

# 'Marriage Story' Is the Perfect Movie for Our Narcissistic Time

It is impossible to watch the critically acclaimed Oscar-nominated "Marriage Story" without bearing in mind that America no longer takes marriage very seriously. The plaudits showered on the film seem like no accident.

A melodramatic tale about two bicoastal (New York and Los Angeles) artists going through a painful separation, "Marriage Story" has been praised for its "realistic" and compassionate look at the anguish of divorce. But the title is deceiving. At the heart of "Marriage Story" is a belief in nothing – not in love, not in the family, and certainly not in marriage.

The only things that are real in this story are the characters and their narcissism. Although it touches on matters of fundamental importance, it has little to say about them. The focus is on the *feelings*, though only of the mom and dad, and not much else. Pitched as a movie about marriage, "Marriage Story" is about the pseudo-liberation of breaking a family apart.

We know how "Marriage Story" is going to end from the start. When the story begins, Charlie Barber, an ambitious and self-absorbed New York theater director, and Nicole, an equally ambitious and self-absorbed actress, are at marriage counseling. In one of the few life-affirming moments, a narration plays of husband and wife reading letters about the things they love about each other as a sentimental montage plays.

Then it's back to reality. Charlie and Nicole are sitting in uncomfortable silence, letters in hand. The session breaks down when Nicole storms out, but not before making a comment

about her husband and the counselor fellating each other.

It quickly becomes apparent that Charlie and Nicole are not particularly modest or pleasant people. Nicole moves to Los Angeles temporarily for a TV pilot but ends up settling there without warning. Although they agree to split amicably, Nicole hires a witchy, ruthless Hollywood divorce lawyer (Laura Dern) to represent her. Charlie, who is focused on directing his play in New York, is taken off guard when he's served his papers. Before long, they are drawn into a nightmarish civil war that inflicts enormous emotional and financial costs on both of them. Charlie hires, then fires, a kind but dotty and ineffective attorney (Alan Alda) and finally takes on a thuggish one (Ray Liotta) who is equal to the fight.

As the conflict escalates, they fight over their child, air out the dirty laundry in court, and get into a viral screaming match. They dredge up every little slight they've ever felt and say cruel things about each other. "Marriage Story" leaves the impression that divorce is a hell that should be avoided at all costs, but it doesn't really work its way to that conclusion. Divorce is depicted both as purgatory and as a basically frivolous detour on the road to self-actualization. That isn't just morally irresponsible, *per se*, it's a narrative weakness.

"Marriage Story" asks for sympathy, but it's too kind to its characters by half. What they experience is terrible, but it also feels contrived, and the story is forgetful that mom and dad are not the only ones in the family. They have a son, Henry, whose perspective is entirely ignored. The story is told through the lenses of the parents and their narcissism. It doesn't dwell too long or hard on the reasons for their separation or the consequences of it.

To find the story convincing, one will probably need to share the assumption behind the narrative that these people deserve unconditional sympathy, rather than shame. How one responds

here will depend on his attitudes about marriage and divorce in general: is marriage a serious, life-lasting commitment or a transaction, something that can be canceled at any time and exchanged for something better? Is there *any* shame in breaking up a family, or is divorce simply a matter of "choice," always for the better?

The remarkable thing about "Marriage Story" is that it depicts an at-fault divorce, but it doesn't feel like one. There is a betrayal on one side, but the narrative driver is more in the realm of "irreconcilable differences."

Nicole is unhappy because Charlie is controlling and has no respect for her ambitions. She's tired of being "just" a wife and mom, and wants "an entirely different kind of life," something that belongs to her alone. She rushed into marriage expecting bliss, but ended up with buyer's remorse. Charlie is miserable because he finds Nicole a burden to his aspirations and, it's implied, he never really wanted to get married (or divorced for that matter) in the first place. He probably would have been happier sleeping with groupies in Brooklyn. He finds his wife's complaints about independence bothersome and not worthy of taking seriously. Both are totally consumed with their personal feelings, their sense of injury, and their desire for artistic glory.

Do these people really need to get divorced, or do they just need to grow up? To put it some other way, are they unhappy with each other, or destined to bring unhappiness with them everywhere that they go?

"Marriage Story" doesn't look into the latter scenario, but it seems like a logical one. It's not hard to imagine an ending beyond the final page like this: Charlie finds another trophy wife to join him on his quest for greatness, while Nicole marries an indie filmmaker of whom she eventually grows resentful and then betrays. Rinse and repeat.

Like a cinematic equivalent of slam poetry, "Marriage Story" validates everything the characters feel. In so doing, to paraphrase Christopher Lasch, it lacks the critical distance from its subject matter that is needed to reach any edifying conclusions. Charlie and Nicole are never seen reflecting on their actions, and they are surrounded by hip New York-L.A. creatives who reassure them that what they're doing is a kind of therapy, a painful but transitory step on the road to true happiness. "Marriage Story" is about the emotional toll of divorce on a couple, but it doesn't depict the end of a family as a tragedy. It's a movie about marriage that doesn't take marriage seriously.

This is clear when all the sound and fury ends with a shrug. Charlie and Nicole go on to become fabulously successful and famous, and their son, if he has experienced any trauma at all, does not show any sign of it. In fact, he doesn't cry or show any distress in the entire movie. How's that for realism?

These lapses might be explained by the surmise that "Marriage Story" isn't really about marriage and family at all, but only about two narcissists and their careers. In the end, have Charlie and Nicole learned anything about themselves or each other? They haven't suffered, really. They're still friends. Outside of one vicious argument, they remain amicable throughout the movie. It can even be said that they still love each other, and the movie shoots for "we're still family even though we're not a family anymore" sentimentalism. What's the point?

If there is one, it appears to be indulging in emotional punishment and histrionic victimhood. "Marriage Story" asks us to buy into its liberal assumptions about life, and to suspend judgment of people who would probably be happier if they took themselves less seriously. There's nothing profound about this stuff, but a shallow culture of confession is predisposed to find over-sharing and "raw" emotional disclosure revealing and deep in the absence of anything asking them to reach higher.

“Marriage Story” reflects the shallow morals of a shallow time. It validates a culture that abhors the family and exalts non-commitment. It tries to “destigmatize” something that is already largely accepted by society without shame. Divorce today is normal to the point of banality. If “Marriage Story” is meant to be uplifting, a generous and nonjudgmental take on this sad reality of American life, then it has the effect of a PSA against the shallow beliefs that underpin its very narrative, the non-committal attitudes that made America into a land of broken homes.

“Marriage Story” dwells on the sadness of divorce, but it never wonders if Charlie and Nicole made the right choice. They give up too easily. Separation is fated. That’s not uplifting, it’s depressing. The objection – if two people are unhappy, then why shouldn’t they just separate? – may be plausible in specific cases, but it’s a hopeless attitude toward life and the society created in its image is a very sad one.

The film affirms that despair as a phony form of liberation. It seems to say that marriage, like everything in life, is trivial. At its core, “Marriage Story” lacks conviction in life, in love, in marriage, in all of the things that make life worth living.

Charlie and Nicole made a commitment they couldn’t keep. Life is full of mistakes like that, but should they be glorified? “Marriage Story” doesn’t deal with its fraught subject in a mature way.

It reinforces the beliefs of a broken, narcissistic society that may be inclined to find its divorce-as-liberation message reassuring. It soothes with the message, “no judgment.” But is that really what America needs to hear?

—

*This [article](#) has been republished with permission*

*from* American Greatness.

[Image Credit: YouTube-Neftlix, "[Marriage Story | Official Trailer | Netflix](#)"]