

It Happened One Night Film Summary

It Happened One Night by Frank Capra

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Context

It Happened One Night is one of Frank Capra's best films. With great leading actors, Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert, the film won five Oscars in 1934. The story is that of a spoiled heiress, Ellie Andrews, who makes a hasty decision to marry King Westley, a gold digger of the worst sort. After her father lectures her for the decision, Ellie leaps from his yacht and rushes away to meet Westley in New York.

As Ellie tries to outwit her father's detectives, she meets newspaper reporter, Peter Warne, on a bus. Warne's arrogant personality doesn't allow Ellie the special treatment that she expects given as a wealthy woman. Ellie reacts poorly to his treatment and the two begin a love-hate relationship.

After Peter discovers Ellie's identity, he agrees to help her arrive safely in New York in order to have an exclusive story to sell to his paper. Ellie knows little of the real world, and without Peter's help, she realizes that she could be caught in just a few hours. As the two travel together, they fight and argue as well as outwit the detectives.

Eventually they must leave the safety of the bus when a reward is offered for Ellie's return and people begin to recognize her. They tramp across the country, hitchhike, and steal cars, trying to get to New York. After a while, the two fall in love. Ellie falls asleep the night before they reach New York, and Peter leaves to borrow money from his editor so that he can propose to Ellie. The motel owners discover that he has left and wakes Ellie.

Feeling deceived, Ellie calls her father and returns home to marry Westley. Her father realizes her love for Peter and his love for her after he refuses to accept the reward money. After a little convincing, Ellie returns to Peter, and the couple runs off to elope while Ellie's father pays Westley to leave.

Entertainment Weekly voted Frank Capra to be the 9th best director of all time. Capra began making a name for himself with his comedy *Lady for a Day* (1933), *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), and *You Can't Take It With You* (1938). However, he is probably best known for *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), which did not gain real success until it was shown on the television in the 1970s.

Clark Gable ended up in this Columbia film after refusing an assignment with MGM; he ended up winning an Oscar. Although this was one of Gable's first major films to win him critical acclaim, it was not his last. In 1937, Clark Gable was labeled the "King of Hollywood" as Myrna Loy was labeled the "Queen of Hollywood." Gable continued on in his career for his role as Fletcher Christian in *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935) and Rhett Butler in *Gone With the Wind* (1939).

Claudette Colbert became one of the greatest film stars of her time. In 1934, she had a great performance in Cecil DeMille's *Cleopatra*. Although the film wasn't DeMille's best work, it showed the talent's of Colbert.. Soon after, she appeared in this film, and her

performance cemented her spot as a star. Colbert also starred in a number of other films including *Private Worlds* (1935), *The Gilded Lily* (1935), *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939), *No Time For Love* (1943), and *Since You Went Away* (1944).

It Happened One Night won five Oscars: Best Actor in a Leading Role for Clark Gable; Best Actress in a Leading Role for Claudette Colbert; Best Director for Frank Capra; Best Picture; and Best Writing, Adaptation for Robert Riskin.



Summary and Analysis

It Happened One Night starts out on a boat. A woman on board, Ellie Andrews, has not been eating because she doesn't want her father, Alexander Andrews, to break up her marriage. He's been planning to have her marriage annulled. Two men bring in some food and run out. She throws the food in the floor, and he slaps her. She runs out, dives off the boat, and swims toward shore. The sailors don't catch up with her, so Alexander sends detectives to watch for her. Ellie has an old woman buy her ticket.

Peter Warne is in the phone booth with people listening everywhere. Warne's editor is angry at him for sending in a story in Greek. The editor tells him that he's fired. Warne is obviously a little drunk so he tries to show that he is quitting in order to cover his pride. The other reporters put him on the bus and call him the king. In order to get a seat, Warne throws some newspapers out the window. However, as he talks to the driver, Ellie sits down in his seat. Peter tells Ellie that he put up a fight for the seat, but she won't give up so he sits down. Peter offers to put her bag up top but she does it herself and falls in his lap in the process.

The bus finally takes a break, and everyone gets off for a few minutes. As Ellie smokes, Peter watches her. He sees a man walk off with her bag, and he chases him. He tells her that the man got away, but she doesn't know what he's talking about. She's upset that it's missing and she doesn't want him to report it even though all her money was in it. He calls her an "ungrateful brat."

Back on the bus, Peter takes up as much of the seat as possible, so Ellie sits somewhere else. The man she's sitting next to snores terribly and keeps falling on her. Peter watches and laughs, but when she looks back there, he pretends to be asleep. Finally Ellie moves to the back, and Peter puts his hand out in the seat. She moves it and sits down. He "wakes up" to find her there and closes his eyes again with a smirk on his face.

The next morning they stop for breakfast and Ellie is sleeping snuggled up to Peter. She wakes up and is embarrassed. He watches her with an amused smile. She tells him she's going to the Windsor Hotel. She is convinced they'll wait for her, and she even tells the driver to wait. However, when she returns, the bus to New York is gone. Peter is sitting there waiting on her. She asks when the next bus comes and is distraught to find out that it's not until 8:00 that night. She tells Peter that he shouldn't look smug since he missed the bus too, but then he pulls out her ticket. She thanks him.

Peter tells her that she'll never get away with it. He shows her the front page and tells her that her father will catch her before she gets half way to New York. He also tells her to go to Miami because her new husband is a fake. She begs him not to notify her father. She offers to pay him if he promises not to tell. He tells her that he knew that she was a spoiled brat of a rich father. He's mad that she has no humility, and he tells her that had she just asked he still wouldn't have said anything. He goes off and sends a telegram collect to his editor offering him the story about Ellie.



That evening, they both get on the same bus. Once again the only empty seat is beside Peter or the man across the aisle from him. The man she sits next to constantly talks.. She is annoyed by him, and Peter asks the guy to move so that he can sit next to his "wife." She asks to thank him if he won't snap at her, but he tells her he didn't do it for her, he just didn't like the man's voice.

Ellie got wet during the day, so he gives her a scarf. Peter asks how she's going to get to New York with only a \$1.60 rather than the \$4 she had the previous night. She argues, but he tells her to shut up. The two stop for the night since the bus can't get through. He gets them a room, but he had to tell them that he was her husband.

Ellie feels insulted, but he tells her that she's just a headline. She's shocked to discover that he's a newspaper man. He wants her exclusive story, and he'll help her get to her husband. Peter tells her that if she tries to disappear then he'll turn her over to her father. Peter even puts up a sheet and gives her some pajamas. He undresses in front of her and explains how a man undresses. As she undresses, Ellie asks for Peter's name.

Mr. Andrews is on his way to New York, and he receives a telegram that no one has found Ellie. Meanwhile, Ellie is asleep in bed, but Peter comes to wake her up. He convinces her to get out of bed and directs her to the showers. Peter has dinner fixed for Ellie by the time she gets back.

Ellie says that Peter must think she's foolish and spoiled. She tells him that she's never been able to do anything on her own and that she's alone with a man for the first time ever. She tells him that one day she escaped and jumped into a car and that's where she met her husband. The detectives show up, and Peter helps her conceal her identity.

Peter's editor receives the telegram and becomes angry. Mr. Andrews meets with the detective company and tells them to put the story in the newspaper, offering a \$10,000 reward. While Peter and Ellie are on the bus, many men perform song and dance to keep everyone entertained. However, they get stuck in a hole. A little boy's mother faints, and Peter and Ellie take care of them. The guy who harassed Ellie earlier, Shapeley, shows the article to Peter and offers him half to turn Ellie in. Peter pulls him to the side to talk.

When they get into the forest, Peter tells him that he'll give him a machine gun to take care of things. Peter tells him that he's kidnapping her for \$1 million. The man tells him that he can't afford to get in this, but Peter says he has to stay in it. The man says his name is Oscar Shapeley and tells him all his information. Peter threatens his children if the man doesn't keep his mouth shut. Shapeley cries, and Peter tells him to stay away from the bus. Oscar runs away.

Back at the bus, Peter pulls Ellie away. He explains to her that Shapeley will begin thinking about what is going on and will turn them in. Peter tells her to wire her father, and she tells him that she'll starve all the way to get there. They need to cross the



stream, so Peter carries her across. They argue about piggyback rides, and then he spanks her. Finally they start walking again and find a place to eat.

Ellie tells him that she's hungry and scared, but he says those things can't happen. She says she is hungry and can't forget about it. Peter becomes frustrated as he pulls down hay for their beds. He goes for a walk while she talks to him without realizing that he's gone. She tells him to leave anytime he wants, and turns around to find him gone.

After Ellie realizes Peter is missing, she starts screaming his name, and hugs him when he runs back. He explains that he was trying to find something for her to eat. She tells him she got so scared that she's not hungry anymore. He covers her up and almost kisses her before they go to bed. Instead he stands up and smokes, and she asks what he's thinking. He says he was thinking of her and wondering why she's so dizzy. Her eyes tear up and they fall asleep.

The next morning her feet begin to hurt as they are walking. She decides to wait until a car comes. He helps her get hay out of her teeth while they're waiting. They accidentally miss a car, and he claims to be an expert hitchhiker. When a car comes he tries to get a ride but can't.

Several cars pass with no luck, so Ellie decides to try. He laughs at her, but she pulls up her skirt a bit and gets a car to stop right away. Peter won't give her any credit, and the driver laughs.

When they stop at a gas station, the man offers them food, but Peter refuses. Peter tries to convince her to eat a carrot. When she tries to go in anyway, he tells her he'll break her neck if she does. Peter and Ellie get out and stretch their legs a bit. He takes her hand and apologizes.

While their backs are turned, the driver leaves, taking their suitcase with him. Peter runs after the car, and he finally retrieves both the suitcase and the car. Since Peter also got into a fight along the way, she helps clean him up. He tells her to find something they can trade for ten gallons of gas. She finally tries a carrot since she is hungry.

Mr. Andrews meets with Ellie's new husband who tells him that they were married for love. Andrews tells him that he's licked, but only because he's worried. He asks Ellie's husband to make a statement to the reporters that everything's okay, and Ellie can return home.

Peter and Ellie finally find a place for free even though Peter doesn't want to stay. She tells him that she doesn't want to get in at 3:00 in the morning. Ellie isn't quite as excited about going home at this point.

Peter puts up a curtain again, and they get ready for bed. Ellie asks whether she'll see Peter in New York, and he tells her that he doesn't run around with married women. Peter tells her that he's served his purpose already. She asks him if he's ever been in love, he says he's thought about love but has yet to meet the right sort of girl. He wants



someone real and alive. He says that he even made plans before; he would want to take her to the Pacific.

As he talks, Ellie longs for him and then she walks around the curtain. She begs him to take her, but he tells her to go back to bed. She says that she loves him and can't live without him. He hugs her, but he tells her to go back to bed. She apologizes and goes back to bed, crying.

During the night, Peter asks her if she would really go with him, but she's already cried herself to sleep. He gets ready and leaves. He offers a bag to a guy so that he can get gas to go to New York, but the guy wants to trade for his hat.

Peter goes up to the newspaper office and turns in his story in exchange for \$1,000. Peter says that he and Ellie are going to get married. Joe, the editor, tries to leave but Peter stops him. The manager's wife wakes up to find Peter and the car gone, so they kick Ellie out. She goes to call her father as Peter hurries back. As he's changing the front page, a reporter calls to say that Ellie is going back to her father.

Ellie's father and his entourage pass Peter as they go to pick her up. As Peter is driving, he finds that Ellie is in a car with the entourage headed the opposite direction back toward New York. As he sees that, the tire on his car goes flat. Newspapers all over New York print the story of Ellie's triumphant homecoming.

Peter takes the money back to Joe. Joe catches up with him, and Peter apologizes for the story. Joe gives him some money and tells him to come in when he sobers up. Ellie's father insists on a church wedding so that she can be remarried. Before the wedding, she is smoking and daydreaming. He tells her that her husband's stunt was impressive. She pretends to be happy with her dress.

Mr. Andrews tells her that he can annul the marriage if she wants him to. She begins to cry and admits that she fell in love with someone else. She says that she doesn't know much about Peter but she loves him. She also believes that he despises her and doesn't think much of Mr. Andrews. Her father wants to find the man and fix things, but she insists on going through with the marriage so that she doesn't cause more problems. She feels like she needs to settle down no matter who it is with.

Mr. Andrews says that he doesn't know Peter Warne. Peter had sent a note wanting to discuss a financial matter with Mr. Andrews. Ellie becomes angry, and Mr. Andrews goes to meet Peter. Ellie meets with her husband, and she says she wants a lot of excitement. Then, he kisses her.

In his apartment, Peter reads the newspaper stories and receives a call from Mr. Andrews. Andrews insists on meeting Peter immediately. Peter decides to go. Mr. Andrews tells Peter that he has an itemized list after Andrews tells him that Ellie thinks he should get anything he want. Peter only wants \$39.60. Peter tells him that he doesn't want the \$10,000 reward; he just wants his \$39.60 to get out of there. Mr. Andrews writes him a check and asks him if he loves Ellie. Peter finally admits to loving her, and he walks out to see her giving a toast. She invites him to stay, but he leaves.



Mr. Andrews tries to tell Ellie what's been going on, but she walks away. Finally a plane lands with Ellie's husband. The wedding begins and Ellie's father tells her she's stupid for going through with this. Warne only wanted the money he spent because she took him for a ride. Her father tells her she doesn't want to be married to her husband, and Peter really loves her. He tells her that if she changes her mind when she gets up front, her car is waiting out back.

When it's time to say, "I Do," Ellie runs away to her car and her father pretends to be clueless. Mr. Andrews talks to Ellie's husband and tells him that he sent him a check for \$100,000 in order to keep him from contesting the annulment. Then, Peter sends a wire from Glen Falls, MI, trying to find out what's holding up the annulment. He sends a wire back saying that it's gone through. They ordered a trumpet, a cord, and blanket so that the "Walls of Jericho," the barriers in their relationship, could topple.



Characters

Peter Warne, played by Clark Gable

Description

Peter Warne is an arrogant, self-centered newspaperman. He spends much of his time drinking, gambling, and chasing women. We first meet Peter while he is drunk and calling his boss to quit his job. Peter's rash decision seems to make him the less responsible of the two main characters, but we soon learn that he is quite capable of taking care of himself.

Peter meets Ellie on the bus after tossing newspapers out the window to make a seat for him self. Peter's pushy ways annoy Ellie who is accustomed to being treated with special respect because of her father's money. Peter seems to ignore her demand for special attention and treats her like any other person.

After discovering Ellie's true identity, Peter decides to help her so that he can get an exclusive story about her life, her marriage, and her escape. As Peter fights and travels with Ellie, he begins to fall for her charms. He finally leaves as they near New York to borrow money from his editor so that he can marry Ellie. Although his plan backfires at first, Peter and Ellie do eventually get together.

Analysis

Peter Warne gives off an air of arrogance, and he only seems to help Ellie to serve his own purposes. When he first recognizes her as the runaway heiress, Peter simply wants to make some money by having an exclusive story on the debutante. As time passes, though, he begins to change and sees a new side of Ellie.

Peter's ingenuity gets him and Ellie out of many sticky situations. As they are chased by her father's detectives, his acting and spur of the moment plans keep them from being captured more than once. Peter begins to respect Ellie when she finally starts playing along and taking care of herself.

Peter finally falls in love with Ellie and decides that he wants to spend the rest of his life with her. Although he generally plans his moves, he spontaneously hurries away to get money to marry Ellie. After losing her, he hibernates and drinks in his apartment. Peter shows his honesty and love by rejecting the award money. He also wins Alexander's respect and Ellie's love.



Ellie Andrews, played by Claudette Colbert

Description

Ellie Andrews is the spoiled daughter of millionaire Alexander Andrews. She has always had everything handed to her, and she is accustomed to getting her way. Ellie finally becomes tired of her father's overprotective ways, and she decides to be rebellious by marrying the gold digger, King Westley. After her father gives her a lecture concerning her new marriage, Ellie runs away.

As Ellie takes a bus to New York and attempts to avoid her father's detectives, she meets reporter Peter Warne. Ellie dislikes Peter from the beginning, and they begin a love-hate relationship. Ellie becomes angry with Peter for treating her like any girl, but she also becomes grateful when he waits for her so that she does not lose her ticket.

As the two travel, they find that they are extremely attracted to one another. Ellie is clueless about how things work in the real world, and Peter watches out for her. As she comes to respect him, she also falls in love with him. When he leaves without notice, however, she suspects that he has neglected her and returns with her father. Ellie then gives up on their love, but her father discovers the truth of the situation and helps bring the couple back together.

Analysis

Ellie is a spoiled young woman who has no idea what it is like to live in the real world. She tries to get a taste of normal life on her own but only ends up getting herself into one mess after another. Ellie's adventures are primarily caused by her unwillingness to take advice from others and her naivety concerning the real world.

Ellie's attitude drives Peter crazy. Having worked his way up in the newspaper business, Peter has little sympathy for this spoiled brat of a woman. Ellie finds Peter's feelings toward her intolerable, and she tries to make him go away. Nevertheless, Ellie quickly discovers that she can only make it to New York with Peter's help.

Although at first Ellie simply wants to make Peter understand that she is better than him, she begins to respect him. As her respect grows, Ellie eventually falls in love with Peter. Due to a miscommunication and her pride, she almost loses Peter forever, but she has finally learned to take advice and listens to her father.

Alexander Andrews, played by Walter Connolly

Description

Alexander Andrews is Ellie's father. Alexander has kept Ellie under a tight watch all her life. She is his only daughter, and he wants to see her safe and happy. Alexander also



wants to protect his fortune since whoever marries Ellie will have some access to the money.

Alexander's efforts to control Ellie only serve to make her even wilder. She rebels against him by marrying King Westley and running away when her father chastises her for the decision. After Ellie disappears, Alexander becomes desperate, accepts Westley, and announces a reward. When Ellie returns, Alexander realizes that she has finally fallen in love, but with Peter not Westley. Alexander uses his money and fame to buy her way out of the marriage.

Analysis

Alexander is simply a loving but overprotective father. His efforts to keep Ellie safe and happy have simply caused her to rebel against him. Alexander struggles to remain calm after Ellie disappears, and he begins a desperate search for his daughter.

Alexander's love for his daughter allows him to help her get out of her ridiculous marriage to King Westley. Although Peter is only a newspaper man, Alexander respects him for loving his daughter and not going after the reward money. Alexander's encouragement helps Ellie to return to Peter and secure her happiness.

Oscar Shapeley, played by Roscoe Karns

Description

Peter and Ellie meet Oscar Shapeley as they travel by bus. Ellie first sits next to Oscar who proceeds to tell her all about his business and Peter helps rescue her from the obnoxious man. While reading a newspaper, Shapeley recognizes Ellie and tries to convince Peter to go in on the reward money. Peter then convinces Shapeley that he is actually kidnapping Ellie, and Shapeley becomes terrified by this "underworld" personality and runs away.

Analysis

Shapeley is an annoying, obnoxious traveling salesman who does not know when to be quiet. Peter and Ellie try to avoid him, but they cannot seem to get away. Shapeley's character helps us realize the real danger of recognition for Ellie and the danger that she really could be kidnapped by someone.

King Westley, played by Jameson Thomas

Description

King Westley is Ellie's fiancé. He is a gold digger who meets Ellie while she is on a trip. As with many other women, Westley leads her on, but she decides to marry him to



make her father angry. Westley is more than happy to give Ellie an annulment when her father offers him a large sum of money so that she can marry Peter.

Analysis

King Westley is a stereotypical gold digger and scoundrel who simply looks for rich girls so that he can get a piece of their money. Although he has been with many women, when Ellie chooses him, he is more than happy to marry her for her money. Westley never truly loved Ellie, so her father has no problem buying him off when she wants to marry Peter.

Joe Gordon, played by Charles C. Wilson

Description

Joe Gordon is Peter's editor. Joe is constantly getting angry at Peter for being drunk on the job or simply wasting the newspaper's money. As the film begins, Joe fires Peter over the phone. Joe is constantly skeptical of Peter's abilities to get a story and his honesty.

Joe agrees to help Peter when he needs money so that he can marry Ellie. However, he soon hears a different story from King Westley and Ellie's father. Joe finally gives up on Peter when Peter simply goes home to drink away his problems.

Analysis

Joe helps the viewer to gather a picture of what Peter was like before he met Ellie. We see that Peter is a scoundrel and a louse at many times, and he is not beyond using another person for a story. Joe's opinion of Peter makes Peter falling in love with Ellie and wanting to marry her even more surprising and impressive.



Themes

Need for Freedom

The United States may be a free country, but not everyone has the opportunity to experience that freedom. Interestingly enough, in this film it is not the poor who miss out on their freedom but the rich. Ellie wants to be free to make her own decisions, but her father is constantly choosing for her.

Every human has a fundamental need and desire to make his or her own choices. When that freedom is taken away by governments, parents, or other people, the automatic reaction is to rebel. Ellie rebels against her father's strict expectations by running off with King Westley, a notorious gold digger who only used rich women to get their money. Her father realizes the dangers of Westley, but he does not let her make her own choices, and her automatic reaction is to rebel against him.

In the short time that Ellie travels with Peter, viewers watch her grow and mature. Her attitude changes from that of the spoiled brat to that of a grown woman who is willing to take responsibility for her life. Peter's companionship and the added freedom has helped to become a strong, sure woman.

Unexpected Love

As with so many stories, *It Happened One Night* shares the theme of unexpected love with viewers. Love has a tendency to pop up just when you least expect it. Ellie is married to King Westley, but she doesn't really love him; she simply married him to make her father angry and express her independence.

At this moment in time, the last thing Ellie expects is to fall in love with a complete stranger, but that is exactly what happens. After jumping off her father's yacht, Ellie swims ashore and buys a bus ticket to New York so that she can get to her husband, King Westley. She knows no one and is trying to avoid her father's detectives. On the bus, she meets Peter, a man whom she at first despises; however, after he waits on her at the bus station and helps her in many confusing situations, Ellie ends up falling in love with him.

Ellie's biggest problem with her new life is that she is still married to King Westley. After she believes that Peter has left her, she returns home to prepare for a traditional wedding. Her unexpected love has ended all too soon. However, her father recognizes the truth and helps Ellie get out of the marriage when she finally realizes that she is madly in love with Peter.



Growing Up

One of the most difficult parts of any person's life is that time when they are growing up and maturing. Trying to balance the emotions and spontaneity of youth with the heavy decisions of adulthood is a difficult place for many people including Ellie. In addition to all of these things, Ellie is being pressured by her father to make the decisions that he wants her to make rather than those she wishes to make. Ellie runs away to make her point and she grows up on her journey.

Ellie is a foolish, young girl at first who has just gotten married to a second-rate guy. She refuses to admit her mistake, though, because that would require her to admit that her father was correct in the first place. Ellie is so impetuous that she even jumps off her father's yacht in the harbor and runs away.

As Ellie begins to travel, she also begins to mature. She realizes that out in the real world, people do not do everything she wants, especially Peter who thwarts her at every turn. With Peter she also learns that money cannot buy friendship. He explains to her that she could simply ask for a favor rather than throwing money at the problem. In that way, she would be able to show some humility and make a true friend. Throughout her journey, Ellie grows up in many ways - learning the ways of the world and falling in love.

Style and Cinematography

It Happened One Night is a screwball comedy similar to Howard Hawks' *His Girl Friday* starring Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell. With a fast talking newspaper man and a girl with whom he has an intense love-hate relationship, we see many similarities. Unlike Russell's independent, intelligent character, however, Ellie is spoiled and naïve.

It Happened One Night combines great actors with significant commercial appeal, excellent dialogue, and perfect direction. As viewers watch the chemistry between Peter and Ellie, they can imagine similar events happening in their own lives, except for the wealthy heiress part, of course. Peter and Ellie's relationship begins with strife, the way so many strong relationships begin.

The film uses comedy to bring joy to the audience. Although there are several themes throughout the film, this is mostly intended solely for entertainment purposes. Neither the director nor the actors intended for the film to be taken to seriously. The characters ensure that this will not happen as they take part in lighthearted banter, serious arguments, and a series of crazy adventures.



Motifs

Modes of Travel

Various modes of travel help tell the story of Ellie and Peter's trip to New York and their journey to love. As their relationship changes so does their mode of travel. In addition, we see Ellie traveling even before she meets Peter. While on the yacht with her father, Ellie shows a complete lack of respect for her father and an unwillingness to face her problems.

When Ellie and Peter first meet, they are riding on a bus together headed to New York City from Miami. Ellie had an old woman buy her ticket so that she can get onto the bus, but there are few seats left by the time she boards. The two must share the seat that Peter cleared, and they begin an uneasy, love-hate relationship on the bus.

After many adventures on the bus, Ellie and Peter begin to form a grudging respect for one another. After Shapeley discovers Ellie's identity and the reward being offered, however, the couple must quickly give up their travel on the bus. They begin to hitchhike after beginning to fall for one another.

Later, they steal a car to reach the hotel outside New York. At this point, they have fallen in love although they refuse to completely admit their feelings. After Peter leaves to borrow money from Joe, Ellie rides home in a huge entourage with her father and Westley. At this point, Peter believes their relationship is over, but Ellie's father helps bring the two together, and they run away to elope.

Newspapers

Throughout the film, we watch as events unfold both on the screen and in the newspapers. As soon as Ellie goes missing, her father sends out detectives to find her. Although he tries to keep the information from the newspapers, Alexander soon discovers that he will not find Ellie without the public's help.

After the announcement of Ellie's disappearance is announced, every newspaper carries the story. Ellie is shocked when Peter learns of her identity and situation from the newspaper as he waits for after she forgets her ticket on the bus. His interest in the beginning is solely consideration for getting an exclusive story with the runaway heiress, though eventually he begins to care for her.

Ellie's father tries to make amends by using the press as his spokespeople. He announces in the newspapers that he has made peace with Westley and begs Ellie to return home. He also announces a \$10,000 reward for anyone who will return Ellie to her home in New York. Without the newspapers, we would have no knowledge of how the rest of the world perceives Ellie's escape.



Night

As night falls, the world changes and so do the attitudes of the characters. The nights help to give the story a structure and emphasize the changes in the characters. We see that each day Ellie grows into a more mature woman while Peter becomes a less arrogant more helpful man.

During their first night together, Peter and Ellie fight and argue. Although he covers her with his coat after she falls asleep, they remain hostile toward one another as morning dawns. After Peter finds them a hotel room the next night, though, Ellie's hostility toward him begins to thin and almost completely dissipates after they trick her father's detectives.

The next night is spent sleeping in the hay, and the couple has a serious argument. They then spend the next day hitchhiking; a day in which they truly begin to fall for one another. Finally, their last night is spent at a motel outside New York City, and Peter recognizes his love for Ellie, even going to New York to borrow money so that he can marry her. Although it takes them a little longer to finally get together, the couple's nights show the changes in their relationship.



Symbols

Curtain

During each night Ellie and Peter spend together, Peter hangs a curtain between their beds so that they can have some privacy. Although he does not make this plan at first, he does it so that Ellie will feel more comfortable with the situation. Not only does the curtain give the characters their privacy, but also it serves as a wall between them both physically and emotionally.

Throughout their journey, the two become closer as they struggle to get back to New York without having Ellie recognized by the detectives, fellow passengers, or police. When they are finally just a short way from New York, Ellie decides that she doesn't want to get into New York in the middle of the night. More than concern for her family, Ellie is not ready to leave Peter yet.

As they talk this night, Peter describes the type of woman he wants, and Ellie comes around the curtain and offers herself to Peter. He pushes her away, but later he regrets his move. He hurries to New York to borrow money from his editor so that he can ask her to marry him. Although she was ready to break down all the barriers, Peter did not feel that he was worthy of Ellie.

When Peter and Ellie finally get together and run away to elope, we see their motel room. They use a small toy trumpet, and the "Walls of Jericho," their name for the curtain, finally comes tumbling down.

Ticket

Ellie's ticket is symbolic of her flight to independence. Ellie is tired of being protected by her father, and she is seeking every opportunity to find her own way. While vacationing with her father in South America, Ellie meets and marries King Westley, a notorious gold digger. After getting in trouble with her father, she quickly runs away.

Ellie has an old woman buy her ticket aboard a bus headed to New York so that she can meet Westley. Ellie's ticket is her show of independence when she leaves her father. Although Ellie tries to prove her independence, she has little knowledge of how the real world works. She proves her naivety by asking the bus driver to wait on her while she hurries across town to a nice hotel; of course, he doesn't wait.

In her hurry, Ellie leaves her bus ticket on the seat of the bus. When Peter reads a newspaper, he discovers Ellie's true identity. He then finds her bus ticket and waits for her at the bus station. He sees her as a spoiled brat but a great story opportunity. Her ticket while symbolizing her search for independence also shows her weaknesses and problems as she makes many simple mistakes while trying to get to New York.



Car

As Ellie and Peter travel, they finally have to leave the bus behind. Oscar Shapeley, an obnoxious traveling salesman, has recognized Ellie, and the rest of the bus is probably not far behind. Shapeley first shares his suspicions with Peter who proceeds to scare Shapeley away and warn Ellie.

After the two leave the bus, spend a night in a hayfield, and walk along the side of the road, they begin trying their luck at hitchhiking when Ellie becomes tired. Ellie is finally able to get a man to pull over and give them a ride. As they ride, they pretend to be a young married couple who has had car trouble on their honeymoon. They do well at first, but then the man leaves them at a gas station.

Peter runs after the man and steals his car. The car symbolizes Peter's true feelings for Ellie. He is no longer simply trying to get a good story for the newspaper, but he is also trying to protect the woman he loves. His instincts tell him to take care of Ellie, and Peter shows his care by stealing the car.

Later, Peter takes the car to New York in the middle of the night so that he can borrow money from his editor and ask Ellie to marry him. Peter pushes the car to its limits in order to get to New York and back to Ellie. Sadly, Peter's car breaks down just at the moment he sees Ellie's entourage returning her to New York. The car symbolizes the breakup of their relationship in that moment.



Essay Questions

Why does Ellie jump off the boat?

How do she and Peter meet?

Why does Peter stick around to help Ellie?

How does Peter get them a hotel room when they have to stop?

Why do they finally get off the bus?

How do they travel after the bus?

How do their feelings toward each other change as they fight and travel?

How does Ellie's father finally find her?

Why are Peter's hopes dashed and what is his reaction?

How do Peter and Ellie finally get together?