

# THE PHILADELPHIA STORY

Directed by George Cukor  
Produced by Joseph L. Mankiewicz  
Distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer  
Released in 1940

This is one of the great films. An exceptional screenplay brought to life by a blockbuster cast, *The Philadelphia Story* is, and will remain, a landmark. The acting by all players is engaging, nuanced, and varied. It's a stage play opened up discreetly, taking root and germinating amidst the Culver City back lot. The story and the acting are unusually important in this film, overshadowing deficiencies in sound (lots of noise), editing (opposing shots are terribly matched), and art design (particularly the huge blank wall in Kidd's office) that would sink a lesser production.

Cary Grant, Katherine Hepburn, and James Stewart were some of the biggest stars ever. To have all three in one great movie released by the most renowned of studios on the bleeding edge of World War II makes for something extraordinary. *The Philadelphia Story* offers an idealized perspective on the rich after a decade of class hostility engendered by the Great Depression. However, though the setting may be fanciful, the story's cutting perspective on human nature is right on. In this tale of high society frivolity on the eve of a divorced woman's second marriage, three men, reluctant snoop reporter Macaulay Conner (James Stewart), coal executive fiancée George Kittredge (John Howard), and ex-husband C.K. Dexter Haven (Cary Grant) provide insightful observations, revealing the character of Tracy Lord Haven (Katherine Hepburn), the imperious bride.

Though much of the plot involves romantic intrigue and burgeoning friendship amongst the characters (with a liberal splash of spoofing humor), the film is really Hepburn's. She is in almost every scene, and when she isn't there, characters talk about her.

We pick up a musical theme from the opening titles. In the famous scene immediately following the titles, Tracy throws Dexter out of the house. It is played silently, which is logical since they're probably past talking to each other. When Tracy first appears, the theme is revisited, that same theme heard in the opening titles on the card 'The Philadelphia Story.' And in a subsequent scene, when editor-publisher Sidney Kidd is working out the details of an expose on Tracy's wedding, he describes her as "the unapproachable Miss Lord—The Philadelphia Story."

A frequent comment in the film is that Tracy is removed from others, either in a good way (pure, clean, her own self) or a bad way (unsympathetic, unforgiving, basking in her own glory). Her fiancée, George, sees her remoteness as something entrancing. His perspective is understood by ex-husband Dexter, who comments, "We're very vain you know. This citadel can and shall be taken, and I'm the boy to do it!" He also observes that George is beneath Tracy not because of class but because of a disparity in mind and spirit, adding that "Kittredge is no great tower of strength, you know, Tracy; he's just a tower." Being from the bottom, he is hoping her family's prestige will open up political opportunities for him in the future, coincidentally consolidating his career in coal by taking on his company's major investor as a

father-in-law. But it may very well be a disparity in mind and spirit that draws George to Tracy. He does not love her, but he certainly admires her and is proud to be associated with her.

George makes two huge mistakes. The first is committed after Dexter and Tracy have a poolside row. Dexter had stimulated Tracy's thinking and in her self-assessment, she seeks out George's opinion of her while also sizing up whether Dexter was right—that she and George are a mismatch. She is not feeling her best. George knows she's not saying what's on her mind, but instead of taking the time to draw the truth out of her, he dismisses himself because he doesn't want to be late to Uncle Willy's party. Here, on the eve of their wedding, was his last chance to understand Tracy. George's second mistake was to think the worse of Tracy after she has gone swimming with Mike. Dexter understands because he knows that Tracy likes to swim after parties. Dexter is also forgiving, in a way Tracy finds herself incapable of doing until the film's end when she realizes that she is not perfect, and therefore ill-suited as the judge of all humanity. George is more concerned about what people think than sorting out the problems in their relationship. He prized her for being distant. And now that she has proven to be more than accessible (under the right circumstances), George behaves like he was the one who was violated. Yes, Tracy's behavior is questionable. But it points less to her character than to the problems in her relationship with George. That's what he should be considering, but he doesn't because he doesn't care about substance, he cares about appearances. And now that she realizes that he doesn't think well of her, she thinks less of him, and tells George to take a hike.

Mike offers a whole different perspective on Tracy. For a while it seems they will end up together. In the end, she wisely refuses to marry him, but says twice that she is beholden to him for all he has done. To Mike she is full of warmth and life and must be treated differently than other women. Despite his reservations about the upper class, he finds himself transfixed by her beauty and gaiety. A lot of her more agreeable characteristics Mike elicits. His short stories reveal a thinking man beneath the cynical bravado paraded about like a badge of honor. Impressed, she warms to him and tries flirting a little. Mike matches her moods very well, considerate of her feelings, enjoying his time with her in a way we never see the undemonstrative George ever do. On two occasions Mike defends her reputation, the first out of ignorance, the second rightly. Unlike George, Mike reveals his feelings and conjures the romantic Tracy long suppressed. But he also compliments her with a fervency that reinforces unhealthy feelings of superiority and exclusiveness, feeding her pride even as her subsequent (and for us, imagined) antics at the pool reveal her to be all-too-human. This is what destroyed the illusion for her fiancée.

We see that George did not really care for the person Tracy—he worshiped Tracy the idol, but Mike, genuinely, did care as he paid homage.

Really, only Dexter is the right man for her. He recognizes, like her father, that she has been privileged, spoiled, and protected too long. She's taken a dim view of other people's failures because she has never faced the consequences of her own mistakes. Coming back from divorce, alcoholism, and a two year exile in South America, Dexter remarks that he has given much thought to these matters since their split. He knows that Tracy needs to be humbled. She will never be a good wife, to any man, if she cannot learn to make allowances for human fallibility. She must discover forgiveness. Just as George imagines the worst regarding her

aqua-frolics, Tracy imagines the worst about her father and the dancer Tina Mara. She assumes they are having an affair and encourages her mother to put the whole matter of their split behind her (mainly to justify Tracy's own actions). But her mother can't help thinking that she made matters worse, that even if she asked him back, he wouldn't return. But Mr. Lord does return. He sets the record straight with his wife and they are reconciled. Tracy won't think of forgiving him. It's a given that he did cavort with his protégé in New York, but he did not begin an affair, despite his temptations. The coolness that Tracy displays for her father, a coolness which he said prompted him to go in search of his youth, still remains on display. But her father tells her to get off her high horse and mind her own business. Tellingly, Mother Lord goes right along, standing by her man. And in a nod to the Electra complex, Mr. Lord tells his daughter that by taking such an interest in Tina Mara she is talking like a jealous woman!

Tracy's self-righteousness is first punctured by Dexter, then by her father. She quickly downs three glasses of champagne, and launches into a night of inebriated abandon, with the willing aid of fellow imbiber Mr. Conner. It is only the next morning, once she realizes that she made a fool of herself, in a way far more substantial (and documented) than her drunken exhibitionism years ago, that Tracy gives up. She tells Dexter that she "doesn't know anything anymore." She and Dexter reflect on their honeymoon aboard his yacht, the True Love. He thinks of selling it (and finally putting Tracy behind him). Significantly, when he says the boat was "yare" she replies "was...and is." He talks about building a new boat "along more practical lines," calling it the True Love Second. Tracy hates the idea because it will be the same as Dexter saying that he can find something as good as Tracy another time and that their love was not all that true. She looks for advice on the mess she is in, but he asks why she is paying him all this attention now. Finally, Tracy comes to her senses and realizes that Dexter is really the man she loves, gratefully accepting his subtle proposal to marry.

This is the climax of the film. In agreeing to marry Dexter she is admitting that their problems were at least partly her responsibility. And he is the one person in the film who can best make an assessment of her. By asking her to marry him, Dexter is saying that Tracy has changed enough that he is willing to share the helm with her, so to speak.

Just why Dexter came back is never fully resolved. First, Mike thinks it's revenge, then the issue of blackmail over Tina Mara comes up; Dexter is trying to suppress the story. He could be back because he loves Tracy, but his behavior toward her is hardly conciliatory. They seem to be picking up where they left off. Bringing Mike and Liz into the mix certainly contributed to Tracy's about-face, but there is no way Dexter could have anticipated how they would have interacted, though their presence does make his return to the old Lord homestead a little easier.

Dexter does say that when he found out Tracy was marrying Kittredge he had to do something. He may have not wanted to remarry her, but he knew she was making a huge mistake by hooking up with George. And in the process of helping Tracy realize George was wrong for her, Dexter shows her that, all along, she really wanted him.