina is the voice of well-contained optimism in this film. While Joanna is bubbling over and Matt is very hesitant, Christina keeps her cool but also shows her happiness for her daughter and her daughter's fiancé.

Additionally, Christina seeks to stand by her husband. Although she does not agree with Matt's first decision, she is willing to stand by him whatever he may say. Christina is a strong woman with strong opinions, but she also knows how to deal well with people, especially her husband.

## Joanna "Joey" Drayton, played by Katharine Houghton

### Description

Joanna is a 23-year-old girl who has returned early from her trip to Hawaii. While in Hawaii, she met John Prentice and fell in love. She returns home to introduce him to her family, with hopes that they will like him as much as she does. Joanna is bubbly and a bit naïve, believing that her family will stand by their principles even when it comes to their own daughter's future.



## **Analysis**

Joanna believes that her parents will have no problem with her relationship with John. She lives her life truly believing that all people are equal. At one point, John says that not only does Joanna not care that they are different races, she doesn't even think there are any differences.

Joanna lives her life in a happy bubble isolated from the sad things in life. She also lives her life with conviction. She knows to some extent that she will face many trials while married to John, but she believes all people are equal, and she lives her life in life with her beliefs.

## **Monsignor Ryan, played by Cecil Kellaway**

### **Description**

Monsignor Ryan is a priest and close friend of the family. Ryan is a buffer in this film and acts as Matt's confidant and advisor.

### **Analysis**

Ryan is a kind man who sees the best in everyone. He is willing to support Joanna not only because he knows that she is right, but also because she was raised to believe exactly the way she does. Ryan tries to help Matt see the light while realizing that no one can change another person.

## **Mrs. Prentice, played by Beah Richards**

### **Description**

Mrs. Prentice is John's mother. She is shocked by the situation, but, like Christina, she stands by her husband and is willing to support his decisions.

### **Analysis**

Mrs. Prentice is the one person who finally gets through to Matt. Although her husband and Matt feel the same way about the situation, Mrs. Prentice sees and appreciates the love between John and Joanna. When she tells Matt that men forget what it's like to be in love, she gets through to him when no one else could.



## **Mr. Prentice, played by Roy E. Glenn, Sr.**

### **Description**

Mr. Prentice is John's father. Like Matt, he does not like the idea of his son marrying Joanna.

### **Analysis**

Mr. Prentice is just as stubborn as Matt when it comes to keeping their children apart. However, when Matt makes his speech at the end, Mr. Prentice goes along with his opinions.

## **Tillie, played by Isabel Sanford**

### **Description**

Tillie is the Drayton's maid, and she is more than willing to tell everyone her feelings about the situation. She is the first to meet John, and she is extremely upset that he is trying to move above his station.

### **Analysis**

Tillie is the voice of parts of the African-American community in this film. She loudly and harshly ignores the idea that people of different races could be equal enough to marry. Although she has probably been pushing for civil rights, she does not seem to really believe that blacks and whites are equal.

When Matt makes his final speech, he tells Tillie that she has been stupid, destroying the validity of her ideas. Tillie's ideas and those who believed them were holding back the Civil Rights movements, and the film sought to banish those ideas as well.

# Themes

## Love Conquers All

Despite the gutsy move to make this film, the creators come across with a "Love Conquers All" theme that is overly optimistic. Although love can strengthen people and hold relationships together, surviving the hatred they would face will take more than love. They need family and friends to support them, as well as plans for dealing with the obstacles.

For anyone who has experienced the challenges of interracial relationships, this message is likely to seem weak and sugar-coated. However, at the time of its filming, this movie was making a major statement about American culture. However it is interpreted, the film does present a picture that love conquers all.

## Family Sticks Together

Throughout the family problems posed in the film, one overarching message comes through loud and clear: family always sticks together. We first hear the message from Joanna, who is convinced that her parents and John's parents will automatically stick by them. However, as the parents grapple with the situation, we begin to wonder if the message rings true. In the end the parents decide that if their children love each other enough to face the challenges of this marriage, then the parents must stand by their side, as they may be the only ones who will.

## Change is Possible

When Matt first reacts to Joanna and John's announcement, he is completely shocked. At one point during the film, he decides that there is no way he can approve of their relationship, and he begins to wonder how he will tell them. Both Christina and Monsignor Ryan try to talk him out of putting an end to the relationship, but for most of the film, their efforts seem to avail nothing. As the film ends, however, Matt changes his mind and supports his daughter and her fiancé.

We learn through the course of the film that change is possible, however unlikely it may seem. Matt is committed to breaking up the relationship, but he has a change of heart through interactions with the other people involved. The message is that anyone can change, even when the change requires them to change their paradigm-their entire understanding of the world and how it works or should work.



## Style and Cinematography

Stanley Kramer took a chance by directing this film, since race relations were a major source of controversy at the time. However, the film is made with style. Rather than trying to shock and disturb audiences, the couples' romantic scenes are kept to a minimum. Audiences might have thought the film was in bad taste had there been more romantic scenes between the couple.

Kramer makes a film that is both challenging and entertaining. By keeping a lighthearted note throughout the film, Kramer helps make the topic more accessible to audiences. Had the film been more serious, audiences would have found it to be boring or insulting. The film does, however, bring a preachy tone to the subject matter, especially in the final scene when Matt makes his speech.

The cinematography in the film is average. Although the content of the film is very interesting, the actual methods used to make it are not anything special. Bright lighting and colors are used to make a happy background for the film. Joanna is a bubbly, excited young lady, and the film fits that personality. Additionally, while the film discusses a difficult situation, the brightness helps to throw an optimistic glow around the subject.



# Motifs

## Race Relations

Race relations were a major issue during the time this film was made. During filming, the film's characters were engaging in behavior that was illegal in seventeen states. The summer the film was released, there were at least 40 race riots in the United States. By using race as the basis for the film, the creators caught the public's interest.

Through Tillie, we also see that races don't necessarily have sympathy for their own. Tillie believed that John was getting above his station, and the viewer can see that she has not begun to accept equality between races. Although the meaning seems to be well-hidden, the viewer notices that Tillie is not looked upon fondly because she is tearing down those of her own race and refusing to believe that equality is possible.

## Romance

Romance, obviously, is one of the major aspects of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. Not only is romance a bestseller for films, it also helps to make the issue of race relations even clearer in this film. Joey and John's relationship highlights a number of problems in the fight for civil rights, since many a liberal such as Matt might find it hard to stand by their beliefs when in an uncomfortable situation.

Additionally, we see the relationships of the parents. Although the adults are no longer young lovers, they do remember the experience of falling in love. In fact, when Mrs. Prentice tells Matt that men forget, he later corrects her and says that he may not be young, but he has never forgotten those feelings. Romance, in the end, helps to bring the parents to an agreement that they will love and support their children in their decision.

## Letting Go

During the film, we see that neither Matt nor Christina has come to terms with the fact that Joanna is now a grown woman. They have difficulty letting her go to choose her own path. Although for some time they do not agree with her choice for racial reasons, the larger problem seems to be that they are not prepared to have their daughter marry and move to Geneva in just a few short weeks.

The couple comes to terms with Joanna's age and choices as the film progresses. Monsignor Ryan is a major influence on their change in opinion, and he eventually helps convince them that she is a bright young woman who has made the best decision for herself. Christina is the first to realize the truth of this as she says that Joanna is unbiased just as they have raised her to be, and Matt eventually realizes the truth of this statement and comes to terms with Joanna's decision.

# Symbols

## Flowers

As Matt and Christina talk outside, she cuts flowers that could be seen to represent the love between Joanna and John and their happiness. As she cuts each flower, Matt continues to tell her that he is not sure how he feels about the situation. Just as Christina cuts the flowers, Matt may cut his daughter by saying no to her relationship with John.

## Statue

In Matt's study, John finds a small bronze statue of Matt. Bronze is a very hard metal and represents the hardness of Matt's heart. Matt has been a powerful liberal for years, always fighting for the rights of others. However, when he is finally put to the test by Joanna's new relationship, John hardens his heart to all his previous beliefs.

## Ice Cream

The ice cream scene is an especially important scene in the movie. Matt and Christina visit a nearby drive-in restaurant, and Matt orders an ice cream that he thinks he remembers liking a lot in the past. However, when the ice cream finally arrives, it is not the ice cream Matt expected. After taking a few bites of the ice cream, Matt admits to Christina that even though it's not what he expected, he really likes the ice cream. In the same way, although Matt is surprised by Joanna's choice, he eventually discovers that he is rather fond of her choice of a mate. Sometimes appreciation is a slow process, especially when a great shock has been received.

## Wreck

As part of the ice cream scene, Matt's wreck is also an important symbol in the film. Matt runs into the car of a young black man. As both men become angry and begin yelling, we see that although Matt may be adjusting to the situation, that doesn't make it any easier. There will still be difficulties between John and Joey and their families, as well as challenges for John and Joey as they face the rest of the world. Although race relations are improving, we see that they are not improving as fast as John and Joanna would like to believe.



## Essay Questions

To whom or what does the title refer?

Do you agree with Tillie's determination that "All hell's broke loose?" Should this be such a big issue?

What are the reactions of Joanna's and John's parents?

Why does Joanna think that there will be no problem? Is she simply naive?

Why is Tillie so upset about the situation?

What is Monsignor Ryan's position?

What is the meaning of the scene where Matt is getting ice cream?

Why is the situation so upsetting for Matt, a liberal who has fought for race rights?

What do John and Joanna's parents finally choose to say to the couple?

Does the movie make a powerful statement on race issues or, as some critics believe, does it cop out with a statement that love conquers all?

### Bibliography

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0061735/>